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Commentary on 50 Years of Teaching at the PSU History Awards Ceremony, June 14, 2019
David A. Horowitz

Thank you, Tim, for the chance to reflect on 50 years in the trenches. Not that I'm thinking of retiring, not until I can find a reason or scrape up the courage to change a life's routine. I've had the fortune to work in a department that has extended me the freedom to follow my passions, and except for a few committee assignments, left me pretty much to my own devices. I've also been inspired by the openness and the willingness of the vast majority of the thousands of students I've encountered since 1968 to explore new ideas.

Having said that, the discipline of History is fraught with contradiction. Our profession took form in this country in the late-nineteenth century as an avenue for eastern Anglo-Protestant elites to train public statesmen and cultural guardians in the interests of instilling white nationalism, social deference, and patriotic loyalty among the industrial working class and emerging business tycoons. Under the impact of two twentieth century world wars followed by the campaign against global communism, prominent historians often served the state's priorities. After 1945, the advent of mass higher education in the consumer-driven economy compelled academic institutions to conform to market priorities and student desires for social mobility.

This leaves the Humanities in a quandary. Whether it be from state subsidies, private philanthropy, or student tuition, much of our financial support comes from those with utilitarian expectations. Yet just about all of us who teach History have a broader concept of our mission. Although everyone might put it in their own way, our calling arguably involves the desire to use historical perspective to expand the centrality of reason and empathy in human affairs.

I realize that family members and loved ones of our graduates might wonder if this is enough to justify the sacrifices often asked of you. Perhaps you might take some comfort in the thought that anyone fortified with reason and empathy may not only thrive in family and personal relationships but aspire to becoming a successful individual in *whatever* pursuit they chose to follow.

Yet there is a larger dimension to the work we do. At best, the global inter-connectivity of the Internet and social media have presented enticing possibilities for engaging far-flung social challenges. How else would we have learned of the World Bank report last fall that a *billion* people across the globe have escaped extreme poverty in the past thirty years? Although substantially higher rates of destitution persist in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Bank heralds this decline as “one of the greatest achievements of our time.”

I wish we heard more hopeful news like this in academic circles. At the same time, there is no denying that ominous political and cultural developments are shadowing the world from Eurasia and the United Kingdom to the United States, South Pacific, and beyond. The current heart of darkness, so to speak, appears to lie in a revival of the virulent tribal nationalism that in the 1930s preceded a global blood letting that extinguished the lives of more than seventy million human beings.

“History does not repeat itself,” Mark Twain is reputed to have remarked, “but it does rhyme.”

I worry how well we are preparing students to deal with a world in which empirical inquiry, rational thought, and mutual tolerance are under assault. Whether originating in the highest circles of power or on social media sites that serve as entertainment for their followers, the potential for violent outbursts emerging from such posturing is exceedingly perilous. This is no time for happy talk: these dangers call for mental toughness, spiritual clarity, and strategic discipline.

My fear is that many of our students come to us imagining a bi-polar universe. On one side are virtuous actors of pure motive who represent groups bound by ties of historical deprivation, culture, ethnicity, gender, or lifestyle. On the other lies a phalanx of characters perceived as transmitters of a hostile ideology that never seems to change through time. The problem is that once people find themselves in the self-contained bubble of their chosen affinity, they can fail to evaluate their own group's actions in strategic terms nor comprehend the possible limitations of its appeal to outsiders. On the other hand, the inability to grapple with the historical or social context of their rivals' animosities makes it difficult to respond to their provocations. For example, how much of authoritarian lashing out stems from resentment of the perceived cultural power of cosmopolitan professionals and academics?

To carry the bi-polar metaphor further, well-intended people who face threatening mindsets and behavior may react in two ways. The first involves a retreat to despair, depression, and fear as if nothing can ever repair the damage the adversary has wrought. The second evokes a manic response that insists that the only path forward lies in the most visionary programs that empower like-minded cohorts regardless of political feasibility.

I think you can see where I'm going. Both reactions risk empowering the forces advocates hope to discourage. Studying history does not provide any blueprint of social activism. But it does offer constructive hints. These include the need for humility as opposed to moral arrogance, as well as a calm self-confidence not intimidated by the words or actions of others. It includes the need for wide-ranging coalitions with goals directed to the interests and sensibilities of broader communities. It often means, as the great antislavery abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison once noted, that although substantive changes may be addressed as immediate concerns, they tend to be gradual in the end.

“I will take better every time,” Barack Obama told a Howard University commencement in 2016. “Better is good, because you consolidate your gains and then you move on to the next fight from a stronger position.”

“We all go up, or we all go down,” Franklin D. Roosevelt instructed the nation at his Second Inaugural in 1937.

I love studying and teaching History because it provides the opportunity to change the way I think about things. In fact, nothing seems more liberating to the human mind and spirit than the chance to keep learning and gain the ability to re-frame one's views, even if core values remain the same.

I hope we are helping students strengthen the ability to carry on the work of nurturing the human condition and binding up the world's wounds, to paraphrase Abraham Lincoln. But to do so, I believe, we must think strategically beyond the boundaries of our own sentiments and affinities. The stakes may be quite severe. But perhaps with the aid of historical perspective we can learn to manage.