History as Political Thought

Essays on the Politics of History and Time

Edited by
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York College/CUNY

Series in World History

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Introduction

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In the 1986 Rodney Dangerfield film *Back to School*, comedian Sam Kinison plays Professor Terguson, an instructor of history at the fictitious Grand Lakes University. One scene of the movie depicts the first meeting of Terguson's Contemporary American History class. Terguson begins the session by informing his students that he holds history to be "sacred," the same way Christians feel about the Bible, or farmers feel about their land. History, according to the esteemed professor, is about more than facts about the past.

Kinison then asks for a volunteer to interpret what he claimed to be one of the "easiest events" in American history: the United States' withdrawal of troops from Vietnam. A young woman raises her hand and gives an articulate response, referencing the "Vietnamization" of the conflict and the United States' role in propping up the regime in Saigon. At this point, Professor Terguson becomes Sam Kinison. The professor rolls his eyes and asks the class, "Is she right?" He notes that what the young woman just said was the "popular" understanding of what occurred and that "a lot of people believe that." He then raises his voice and goes into a diatribe about having served in Vietnam while others, arguably those who "wrote" the history of the Vietnam War, were home "partying" and listening to Beatles' albums. He breaks into Kinison's patented scream, getting uncomfortably close to his student's face, at which point Dangerfield's character interjects, reminding the professor that his classmate was not involved in the decision to end America's role in the conflict. Terguson then asks Dangerfield, whom he calls "Mr. Helper," to explain why the United States did not win the Korean War. Dangerfield's response includes a shot at both General Douglas MacArthur and President Harry Truman for not taking control of the entire Korean peninsula. Terguson smiles and responds by telling Dangerfield: "Good answer. I like the way you think."

The scene is, in my humble opinion, downright hilarious, but it is so because Kinison's portrayal of Terguson deviates from what one would expect of a typical history professor. Professor Terguson has the title and is in a position of authority in the classroom. Yet, his disposition is anything but academic. His attachment to his subject is deeply personal and "sacred" in a way that is distinctive from the feeling of attachment an academic historian would have

toward his field. Terguson is anything but dispassionate. He is deeply emotive and, in this case, roots his understanding of the Vietnam War in his own personal experience with the conflict. He is not viewing history through the prism of the Ivory Tower. His response to his student's understanding of the end of the Vietnam War does not encourage examining the subject matter in a detached, objective manner or exploring alternative perspectives to understanding historical events and their meaning. He views his explanation as true based on his own experience, as opposed to that put forward by his student, who could only experience the conflict secondhand through media and history books. He is making a claim as to the correct interpretation of history based not on rigorous study of the issue but on personal attachment to the subject matter.

This scene resonated with me as a scholar of American political development and political theory, but also as an American citizen. In terms of research, I spend time in archival collections, comb through digital newspaper archives, and oral histories. I have taken part in classes and seminars on research methodology and design, and my scholarship largely takes the form of a historical narrative. I experienced the history about which I write through analysis of documents and reading the scholarship of historians and other academics. I was not in the room where (or when) it happened, to reference the play, *Hamilton*. In this way, even though I share a title with Terguson, my experience with history is, like Terguson's student, secondhand.

However, I, and the authors of the chapters in this volume, would agree that while history is indeed a topic of study, it also is a past that informs our understanding of contemporary political issues and our own identities, and how we feel connected to past events. Our experience of history is, in this way, personal, even if not as emotively as Terguson's. We all, in our own ways, approach history as scholars and as members of a political community whose connections to history are more than merely academic. We are all, in a sense, like Terguson in that we feel personal attachment to our subject matter, even if we have not experienced the events which we study, and about which we write, directly. In other words, Terguson's approach to interpreting history is not something that we can readily discard.

My collaborators and I would also agree that even our scholarship that examines history is not totally dispassionate. A recent volume on noted historian David McCullough, entitled History Matters, discusses the passion he developed for his subject matter. In a speech delivered at the Library of Congress, he argued that "anyone who writes history and leaves out feeling isn't writing history. Maybe we can never truly know anything without feeling" (McCullough 1995, 131). John Meacham, another noted historian, in the foreword of the volume, argues that "the rendering of great history, then, is

rooted in humility and in empathy," which, he claims, "are the same things that make for great citizenship" (1995, xii).

Again reflecting on my own experience, I sometimes cannot help but sympathize with the characters whose archival materials I am exploring. Sometimes their actions seem downright heroic. At other times, I find their rhetoric and actions cunning and shrewd, even if I disagree, sometimes vehemently, with what is being said or done. At still other times, I feel as if I am reading the speech of a villain and feel the need to "root against them." Our attachment to History is, in other words, informed both by a reasoned commitment to accurately understand and distill the past and an attachment to our subject matter. At the very least, we recognize that our scholarship is motivated by our current interests and our places in contemporary society. We are bringing the present, our present, to the past.

History and Time as Political Thought

This volume explores history and time as political concepts. A central premise of the volume is that history is political thought. History and the passage of time provide means of understanding contemporary politics: they are inherently political concepts. Political actors invoke the past to situate their actions in the present. They also provide visions of the future, history that has not yet occurred. In this way, history and time structure political rhetoric, discourse, and debate. Invoking history is a ubiquitous tactic for political actors looking to achieve their goals. These concepts have meaning, and ambitious political actors seek to tap into the power of these concepts in building political coalitions and furthering their strategic objectives. This is true for political actors of different, even competing, ideological persuasions, as well as across different social, cultural, and historical contexts. Liberals, conservatives, Marxists, theologians, and even musicians all incorporate understandings of history and the arc of time in their public utterances.

History is an idea that matters. Each contribution to this volume, in its own way, builds on the premise that ideas are "not epiphenomenal" but, rather, constitutive elements of politics (see Tulis 1987, 17). One facet of this volume is an examination of history as the content of political rhetoric and argumentation. We, in other words, explore what is being said about history and time. In various ways, each chapter explores some invocation of history and time, ranging from specific moments—such as a "founding" or an "apocalypse," a beginning or an end—to sweeping historical or meta-narratives, to appeals to newly discovered, overlooked, or "forgotten" history. In each case, the passage of time is deemed to be meaningful, but how this subject matter is characterized and presented varies a great deal. In all of these cases, political actors put forward "explanation or justification by situating things in the flow of time" (Ceaser

2006, 7). The invocation of history in political rhetoric is a means of legitimizing particular points of view and justifying, or critiquing, different actions taken (see Kackna and Schattkowsky 2017).

Time also structures history by providing an organization to understand events. It allows us to establish order and coherence in the past, present, and future and make connections between ourselves and past figures and events. Chronology, establishing a sequence of events, in other words, provides a narrative structure allowing for history to become justifiable by becoming comprehensible.

Relatedly, a question arises over who gets to decide how history is to be understood. Who decides what the "correct" understanding of history is? Who are the messengers that will be seen as legitimate? Historians, those who share Professor Terguson's title and training and dedicate their professional lives to studying the subject matter, seem to have legitimacy in this conversation due to their professional credentials, even as there are disagreements in the field over how best to go about analyzing the past. History is an academic discipline, and people can identify as professional historians with various specializations within the field. However, others often invoke alternative sources of authority in putting forward historical narratives. Political philosophers, elected officials, jurists, and social movement activists, among others, espouse their own interpretations of the past. As Johnson notes in his chapter, some of the greatest works in the field of political theory are histories.

The question of who invokes history relates to a second theme of this volume: that the meaning of history is contested. Scholars of history, for their part, debate historiography, the relative importance of historical facts, how one should study history, and the significance of past events to contemporary problems. They debate epistemologies and methodologies of history and time. Scholars of history are embedded within their own social contexts and are not immune to becoming attached to their subject matter. Contemporary social context, in other words, can influence how scholars experience and engage with history.

Scholars of history, for their part, wear multiple hats that structure their presentation of history. Questions of audience influence how historical arguments are presented. For instance, Ferro demonstrates that the teaching of history is often infused with "myth," regularly with the purpose of promoting forms of patriotism and nationalism (1981). Historians, in their role as educators and as the writers of textbooks, do not just speak to other historians the way they do when writing for academic journals or presenting at academic conferences. They often put forward scholarship with different target audiences: students or the public at large. Textbook authors, for example, particularly those writing for elementary school students, seek to present history in ways that are accessible to young audiences who are often being exposed to historical narratives for the first time.

Debates over the meaning of history often occur outside of history departments and academia, involving many who are not historians. As Cannadine notes in an edited volume entitled *What is History Now?*, "more people are writing about history than ever before, in an unprecedented range of sub-disciplinary specialisms and expositional modes" (2002, x). Competing interpretations of history are often espoused by overtly political actors: elected officials, including presidents and legislators, social movement activists, religious authorities, etc., and these interpretations often conflict with those of professional historians. These are often the figures whom historians could call the makers of history, the subjects of their writing. As Meacham notes, "like all of us, they [the subjects of historical writing] dwelt in a vivid, living, chaotic present" (1995, xii). These actors put forward interpretations of their own actions to justify them, often by rooting them in understandings of continuity and change. The political actors we examine here were putting forward contestable claims as to their places in their own histories. They were both "students" of history and participants in history as it happened. In such cases, the stakes of winning the debate over history's meaning are elevated. History is deeply tied to issues of identity, including race, nationality, ethnicity, and religion. Again, debates over understanding history are about more than discovering objective truth. Understandings of the past are intimately tied to the problems of the present and visions of the future. In this way, history is actionable.

Jason Stanley has provided an insightful study of how authoritarian regimes seek to control historical narratives in their pursuit and maintenance of political dominance. He notes, for instance, that "one lesson the past century has taught us is that authoritarian regimes often find history profoundly threatening. At every opportunity, these regimes find ways of erasing or concealing history in order to consolidate their power" (2024, xi). In other words, if knowledge is power, authoritarian regimes maintain themselves by keeping the masses ignorant of the past.

The state, and not just its authoritarian forms, is a critical actor in shaping historical narratives. In part, this is because governments play a role in policy, including education policy, which determines what history is allowed to be taught, how it is taught, and who gets to teach and learn it. Governments provide a number of services in this regard, including public schools, research grants, public libraries, student loans, etc. For instance, in the United States, according to the National Center of Education Statistics, there were over 3 million people employed as public-school teachers in full or part-time roles during the 2023-24 academic year (2025). Governments have motivations to become involved in the teaching of history beyond promoting the pursuit of knowledge. Those in power have interests in cultivating certain behaviors among those they are governing. Even if those in power are not autocratic, as

are the subjects of Stanley's work, the state has an interest in maintaining social order and invests in telling stories about itself and its people.

This connects to a third theme of the volume, that contemporary social and political contexts provide both agency and limitations on one's ability to invoke and define history. Those who invoke history do not do so in a vacuum. Each actor that makes these types of arguments does so in a particular historical context and has their own place within contemporary society that can provide them with a source of authority in putting forward a historically rooted argument or, on the other hand, limitations on how their arguments may be received by others, and arguably a combination of both.

Historians, for instance, bring to bear professional credentials, which, as intimated above, are themselves sources of legitimacy. In a recently published volume on the events of January 6th, several historians noted that they were often called upon by media outlets to offer context and meaning to the events that occurred that day. The scholars participating in the roundtable that was ultimately published reflected on the roles historians can play in a crisis (Downs 2024, 4). They also discuss the relationship between journalists and academic historians and the role of being public intellectuals. They similarly, however, indicated they had difficulty in doing so because of how they felt in the moment of what occurred that day. Joanne Freeman, for instance, noted that she "was having a hard time processing 'the events transpiring on television'" (Downs 2024, 13). Elizabeth Hinton stated that she "had an emotional response initially" (Downs 2024, 13). Their feelings were critical to their interpretation of these events, but also made it difficult to fulfill their roles as experts.

At the same time, a society with an anti-intellectual tradition may provide obstacles to historians in making political claims, even if they are experts in their field (see Hofstadter 1963). Gallup, for instance, has documented diminishing public trust in academia over the last decade. (Gallup 2025). Pew Research also recently found that 70% of Americans felt that higher education was moving in the wrong direction (Parker 2025). Those who expressed dissatisfaction in the survey often attributed their disapproval to concerns about political agendas being present in education. Different societies and differing subgroups within societies will have different levels of receptivity to these types of arguments based on who is making them.

The state, again, has numerous resources in cultivating particular understandings of history. In the United States, state governments have been tasked with providing universal primary and secondary education, and history is part of the curriculum across the country. My home state of New York, for instance, has guidelines for the teaching of the history of the United States, the state of New York, and global history as part of its K-12 learning standards for social studies. "The primary purpose of social studies," according to the state,

"is to help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse and democratic society in an interdependent world" (New York State K-12 Social Studies Framework 2024, 2). Governments promote historical experiences through patronizing museums and the arts. It is also the source of many of the records historians and others explore when writing history, for instance, documents catalogued in the Library of Congress or any number of records subject to Freedom of Information Act requests. However, "official" accounts of history can be, and often are, viewed with suspicion. Trust in government, like academia, has seen a decades-long decline, a trend far predating the recent explosion in public discourse over mis- and disinformation (see Pew Research Center 2025). Numerous books are now billed as providing a more complete and accurate view of history, capturing stories and perspectives typically not featured in mainstream history books (see, for instance, Ayers 2004). Some even have provocative titles accusing official histories of including lies and deception (see, for instance, Loewen 2018). These titles are predicated on the idea that these omissions and deceptions are intentional rather than innocent mistakes of researchers and writers. These titles at the very least imply intentionality on the part of those writing "traditional" histories.

For their part, religious authorities invoke historical narratives as being driven by the divine, allowing them to reach particular constituencies—the devout—but not others. Religion provides a powerful source of authority, including political authority, and can, thus, influence how one understands the past. Indeed, as Smith notes, overtly religious appeals are far from absent today, as is obvious in debates over abortion, stem cell research, same-sex marriage, and gay rights" (2006, 149). Religion provides people with a sense of purpose and can influence one's understanding of chronology. History can be seen as "sacred."

Ultimately, history provides a resource to any number of political actors, giving those who invoke it agency, but the strategies available to any individual in their deployment of history are limited by their current place in society. As Stanley notes, history "provides multiple perspectives on the past." And "through exposure to multiple perspectives, citizens learn to regard one another as equal contributors to a national narrative" (2024, xi). Understanding the political deployment of history requires us to appreciate not just what is being said, but who is making historical arguments, the audiences which they are attempting to reach, and the resources these actors have at their disposal.

Outline of the Volume

This volume contributes to a discussion of the uses and potential abuses of history and temporalized political arguments by examining how a range of political actors incorporate historical argumentation into their political

projects. Each contributor takes a unique approach to the subject matter, in their own way, and focuses the readers' attention on how history and time structure political controversies.

One important note about the contributors to this volume: we are, largely, not historians or historiographers by training, even though we are all fascinated by history. Only one of us has a graduate-level degree in history. Most of us are approaching the subject matter with a political science background. A majority of us are in political science departments. Included in our eclectic group are an anthropologist and a music theorist. Overall, we are history adjacent. We are not putting forward a reflection on the state of the discipline of history, even as some of our work here draws upon these discussions.

Collectively, our backgrounds point to the ubiquity of historical argumentation in contemporary political discourse. History and time are invoked constantly and in venues ranging from grade-school textbooks to heavy metal music. The scope of the essays included in this volume speaks to the importance of historical reasoning, imagery, and argumentation in contemporary society. History is experienced in the classroom, mass media, museums, numerous public spaces, including parks, and even concert venues. It is experienced in professional and leisure settings. I, for one, did not initially expect to include an essay on metal music when the opportunity to put together this volume came about. That was a failure of imagination on my part. Our backgrounds are mainly within the context of the academy. We have, to varying extents, familiarity with debates over methodology that are connected to the discipline of history. We appreciate the difficulties associated with producing quality historically oriented scholarship and being able to communicate what is important about these studies to different audiences. Yet, because we are also from different academic disciplines, we recognize that our approaches to the subject matter are rooted in different experiences, not all of which are shared with historians, or, for that matter, with each other. Our individual expertise offers different perspectives to that of historians, and this volume is meant to profess an appreciation for history as politics and to call for a degree of humility in making historically rooted claims.

On the point of humility, we do not offer a specific definition of history here. Doing so would be antithetical to the mission of the volume. My colleagues and I embrace pluralism and recognize that history is subject to interpretation. We recognize the difficulty of writing history, in getting the empirics right, and presenting our findings coherently and compellingly. We also recognize that those who write and read history are coming from different backgrounds and will inevitably feel passionately about their own histories. History is foundational but ultimately contested and can be potentially uprooted. We are

offering reflections on the writing of history, not attempting to argue that a specific philosophy of history is necessarily valid.

The contributions consist of eight chapters organized in three parts. The first, "Ancient to Modern Conceptions of Time and History," features essays demonstrating the importance of history and time as political thought in the works of political theorists and philosophers spanning the ancient/modern divide. LeJeune explores different conceptions of time in antiquity, investigating what he labels a "civilizational crisis" in ancient Greece, specifically in Thucydides' Peloponnesian War. The passage of time can be interpreted as a source of decay and decline, as in Sparta, or as offering growth potential, as LeJeune argues is the case of Athens. Understanding the passage of time and how that very concept is culturally conceptualized and rhetorically utilized by actors within that culture is critical to understanding the broader political regime in Thucydides' work. This is what makes Thucydides' work both history and political science, and is one reason his writings remain so illuminating of the present. Johnson, in an essay entitled "Historical Vertigo," provides an analysis of Nietzsche, Marx, and Benjamin, exploring the connections between political theory and historicism, and the feeling of vertigo, he demonstrates, is a critical part of political theorists' experiences of history. History and time are concepts with which theorists operating across millennia have been grappling, and exploring history can be disconcerting.

The second part, "Time and History in Political Discourse," shifts attention to the use of history as political argument in a range of areas, including in university settings, debates over colonialism and civil rights, and contemporary electoral politics. Gibson brings our attention to heritage practice, demonstrating that expertise in presenting history is tied to ideological discourses, including white racial privilege, and inherently to questions of legitimacy and authority. Professions associated with the idea of history have histories themselves, and Gibson challenges us to examine how perceived authority over history can reinforce and/or challenge power dynamics. Upton and Miller bring us back to the Ivory tower, in this case to the physical college campus, by exploring history as presented in land acknowledgements and the broader relationships of universities to indigenous communities and their own histories. Universities are not just spaces in which historical knowledge is produced and disseminated. College campuses are spaces that must grapple with the politics of history and space. Universities are built on spaces that have histories long predating their establishment, and many, including institutions with which several of the authors of this volume have connections, have grappled with, or at the very least "acknowledged" these histories.

I follow these chapters with a piece exploring President Donald Trump's critique of the 1619 Project, which became the 1776 Project, as part of a broader

fight over the meaning of America's origins. The debate over what the "real" American Founding is illustrates both the contested nature of America's historical narrative and how the legacy of the Founding, including the creation of the institution of the presidency, has continued to shape political conflicts today. Presidents, in other words, can, and do, act as historians. Next, Phillips provides an analysis of historical rhetoric in the context of American political development in the twentieth century. Historical narratives were, he demonstrates, critical elements of political movements as different as the civil rights and anti-abortion movements. Actors as ideologically different as Martin Luther King and Phyllis Schlafly can act as policy entrepreneurs and disseminate historical lessons to provide legitimacy for their political projects. Part of their entrepreneurship is in the crafting of meaningful narratives that resonate with audiences that can become part of political movements. And, this phenomenon occurs on the political Left and Right.

Part III, "Time, History, and Political Imagination," includes contributions that ask us to imagine different roads traveled. This includes essays asking readers to engage with "future" history, such as the apocalypse, and our experiences of history in music and popular culture. Hudson explores historical imagery in the songs of German heavy metal band Rammstein, the experience of which he shows can be quite discomforting when the historical references made in the band's songs are examined closely. The piece also demonstrates that history can be experienced through music and not just in books and classrooms. The lyrics are juxtaposed with music and can be experienced in deep, even physical, and, to use his term, "heavy" ways. Finally, Wycoff brings us to the end of time: the apocalypse. The concept of the apocalypse, he argues, is itself a "genre of history." Apocalypse provides a narrative structure combining critiques of the past and gesturing, if not demanding and divining, a future. The concept is also not necessarily religious. "Ends" of history can be deployed in secular ways, even in left-leaning political discourses.

Ultimately, this volume is an eclectic assortment of essays on the politics of history and time. We do not claim to have a final say over the politics of history. What we do hope is to contribute to an exploration of history in a democratic society and to allow readers of this volume to engage with scholarship of different varieties by those who appreciate history from across different academic disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. History is a resource that political actors tap into often, in a range of contexts, and our essays are meant to promote an appreciation of this phenomenon and to recognize the potential of history as a political force. We are all some combination of Professor Terguson and his student. We experience history in very personal ways, but also recognize a need to maintain a commitment to accuracy and objectivity in approaching our subject matter. Our engagement with history is

both academic and personal. And if, on occasion, it's as loud or absurd as Kinison himself, that's OK too.

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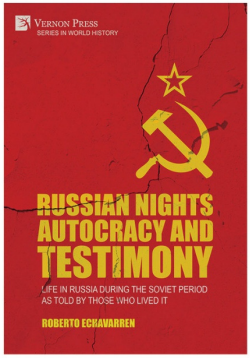
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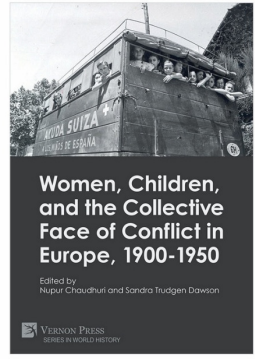
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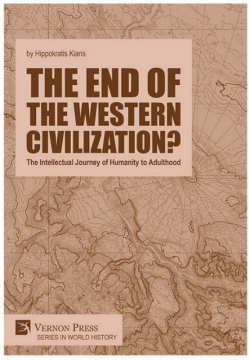
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