Only Connect: Why History Really Matters

In the latest of our articles on climate change and the study of history, Mark Levene makes an impassioned plea for historians to leave the comfort zone and spell out where globalism is taking the planet – before it is too late.

We cherish history in part because it provides a comfort zone around our own lives, a reminder that however difficult and dangerous life was in the past, people managed, survived, even flourished; a thread of celebration which connects our ancestors to ourselves and implicitly extends the promise of continuity to future generations. Needless to say, history is a social construction but one that the creators of the recent History Matters campaign carefully nurtured to 'raise public awareness of the huge contribution that history, heritage and the built environment makes to our quality of life'. Given that the organizers included the National Trust, English Heritage and the Historic Houses Association, it is hardly surprising that they made much of their pitch around stately houses, which we were asked to believe belong to us as a nation, and which are set in larger landscapes still, in which the dominant motif is nature.

But what has this got to do with the vast majority of us who do not live in the countryside, or work the land, or who were not born in England? In situating the History Matters campaign outside the experience of an urban, increasingly diverse and multicultural Britain, what it actually suggests is an underlying anxiety about the nature of contemporary national cohesion. More crucially, by setting humanity's relationship to nature almost in aspic, the campaign failed to confront what should matter to all lovers of history, whatever their background: the possibility of its continuing supply coming to an untimely and catastrophic end.

For most of human existence, the effects of climate change were visited on us, something to which we had no choice but to respond. Indeed, changes in the climate, including the onset of the interglacial period we still live in, could be argued to be the exact parameters in which our species was able to take that giant leap over a period of a mere few thousand years towards the planetary dominance we now take for granted. By contrast, the fate of the planet's climate, and its biosphere, is now largely in our hands. With, however, a barbed sting in the tail. The radical alterations that we have inflicted on the biosphere over and beyond the accelerating rate of carbon emissions are now – through feedbacks in the Earth systems – taking us into the early stages of runaway warming which, if we continue in current mode, will certainly spell our Nemesis.

The story of the past we usually tell ourselves might be considered not so much as an anchor by which we define our sense of place and belonging, but more like a rudder, the instrument by which we are able to assess progress towards the present. But this itself is predicated on an assumption that the human voyage – occasional, even frequent storms such as war, epidemic or other disasters notwithstanding – is sufficiently calm and prosperous in the main for the ship to make it to its destination largely intact. The proposal that passengers and crew had almost completely failed to notice the turbulence en route and, moreover, had been heading up the equivalent of the Northwest Passage might be so unsettling as to undo our trust in the rudder. And so we would be thrown back on the pilot – that is, the historian – to tell us where we are heading.

Yet most professional historians are not well suited to this task – their usual assumption is that where we have arrived at is indeed terra firma (whether they like it or not is another matter) and will continue to be so. Most work as if they assume the perpetuation of a comfort zone from here into the future to which they, like the general public, are able to retreat. Cut away that reality and they are left as floundering as the rest of us.

If we want historians to act as responsible guides to tell us how we got into this mess and help offer a way out, what we require is that they stare into the near future and face up to its shocking potential. This is not going to be easy – or even fair. What is at stake, after all, is the survival of this species, and all those millions of others on this planet. Yet, finding the roots of the present crisis is not impossibly difficult. While the impact of humankind on the atmosphere over the longue durée can and should be a matter of debate, we know that atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide for many thousands of years before 1750 were relatively stable at 280 parts per million (ppm). Since then carbon emissions have been rising, the radical acceleration to the present position of 383 ppm coming in the last fifty years, while current forecasts of our present trajectory suggest a 450 ppm concentration in the very near future, beyond which is extreme danger.

What matters in terms of history is the close correlation between these trends and key developments in human activity. Population growth in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the consequent extension of agriculture – especially methane-emitting livestock – have been major contributory factors, but population growth itself is closely linked to the advent of the carbon economy, initially through the use of coal in the first century of the industrial revolution, then more particularly oil and gas in its second. These finite sources of biologically sequestrated solar energy powered the industrially based mass production and technological advantage we associate with the 'rise of the West' and led to the present globalized political economy.

Momentum towards this global system was slowed in the first half of the twentieth century through two World Wars and even after 1945 was held in check by the command economies of the Soviet system, though this itself wrought untold environmental – as well as human – damage on great swathes of the planet's surface. However, by the 1960s, the USA, liberal capitalism's chief engine and outstanding champion, was leading a resurgent globalization that not only reasserted the earlier trajectory but, in terms of annual economic growth rates, rapidly overhauled it.

From our position of hindsight, the direction of the vessel's steer can be seen as clear and irresistible. With oil and gas for the already industrialized economies ridiculously cheap and plentiful, despite the oil-shocks of the 1970s, brakes in the form of market regulation were largely abandoned. All caution was thrown to the winds as the 'Great Acceleration' surged towards its political, if not economic, apotheosis in 1989–90, with the West swatting its apparently moribund Soviet competitor off the board, a triumph famously celebrated in Francis Fukuyama's The End of History and the Last Man (1992). This much debated treatise critically represented the new era of globalization as a cornucopia of abundance for everyone on the planet. The irony of its title, however, should not be missed. The year of the book's publication was also the year of the Rio 'Earth Summit', in which, under the auspices of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, climate scientists clearly and unequivocally asserted that the impact of an ever-increasing carbon economy was unsustainable. The relationship between the globalizing thrust and the threat to the biosphere was proving to be a rather exact one.

With the planet's human population soaring from an already massive 3.85 billion in 1972 to 6.1 billion in 2000, and with no demographic downturn in sight at least until mid-century, our species is clearly bursting at the seams and, even putting aside climate change, is threatening environmental breakdown on many levels. However, accelerating rates of carbon emissions have little to do with the rapid, primarily Third World-based growth, of population. The average Tanzanian family, for instance, burns the equivalent fossil fuel in a year to what a single Briton burns in a day. The message is again unequivocal: the unequal nature of production and consumption worldwide, as determined by a process of historical development that has favoured and continues to favour the North against the South, means that the carbon threat comes primarily from the urbanized, over-nourished and materially over-burdened populations that made the leap into industrial and post-industrial carbon economies first.

If the early corporations such as the British India East Company, or its French and Dutch equivalents, can be seen as seventeenth-century prototypes in what has become a process of state-sanctioned and legalized business plunder, we should not forget, however, that their writ was often founded on military force. They and the states that backed them used this force against historic world empires – Mughal India, Qing China and so on – who, though forced to bow to this force majeure, were themselves already highly organized, economically largely self-contained and with industrial production rates that were, in pre-fossil fuel economy terms, often highly significant. Even in 1800 the whole of Western production could not challenge China's industrial pre-eminence. Yet a century later a staggering nine-tenths of such production was Western.

The point here is two-fold. Firstly, large numbers of people across the globe, for century upon century, have lived and worked within imperial systems. Secondly, while the New World's empires disintegrated or collapsed on the arrival of the Europeans in the sixteenth century, in Eurasia the Qing, Ottoman, Romanov and Mughal empires were still powerful. It is true that, over the next two hundred years, these empires were either liquidated by their Western competitors, or struggled on against the grain of the semi-peripheral status conferred on them by the ascendant Western system. Indeed Russia and China, under communist rule, would do so as consciously 'anti-system' states. However, this was not the end of the story – radical transformation by the start of the 'Great Acceleration' being part of their destinies too.

It came – again paradoxically – through the worldwide imitation of the political model the West had devised and developed in tandem with, and corollary to, its own economic imperatives: the nation-state. In the post-colonial era, all new states were thus required to participate in an international economy with rules of competition and pace of transformation as set by the West. Not surprisingly, many weaker polities, especially in Africa, starting off from low economic base-lines, rapidly fell by the wayside – with disastrous environmental and human consequences. But as the 'Great Acceleration' gathered pace, it is perhaps of little surprise that by the beginning of the twenty-first century some of the old world-empires, now risen phoenix-like in reformulated national colours, whether post-communist or not, should be making rapid strides towards overhauling the West on its own terms. In short, the lethal logic of the present trajectory is founded on both Western greed and Eastern revenge.

What then can historians do about any of this, especially when scientists already have spelled out the perils before us? A paradox of modern science, however, is that it is itself part of that Western historical process which, especially since the triumph of the Enlightenment, has assumed nature to be an object to be understood but also mastered. 'Big science' may offer technical fixes, for example pumping excess carbon down oil wells, building more nuclear power stations, or even reflecting sunlight back into space through giant space mirrors; exactly the sorts of solutions that government and business encourage, not least to provide assurances to the public that climate change can be managed and controlled. But they will fail because they cannot and will not address the problem at source.

Anthropogenic climate change is the result of a historical trajectory the present upshot of which is an international political-economic system at odds with the carrying capacity of the planet. Indeed, operating on a neo-Darwinian formula of 'the survival of the fastest', the slope to self-destruction is approaching the vertiginous with frightening rapidity. More immediately this trajectory has encumbered all of us with a form of globalism that, though hugely complex, is extraordinary brittle. It would take very little to bring it to its knees. A run on the markets brought about, for instance, by a handful of simultaneous climate change-related disasters is one obvious scenario. The consequences of such a crisis are almost too horrible to contemplate.

In these circumstances, historians have a particular responsibility to speak truth to power. Other paths can be taken. These, however, involve human beings grasping the nettle as agents for their own wellbeing, away from the hierarchical relationships of the so-called global village towards a more genuinely heterarchic order adapted to local environmental conditions in terms of productive capacity, economic exchange and an egalitarian politics of human scale.

In even the recent past such an observation of this kind would have elicited a likely retort that it implied a return to the Stone Age, which is somewhat ironic given that our prehistoric ancestors were so much more capable, resilient and attuned to their world around them than we will ever be. We cannot go back – nor would we want to – but we can start learning, both from recent and more distant history, how people managed and survived in conditions of often great extremes.

We might also begin taking a leaf out of our ancestors' spiritual world, founded above all their connect to nature. The historian Arnold Toynbee, writing before the onset of a general knowledge about anthropogenic climate change in his valedictory study Mankind and Mother Earth (1976), urged that if the biosphere were to remain inhabitable we should strive not to seek material mastery over our non-human environment but spiritual mastery over ourselves. Or – as Richard Fortey, a great observer of the natural world, put it in Life, an Unauthorized Biography (1998) – if we are to have a future, human consciousness must be met with that of human conscience.

Is such a paradigm shift achievable? The signs are not promising. Even if we can envisage spirituality and science, reason and compassion coming together to create an outcry that perhaps might force the UN to implement a framework by which the rudder might be altered to steer us onto a saner path, that instrument is in the hands of political and corporate drivers more intent on accelerating the reckless and tunnel-visioned rush to the abyss than ever.

As well as repeatedly demonstrating that this trajectory to disaster is founded on a false premise, the historian's vital role is also to show clearly that we cannot, at one and the same time, reduce carbon emissions yet continue the pursuit of voracious profligacy, but that our efforts should be focused on reconnecting humanity to the elements of its more resilient and sustainable past. Which in turn means rediscovering our complex, fraught, precarious, but sometimes remarkably synergistic and holistic relationship with nature.

As we learn from historical reality we might thereby begin to recognize global warming for what it actually is: our last best friend. Its actions – anthropomorphically speaking – remind us that we were always dependent on the biosphere and if we abused it the gods would avenge themselves on us. History is our witness. It's time for historians to get a grip on what really matters.

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