

# The History Manifesto

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## Introduction

### The bonfire of the humanities?

A spectre is haunting our time: the spectre of the short term.

We live in a moment of accelerating crisis that is characterised by the shortage of long-term thinking. Even as rising sea-levels threaten low-lying communities and coastal regions, the world's cities stockpile waste, and human actions poison the oceans, earth, and groundwater

for future generations. We face rising economic inequality within nations even as inequalities between countries abate while international hierarchies revert to conditions not seen since the late eighteenth century, when China last dominated the global economy. Where, we might ask, is safety, where is freedom? What place will our children call home? There is no public office of the long term that you can call for answers about who, if anyone, is preparing to respond to these epochal changes. Instead, almost every aspect of human life is plotted and judged, packaged and paid for, on time-scales of a few months or years. There are few opportunities to shake those projects loose from their short-term moorings. It can hardly seem worth while to raise questions of the long term at all.

In the age of the permanent campaign, politicians plan only as far as their next bid for election. They invoke children and grandchildren in public speeches, but electoral cycles of two to seven years determine which issues prevail. The result is less money for crumbling infrastructure and schools and more for any initiative that promises jobs right now. The same short horizons govern the way most corporate boards organise their futures. Quarterly cycles mean that executives have to show profit on a regular basis.<sup>1</sup> Long-term investments in human resources disappear from the balance sheet, and so they are cut. International institutions, humanitarian bodies, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) must follow the same logic and adapt their programmes to

annual or at most triennial constraints. No one, it seems, from bureaucrats to board members, or voters and recipients of international aid, can escape the ever-present threat of short-termism.

There are individuals who buck the trend, of course. In 1998, the Californian cyber-utopian Stewart Brand created the Long Now Foundation to promote consciousness of broader spans of time. ‘Civilization is revving itself into a pathologically short attention span’, he wrote: ‘Some sort of balancing corrective to the short-sightedness is needed – some mechanism or myth that encourages the long view and the taking of long-term responsibility, where “the long term” is measured at least in centuries.’ Brand’s charismatic solution to the problem of short-termism is the Clock of the Long Now, a mechanism operating on a computational span of 10,000 years designed precisely to measure time in centuries, even millennia.<sup>2</sup>

But the lack of long-range perspective in our culture remains. The disease even has a name – ‘short-termism’. Short-termism has many practitioners but few defenders. It is now so deeply ingrained in our institutions that it has become a habit – frequently followed but rarely justified, much complained about but not often diagnosed. It was only given a name, at least in English, in the 1980s, after which usage sky-rocketed significantly (see [Figure 1](#)).

The most ambitious diagnosis of short-termism to date came from the Oxford Martin Commission for Future Generations. In October 2013, a blue-ribbon panel

chaired by Pascal Lamy, former Director-General of the World Trade Organization (WTO), issued its report, *Now for the Long Term*, ‘focusing on the increasing short-termism of modern politics and our collective inability to break the gridlock

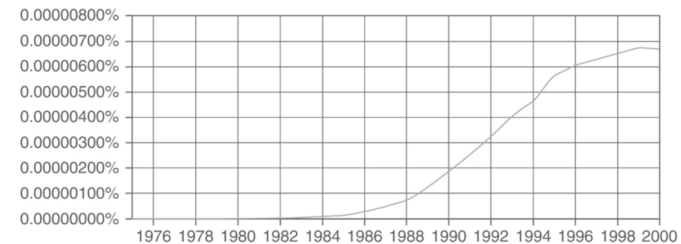


Figure 1 Usage of ‘short-termism’, c. 1975–2000  
Source: Google Ngram viewer.

which undermines attempts to address the biggest challenges that will shape our future’. Though the tone of the report was hardly upbeat, its thrust was forward-looking and future-oriented. Its motto might have been the words quoted in its introduction and attributed to former French premier Pierre Mendès France: *gouverner, c’est prévoir* – to govern is to foresee.<sup>3</sup>

Imagining the long term as an alternative to the short term may not be so difficult, but putting long-termism into practice may be harder to achieve. When institutions or individuals want to peer into the future, there is a dearth of knowledge about how to go about this task. Instead of facts, we routinely resort to theories. We

have been told, for instance, that there was an end to history and that the world is hot, flat, and crowded.<sup>4</sup> We have read that all human events are reducible to models derived from physics, translated by economics or political science, or explained by a theory of evolution that looks back to our hunter-gatherer ancestors. Editorials apply economic models to sumo wrestlers and palaeolithic anthropology to customs of dating.<sup>5</sup> These lessons are repeated on the news, and their proponents are elevated to the status of public intellectuals. Their rules seem to point to unchanging levers that govern our world. But they do little to explain the shifting hierarchy of economies or the changes in gender identity and reconfigurations of banking witnessed in our own time. Only in rare conversations does anyone notice that there are long-term changes flowing around us, ones that are relevant and possible to see. The world around us is clearly one of change, irreducible to models. Who is trained to steadily wait upon and translate them for others, these vibrations of deeper time? (...)

### **Chapter 3**

#### **The long and the short. Climate change, governance, and inequality since the 1970s**

Long-term thinking about the past and the future proliferates outside the discipline of history, notably around questions of climate change, international governance, and inequality. In all of these domains, the past is already being used as a tool with which to contemplate the future.

In discussions of climate, scientists have used the past to formulate warnings about how environmental destruction will affect our planetary future. In the decades after Rachel Carson's early warnings about the ecological consequences of pollution, the first terrifying pronouncements were published to the world forecasting planetary holocausts if changes were not made. In 1968, the American ecologist Garrett Hardin published his seminal article on the 'tragedy of the commons', comparing an over-populated planet to a wilderness preserve grazed excessively by wildlife. In announcing the limited carrying-capacity of the planet, and forecasting starvation and death for the many, Hardin's narrative paralleled the story of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden.<sup>1</sup> As biologists like Paul Ehrlich confirmed that extensive species extinction was a reality, they too articulated their fears about the future through the Malthusian vocabulary of testing, judgement, and despair.<sup>2</sup>

Through the 1970s, these claims about an imminent future were sharpened and refined in the course of data-driven analysis, political debate, and mounting impatience. In 1972, a newly founded global think-tank, the Club of Rome, issued a rousing report on environmental futures, funded by the Volkswagen Foundation, *Limits to Growth*, which publicised the new computer models of a systems analyst at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Jay Forrester, who warned against overshoot and collapse driven by over-population,

pollution, and resource depletion. The book sold 12 million copies. At the same time, a report to the United Nations World Conference on the Human Environment endorsed the *Limits to Growth* report's conclusions of imminent doom, warning against both the reckless pursuit of economic success science and the nation-state itself.<sup>3</sup> At a variety of scales, scientific, governmental, and private organisations endorsed the view of impending ecological peril requiring immediate action.

Since the 1970s, pressure to rethink our relationship to the ecosystem has borne the mark of a quasi-apocalyptic form of long-term thinking, which moves from our sins in the industrial past directly to imminent destruction in the long-term future. Around the time of Rachel Carson's exposé, stories prognosticating doom arrived at almost exactly the moment of the last great recapitulation of popular apocalyptic religion in the United States, conceptualised in Hal Lindsay's best-selling story of the Rapture, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970), which became the largest-selling American non-fiction book of the 1970s.<sup>4</sup> Scientific predictions helped to kick off a new wave of apocalyptic speculation in American popular religion.

The apocalyptic diagnosis of our relationship to past and future continues to exert a pull on scientific discussions of climate change, shaping analysis even as the understanding of the climate is broadened and refined. In the early 2000s, a new narrative of collapse appeared which, following the work of entomologist E. O. Wilson on colony collapse, compared the history of

civilisations to over-driven ecosystems, the most prominent of which compared industrial capitalism to the vanished civilisation of Easter Island and forecast the extinction of the human race. Piles of scientific evidence have been amassed since the 1970s, but our long-term thinking has shifted little if at all from the terrors of that moment. We still reason largely in terms of apocalypse, as if we are afraid that without final judgement on our future we will be unable to summon the collective courage to shift from an unsustainable future to a sustainable one as we live in what is alleged to be our 'final century', even 'our final hour'.<sup>5</sup>

It is not our purpose here to question the accumulation of evidence about the past that scientists have amassed since the 1970s, but rather to call attention to certain patterns in the historical

### 63 *Climate change, governance, and inequality*

interpretation of those results. Since the 1950s, climate science has expanded and refined into a new profession, which has established certainty about global climate shocks and proved that beyond mere pollution and resource exhaustion, the planet is now facing both global warming and rising sea-levels.<sup>6</sup> The problem is not that the climate science community does not have data about these events: it has immense amounts of it, regarding many historical events and trends. What is important here is that the overarching narrative wrapped around those events has largely remained one of apocalypse. In scientific discourse, more data should result in new conclusions. In historical accounts, likewise: more data

should result in refined and expanded metanarratives.<sup>7</sup>  
(...)

64 *The History Manifesto*

We need long-term data on the climate and economy to tell us when someone notices that the earth is changing. The second level of analysis – assigning responsibility, finding concomitant recommendations about how the earth should be reformed to prevent greater catastrophe still – requires skills of working back and forth between past and future, discerning multiple sources of causality and ranking them, examining them from different perspectives and experiences to offer the fullest possible account of how the catastrophe came to be and therefore what is owed to whom. That kind of thinking about the past, compiling cases for possible vectors of reform, has always been the purview of neither science nor economics but of history.

### **Long-term thinking about the climate**

But no one can blame those worried about the environment for trying. What climate science has grasped since 1970, in its insistence on reasoning about past and future, is the absolute necessity of making claims about causality if we are indeed to change our behaviour from forms of economic behaviour known to jeopardise both humans and other living organisms. Thinking with history has always been a tool for reshaping the future, whether that intervention takes the

form of time on the therapist's couch remembering one's childhood, the collective examination of national or planetary sins in the past, re-running scenarios of historical decision-making, or forming policy through the carefully contextual handling of evidence.<sup>10</sup>

For all of those reasons, when scientists have sought to establish human culpability in climate change and call for future action, they have found themselves in the realm of historical reasoning. In the midst of policy wars between economists and climate scientists, history has become a trump card played by both sides in order to

65 *Climate change, governance, and inequality*

secure their argument about the nature of our world and the necessary conditions of a sustainable future. Indeed, one might say that a great deal of climate science now concerns less the extension of new models of ecosystem or biology, and more the reckoning of historical problems. Scientists now spend a great deal of their energy establishing agreed-upon timelines for the human cause of climate change, a conversation never far away from calls for a change in national and international policy towards the environment. The 'Anthropocene' was first proposed as a concept in 2000 by Nobel laureate Paul Crutzen, an atmospheric chemist, who identified the era as a new epoch in terms of planetary geology, comparable to the Holocene or Paleocene in its difference from previous epochs.<sup>11</sup> As Australian historian Libby Robin records, Crutzen's intervention 'was a bold statement on many levels', not least because

it was the first geological epoch ever proposed that included the future – the accumulated effects of anthropogenic activity – as well as the past.<sup>12</sup> The label immediately resulted in a historical debate over whether the effects of climate change began 250 years ago with the steam engine, eleven thousand years ago with the rise of human hunter civilisations and the extinction of animals, or five to eight thousand years ago with the agricultural revolution.<sup>13</sup> At issue were not so much the numbers, as how scientists assigned causality to past events. Was the domestication of the cow and rice to blame for later patterns of cutting down rainforests that would not appear for millennia to come? In a sudden turn of events, the major public battle engaged in by climate scientists was in essence a controversy about history.

Thinking with the past still offers most of the solutions that have been proposed in debates about climate change. A number of scientists today stress the need for ‘earth systems governance’, or ‘carbon trading’, looking to the evidence of human history to provide models of government or market capable of remedying disasters like this one.<sup>14</sup> In so doing, they typically seek to replicate other state infrastructure projects, where nations have assumed responsibility for preserving life into the future, from the government-built dykes of the early-modern Netherlands to the American Manhattan Project in the Second World War and on to the World Bank-organised credit programmes from a decade ago inspired by the writings of Hernando de Soto.<sup>15</sup> Nor must all the possible historical precedents for coherent

environmental change necessarily take the shape of centralised authority. Indeed, climate scientists have begun to construct models of climate change that focus on the specific ways in which tribes of humans have shaped the biosphere, foregrounding sustainable and unsustainable patterns of land use as models for the future.<sup>16</sup> Questions about which options to choose and how have driven a new generation of scientists trained as biologists, chemists, and geologists to become, effectively, historians of institutions. (...)

Data mined over generations in the past can give us insight into the future of sustainability. Barles conjectures that nineteenth-century Paris can offer more in terms of a capitalist city that nonetheless was more sustainable, in terms of local agriculture and waste recycling, than the twenty-first-century cities of today. Barles has published some of her historical research with an audience of policy-makers in development in mind. Indeed, Barles is only one of the historians who delved back into urban records to find the story of how nineteenth-century managers invented sustainable practices for waste reuse in large cities.<sup>23</sup> Could the nineteenth century offer a paradigm of a city worth returning to, a city still brimming with entertainment and consumption and global trade, but which nonetheless depended on nearby farms for its produce? History can open up new possibilities, expanding the array of policy

and market futures available past carbon trading and earth systems governance into a wider array of possible sustainabilities.

Examples of events from the deep or recent past alike can point to alternative traditions in governance, collecting and describing the fringe movements of the past that are bearing useful fruit today. Joan Thirsk ploughed five centuries of the past for examples of moments similar to the present, when shifting dynamics around land and water caused a search for a more sustainable agriculture. Paul B. Thompson has given a remarkable overview of the historical sources for conservation, organic farming, and sustainable building. Martin Mulligan and Stuart Hill have written a history of permaculture.<sup>24</sup> Histories such as these perform an important role: they are energising of new movements; they give scientists and policy-makers on the ground a sense of where to look for possible futures.

That opening up of possibilities and alternative models has revolutionary potential in a world where most models of the future cluster around climate change-induced doom or invisible hand-managed versions of the status quo. Suddenly, it looks like historical

69 *Climate change, governance, and inequality*

civilisations and recent environmental activists can offer models of sustainability that can feed the poor and house the refugees of rising sea-levels, if only there is political will. Such a message of hope, and such a recipe for focused action, can act as a salve for minds troubled by spectacles of apocalypse or mantras of rational choice. It

is medicine for reasoned action in our time, using knowledge of the past, rather than fantasy or dogma, as a tool with which to shape the future. As Libby Robin writes:

The future is no longer destined. Rather, it is something we ‘create’... If so, we need to engage all possible creativity in making that future: science, economics, history and the human imagination. No one can predict the future, but imagination can illuminate its relationship to history and the present condition of the world.<sup>25</sup>

Written at the nexus of past and future, history can draw a map that includes not only pictures of the fantasy world of capitalistic success and the world burning in climate change apocalypse, but also realistic alternative pathways to a world that we actually *want* to inhabit. These stories can open up new ways of thinking and escape old nightmares: ‘The Anthropocene ... is not a parable of human hubris, but rather a call to realize our fullest potential as managers of the earth and our future on it.’<sup>26</sup> (...)

72 *The History Manifesto*

The genre of history illustrated by Robin, Yates, and Thompson is history at its most critical. They identify the players who are constructing the game; they show where the terms came from, and they point out contradictions in the system. Critical history is one of the forms of story-telling that most historians today are

trained to perform. Critical history can help us to tell which logics to keep for the future and which to throw away. Stamped with the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’, critical history is the child of the 1970s just as much as micro-history is, although it has a rich legacy going back at least to Karl Marx. It is fruitfully applied to the purpose of unmasking institutional corruption – finding toxic discourses with laden or implicit meanings; unveiling supposed saviours as frauds; disrobing would-be emperors. We have a lot of good critical history. Nathan Sayre tells us how the term ‘carrying capacity’ was first applied to boats, which would literally sink if their capacity were over-reached; it was then transferred to animal populations in the case of British colonial monitoring of hunting reserves, and later passed from the colonial government of animals to the governance of native populations.<sup>34</sup> Implicit in the term are the logics of top-down government control of population. Similar findings have been suggested by Alison Bashford's and Matthew Connelly's histories of international government, population control, and neo-Malthusianism.<sup>35</sup> Of all of the kinds of control we can put into place, history suggests, the control of population is one of the most likely to go awry.

73 *Climate change, governance, and inequality*

The implications for international policy of all of this sorting into fact and fiction are immense. Indeed, this form of historical reasoning directly controverts the

international policy embraced by most nations since the Brundtland Commission in 1987, which reasoned that developed nations could not shoulder the burden of ameliorating climate change, because of their relationship to ongoing industrialisation projects in the Global South.<sup>36</sup> In this example, species thinking – insisting that we as a species must cooperate together – has served as a convenient excuse for western elites to deny that they are in a position to respond to a changing climate. Historical reasoning, including the postcolonial history embraced by elites in India and China, gives western powers no such veil of economic theory as an excuse for doing nothing. (...)

## **Conclusion: the public future of the past**

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118 *The History Manifesto*

If long-term historical thinking is to fulfil the promise we have proposed for it here, then we will need a rubric for thinking big with adequate skill and historical finesse. What constitutes a critical eye for looking at long-term stories? What characteristics unite the models that we choose? How would a classroom training young minds to think far back and far forward in time operate? We sum up this book by looking back over the arguments we have drawn together, and by pulling out major ways of thinking about the long-term future. That



task, we believe, requires the services of scholars trained in looking at the past, who can explain where things came from, who can examine the precise evidence of the Short Past and the broader picture of big data and the *longue durée*, and who are dedicated to serve the public through responsible thinking about the nexus of past, present, and future. These methods may offer a recipe for change in the university and for the sciences of prediction and future response at large.

In a moment of expanding inequality, amid crises of global governance, and under the impact of anthropogenic climate change, even a minimal understanding of the conditions shaping our lives demands a scaling-up of our inquiries. As the *longue durée* returns, in a new guise with new goals, it still demands a response to the most basic issues of historical methodology – of what problems we select, how we choose the boundaries of our topic, and what tools we put to solving our questions. The seeds of a new conversation about the future of the past and the big picture are already planted, indeed they represent the reasons why Big History, Deep History, and the Anthropocene are on the rise already. In other subfields, a new synthesis has also begun, albeit rarely explicitly critical of data, visualisation-oriented, or directed to the public, activists, or policy.

An era defined by a crisis of short-termism may be a particularly good time to start rethinking attitudes towards the past. Many histories have been written with the express purpose of offering a window into the future, and some – especially long-term histories of capitalism and the environment – are very clear about what they

offer. Reflecting on the power of reading a history book that shows how modern game-theory came out of the Cold War industrial complex, the University

of California historian Sanford Jacoby enthuses, ‘We should be the ones taking the lead on developing cross-disciplinary, big-think courses’. Jacoby teaches at a business school, where, he writes, ‘The students, it is said, fail to get “the big picture” and cannot escape the conceptual fetters of the present moment. Historians have a lot to offer here.’<sup>1</sup> To respond to such challenges, those who deal in knowledge of the past should be unafraid of generating and circulating digestible narratives, condensing new research about political, economic, and environmental history for a public audience.

The public needs stories about how we came to be at the brink of an ecological crisis and a crisis of inequality. The moral stakes of *longue-durée* subjects – including the reorientation of our economy to cope with global warming and the integration of subaltern experience into policy – mandate that historians choose as large an audience as possible for all of the human experiences about which they write – including (but certainly not limited to) problems of the environment, governance, democracy, and capitalism. In the university, much may need to change to make room for forms of inquiry that concentrate on public knowledge of our mutual future. Journals that exist behind pay-walls, accessible only to those with access to major public or

university libraries, need to be supplemented by open-access sources available to wider global publics.<sup>2</sup> We also need informative visualisations of our research and to put them in public, and peer-review the research behind them quickly and efficiently with the agenda of forming a new, crucial, and politically informed synthesis.

Micro-history and macro-history – short-term analysis and the long-term overview – should work together to produce a more intense, sensitive, and ethical synthesis of data. Critical history is capable of addressing both the macro and the micro, of talking about how small and repressed experiences add up to the overturning of nations and empires. As Lynn Hunt rightly notes, ‘A global, mega-long-term history is not the only story to be told’, but such long-term histories do need to be articulated with the fruits of more precise and local histories and vice versa: ‘The scale of the study depends on the question to be answered.’<sup>3</sup> It is not that micro-histories or short-term studies of any sort are not critical – far from it. In pointing to the challenge that history can offer to the mythologies of neo-liberal

big picture in favour of the assiduous concentration on sources from particular archives approached with particular procedures of critical reading.

economics and climate catastrophism, much of our evidence here is gathered from the work of historians who worked hard in the archives, with deeply controversial questions driving their inquiries. But the rule in the training of historians, at least since the 1970s, has been one that often discouraged thinking about the