**In the Service of Technocratic Managerialism? History in UK Universities**

**Keywords:** history theory, history culture, universities, managerialism, employability

**Abstract:**

This article discusses the conceptualization, organization and philosophical orientation of academic history culture in UK higher education. It problematizes the extent to which a dominant history culture in UK universities implies and uncritically reproduces normative understandings about the subject; about its epistemological standing, socio-political functions, and the presumed cultural value of the discipline practices that students learn to perform. We suggest that current conceptions of history degree curricula are overly thin and organised around a dominant managerialist discourse of skills, personal development and learning outcomes. In a historicised world in which history-focused behaviour has a crucial, ideological, affirmatory role, and in which historical narratives have a privileged cognitive function, we argue that it is critical for university history students to be able to deconstruct the processes by which history legitimises itself, and reinforces matrices of power in our societies. The positioning of history in higher education as a form of technocratic managerialism closes down spaces in which students can explore the potential of historical practices as a means of engaging with issues of current socio-political and ethical concern. We ask in this article, is this what we want an academic history culture to do?

**Introduction**

The UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) states that ‘all History students should be expected to reflect critically on the nature of their discipline, its social rationale, its theoretical underpinnings and its intellectual standing’ (QAA quoted in Gunn and Rawnsley, 2006, p. 370). We share this expectation. Paraphrasing Martin Davies we would argue that in a historicised world in which history-focused behaviour has a crucial, ideological, affirmatory role, and in which historical narratives have a privileged cognitive function, it is critical to be able to deconstruct the processes by which history legitimises itself, and reinforces matrices of power in our societies (Davies, 2010, p. 128). (A ‘historicised world’ is one in which all phenomena are conceived in terms of their relation to putatively unfolding historical processes. A ‘historicisation’ forms an object of knowledge within the discursive field of the historical.) However, it seems that what most of our fellow historians understand by theory is not ‘the systematic exploration of the unthought categories of thought which delimit the thinkable and predetermine the thought’, nor a careful deconstruction of the politico-cultural impact that historicisation has in our society (Gunn and Rawnsley, 2006, p. 371 citing Schön 1983, and Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 40). Instead they see it as constituting an investigation into the epistemological status of history (is it a special kind of knowledge?); a study of the history of history (essentially a history of great – white, male – historians over the past 2000 years); or an exploration of how history developed as an academic discipline, including the means by which influences from other disciplines (anthropology, sociology, English literature, geography) were incorporated alongside other ideas such as Marxism and feminism (Gunn and Rawnsley, 2006, p. 371).

This paper seeks to work in the spaces vacated by conventional history theorizing by discussing the conceptualization, organization and philosophical orientation of academic history culture in UK higher education. We aim to describe and problematize the extent to which a dominant history culture in UK universities implies and uncritically reproduces normative understandings about the subject; about its epistemological standing, socio-political functions, and the presumed cultural value of the discipline practices that students learn to perform. We suggest that current conceptions of history degree curricula are overly thin and organised around a dominant managerialist discourse of skills, personal development and learning outcomes. Moreover we are sympathetic to Martin Davies’ argument that the history-focused behaviours and historicised thinking encouraged by education institutions, history degree courses, research exercises, grant bodies, and perpetuated by practicing historians, reproduce instrumentalised thinking and passive-reactive intellectualism. As he puts it, history as an ‘indispensible information-management technology’ makes universities, as well as heritage institutions, potentially the ideal, compliant instruments of socially dominant interests, government cultural policies and neo-liberal ideology (Davies, 2010 pp. 57 and 61; Davies, 2006, p. 133).[[1]](#endnote-1) Through its identitary thinking and reiteration of events as the ‘same old thing’, history explains, justifies and normalises existing socio-economic injustices, it perpetuates the status quo and ‘affirms already instituted meanings and currently prevailing realities’. History’s teleological perspective figures the now as inevitable and in doing so it ‘ultimately enforces public acquiescence in what is. It functions as a social anaesthetic’ (Davies, 2006, pp. 105, 85, 8, 117). What we regard as a positioning of history in higher education as a form of technocratic managerialism closes down spaces in which students can explore the potential of historical practices as a means of engaging with issues of current socio-political and ethical concern. We ask here, is this what we want an academic history culture to do?

**Curriculum concepts in the corporate university**

The current managerialist discourse that characterises academic history culture is symptomatic of a ‘business ontology’ that has dominated the UK university sector since the 1980s (see, for example, Taylor, Barr and Steele, 2002, pp. 88-96). In 1985 a government Green Paper on *The Development of Higher Education in the 1990s* emphasised how universities should focus on serving the needs of the economy. In the same year the Jaratt Report marked the first step towards the corporatisation of university governance and the development of sector-wide performance indicators (Brown and Carasso, 2013, p. 8). In place of a public service model for universities, institutions were now to be regarded as economic centres that sold specialised services to the state and other potential buyers – including students. Higher education marketisation continued with the recommendations of the Dearing Committee in 1997 and was consolidated shortly afterwards with the introduction of undergraduate tuition fees – starting at £1000 per annum in 1998, and since 2012 set at a maximum of £9000 per annum. The decision to shift the cost of university education from the state to the individual has been defended on the grounds that it was simply a necessary response to a rapid increase in student numbers (McCaig, 2012, p. 40). However, the introduction and increases in tuition fees was more profound than this, representing as it did a fundamental reorientation of the role of the university. While universities have for centuries been associated with training for vocations such as the clergy, it is fair to say that until fairly recently the purposes of higher education were usually expressed in philosophical, cultural and broadly social terms. However, universities are now primarily seen to be central agencies in meeting the challenges of globalisation, producing the workers who can supply the labour markets of what has become known as the knowledge economy. Such a coupling of higher education with the needs of a globalized market economy is characteristic of what Zygmunt Bauman called ‘liquid modernity’. In a culture that is sceptical about the kind of ethical or political grand narratives that might provide the basis of a common *telos*, society is left with the acclamation of constant change as the highest state of all. As Marvin Oxenham argues, under such conditions it has become the task of ‘liquid education’ to instil in learners the values of flexibility and adaptability that the contemporary labour market requires:

Liquid education [therefore…] dismantles previous higher learning and pursues temporary, tentative and unarranged bits of knowledge and helpful competences. It is the un-authoritative activity of learners that, lacking cultural purpose and rational framework, operates outside the bounds of structure in the service of the market. (Oxenham, 2013, p. 40)

As if to reinforce the idea that higher education is now in the ‘business business’, the legitimating sense of purpose for contemporary universities is most likely to be articulated using terms drawn from a business vernacular – excellence, quality, administration, efficiency, profitability, and so forth. And yet as Bill Readings has discussed in detail a term such as ‘excellence’, whose use is now ubiquitous across the university sector, is an empty signifier, one that is filled out in a higher education setting by the content of managing or administering quality management and enhancement processes (Readings, 1997, 2013, pp. 21–43). Much university work now involves feeding a bureaucratic regime of audit, review, evaluation, monitoring, appraisal, and performance measurement. The content or ideological positioning of people’s teaching and research is relatively unimportant compared with their ability to make whatever they do compliant with the self-referencing requirements of an academic audit culture. In the UK the QAA is the main agency responsible for producing and monitoring this culture. Curricula in UK universities are referenced against a mix of discipline-specific and generic course design protocols generated by the QAA. These protocols include subject benchmarking statements, and instructions for writing programme specifications, level descriptors and assessment criteria.[[2]](#endnote-2) According to the QAA’s own formulation, the various frameworks and templates that are issued under its aegis help it to safeguard the public interest and improve students’ experiences of higher education. They do so, the Agency claims, by acting as a mechanism for transmitting good practice in learning and teaching across the university sector, and by enabling it to compare and monitor academic standards across the wide variety of institutional settings (both inside and beyond the UK) for courses that lead to a UK higher education qualification.[[3]](#endnote-3) However, these QAA statements are just as likely to be experienced by academics as prescriptive and normative codes for controlling and policing the discourse of curriculum design, mainly around instrumental notions of ‘skills’, ‘learning outcomes’, ‘standards’, ‘quality’ and ‘benchmarking’. Whatever its intentions, an undoubted effect of the QAA’s influence has been to increase the administrative complexities involved in designing and teaching courses. And as Barnett and Coate have argued, it is unclear whether the QAA’s bureaucratic requirements for academic staff have done anything to improve students’ learning (2005, p. 29). More importantly, Barnett and Coate believe that the QAA’s discursive power has led to overly narrow conceptions of the term curriculum dominating contemporary academic discourse, particularly via the agency’s commissioning and publication of subject benchmarking statements that emphasize the importance of students’ acquiring economically productive skills during their studies:

[T]he state’s concerns with skills and the knowledge economy […] loom large within the benchmarking statements, seeking as they do to identify the value of degrees through the skills they impart. Benchmarking seems to require forms of accountability and specificities in a complex world in which the labour market has become a key indicator of success. (Barnett and Coate, 2005, p. 29).

Barnett and Coate’s analysis of the movement in degree curricula towards work-based skills was written before the introduction of a variable fees system, since when the trend has intensified. With most UK students now incurring debts of some £27,000 just to meet the estimated cost of their degree tuition, the link between curriculum design and graduate skills has strengthened. Universities – including our own – publicise statistics showing how many of their recent graduates have entered employment, seeking to reassure students that taking on tuition fee debt will pay off in the form of a career in the longer term. In similar vein, universities are encouraged to show off their links with employers. The Wilson Report, which recently reviewed business-university collaboration, described universities as ‘an integral part of the supply chain to business’ (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, 2012, p. 1). This description seems to be borne out by a 2014 joint publication from Universities UK and the UK Commission for Employment and Skills – *Forging Futures: Building higher level skills through university and employer collaboration.* It noted that 130 out of 161 UK higher education institutions reported that employers were actively involved in the development of content and regular reviewing of their curriculum (Universities UK, 2014, p. 9).

History degree courses are as likely as any other to reference the ‘human capital’ gains that they can offer to students. The two generic instantiations that best illustrate how a discourse of employability, work-based skills and personal development skills has become manifest in history curricula are the work of the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and the subject benchmark statement. The HEA website has archived a number of resources that relate to the subject of history students and employability. These include a quantitative survey of history students’ employability, a survey of history graduates’ employment, and summaries of how taught undergraduate history modules at Edge Hill and Glyndwr universities have incorporated employability skills into the curriculum.[[4]](#endnote-4) Indeed it was an award of one of the HEA’s National Teaching Fellowships that enabled David Nicholls to research and write *The Employability of History Students* (2005). The history benchmark statement also has a strong focus on the transferable and subject-specific skills that make history graduates ‘highly employable in a wide variety of professions and careers’. One of the features of the 2014 version edition of the statement is that it has updated the sections that address the employability of history graduates. It lists thirteen generic skills that history students will acquire, and states that history graduates as employees may be expected to use these skills to solve complex problems and demonstrate ‘a capacity to understand diverse human contexts, cultures and motivations’ (QAA 2014, pp. 7, 10). This kind of vocabulary can be found in almost any UK history department’s description of its own degree course. For example Strathclyde University’s information on ‘What makes history graduates employable?’ copies entire sections from the benchmarking statement.[[5]](#endnote-5) Birmingham University’s history department – recently ranked the top history department for research, with 40 per cent of its research output rated as ‘world-leading’– emphasises how its graduates will develop the kind of generic skills that the benchmark statement says employers want.[[6]](#endnote-6) Historians at Leicester University run a ‘History Apprentice’ programme, on which students work on presenting themselves and the work-related skills they have developed on the degree to prospective employers and recruitment agencies.[[7]](#endnote-7)Moreover, Hull University’s history department focused on making 2014 what they called ‘!YEEH’ - ‘a year of embedding employability in history’, running a number of employability related events, developing links with small and medium-sized businesses, and establishing sixteen new internships.[[8]](#endnote-8)

The reason why we have focused here on the history subject benchmark statement is that it constitutes the most authoritative description of academic historians’ collective sense of pedagogical purpose. The 2014 ‘draft for consultation’ version of this statement was produced for the QAA by a review group of eighteen academics and one student, and it provides an articulation of what a history graduate should be expected to know, understand, and be able to do at the end of their studies. The expectation that follows from this is that history degree curricula will be oriented towards producing graduates who can demonstrate just those attributes or qualities that the benchmark statement describes. A notable feature of the history statement in this regard is that it makes only the most cursory attempt to explain why the subject should be studied at all. Using an almost identical form of words to make the same point as its predecessor in 2007, the statement simply takes it ‘as self-evident that the acquisition of knowledge and understanding of the human past is of incalculable value both to the individual and to society at large’. Again as in 2007 there is no attempt to define what this ‘value’ might be, beyond rather generic references to developing an appreciation of cultural difference and the fostering of ‘critical yet tolerant personal attitudes’ (QAA, 2014 p. 6).

Similarly, when the document claims that ‘the possession of a history degree is a public good’ this is justified only in the most general terms of how history graduates can be expected to make ‘social and cultural contributions to their communities and the wider world’ (QAA, 2014, p.8) – what kinds of contributions, for what purposes and in whose interests? In the single paragraph that discusses what it calls ‘critical awareness’ of the subject, the statement does register a subtle shift – retreat? – in its wording from 2007. Whereas the 2007 version of the statement said that ‘all history students *should be expected* to reflect critically on the nature of their discipline, its social rationale, its theoretical underpinnings and its intellectual standing’ (QAA 2007, p. 6), the 2014 draft says that ‘*it is anticipated* that all history students reflect critically on the nature of their subject, its social rationale, its theoretical underpinnings, its ethical dimensions and its intellectual standing’ (QAA 2014, p. 11) [our emphases]. Moreover, in the remainder of the paragraph it is clear that ‘critical awareness’ of historical practice really refers to questions about historiography and method. So cursory are its references to theory, the benchmark statement spends longer explaining why it is important for history students to experience teaching by lectures than it does discussing why those students should be required to think critically about what it is that historians do. Does it matter that the benchmark statement, the HEA and university history departments place more emphasis on work-based skills and the contribution history students can make to society and the economy, than theoretical reflection on and critical awareness of the socio-political uses of historicisation?

**Managing and Measuring Research: Funding Bodies and RAE/REF exercises**

Academia as a machine, its cultural practices, cognitive strategies and institutional structures, increasingly reinforces realist epistemologies and the commodification of knowledge in the service of ‘totalitarian capitalism’, not only through the machinations of the QAA and benchmark statements, but also through the practices and parameters of the institutions that facilitate and measure the research outputs of academic historians.[[9]](#endnote-9) The system for funding research projects that can be broadly categorised as concerned with history or historical discourse has an implicit reticence for projects that focus on the cultural politics of historicisation or that contest the status of history as having a ‘privileged cognitive function with a special social relevance’ through its ability to account for everything by demonstrating how things came to be the way they are (Davies, 2010, pp. 128 and 132). From the design of the application forms, to the choice of assessors the assumption is that acceptable academic research is focused on an exploration of the past, uncovering new knowledge about the ‘before now’, or explaining how things came to be the way they are. This is hardly surprising when you consider that the academics charged with designing the forms, articulating the criteria for various funding calls, and assessing the applications are all products of, and work within, an educational system that presupposes and privileges a fundamentally empiricist conception of historical knowledge.

The application forms that funding bodies require you to complete ask you to categorise your project according to various criteria. The categories, without exception, reflect a normative view of historical knowledge as realist and empiricist, that is, they … [presuppose a direct relation between what historical inquirers perceive and a ‘real’ past as lived by its inhabitants?]. There is no conceptual space for projects that directly problematise the epistemological status or socio-political functions of historical narratives, nor for those that critically address history as a discursive and constructed practice. From the perspective of the British Academy/Leverhulme and the AHRC – the major grant bodies in the UK that support history-related research – all historical projects can be categorised chronologically (as relevant to the fourteenth-century, twentieth century, medieval or modern periods), geographically (the history of a specific country), thematically as women’s history or the history of medicine, or in terms of disciplinary types (political, social or economic history).[[10]](#endnote-10) While there are categories for the history of ideas or intellectual history on the British Academy e-gap form there is nothing that corresponds to historiography or theory. Similarly on the AHRC Je-S form there is no category for research that takes as its primary focus the way in which we construct historical knowledge, the socio-political, ethico-aesthetic role that historical discourses have or the cultural politics of historicisation. It does, however, at least permit the applicant to add their own new keyword.

The categorisation of your project is crucial because as the e-gap British Academy application form guidance notes advise, your selection directly affects the choice of assessors. Moreover, the assessors, drawn as they are from among practising academic historians tend, as people do, to reproduce their own positions, assumptions and perspectives in their decisions. So while universalizing categories such as history, memory, ethnicity, gender, identity, society and alterity are regarded as commonplace, socially relevant and able to facilitate debate and greater comprehension, terms such as ontology, epistemology and scepticism are viewed with greater suspicion (Davies, 2012, p. 473 for mention of the universalizing nature of the aforementioned terms).

The research exercises (RAE2008, REF2014) that are periodically undertaken as a means of assessing ‘the quality of submitted research outputs in terms of their “originality, significance and rigour”, with reference to international research quality standards’ of academics at UK universities also reinforce the normative view of historical knowledge among academic historians.[[11]](#endnote-11) Although the REF2014 guidance notes for the sub-panel UOS 30: History states that submissions are welcome from all areas of history including that of historiography, a number of factors militate against scholars who wish to submit work on this subject matter. Firstly, none of the academics who sit on Panel D for REF2014 has an expertise in this area. While this should not, and perhaps does not, mean that they will respond less favourably to published works that are historiographical in nature or that seek to question the norms and practices underlying the current discipline of history it does mean that the assessors are probably less familiar with the relevant vocabulary, literature, and relevance of research in this area. Moreover, universities are required to construct a narrative linking together the research outputs of the various academics who form part of the submitted unit in the REF exercise. If your research concentrates on historiography or theory rather than ostensibly directly contributing to our ever-increasing knowledge of the past, it is less likely that it will fit with the work of colleagues and the institutional narrative. It is therefore possible that it will be excluded from a REF submission.[[12]](#endnote-12) As promotion is often based on a successful REF performance academic historians might prefer to defer more theoretical projects to after they have produced their four, less controversial, required outputs. An article discussing an aspect of conversion to or from Islam in the early-modern Mediterranean might just be easier to write in terms of time commitment, possible publishing options and inclusion in research exercises than one on theory, particularly if it challenges the core precepts of the discipline.

‘Heritage is acknowledged to make a valuable contribution to society through its contribution to national identity and well-being as well as for its intrinsic value and its role in delivering social and economic progress.’ (Davies, 2010, p.25 quoting The National Trust, 2006, p. 9). The REF2014 exercise also contained a component termed *impact* carrying a weighting of 20 per cent. This category measures ‘the “reach and significance” of impacts on the economy, society and/or culture that were underpinned by excellent research conducted in the submitted unit.’[[13]](#endnote-13) ‘Impact is defined as an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia.’ As such it encourages the discipline of history and history departments to set social-eugenic and economic objectives – to make changes in the ‘real’ world. *Impact* on students, teaching, or other academic activities including research and the advancement of academic knowledge are specifically excluded.[[14]](#endnote-14) *Impact* criteria encourage academic historians to ask how their work can deliver social and economic progress and contribute to national identity and well-being – how it can benefit people as consumers of heritage ‘goods’. It encourages universities and history departments to present themselves, their research outputs and the value of their practice in primarily capitalist economic terms – as commodities. ‘[H]istorical culture […] is the inexhaustible “raw material” of the post-industrial economy […] a plentiful resource like oil, coal, gas, or minerals to be refined by academic scholarship for ideological and economic exploitation’ and universities ensure a continuous supply (Davies, 2010, p. 24). Arguably this is most easily achieved by working in partnership with heritage institutions and producing narratives predicated upon realist epistemologies that unquestionably and uncritically reify the past ready for consumption.

Furthermore, the type of historicisation that can be used to cut crime, promote inclusion, improve educational achievement, encourage active citizenship and social cohesion and slay the poverty of aspiration – that is the type of research most amenable to an impact case study – is precisely, according to Davies, a non-reflective, anaesthetising, coercive, realist retelling of historical facts churned out by the historian as information technician and resource manager (Davies, 2010, p. 26. The supposed impacts of history are from a speech by Tessa Jowell, 2005, pp. 23-4 quoted by Davies). History teaching and research is therefore increasingly articulated in the bureaucratic or technical-managerial jargon of the ‘administered world’ – there are frameworks, productivity targets, objectives that are calibrated according to value drivers, optimized delivery, benchmark performance, indicative measures, sector outputs and cost effectiveness scores. It thus becomes enmeshed within neo-liberal capitalist strategies and any values it might have are refigured solely in terms of economic worth (Davies, 2010, pp. 96 and 126).

**The theory gap in UK history degrees**

Despite professions to the contrary in benchmark statements and programme handbooks, and while it is true that history as an academic discipline critiques and evaluates evidence for its knowledge claims, it rarely investigates its own conventions and practices. Instead it assumes that such practices are self-evidently appropriate as means of guaranteeing objective knowledge. Martin Davies argues that social institutions such as universities (and also museums, galleries and archives) are sociogenic in so far as ‘they reproduce their own ethos and purpose: they perpetuate their own sense of things’ (Davies, 2010, p. 61). Their rationale also includes the selection and shaping of their own future staff. As Collini observes, a history education above a minimum introductory level ‘largely consists in a form of apprenticeship’. (2012, pp. 8, 81). See also Gunn and Rawnsley, 2006, p. 387 who argue that ‘Historians are condemned to reproduce an academy in their own image’.) Moreover, university teaching is not primarily concerned with the transference of a body of information, but rather seeks to impart the ‘capacity to challenge or extend the received understanding of a particular topic’, something it does by exposing students to examples of such work and encouraging them to take part in the discussion (2012 pp. 9, 81). This being the case, if our history modules, the means of assessment, and the discussions we encourage lack any substantial, critical self-reflexivity and are more concerned with how history can support the neo-liberal capitalist knowledge economy, then students and future academics are likely to unconsciously repeat the epistemological certainties that indiscriminately reinforce articulations of power in our societies.

In a 2006 survey of the profession, Gunn and Rawnsley confirmed that historians were reluctant to reflect critically on their own disciplinary habits. The authors argued that the majority of history programmes preferred ‘a traditional, empirically-based model of history’, that the postmodern and theoretical turn had had a limited impact on university history teaching which ‘was dominated by traditional concerns with ‘coverage’, subject specialisation and the lecture/seminar format’ (Gunn and Rawnsley, 2006, pp. 376, 384). Their findings demonstrate that although theory is taught at quite a few universities in England and Wales, it is either a stand-alone module that once taught is essentially forgotten about or, in degrees with a more sustained taught theoretical component, the approach is based on ways of doing history (i.e. micro-history, feminist history, postcolonial history) rather than an analysis of the socio-political functions of historicisation in academia, the media, government and popular culture. There is not much evidence that anything has significantly changed in the last eight years.

The benchmark statement’s elision of theory with historiography and method discussed above is – not surprisingly – reproduced in university programmes’ own courses. To cite one example, the website description of the two part, level one history module ‘History and Meanings’ at Royal Holloway, University of London offers a chronological overview of the development of (mainly) western European historical writing before considering the professionalization of history writing from the nineteenth century onwards, including the impact of Marxism, anthropology, gender studies and postmodernism. The module summary specifically notes that ‘[a] philosophy of total doubt is rejected, as making it impossible for historians to oppose (say) Holocaust deniers’.[[15]](#endnote-15) Part two of the module does broaden out in terms of scope, exploring how ‘historians, politicians and communities make use of the past in the present’. However, the assessment for this module ensures that the historian’s critical gaze is firmly directed away from their own practice and onto the ‘historying’ practices of others: ‘[a]s part of their assessment, students will critique a manifestation of public engagement with History. This might focus on a controversy which attracted significant media coverage, or an attempt to revise public views of a historical event, or the establishment or refurbishment of a monument or museum’, but not, presumably, the practices of professional historians.[[16]](#endnote-16)

**Conclusion**

Historians as technicians, resource managers, information engineers encourage a disinterested, passive attitude; their work functions as mirroring, ostensibly reflecting what happened before, but in reality reflecting and reaffirming what happens now (Davies, 2012 p. 468 quoting 2006, pp. 120, 132–6, 469). They conflate institutional with cognitive legitimacy: the managerial strategies (peer review process, QAA benchmarking, Research Excellence Frameworks, applications to state-sponsored grant bodies or corporate-based educational trusts) they use to evaluate and authorise their work do not equate to epistemological certainty. Rather the structures of academic practice, the vocabulary of professionalism (their use of evidence, critical approach and clear narrative) is suffused with rhetorical cliche that provides a (pseudo) guarantee of veracity and objective, neutral, non-ideological knowledge (Davies, 2012, p. 471). Yet history degree curricula do not provide space to unpack ‘what history does rather than […] what historians say it is’ (Davies, 2006, p. 138). In the modules taught, the grants applied for, the REF exercises completed it is more or less implicitly accepted that history provides a ‘pan-optical focal-point of truth’ – it scrutinises, but is not scrutinised (Davies, 2006, p. 174). The institutional, systemic discouragement of self-reflection means that we as historians and our students do not critically analyse the elements that make it so persuasive, reveal its self-affirming tautologies and comprehensive intention. Nor do we disclose how it derives its symbolic authority, endorses affirmative social interests, and why it is so valuable to government decision makers (Davies, 2006, p. 174). We are therefore merely inculcating our students to be the next generation of technocratic managers implicit in reproducing and affirming the ‘same old thing’ – using history as ‘a social management technology’ in the service of the neo-liberal state to fabricate social cohesion and anesthetize people against socio-economic inequalities, by depicting the status quo as inevitable (Davies, 2006, p. 137; Davies, 2010, pp. 134, 131, 30).

History degrees could perhaps be comprised of theory-led, as opposed to content-led, teaching. They might more usefully explore how and why historical knowledge is constituted, transmitted and used; what makes it so persuasive; the role it actually has in our society rather than that ascribed to it by historians; why it is so useful to, and interwoven with, dominant socio-political institutions; and in what ways the ‘technics of academic practice’ sustain or reinforce a wider historicised culture and the complacency it engenders (Davies, 2006, p. 139). They could investigate the ways in which styles of reasoning embody and create the standards of objectivity rather than uncover the objective truth, and recognise history as simply another style of reasoning with determinate socio-cultural and political uses (Davies, 2006, p. 151 responding to and building upon Hacking, 2002, p. 198).

We should encourage our students to ask what *really* is the educational value of history. And in answering that perhaps our history teaching needs to include not only a greater theoretical, more self-reflexive component, but also the work of artists, film-makers, activists, poets, novelists and photographers, people who tell stories about real people with real lives, stories that do not encourage passive complacency, but which incite us to anger and action. The current cognitive conventions of historical research and university history teaching through their normalisation of teleological and identitary thinking produce and compel complacency, affirm social conventions and instantiate dominant ideologies. A more radical education would encourage our students not simply to acquire work-based skills, but to challenge normative customs and reified practices and to ask not how society got the way it is, but how we can change society and make it better.

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1. Davies, 2012, pp. 464-5 quoting Deleuze and Guattari 1980, 456 expands this point arguing that the ‘academic function, sponsored as it is by the state, blocks any knowledge that “won’t reproduce the prevailing order” or won’t affirm received values.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Referring to these ‘directives’ might be seen as a pejorative and provocative piece of naming. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See Quality Assurance Agency, ‘About Us’, <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us> last accessed 17 November 2014 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/search/resource/history%2520employability>, last accessed 18/12/14 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. <http://www.strath.ac.uk/humanities/schoolofhumanities/history/careerswithyourhistorydegree/whatmakeshistorygraduatesemployable/>, last accessed 18/12/14 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. <http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/undergraduate/courses/history/history.aspx#CourseOverviewTab>, last accessed 29/12/14 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. <http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/history/careers/the-history-apprentice-2012> [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. <http://www2.hull.ac.uk/fass/department-of-history/employability2.aspx>, last accessed 18/12/14 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. For the ideas of academia as a machine see Davies, 2012, p. 466 and ‘totalitarian capitalism’ see Davies, 2010, p. 30. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. See the on-line British Academy e-GAP system and the AHRC Je-S system. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. <http://www.ref.ac.uk/media/ref/content/pub/assessmentframeworkandguidanceonsubmissions/GOS%20including%20addendum.pdf> last accessed 15/12/14. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. There are few ‘formal’ sources that discuss the intransigence and sometimes hostility with which history departments view scholars who wish to teach or write about theory. Gunn and Rawnsley (2006, p. 379) quote a number of academics who met enmity in their departments for their interest in theory and they note that at times ‘opposition to theory among senior staff clearly meant that opportunities for extending it in teaching were limited’. They also note that for some historians ‘their theoretical interests’ were an ‘issue in trying to get a full-time post’ (2006, p. 384). Cohen (2013, p. 11) describes that after publishing the theoretical work *Historical Culture*, although he was recommended for an on-going three-year appointment that was supported by the history department at UCLA, the administration denied it and then got rid of historiography as a field. Since the 1980s Cohen has only taught historiography in an Art School context. He argues that the kind of historiography he did was tied to criticism and was thus ‘out of synch with the politics of a discipline of history […] research units in the arts and humanities were businesses as much as intellectual knowledge exchanges’ (2013, p. 11). We are also not aware of any history departments in the UK advertising for specialists in historiography or the cultural politics of historicisation. Historians with an interest in this area get jobs on the basis of their other, more historically-focused research areas such as the early-modern Islamic world or twentieth century Britain. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. <http://www.ref.ac.uk/media/ref/content/pub/assessmentframeworkandguidanceonsubmissions/GOS%20including%20addendum.pdf> page 6 last accessed 15/12/14. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. <http://www.ref.ac.uk/media/ref/content/pub/assessmentframeworkandguidanceonsubmissions/GOS%20including%20addendum.pdf> Annex C page 48, last accessed 15/12/14. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. <https://www.royalholloway.ac.uk/history/prospectivestudents/undergraduate/first-yearcourses/historyandmeaningspart1.aspx> last accessed 15/12/14. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. <https://www.royalholloway.ac.uk/history/prospectivestudents/undergraduate/first-yearcourses/historyandmeaningspart2.aspx> last accessed 15/12/14. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)