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## Bringing in the externalities: historians, time work and history's boundaries

Paul A. Kramer

### ABSTRACT

This article responds to the pieces in this forum, bridging them through the concept of history's externalities. What have historical actors identified as outside their spheres of analysis and concern, and what do they place on the inside? Similarly, what do historians place outside and inside the boundaries of their scholarship? And where, along the borders between academia and other spaces of knowledge production, should advanced training in history occur? The article argues for the benefits of mapping these different relationships between inside and outside and, in each instance, for the advantages of bringing the externalities 'in'. It also reflects on the stakes for historians of identifying the present moment as one of urgency or emergency.

I would like to thank the authors of these insightful, probing and challenging essays, which raise essential questions about historians' roles as scholars and political actors. And I am grateful to the journal editors for the opportunity to engage with this work. It is a role that I approach with some humility, as someone based outside Australia, with a limited knowledge of the immediate academic, intellectual and political contexts the essays address and, importantly, no firsthand experience of last summer's catastrophic fires, which infuse these pieces with a sharp sense of urgency. My sense of my limits is also informed by an awareness of many US-based scholars' propensities to universalise US experiences, or render other countries' histories unto America, or both, something that I strongly hope these comments do not do.

What are historians' particular responsibilities, as historians, in this moment? It depends, of course, on how one characterises the moment, a question that historians are well positioned to pose and debate. It also depends, more generally, on how one frames what historians do. Especially in the course of teaching, interacting with other disciplines and, sometimes, asking myself what exactly I am doing and why, I have come up with this rough, working definition for myself, at least for now: historians explore where things grew out of, how they once worked, and why and how they changed over time and did not. In other words, historians are time workers; our work is temporal work. If we were artists – and perhaps we are – time would be our medium. We build temporal architecture with beginnings, endings, arcs, trajectories, stages, events, turning points, stabilities, crises, aftermaths, legacies. History, at least aspirationally, involves the accurate, creative reconstruction of past worlds at the

crossroads where our questions, analytic categories and interpretive lenses intersect with surviving traces of the past. The angles of vision we bring to bear hopefully illuminate the primary sources in compelling ways; ideally, the sources also push back, complicating our pre-existing frameworks of interpretation.

Alongside history's reconstructive work, history can also serve as a mode of critical social thought. Such critical histories reconstruct past worlds, in part, in order to problematise, destabilise and denaturalise particular social formations, by embedding them in currents of time and change. It is an enterprise that necessarily registers the ways in which politics is temporally mediated. Dominant regimes and social arrangements anchor themselves in convenient, self-defensive temporalities: their power is natural and primordial, or represents history's teleological endpoint, or is anchored in static, unbending social laws. How are these forms of power, seemingly impermeable to change over time, subject to anybody's agency? Here critical history's task is to call into question and redraw the very boundaries between givens and options. By showing that existing arrangements emerge out of the past – battered by twists and turns, near misses and flukes – they can undermine authoritarian inevitabilities and help open space for pressing, critical work.

By this definition, each of these three pieces reflects critical-historical sensibilities, if in different ways. Before discussing each in turn, it is worth setting out what the essays have in common, and where they diverge in their emphases and goals. All three share a sense of urgency, criticism of neoliberalism's domination of socio-ecological domains and widening of social inequalities (including within the university), and discussions of academic historians' engagements with worlds outside the academy. The pieces also zero in on distinct problems, and approach them in different ways. The first, an exchange, presents a number of perspectives on the ways in which environmental historians can and should use their unique, specialist knowledge to shed light on climate and other ecological crises, especially in the public domain. The second piece explores the roles historians in general should play in clearing social space for historical thinking itself, specifically when it comes to contingency and socio-political possibility; displacing anti-historical, technocratic-managerial modes of authority; and cultivating a popular, national consciousness capable of harnessing state power towards crucial regulatory and ecological ends. The third piece discusses the need for innovative approaches to graduate pedagogy to supplant bankrupt, traditional models and the often alienating social relations of the neoliberal university, and makes the case for self-consciously alternative 'micro-utopias' that might prefigure new and different ways to relate, think together and develop as scholars.

In what follows, I will examine how each piece deals with the various boundaries it foregrounds, framing these in terms of externalities. What have historical actors identified as outside their spheres of concern, and what do they place on the inside? What, for example, is included in the 'human' or 'social', and what is 'nature'? Similarly, what do historians place outside and inside the boundaries of their scholarship? How does the drawing of these boundaries relate to the political and ethical questions societies allow themselves to pose about their places in the world, and those they do not? What are the analytical, political and ethical implications of framing history nationally, and of historians defining their task, in part, as the forging of national identities with a

specific political potential? And where along the borders between academia and other spaces of knowledge production should advanced historical training take place? As universities casualise their labour forces and intensify their metrics of 'productivity' in ways that reflect broader political-economic shifts, what potential lies in 'outside' spaces where new definitions of historical pedagogy can be invented? In reflecting on these pieces, the article argues for the benefits of mapping these different relationships between inside and outside and, in each instance, for the advantages of bringing the externalities 'in'. It closes with reflections on the stakes for historians of identifying the present moment as one of urgency or emergency.

In their rich and wide-ranging exchange, 'Doing Environmental History in Urgent Times', Katie Holmes, Andrea Gaynor and Ruth Morgan highlight the significant roles that environmental historians have played in present-day ecological struggles.<sup>1</sup> Environmental historians' emphasis on nature's agency, and on humanity's profound and changing embeddedness in more-than-human natures, has supported larger efforts to interweave social, political, economic and ecological thought generally, within the academy and beyond it. As environmental historians have vividly demonstrated in numerous contexts, extra-human natures have never served merely as a backdrop or platform for historical processes, but have themselves been dynamic, historically evolving participants and determinants. Reconstructing the ways in which these more-than-human natural forces have shifted in tandem with human societies in the past has raised urgently-needed awareness of their complex interdependencies in the present.

The dialogue also foregrounds the many critical interventions that environmental historians are well prepared to make in public deliberations over ecology and society. They can counter false or misleading claims about historical time, especially those that underwrite present-day efforts to minimise the severity of climate change ('the climate has always been changing'). They can heighten awareness of the problem of shifting baselines of comparison, by setting ostensibly 'pristine' landscapes – as metrics against which present-day environmental degradation is gauged – in deeper historical timelines. They can remind us of past alternatives, especially of societies that thrived before the reign of either economic growth or fossil fuels; of past projects in stewardship, restoration and sustainability; and of societies that managed to adapt, sometimes radically, in the teeth of rapidly changing ecological conditions.

Environmental historians can also help us recognise the importance of past-making to place-making: the ways in which common histories of relatedness to land and sea over time are needed if the solidarities required to protect and preserve them are to be grown. They can reveal how, in both past and present, patterns of environmental injustice often map strongly onto, and deepen, fault-lines of racial, class, national, imperial and global inequality. They can gather, safeguard, organise and make available historical records of ecological abuse in ways that are essential if perpetrators are to be held to account, and social and legal norms institutionalised. As they explore the many, changing ways in which humans have drawn and redrawn boundary lines between themselves and 'nature', they can deepen our capacities to care for non-human natures in our own moment. They can also insist that ecological concerns – intellectually

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<sup>1</sup> Katie Holmes, Andrea Gaynor and Ruth Morgan, 'Doing Environmental History in Urgent Times', this issue.

monopolised in many contexts by technocratic, managerial, science and engineering fields, and largely organised in the interests of resource exploitation profit maximisation – need to be understood as necessarily subject to humanistic and broad, social-scientific intelligence and imagination as well.

Reading this exchange, one can only be struck by how deeply debates about ecological crisis are also debates about time, and thus especially amenable to historians' expertise. It was the unique (if sometimes doubted) rapidity and intensity of global warming, among other indices, that helped mark it as extraordinary, man-made, and catastrophic in its implications. Temporal questions have been at the centre of arguments about the cumulative effects of past socio-political, economic and technological paths taken: energy regimes, industrial technologies, transportation systems, regulatory frameworks, and geographies of urbanisation and suburbanisation. Similarly, matters of time have been at stake in arguments that, at least until recently, the gradualism of climate change made it hard to perceive and collectively act upon (as in the metaphor of the frog slow-boiling in incrementally heated water it fails to notice). There are deadline arguments about the precise (and small) number of years human beings have left to respond before catastrophic changes are irreversible. There are predictions for the future, about the likely dimensions of ecological desolation and the potential effects of remediation across various timescales. There are inter-generational clashes over responsibility, particularly as younger (and less powerful) political cohorts begin to inherit and inhabit ecological ruination they played little role in creating. As the participants in the exchange point out, in all these ways and many others, debates over human societies' past, present and future remaking of the extra-human natural world are fundamentally changing our sense of ourselves in time.

Environmental historians have long subjected the nature/society and nature/human dyads to critical scrutiny, as both a matter of field self-definition and as a consequential social-historical force. One opportunity that they possess, and are already taking advantage of, is to direct this inquiry towards the problem of externalities. Who and what got counted in the past – and did not – when it came to the beneficiaries and victims of particular constellations of life, energy, labour and production? On matters of decision-making, participation and measures of impact, what domains were held to be on the 'inside' – in social, political, economic and ethical terms – and what domains were rendered 'outside'? In what ways did these 'outsides' remain stubbornly present nonetheless? What role did the work of internalisation/externalisation play in securing and legitimating the cheap natures and labours required for maximised capital accumulation and circulation?

As revealed with particular acuity by world-ecology scholars, these externalisations took myriad, protean forms: externalisations of coerced, enslaved, and gendered, reproductive labour from the normative domain of 'free labour'; of native polities from regimes of land rights and sovereignty; of extra-national, imperial power from nationalised political space, for example.<sup>2</sup> Which humans were not fully inside humanity? Whose work was outside the domain of recognised work? Closest to environmental historians' principal themes, but overlapping with these others, is the externalising of

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<sup>2</sup> My thinking here has been influenced especially by Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (New York: Verso, 2015).

the work of non-human natures and the biophysical dynamics required to sustain them vis-à-vis the reproduction of capital. There is also, more conventionally, the externalisation of ecological devastation that results from processes of commodification and accumulation.

Where were the sacrifice zones, who dwelled there, and how were they kept distant – in terms of space, politics and ethics – from those who decided upon and stood to benefit from the sacrifices? Externalisation's political technologies have themselves evolved historically: gendered and racialised divides, national borders, citizenship regimes, regulatory exceptions, colonial and neo-colonial conquest and rule and, foundationally, the nature/society binary itself. Indeed, many of these externalisations were ideologically grounded in splits between the 'human' or 'social' (as more advanced and civilised) and the 'natural' (as backward and uncivilised.) But they never went uncontested, as individuals and collectivities pursuing survival, resources, power and dignity managed to make their labour and their compliance 'expensive', pressing their situations onto ledgers from which they had been excised, while also insisting that their value lay far beyond them.

At a moment when many societies are, very belatedly, coming to grips with the unsustainable costs of development models predicated on unlimited growth and existing patterns of resource extraction and exploitation, environmental historians are well suited to investigate the ways in which past and present socio-ecological frameworks have been built on often implicit definitions of 'outsides' that do not count, and 'insides' that do. How have societies tallied and debated the 'costs' of their social models, and what and who have they left out? Who pays the uncounted costs, and in what currency? Who has the power and privilege not only to not pay them, but to not know they are being incurred? And how have historical actors struggled, and with what successes, to redraw these lines, to bring the externalities in?

In 'Here we Stand: Temporal Thinking in Urgent Times', a sweeping essay that bridges philosophical and epistemological questions and shorter-term matters of political strategy, Tamson Pietsch and Frances Flanagan depict the crisis – on a 12-year countdown clock – as a struggle over ways to make sense of the systems that structure the world we live in and over the very horizons of social possibility.<sup>3</sup> Stepping into the arena, in their framing (although not on an equal footing when it comes to social power), are two very different and antagonistic approaches to time, society and political agency. Technocratic-managerial modes of authority flatten the past into static case studies; narrow temporal attention to short-term, risk-oriented futures; and instrumentally carve up interacting socio-political domains. These frameworks presume the terms of existing systems are fixed and that political agency must conform to their strictures. They steer their adopters towards hierarchical roles as manager and managed, rather than as citizens coming together, in conflict, cooperation and mutual self-definition, to co-invent terms for a common life.

By contrast, they characterise historicist mentalities as remaining open to contingency, indeterminacy and agency, and rejecting both stasis and teleology. This approach to temporality and society, they hold, must be fostered if citizens are to

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<sup>3</sup> Tamson Pietsch and Frances Flanagan, 'Here We Stand: Temporal Thinking in Urgent Times', this issue.

embrace forms of collective self-activity required to radically rethink and transform baseline assumptions about how socio-ecological worlds can and should interact. It is historicism that has the capacity to open (or reopen) the future to agency and to recast socio-technical systems in ways that reflect the democratic, collective will and the planet's ecological limits: to make the world 'remake-able' (their wonderful term) in ways that it must become.

While they register Australian historians' past participation in civilisationist hierarchies and stadial theories of teleological development, they emphasise their more recent roles, allied with activist communities, in building a more inclusive national self-definition that, among other things, embraces and foregrounds Aboriginal history and temporality and critically thematises Australia's settler-colonial past and present. Through their public engagements, these historians have participated in reconstituting the Australian nation and, at the same time, remade their sense of scholars' public roles. As they rewrote the nation's prevailing narratives, they observed that the new stories could profoundly reshape national institutions and popular consciousness.

In light of this history, they argue, present-day historians should not underestimate their capacities to connect with broad publics, tap into popular historical interest, and play a role in reforging and activating national solidarities willing to demand strong, transformative action by the state, particularly when it comes to socio-ecological regulation and models of social development not predicated on fossil fuels. To do this, historians need to set up shop in the thick of national-public deliberation, and lay claim to the nation. They need to emphasise the past's rich possibilities when it comes to present-day searches for alternative kinds of social organisation, definitions of human worth and belonging, and ways of relating to the more-than-human natural world.

I found this essay particularly inspiring in its attention to the necessary political-epistemological work historians can undertake by insisting upon contingency and possibility, especially against modes of authority that seek to narrow and foreclose possibilities. The naturalising of status quo arrangements outside of time, and their fortification within anti-historical, technocratic parameters – even as the severe, unsustainable ecological toll of existing systems of production, consumption and infrastructure becomes painfully clear – presents historians as time workers with unique challenges and opportunities. As the authors powerfully convey, scholars can, by insisting on history's indeterminacy, help create the future, temporal spaces required for change, and provide examples (if they are not 'lessons') in how past societies have altered themselves and their relationships to the extra-human natural world in the interests of survival and justice.

While the essay closely associates technocratic managerialism, neoliberalism and corporate power, I found myself wanting more specificity about their inter-relationships and divergences. Should technocracy be seen as synonymous with neoliberalism, or only one possible expression of neoliberal reason and rationalisation, distinct to its moment and context, among others? If the former, why not identify neoliberalism on its own as the source of reductive, disempowering temporalities? If the latter, is technocratic managerialism itself the problem? Or is the issue a capitalist politics in which systematic disenfranchisement through temporal pre-emption – 'there is no alternative' – is ultimately secondary to the more fundamental project of reducing all meaning and



value to suit the demands of profitability, commodification, and capital circulation and accumulation?

Approaching the question from a different angle, mid-twentieth-century social-democratic capitalism – against which neoliberalism warred and forged itself – represented a consummately technocratic-managerial political mode, if one directed towards different, national-welfarist ends. Its frameworks of socio-economic citizenship were shot through with hierarchies and exclusions. But if its temporal sensibilities tended towards triumphalist, modernist, progressivist arcs, social-democratic technocracies did not systematically preclude agency, contingency or historical dynamism – up to a point – or the mass-based political coalitions upon which they depended. (It is also worth recalling that, at the international level, the UN's multilateral technocracy originated the very 12-year climate timeline that the essay itself invokes.) While I share the authors' critiques of neoliberal managerialism, its anti-historicism and its hostility to democracy, I wonder if, in this longer historical context, there aren't significant variations between technocratic approaches to temporal politics worth exploring.

I also had questions about the piece's confidence in the progressive prospects of an energised, popular nationalist politics. My knowledge of the Australian political-cultural context is limited, but similar arguments have recently become commonplace among historians based in the United States who seek to find a positive, oppositional role for historians in a context of emerging forms of right-wing, authoritarian nationalism. In their writings, as in this essay, the argument runs something like this. Citizenries are passionate about national-political membership, and often surprisingly enthusiastic about history. For this reason, politically progressive historians are uniquely positioned to provide these publics with alternative nationalisms that can displace right-wing versions which promote obscene concentrations of wealth and power, wrenching inequalities and unprecedented ecological destruction. Animated by this progressive nationalist vision, polities might successfully demand of the state robust, transformational reforms to society's infrastructures.

Here I find myself wondering whether this account's alignment of progressive historians' values, skills and narratives, of the stories they tell and the lessons they hope others will receive and act on, is somewhat too tidy. Are right and left nationalisms really so fungible? Relatedly, there are tactical questions one might ask. The essay's operative theory of political change is that, within nationally organised polities, progressive change can best be realised, or perhaps only be realised, when those who pursue it address the state in its own, nationalist ideological terms, terms which historians can help prepare and publicize. It is, to some degree, a plausible theory, but nonetheless a theory, and one that minimises other political factors that have historically promoted state-reformist policies of various kinds and depths: horizontal, class-based organising and mobilisation; transformative political agendas; successful campaigns at enfranchisement and mass electoral turnout; the threat and actuality of political exit by citizens; and the pressure of international norms and laws, for example. If, theoretically, nationalism can play some role in enabling progressive change, is it the necessary or pivotal factor, relative to these others, and especially in light of nationalism's harsh and often lethal downsides, all too evident to historians?



Most importantly, what about national history's externalities? Traditionally, many of national history's exclusions have been defined within conventional, national political geographies: histories of women, workers, people of colour, colonised subjects, queer people, immigrants and religiously defined groups within the nation whose histories had been written out of it, and whose experiences and perspectives needed to be brought into the national historical fold both in the interests of historical accuracy and in aid of these groups' efforts to lay claim to national membership and resources. As the essay points out, historians have played major, positive roles in addressing these exclusions in academic scholarship and public life, if more always remains to be done.

But what about international externalities? What about the ways in which nation-states have affected peoples and spaces on their 'outsides', through border-crossing invasions, occupations and military bases; international political influence and intervention, from politico-military support, to manipulative grants and denials of 'humanitarian' aid, to covert action and coups; the outsourcing of production facilities to more oppressive, exploitative and ecologically deregulated political-economic settings; asymmetric trade agreements that reproduce vertical global divisions of labour and relations of dependence; and the imposition of transnational regimes of politico-economic discipline and austerity, for example?<sup>4</sup> Especially salient to the essay's themes are a nation's socio-ecological externalities: the ways in which richer, more powerful nations have insisted on access to raw materials, energy resources, markets and sources of labour beyond their borders and have attempted to channel ecological damage either to the nation's politically vulnerable internal peripheries or to its territorial outsides. And what about formerly colonised peoples, once subordinated on the differentiated 'insides' of dominant states, that now find themselves and their political dilemmas on the 'outside', at least for purposes of ethical deliberation. These and other externalisations have often, and successfully, been critically apprehended through use of a language of imperial power, a conceptual idiom that foregrounds the structures of a connected, unequal world and the inseparability of national-territorial 'insides' and 'outsides'.<sup>5</sup>

These particular, imperial externalities are, I would argue, fundamentally different from intra-national ones, even as they are never separable from them. In an interconnected, unequal world that is geopolitically structured by the nation-state form, the implicit or explicit conceptualisation of nations, states or nation-states as integral, autonomous, contiguous political communities that conform to the jigsaw boundaries of national-territorial maps constitutes a formidable imperial ethic. It is formidable, in part, because of the ways in which it erases or brackets power dynamics between nations and regions and across global space from analytical, political and ethical consideration.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, the methodological nationalism of the modern social sciences

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<sup>4</sup> My thinking here has been informed by Nancy Fraser, *Scales of Justice: Reimagining Political Space in a Globalizing World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> For a compelling conceptualisation of empire's relationship to global inequality, see Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> On the analytic utility of concepts of empire, specifically for US history, and on borders as imperial technologies, see my 'Power and Connection: Imperial Histories of the United States in the World', *American Historical Review* 116, no. 5 (2011): 1348–91, esp. 1369–70; and 'The Geopolitics of Mobility: Immigration Policy and US Global Power in the Long Twentieth Century', *American Historical Review* 123, no. 2 (2018): 393–438.

and humanities represents not only a formula for artificially bounding domains of scholarly inquiry, but masks and legitimates highly consequential forms of unequal power that require critical scrutiny.

Unlike in the case of intra-national exclusions, in which common participation in the historical life of the nation can serve – at least in theory – as a principle of greater inclusion, in the case of these imperial externalities, national-territorial boundaries and borders represent technologies of exclusion, in and of themselves: ways to partition nation-states from political spaces to which they are, in fact, profoundly and unequally connected. Especially in the post-1945 period, these imperial externalities have been achieved in large measure through the institutional and ideological work performed by national-territorial borders themselves. Such boundary lines have decisively separated spaces where decisions are made from spaces where their consequences have been experienced; naturalised and legitimated these separations; and neutralised challenging questions about unequal power relations between national polities. The unfolding geopolitics of climate, in which national borders partition those most responsible for global warming from those who suffer its worst effects, illustrates a much older phenomenon with diverse manifestations.

Such exclusions represent national history's constitutive externalities. They suggest the structural insufficiencies of national history, even self-consciously inclusionary national history, when it comes to critically addressing and historicising a globally integrated and unequal world. Such imperial externalities may, indeed, become less politically salient and actionable as a nation becomes convinced of its improving record when it comes to its historical and ongoing exclusions 'within'.

Following the essay's summons to consider ways that the historical imagination can help bring new kinds of political community into being, I would like to suggest that historians might turn not to renovated national history, but to transnational history. Here, it is important to reframe transnational history not simply as a way to complicate or enrich national history, or to provide a comforting, cosmopolitan pre-history for contemporary capitalist globalisation, but as a way to historicise and problematise, analyse and narrate the structures of an unequal world. How did global inequalities develop, and what shaped, contested and transformed them over time? And what lineages stretch from these pasts into the present moment? Such histories can provide contemporary political communities with more complex, critical ways to think about their nations' historical and present-day relationships to the larger world. Importantly, such histories will necessarily, in whatever small way, bring previously externalised peoples and landscapes into their spheres of political and ethical concern.

In the third piece, 'Training Historians in Urgent Times', Yves Rees and Ben Huf explore the insides and outsides of the university world.<sup>7</sup> As the authors point out, good scholarship only thrives in a sustaining environment, but university conditions in our time can prove openly hostile, especially with the erosion of tenure tracks, the casualisation of academic labour, and intensified metrics of 'performance' and 'impact'. How are academic historians supposed to get their work done as teachers, scholars and administrators – and make interpretive sense of the proliferating crises of our moment

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<sup>7</sup> Yves Rees and Ben Huf, 'Training Historians in Urgent Times', this issue.

– when many find themselves persistently at risk of losing academic jobs and, in the US context, of losing their health insurance? Gains in labour market ‘flexibility’ for university employers mean further reaches of academics’ mental time spent worrying about how to get by. Such conditions, they argue, call on us to substantially rethink graduate pedagogy, in ways that de-centre the advisor/advisee dyad and replace the model of academic as individualist hero of knowledge.

As a potential alternative to existing approaches, the piece makes the case for ‘micro-utopias’, spaces of intellectual community deliberately at odds with the values and procedures of increasingly alienating university spaces. As in the example of a winter symposium on the history of capitalism, such spaces can serve as experiment stations of inclusivity, collegiality, public mindedness and, especially, care. Against the current of institutionalised speed-ups and the superficial scholarship that can result, such spaces are aligned with the values of ‘slow scholarship’ characterised by thoughtfulness and deliberation. Spending time in such spaces, trying on new shapes of intellectual discussion, and reinventing boundaries between the personal and the intellectual, the authors argue, can be a way to prefigure dynamics one might like to see characterise the larger world of academia.

Here I have to confess a certain scepticism about utopias, even micro ones. But I am very appreciative of the ways in which this essay highlights the multi-dimensional conditions required for good scholarship: material and institutional supports; an individual sense of purpose; a community of interlocutors; a sense of belonging and camaraderie; active, responsible mentors; and participation in a web of mutual support and encouragement, especially. (I sometimes find myself envisioning intellectual communities as rope teams inching up a difficult mountain, each climber free-moving and connected. Up is towards better work, sharper skills, thinking that you can’t quite do yet, and projects that you don’t even know that you should want to be able to accomplish. Down is about low standards, carelessness, complacency, overconfidence, and unthought compliance with received wisdom. Down is easier. The way up is together.)

I also appreciate the piece’s emphasis on the importance of building and nurturing strong spaces of serious inquiry and exchange within the academy, but also on academia’s edges, or outside of the university system: in independently run seminars, reading groups, discussion forums and more generalist publication venues, for example. While academics sometimes indulge the idea that they monopolise serious thought, it can be helpful to remind ourselves, always, of the gaps between academic life and intellectual life. In the past and present, how much intellectual work – alive with curiosity; venture-some, playful and rigorous with ideas; consistently self-questioning; and necessarily open to confronting dominant powers and ways of thought – takes place away from the academy, out of choice or necessity? By this definition, how much academic scholarship is non-intellectual or anti-intellectual?

The essay made me ask about the many practical decisions to be made in building institutions like the winter symposium, which are alternative by design. Where do you hold such an event? On campus would likely come with logistical advantages and perhaps cost savings, but might diminish or undermine efforts to create an ‘outside’ space. Who gets to decide who attends, and what should the principles of selection be? How important is it that the participants know each other or have collaborated previously

or, to the contrary, that they start off as relative strangers? Some familiarity and pre-history would clearly be helpful in terms of rapport and common frames of reference, but too much might involve a hermetic, involuted exchange.

Relatedly, there is the crucial matter of disagreement and argument. What, if anything, are participants expected to already agree upon when it comes to research questions, modes of inquiry, interpretive styles, analytic categories, relevant scholarship or broader values? And how directly and openly is that agreement presented to participants and others? Utopias are most often framed in terms of harmony and peace, and ones framed in terms of refuge, safety and care might be understood – or misunderstood – to be ones in which either the style or content of argument, or even the fact of argument, is delimited. This might particularly be the case in consciously alternative settings where conventional boundaries between the personal and the scholarly, and the personal and the public, are taken on directly.

If, in such a space, I am encouraged to cast my scholarly project as an expression of my deepest selfhood and values, but the work itself abuses evidence, mangles argument and logic, enlists concepts badly, or mischaracterises the existing scholarly context (or, maybe, all of these), are my colleagues going to say something, as they should? If they do, am I prepared to see their critical interventions as – at least potentially – acts of generosity, assistance, and even care? Ideals and practices of respect, collegiality, mutual support, and lively disagreement and argument are, of course, far from incompatible; one can see them, in fact, as essential to each other. (There are also approaches to research and argument that one can find less worthy of respect, or unworthy of respect.) Reading the article, I found myself wondering what kinds of personal/scholarly boundaries, and what kinds of explicit and agreed-upon rules of engagement, might actually enable such vigorous exchanges.

Perhaps most significantly, the article made me ask how something of the collective, cooperative and egalitarian spirit and ways of relating that ideally characterise such ‘outside’ settings might be injected into everyday university life. To the extent that these projects frame themselves as retreats, it is important to recall that, while the term can denote defeat and exit, it can also signal temporary withdrawal, recuperation and return. The question is: after prefiguration in relative safety, what comes next? Where should energies and ways of being developed on the ‘outside’ go, and how, if at all, can they change the institutional ‘inside’? There are nearly endless ways to engage university environments as significant political domains in and of themselves.

Might we find, if not once-and-future utopias, flashes of emancipatory possibility in support for campus unionisation drives and campaigns for living wages and better work conditions; efforts to expand scholarships and recruit students from impoverished, marginalised or under-represented communities; solidarity between tenured and precarious faculty, and the former’s defence of the rights of the latter; recruiting and mentoring programs that address academia’s historic and ongoing reproduction of societal exclusions of class, race and gender; robust policies to prevent and punish sexual harassment and violence on campus and to support women and men who confront it; the pursuit of accessibility to all campus facilities for students who face physical disabilities; the greening of campus buildings and university-directed supply chains; critical attention to university real-estate practices and roles in gentrification and the

dislocation of nearby communities; insistence on accountable policing on and near campuses, with particular attention to biased, racialised enforcement; public reckoning with universities' structural and symbolic entanglements with enslaved labour, racial segregation and settler-colonialist land seizures; and divestment campaigns directed at university complicities with oppressive regimes, ecological violence and imperial statecraft? Importantly, faculty can also provide students who are active on these and other issues with mentoring, moral support and institutional backing.

This somewhat exhausting list is, of course, not exhaustive; it is only a start. Not all faculty who share these priorities will have equal time and resources to commit to such efforts; not all issues will speak to all faculty equally, or trade on their strengths. And while we work to create the kinds of institutional environments we would like to work in, we also need to continue to teach good classes, create good scholarship and be good colleagues, all of which obviously takes intense time and commitment. But using energy gathered at the university's near-outsidings to reclaim and remake university spaces can, in ways small and large, also inspire efforts to transform the wider worlds from which universities are inseparable.

In conclusion, and applying the reflexivity towards temporal frames argued for above, I would like to raise some overarching questions about the language of urgency that organises this exchange as a whole. What temporal work does this idiom do for us, as scholars and political actors? Talk of urgency, emergency and crisis – of all kinds, genuine and manufactured – is, of course, a mainstay of contemporary media discourse. And historians who value democracy, equality and justice within and between nations and hope for a sustainable future on this planet understandably experience our moment of converging authoritarianisms and ecological catastrophe with alarm, as do others who share these priorities.

Nonetheless, I will suggest that historians may want to approach languages of urgency and emergency with great caution, for at least two reasons. First, historians are better positioned than most to understand how states of exception – and the horrific projects they have often enabled and organised – require exceptions in time, rips in the temporal fabric. We are placed, abruptly, not only in a new time but a new order of time; more often than not, the new temporal regime is cast as 'wartime', structuring the emergency around its indispensable enemy. When such exceptions are declared, hard-won limits on unaccountable state power or the reign of capital, and existing structures of rights, resources and recognition, are hastily fastened to 'normal' time, now depicted as under siege. Precisely because time's 'ordinary' flows and rhythms have been broken, their associated constitutions of power can or must be abandoned, at least temporarily; with further effort, already dangerous, 'temporary' exceptions can be extended indefinitely. Emergency temporalities can always be undeclared after a time, in theory, but the question of who is authorised to undeclare them can become diffuse, let alone the question of why emergency authorities might find it in their interests to end the crises that constitute their power.

Historians have, rightly and necessarily, directed intense scholarly scrutiny to the political construction of such emergencies: how they are invented, what they allow, how they are contested, how they are brought to an end, and how their conditions of possibility are confronted. But in this process, we might also want to ask ourselves

some hard questions about how invocations of emergency might change our relationship to our scholarship, knowingly or not. Might we, in the name of laudable ‘all hands on deck’ immediacy, deliberately or accidentally exempt ourselves and our colleagues from standards of evidence, analysis and argument? Histories that result from such contexts and orientations might (or might not) serve the perceived political needs of the moment, but might they not also introduce serious if admittedly non-emergent problems for the depth, acuity and dynamism of the conversation among scholars going forward? (And what does it mean if we don’t think to ask ourselves about these potential costs? What does it mean if we do ask ourselves about the costs, and decide they don’t matter?)

Second, historians have a particular responsibility to frame time within the civil societies in which they live, in part by critically engaging false or misleading temporal arguments advanced by powerful social actors in their own interests. We should not be tempted to arrogate to ourselves the status of ‘stewards’ of the past, but people do look to professional historians (among many others) for insights into how they should situate themselves in time, particularly at moments of rapid, disruptive change. Think of the two questions reporters are most likely to ask us. Have we ever been here before? What lessons can we learn from the last time? We don’t have to particularly like these questions – each is anti-historicist – to respect the impulse behind them and to acknowledge the responsibilities that come with being approached with them. Alongside the basic, unceasing task of tackling outright falsehoods about history on empirical grounds, our responsibility is (within the constraints of the bandwidth we’re offered) to help our publics think about temporal argument itself.

We can do this by encouraging people to ask, among other things: What do temporal claims do and what is at stake in contests over them? What kinds of evidence, argument and thinking ought to count as legitimate in staking out and assessing arguments about time? Who do temporal claims empower and disempower, and what social and political relationships do they encode, enact and prefigure? Whose interests do narratives of dramatic rupture, seamless continuity or teleological inevitability, for example, serve in particular contexts? Perhaps most of all, we might convey a sense of time’s irreducible layering and multiplicity: how each moment comes into being at the confluences between diverse historical currents with varied depth and strength. In order to teach others to reflexively question the temporal frameworks dominant powers insist upon (not the least of which are its preferred emergencies), we have to, of course, do so ourselves in a sustained and determined way.

In the conversation about environmental history, Andrea Gaynor asks a rhetorical question (riffing on climate change activist Greta Thunberg’s apt alarm that ‘our house is on fire’) which I can imagine many Australian historians asking themselves as they struggled to make sense of their commitments as scholars of the past during last summer’s fires, and in the months since: ‘When your house is on fire do you want a historian or a firefighter?’

As discussed above, the question of what kind of emergency we face, and what it means to see ourselves and our world in its grip, is one that historians should ask and debate among themselves, and with many others. But I can testify that historians based in the United States have been asking themselves similar questions about the US’s own,



literal out-of-control fires and its more metaphorical, ongoing dumpster fires of plutocracy, authoritarianism, revanchist racism and sexism, xenophobia and ecological destruction. Who needs historians and their temporal work? Such questions are understandable, and also admirable in their honest, self-deprecating sense of proportion about historians' labours can and cannot accomplish.

But what if firefighters need history? Without a sense of the past, would firefighting experts know how to distinguish ordinary, cyclical fires from epochal ones? Without a sustained, organised, institutional record, would they be able to measure their efforts to improve firefighting strategies over time? Without an awareness of the passing down of fire control techniques across time, would firefighters be able to draw upon successful, historically deep – even ancient – methods of fire management? Take, for example, Australian state fire agencies' growing interest in and application of aboriginal methods of controlled burns and land management that date back tens of thousands of years, which can dampen fire risks, revitalise local flora and preserve animal habitats.<sup>8</sup>

In the absence of a developed historical sense of what fires and other disasters can do to society, and better and worse ways to respond, would polities even invest the resources necessary to prevent, counter and remediate them in the first place? (Think about all those community fire museums, with their proud, old, polished-up machines, quietly testifying to past commitments to collective protection, and present and future priorities.) And without a sense of their membership in a society whose participants share something of a history in common, would firefighters and other imperilled first responders sign on to confront the risks they regularly face to protect others? None of this is to say that when fires strike – literally or metaphorically – historians should be the first ones called. It is simply to note that, when it comes to the forms of knowing that societies require to survive and sustain themselves, and re-open what can seem closed futures, historians' temporal work is far from external.

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<sup>8</sup> Isabella Higgins, 'There's Been "Huge Interest" in Indigenous Fire Practices, Experts Say – This Is How They Work', *ABC*, 8 January 2020; Gary Nunn, 'Australia Fires: Aboriginal Planners Say the Bush "Needs to Burn"', *BBC*, 12 January 2020; Aarti Betigeri, 'How Australia's Indigenous Experts Could Help Deal with Devastating Wildfires', *Time*, 14 January 2020; Thomas Fuller, 'Reducing Fire, and Cutting Carbon Emissions the Aboriginal Way', *New York Times*, 16 January 2020. My thanks to Michael Thompson for bringing this phenomenon to my attention.



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