History in a Time of Crisis

by Paul Kramer

In dark times, writing about the past can feel suspiciously like retreat. Donald Trump issues an executive order barring immigrants and refugees from seven Muslim-majority countries; should I just keep researching the history of America's treatment of immigrants? One of my graduate advisees emails me, dispirited, from an archive overseas. He's thinking of changing careers. He doesn't want to be like one of the Germans who did nothing in 1933. What am I supposed to tell him?

What use is history at a time like this? Specifically, what if any distinct role should historians play in countering both creeping and hard-charging authoritarian politics? The question of why we do what we do is always worth asking, but shock can make us wrestle an answer from ourselves as we wonder if our skills and energies are more urgently needed for other tasks.

The question of historians' role in fighting autocracy can't be answered for the entire profession. Not all historians oppose Trump, the forces behind his rise, or the policies he is pushing. Nor should we ignore elitist, authoritarian tendencies within academe itself, tendencies that are reinforced by the advance of exclusionary, class-stratifying market forces into wider reaches of university life. Scholarly training should not be understood as issuing special obligations, moral mandates, or intellectual monopolies when it comes to political debate. But if, as human beings and members of the polity, people who happen to be scholars decide to contest authoritarianism, there is no reason why they should not put their skills to good use. The question here, in other words, is not whether Trump somehow threatens historians' "values" (and if he did, is that the most important bad thing about him?), or whether all historians — as historians — should resist him. Better to ask how those who do oppose him might draw on their expertise in confronting the volatile, supremacist plutocracy that is emerging. In tackling this question, it's important first to challenge a lament heard frequently from scholars: that history is absent or virtually absent from American public life. It's a claim that's not hard to sustain in a remorselessly future-oriented, frontier-inflected consumer society. But look closer and you'll find that history is not absent from our deliberations; to the contrary, for better and worse, it is everywhere.

When people talk about politics, they are often talking, subtly or flagrantly, about time's passage. We authorize ourselves by attaching to what we and others see as powerful, prestigious lineages — cultural, religious, national, racial, political — endlessly corralling and gerrymandering, mobilizing and disenfranchising the dead, whom we summon to speak to us in our own tongue. We give treasured practices and institutions entrenched pasts, with root structures we hope might

anchor them against present-day storms. The more we prize them, the more we insulate them — in Tradition, Nature, the Divine, the Laws of History — from the frightening vagaries of time and change.

We craft narrative arcs, long or cropped, to situate ourselves in time. Sometimes we put ourselves on stay-the-course trajectories with an upward slope of gradual, inevitable progress; at other times, we locate ourselves in stories of crisis, rupture, or decline that demand decisive social and political intervention. We build timelines that animate or limit our agency, telling ourselves and persuading others what the moment itself requires of us, against whatever countervailing claims of politics or conscience. Here History looms into view capitalized, a stern, potentially vindictive judge on whose "right side" one wants to be.

We struggle to prune tangled pasts into streamlined, just-so "lessons" that just happen to teach us what we are already predisposed to learn. Here it's worth noting that George Santayana's inescapable aphorism about the necessity of learning from history, "Those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it," manages to put forward at least two fallacies — that history involves fate and recurs — in just 11 portentous, lamentably resonant words.

All political narratives arguably fall back on some account of historical causation. They tell us what precisely in the past did and didn't go into making the present, how proximate histories have to be to influence us, and how actions taken now will play out in futures that endlessly recede, even as we try to harness them to our purposes. We debate what we owe each other in historical idioms. For the proponents of African-American reparations, slavery and Jim Crow are not "history" as surmounted, transcended past but elements of a past-haunted present. For many of its opponents, they are distant, perhaps infinitely distant, in time. We argue over the right course of action by recasting ourselves as ancestors whose descendants will thank us, vindicate us, condemn us — but not, usually, forget us or remain baffled by us. Here, remarkably, we try to seize hold of unruly presents by dictating the historical consciousness of our heirs. Perhaps most fundamentally, like all stories, histories define the boundaries of "us." Whose past matters? Which characters get speaking parts? How are triumph and tragedy measured? Who is authorized to tell the story? And, most importantly, what is at stake in the telling for historians and their public? Upon the answers to these questions hinge the deepest, most consequential matters of social and political belonging.

History matters, in other words, because it infuses how we think about everything else. Even seemingly small historical gestures can conjure worlds.

Take two examples. Saturating the American landscape right now, on red baseball hats, bumper stickers, and boxed-up $149.99 Christmas ornaments, is a historical vision of sorts: "Make America Great Again." What's the history

here? It's a classic jeremiad boiled down to small, focus-grouped words, hailing participation in a project of restoration. Coiled inside is a trajectory of decline for which someone is responsible, and a revanchist nostalgia that hearkens back to a mythic era of U.S. global hegemony, industrial dominance, nationalist consensus, white supremacy, and patriarchal authority.

Then there is "unprecedented." Lately, commentators on the U.S. political scene have also been talking history. During the campaign and since, Trump's outrageous tactics, disregard for the law, and equal-opportunity demonology, commentators tell us, are historically unmatched. To be sure, there is much here — more each day — that can safely be said to lack earlier parallels. But "unprecedented" is often just outrage expressed in a lazy, fallback historical idiom. Not unlike the "again" on all those hats, it's a temporal call to arms: Since nothing like this has happened before, the word telegraphs, you cannot, despite your despair, apathy, and disbelief, sit this one out. It's also history crafted to comfort, insulating the present from a homogenized past that invites no further inquiries. Lacking antecedents, growing out of nothing, perhaps the malignancy is a surface growth, excisable without damage to otherwise healthy tissue.

If history's inescapability raises its stakes, how should historians intervene? One problematic approach has hand-picked historical experts whispering "the lessons of history" into the ears of policy elites. In a recent essay in *The Atlantic,* Graham Allison and Niall Ferguson argue for a "Council of Historical Advisers" (like the one the economists have), a presidentially appointed team of experts, ideally trained in an aspirational field of "applied history," its mandate to "illuminate current challenges and choices by analyzing precedents and historical analogues."

Here history is depicted as instrumental, technocratic, managerial knowledge, seamlessly adaptable to pressing policy questions. Absent is a sense that historical analogies, precedents, and "lessons" are intellectually suspect — tools built by people inclined to wrench history to their purposes. Abundant is a confidence in the power of academic-historical knowledge, passed across upper-story conference tables, to shift policy agendas rather than simply giving them an ostentatious, history-scented gloss.

But what is most striking here is the elitist understanding of politics and the constrained vision of the domains in which historical thinking should be present. The corridors of power are foregrounded; vanishingly far in the background are engagements with an active public. Historians' search for a broader role and the pursuit of a more democratic, egalitarian social order shouldn't, of course, be confused with each other; in many cases, they either don't overlap, or directly clash. Nonetheless, we might linger at the place where they intersect, and ask what can grow there.

Rather than providing often unaccountable elites histories they can deploy, history-making might aid struggles for democratic, egalitarian politics within civil society. If historians are going to join the existential fight for democracy (conspiring not only with other humanists, social scientists, and legal experts, but artists, writers, musicians, organizers, faith leaders, and others), they will ideally carry out at least some of their work in widely shared spaces. In doing so, they can play a part in constituting, sustaining, and defending an open, democratic public sphere that is vulnerable to many threats. Evidently, this is far easier and safer for those who have managed to clear the hurdles of the tenure process (to the extent that such a process still exists). But even seemingly modest interventions can matter. Moving beyond our monographs and classrooms, we can speak in public libraries and to civic groups, write editorials and accessible analyses for newspapers and magazines, and comment on the radio, in podcasts, and documentaries. We need to venture out. We'll know we're succeeding when we find ourselves in places where we are not expected, comfortable, or welcome.

But once in these venues, what if anything can historians offer? What are historians good for? I'll focus here on three particular knacks: disrupting inevitabilities, digging out lost alternatives, and widening the horizons of empathy. Historians are good at turning givens into problems. Authoritarian politics relies upon narratives of inevitability: The present was always imminent in the past, things had to turn out this way, and you are too infinitely tiny to have altered its fixed course, then or now. Currents rush up out of the past and crest forward into the present and beyond into the future, but the wave — the same wave — only rises, never breaks.

Good historians know this is hooey, that what seem to be fundamental, bedrock patterns, institutions, ways of thinking and doing, came out of somewhere, got fought over, and twisted and shifted even as their architects offered assurances that they had always been there. One, then, is to place power arrangements that are unequal, asymmetrical, illegitimate, and anchored in certainty into history's slipstream, where they are subject to intervention, to change, to *us*. Joan Wallach Scott powerfully defines history as critique, the point of which is "to open the possibility for thinking (and so acting) differently" and, in this way, to remain "open to the future." We might think of this as the opposite of "the lessons of history." Instead of subordinating history to the questions posed by existing power relations, it shows those relations (and the questions they ask) coming into being and, in the process, strips away their pretensions to eternal life.

Even as historians can dethrone legitimating myths, they can set themselves to the imaginative work of historical re-creation. Authoritarians manufacture convenient pasts that justify their power, but they also build, toward this end, rigidly forward-facing timelines that do away with history altogether, issuing new calendrical systems, Year Zeros, and days that "changed everything." Such official

forgetting projects vast hubris — if the past itself can be overcome, how can the polity resist? — angling for exemption from traditions that contain and regulate power. These erasures are useful, for example, to proponents of market domination in their efforts to upend ameliorative, social-democratic politics: Fantasies of an "even playing field" of capitalist competition in the present are easiest to sell once the troublesome matter of durable, continuing historical injustice has been dispensed with. Deleting the past and starting history over in the name of the heroic future is, among other things, a way to pave over alternatives: the laying of chronological asphalt through which nothing green might poke.

Historians seeking a democratic and egalitarian society have crucial roles to play here. In the teeth of neoliberal denial, they must make the case for history itself — for the ways current distributions of power, privilege, and resources emerge from and are inseparable from the past. (Nietzsche said it best: We require history to know ourselves, he wrote, "for the past continues to flow within us in a hundred waves; we ourselves are, indeed, nothing but that which at every moment we experience of this continued flowing.") We should not underestimate the role that consignment to "ancient history" plays in reactionary politics. If they ever mattered at all, we are asked, weren't racism and sexism a long time ago? The work of repair requires admitting the fact of destruction. Healing requires acknowledging there are wounds.

In the space opened by unraveled inevitabilities, historians have a key role to play in identifying alternative paths. We can and should be, among other things, the archaeologists of roads not taken. In some cases, diverging possibility suffers something approximating a natural death: "The time was not ripe," we say. In many others, potential is buried alive, crushed and sometimes erased by its opponents. The terrorist cavalries that overthrew Reconstruction in the U.S. South, and the historians who continued their work, come to mind. Here our task is, first and foremost, rediscovery. What possibilities for thinking, saying, doing, and being in the past have closed over? What emancipatory energies might lay trapped beneath layers of accumulating sediment?

This kind of exploration can be hazardous. History can easily become a quarry from which only select minerals are extracted, leaving large, treacherous holes. And there is, along with the condescension, the enormous narcissism of posterity, a tendency to fabricate ancestors that make our own existence a matter of happy destiny. Even as we struggle against inescapability, we must not limit our search to only those ancestors whose descendants we care to be. (When it comes to sought-after forebears, freedom fighters, resourceful survivors, colorful rogues, and free thinkers — "ahead of their time" — are among the usual suspects.)

Making our ancestors over in our image is a way of building conveyor belts between pasts we envision and futures we want, a troubling move even if those futures are desirable. Instead, we can see the past as provocation, recognizing histories that help us recognize ourselves in new ways. We might approach history not as a mine, but as an underground spring to be found, tapped, and tended, and whose unruly currents remain, always, partly hidden and outside our control.

In raising generative pasts that sustain open societies, historians can help us exercise our capacities for empathy. Authoritarians do not like empathy. Such figures stoke emotionalized connections between their subjects and capitalist institutions, state authority, or charismatic leaders, but they do not want those they rule to connect with each other in unsanctioned ways. Authoritarians also have a tendency to unleash forms of suffering — material deprivation, state violence, ecological spoliation — that they do not want people to think about too hard or too collectively. So it's not so surprising that empathy draws autocrats' scorn. Tightly associated with women, the feminine, and the domestic, it is stigmatized as soft, squishy, unserious — unsuited to a masculinist public realm of power, autonomy, and competition.

By contrast, good history requires us to reach out empathically to those who came before: to make sense of past actors, their mental worlds and the circumstances they faced not strictly on their terms, or ours, but on the complicated ground between. It requires a balance of critique (where past actors don't live up to our standards) and generosity, an acknowledgment of humanity's limits, the constraints that our times lay upon us, and the very contingency of our criteria. By some metric we can't anticipate, none of us will look very good to those examining us 50 years from now. Yet if we can't reasonably ask to be forgiven by our descendants, we wouldn't mind being grappled with, taken seriously, and approached by them with empathy.

Empathy carries a bad reputation especially, and justifiably, when, as often happens, those attempting it underestimate its difficulty and overemphasize their success and gather these delusions into self-congratulatory dispensations. The problem is especially acute where the relatively powerful try to empathize with the relatively powerless and praise themselves for their efforts, however failed. Empathy across social fault lines can express rather than undercut paternalist magnanimity.

But what if we saw empathy as a charge, a discipline, and a permanent challenge? What if we recognized it as an act that, even as it is always compromised, is necessary, radical, and dangerous? For authoritarians, empathic projects siphon off emotional resources claimed by capital, the state, or the powers that be. Perhaps they suspect (not without reason) that those who feel themselves to be recognized — listened to, engaged with, understood — are less vulnerable to demagoguery, exploitation, and political self-destruction. By this light, might empathy be seen as a potentially insurgent form of civil disobedience?

Colleges are far from the only, let alone the best, places in which the essential craft of empathy might be taught and practiced, but they are what academics have, and there are worse places. After all, colleges do — at least for now — frame sustained encounters between people who might not otherwise meet and who are figuring out ways to coexist, even as they figure out who they are. And, in humanities and social-science classrooms, in particular, students are exposed to new lifeways, expressive forms, and social situations and dilemmas that are not their own, and which they are asked to make sense of, both despite and because of that fact.

Here, amid the broader humanities and social sciences, history has its own unique role to play. Existing social orders profoundly pattern and delimit the communities with whom we are and are not supposed to empathize. And while students — and we ourselves — knowingly and unwittingly bring these tribalisms into our classrooms, historical encounters can productively scramble our affinities. Students do not necessarily know who "their people" are when they disembark in the foreign country of the past. They can and do align, sometimes quickly and conventionally, but they can also stretch, disturb, and surprise themselves, widening and deepening both their solidarities and their capacities for solidarity. Ideally, they develop empathy with those with whom they disagree, and those whose political views they find repellant.

Historians and other humanists should stress that empathy is hard work, requiring rigor, skill, and patience. It is easier to empathize with those we decide are like us, with individuals rather than collectivities. Like most demanding tasks, it can be tempting to leave it half done and declare victory. We can and should stress empathy's limits, its capacity for colonization by inequality; we should point out that one gets better with practice. We might also highlight the abilities that gifted historians and empathic people have in common: open-ended curiosity about the lives of others, careful reading, a sense of context, critical self-awareness, attention to the ways our times live in us, and vice versa. That many historians get by just fine professionally with a patchy set of these aptitudes is no reason why our classrooms (and journals and conferences and op-eds) should not be places to cultivate them, in our students and ourselves.

Most of all, historians should underline that empathy, while exacting in its own right, is the means toward other ends, including compassion for those who are suffering and a politics directed at the source of that suffering. Where authoritarians constrict the polity, empathy allows us to open it, as we become aware of strangers to whom we are connected, fellow political beings whose voices and desires we must take into account.

Writing in another dark hour, Walter Benjamin challenged simplistic, empiricist accounts of history's mission. "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was,'" he wrote, taking to task a founding historian, Leopold von Ranke. "It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger."

We stand at just such a moment. Perhaps, with enough of what Benjamin identified as signs of resistance — courage and cunning, humor and fortitude — we might take hold of the histories within us; illuminated by crisis, they might guide us into it and through it. To achieve this, the historian's task is to cultivate what Benjamin called the "gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past." Our charge may be less to light the way than to keep torches lit from which unforeseen potentials can be set ablaze.

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Decolonizing the History of the Philippine-American War

by Paul Kramer

The Philippine-American War, the subject of this book, is often said to be a "forgotten" episode in US. history. While the intentions of those who identify it in this way are often admirable—frequently aiming to remedy this oblivion—the statement is nonetheless technically incorrect. The Philippine—American War has not been forgotten. It has been hidden. Most of all, the war has been smothered beneath the protective mantle of the much shorter war that immediately preceded it, the Spanish—American War, a war that unfolds in American history textbooks and in popular memory as a kind of Gay-'90s comic—opera of pleasantness, innocence and easy heroism, its soundtrack by John Philip Sousa, its central tableau Theodore Roosevelt's over-the-top charge up San Juan Hill. We are told, as much by then-Secretary of State John Hay as by the historians that have parroted him, that the war was "splendid" and "little." The solitary Paci•c cut-away in the war's drama features Commodore George Dewey crushing the Spanish Navy at Manila Bay with the thundering weaponry of the U.S.'s new navy. Sometimes, just before the curtain falls, audiences witness the outbreak of something called the "Philippine Insurrection," when "insurgents" there refuse to recognize the United States' sovereignty over the Islands, ceded by Spain at the Treaty of Paris.