

World History and Other Marginal and Perverse Pursuits: Interview with Felipe Fernandez-Armesto

Lincoln Paine interviewed Felipe Fernandez-Armesto at the St. Botolph Club in Boston on 13 November 2008.

I want to thank you for agreeing to talk to me about your career, your teaching and your writing, and I thought we would divide the interview into three sections...

Rather like Gaul...

Yes, but I don't want to come, see and conquer; I just want to elicit information...
You're very welcome.

But I would like to talk a little bit about your background, your education, and also your approach to history and your observations on the craft.

Right, okay. I don't really feel as though I had much family and even less education.

Well, despite your Spanish name, you are very English.

Well, my mother-in-law, God rest her soul, who travelled in Spain with me said it was like being with a werewolf. I started off being exaggeratedly English, which I suppose is a desperate attempt to make up for my Spanishness, and after a few days I became exaggeratedly Spanish, which I suppose is an attempt to make up for my Englishness. Apparently after a few days in Spain I always start shouting and wave my arms about.

So, you were born and raised in England?

Yes.

And your father was a journalist?

Yes.

For newspapers, magazines?

Yes, yes. I mean, he spent most of his career with *La Vanguardia*, which is the main Spanish-language newspaper in Barcelona. He wrote books, but they were... essentially it was his collected journalism.

And your mother is English?

Yes.

And where did you grow up?

In London.

Did you go to public school?

Well, I went to a school which I guess technically was a public school. It belonged to this group of about 200 independent schools, which was called the Headmaster's Conference. It belonged to that group, but it wasn't a typical public school. It was a day school and it was secular, and it had been founded by Jeremy Bentham. Apparently, it had a progressive ethos, although it wasn't apparent to those of us who were there in my day.

And from there you went to Oxford?

Yes. Well, I had a very brief sojourn at the University of Salamanca. But whilst I was there, General Franco in his wisdom decided that if you talked to more than two people on the street, that was a riot. My faculty was closed down. And I had a place at Oxford; in those days, you could do things like write them and say 'I've changed my mind. Can I come after all?' So, although I greatly enjoyed being in Salamanca with the faculty closed and spending my time drinking with my friends, which I subsequently realised was a much superior education to attending class, I'm afraid I got a little nervous and decided I probably ought to be doing something a little more proper, so I went to Oxford.

And you read history there?

Yes.

What was your initial focus, and who did you study with?

Oh, God. Well, I don't know. I think before I went there I was really interested in the Enlightenment and the transition to Romanticism. There are something like 250,000 books about Napoleon and I think I'd read most of them by the time I started. As I remember my interview at Oxford, they asked me what I'd been reading and I said I'd been reading

Sorel's *Europe et la revolution francaise*.¹ And I probably didn't need to say anything else in order to get my place at the University. However, in those days, when you started at Oxford you had a very limited choice of what you could do in your first term, and I thought I ought to do something unfamiliar, so I did some medieval history in my first term, and I rather got seduced by that. I suppose my main tutor in my first year was Karl Leyser—I was at Magdalen, which had a big history school and had some great tutors. It had Karl Leyser, A.J.P. Taylor and John Stoye, Gerald Harriss, Angus Macintyre.² And I started with Karl and he was a wonderful tutor. People don't realise, people who know his publications, don't realise what a wonderfully uninhibited person he was when you were talking to him, because all his writings are extraordinarily inhibited articles in which he advances a thesis in the first three lines and then spends the next thirty pages withdrawing it. But as a tutor he was liberated and he would wander around his room kicking the piles of notes which he kept on the floor in high dudgeon when he reflected on the immorality of the great ones of the past. He was impassioned and an exciting person to be with and he—and his tutorials were immensely wide-ranging. I mean you'd start off with Charlemagne and you'd end up talking about Schiller, and you know just being with him was a great educational experience and very, very mind-broadening. So, from that time, although I tried to compose myself a curriculum with a course which covered as much of history as possible, I was really most interested in the Middle Ages.

What was your thesis on?

My doctoral thesis?

Did you have an undergraduate thesis?

Yes. In those days at Oxford you could get a first, which is kind of like a *summa cum laude*; I don't know what the equivalent in Leiden would be. But in order to get yourself into the top category, you really needed... typically you prepared for your final exam eleven subjects, and you could do an optional thesis. And if you got the top grade in six or more of those, if you did a thesis it would be twelve, subjects, you'd get yourself into the top category. So I did the thesis. It seemed to me to be the obviously sensible strategy, because one of the subjects was just an essay on anything; one of them was translating from foreign languages. Two of them were topics which you prepared from the original sources on quite a sort of narrow field. And then there was something I think called the general historical paper in which you could divagate without really knowing anything. And

so that was five papers that you could score heavily on, and then if you did the thesis I thought you could more or less guarantee yourself the top rank without necessarily knowing that much. So that was my strategy.

And what was it that you didn't know very much about?

Well, my thesis, which was terribly successful because it won the Arnold Prize [1971], which is the prize that you get for the best thesis, was about the conquest of the Canary Islands.

Was that your first foray into European expansion?

Well, I suppose it was, really, although I also did quite a lot of stuff on that before, for the rest of my final exam. The syllabus has changed a little bit, but in those days one of these topics that you could prepare with documents in the original languages was a paper which, broadly speaking, covered Columbus and the conquests of Mexico and Peru, and I did that. So I suppose already as an undergraduate I was relatively self-concentrating on early Spanish colonial endeavours.

And was colonialism at that time already being seen as this idea of European expansion or was it still a colonialist, nation-state oriented approach?

Oh, God, well I don't know because at Oxford we don't have, and didn't have, approaches. We just got on with it. It was a place which was very, very hostile to theory of any sort. I remember when I was a young don being stopped in the street by an immensely distinguished Oxford historian who said to me, 'Felipe, you're the sort of person who would know about this. Can you tell me about this person everybody's going on about called Fouquet.' And I couldn't think of whom he meant. The only Fouquet I could think of was an eighteenth-century ethnographer of that name. I'd never read anything by him, but the name rang a bell, and I said, 'As far as I know, he's an eighteenth-century ethnographer.' And this guy looked at me weirdly and walked on, and it was only subsequently that I realised he was actually talking about Foucault! And that shows you the degree of innocence that prevailed at the time in Oxford. You know, you think of the great figures of Oxford in those days, people like Richard Cobb, Hugh Trevor-Roper, people whose whole career really was founded on their objection to theory. So, we weren't really into post-colonialism or anything like that. It was very, very humanistic; it was all about understanding text. It was *philologie et histoire*, and you kind of didn't worry whether you were being Eurocentric or not.

But I do have to say that I was...I found texts which came from indigenous sources much more interesting, compelling—very much more mysterious, more intriguing than those which were more obviously accessible because, though removed by half a millennium, they were recognisably texts from a culture with which I could recognise my kinship. When I was looking at one of the sources in which the University of Oxford is surprisingly rich—early colonial and pre-colonial Meso-American texts—I felt entranced, and I guess my sympathy for the indigenous point of view started then even though I hadn't read Van Leur or anybody like that at that stage.³

So if you come out of this anti-theoretical approach, do you see in your own background a development towards becoming interested in European expansion, or did you see yourself running on a parallel track?

Oh, I don't know. I think I thought I was doing global history. I was very influenced by [Charles] Verlinden long before I met him and came to like him and admire him as a person.⁴ I was a great admirer of his scholarship. And it just seemed obvious that a comparative approach is bound to impart some understanding. That's why Our Lord spoke in parables. And I think that is why I felt attracted to the Canary Islands. I saw them as a sort of fulcrum of global history. I was interested in European expansion only because it's a great global event with an extraordinary global resonance which marks the beginnings of the emergence of this Latin, Christian world which had been marginal and backward in the Middle Ages, by global standards, into a world-shaping force. I suppose at the time one of the things that had penetrated the Oxford history scholars was interdisciplinarity.

In particular, there were two obsessions. One was cliometrics, which I must confess I was never terribly sympathetic to, although I included it in my doctoral thesis. I had all of these very elaborately calculated tables, in all of which I made fundamental arithmetical errors which I only discovered just in time before the thing was published, and which had not been noticed by all the important people: my supervisors, my examiners, my editors at the Oxford University Press, all the outside readers whom they sent this to. Nobody had noticed that all my calculations were wrong! And that made me realise that cliometrics was nonsense, and it was really unnecessary to have all of these very exactly calculated quantitative data. Cliometrics was one of the obsessions, and the other was anthropology. One of my tutors was a great friend, Peter Clarke, an urban historian, who I think was the person who introduced me to the possibilities of getting insights from reading anthropological work. And he made me read Evans-

Pritchard's book on witchcraft.⁵ Of course I subsequently became close to him and a colleague of Keith Thomas, who was one of the pioneers of anthropology in the Oxford history school, and then there was another—there were two colleagues of mine, Michael Hurst and Edward Ardener, who were respectively a historian and an anthropologist, who had a joint seminar and I hung out with them quite a lot, and so I suppose that reading the anthropological literature also disposed me to this interest in the indigenous side of empire, the indigenous contribution to empire.⁶

I think that we tend to think of the indigenous in terms of the Americas, or Africa, or places where nation-states and a written tradition are not as strong as in Asia or east Europe, eastern, or wherever that borderland is, in the Caucasus or wherever. It seems to me that you've done an amazing amount of work in terms of trying to incorporate these other indigenes.

Well, I've always been interested in the margins of everything. I suppose, partly because being Anglo-Spanish I've always felt on the margins myself, wherever I am, I've always felt a bit foreign. And I'm congenitally, intellectually perverse. I had two quite intellectually perverse parents, and I've inherited the worst of both of them. And, I think, thank God I was in Oxford where the whole system is quite sympathetic to intellectual perversity. I mean it's rather like, I don't know, physical beauty and sporting prowess—it's one of those oddities which the University of Oxford rather overvalues. So I was kind of lucky, but of course my intellectual perversity did take the form of quarrelling with my tutors and my supervisors and being extremely unwilling to accept any historical orthodoxies. I've suffered from this perversity ever since. One positive thing about it was that it drew me to the margins and did make me reject what I call these sorts of slick metropolitan skylines which dominate conventional historiography and turn to the frontiers, which I've always thought...if civilisations are the tectonic plates of history, frontiers are the places where they scrape against each other and generate seismic effects.

I think that's slightly different from having an indigenous point of view because I've always been interested in the settlers who colonise frontiers. That kind of perversity, that kind of madness has always been mysterious to me and I've always striven to understand it. I mean that's why I've always been terribly interested in people who in the sixteenth century were in Peru, which you would have thought was far away—far enough from Spain for anybody, but you know they want to go off and find the Solomon Islands. And one wants to know what makes these people tick, or people in Qing China who go to Urumchi or Ninguta, these are very

surprising undertakings. So my attraction to the margins is I think a little bit different from my attraction to the indigenous point of view. But I suppose the two things must be connected at some level; that level must surely be hostility to or rejection of the mainstream. I don't know; it's a perpetuation of the form of youthful rebellion which I indulged in when my contemporaries were taking to the barricades.

You certainly talk about, in the introduction to Civilizations, you talk about the Amalia Effect—for the woman in Jorge Marmol's novel—of her being so close, in this opulent European home in Buenos Aires, so close to the pampa and the barbarian world just outside town. But you talk about these tectonic plates of civilisation which makes me want to ask about your interest in geography, which seems to be something that permeates your work, and not only in Civilizations, when you're obviously talking about man's relationship to his environment but also in your work in atlases, the work I think you did with Gibbon and the Times Atlas of Exploration, and Pathfinders—and also your famous jibe about maritime historians, historians of exploration having not enough wind.

Yes. Too much hot air, not enough wind. Yes. Well, thank you, Lincoln, I'm glad you mentioned this. I think it is all to do with, I don't know, wanting to *épater les bourgeois*, it's all to do with this rebelliousness. As I say, I was schooled in a very textual, very humanistic kind of history, and although I certainly strove to master that and I still love textual scholarship and I still do indulge in it from time to time, I was looking for something different, for something which my tutors and my fellow students would find surprising, perhaps even scandalous. I'm not sure quite how I stumbled on this conviction that—well, I suppose it's a dual conviction. First is the conviction that history is unintelligible except in the context of the environment that surrounds us and the ecosystem that sustains us. I don't think you can make sense of what humans do unless you locate them in their ecological context. And the other aspect is my growing conviction that humans aren't the only species that have history, and the old idea that this literally humane discipline is only about people—that history is about chaps and geography is about maps—that just doesn't work.

If you take the sort of comparative doctrine that I originally got from reading Verlinden in the context of colonial societies and you extend it to its logical conclusion, you have to compare human cultures with those of other cultural species. I think my journey towards the discovery of this started when I was an undergraduate. Because I think the very first paper

I did at Oxford, for my first term, was called historical geography. And I was very surprised to find that there was no geography in it at all. You get all these textual minutiae, and the geographical component—which was obviously in the minds of some Oxford dons of some past generation who thought that it was important, I suppose, just to know where different places were—got sidetracked or even lost, and it made me realise that maybe one should reincorporate it.

Of course *annalisme* was very fashionable at the time, and I read a lot of that sort of stuff. So I think the idea one did need to start looking at the physical environment in which these texts were written in order to understand them began to take shape. And I think I also got that idea from reading a lot of old-fashioned biblical commentaries and atlases of the holy land, this sort of great nineteenth- and early twentieth-century attempt to understand sacred texts by looking at the environment in which they were written. And I realised how illuminating this was, and I thought one should be doing the same with other texts.

So I think that was part of it, but I very much remember that one of my epiphanies was reading Pieter Geyl's critique of Toynbee and thinking, 'Pieter Geyl hates Toynbee so much there's got to be something in this.'⁷ And it made me read Toynbee. And Toynbee—you can say what you like about him—but he was a great pioneer of environmental history. He had a wonderful sense of the relevance and pertinence of environment interacting with those very powerful initiatives that arise in our minds and in our emotions and which I'm perfectly willing to believe arise independently of environmental circumstances, but which only shape history within the conditions and limitations of and imposed by the environment. So I think that was also part of the reason that I got propelled in these directions.

But it was a great big struggle for me because I belong to a generation of English schoolboys who spent most of their time—no, sorry, not most of their time—spent more time doing Latin than anything else. I think I might have been almost the last of that generation. I took up science at the age of 12 and gave it up at the age of 14, and I've had to re-educate myself in it. I wasn't stimulated to do this by the struggle between evolutionary and counter-evolutionary explications of human behaviour. I did subsequently become interested in those, but I hadn't seen the relevance. Of course all of this was long before sociobiology, or maybe sociobiology was just beginning to come in, but not when I was growing up, it was more in my early years of teaching.

In terms of geography, again, which I think is a real hallmark of your work, it seems to me that you are still somewhat out of the mainstream in your use of geography and your willingness to embrace geography as a backdrop to historical study. It still seems to me that an awful lot of people rely either on texts—or certainly in the Leiden tradition, a more archival approach—on more theoretical understandings. We were talking about that at lunch, that there seem to be methodological approaches. But do you think that geography, do you think that people are taking a different view of geography now, for whatever reason, whether it's because of climate concerns, or at least in America because we've lost a sense of where we are in the world and where the rest of the world is in relation to us?

Golly. Well, I don't know about that. I'll come back to that sort of sub-question in a moment. I'm always very happy to be out of the mainstream. I mean, I'd hate the mainstream to engulf me. I'd have to—that would force me into even more marginal and perverse pursuits. But I think obviously there is a huge, growing sort of industry in environmental history, but the danger to me is that it's becoming another sub-discipline. I hate it when people ask you: 'Are you a cultural historian or an intellectual historian or a social historian or an economic historian?' I'm just a historian! I try to do total history and global history and try to use every kind of source material and see the connections between all the spheres in which we lead our lives, and I feel that the environment encompasses everything that we do and should be part of every kind of history, and not just another room which opens off the corridor, another atomised part of an already excessively atomised discipline. It worries me that we have this rhetoric of interdisciplinarity, but we don't even talk to each other, let alone people in other departments. And I just feel that specialisation is a vice and it upsets me that we have systems of education and of the institutionalisation of research which nourish vice. So I do think that environmental history is growing, but I'm not satisfied with the way in which it's growing.

The other thing which is growing is obviously global history. In the United States this is now the form in which most undergraduates encounter history. There are hundreds of thousands of students studying global history or world history—slightly different things perhaps, but courses under one or other of those rubrics—in the United States, and I think that is connected with the geopolitical dilemmas of the United States in the world today. Obviously the world history movement in the United States started earlier, but it really took off and attracted these masses of students I think after 9/11, when people in the United States at last realised that

they do need to situate themselves in the world; they need to learn about it if they're going to survive in an increasingly dangerous future.

And I'm rather...it may be invidious to speak of something good coming out of an episode as horrific as the collapse of the twin towers, but I do celebrate this specifically. And when I'm in my own global history class with my own students, I love the way they want to know about the world and how they're looking ahead to a post-American century in which the United States will no longer be the unique global hegemon and will be looking for the help of other decent communities around the world in ensuring peace and humanity. And I always ask my students why they've chosen the course, and overwhelmingly they give me answers along those lines. They want to be there when the saints go marching in; they want to be there when America rejoins the world.

And so do you think that there's...not to be too distracted by the American question, but do you think that this is sort of...the idea that America will not be the only superpower is increasingly part of the Zeitgeist of American students?

Well, I don't think that American questions are a distraction. You know America is still the most important single country in the world, and a place which the rest of the world needs to take greatest account of and greatest notice of. I have absolutely no doubt that the United States can't sustain its position as the unique global hegemon; that position is already in ruins and that ruin has been self-inflicted—inflicted by an irresponsible US government that's undertaken wars which are not only a crime but also a mistake, and has betrayed every American...destroyed every ingredient in the American identity. You know if we had Senator McCarthy around, he should be indicting Mr. Bush and Mr. Cheney and Mr. Rumsfeld and Mr. Wolfowitz for un-American activities.

The global power of the United States is obviously irrecoverable partly because the economy is in ruins, the country is mired in inextricable wars... America as a moral exemplar has been sullied and besmirched so profoundly that no effort can redeem it. But above all the position is irrecoverable because other countries are ascending to comparable levels of wealth and power. There's been a lot of comment recently about what made the United States a global hegemon. I think on the whole historians and political scientists have got this wrong. I point to overwhelmingly two factors. Well I hate the word 'factor'; there are two features of the history of the United States in the time of this country's ascent to the status of a global power. One of them is the size of its internal market,

and the other is its huge underexploited resources, above all the prairie, the so-called Great American Desert, which in the nineteenth century became the great granary of the world. Well, the United States no longer has any underexploited resources and it no longer has a particularly large internal market by the standards of the world, so the conditions on which American greatness was founded are now irretrievably in the past.

I think your point about the reason for American students' interest in world history is well taken, but I think that another reason that we're interested in global history is that we don't have quite the same background either as an expansionist country, or the same depth of background as any of the European countries. We can't look back to when Roman legions first planted their standards on our soil and trace our evolution from that point forward. And we tend to ignore entirely our Native American antecedents. And so if you can't look into the past you might as well look laterally. And I'm wondering if you think global history is something that is peculiarly American? Or are Europeans beginning to look at it in the same way, beyond this colonial expansionist, European expansion programme?

It certainly hasn't taken off in the classroom in the same way in Europe. There hasn't been this great explosion of courses in it. And most European history departments—almost all Europeans—don't have anybody who has a particular responsibility to teach it and to work on it. Obviously there is a great, a growing interest in a scholarly context in global topics in Europe and a lot of very good work is being done there. But to some extent the European tradition, what historians do outside the classroom, has always been rather independent of what they do in it. And that's not so much the case in the United States I don't think.

Again, to go back to my own undergraduate experience in Oxford where everybody taught everything and what their own research interests were didn't necessarily have anything to do with what they were doing in their lectures or in their tutorials with undergraduates. It would be most unusual in the United States, where people go into the classroom and they teach their speciality.

So when you're teaching at Tufts, are you teaching pretty exclusively world history or global history?

No. Well, I mean of course everything is, if you have this sort of totalising, globalizing approach that I have, then everything is sort of seamless, part of the great web, and I don't really like to pander to specialisation by admitting that there are any subcategories. But in practice, to avoid a lot

of circumlocution, I do other stuff. One of the obligations of my chair at Tufts is to teach Spanish history, so I always teach a Spanish history course every year. Or I try to teach it. Teach is a transit verb and I'm not really sure I can say that I teach something unless my students actually learn it. Tufts has a category of courses which it calls research seminars, which sounds rather grand but essentially it just means a small class in which people study a subject with reference to the primary sources. And my research seminar is on Native American attitudes to Spaniards in the early colonial period. I also have an environmental history course that I teach, among one or two other things that I use to vary the menu. But the environmental history course, the Spanish history course, the Native-American course and the global history course are the bedrock of my curriculum.

I guess if there isn't this approach to global history in Europe or elsewhere that there is in the United States, it would be difficult to discuss national approaches to world history in the same way that one might discuss different national approaches to colonial history.

No. If there are such different national approaches I don't really know what they are. I suppose it's inevitable; we always see the world from somewhere. What I've said about the motivation for American undergraduate students to study global history implies an American point of view. I don't like to call it a national point of view because I never like speaking of the United States as a nation. Americans do that but it seems to be somewhat an abuse of the word. I never really like speaking of nations in any context; I try to avoid the word.

Do you think there are, whatever the alternative term is, national views of colonial history in Europe—English versus Spanish versus Portuguese versus Dutch or French—that have any bearing on the way global history—might wind up evolving?

Well, what strikes me as remarkable is that traditionally the national perspectives, if you like to call them that, of all these communities—Dutch, French, Spanish, British, Portuguese—all of these communities of people whose predecessors established and ran and exploited these empires seem to be remarkably similar. They've all traditionally had a very metropolitan perspective and all the while kidded themselves that these empires were achievements of their forebears who with extraordinary cunning and prowess created these empires. The great breakthrough really of the last forty years or so—sixty years if you go right back to

Van Leur—has been to unpick that perspective and to see that empires are collaborative ventures and they don't—except in very, very, very brief periods when you've got crushing technological superiority—necessarily enable outsiders to impose their views on indigenous society.⁸ Even in the most extreme cases—I don't know, Congo of King Leopold II—you always had the quislings and collaborators from the indigenous world, and for me the real problem of imperial history that has emerged is trying to understand why and how these collaborative relationships grow up and above all what's in it for the indigenous collaborators. Why do people see outsiders as potentially positive sources of influence in the lives of various societies?

Isn't that something you begin to answer in Pathfinders, in talking about the explosion of people across the world trying to get away from each other and then all of a sudden in the period of recorded history coming back together again?

Well, *Pathfinders* is about a different matter. It's about, perhaps, something else that has always concerned me, which is 'How does culture change?' In a way, that is the great central theme of the historical discipline. History is an attempt to describe and understand how cultures change. And the reason why it's interesting can only be fully appreciated in comparative perspective, because human culture is very volatile and mutable compared with that of other cultural animals. That's what makes us humans an interesting subject.

Pathfinders is really part of that attempt to understand how cultures change, how they change by virtue of one particular mechanism or medium—the interaction of one culture with another. The subject of *Pathfinders* is how explorers first led cultures to diverge by putting distance between them and moving into different, variously demanding environments and then caused them to converge by re-establishing routes of contact between them. So I think that's a slightly different subject, although a deeply important and pervasive one.

The question of how empires work is a small part of that huge puzzle. And I have proposed a contribution towards an answer to this question of how empires work, or to the problem of these collaborative ventures in which indigenous and incoming elites find each other mutually useful. I have contributed something towards an answer to that, but not so much in *Pathfinders* as in a collection of essays that Leonard Blussé and I put together about shifting communities in early modern Asia, where I proposed for the first time in print something I'd developed

years previously in lectures to undergraduates in Oxford, what I call the stranger effect.⁹ I elaborate on this concept, again really on the basis of a long course of interdisciplinary readings in sociology and anthropology.

The stranger effect I define as the propensity that some cultures have to defer to strangers, sometimes to the point of investing them with power. And of course it's a very rational form of deference because the stranger's objective; the stranger is unimplicated in existing factions and networks. The stranger is therefore an ideal arbitrator, an ideal holy man, an ideal marriage partner. For all of those reasons, in cultures that have this propensity to value the stranger, it's a perfectly rational strategy to hand over power or to incorporate incoming elites in existing power structures. But as well as being a rational response to the opportunities that empires create for collaboration it's also rooted in very widely diffused aspects of collective psychology and of cultural behaviour.

And you can see this even in societies like ours, which is rather hostile to the stranger. Anybody who has tried to get a visa or green card to work in the United States knows this is not a culture—I mean, modern industrialised cultures typically are not particularly responsive to the stranger—but even we value goods from afar, almost in proportion to the distance they've travelled. Well, there are a lot of cultures that value people in the same way. The *nouvel arrivé* who comes with the aura of the divine horizon is a suitable person to invest with authority. And I've particularly found the work of the anthropologist Mary W. Helms helpful in formulating the idea of the stranger effect.¹⁰

What is your view of this idea of empire? I know you've spoken a little bit about it in terms of the way that Europeans tend to view themselves as the architects of their own success. I think that one of the difficulties that Americans have had—going back to this question of geography and looking at the map—is that, unlike the British who could 100 years ago look at this great swatch of pink on the world map and see where their influences are, America's modern, neo-empire preserves at least the illusion of different colours and different states, which doesn't allow us to see how our culture, economy and military permeate the rest of the world.

Even at the height of the British Empire, when British schoolchildren were all being taught where cocoa and ground nuts came from, they still actually weren't all that good at geography. I don't know whether the story about Queen Victoria asking for a gunboat to go to La Paz [Bolivia] is true; it's probably apocryphal. It has a kind of symbolic validity. One does have to accept that the British have the advantage over the Americans in

geography because they have a small country and you can learn where the Gorbals [in Glasgow] are and you've still got time to know where the Ganges is. America's a very big country and, I don't know, if you're in Milwaukee, by the time you've read the news from Minneapolis and Mississippi you don't have time for Moscow and Madrid. I get slightly impatient with Europeans who have this sort of sneering attitude to Americans' geographical ignorance. It's true, I do know a lot of Americans, some very well educated Americans, who don't know whether Paris is actually east or west of Madrid, but I know an awful lot of Europeans who don't even know whether North Dakota is north or south of South Dakota. I think this ignorance isn't peculiar to Americans.

Another question which is really unrelated, but I'll try to create an artificial bridge anyway, about this outsider effect, and also a little bit about your perversity: as a historian it seems that you straddle these worlds of being the academic historian with edited volumes to your credit and essays contributed to other people's volumes, but you've also done a lot of very broad-gauge history like Millennium and Civilizations and Food. You've written about Truth. You've written the essays on the Americas and on humankind. And I suppose it's too big a question to ask what you think the role of the historian in society is, but I want to ask it anyway. Because it seems in the American context that historians do seem to be bogged down. When we do see historians writing trade books, they tend to be either I think very narrowly focused on, you know, the new biography of Jackson, or Washington, or they tend to be very polemical. I think of Victor David Hanson or Niall Ferguson. What do you think the role of the historian might be?

Well, I think there are two answers, or perhaps three, to that. The first, or first two: there isn't anything very much that's special about history, especially if you take my view of it and you think it encompasses everything. Everything that we know is in the past, and therefore I regard it as proper for me to study it. And though you know you're right that I've written about all these different things and it sounds as though I'm terribly intellectually undisciplined, which indeed I am, I make no apology for that because I chose to specialise in history when I was an undergraduate because I was interested in everything and I couldn't make up my mind what to do and I wanted to do the subject that incorporated something of everything else. So especially if you take that very holistic view of history, there is therefore nothing special about it. Also, it has the virtue of all academic disciplines. And I think the common virtue of all academic disciplines is that they can do two things for those who study

them. They can enhance life and they can prepare for death. And actually those are the only two things worth doing in the world anyway.

History does have, I suppose, enough of a distinctive profile for one to be able to say that it enhances life and prepares for death in particular ways. It enhances life by enriching your experience, because if you go out into the streets and you look at the streetscape and the roovescape you can enjoy it more if you know that that building is Georgian or that building is Elizabethan. If you go out into the countryside and do this environmental history as I do, you can understand why the topography is as it is, why particular crops are being grown in particular places, and when all that happened—all that actually makes it a more vital experience and more enjoyable. It enhances individual lives by helping those who are leading those individual lives to situate them in a vast context.

And it helps you prepare for death I think. I hope you won't think this is canting if I say that I think it makes you a better person, or has the potential to make you a better person, because it encourages you to strive to understand minds very different from your own. I think if you can understand people in the past of your own culture, because the past is a foreign country and they do things differently there, you can understand better your own contemporaries in other cultures and people with other values. It's a mind-broadening experience to be a historian, and if it does enable, if it helps you sympathise with other people, then I think you're a better person for it.

And my other answer, about the responsibility of the historian: obviously the historian is a teacher. I see all these books and television programmes and stuff, and all the dreadful journalism that I churn out, I see these as teaching in print. I see them as extensions of my life in the classroom; I don't really draw a distinction between them. And what the teacher has to do is obviously stimulate—stimulate his students and readers to respond; if necessary provoke them into reaction and outrage. The greatest pleasure to me in my life as a teacher of history is when my students disagree with me. I once gave a public lecture in New Zealand and a fight broke out in the audience and I was so gratified because I really thought: 'At last, I've stimulated a response.' Of course that's not the whole of teaching, because obviously one hopes that one of the ways you can stimulate a response is by hitting on the truth, and it's obviously the responsibility of all professional intellectuals to speak the truth, to deconstruct myths, to excoriate abuses of power and mistaken policies on the basis of privileged knowledge they have as a result of having studied.

How secure do feel the discipline of history is in the academy?

Do you know, I honestly don't care about that. I mean—and I know I shall get stoned to death by my fellow history teachers for saying this—but I never lost a moment's sleep over anxiety that history is going to disappear from the curriculum. And I don't think it really is. But if it did, I don't think it would make any difference, because you can't eliminate history from people's experience of education, because you can't study physics without studying the history of physics. You've got to know about Einstein and Bohr. And if you're going to do chemistry you have to know about, I don't know, Lavoisier. There's no knowledge that isn't historical, which by definition is in the past. And people can never get away from history. If it ceased to be taught in schools or universities, people would still thirst or hunger to read about it, and there would still be work for professional historians in Grub Street and as pen-pushers and publishers of books.

Do you think history as a discipline—in terms of methodology, do you think there are methodological principles or applications that should be taught to historians? It sounds like you could be arguing that anybody can be a historian.

Yes. I am arguing that. I mean I think there are all sorts of terribly good reasons for taking formal history courses, and even graduate courses in history. But to be a historian is not one of them. Some of my favourite historians are not professional historians at all. They are lawyers and scientists and nuns who have written history books just as good as those by any professional historian, and hugely better than my own. And that's one of the great virtues of history, and that's why to me it is the people's discipline, because anyone can do it. You don't need any formal training. You need to be able to read, and it helps to know more than one language, but you just need the compulsion, the passion, and the interest more than you need any specific technique or methodological training or that ghastly stuff, because any such training limits you. It's in some ways better not to have it, or if you have it to react against it and to reject it because then you've really taken advantage of it and you've got something creative out of it.

The wonderful thing about history being the people's discipline, being universal and accessible, is that it can be the forum in which this interdisciplinarity comes together and in which we can all, whatever our training, take part in a conversation about the past. It's inescapable, the past! Everyone's got a past! Everyone is a historian of their own lives and experiences. And that's why I don't try to write accessible books in

order to make them more commercial; I write to make them more easily intelligible and more widely inspiring and stimulating and provocative. I utterly detest and reject the attempt to make any academic discipline hieratic and esoteric and to exclude people by having a lot of jargon and a lot of arcane theory that creates a barrier between a writer and the reader, or that divides this great common pursuit that I see as being possible among warring sects.

That brings me I guess to my last question, which I'll preface with an observation that you write with the conviction of an autobiographer or memoirist, and with the genius of a novelist.

Well, I think that's putting it a bit strongly, Lincoln, but it's very nice of you to say so.

Genius in that you have the novelist's sensibility. And I'm wondering what you think that you would recommend to an aspiring historian, your students, whether undergraduates or graduates in becoming historians and to make themselves better historians. What do you recommend as the most important thing? I think I could anticipate an answer, which would be that they should read more literature, and not just history. But I'm very curious to hear your take.

I think perfectionism is the end, because you can never attain it. And of course being a perfectionist is a recipe for unhappiness, but I don't mind inflicting unhappiness on my students. After all, I think history is going to enhance their lives and prepare their deaths, so I think a little bit of unhappiness is worth enduring along the way. But it's perfectionism that I recommend. I always smother students' papers with quibbles and complaints and suggestions for changing everything and reworking it. And this can be shocking for a student to get their work back and to see there isn't a sentence in which I haven't challenged them over something. I think you're only ever going to improve if you're reaching for higher standards, and I think that the feel-good society is the enemy of education. If you want to be better, feel badly about yourself. Hate your work. But of course, I suppose, what I'm offering here is a prescription for any field of study and isn't peculiar to history.

If I'm looking for a nostrum that history students need to know, the thing I do often say to students is, think the best of the people you're studying. They may be the foulest tyrants, the most bloody oppressors, the most ruthless exploiters. But what did they think they were doing? How did they justify themselves? And scour the sources for clues to that.

One way of putting this is to say to yourself, ‘The work of a historian, the work of a historical researcher, is really the interrogation of the dead.’ And the aim of that interrogation is to hear them speak to you with the same intelligibility and vividness as you experience when you’re speaking to your friends and contemporaries and people whose outlook and cultural background are very similar to your own. That’s when the wave of academic pleasure which is the nearest intellectual experience you have to an orgasm occurs.

And I think the ultimate test—again I always try to inflict this on my students—is do you get the joke? And you know you’ve graduated as a historian, not when you get the Ph.D., but when you can laugh at a joke that is hundreds or even thousands of years old. And that’s the moment when you know you’ve established that sympathy which is the unique pleasure the study of history can impart.

Notes

- 1 Albert Sorel, *Europe et la révolution française*, 9 vols. (Paris: E. Pion, Nourrit, 1885–1904).
- 2 Karl Joseph Leyser (1920–1992); A.J.P. Taylor (1906–1990); Angus Macintyre (1930–1994). John Stoye’s books include *The Siege of Vienna* (1965); Gerald Harris is author most recently of *Shaping the Nation: England 1360–1461* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005).
- 3 Jacob Cornells van Leur (1908–1942).
- 4 Charles Verlinden (1907–1996), Belgian historian of slavery in medieval Europe and the early modern European slave trade.
- 5 Edward Evans-Pritchard (1902–1973), *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (1937).
- 6 Keith Thomas (1933–), whose works include *Religion and the Decline of Magic* and *Man and the Natural World: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England* (1971), and *Man and the Natural World: A History of the Modern Sensibility* (1983).
- 7 Pieter Geyl (1887–1966): Dutch historian; see in particular *Can We Know the Pattern of the Past? Discussion between P. Geyl and A. Toynbee concerning Toynbee’s Book A Study of History* (Bossum: FG. Kroonder, 1948).
- 8 Van Leur’s posthumously published *Indonesian Trade and Society: Essays in Asian Social and Economic History*, translated by James S. Holmes and A. van Marie (The Hague: W. Van Hoeve, 1955).

- 9 Leonard Blussé and Felipe Fernandez-Armesto (eds.), *Shifting Communities and Identity Formation in Early Modern Asia* (Leiden: CNWS, 2003).
- 10 See in particular Helms's *Ulysses' Sail: An Ethnographic Odyssey of Power, Knowledge, and Geographical Distance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), and *Craft and the Kingly Ideal: Art, Trade and Power* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993).