Debating the Longue Durée

Has history, as a social science, become inaudible? With the exhaustion of the great paradigms and the fragmentation of research, have historians cut themselves off from their public, retreating to an internal dialogue with no resonance beyond their ivory tower? And, if this observation proved true, would it signal a crisis for the discipline? This is the premise of David Armitage and Jo Guldi’s reflection in the text that opens our debate. The “crisis of history” has been a recurring theme for at least a generation. Here, however, the two authors offer a very different diagnosis from the one the Annales proposed in two recent editorials.¹

This is, in part, a matter of perspective. Armitage and Guldi’s position stems explicitly and near-exclusively from North-American historiography, and especially from the major research universities in the United States, where the professional imperative to demonstrate novelty has fostered the “turns” that the authors criticize and which can sometimes appear rather removed from European historiographical practices. This situated perspective explains, perhaps, why Armitage and Guldi appear particularly sensitive to what they describe as the loss of history’s influence as a discipline on society, and, more specifically, on public policy.

Yet in their own way, they might just be advocating another of those “turns.” Is the article published here not contemporary to their History Manifesto, addressed to the entire community of historians?² In both texts, they call for a return to the longue durée, combined

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with the mobilization of new technological capacities to analyze information on a large scale, today known as “big data.” Let us say it from the outset: the Annales does not share their conception of the longue durée. In Fernand Braudel’s thinking, it served two purposes. In The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Phillip II, the longue durée made it possible to grasp the importance of a “history in which all change is slow, a history of constant repetition, ever-recurring cycles.” It also encouraged an analysis of human phenomena in their own relevant temporality. As a method, the longue durée was therefore part of an experimental approach, weaving together different temporalities and scales. By 1958 and his famous article on the concept, Braudel’s focus had shifted significantly. In the face of the rising tide of structuralism, the longue durée was a reminder of the essential historicity of social facts. In this sense it provided a programmatic horizon for the articulation of history and the other social sciences, which were more oriented toward the present. Yet it never excluded the validity of other scales of analysis, and in this respect it did not seek to oppose other approaches. In this light, the opposition constantly evoked by Armitage and Guldi between what they call the “longue durée” and “microhistory” seems excessively simplistic. Microhistory, in the strict sense of the term, proposes specific protocols for research that are not necessarily synonymous with a focus on short time-scales—far from it. Moreover, there exist a whole range of intermediary possibilities between the macro and the micro approaches, which Braudel in fact recommended exploring in order to recognize the complexity of histories and their temporal inscription.

However, this fundamental disagreement should not form an obstacle to debate. The Annales have no intention of acting as the guardians of an orthodoxy that should not exist. We are not, nor is anyone, the proprietors of a proposition that has, over the last half century, produced varied effects in a profoundly transformed historiographical landscape. On the contrary, we share the conviction that the current historiographical moment calls for an experimentation of approaches, as well as the reformulation of the links between history and the other social sciences. The deliberately polemical manifesto proposed by Armitage and Guldi has the immense advantage of offering a situated diagnosis—the “Anglo-American perspective” mentioned in the title—as a framework for its programmatic exhortation. The authors bring together historiographical considerations and a professional analysis of the discipline, emphasizing what they perceive as an increasing separation between the imperatives of research and the mission of educating the general public (with a particular interest in political institutions). It is on this ground that the Annales would like to situate the debate. Rather than evaluating the relevance of a “return to the longue durée”—however one chooses to define it—the articles in this issue discuss Armitage and Guldi’s proposal from this broader perspective: decentering historiographical points of view, bringing them into tension,


and critically exploring the approaches used by historians, with the shared conviction of the
need to step out of the comfort zone of each specialized subfield. We have therefore chosen to
submit this text to a range of cross-analyses, from critical comments from within American
historiography, such as the contribution by Lynn Hunt, to those anchored in other traditions
or associated with different lines of historical inquiry that invite us to reformulate the terms
of the debate itself—the Chinese example explored by Christian Lamouroux is enlightening in
this respect. Some readings reexamine, in their historicity, the approaches emphasized by the
authors: Francesca Trivellato looks at the longue durée from the background of microstoria;
Claire Lemercier reviews the promises and pitfalls of quantitative methods. The contribution
by Claudia Moatti is situated on yet another terrain: she claims an explicit epistemological
distance, outside the perspective adopted by the authors, to challenge the very meaning of their
approach. Of course we have left the (provisional) last word to Armitage and Guldi, who
respond to the comments on their proposition.

Most of the contributions collected here are critical. Together, they open up an inter-
national space for reflection on history, its role, and its place in the social sciences, one that
takes seriously not only the circulation of knowledge and historical paradigms, but also the
anchoring of different perspectives in particular historiographical traditions. However open
these traditions are to one another, they seem on this occasion to remain durably distinct.

Les Annales
The Return of the Longue Durée
An Anglo-American Perspective*

David Armitage and Jo Guldi

For in truth the story that is told in your country as well as ours, how once upon a time Phaethon, son of Helios, yoked his father’s chariot, and, because he was unable to drive it along the course taken by his father, burnt up all that was upon the earth and himself perished by a thunderbolt—that story, as it is told, has the fashion of a legend, but the truth of it lies in the occurrence of a shifting of the bodies in the heavens which move round the earth, and a destruction of the things on the earth by fierce fire, which recurs at long intervals.¹

It is the fear of great history which has killed great history.²

Historians are notoriously vagabond creatures: more than most other scholars, it seems, we like to make turns. Over the last fifty years, the anglophone historical profession—often in tandem with other historians around the world—has taken a variety of such turns. Perhaps the primal move was the social turn, away from the history of elites and toward history “from the bottom up,” focusing on the experiences of ordinary people, the subaltern, the marginalized, and the oppressed. Then there was the linguistic turn—a movement adopted from analytic philosophy which historians adapted to their own purposes.³ The linguistic turn led to a

¹. Plato, Timaeus 22c–d.
cultural turn and a revival of cultural history. Since then, there has been a series of turns away from national history, among them the transnational turn, the imperial turn, and the global turn. Many of these historiographical movements were surely turns for the better, though some might judge them to have been turns for the worse. But neither enthusiasts nor skeptics could ignore the troping of intellectual advance in the language of “turns.” So frequent and so unsettling was all the talk about turns that the American Historical Review convened a major forum on “Historiographic ‘Turns’ in Critical Perspective” to survey the phenomenon. Most of the contributors to that conversation concluded it was time to stand still for a while, in order to see where all this movement had brought historians and to decide where they might want to go next.

To speak of scholarly movements as “turns” implies that historians always travel along a one-lane highway to the future, even if the road has many twists and bends. The authors of this article have both been guilty of using and promoting the language of turns: one of us recently offered a genealogy of the “spatial turn” across the academic disciplines in general; the other has surveyed the prospects for an “international turn” in intellectual history more specifically. Yet here we want to move away from these discussions to address a development that we believe to be even more fundamentally transformative. In this case, our subject is not a turn but a significant return to an older mode of historical analysis: the return of the longue durée.

The longue durée as a temporal horizon for research and writing largely disappeared for a generation before coming back into view in recent years. As we hope to suggest, the reasons for its retreat were sociological as much as intellectual; the motivations for its return are both political and technological. Yet the revenant longue durée is not identical to its original incarnation: as Pierre Bourdieu

classically noted, “returns to past styles ... are never ‘the same thing’ since they are separated from what they return to by a negative reference to something which was itself the negation of it (or the negation of the negation, etc.).”9 The new longue durée has emerged from the negation of its negation into a very different ecosystem of intellectual alternatives. It possesses a dynamism and flexibility earlier versions did not have. It also has greater critical potential, for historians, for other social scientists, and for policymakers. The origins of this new longue durée may lie in the past but it is very much oriented toward the future.

In some fields, broad historical time-scales never went away: for example, in historical sociology or in world-systems theory.10 However, in the field of history, the longue durée—associated at first with Fernand Braudel and the Annales school, but soon more widely diffused—flourished and then withered away before returning with fresh purpose, renewed vigor, and the promise of even greater impact. We draw our examples mostly from the English-speaking world, but we believe that our argument has relevance for historians more generally at a time when short-term horizons constrict the views of most of our institutions, whether governments, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), corporations, or, increasingly, universities.11

This return to the longue durée is not only feasible, it is imperative. It is feasible because of an unprecedented availability of materials, along with the tools to make sense of them. Historians of the early twenty-first century lack neither data nor texts to work upon. Large-scale digitization and databases have already made reams of images and texts accessible. Analytical tools, likewise, are no longer a problem. In fact, digital tools have a natural fit with such questions, for they are able to scale over time (think of Google Ngrams) and over space (as with geoparsers, for example).12

A return to the longue durée is also imperative because many short-range histories have only a limited impact on the surrounding discipline, let alone among non-historians. They may contribute another brick to the wall of knowledge without formulating a turning point of consequence to the rest of the field or explaining their significance to general readers and citizens. It can often be unclear

12. Matthew L. Jockers, Macroanalysis: Digital Methods and Literary History (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), and Franco Moretti, Distant Reading (London: Verso, 2013), similarly advocate the use of digital tools in literary studies. An Ngram is a histogram showing the frequency with which a particular word (or expression consisting of two words) occurs within the Google Books corpus. A geoparser is an algorithm that generates a map of places cited within a given corpus by comparing each word to a geographical index.
how representative such studies are of any particular nation’s history, not to men-
tion history at a larger scale. By contrast, *longue-durée* history allows us to step
outside the confines of national history and to ask about the rise of long-term
complexes over many decades, centuries, or even millennia: only by scaling our
inquiries over such durations can we explain and understand the genesis of
contemporary global discontents.

What we think of as “global” is often the sum of local problems perceived
as part of a more universal crisis, but the fact of aggregation—the increasing
sense that local crises are instances of larger structural problems in political econ-
omy or governance, for example—is itself a symptom of the move toward larger
spatial scales for understanding contemporary challenges. Those challenges also
need to be considered over longer temporal reaches. In this regard, the return of
the *longue durée* has an ethical purpose in the sense that it proposes an engaged
academia trying to come to terms with the knowledge production that character-
izes our own moment of crisis, not just within the humanities but across the
global system as a whole.

From the *Longue Durée* to Microhistory

The original *longue durée* was itself the product of “a general crisis in the human
sciences.” Indeed, this was the opening phrase of the 1958 *Annales* article in
which Braudel launched the term in dialogue with, among others, Claude Lévi-
Strauss, whose structural anthropology had put “unconscious” history on the hori-
zon. The nature of the crisis was in some ways familiar in light of twenty-first-
century debates on the future of the humanities and social sciences: an explosion
of knowledge (including a proliferation of data); a general anxiety about disci-
plinary boundaries; a perceived failure of cooperation between researchers in
adjacent fields; and complaints about the stifling “grip of an insidious and retro-
grade humanism” might all have contemporary parallels. Braudel lamented that
the other human sciences had overlooked the distinctive contribution of history
to solving the crisis, a solution that went to the heart of the social reality that he
believed was the focus of all human inquiry: this “opposition between the
instant of time and that time which flows only slowly.” Between these two poles
lay the conventional time-scales used in narrative history and by social and eco-
nomic historians: spans of ten, twenty, fifty years at most. However, he argued,
histories of crises and cycles along these lines obscured the deeper regularities
and continuities underlying the processes of change. It was essential to move to
a different temporal horizon, to a history measured in centuries or millennia: “the
history of the long, even of the very long time-span, of the *longue durée*.13

pp. 25–27. Originally published as “Histoire et sciences sociales. La longue durée,”
By 1958, Braudel’s increasingly adversarial relationship with the other human sciences had impelled him to include a wider range of longue-durée structures. Now the longue durées of culture, such as Latin civilization, geometric space, or the Aristotelian conception of the universe, had joined physical environments, enduring agricultural regimes, and the like. These were human creations that also exhibited change or rupture in moments of invention and supersession by other worldviews or traditions. They lasted longer than economic cycles, to be sure, but they were significantly shorter than the imperceptibly shifting shapes of mountains and seas, or the rhythms of nomadism and transhumance. These not-quite-so-long durées could be measured in centuries and were discernible in human minds, not just in natural landscapes and human interactions with them.

Braudel admitted that his earlier reflections on the longue durée arose from the depressing experience of his wartime captivity in Germany in 1940–45. They were in part an attempt to escape the rhythms of camp life and to bring hope by taking a longer perspective—hence, paradoxically, his frequent use of the imagery of imprisonment.14 When he theorized the longue durée in 1958, Braudel had come to believe that it was fundamental to any interdisciplinary understanding and that it offered the only way out of postwar presentism. His immediate motives were as much institutional as intellectual. Not long before the article appeared, Braudel had assumed both the editorship of the Annales and the presidency of the famed Sixth Section of the École pratique des hautes études following the death of Lucien Febvre in 1956.

He had to justify not merely the existence but the primacy of history among the other social sciences, particularly economics and anthropology. At this time, history was in competition with other social sciences that were in the process of becoming autonomous disciplines—ethnology, sociology, and even social psychology. It was also put to the test by the tendency, prevalent in the public as much as the private sector and based on concepts of modernism and growth, to privilege questions relating to the present and the future. In this competitive context, where prestige and funding were at stake as much as professional pride, the longue durée was Braudel’s “trump card ... which allowed him to claim for history the role of unifier of the human sciences in opposition to mathematics.”15

This agenda also dovetailed neatly with the rise in France of futurology—the forward-looking counterpart to the *longue durée*—which Braudel’s friend Gaston Berger was promoting in his capacity as director general of Higher Education at the same time as he was supporting the Sixth Section and engaged in creating the Maison des sciences de l’homme (MSH) that Braudel would soon lead.16

Braudel ranged *histoire événementielle* against the *longue durée* not because such history could only treat the ephemeral—the “foam” and “fireflies” he notoriously disdained in *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World*—but because it was a history too closely tied to events. In this respect, it was like the work of contemporary economists who, he charged, had harnessed their work to current affairs and to the short-term imperatives of governance.17 Such a myopic form of historical understanding, tethered to power and focused on the present, evaded explanation and was allergic to theory: in Braudel’s view, it lacked both critical distance and intellectual substance. His solution was that all the social sciences should go back to older models and problems—for example, to the treatment of mercantile capitalism by Karl Marx, the “genius” who “was the first to construct true social models, on the basis of a historical *longue durée*.18 In short, even fifty years ago, Braudel himself was already recommending a return to the *longue durée*. For him, the issue was the pursuit of an ideal of scientific history that had also engaged Marc Bloch and Fevre.18

Anglophone historians of the generation immediately after Braudel’s began to move away en masse from *longue-durée* models as appropriate modes of scholarship. That retreat from questions of scale in fact tells a story about fears very much like Braudel’s own. In the United States, for example, state subsidies for the education of returning soldiers under the GI Bill of 1944 had led to an explosion of graduate programs in all fields, including history. The training time for the PhD was expanded from three to six years, and often extended even beyond that. By the late 1970s, when a new generation of American graduate students came of age, “the academic labor market in most fields became saturated, and there was concern about overproduction of PhDs,” reported the National Science Foundation: “The annual number of doctorates awarded rose from 8,611 in 1957 to 33,755 in 1973, an increase of nearly 9 percent per year.”19

In their quest for collective professional independence and individual success in an increasingly competitive field, historians of this generation began to rethink their relationship to both archives and audiences. As the need to specialize

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became ever more acute, archival mastery became the index of this specialization and temporal focus ever more imperative. In the earliest years of doctoral training in the American historical profession, a thesis could cover two centuries or more, as had Frederick Jackson Turner’s study of trading posts across North American history or W. E. B. Du Bois’s work on the suppression of the African slave trade from 1638 to 1870. A 2013 survey of some 8,000 history dissertations written in the United States since the 1880s shows that the average period covered in 1900 was about seventy-five years; by 1975, that had fallen to about thirty years. Only in the twenty-first century has it rebounded to between seventy-five and a hundred years—evidence of the more general return to the longue durée.

Anxiety about specialization—about “knowing more and more about less and less”—had dogged the rise of professionalization and expertise, initially in the sciences but then more broadly, since the 1920s. But only in the 1980s did historians on both sides of the Atlantic begin to complain that specialization had created acute fragmentation in their field.

Figure 1. Usage of the expression “more and more about less [and less],” 1900–1990, Google Ngram viewer

“Historical inquiries are ramifying in a hundred directions at once, and there is no coordination among them ... synthesis into a coherent whole, even for limited regions, seems almost impossible,” Bernard Bailyn observed in his 1981 presidential address to the American Historical Association (AHA). “The Challenge of Modern Historiography,” as he called it, was precisely “to bring order into large areas of history and thus to reintroduce ... [it] to a wider reading public, through synthetic works, narrative in structure, on major themes.” Shortly afterwards, in 1985, R. R. Palmer, another former AHA President, complained of his own field that, “Specialization has become extreme ... it is hard to see what such

specialization contributes to the education of the young or the enlightenment of the public.” And in 1987, the young David Cannadine similarly condemned the “cult of professionalism” that meant “more and more academic historians were writing more and more academic history which fewer and fewer people were actually reading.” The result, Cannadine warned, “was that, all too often, the role of the historian as public teacher was effectively destroyed.” Professionalization had led to marginalization. Historians were increasingly cut off from non-specialist readers as they talked only to one another about ever narrower topics studied on ever shorter time-scales.

Peter Novick, in his moralizing biography of the American historical profession, saw the 1980s as the moment when it became clear that fragmentation was endemic and “there was no king in Israel.” The anthropological turn, with its emphasis on “thick description”; the export of microhistory from Italy via France; the destabilization of the liberal subject by identity politics and postcolonial theory; the emergent skepticism with regard to grand narratives diagnosed by Jean-François Lyotard: these were all centrifugal forces tearing the fabric of history apart. Yet such jeremiads may have missed the central point: the disintegration of the discipline was simply the symptom of a much larger trend—the triumph of the short durée.

Short-durée thinking was driven less by theoretical considerations than by the professional and economic realities of the academic job market after 1968. As we shall see, a generation with limited employment prospects increasingly defined itself by its mastery of specific and discrete archives. As young historians infused their archival visits with the politics of protest and identity, anglophone historians widely adopted the genre of microhistory in a movement that produced historical monographs of exceptional sophistication. But these microhistorians rarely took the pains to contextualize their short temporal horizons for a common reader; ultimately, they were playing in a game that rewarded the intensive subdivision of knowledge. In a university committed to the division of labor, there was ever less room for younger researchers to write tracts aimed at a general audience, or for the deep temporal perspective that such writing often required. And there was the rub: the requirements of the profession thwarted the political ambitions of a generation. Political commitment did not cause irrelevance, as Novick somewhat unkindly suggested. Rather, an entire generation of historians were unable to make good on their political commitments because of the constraints of their guild. Ultimately, baby-boomer historians whose own lives were bound up with

feminist and labor movements warned their own graduate students that without specialization they would never get a job. And once generations of historians reproduced the short durée without really knowing why they were doing so, the result was irrelevance.

The resulting “Age of Fracture,” as the American intellectual historian Daniel Rodgers has called it, was essentially defined by the contraction of temporal horizons: “In the middle of the twentieth century, history’s massive, inescapable, larger-than-life presence had weighed down on social discourse. To talk seriously was to talk of the long, large-scale movements of time.” By the 1980s, modernization theory, Marxism, “theories of long-term economic development and cultural lag, the inexorabilities of the business cycle and the historians’ durée,” had all been replaced by a foreshortened sense of time focused on one brief moment: the here and now of the immediate present.27 The unintended consequence of microhistory, deprived of its long context, was that even studies rich in theory and driven by brave questions became largely irrelevant to nonspecialists due to the extremely short time-spans on which they focused.

Shorter time-scales had, of course, a literary place before they influenced the writing of professional history. From Plutarch’s Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans to Samuel Smiles’s Lives of the Engineers (1874–99), biography had formed an instructive moral substrate to the writing of history, often focusing on a purportedly diachronic category of “character” visible in these exemplary life-stories.28 Yet never before the 1970s had an entire generation of professional historians made so pronounced a revolt against durée thinking, as scholars born during the baby boom rejected a style of writing typical of relevant, engaged historians in the generation just before their own. The works of Marxist historians, from E. P. Thompson’s The Making of the English Working Class to Eugene Genovese’s Roll, Jordan, Roll, had recovered the experiences of the repressed as a durée adventure, borrowing techniques like the examination of ballads, jokes, and figures of speech from the study of folklore in order to characterize working-class and slave culture and explore widespread attitudinal tensions between subaltern and elite.29 That willingness to characterize grand moments shifted in the early 1970s with the work of social historians of labor like Joan Wallach Scott and William Sewell, who narrowed the focus of their studies to a single factory floor or patterns of interaction in a neighborhood, and imported from sociology habits of attention to individual actors and details.30 The task of understanding shifted

from generalizations about the aggregate to micropolitics and the successes or failures of particular battles within the larger class struggle. This led to the charge that social history had abandoned all interest in politics, power, and ideology, leading its practitioners instead to “sit somewhere in the stratosphere, unrooted in reality.”

This wholesale renunciation of the big questions and large scales that had long informed social history was in part an Oedipal revolt against the intellectual patriarchs who dominated conferences, monologued through the questions raised by younger historians, and jokingly dismissed the new history as a pedantic exercise. Geoff Eley has memorialized this moment in his autobiographical account *A Crooked Line*, from the perspective of a British child of the postwar baby boom faced with a tightening job market and fighting alongside his peers for their professional positions with a new approach to the archive. According to Eley, the cultural turn was a kind of personal liberation for younger historians who “bridl[ed] against the dry and disembodied work of so much conventional historiography,” and for whom theory “resuscitated the archive’s epistemological life.” The rebellion of young historians against old here parallels, in terms of its rhetoric, the anti-war, free-speech, and anti-racism youth movements of the same moment in the late 1960s and 1970s: it reflected a call of conscience, a determination to make the institution of history align with a more critical politics. Talking about the “big implications” of this reaction, Eley is direct: historians of his generation took their politics in the form of a break with the corrupted organs of international rule, those very institutions that had been the major consumers of *longue durée* history for generations before.

The major weapon used in this battle was an attention to local detail, a practice derived from the urban history tradition, where German and British city histories frequently narrated labor altercation as part of the story of urban community. Indeed, the increasing emphasis on extremely local experiences in the work of historians such as Gareth Stedman Jones and David Roediger allowed such a precise examination of race, class, and power in the community that historians were able to reckon as contingent the failures of working-class movements to transform the nation. Exploiting an arcane archive became a coming-of-age

31. Tony Judt, “A Clown in Regal Purple: Social History and the Historians,” *History Workshop Journal* 7, no. 1 (1979): 66–94, here pp. 84–85 (on Scott and Sewell, among others). Judt was, however, also critical of the effects of Braudel’s *longue durée* on the “dismantl[ing] of the historical event altogether. One result of this is a glut of articles about minute and marginal matters.”


ritual for a historian, one of the primary signs by which one identified disciplined commitment to methodology, theoretical sophistication, a saturation in historiographical context, and a familiarity with documents. Gaining access to a hitherto unexploited repository signaled that one knew the literature well enough to identify the gaps within it, and indicated a mastery of the analytical tools necessary to make sense of any historical record, no matter how obscure or complex.

A characteristic of this movement was the development of a new kind of microhistory that abandoned grand narrative or moral instruction in favor of focus on a particular event: the charivaris of early modern France as analyzed by Natalie Zemon Davis or the cat massacres of eighteenth-century Paris as considered by Robert Darnton, for example. Microhistory had originated as a means of testing *longue-durée* questions, in reaction to the totalizing theories of Marxism and the *Annales* school and in search of what Edoardo Grendi famously called the “exceptionally ‘normal.’” Its analytical method was therefore not inherently incompatible with temporal depth, as demonstrated in a work such as Carlo Ginzburg’s study of the *benandanti* and the witches’ Sabbath, which moved between historical scales of days and of millennia. Nor was microhistory originally disengaged from larger political and social questions beyond the academy: its Italian roots included a belief in the transformative capacity of individual action “beyond, though not outside, the constraints of prescriptive and oppressive normative systems.”

However, when transposed to the anglophone historical profession, microhistory produced a habit of writing that depended upon shorter and shorter time-scales and more and more intensive use of archives. In some sense, the more obscure or difficult to understand a particular set of documents, the better: the more a strange archive tested a writer’s sophistication in a wealth of competing theories of identity, sexuality, professionalism, and agency, the more the use of that archive proved the scholar’s fluency with sources and commitment to immersion in the field. A suspicion regarding grand narratives also fuelled a movement toward empathetic stories of past individuals with whom even nonprofessional readers could identify; such “sentimentalist” accounts risked the charge of “embracing the local and personal at the expense of engagement with larger

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public and political issues” even as they earned their authors fame and popularity within and beyond the academy.  

With a few exceptions, the classic works of the cultural turn concentrated on a particular episode: the identification of a particular disorder within psychology, or the analysis of a particular riot in the labor movement, for instance.  

Almost every social historian experimented in some sense with short-*durée* historical writing, each filling in a single episode in the long story of labor, medicine, gender, or domesticity. The studies of psychological diagnoses followed a particular model: each defined its time-frame to coincide with the life of the doctors doing innovative work—the diagnosis of hysteria, the fad of mesmerism, the birth of agoraphobia, or the discourse on fugue states, which, according to Ian Hacking’s *Mad Travelers*, departed from a twenty-year medical tradition suddenly deprived of its “ecological niche.”  

Biological time-scales of between five and fifty years became the model for original work in history. Microhistorians revolutionized historical writing about unions and racism, the nature of whiteness, and the production of history itself. Indeed, a flood of doctoral dissertations since that time has concentrated on the micro and the local as an arena in which the historian can exercise his or her skills of biography, archival reading, and periodization within the petri dish of a handful of years. In the age of microhistory, it was these minimalist theses that were most likely to impress a hiring committee, and advisors urged young historians to narrow, not to broaden, their focus on place and time, trusting that serious work on gender, race, and class comes most faithfully out of the smallest, not the largest, picture. Yet, according to Eley, the project of politically-engaged social history was largely a failure, due precisely to this over-concentration on the local: “With time, the closeness and reciprocity ... between the macrohistorical interest in capturing the direction of change within a whole society and the microhistories of particular places ... pulled apart.” Eley even contrasted local social history with another politically oriented history, that of the *Annales* tradition, which much like his own project promised a “total” critique of history of the present.

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From the late 1970s to the end of the 1980s, broad swaths of the historical profession thus retreated into short-durée studies. Within a generation, the field was dominated by the microhistorical, by an event-based history focusing on the short durée. Of course, longue-durée history never disappeared entirely from the publishing lists of university presses. In 2001, Jean Heffer noted that “An approach in terms of longue durée might seem old-fashioned today when post-modernism pushes scholars towards fragmented and fugacious inquiries, but it remains an asymptotic ideal we may tend toward, without being able to reach it some day.”42 But the old-fashioned can quickly become the new-fangled. The longue durée is no longer so unapproachable; its full promise is now within reach.

**A Change of Scale: A Return to the Longue Durée?**

To return to the longue durée, the best way to go forward may be to look back. In general, the major histories of the ancient and medieval West drew on theology, geography, and cosmology in their attempts to narrate holistic syntheses over broad scales of time. For Thucydides, Herodotus, and Augustine, history was an attempt to disentangle the threads unifying biographical studies of character with anthropological and geographical studies of foreign cultures. The first historical works were thus long in their time-scale insofar as their aim was an explication of knowledge in its universality. With Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, that orientation toward the long and universal progress of nations received the imprint of the Enlightenment and a new moral purpose grounded in the nation-state: the study of global history would, he believed, help each nation discern its cosmic place in the revelation of divine will through material reality. In this project to understand the global, moral purpose of the nation—which was shared by figures such as Jules Michelet or Thomas Babington Macaulay—the long view could be used to contextualize different kinds of progress, whether toward empire, revolution, liberalism, aristocracy, or democracy. The influence of this project infused historiography throughout the century that followed.

By the twentieth century, the longue durée (although generally not, of course, under that name) offered a canonical tool for writing revisionary history in the service of reform. For example, assembling long-range comparisons helped Fabian historians like R. H. Tawney, John and Barbara Hammond, and Sidney and Beatrice Webb to reimagine socialist Britain as the extension of ancient beginnings. In the kernel of medieval parish government, argued the Webbs, lay the root of modern participatory, representative government and the welfare state. According to Tawney, the sixteenth-century struggles between export-oriented pastoralists and sustenance-oriented poor farmers offered a precedent for struggles

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against landlordism in the age of advanced capitalism and international land reform.\textsuperscript{43} Long-range history was a tool for making sense of modern institutions, for rendering utopian schemes comprehensible and revolutionary programs for society thinkable. Indeed, Tawney’s career exemplifies the activist agenda of long-term thinking by historians of that generation. Sent to China by the Institute of Pacific Relations in 1931, he authored an agrarian history that sounded strangely similar to his histories of Britain: the drama between landlord and peasant was presented as the ultimate pivot of history and evidence of the immediate need for rational land reform.\textsuperscript{44} In this way, history allowed Tawney’s arguments, so pertinent to the era of David Lloyd George’s People’s Budget and land reform in Britain, to be generalized around the world. Tawney thus demonstrated that a universal truth concerning class dynamics and land ownership, narrated as a \textit{longue-durée} history inspired by Marx and the American political economist and land-tax reformer Henry George, could be brought to bear on specific national traditions and its truth tested and persuasively argued for in different regions. Such applications were very different from those Braudel would later condemn among his own contemporaries for being excessively presentist, uncritical about power, and evasive about fundamental questions of causation and explanation.

In the immediate postwar period, a series of new institutions began wrestling with the question of international development. The administrators of those institutions often looked to history when attempting to position a major shift in policy. One of the most important debates was whether to continue the program of radical redistribution of land, envisioned as an alternative to Communism, that the British Empire had been forced to carry out in Ireland and had begun to apply in Scotland and England through the People’s Budget and the postwar land nationalization schemes. Land reform measures were almost immediately enacted by a newly independent India. Within the United Nations, land reform was touted as a peaceful path to reform lying midway between Soviet Communism and American capitalism.\textsuperscript{45} In all of these debates, histories of land use,

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private property, and agricultural policy played a major role. Among them were works by Tawney, Joan Thirsk, and other British historians who had established the significance of peasant commons and the tragedy of the enclosure movement in the generation before E. P. Thompson began writing on similar subjects.46 The institutions of international development looked to history to supply a roadmap to freedom, independence, economic growth, and reciprocal peace-making between the nations of the world. For example, John Boyd Orr, founding director of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, launched his career by publishing a retrospective history of hunger that began with Julius Caesar’s conquest of Britain and ended with improving relationships between farm laborers and landlords following the Agriculture Act of 1920.47 By the 1960s, economic historians like David Landes had retooled the study of the Industrial Revolution to support Green Revolution development policies, promising a future of plenty on the back of a history of constant invention.48 And in the 1970s, theorists of land reform like the agrarian economist Elias Tuma and the geographer Russell King turned to longue-durée history, synthesizing the work of historians as they consulted for the organs of international policy by contextualizing present-day land reform in light of centuries of peasant struggle for participation in agrarian empire dating back to ancient Rome.49

There was plenty of longue-durée history of land policy for them to work with. As the founders of the United Nations debated appropriate interventions in the Global South to put the world on the path to a peaceful order, followers of Henry George, still numerous on both sides of the Atlantic, turned to the longue durée to offer an account of history that read landlord monopoly as the signal crime of the modern era and popular ownership of land as its necessary antidote. “Georgist” histories appeared throughout the 1940s and 1950s, establishing narratives of the American agrarian tradition since Thomas Jefferson. These Georgist historians labored to make clear the tide of abuses by landlords and the necessity of populist government that would hold these land grabs at bay. In this vein, Alfred Noblit Chandler’s Land Title Origins: A Tale of Force and Fraud presented a history of the expanded powers acquired by capitalists over land, tracing the problem to the railway barons of George’s era and their power over the

land-grant colleges funded by the Morrill Act of 1862. Similarly, Aaron Sakolski’s *Land Tenure and Land Taxation in America* offered an intellectual history of the United States based on the long story of successive amendments to property law, pointing to an enduring tradition of debates over the history of land ownership, from Henry Maine through Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges, Max Weber, and G. R. Geiger. Ultimately, he reasoned, the injunctions concerning land were the reflection of a conception of justice, and that justice had at its core a set of spiritual and religious values in which participatory access to land was the direct manifestation of a doctrine that valued every human, rich and poor alike. According to Sakolski, “The early Christian church fathers were imbued with the ancient Hebrew traditions, and their concept of justice as related to landownership followed along the same lines.” All the way back to biblical times, moral precedents could be found for challenging the accumulation of capital among landed elites, and these precedents were now packaged to promote legal action on the national and international scale.

These debates did not fail to influence how professional historians understood their own work, as they were writing for an audience of civil servants and experts who used historians’ *longue durée* perspective to support public reform. Those writing about land issues in the age of Tawney thus borrowed the long view not simply to structure their work but also to engage with larger questions of public policy. Their research constituted a conversation between disciplinary history and the institutions of international governance, ranging over centuries with the help of close readings of particular documents, events, and characters, and leaning heavily on the work of other scholars in the field. For historians who came of age in the 1950s and 1960s—the very generation against whom Eley and Sewell rebelled—*longue durée* history was a tool for persuading international bureaucrats and making policy.

The classical *longue durée* of social historians like Tawney, using their sense of the deep past of institutions and movements to persuade their readers about the need for social change, was nevertheless appropriated into a “dirty *longue durée*” in the hands of think-tanks and NGOs. In this dirty *longue durée*, non-historians dealt with an impoverished array of historical evidence to draw broad-gauge conclusions about the tendency of progress. They rarely acknowledged secondary sources or earlier scholarly traditions in thinking about the period or events in question. Typically, they dismissed Marxist and other leftist perspectives

out of hand, offering an interpretation of history that vaguely coincided with free-market thinking, faith in technological progress, and the future bounty promised by Western ingenuity.

That history can be used to promote a political bias is nothing new. There are older precedents, of course, to the dirty longue durée, going back at least to Charles Dupin’s Commercial Power of Great Britain and extending through the popular histories of technology of the 1850s. Yet political and institutional conditions must align for any new genre to come into being. In the postwar United States, with the expansion of NGOs, the broadening of American hegemony, and institutions of transnational governance like the United Nations and the World Bank, the conditions were set for a wide class of consumers of longue durée history, hungry for instruction about how to manage tremendous questions like famine, poverty, drought, and tyranny. As baby-boomer historians retreated from direct engagement with these issues into the microhistory of race and class, the long-term history of poverty and hunger became the domain of other writers and essayists with no historical training. Some of them were demographers or economists employed by the Club of Rome or the Rand Corporation, others were psychologists, biologists, self-proclaimed futurologists, or historical amateurs writing for a popular audience in the era of the alleged “population bomb” and “limits to growth.” Dirty longue durée history blossomed, but historians were not the ones with their hands in the dirt.

International governance’s demand for useful historical stories incentivized the production of impossibly inclusive large-scale syntheses. The demands for historical understanding, and indeed the leaps of rationality and abstraction executed with historical data, grew larger and larger. The most fantastic of these claims were made by the physicist turned systems-theorist and futurologist Herman Kahn, who promised to settle debates about resource use, environmental catastrophe, and consumption by examining long-term trends in world history. Kahn and his collaborators charted streamlined historical data on population growth since 8000 BCE against prophecies of future technological improvement and population control, and concluded by foreseeing a postindustrial world of “increasing abundance.”

Equally dramatic were the historical claims made by the chiefs of individual agencies about their own discipline. In 1970, for instance, William D. Clark, director of information at the World Bank, gave a speech that framed development economics in terms of world historical shifts. His conclusion, ill founded upon historical data, urged the importance of development economics relative to any other policy program of the time: “This is not likely to be known as the Nuclear Age, or the Space Age, or the American Century, or the Era of the Common Man,” he proclaimed. “It is going to be known as the Development Age, the age in which two-thirds of the world’s population revolted against their customary but no longer tolerable conditions.” Civil rights in America, according to Clark, would be seen by historians as a “minor skirmish” in comparison with that great question.⁵⁶

By the end of the 1970s, this tendency to go long began to look tarnished. Furthermore, those historians still left in the longue-durée game were subject to pressures from readers divided by the impossibly conflicting opinions typical of the international scene during the Cold War. Consider the experience of Caroline Ware, editor of the History of Mankind, a multi-volume project commissioned by UNESCO and developed between 1954 and 1966. Ware’s text, submitted for approval to various civil servants of the nations represented by UNESCO, was subjected to an ideological tug-of-war between Russian and French readers, Protestant and Catholic reviewers, all of whom lobbied UNESCO for revisions that would reflect their own national and ideological understandings of world history. For a historian working on behalf of an organ of international governance like Ware, the success of such a project depended upon forging a synthesis that

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both communists and capitalists could agree with, a task that proved simply insurmountable. The lobbying for content was such that the project’s staff despaired of ever writing a synthetic history capable of working within this consensual frame. Ware herself wrote in a letter that “it is not possible to write a history of the 20th century.”57 Such dispiriting experiences of writing for the organs of international government tarnished the genre of long-range history still further. Ware’s frustration with rhetorical appeasement was something her microhistorian colleagues in the archives could avoid entirely. These experiences, and many others like them, provided a major rationale for a generation of historians to retreat from longue-durée history in general.

By and large, after this episode, historians as a cohort declined to engage with futurists, leaving “dirty” longue-durée history in the hands of journalists and pundits. Seen as hardly a science at all, it was rarely assigned in the classroom, and almost never debated or emulated. Works of microhistory have expanded our understanding of peasant lives, the variety of psychological impulses, public and private, and the constructedness of human experience. But they have also largely abandoned the rhetoric and the ambition of a larger moral critique available to non-historians as a source for alternative social formations over the longue durée.

In that era of ideological divisiveness, social scientists like James C. Scott and Sewell effectively retreated from engagement with institutions of international government. Researchers became increasingly skeptical that the institutions of international development could be ideologically neutral or effective as the promises of modernization theory withered and died across the globe from Latin America to Southeast Asia, especially after the Vietnam War.58 Their bibliographies, in contrast with those of the previous generation, would accordingly be filled with publications in peer-reviewed journals rather than contributions to the ballooning grey literature produced for international organizations.

As historians, anthropologists, and sociologists stopped writing for the institutions of world government, economists took their place.59 Beyond history

departments, the consequences of losing this audience of influential organizations has expressed itself in many other ways: a creeping science-envy within the social sciences more generally, leading to increased use of modeling; a focus on game-theory and rational actors—in short, a retreat to the individual and the abstract as opposed to the collective and the concrete. A policy-driven focus on case studies migrated from law schools (where it had been established in the nineteenth century) to business schools and political science departments, where future bureaucrats learn only the rudiments of history. These students accumulate statistics without the perspective of history or historiography, benefitting little from the revolutionary critiques of identity theory and epistemology that have transformed the discipline over the last forty years. The baby-boom generation did much for the ability of historians to understand the world, but it did so at the cost of their ability to speak back to the institutions of governance.

Seen in this light, much of anglophone historiography from roughly 1968 to 2008 can be cast as evidence of a moral crisis, an inward-looking, almost blind-eyed retreat from commenting on contemporary global issues and alternative futures. In that era, historians turned away from their former role as advisors of policy and the prophets of national and international or civic and social cooperation. Instead, they took upon themselves a metaphysics of injustice, written in terms of race, class, and gender and honed through commentaries on the peculiarities of psychology, marriage, or law, for instance. While they refined their tools and their understandings of social justice, they simultaneously inflicted upon their discipline habits of microscopic attention that culminated in a sense of practical irrelevance, of the historian as an astronomer in a high tower, distanced from the political and economic landscape.

Part of this crisis was an increasing reluctance on the part of historians to enter the fray of international relations and public policy in the role of professional advisor. Historians of Sewell and Darnton’s generation commented far less frequently on political events than the contemporaries of Tawney or Lewis Mumford. Instead, the role of advising citizens and policy-makers on the utopian possibilities of long-term change was largely ceded to colleagues in economics departments, with the resulting dominance of newspaper headlines and policy circles by theories that idealized the free market, taking little to nothing from the moral lessons that postcolonial and social historians have drawn from the histories of empire and industrialization, public health and the environment.60

In the 1990s, Michael Bérubé and other academic commentators in the United States complained about the increasing irrelevance of history and other humanities disciplines, looking nostalgically back to the New York intelligentsia of the 1950s and the active role played by historians and literary critics in the

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By the end of the decade, a younger generation of historians began to reopen the question of the longue durée. Many of them were ancient and medieval historians by training, for whom silence on the topic of long time-spans was particularly painful. Recently, for example, medievalist Daniel Lord Smail has led the charge into a dialogue with evolutionary biology, opening up questions about topics such as the periodization of human identity and consumerism.

The emergence of questions of “world history” and “big history” also widened the scope of the narrative as it began to incorporate an environmentally-minded retelling of history, in which human events were contextualized against a broader backdrop of natural processes. A return to the longue durée, founded in part upon discontents with the limits of microhistory, thus started to take shape, accompanied by a moral rethinking of historians’ place in the university and in the world beyond. In addition to these moral reasons, this shift was also encouraged by two purely technological factors: not only were larger numbers of archives available, but more analytical tools existed to treat them. Quite independently of debates on global climate change or the moral duties of historians, these two factors began to drive historians to consider longer and longer time periods.

Big is Back: The Return of the Longue Durée

In the last decade, evidence for the return of the longue durée can be found across the intellectual landscape. Jeremy Adelman notes of his field that “it became unfashionable to posit theories about ... historical trajectories over the very long-run,” but change is now in the air: “the longue durée is back.” Thomas Laqueur tells his colleagues at a conference, “all of us are ... invested, more or less explicitly, in a longue durée of sexuality.” Susan Gillman remarks that “anyone in literary studies who has looked recently at titles of books, conferences, research clusters, and even syllabi across the field cannot have missed two key words ... that are doing substantial periodizing duty for literary and cultural criticism”: one is geographical (the Atlantic world), the other “a chronological unit, the longue durée.”

durée.” Recent works have placed the Cold War and migration, the Black Sea and the Arab Spring, women’s spirituality and the history of Austria, German orientalism and concepts of empire, into the perspective of the longue durée. And even a cursory scan of recent publications turns up a host of long-range histories: of around-the-world travel over 500 years; of the first 3,000 years of Christianity or of anti-Judaism from ancient Egypt to the present day; of strategy from chimpanzees to game theory; of genocide “from Sparta to Darfur” and guerrilla warfare “from ancient times to the present”; of the very “shape” of human history over the last 15,000 years; and of a host of similar grand topics directed to wide reading publics.

Indeed, 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 “prehistory.” And more focused still, though with perhaps the most immediate resonance for present concerns, is the history of the Anthropocene, the two centuries since the Industrial Revolution in which human beings have comprised a collective actor powerful enough to affect the environment on a planetary scale. The time-scales of these movements are, respectively, cosmological, archaeological, and climatological: each represents a novel expansion of historical perspectives and operates on horizons longer—usually much longer—than a generation, a human lifetime, or the other roughly biological time-spans that have defined most recent historical writing.

The arrival in recent years of mass digitization projects in libraries and crowdsourced oral histories online has announced an age of easy access to a tremendous amount of archival material. Coupled with the constructive use of tools for abstracting knowledge—such as Google Ngram, Wordle, and Paper Machines—these digital corpora invite scholars to try out historical hypotheses across the time-scale of multiple centuries. The nature of the tools available and the abundance of texts render history that is both longue-durée and based on archival sources a surmountable problem. In law and other forms of institutional history, where the premium on precedent gives longue-durée answers a peculiar power, we shall surely see more of such work sooner rather than later. Scholars working on the history of law have found that digital methods enable them to answer questions over a longer scale: the website The Old Bailey Online, for instance, covers the period 1673–1914 and hosts the largest collection of subaltern sources currently available in the English-speaking world, while Colin Wilder’s

72. http://books.google.com/ngrams; http://www.wordle.net/; http://papermachines.org/. Wordle is a word cloud generator that makes it possible to visualize the themes of a text and organize them hierarchically. The words that appear most frequently are presented at the center of the “cloud” and in a larger typeface. Paper Machines is a plug-in designed for the bibliography management program Zotero. It facilitates the application of various visualization tools to corpora assembled manually by historians on their own computers.
“Republic of Literature” project digitizes early modern legal texts and links this information to a gigantic social networking map of teachers and students of law, thereby revealing who drove legal change in early modern Germany, where many of our first notions of the public domain, private property, and mutuality emerged.73

Faced with these two frontiers, the one of moral duty and the other of technological opportunity, historians need to begin a conversation about what it means to think in terms of centuries rather than decades. We need to highlight particular digital techniques and their application to questions of periodization suited to graduate training. We also need to hold up new exemplars and develop a new theory of transtemporal history that would help us understand what makes a persuasive and meaningful study of multiple centuries, of an “epoch” or an “age.” To reach this goal, we must consider the methods used in the subfields that have successfully dealt with *longue-durée* questions, along with the abstracted relationship between the large and the small and the various tools that can help the process of synthesis.

Particular domains of research have different relationships to social movements and international governance, but in all cases we can point to *longue-durée* studies that hold promise. Those working in the field of public health are lucky enough to have Allan Brandt and Robert Proctor’s books on the cigarette “holocaust” in the United States.74 Political economy has likewise been well served over longer time-scales. Fredrik Albritton Jonsson’s powerful history of Adam Smith and capitalism bridges what were traditionally separate fields—colonial bioprospecting, the history of science, and the force of Malthusian arguments in the official mind—to foreground a century-long debate between natural historians, optimistic about an era of unlimited abundance, and political economists, convinced that a Presbyterian God had ruled against the poor.75 Blending ecology and economics in a similar way, Alison Bashford has combined histories of population, eugenics, agriculture, and geopolitics into a global study of the surprising resilience of neo-Malthusianism well into the age of the dirty *longue durée* in the 1970s.76

Social and cultural movements have been less extensively treated in *longue-durée* studies and, despite the attention they have received from historians, have only rarely been contextualized over longer periods in a way that would dramatize these events for average readers. For social movements, the scholar must look back to 1980 for a book as widely known among radicals as Howard Zinn’s

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history of labor. When we look for more recent syntheses, such as Peter Marshall’s histories of radicalism or John Curl’s magnificent work on cooperatives, we are obliged to recognize that it is not professional historians who have done most to break new ground; urban organizers are more likely to cite the work of a journalist like Mike Davis or a fellow organizer like Beryl Satter. Social movements interested in identity and sexuality must likewise look to past decades for works, like those by John Boswell and William Leach, that treat such topics over longer time-spans: the major syntheses stopped being written after about 1980. The rest of our work as historians—sadly, all the piles and generations of it—is far less likely to be encountered by members of the reading public or even journalists.

Our most hard-fought debates over race, class, and unions are at their most relevant when read by master’s students who go on to become activists and organizers; without the aid of longue-durée positioning and synthesis, they are indigestible to first-year students, non-specialists, and members of the public. An author like Zinn remains widely cited by social activists and alternative media. Historians of another generation such as Tawney aimed for a readership among a general bureaucratic elite who used history to ponder the wider frontiers of international policy and stake claims more daring than those of political scientists, constrained by theory and social science. What is common to both authors is their confidence in history’s capacity to command stories that can persuade readers whose actions matter, whether because of their privilege and expertise (in the case of Tawney) or because of their number, organization, and dedication to a cause (as for Zinn). Alternative futures became the purview of futurists and science-fiction writers only when historians gave up the field. Our hope is that a return to the longue durée will evoke courageous engagement with the whole range of precedents for public writing, both within and without the historical profession.

With these opportunities and challenges in mind, the recent return to the longue durée as a key to environmental engagement bears examination. Nothing about the new technologies for treating digital archives forces longue-durée environmental history to take on questions of biology. Rather, digital history offers up

multiple possibilities for better understanding the evolution of modern institutions, an opportunity missed by devotees of the Anthropocene. Historians like Smail and Dipesh Chakrabarty have invoked the *longue durée* to analyze the relationship between pollution, environmental devastation, and humankind’s shifting agency in our natural environment since the beginning of the Anthropocene. From the perspective of *longue durée* work in the tradition of Tawney and Mumford, entering a dialogue with departments of biology is a secondary goal in comparison with history’s ability to directly speak to the policy-makers and activists who deal with climate governance. Ironically, the moral purpose of a *longue durée* history of species biology seems rather insignificant in comparison with more pressing long-term historical issues, for instance recalling the state’s power to create and destroy common property in land and water. In this age of global warming and coming wars over land and water, surely histories of class struggles over resources and their distribution are needed now more than ever, but we have few examples to which to turn.

That narrative move to larger scales relates directly to the availability of “big data,” the possibility of analyzing them, and the pressing question of whether we go long or short with those data. There are places in the historical record where that decision—to look at a wider context or not—makes all the difference in the world. The need to frame questions more and more broadly determines which data we use and how we manipulate them, a challenge that much *longue durée* work has yet to take up. The power offered by *longue durée* frames is that of magnificent persuasion, of opening up conversations about social change, its potential, and its limitations. It would be a mistake to reduce the *longue durée* merely to biological questions or the desire to attract the attention of our colleagues in the hard sciences.

We ourselves have used digital methods that enable the historian both to excerpt one episode from its long context with increased confidence and to more accurately synthesize the history of transnational social movements over centuries. In Jo Guldi’s work on the history of walking, Google Book Search made it possible to test and extend the claims of Walter Benjamin and Richard Sennett about the behavior of strangers on the public street in the nineteenth-century city. After beginning a study of the rivalry between private property and common property systems since 1870, she began working with digital tools that aggregated commonly used words into timelines showing the rise and fall of different concepts. This work eventually led to the creation of a digital toolbox, Paper Machines, which she released with collaborator Christopher Johnson-Roberson in 2012. In Guldi’s experience, both the cheap tool—Google Book Search—and the more expensive tool—Paper Machines—function as “macrosopes” that offer a window onto long-term change, grounded in quantitative analysis of words in their context. This quantitatively-based confidence, founded on the algorithmic analysis of masses of information about cultural thought or a particular government

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institution, enables researchers to generate new hypotheses and to characterize periods of time.82 Macrosopes thus act as an intellectual stimulus to making claims about the longue durée, each grounded in verifiable and comparable characterizations of place, institution, discourse, or period that the historian can weave into a richly contextualized background to support his or her archival research.

The recent work of the economist Thomas Piketty and his collaborators is another example of this quantitative turn. Piketty’s work compares the relative levels of inequality produced under capitalism from the Industrial Revolution on, foregrounding the rise in income inequality around the world since the era of Reagan and Thatcher.83 These quantitative analyses are impressively focused deployments of hard data, and they bear upon public debates in exactly the way we hope a relevant study of the longue durée would. They also raise important questions about whether this kind of data-based research can be generalized to other fields of study. Is it conducted, like the ill-fated quantitative turn of the 1970s, in individual research laboratories aimed at developing one-off theses, supported with numerical data acquired at vast cost and inapplicable to other topics? Or will quantitative digital research follow the other digital humanities in manufacturing tools for identifying aggregate change over time? Projects such as Google Ngrams or Paper Machines have the potential to revolutionize classroom practice by putting powerful new forms of analysis into the hands of the masses.

Such questions about how scholars of the longue durée work with archives and digital tools are all the more important when it comes to the representation of subalterns and developing nations in a world dominated by anglophone conversations and nationalist archives. Where funding for digitization is linked to nation-building projects (as it is in many places), archives relating to women, minorities, and the poor risk being left aside: digital documents require ongoing funding for their servers and maintenance. The power of digital tools to promote longue-durée synthesis that includes perspectives other than that of the nation-state rests upon the ongoing creation and maintenance of genuinely inclusive archives.

These kinds of questions draw deeply from the traditions of microhistory and its focus on how particular and vulnerable troves of testimony can illuminate the story of slavery, capitalism, or domesticity. And indeed, questions about how to preserve subaltern voices through the integration of microarchives within the digitized record of the longue durée form a new and vitally important frontier of scholarship. That immense labor, and the critical thinking behind it, deserves to be recognized and rewarded through specially curated publications, grants, and prizes aimed at scholars who address the institutional work of the longue-durée microarchive. This is another side of the public work of the longue durée, one that aims less at broad audiences, high sales, or influencing bureaucrats than at the careful marshaling of documents, objects, stories, resources, and employment to create the microarchival structure for macrohistorical stories of genuine importance.84

The moral stakes of longue-durée subjects—from the reorientation of our economy to cope with global warming to 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 not limited to) problems of environment, governance, capitalism, exploitation, and psychology. Longue-durée history is rightly deployed to allude to the Anthropocene when it becomes necessary to persuade an audience of the fact of a long-term relationship between humanity and the planet, particularly in terms of the atmosphere, delicate ecosystems, and constrained natural resources. But it may equally persuade us of the long struggles about the legacy of capitalism toward injustice, as did Tawney and Mumford, or over the governance of the environment, as Denis Cosgrove and John Gillis have done more recently.85

In the era of longue-durée tools, when experimenting across centuries becomes part of the toolkit of every graduate student, conversations about the appropriate audience and application of large-scale examinations of history are becoming part of the fabric of every history department. We should not constrain them to the Anthropocene or limit them to Marxist approaches, but we would be wise to take instruction from the utopian aspirations of both those genres, and to welcome back a form of history with the serious ambition of reconfiguring public discourse and reorienting policy.

The return of the longue durée is intimately connected to changing questions of scale. In a moment of ever-growing 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 and with new goals, it still

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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 the question. The power of memory can return us directly to the forgotten potential of history as a discipline to persuade, to reimagine, and to inspire. Renaissance historian Constantin Fasolt has argued that thinking about early modern civic institutions was largely premised on what he calls an attitude of “historical revolt.”86 In a similar way, the new historians of the longue durée should be inspired to use history to criticize the institutions around us and to return it to its mission as a critical social science.87 History can provide the basis for a rejection of anachronisms founded on deference to longevity alone. Thinking with history—but only with long stretches of that history—may help us choose which institutions to bury as dead and which we might want to keep alive.

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