

# 'History Manifested: A Commentary on continuity, disruption and the production of history'

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NOTE: this piece appeared as a comment on the article, 'History Manifested: making sense of unprecedented change' by Zoltán Boldizsár Simon, in the *European Review of History*, 22.5 (2015):

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This comment began as a referee's report on the essay - finding myself so engaged with its arguments that I went beyond my remit in 'quality control' and wrote a report of such extent that the editors (possibly dismayed by its length) asked me to convert into a comment on the review. In this spirit of meta critique then, what follows is less of a detailed engagement with the way in which the author reads *The History Manifesto* and *The Practical Past*, and more of a comment on their view of how to face our present condition *as historians*. The essay, the books it critiques, and the debates they have generated, are evidence of a fertile moment in debating what History is, and what it should be.

While the piece is in agreement with the works it reviews that history 'ought to have an all-important public role in shaping our future'; the Author takes Guldi/Armitage and Hayden White to task for defending what could be termed a developmental, or genealogic view of history. To paraphrase, this would be the argument that 'useful' history is the history of 'how we got here'. The fundamental criticism levied at the developmental view of history is that this view forged in the kind of historical thinking developed in the nineteenth century to accompany the process of nation-building, is unable to address the present condition of 'unprecedented change' - a change expressed in global effects such as the

*Anthropocene* or the 'technological singularity' There are many elements of this argument I would agree with, but it is largely on the solutions presented by the Author that I would like to focus my comments on.

This solution is two-fold. Firstly, the author argues that we need to recast the subject of history. Secondly, that a more suitable history for our present time would have to focus on disruptions, rather than on continuities, which are the bedrock of the 'developmentalist' view of history.

Recasting the historical subject would mean asking what is the human, and whether the human should be at the centre of the project of writing history, encompassing material and environmental agency and taking into account the interactions of these multiple foci of agency. However that does not alter the stakes in a the discussion between a 'developmental' and a 'disruptive' view of history. Both could be, and probably should be, reflexive and expansive in their consideration of their subjects. But in the same measure, both views could cope with a fundamental redefinition of its subject and still retain the essence of their distinct take on the nature of human experience through time.

The author's second point is more central to the argument: that to address the challenge of unprecedented change we must refocus our historical sensibility from a learned inclination to detect continuities to instead depart from moments of disruption to consider human history. But how dramatic a departure from historical practice is this? Guldi and Armitage's view of the *long durée* is a legitimate target of such a critique, but it seems to me that the author somewhat misses the point made by White in *The Practical Past* in a chapter on history's use of the category of the 'event'

“...history itself, with its division into past and present, parses human nature into earlier and later avatars whose differences are often thought to be more striking than any similarities between them, already contains more than enough evidence of radical discontinuity.”<sup>1</sup>

In other words, for White, disruption and continuity have long been central to the historical way of thinking (cf. Marx, or even Khun), while the opposition between one and the other falters in the face of their essential connection.<sup>2</sup> Is it possible to think about history from a developmental perspective without considering

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<sup>1</sup> 47-48

<sup>2</sup> In addition, as Spiegel notes in her essay on his work, rupture and discontinuity have long been central, if somewhat paradoxically rooted, in White's thinking about history. Spiegel notes that in his earlier essays, White argued that his analysis of the tropes of the historical genre was meant to allow historians to embrace the essential discontinuity of the human condition, even while retaining a sense of 'progress' in historical understanding. Spiegel, Gabrielle M. "Above, about and beyond the writing of history: a retrospective view of Hayden White's Metahistory on the 40th anniversary of its publication." *Rethinking History* 17.4 (2013): 492-508: pp.497, 501.

disruption, and to see history as disruption without considering continuity? Each concept needs the other as a sort of chemical paper to be revealed - any continuity can only be perceived against the background of moments disruption through which its thread runs, or by which it is bookended. Disruption is only disruptive to the extent that it is seen to affect continuities, making itself visible.<sup>3</sup>

The distinction seems to me to hinge on the idea of the 'unprecedented' that the author invokes earlier in the essay to characterise our present condition, and with which I find myself in disagreement. In my perspective, unprecedentedness (please forgive the clunky term) is a condition of history, not a characteristic that can be attributed to a singular point in time - without the unprecedented, there could be no human experience of time, there could be no history. Exploring the nature of the 'event' in history, White places its importance in the historical mode of thinking in the following terms:

"It is possible that the specifically historical event is a happening that occurs in some present (or in the experience of a living group), the nature of which cannot be discerned and a name given to it because it manifests itself only as an "eruption" of a force or energy that disrupts the ongoing system and forces a change (the direction or trajectory of which is unknowable until it is launched or entered upon), the end, aim, or purpose of which can only be discerned, grasped, or responded to at a later time."<sup>4</sup>

That is to say, the 'event' cannot exist other than in a condition of unprecedentedness, but even then only becomes historical once it is incorporated into a teleological sequence. Disruption, then, is a constant of the way in which modern civilisation thinks about itself historically, but has not yet been, from the perspective of the human as a historical entity, total. Total disruption from the human standpoint lies only at the ultimate unprecedented: the extinction of the species, and we have not yet reached (but can at least imagine) such an 'event horizon'. However, while the imagination of a future without humans is certainly a challenge to historical thinking, it is not a fundamental one. The horizon of human extinction will itself have a history that can be imagined, even if there are no humans. And it often is, in a genre we call science fiction. Furthermore, other species or a form of AI could, imaginably, write the history of the extinction of humanity from a different standpoint (I like the idea of an extra-terrestrial Gibbons, although we could criticise it *a priori* for developmentalism). The act of imagining that non-human future could serve as a

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<sup>3</sup> At the end of *The Practical Past*, White questions the possibility of a continuity in both substance and appearance (p.101), but recaptures it through the notion of "practice" (102). It is also in this sense that I understand the idea of continuity (and as a consequence of disruption) – as performative reiterations, echoes, re-enactions by actors conscious of a past. On this understanding of continuity and change see William H. Sewell, *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (University of Chicago Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> White, p.62

way of sustaining the construct that allows history writing - much as the imagination of post-apocalyptic eternal life could sustain an historical world-view for medieval Christianity.

As such, the programmatic side of the essay, while stimulating, is less than fully satisfying. Seeing disruption and continuity as equally essential and inseparable parts of the human historical experience may equip us slightly better to look at the present, but is that enough?

It is in the matter of whether any shift in perspective is enough that I find the author actually shares something with the authors of the two books discussed. In different ways, both Guldi/Armitage and White describe a kind of 'crisis' of history resulting from the way in which historians write and communicate history. Guldi and Armitage argue that, driven by specialisation and the demands of the profession, historians have left the essential task of synthesising, interpreting and giving shape to public historical knowledge to non-academics, or to academics (i.e. economists) who do not understand its nature.<sup>5</sup> For White, in the modern quest for scientific status 'theoretical' (i.e. academic and professional) history, has lost its ethical dimension, divorcing it from the everyday 'practical' past that has a real bearing on actions here and now. Both *The History Manifesto* and *The Practical Past* therefore see history losing its public role as a result of internal, professionalising tendencies - although expressed in different ways. The author of this essay concurs with the diagnosis of the symptoms (a loss of a crucial public role for professional history), but not of the underlying disease, here a mismatch between the way in which view the human trajectory and the unprecedented condition of the anthropocene: History's explanatory model no longer makes sense. While these diagnoses are clearly different, what unites them (with the partial exclusion of White's) is the idea that if only historians could *make more or better sense* of the past they would regain a strong ethical, political and civilisational voice and, crucially, an audience.

Personally, I find the assumption of a hierarchy of historical competence, a corporate entitlement of the academic historical profession, deeply problematic. White, I would say, goes further than either Guldi/Armitage or the Author in problematising the place of the professional historian. Invoking Oakeshott, White argues that history and thinking historically, rather than being in crisis, are doing very well amongst a wider public who is itself producing its own sense of history, and using it to think about past, present and future (and act), but largely without the aid of the academic historian. Yet, ultimately, White also sees the historian, or at least the historian/novelist as the bridge between the 'theoretical' and the 'practical' past.

But has history really lost its wider public? If we mean by that that professional, academic historians have lost a wider public, I would agree, even with the caveat

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<sup>5</sup> Jo Guldi and David Armitage, *The History Manifesto*, Cambridge University Press (2014): 11-12.

that perhaps there was never a golden age at which a public sat gratefully at our feet as we dispensed wise words of knowledge. History as a commodity has probably never had a greater reach, nor have there ever been so many people who are not professional historians engaged in the production of historical knowledge – including amateur and community historians, family historians, TV and media researchers and producers, computer game writers, and so on and so on.<sup>6</sup>

This is I would argue are exciting, rather than threatening changes - although not without their pitfalls. And if there is a way in which historians can help address the challenges of environmental and technological change it can do so by being more democratic, sharing not only their knowledge, but particularly their craft much more widely. If historical knowledge matters for the present and future, it matters to the extent that it promotes reflexive, open-ended and pluralistic modes of thought and exchange. If we want that historical knowledge to be produced in such ways, we have to reconsider how to position ourselves. I firmly believe that if we can proselytise not historical narratives (either of continuity or of disruption), but what Marc Bloch called ‘the historian’s craft’, we can help create a citizenry that takes a critical stance with regards to its own past, present and to its possible futures – both in its continuities and its disruptions. But it is also my opinion that we can only do so embracing the demotic production of history, and fighting the battles about what history is and should be on that ground.

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<sup>6</sup> In the interests of full disclosure, and self-promotion, these ideas are at the heart of a volume I recently co-edited: Bertrand Taithe and Pedro Ramos Pinto (eds.) *The Impact of History? Histories at the Beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, London Routledge (2015).