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Taking Historical Fundamentalism Seriously

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In her recent book The Whites of Their Eyes Jill Lepore argues that today’s conservatives’ embrace of history is not just another example of citizens using the Revolution for political purposes—which generations of Americans have done—but instead an attack on the very idea of history. Tea Partiers, she concludes, practice a form of “antihistory.”

“In antihistory,” Lepore writes, “time is an illusion. Either we’re there, two hundred years ago, or they’re here, among us.” To Tea Partiers, there is no distance between the past and the present; the past is not a foreign country. To believe that the founders can speak to us directly, not mediated by the mists of time, “is to subscribe to a set of assumptions about the relationship between the past and the present stricter, even, than the strictest form of constitutional originalism.” It is to be, Lepore argues, a historical “fundamentalist.”

Lepore rightly finds the Tea Party approach to history quite troubling. As her book makes clear, the founders lived in a time and place very different from ours. It was a time of slavery, when women lacked political equality, and when one needed property to vote. Moreover, American democracy has always been a work in progress; struggles from below as well as from above matter. We do not want to treat a few founding fathers as gatekeepers to the true America.

Lepore dismisses the Tea Partiers’ effort to find wisdom in the founders: “What would the founders do? is, from the point of view of historical analysts, an ill-considered and unanswerable question, and pointless, too.” To seek guidance from men who lived over 200 years ago is “not history. It’s not civil religion, the faith in democracy that binds Americans together. It’s not originalism or even constitutionalism. That’s fundamentalism.”

While it is certainly open to debate whether we Americans today should seek guidance from men and women who lived over two centuries ago, Lepore’s tone is dismissive and, at times, derisive of the effort of many Americans to learn from the past. It’s the same tone candidate Barak Obama expressed when he referred to ordinary Americans who “cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren’t like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations” and that Thomas Frank uses when he wonders “what’s wrong with Kansas?”

As scholars, however, we need to take historical fundamentalism seriously. In fact, we cannot afford to dismiss it condescendingly. Lepore is right about the American Right’s rejection of professional history, but her approach makes it impossible to understand the nature of their distrust.

In reality, “antihistory” is a form of history. What Lepore calls “history” is quite new. As professional historians have made clear, it was only about a century ago that we professional historians wrested control of history from amateurs. To justify our craft, we formed new professional associations, created graduate degree programs, focused on understanding national over local questions, and established scholarly journals. In order to bolster our authority, we took control of the school curriculum, ensuring that our way of understanding the past would be taught in America’s classrooms. We imposed ourselves between the people and their history, and in doing so claimed to be the true mediators of historical truth.

The Tea Partiers give expression to an older tradition of history, one in which the past was didactic rather than distant. People could learn lessons from the past, and the past could speak in the present. The roots of historicism lie in an 18th-century transformation of temporal consciousness, a shift away from circular or biblical time and toward time as a linear progression, an endless series of causes and effects that lead to the present. But historicism—which sometimes even
treats human nature as changing over time—is only one variety of historical consciousness, and one that rests on recent assumptions.

Professional historians have themselves reached similar conclusions. As new theories of knowledge have undermined the faith we historians once had in our method, the possibility exists for professional history to return to history's moral roots, and be once again a conversation with the present. Others have suggested that we should see historical writing as an aesthetic or literary, rather than scientific, enterprise. We may choose not to go down this path, believing, for good reasons, that academic history's primary purpose is to understand the past to the best of our ability, which requires using appropriate methods and, yes, a commitment to context.

However we proceed, we need to find a way to speak to the broader public, to the people who read David Barton. Barton is one of America's most popular history writers, and he is most famous for his argument that today's scholars have misconstrued the role of religion during the founding era. To Barton, scholars committed to the absolute separation of church and state have read their politics back into the past. In response, Barton argues that the founders were not only more religiously committed but much more committed to the public role of religion than either today's Supreme Court would allow or most scholars would admit.

Lepore sees in historical fundamentalism a Counter-Reformation, but Barton and others would see themselves in the spirit of the Reformation. Barton might be considered professional history's Martin Luther. On his website www.wallbuilders.com—the 21st-century equivalent of the Wittenburg church door—Barton offers interested readers access to the founders' original words. Like Luther, Barton seeks to slice through the layers of dogma that he associates with professional history. Unlike most of us, he does not want his experience with the past to be mediated by historiography. He urges his followers to read the founders for themselves rather than allow professional historians to serve as history's priests. By clicking on the "Library" link one can go directly to documents in which various founding fathers disagreed and undermines our ability to speak with those whose minds we wish to change. More important, Kramnick and Moore downplay the distance between the past and present by referring to "seculatism as a fundamental principle of American government." By ignoring context and asking the founders to speak directly to present aspirations, Kramnick and Moore offer a good example of Lepore's historical fundamentalism.

In response, Barton asks his readers to turn away from historians and back to the founders themselves. In fact, he contextualizes the First Amendment quite effectively in his equally polemical book, Separation of Church and State. In this short book Barton reminds readers that the First Amendment was never intended to establish a godless nation. Instead, Barton concludes, the founders proclaimed over and over that the new republic's success depended on morality, and that morality would be derived from religion. To Barton, "not only did the Founders never intend that the First Amendment be a vehicle to separate religious principles from public affairs but they believed that through its Free Exercise clause they had protected these principles and kept them in the public square." The disagreements between Kramnick and Moore and Barton show us how difficult it is to determine the appropriate context to understand the past. On the one hand, Kramnick and Moore are no doubt right that the Constitution did not establish a Christian state. Instead, it explicitly separated religion from formal political structures. Building on his Virginia experience, James Madison designed in the First Amendment a wall between church and state much higher than that in many Revolutionary-era state constitutions. On God not recognized by the Constitution, but the framers ensured that "no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States." Despite Kramnick and Moore's admission that their book is a "polemic," and that they "recognize that religion is important in American life," the book's narrative is a one-sided attack on religion in public life. Responding to Richard John Neuhaus's worry—one shared by many founders, most notably John Adams and Benjamin Rush—that without a transcendent point of reference, morality will founder, the authors reply, "with all due respect, that is nonsense."

Although offering more due respect to sociologist Robert Bellah, they dismiss what Bellah calls America's "civil religion" as nothing more than a tool "to stir a sense of national arrogance."

Such an approach dismisses the thoughtfulness and intelligence of those with whom we disagree and undermines our ability to speak with those whose minds we wish to change. More important, Kramnick and Moore downplay the distance between the past and present by referring to "seculatism as a fundamental principle of American government." By ignoring context and asking the founders to speak directly to present aspirations, Kramnick and Moore offer a good example of Lepore's historical fundamentalism.

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the other hand, Barton is also correct that the
draftsmen of the First Amendment took it for
granted that Protestant values in civil society would
help sustain the republic over time, that Americans
would be Christian even if the state was not.

To many conservatives, the issue is more com-
plex than Lepore's dichotomy of history and anti-
history would suggest. Not only is anathema a
form of history, but we historians are sometimes
guilty of practicing it. The real de-
bate, therefore, is over authority.
Barton and many other Americans
are no longer willing to defer to
professional historians; we are not
credible. In Texas conservative
politicians have taken to rewriting
historical standards to correct for
what they consider our biases.

But why we have so effectively
lost the trust of the conservative
reading public? Why are conserva-
tives convinced that, as Lepore puts
it, the academic study of history .
. . is a conspiracy and, furthermore,
blasphemy?*

One major reason is that
Americans have never been willing
to defer to an elitist intellectual class.
Intellectuals hold an ambiguous
place in a society founded on the
premise that, as Thomas Paine put
it, every person should be able to
understand "simple facts, plain ar-
guments, and common sense" and
"determine for themselves" the truth. To many
Americans, intellectuals seem unnecessary. This has
been the foundation for a populism in which, as
Sophia Rosenfeld writes in her recent book, popu-
lar judgments "are in possession of a kind of
infallible, instinctive sense of what is right and true,
. . . that necessarily trumps the 'expert' judgments and
knowledge of a minority of establishment insid-
ers."

For many conservativ es, the professional
_tenured historical profession is a priestly class
that defies common sense. And here Americans echo
not just Luther, but also Thomas Jefferson. Jeffes-
ton believed that for generations the established
church had denied people access to Jesus' s teach-
ings. In order to sustain their own earthly power,
church leaders had fabricated "Platonic mysticisms"
that preverted Jesus' s message. The clergy inter-
posed themselves between Jesus and his followers.
As a result, Jefferson argued for a "wall of separa-
tion" between church and state in order to under-
mine the established clergy's mediating role. Jesus' s
readers often have to educate themselves in the
histrorihgraphy of the subject before they can begin to
make sense of many of these monographs."

So what is to be done? One reason that Ameri-
cans read little academic history is that most of it
is not written for them. This is a bad thing. As
Gordon Wood asserts, academic history is a differ-
ent kind of enterprise from popular history. It fo-
cuses on analysis, not plot lines and characters. It is
not meant to be accessible; in fact, "new and inno-
cent readers often have to educate themselves in the
history of the subject before they can begin to
make sense of many of these monographs." But
if we historians wish to be more influential, Wood
argues, we must translate academic history for a
broad audience.

Yet historical fundamentalism speaks to some-
thing deeper than the failure of academic histori-
rians to write for the public. It reflects a broader loss
of faith in scholars as mediators of historical truth.

Meanwhile, the distrust of faculty, such attacks
resonate with citizens because they draw on a deep
and in many ways worthy tradition. When we his-
torians talk of context, many Americans hear Jeffer-
son's mysticisms designed to limit their access to
the true founders.

Certainly, we do not want academic history to
become popular history. The role of academic his-
tory is to ask questions even when the answers
prove unpopular. Critics of the
academy are often frustrated that we are accountable for the knowl-
edge we produce and teach rather than directly to the market. Yet,
even as we defend ourselves from such critics, we must remember
that we, too, can be wrong. As his-
torians, we often condemn past
elites who sought to maintain power against the legitimate aspi-
rations of the people. But when it comes to us, we naturally have
a harder time. Our starting point
must be that history proves that
sometines elites are wrong and
common sense is right. We must
be humble since we, of all people,
should know better.

Humility, then, may be what we need. Attitude matters. In a
democratic culture suspicious of intellectuals, we cannot force citi-
zens to accept our doctrines, nor
do we wish to. Instead of con-
demning other Americans' understandings of history, we should reach out in the spirit of fellowship.

Our goal is explanation, not compulsion. We hope
to change minds, not offend them. Whether in the
classroom, in our writing, or in the broader public
sphere, we must learn to speak from within, as fel-
low Americans, rather than from without, as a privi-
leged class.

This is going to be tough work, but if we don't
find a way to communicate, the cost could be quite
high. Sticking with the clergy example, David
Hollinger has written in his recent Organization of
American Historians presidential address that one of
the reasons for the success of evangelicalism and fundamentalism in post-World War II America is
that mainstream ecumenical Protestant ministers
moved so far away from their congregants' beliefs
that they were no longer trusted authorities. In
short, ecumenical ministers lost the ability to speak to
and with, the Christian laity. As mainstream min-
isters lost their influence, evangelicals and funda-
mentalists claimed the right to speak for ordinary
people and for America.

The same is true of professional historians—
and, one might add, professional academics. We
have done a bad job speaking with the public rather
than against them. We have tended to be critical of
an America they love without offering redemption.
We have engaged in what Todd Gitlin calls the
"pleasures of condemnation."* We dismiss our fel-
low Americans' desire to forge a usable past, and

thus we have left that work to amateurs and, too often, the corporate media. Lepore herself reflects this attitude: “The study of history requires investigation, imagination, empathy, and respect. Reverence just doesn’t enter into it.” "

Except, of course, for the many Americans who revere their past and find meaning in it.

I am proud to be a professional historian, but something about the historical fundamentalists’ critique haunts me; I cannot dismiss it. If we historians act like the established clergy of Jefferson’s day, we will be portrayed—rightly or wrongly—as elites alienated from the lives and struggles of ordinary people. In time we may find ourselves not just disestablished but preaching a gospel that finds no followers.


2 Lepore, Whores of Their Eyes, 15-16.
4 Lepore, Whores of Their Eyes, 124-25.
6 See also Gordon Wood’s review of Lepore, “No Thanks for the Memories,” New York Review of Books, January 13, 2011. Paradoxically, Lepore may be a better defender of our country; (2) providing information to federal, state, and local officials as they develop public policies which reflect Biblical values; and (3) encouraging Christians to be involved in the civic arena.”

http://www.wallbuilders.com/ABTOverview.asp

5 To be sure, many Americans who revere their past and find meaning in it. Except, of course, for the many Americans who revere their past and find meaning in it.

7 According to the website, “Wallbuilders’ goal is to exert a patriotic and positive influence in government, education, and the family by: (1) educating the nation concerning the Godly foundation of our country; (2) providing information to federal, state, and local officials as they develop public policies which reflect Biblical values; and (3) encouraging Christians to be involved in the civic arena.”

8 Krasnitsch and Moore, Godless Constitution, 174.
9 Krasnitsch and Moore, Godless Constitution, 170.
10 Krasnitsch and Moore, Godless Constitution, 174.
12 For Madison’s Virginia experience, see most recently John A. Raines, Widening of Liberty: How Virginia Religious Dissent Helpful in Win the American Revolution and Secured Religious Liberty (Oxford University Press, 2010).
13 Lepore, Whores of Their Eyes, 16.
16 Barton, Separation of Church and State, 5.
22 Lepore, Whores of Their Eyes, 162.