It’s probably in the nature of manifestos to be one-eyed and just a little authoritarian: they’re rallying cries to lead soldiers into battle. For that reason, history is a subject almost uniquely ill-suited to manifestos. Historians aren’t soldiers, they don’t fight on a single front, and – at a time when, more than ever before, historians have been operating in an impressive diversity of modes and theatres – they certainly don’t need to be led in one direction. In our critique we do not dispute the validity of Guldi and Armitage’s favored modes of historiography. We have both worked in a variety of time scales (long, short and medium). We view quantitative and digital methods as useful tools in the historian’s repertoire and use them in our own practice (as well as in this critique).¹ We are entirely in favor of the social engagement of scholars outside the academy.

What we object to are the arguments (and where they present any, the evidence) that Guldi and Armitage offer in their attempt to persuade everyone else to follow their own chosen path. When the underpinnings of their manifesto are examined, the supporting evidence is either non-existent or mandates just the opposite conclusion. This is true for each of their major propositions: the retreat of the longue durée they posit, the correlation they draw between the length of time a study covers and its significance, the alleged salience of long-term arguments to policy-making, the presumptions about historians’ superiority as arbiters of big data, the crisis of the

¹ Our reference points, like Guldi’s and Armitage’s, are Anglo-American. There is much more to be said about other parts of the world where textual evidence is lacking and the prospects of digitization are more distant.
humanities that requires the cure they are proposing. ² The History Manifesto offers not, as its authors imagine, a bold new frontier, but rather a narrowing of the public role that historians already occupy and a diminution of the audiences they currently enjoy.

At the heart of The History Manifesto is a historiographic account that is both simple and deceptive. In the early and mid-twentieth century, Guldi and Armitage argue, historians told “arching stories of scale” that won them the esteem of the public and influence over policy-makers. (7) Between 1975 and 2005, they contend, “many if not most” professional historians retreated to short-term studies “on biological time-spans of between five and fifty years” and thus “inflicted upon their discipline habits of microscopic attention that culminated in a sense of practical irrelevance.” (7, 84) As evidence for this retreat, they cite the historian Benjamin Schmidt’s data, asserting that the “compression of time in historical work can be illustrated bluntly by the range covered in doctoral dissertations conducted in the United States.” (7-8)

Except that it can’t. Discovering a “transition to the Short Past” in the 1970s requires that Guldi and Armitage ignore the very data they cite. (39) Not only does their chart (reproduced here as Fig. 1) show nearly the reverse of what they argue, but – improbably – they assign it a meaning contrary to the one that Schmidt himself offers. ³ Since the mid-1960s, there has been a steady rise in the length of time dissertations


³ About his own data, Schmidt concludes: “So since about 1965, dissertations have covered longer and longer periods. (The data is sparse, but there’s some reason to think there might even be a trend toward more focused dissertations until the 1970s). [Edit – with parsing of decades, this trend is less dramatic but still present. Graphs later].” http://sappingattention.blogspot.com/2013/05/what-years-do-historians-write-about.html#more [accessed 23 Nov. 2014].
cover, measured either by the mean or the median. How Guldi and Armitage manage to convert that expansion into a shrinkage is bewildering.\(^4\) They do no better in characterizing the entire century, asserting “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 did it rebound to between seventy-five and a hundred years.” (43)

In fact, the mean their chart shows for 1900 is not seventy-five years, but almost exactly fifty years. By 1975, the time period covered was not contracting, but had been on the rise for over a decade. And there has been no rebound in the twenty-first century. According to their chart, the trend has been basically flat since 2000.

For all that Guldi and Armitage exhort their fellow historians to embrace big data in the service of “good, honest history,” their own arguments offer no such thing, ignoring numerous, readily available sources from which this information could be gathered. (116) To test their thesis about a retreat from the *longue durée*, we made a foray into the sort of systematic research they ought (at a bare minimum) to have conducted before generalizing about historians’ work over a century. To extend Schmidt’s data on dissertations to cover research monographs, we surveyed eight years of book reviews published in the *AHR*: four in the period of Guldi and Armitage’s purported “long-horizon history” (1926, 1936, 1956, and 1966), and four that encompass

\(^4\) When challenged about this error by Danny Loss on Twitter (@DannyScL), Guldi and Armitage responded in their blog with a celebration of form — “the great opportunities made possible by online publishing [in] correcting a chart” — rather than addressing the criticism, the kind of elevation of technique over substance that dogs the entire enterprise. Their “correction” only underscores their original misinterpretation, which mysteriously they repeat in the same blog post: “our figure 2, which shows the shortening of time scales in dissertations” shows nothing of the sort.

books written in the era of their “Short Past” (1976, 1986, 1996 and 2006). Our sample amounts to nearly 1100 books in total. Based on our research, Guldi and Armitage have the facts backwards, as their own chart should have told them. There’s no evidence either that historians concentrated on long-horizon research before 1968 or that there was a fall off afterwards, when the great shrinkage supposedly began. Quite the contrary, the longest time scales came after 1975, when the numbers of years covered steadily increased, with the median more than doubling between 1966 and 1986. [Fig. 2] The point is made even more graphically with respect to the “biological time-spans” of five to fifty years that Guldi and Armitage see as the hallmark of the historians’ retreat. As our Fig. 3 shows, the percentage of studies conducted on such “biological” time periods declined significantly between 1926 and 2006. Similarly, short time spans of fewer than five years were the subject of a larger percentage of the monographs published before 1966 than was the case in the period after 1976, entirely predictable given the predominance of political and diplomatic history in those earlier years. In sum, there is

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5 The books reviewed in the 2006 AHR were published in 2004 and 2005, and given the number of years it takes to bring scholarly work to fruition were likely conceived in the mid- to late-1990s.
6 The parameters of our study, designed to track Schmidt’s sample, are: work by scholars with the PhD in history and/or working as academic historians in institutions in North America and Britain; focus on research monographs, excluding textbooks and national/regional surveys but including biographies; (like Schmidt) only histories of the post-1500 period. We excluded outliers in our sample (chronological time spans of 1000 years and more), of which there was 1 in 1926; 2 in 1966; 2 in 1976; 1 in 1996 and 4 in 2006. Our sample includes all four volumes of 1926, 1936 and 1956; and for 1966-2006, years in which the numbers of books reviewed grew massively, the first and last volume of each year. This research was conducted by Emily VanBuren, a doctoral candidate in the History Department at Northwestern, who coded each book.
7 Guldi and Armitage seem now to be retooling their arguments to focus not on the trend-lines but on the scatterplot, apparently the concentration of chronologically-focused dissertations in the 1970s. http://www.historymanifesto.cambridge.org/blog/2014/11/updating-visualizations-and-power-open-access-review/ [accessed 6 Dec. 2014] That escape route, however, is cut off by our data, which shows that the percentage of work taking fewer than five years as its focus was lower in 1976 than in 1966, and lower again in 1986, 1996, and 2006 than in any of the pre-1976 years. Similarly, the percentage of century-plus studies climbed from the late 1960s onwards.
much more continuity than change across the twentieth century and, if anything, longer
time scales had become more, not less, common as of 1986.

The qualitative evidence is no kinder to Guldi and Armitage’s thesis. The early
20th-century champions of long-range history they hold up for emulation frequently
worked on different time scales, some exceedingly brief. While it is true that Arthur
Schlesinger, Sr. and Charles Beard published the “longue durée histories of American
identity” that Guldi and Armitage cite approvingly, both were textbooks, like the vast
majority of textbooks then and now, wide-ranging surveys. (25) More typical of
historical monographs of the time, Schlesinger, Sr. also published Colonial Merchants
and the American Revolution, 1763-1776; A Critical Period in American Religion, 1875-
1900; and Prelude to Independence: The Newspaper War on Britain, 1764-1776.9
Similarly, Beard’s other works include An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of
the United States (an investigation of the property held by the signers of the
Constitution) and American Foreign Policy in the Making, 1932-40.

Why do Guldi and Armitage get the history so wrong? To judge by their
disregard for the basic rules of evidence, argument and proof, they don’t seem to have
tried very hard to get it right. In the place of cogent intellectual genealogies of the last
half-century, they resort to instrumental explanations involving declining job markets,
Oedipal crises, and identity politics. (42-3, 11) They indulge in irresponsible
generalizations, which neither a reading of the works cited nor a survey of the

8 In addition, it evinces a particular disregard for context (another of the virtues Guldi and Armitage think
historians have to offer policy-makers) to wrench figures such as the Fabian reformers Beatrice and
Sidney Webb out of their early twentieth-century setting and declare them representative of the discipline
of history. (21) Writing in an era before the explosion of higher education and the further specialization of
knowledge, the Webbs omnivorously investigated everything from the constitutional problems of
cooperative societies to the decline in the birth rate to the rosy prospects for Soviet Russia.
9 Our thanks to Daniel Immerwahr for this observation.
historiography can sustain. Thus, they tell us: “With a few exceptions, the classic works of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s concentrated on a particular episode: the identification of particular disorder within psychology, or the analysis of a particular riot in the labour movement, for instance.” ¹⁰ (45) They assert that “historians of the Short Past tended to outsource” to European social theorists their long-horizon explanatory frameworks: “From 1968 to approximately 2000, many a researcher in those disciplines was thus temporarily relieved of the obligation of original thinking about the past and its significance for the future.” (50, 51) Or: “By the end of the 1970s, the tendency to go long began to look tarnished, something grubby that no self-respecting historian would do.” (82, unfootnoted).

In fact, to see the years 1975-2005 as abjuring longer term narratives and “generalisations about the aggregate” requires that Guldi and Armitage ignore the mass of evidence that doesn’t fit: the rise of global history, environmental history, and cultural history, all frequently with long time-scales – even the fact that Braudel’s books were translated into English for the first time in the early 1970s, exactly the moment at which Guldi and Armitage identify the collapse of Anglo-American interest in the longue durée.¹¹ (51) It neglects the fact that in this same period, 1975-2005, the geographical range of historical work has widened considerably, as U.S. and Canadian departments

¹⁰ As “classic” works of the 70s, 80s and 90s, Guldi and Armitage here cite one article from 1960, two monographs (1983, 1993) and one edited collection (2012), all about late eighteenth-century British riots, which all together have garnered 301 citations in the years since they were published, according to Google Scholar. By contrast, see citations of three works that are undeniably classics of the era (but also long-horizon histories) McNeill’s Plagues and Peoples (1977) has been cited 2821 times; Cronon’s Changes in the Land (1983) has been cited 1823 times; Laqueur’s Making Sex (1990) has been cited 3435 times. Classic works in the genre of micro-history have accrued fewer citations according to Google Scholar: Davis’ The Return of Martin Guerre (1983), 525 cites; Darnton’s Great Cat Massacre (1984), 1504 cites; Ginzburg’s The Cheese and the Worms (Eng. trans. 1989), 844 cites.

¹¹ Explaining the inconvenient fact of Braudel’s translation history requires some contortionism: “Almost as soon as the longue durée was named, it began to dissipate.” (11) On the glancing treatment of global history, see p. 15, 36.
especially have moved beyond their traditional redoubts of North America and Europe to explore a fuller spectrum of human experiences across time and around the world. ¹²

Most tendentiously, it requires reclassifying entire subject-areas (particularly the histories of race, gender and class) as “micro” and “Histories of the Short Past,” whether they are or not. Guldi and Armitage’s category of “micro-history” includes the genre conventionally known by that name as well as an overflowing grab-bag of other sorts of history. ¹³ Even more bizarre than the criticisms they levy at these Short Pasters are Guldi and Armitage’s attempts at characterizing their virtues. The “refinement of the exemplary particular,” the “art of looking closely at all the details,” the attainment of “heights of sophistication in the constrained inspection of experience in the past,” or “the recovery of the subaltern and the patient sifting of the archives”: these apparently are the signal virtues of historians ranging from Theodore Porter to Natalie Zemon Davis to David Roediger. (36, 57, 120) If their contributions are made to sound pedestrian, that seems to be Guldi and Armitage’s point.

Throughout The History Manifesto, Guldi and Armitage persistently equate long with significant. Not until the conclusion (and only then in a quotation from Lynn Hunt) do they acknowledge the fundamental and obvious point: the time scales that scholars adopt depend on the questions they’re asking and the subjects they’re investigating. (119)


thematically to studies of war and revolution, but should it really be otherwise? 14 Who could plausibly claim that a five-hundred-year history of rebellion from the Peasants’ War of 1525 to the Occupy Movement obviates the need for a history either of the rise of the German Social Democratic Party from the 1860s to 1914 or the impact of the baby boom on student and popular radicalism in the 1960s? And who could plausibly deny that the latter two studies might be just as convincing, absorbing and “useful” (and very often more so) to a wide variety of audiences, including but not limited to policy-makers? On this point, Guldi and Armitage dodge and weave. They begin with overheated claims about a woeful retreat from the longue durée: “evidence of a moral crisis, an inward-looking retreat from commenting on contemporary global issues and alternative futures.” (83-4) But in their conclusion, they end up calling weakly for a union of “micro” and “macro,” hardly a proclamation worthy of the manifesto label, a point to which we return at the end. (119)

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There is nothing new about lamenting the specialization of knowledge, but Guldi and Armitage have erected a fantasy on those age-old foundations. 15 Certainly the world of historical research has grown massively since the 1950s, in large measure due to the dramatic expansion of access to higher education. However, it takes a far-fetched interpretation of the steep rise in History PhDs from the 1960s and early 1970s

15 Ian Tyrrell, Historians in Public: The Practice of American History, 1890-1970 (Chicago, 2005), pp. 25-40, offers examples from the 1890s to the 1990s, as well as the sobering conclusion: “So common have criticisms of overspecialization been that their continuing appearance registers a failure of American historians to examine the history of historical practice”; and see further his reflections, pp. 21-2, on why historians may be more prone to this kind of self-doubt than other academics.
to imagine that history became less, not more relevant in public life as the discipline
gained more formally-trained practitioners, and a more democratic sense of who gets to
have a history and to write it. The expansion of universities led to the proliferation of all
kinds of history-writing: the short-termist dissertations Guldi and Armitage cite and long-
term studies as well, thus laying the groundwork for the so-called “history boom” of the
1980s and 1990s.16

Far from cutting themselves off in their professional ivory towers, historians in the
last forty years have been reaching larger and ever more diverse publics in a wide array
of public theatres: in the classroom, where the number of U.S. humanities students
grew rapidly in the supposedly dark days of the “Short Past” from the mid-1970s to the
mid-2000s, and where the number of U.K. humanities students has probably trebled in a
period of very rapid expansion; in the media, where in the U.K. the phenomenon of the
“telly don” emerged in precisely this period and where in the U.S. history programming
has been a staple from Roots (1977) onward; in new museums devoted to history, such
as the U.S. Holocaust Museum and the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in the U.S.
and the wave of Heritage Lottery Fund foundations in the U.K., and older history
museums reinvigorated, not least by burgeoning research programs that link with
academics; in the widening embrace of “public history” and “heritage” by publics and

16 The chronology of the expansion of higher education follows different paths in the U.S. and U.K., but in
both countries this expansion is roughly paralleled by a growing consumption of history by popular
audiences in both countries, which suggests to us a connection — rather than a disconnection — between
academic and popular history. For a crude measure of the growth of history publishing in the U.K., which
follows the trajectory of higher education, see Peter Mandler, History and National Life (London, 2002),
100-2, and for the US, Robert B. Townsend, “History and the Future of Scholarly Publishing,”
the-future-of-scholarly-publishing [accessed 8 Dec. 2014], Fig. 3. To tease apart the respective
contributions of this body of publishing to direct popular consumption, to the provision of an essential
research base for other forms of history for popular consumption, and to purely academic discourse
would require a more forensic analysis, but see Tyrrell, Historians in Public, for an argument that in most
periods these contributions are mutually supportive.
academics alike in both countries; and among the reading public, as history titles have maintained strong sales even while the publishing industry as a whole has struggled. 17 Historians have recruited these new audiences as the range of acceptable subjects has opened out from the realms of politics, international relations, intellectual life, and governing institutions to encompass economic performance, race, class, gender, family, sexuality, art and science, and latterly the “inner space” of identities and emotions. 18

All of this activity doesn’t make a dent in Guldi and Armitage’s account of history’s “retreat from the public realm” because their own definition of public engagement is very narrow-gauged. 19 (79) By and large, their target audience is not millions of their fellow citizens, but very specifically a set of elites: “activists,” “entrepreneurs,” “CEOs”, policy-makers and politicians (4, 12, 78), or, as Armitage put it in the Harvard Crimson recently, “somebody very powerful on Wall Street”.20 Their conception of appropriate theatres for engagement are not classrooms or museums or the media or reading but “legislative committees…activist campaigns…Silicon Valley

17 On the reinvigoration of historical societies, Robin Pogrebin, “These Fusty Names are History,” New York Times, 26 October 2014, F9. On book sales, see the Nielsen figures reported in The Independent in 2012: between 2002-2011, “sales of history books have increased by more than 45% to nearly 5.4 million copies a year – more than double the rate of growth across the publishing industry as a whole….” http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/history/young-historians-are-damaging-academia-in-their-bid-for-stardom-7723284.html. Although sales figures have contracted in the past two years, “history & military” titles (the Nielsen designation) have maintained their share of the total UK market. Emails from Hazel Kenyon, Head of Publisher Account Management, Nielsen (4 Dec. 2014) and Joanne Kaptanis, Nielsen (5 Dec. 2014). Comparable figures for the U.S. were not available from Nielsen without substantial cost. But see Townsend, “History and the Future of Scholarly Publishing,” which suggests that academic history has consistently done better than academic publishing in other fields in reaching non-academic markets in the U.S.

18 A point that Laurel Thatcher Ulrich makes in Well-Behaved Women Seldom Make History (New York, 2008), p. 39, and see Tyrrell, Historians in Public, p. 254, on “the democratic potential of the newer forms of specialized history,” which he sees combining since the 1990s with other forms of public outreach.


Their ideas about what historians can do for these policy and business elites are equally narrow-gauged and unsupported by evidence or logic. The big questions that should grip these policy and business elites are, they argue, questions of the *longue durée*, and the answers can be supplied by the assembly of big data. Here is some explanation for their forced arguments about the short-termism of academic history. They have to invent a crisis of short-termism in history in order to point clearly towards the advantages of the *longue durée*.

Yet why should policy and business elites be interested in the *longue durée*? It is true that some of the pressing problems of our time are long-term problems – climate change being the obvious one, and the subject of a large portion of *The History Manifesto*’s chapter three. But even some of the problems cited by Guldi and Armitage as intrinsically *longue durée* strike us as benefitting from “Short Past” answers too: the rise of income inequality in the West, for example, a phenomenon of the last thirty-five years and requiring surely as many new studies of neoliberalism, global political economy and inequality in the “Short Past” as longer-term studies such as Thomas Piketty’s. And most of the problems that beset policy and business elites today are probably best couched in the five to fifty year “biological time-span” about which Guldi and Armitage are so scornful. We see no evidence (either in *The History Manifesto* or in the real world) that “five hundred years” is “better than five months or five years as a planning horizon,” the slogan emblazoned on the book’s print cover.

Indeed, Guldi and Armitage don’t offer a single example from the past few decades to prove that there’s any correlation whatsoever between the time-scale of a

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21 The emphasis on historians’ unique (expert) analytical capacities and on their usefulness in elite job markets sits uneasily alongside occasional outbursts of populism such as can be found at pp. 30, 117, 119.
study and its significance to public policy. Given that initiatives that seek to bring historians and social scientists in contact with policy-makers (such as History & Policy in the U.K. or the Scholars Strategy Network in the U.S., neither of which are mentioned in *The History Manifesto*) have by now accumulated years of experience on the subject, wouldn’t it be useful to consider how expertise has been brought to bear – and what sorts of obstacles such efforts have faced? Sociologists and political scientists, never mind economists (despised and cartoonish in Guldi and Armitage’s treatment), have, they acknowledge, decades of experience in this realm. By ignoring other social scientists’ efforts to influence policy-making, *The History Manifesto*’s central arguments appear all the more oddly blind to the real constraints of politics, either to historians’ ideas being taken up or to the very complex sorts of problems that global warming or disintegrating states pose.

At the same time, Guldi and Armitage omit any discussion of historians who have had a demonstrable influence on policy, perhaps because these examples have little to do with the sort of history they favor. Here, too, the record contradicts their portrait of a profession’s turn to insularity and irrelevance beginning in the 1970s. It was in the 1980s that historians in the U.S. first undertook to file their own *amici* briefs, intervening in judicial proceedings to influence court decisions.²² Some of these, as one might expect, did draw on relatively *longue durée* generalizations – the Sears case comes to mind, where historians on both sides in the 1980s dueled over the significance of the

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past 50 years’ history of women’s work.  

That case, however, as also the Supreme Court’s landmark decision in *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003) – the case that overturned the country’s remaining sodomy laws, where the historians’ *amicus* brief proved pivotal – represent at its best the type of identity history that Guldi and Armitage disparage as “the documenting of the victim under mainstream society.”  

(34) In Europe, a string of legal and political disputes since the 1980s have also drawn on the expertise of historians, almost entirely for the “Short History” skills discounted by Guldi and Armitage: forensic analysis of documentary evidence, arbitrage not of “big data” but of very intense human conflicts, “speaking truth to power” not about the last 500 years but more often about the last five or fifty. The only case we know of an historical commission bringing down a government came in 2002 when a group of historians of the Second World War (six years’ duration) reported against the Dutch military’s conduct in the massacre at Srebrenica (a few days’ duration, a few years previously).  

Let us suppose, though, that the “five hundred year planning horizon” Guldi and Armitage advocate were desirable. Why should historians be uniquely anointed to command it? There may be a few very long-term (unchanging or consistently changing) factors in human history, though most of the obvious ones Guldi and Armitage are rightly chary of embracing, and they don’t seem particularly congenial to historians – 

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evolutionary psychology, for example, which posits some invariable human traits fixed for all time in the Pleistocene (3, 71, 109), or modernization theory, which Guldi and Armitage themselves dub “the dirty longue durée” (27-9), without considering its power as a counter-example of historians’ courtship of policy-makers gone wrong. 26 We share Guldi and Armitage’s view that historians’ most practical contribution here has been to challenge theories based on invariance or consistent variance, by identifying conjunctures (often unpredictable) which disrupt patterns or introduce novel factors, but then this seems a quintessentially “Short Past” task. Churchill may have said, “The longer you can look back the further you can look forward,” (cited approvingly, 14) but how many historians believe this?

Guldi and Armitage have a near mystic faith in historians’ singular talent for looking into the future. Apparently history, unlike all of the other disciplines, is devoted to “facts” rather than “theories.” (3) Alternatively, only historians know, based on the facts, when one theory – apparently applicable for some period of time – has become out-moded and requires replacement by another theory. (109) At times, History becomes nearly personified as an absolute arbiter, giving clear “directives” based on its “longer perspectives.” (70) The facts seem to speak for themselves and only historians can wrangle them. Thus it has been a failure to properly assemble and analyse the facts about climate change – “the purview of neither science nor economics but of history” – that has explained the failure of climate-change politics. (64) Similarly, it has been a failure to consult the facts of history on the effects of regulation and taxation on

26 Guldi and Armitage conveniently exculpate historians from the misadventures of the “dirty longue durée,” though of course the economic historian and modernization theorist Walt Rostow (neither mentioned nor cited in The History Manifesto) is an obvious example of an historian who used longue durée narratives not to speak truth to power but to propagandize for it.
economic growth that led to “the policy stalemate of the 1990s,” a stalemate that is “no longer tenable” “because of the evidence about long-term processes amassed by historians.” (71)

What accounts for historians’ special predictive powers is that they are somehow, by definition, the preeminent data handlers, better qualified than anyone else to manipulate huge reservoirs of quantitative or quantifiable evidence. The History Manifesto is brimful of contempt for everyone else who seeks to address complex problems, including (or especially) by means of recourse to “Big Data.” “Information scientists, environmentalists, and even financial analysts” need us to tell them when their data comes from – they never think about that themselves, apparently. (12) Only historians can make expert “claims about causality.” (64-5) Only historians can “work with big data that were accrued by human institutions working over time.” 27 (105) Or perhaps other specialists can marshal their own data, but only historians have the breadth of vision to do “arbitration” between discrete bodies of data. (105, 107) In arbitrating the coming “war between the experts,” “the History departments of major research universities will almost certainly take a lead; it requires talents and training which no other discipline possesses.” (107)

Not if Guldi and Armitage’s own displays are any indication. Their debacle with Schmidt’s data on the time-span of dissertations is a case-in-point. So is their travesty of the complex arguments made by economists and economic historians. To say that

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27 The example given is of a paper by geographers that searched a scientific database for keywords to assess changing public opinion over time, which “would never pass muster in a history journal,” but the example cited is no more risible than G&A’s own Google n-gram search for “more and more about less” in Figure 3: 49, 105. What does an n-gram which demonstrates that the phrase “more and more about less [and less]” reached its high point in 1942, sloping steadily downwards thereafter, prove about specialization throughout the 20th century?
the economists conclude that the nineteenth century led to gains in equality, opportunity and nutrition” is an absurd distortion, given the vociferous debates about these issues in the field. 28 (57-58) Furthermore, they cite as proponents of this idea scholars who have argued no such thing, misrepresenting specific studies even as they attack the field of economics as a whole. 29 Guldi and Armitage can certainly lament the rise of economics as a master discipline in the past half-century. They’d land more fearsome blows, though, if they proved that they understood what they had read and if they acknowledged that economists’ predominance owes not just to their discipline’s proximity to the powerful but also reflects the growing sophistication of their data-handling techniques.

Guldi and Armitage have seized upon big data and historians’ expertise as the solution not just to the world’s problems but to the troubles they see for the discipline of history. The History Manifesto is a book in a panic – its authors gripped by a “crisis of the humanities” and grasping desperately at solutions. Once again, Benjamin Schmidt’s data on history enrolments across the U.S. doesn’t support this conclusion. History and the humanities in general have done well to hold their position steady for the last forty years, and a similar stability over an even longer period has been evident in the U.K., though in the short term the humanities tend not to do well in periods of economic

downturn. In this respect Guldi and Armitage’s alarmism smacks of the very short-term thinking they purport to deplore. Worse, by portraying much of the work of historians over the past half-century as irrelevant, even worthless – misrepresentations of the historiography seemingly pitched more to the public than the profession – they risk contributing to the decline of the humanities they claim to fear.

Since the publication of The History Manifesto, Guldi and Armitage have insisted that their purpose was simply to add another tool to the historians’ toolbox. That is an ambition no one could fault, though were it their aim, much more useful would have been a tough-minded assessment of big data as a new platform for historical analysis, which took into account the risks and costs, something other than the unqualified encomium to its possibilities now on offer. But such an ecumenical program is not in fact the book’s point, and that is not how Armitage and Guldi have characterized their position in the articles they have published since its launch.

If Guldi and Armitage are no longer arguing that long-range histories have particular “moral stakes” that impose a “mandate” upon historians and can claim an a

30 Humanities degrees in U.S. universities have retained a stable share of about 17% of all degrees since 1970, with a dip in the 1980s and recovery in the 1990s. See National Center for Educational Statistics, http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d11/tables/dt11_289.asp [accessed 14 Dec. 2014]; and cf. Benjamin Schmidt’s statistics, using different categories and a longer time-scale, but again showing considerable stability over the last 30 years: http://chronicle.com/bloqnetwork/edgeofthewest/2013/06/10/the-humanities-crisis/ [accessed 14 Dec. 2014]. A similar story can be told about U.K. universities, where the humanities broadly defined have retained a stable share of about 21% of all degrees over the same period. See Peter Mandler, “The Two Cultures Revisited: The Humanities in British Universities since 1945,” Twentieth-Century British History, forthcoming 2015. As Schmidt points out, thanks to university expansion, the proportion of the college-age population holding humanities degrees has of course increased greatly.


32 For example, http://aeon.co/magazine/society/how-history-forgot-its-role-in-public-debate/: “Why not toss all those introverted but highly competent monographs and journals articles onto a bonfire of the humanities?”
priori superiority in policy-making different from studies of other durations (84-5); if they no longer assert that the discipline of history as a whole took a wrong turn in the years 1975-2005; if they recognize that big data are not the only “future of the university”, let alone the only ethical future (115-16, 119); if they acknowledge that the discipline of history has been capacious to its profit and won’t benefit from being herded in a single direction: we’re wondering what exactly it is they have to say. Our points are simple and, until The History Manifesto, we hardly would have thought they needed articulation. Superb history, influential either in academic circles or more broadly in public life, can be conducted on any time scale, from a single day to thousands of years. It is precisely the diversity of our discipline, its rich humane traditions that speak to multiple audiences on all the scales in which humans feel and think, that have made us an indispensable part of the educational and cultural landscape over the past generation. Nurturing and, where necessary, defending these traditions is “the future of the university” and the job for us all.
Fig. 1: “Updated Visualization,” *The History Manifesto* [http://www.historymanifesto.cambridge.org/blog/2014/11/updating-visualizations-and-power-open-access-review/](http://www.historymanifesto.cambridge.org/blog/2014/11/updating-visualizations-and-power-open-access-review/)

Number of years covered in History dissertations in the U.S. Mean is blue, median is red (mislabeled in the original).

Data from Benjamin Schmidt’s “What Years Do Historians Write About?” [http://sappingattention.blogspot.com/2013/05/what-years-do-historians-write-about.html#more](http://sappingattention.blogspot.com/2013/05/what-years-do-historians-write-about.html#more)
Fig. 2: Numbers of years covered in research monographs reviewed in the *AHR*, 1926-2006. Mean is blue line, median is red line.
Fig. 3: Percentage of research monographs reviewed in the *AHR*, 1926-2006, covering time-spans of 5 to 50 years.