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Ramses Delafontaine

« La longue durée en débat », *Annales*, n° 2, 2015

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Ramses Delafontaine

« La longue durée en débat », *Annales*, n° 2, 2015

- 1 The second number of *Annales, Histoire, Sciences Sociales* of 2015 discusses the project of two Anglophone historians under the title *La longue durée en débat*. David Armitage, chair of the history department at Harvard and Jo Guldi, an assistant professor at Brown University have been preparing their vision for the historical discipline for over two years. Intent on restoring historians as policy advisors instead of economists, Armitage and Guldi call upon historians to return to the study of longer time scales. Their efforts culminated in October 2014 with the publication of the *History Manifesto* in open access with Cambridge University Press.¹ Initially, the *Manifesto* garnered critical acclaim from its readers. One only has to read the blurbs in its opening pages to find praise and endorsement from historians of the calibre of Georg Iggers, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Craig Calhoun, and economist Thomas Piketty. Yet, not before long did negative reactions outnumber positive ones. An evolution which reached its peak with the publication of a devastating critique in the April 2015 issue of the *American Historical Review* by historians Deborah Cohen and Peter Mandler. A critique which the editor of the AHR described as exceptionally sharp.²
- 2 A similar round-table has now been published in the *Annales* in which Armitage and Guldi discuss their ideas and reply to several critiques authored by Lynn Hunt, Claudia Moatti, Francesca Trivellato, Claire Lemerrier, and Christian Lamouroux. The register employed by these critics is also unusually polemic for academic historians. Hunt calls the effort by Armitage and Guldi an example of time-worn rhetoric with arguments based on little or no proof. Moatti accuses Armitage and Guldi of self-promotion through a peremptory and oracular discourse that does not convince. While Trivellato notes that Armitage and Guldi forge an artificial and negligent connection with Braudel's *longue durée*. Lemerrier charges Armitage and Guldi with holding the false presumption of a Manichaean relation between the study of longer and shorter time scales. Armitage and Guldi note in their reply that they will not comment on the unpleasant terms Lemerrier has employed to describe their project. For more information they refer their critics to the *History Manifesto* itself.
- 3 Armitage and Guldi focus on two presumptions. (A) Contemporary science and politics miss the big picture by being too concerned with short term issues. (B) Historians have followed this trend by abandoning the study of longer time scales or the *longue durée* in favour of microhistory, thus ensuring a crisis in historical research in terms of relevance and quality. It is worth noting that Armitage and Guldi use the terms "*longue durée*" and "longer time scales" as if they were one and the same thing. Braudel's *longue durée* is a causal system of dialectic interaction of three layers of time: that of the *longue durée*, the *durée moyenne des conjonctures*, and the *histoire événementielle*.³ While Armitage and Guldi simply argue for the study of longer time periods without presenting any theory on comparative history or causal relations. Historians have seen their social influence diminish because of short-termism, Armitage and Guldi proclaim. This marginalization of the discipline can be overcome by returning to the study of longer periods of time. They call upon historians to use big data and digital methods to retrieve their status as critical social scientists and engaged policy advisors on subjects such as climate change in the Anthropocene and international governance. The authors are keen on dethroning economists as they go to social scientists for policy decision-making.
- 4 Yet, as Hunt eloquently states at the start of her contribution, many programmatic writings have used the notion of a crisis to further their own ideas. According to Hunt, Moatti, Trivellato, and Lemerrier there is no moral crisis in historical research such as Armitage and Guldi maintain. Hunt acknowledges a crisis, but in her view it is to be found in the increasing inequality between the budgets of different universities, the decline of public universities, and the challenges assistant professors face in institutions of higher education in the United

States of America. Trivellato identifies a crisis in all of the social sciences. She attributes this demise of public relevance of social scientists to the dominance of finance and mathematical perspectives in the public sphere during the last three decades. Armitage and Guldi note in their reply to the round-table that Hunt and Trivellato recognize the existence of a crisis in the social sciences. Despite what Armitage and Guldi suggest, there is no similarity between the crises Hunt and Trivellato discuss and the crisis due to micro history advanced in the *History Manifesto*. Concluding on the alleged crisis of the historical discipline Hunt writes that Armitage and Guldi's subsequent arguments are based on the foundational hypothesis that there is a crisis while they do not offer much or even any proof of such a crisis. What now remains of the programmatic writing of Armitage and Guldi is a call for the study of longer time scales by historians: an approach which according to the *Manifesto* would turn historians into more engaged and critical social scientists.

- 5 The Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg referred to the *History Manifesto* during his recent lectures in May 2014 at the Collège de France. He noted the semantic confusion over the *longue durée* and the study of longer periods of time in the work of Armitage and Guldi. And while he thanked the authors of the *Manifesto* for naming his own work as one of the few good exceptions in micro history, Ginzburg invited Armitage and Guldi to consider that microhistory itself might be the solution for the supposed or real crisis historians are faced with. Ginzburg continued that microhistory might offer more convincing solutions for historical generalizations.⁴ But the question is not about long or short time scales: the question is one of appropriate time scales. The choice of a suitable period of time for research is determined by the research questions and the available sources. (1) The dichotomy between longer and shorter time scales proposed by Armitage and Guldi makes no sense, i.e. where does short term end and long term start? It depends on the research. (2) The true holistic form of history is a study that combines diachronic and dialectical causal explanation in a true Braudelian manner. Armitage himself wrote in an article published in 2012 on the history of the idea of civil war that historical research is a combination of distant reading and close reading. Armitage went on to conclude that "... 'distant reading' of large accumulations of sources now supplements close reading but cannot replace it".⁵
- 6 The final critic in the *Annales* round-table, Lamouroux evades the whole polemic by highlighting the importance of long-term studies and big data for the re-emergence of Chinese historians on the international scene. It is in a similar manner that I propose two roads along which this discussion can evolve, while aiming to transform this debate on the future of the historical discipline into a discussion which moves beyond formulating critiques on the *History Manifesto*. The first topic is public history and the second is forensic history. Both present new contexts in which historians are forced to find new answers to traditional questions such as impartiality, methods of publication, external influence on source selections and research questions, budgetary influences, etc. The answers historians will come up with in these challenging contexts – where in many instances they exercise the civic and social responsibility of their craft – are going to determine whether the historical discipline and historians will have a role to play as policy advisors and as an inspiration for a broader public.⁶
- 7 To conclude, by publishing this round-table *Annales* has commendably introduced its readership to an international discussion on the future of the historical discipline. Armitage and Guldi close somewhat provocatively by stating that they leave it up to their readers to judge whether the debate on the *History Manifesto* will have the same stimulating effect on historians as Braudel's publications on the *longue durée* have had on the historical discipline. If the critiques published by the *Annales* are any indication it is fair to say that this round-table offers an epilogue to the *History Manifesto* which will remain a faithful reminder of the complexity and greatness of the Braudelian *longue durée*.

Notes

1 Guldi Jo and Armitage David, *The History Manifesto*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014.

2 Schneider Robert, “AHR Exchange. On the History Manifesto. Introduction”, *American Historical Review*, vol. 120, n° 2, 2015, p. 527.

3 For more see: Braudel Fernand, “Histoire et Sciences sociales: La longue durée”, *Annales. Histoire, Sciences sociales*, Vol. 13, No. 4, 1958, p. 725-753.

4 Ginzburg Carlo, “La longue durée, à la loupe”, Collège de France, 4 May 2015, 10:35-11:49 et 54:43-56:19, www.college-de-france.fr/site/roger-chartier/guestlecturer-2015-05-04-17h00.htm, accessed 4 September 2015.

5 Armitage David, “What’s the Big Idea? Intellectual History and the Longue Durée”, *History of European Ideas*, Vol. 38, No. 4, 2012, p. 497-498, 506.

6 I have written an expanded review of the *History Manifesto* which can be found at: www.thejudgeandthehistorian.ugent.be/review-of-the-history-manifesto, accessed 4 September 2015.

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Ramses Delafontaine is a FWO PhD-fellow at the history department of Ghent University. His PhD research is focused on the legal and judicial use of historical argumentation with special attention to the legal figure of the historian as an expert witness in the courtroom. His first monograph is entitled: *Historians as Expert Judicial Witnesses in Tobacco Litigation: A Controversial Legal Practice* which was published by Springer International Publishing in April 2015. Delafontaine’s research combines philosophy of history, public history, and legal history. He is a member of the executive board of the International Network for Theory of History (INTH). Currently, he is continuing his research as a Fulbright visiting researcher at Stanford University. Personal website: www.thejudgeandthehistorian.ugent.be.

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