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Space, time and the future of the past

The wide-angle, long-range view of historians is crucial to keeping the world's challenges in check

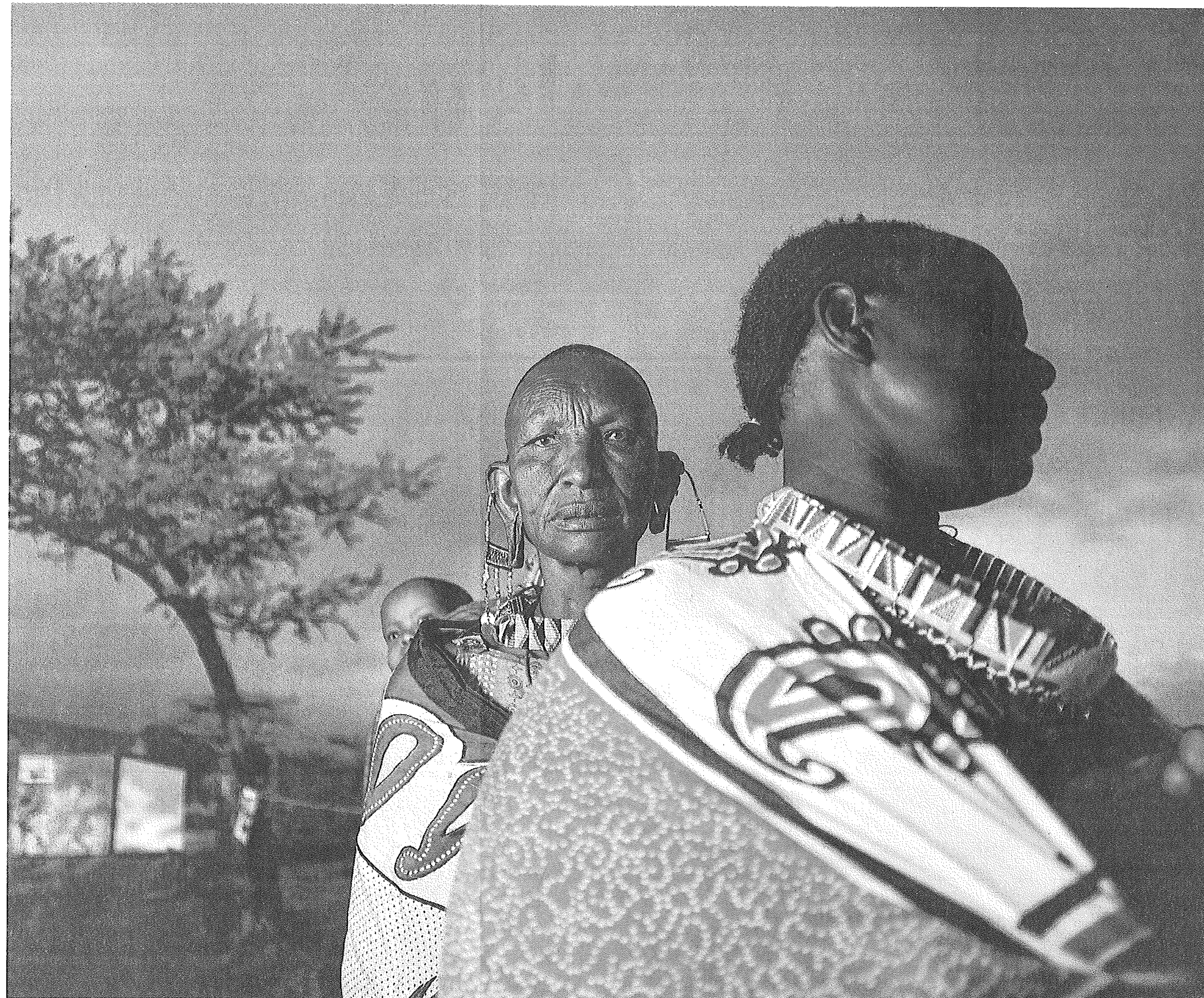
DAVID ARMITAGE

THE title of this distinguished lecture series gets to the heart of the matter — the question every academic needs and many a scholar dreads: "So what?" The challenge comes in various forms and in different forums. In a seminar, it is rarely friendly: "So what's new?" From an administrator, it is hardly reassuring: "Why should we fund that?" And from the general public — the academy's most exacting critics and ultimately, even in private universities, our paymasters — it is fundamentally probing: "What's the return on our investment?"

"Your point being?" "Cui bono?" "Where's the beef?" These are all unavoidable questions and ones a series like this, addressed to an audience beyond the academy's walls as well as within it, is uniquely well-placed to help answer.

I've been asking myself these questions a lot in the past year as I've added chairing a department of history to my day-jobs as a teacher and a researcher, mostly in intellectual history and international history. When friends ask me what it's like to be a chair, on bad days I refer them to the dictionary definition: an object on which other people sit. On the good days, I tell them it's a great chance to think broadly, not just about the directions my own department should be going in the next few years but also about trends in the field, the meaning of history (as a discipline, not as a least, in the English-speaking parts of it — there is now a much-discussed crisis of the humanities, in the US, Britain and Australia. The motors of the current crisis, despite its local manifestations in different countries, are many and miscellaneous: sharply declining enrolments in classrooms; the controversial rise of massive open online courses which threaten to create a hierarchy of institutions and promote easily quantified subjects at the expense of those that cannot be reduced to machine-readable responses; the shifting boundaries between scientific and non-scientific disciplines which can make humanistic studies seem quaint or luxurious to some; genuine concerns about employability among students and their parents; ideologies of "impact" and "relevance"; a creeping instrumentalism among administrators; and the squeezes on public (and private) university revenues that inform them, among others.

Battling these challenges, from within and without, can feel like a struggle against the many-headed Hydra: Herculean (and therefore heroic) but unremitting because every victory brings a new adversary. These challenges affect history as much as the other humanities subject: although history is counted among the social sciences at my university, its patterns of enrolments over time mirror closely those of subjects like English,



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then, barely 10 per cent of students majored in humanities subjects, and it was the late 60s and 70s, when enrolments boomed, that appear to be the anomaly.

Deeper digging has also revealed a crucial gender dimension to these figures: much of the alleged flight from the humanities has been the movement of women, first into and then out of humanities subjects; the proportion of men taking these subjects has barely changed since 1950.

etymological meaning of the Greek word from which the term "history" and its analogues in other European languages derive. It therefore long preceded the very recent confining of such modes of understanding into professional disciplines and academic departments, and has a long pedigree within broadly classical systems of education from late antiquity to the 20th century.

For much of that time, history was a more or less practical pur- national, or global. This retreat to the margins is partly self-inflicted, partly the unintended consequence of professionalisation, partly the result of more aggressive claims to influence by other academics, especially economists. But damage done can be undone.

New directions in historical work can help bring historians back into the marketplace of ideas. History is broadening its horizons in space and expanding its horizons in time. Where once his- roughly biological time-spans that have defined most recent historical writing.

One of the many reasons I like to visit Australia frequently is that, in matters of big history, Australian historians' approach to the past has consistently pointed to the future of the discipline elsewhere in the world. The tyranny of distance — perhaps more optimistically thought of as the thickness of long-distance connections — has encouraged Australian histo-

cycles of budgets, elections, and investment returns. It is along these lines that universities, especially in Britain and Australia, have been asked by governments to demonstrate the impact of their teaching and research; however, as the V-C of Sydney University, Michael Spence, noted last week, "impact, as defined in this context, is always short-term" while universities remain "the one player capable of making long-term, infrastructure-intensive research investments" over decades, with often unforeseeable results.

The longer perspectives afforded by this new, enlarged view of history have obvious relevance to our current situation. Since World War II, planning horizons and budget-cycles around the globe had shrunk even more drastically than the timescales of historians. Electoral cycles and models drawn originally from military strategy and economic forecasting narrowed the focus of policymakers and NGOs to periods of between one and five years. It is little wonder, then, that global governance is in collapse, inequality within countries is rising (even as the inequalities between them are declining), or that climate change is almost certainly already beyond human remedy.

All these crises have deep roots, stretching back respectively to the mid-20th century (and the rise of modern international institutions), the late 19th century (and the acceleration of capitalism), or the late 18th century (with the beginnings of the anthropocene), at a minimum.

History is not, as some economists might tell us, reducible to path-dependency. The future need not run in the ruts of the past. It is possible to jump the tracks and take a new direction, just as it is feasible to go back through the past to discover paths not taken.

Only by scaling our inquiries over so many decades, centuries, or even millennia, can we hope to understand the genesis of our present discontents. And only by delving deep into the past can we hope to project ourselves imaginatively any meaningful distance into the future: as Winston Churchill once said: "The longer you can look back, the further you can look forward."

For these reasons, the future of the past is in the hands of historians. "So what?" you might ask? Well historians can be guardians against parochial perspectives and endemic short-termism. Once called upon to offer their advice on political development and land-

metaphysical force), and the fate of the humanities.

Many of you will remember the benighted, bumbling head of department in Kingsley Amis's novel *Lucky Jim* (1953) who portentously answers his office phone, "History speaking". I can't claim to speak with the voice of history but I do want to reflect on some of the purposes of history as an academic discipline, precisely to answer that salutary question — "So what?" — before it gets too late.

What's the rush, you might ask? The hurry comes from the worry that history might be in decline or en route to obsolescence along with its sibling disciplines in the humanities. Across the world — at French, or German, for example.

One advantage historians possess is perspective: we can see that there have been recurrent crises of the humanities over the past 50 years and that this one is nothing new. A historian has also shown that some of the panic about shrinking class-sizes is misplaced. If judged from a peak in the 1970s, it can indeed look like the bottom is falling out of the humanities, with *The Wall Street Journal* reporting a drop of almost 50 per cent in the proportion of US students majoring in humanities, from 14 per cent in 1966 to 7.6 per cent in 2010.

The decline appears less shocking if the baseline is 1945 not 1966:

Whether these findings would hold true in quite the same way in Britain or Australia, I do not know. But two things are clear. The humanities do perceive themselves to be embattled and are on the defensive, throughout the English-speaking world; and their methods — particularly, the long-term analytical perspective afforded by history — can help to identify meaningful rather than misplaced causes for concern.

What then can be done to snatch history from the bonfire of humanities?

History, understood as an inquiry into the past, has been pursued in various forms for over 2000 years; indeed, "inquiry" is the suit, a guide to public life, for rulers, their advisers, and citizens: to provide "philosophy teaching by examples," as one classic tag had it, or to be the "guide to life" (*magistra vitae*), as Cicero famously put it. It deployed analysis of the past precisely to shape the future. It is only in the past century that history has gradually lost this public, future-oriented mission, though there are signs that its vocation — in a more critical, democratic, even radical guise — may be returning.

History's place in public life remains fragile and uncertain, to the point that historians now occupy very little space in policy debates, whether national, inter-

torians preferred the microscope, we're reaching again for the telescope; landscapes as well as portraits are increasingly in the historian's repertoire; the long shot is once more joining the close-up as a major perspective on the past. No other form of humane inquiry is so well equipped to go wide and to go deep at the same time.

BIG is back across a spectrum of new and revived modes of historical writing. Grandest of all is "Big History", an account of the past stretching back to the origins of the universe itself. More modest in scope, because it includes only the human past, is the still remarkably expansive "Deep History", which spans some 40,000 years and deliberately breaks through the entrenched boundary between history and pre-history. And more focused still, yet with perhaps the most immediate resonance for present concerns, is the history of the Anthropocene, the 200-year period in which human beings have comprised a collective actor powerful enough to affect the environment on a planetary scale.

The timescales of these movements are, respectively, cosmological, archaeological, and climatological: each represents a novel expansion of historical perspectives, and each operates on horizons longer — usually much longer — than a generation, a human lifetime, or the other rians to be at the forefront of transnational and global history.

And the timescales of Australian history have likewise spurred them to innovate with different temporalities in ways other historians are only just beginning to appreciate. As scholars such as Ann McGrath, Libby Robin and Alison Bashford have all recently pointed out, Australia's history must articulate two very different horizons, one of roughly 40,000 years, the other going back only to 1788. This demands the integration of indigenous and settler history, archeological and anthropological perspectives, local and global histories, histories of deep time and a longish *durée* simultaneously.

In this sense, Australia's histories are exemplary for the kinds of boundary-breaking efforts other historians around the world are now attempting. If anyone asks Australian historians "So what?", then this can be one of the most powerful answers they can give — that they lead the world in both transnational and transtemporal history, often concurrently.

These various forms of transtemporal history stretch across timescales far larger than those of most of us who live under the rule of governments, the supervision of civil servants, or the care of non-governmental organisations.

The planning horizons of all these institutions range from one to five years, or the limits set by the reform, the creation of the welfare state and post-conflict settlement, historians, along with other humanists, effectively ceded the public arena, nationally as well as globally, to the economists and occasionally political scientists. (When was the last time you saw a historian writing a regular column for the *New York Times* or being seconded to the White House from their academic post, let alone consulting for the World Bank or advising the UN secretary-general?)

It is little wonder that we have a crisis of global governance, that we're all that the mercy of unregulated financial markets, and that anthropogenic climate change threatens our seas and cities, our food supplies and water sources, political stability and the survival of species, to mention just a few foreseeable but increasingly unavoidable consequences. To put these challenges in perspective, and to combat the short-termism of our time, we urgently need the wide-angle, long-range views only historians can provide.

Historians of the world, unite! There is a world to win — before it's too late.

David Armitage is chair of the Department of History at Harvard University. This is an edited version of the So What? speech he delivered at the University of NSW on August 15.

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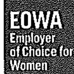

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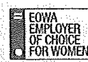

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