

The Future Of History

by Professor Martin Stuart-Fox

I want to approach the future of history on two levels: for the discipline, and for the department at the University of Queensland. The two are not necessarily linked, though they should be. If history is important and has a bright future, then it should be taught at university, and departments of history should thrive. But that is not how things work in our brave new university world. Departments thrive not because they teach what is important, even essential, to building an informed and self-confident modern society, but because what they offer appeals to the interests of their student 'clients'. Subjects are offered not in order to impart a framework of knowledge; rather pedagogical purposes have to be surreptitiously smuggled in. This shifts much of the burden to students themselves to ensure that their learning is more than just a superficial skipping from subject to subject. In the modern university, students learn how to learn, but what they learn, or whether they learn at all, depends largely on them.

History as a discipline

Let me begin with history as a discipline, in the sense of constituting an ordered body of knowledge to which successive generations of scholars contribute. Here the future of history seems assured, both because as the pace of change accelerates in modern, increasingly post-modern, societies history becomes more necessary than ever to an understanding of our world; and because of the vigorous and innovative ways in which the discipline has responded over the last half century, and continues to respond, to the challenge of providing that understanding. This argument needs unpacking.

There are only two ways of rationally understanding the world (leaving aside religion and mysticism). The first is through science; that is, the search for regularities that can ideally be expressed in the form of numerical relationships and law-like statements that tell us that if we do 'x', then 'y' will result. The second is through history; that is, through tracing the processes by which situations came to be. Science works best with the natural world. Its triumphs have been in the area of technology. It does less well as complexity increases; for example, in explaining environmental and ecological change. (There has been any number of disastrous 'scientific' interventions based on inadequate understanding of complexity that have resulted in severe environmental damage.)

In the nineteenth century, it was widely believed that scientific methods could be directly transferred to the study of human societies. At the same time, history claimed the status of an academic, even a scientific, discipline. This claim was reinforced by the social scientific systems of thinkers like Comte and Marx who proposed historical metanarratives as theoretical constructs in their understanding of social change. Historians were not impressed, however, and the first half of the twentieth century saw a widening gap open between history and structuralist/functionalist social science. The last half-century has seen the gradual return of history in the social sciences, especially in the explanation of macro-social change. Why has this occurred?

I think there are two reasons: one has to do with the pace of social change; the other with the complexity of post-industrial, post-modern societies. Both these developments have strengthened the need for historical analysis and explanation. Where change is slow, as it is in traditional agricultural societies, there is slight need for historical explanation. Both identity and future direction are given in the stability of seasonal repetition. It is where such stability is interrupted that we want to know why. No such stability grounds identity in modern urban societies, where change is endemic, but unpredictable. The unpredictability of social change is a function of complexity. The chaotic effect of even minor interventions in a complex social environment is the social equivalent of the butterfly effect on weather patterns. But if social outcomes are not scientifically predictable, then they cannot be scientifically explained (except by reference to evolutionary theory of the kind scientists use to explain historical change – but that is another story). We can only explain them retrospectively, by revealing their histories.

What I am arguing, in summary, is that the social need for history becomes pressing precisely at times of rapid social change, and that as modern societies cannot help but undergo change in an era of globalization, history will continue to be required as alone providing explanations for, and interpretations of, social change. This may seem to be a rather abstract argument, but it is backed up by the history of historiography over the last fifty years.

One cannot use bare figures, such as the number of historians, academic and public, or the number of histories published, to tell the story. History departments grew rapidly in the sixties and seventies, held steady in the eighties, and have contracted in the nineties under the restrictions of economic rationalism demanded by global capitalism. Output follows roughly the same pattern, though less closely. Better indicators of the state of history come from the variety of new histories that have been and are being produced, the potential these open up for new work, and the extension of historical interest within the broader community.

The complexity of modern societies has spawned, at least in part, the variety of new histories, as different social groups, associations and organizations seek to place themselves within an explanatory historical perspective. What is important about this process is that it legitimizes their existence, and so has a significant political dimension. Such needs will not go away. As more groups seek to identify and validate their interests, so more and different histories will need to be written.

An important aspect of writing ‘minority’ histories has to do with how groups define themselves and are perceived by others not of the group. This opens up the possibility of writing histories of how such perceptions have changed over time, and what changed them. Histories weaving in perceptions and attitudes force historians to position themselves, and this leads to more self-reflective, more nuanced history that draws upon some of the lessons of post-modernism.

It seems to me that the need for history will not diminish in the future. We cannot determine the form of that future. All we can do to position ourselves is, like Walter Benjamin’s angel, to look back. So in writing history we concern ourselves not with the past *per se*, but with the relationship between an ever changing present and a past we can reconstruct, but never finally know. As the pace of change is unlikely to slow, nor the complexity of global society diminish, the future of history as a discipline, judged by social need, would seem to be secure.

History at the University of Queensland

On the face of it, history at the University of Queensland bears out just what I have argued. The Department of History is certainly one of the most vigorous and attractive to students in the Faculty of Arts. Undergraduate enrolments are healthy, while postgraduate numbers stand well above the Faculty average.

That said, staff numbers are down and workloads up. This means that students, at least until their Honours year, get less individual attention than they once did. At the turn of the decade, the Department boasted twenty-two historians: now there are sixteen teaching more undergraduate and postgraduate students. Much of the tutoring burden now falls on postgrads.

One result of the reduction of staff is that the range of History subjects has decreased. The Department no longer offers Indian or Japanese history, the history of international relations in the Middle East or Australian foreign policy. Nor is it likely to do so again in the foreseeable future. How serious is this? Does it matter that the principal university in Queensland has such glaring gaps in its Asian Studies programme? I believe it does matter, especially as we have a large Department of Asian Languages and Studies and a flourishing international relations programme in the Department of Government. Students in both are being deprived of the opportunity to place their knowledge in historical context.

In place of subjects lost, staff have come together to offer two new team-taught subjects – History of Warfare, and Crime and Punishment. The popularity of these subjects reinforces the trend in student interest towards broad and thematic subjects, such as gender and popular culture. More such broad, thematic subjects are thus likely to be offered in the future.

The other likely change in subject offerings is towards providing subjects of interest to students from other faculties and departments. While the History Honours programme will continue to cater for those hooked on history, or who seek a career for which history provides the best intellectual training, most students will still take no more than a couple of History subjects. Those who have only one or two electives available to them can be attracted to history. The obvious targets would seem to be the sciences, medicine and law. Already the Department offers Crime and Punishment, the History of Biomedical Ethics, and History of the Environment. The big gap would seem to be in history of science and technology.

The future of History at the University of Queensland will, however, be determined as much by forces outside the university as by policy (and student preferences) within it. In the present climate of economic rationalism, driven by 'user pays' and economic outcomes, there is little understanding of the social role of the humanities. The present government has very little interest in or sympathy for the principles for which universities have traditionally stood; that is, the education of a literate, informed, and critically aware society. It sees universities as training institutions as far as teaching is concerned, with added value for industry the principal purpose of research. It wants a society smart enough to be of value to capitalist enterprise, not one educated to question its policies.

A change of government would bring some relief, but probably not a great deal. In order to maintain its standing, History must demonstrate the importance of what it teaches, both for an understanding of the world in which we live, and as a pleasurable means of acquiring skills essential for a citizen of Australia and the world – skills for life, such as the ability critically to locate, analyze, collate and synthesize written material, use information technology quickly and efficiently, and express

conclusions clearly and succinctly. As long as the Department of History continues to do this to the satisfaction of students, its future is assured.