In *The History Manifesto*, Jo Guldi and David Armitage challenged their fellow historians with a "call to arms." For years, the book argued, historians had narrowed their research and retreated from the public sphere. But problems like climate change and inequality demand big-picture thinking. Historians should supply it.

Cambridge University Press published [The History Manifesto](http://historymanifesto.cambridge.org/) free online as an open-access experiment. The slim text has provoked an international reaction since its release in October, with dozens of commentaries.
in newspapers, blogs, journals, and on the BBC, where Mr. Armitage debated the book with a member of Parliament. Much of the reaction has been positive. Writers have praised the manifesto for highlighting the diminution of historians’ influence on policy and for sounding a "clarion call" to rethink the study of the past.

But now some historians are turning their guns on the manifesto’s authors. In prominent American and French journals, these critics attack the narrative presented by Ms. Guldi, an assistant professor of history at Brown University, and Mr. Armitage, who is on leave as chair of Harvard University’s history department. Some critics, citing changes made in the book’s online edition, also question the authors’ ethics.

The debate seems likely to become a case study taught to future graduate students — a sharp exchange that concerns both how historians do their work and what protocols should prevail for critiquing and revising scholarship online.

"All parties have touched a nerve that gets at historians’ anxiety about their vocation," says Samuel Moyn, a professor of law and history at Harvard, who praised the manifesto’s "exciting argument" in The Nation. "Why are we doing this? For whom? … This debate, whoever you think wins, has raised the profile of those questions."

Impassioned Critiques

The debate is playing out most prominently in The American Historical Review — "the Anglophone historical profession’s leading journal," as The History Manifesto itself refers to it. Historians opening the April issue will find something unusual in the journal’s pages: a polemical debate.

On one side are Deborah Cohen (Northwestern University) and Peter Mandler (University of Cambridge), who land the first blow with a critique of The History Manifesto that seeks to undercut one of its core claims: that historical scholarship narrowed in the later decades of the 20th century. They describe the manifesto with terms like "debacle," "travesty," "deceptive," "fantasy," "bewildering," and "irresponsible."

On the other side are Ms. Guldi and Mr. Armitage, who accuse their critics of complacency amid a humanities crisis marked by a seven-year slide in undergraduate history enrollment. "As an apology for business as usual and a defense of the status quo, their essay is unimpeachable," they
reply.

Also joining the fray is Lynn Hunt, a distinguished research professor at University of California at Los Angeles and a past president of the American Historical Association. She is one of five scholars who have responded to Mr. Armitage and Ms. Guldi’s arguments in a debate scheduled to appear in June in the French journal *Annales*. She, too, criticizes the manifesto's use of data; in an interview with *The Chronicle*, Ms. Hunt calls their work "scandalously bad."

To understand why people are so riled up, it helps to have a fuller picture of what *The History Manifesto* says. At a time of economic and environmental problems, the book argues, the world suffers from a lack of long-term thinking. Historians once provided such analysis. They wrote "arching stories of scale." They wielded public influence.

But roughly 40 years ago, the manifesto argues, many if not most historians stopped taking the long view. "For two generations, between about 1975 and 2005, they conducted most of their studies on biological time-spans of between five and fifty years, approximating the length of a mature human life," the authors write. How that happened is a complicated story that involves a variety of forces: job-market pressures, methodological trends like microhistory, the '68 generation rebelling against its elders.

But changes in the profession resulted in a "moral crisis," the manifesto's authors argue, "an inward-looking retreat from commenting on contemporary global issues and alternative futures. While historians refined their tools and their understandings of social justice, they simultaneously inflicted upon their discipline habits of microscopic attention that culminated in a sense of practical irrelevance, of the historian as astronomer in a high tower, distanced from a political and economic landscape."

In the last quarter of the 20th century, the authors say, historians lost whatever influence they had over policy to other social scientists, especially economists.

The good news: Big seems to be back. The scope of dissertations is expanding, Mr. Armitage and Ms. Guldi report. Historians are again publishing monographs that span 200 to 2,000 years, if not more. They study the history of the Anthropocene, the era during which humans have shaped the planet’s environment. They write "Big History ([http://chronicle.com/article/In-Ian-Morriss-Big-History/137415/](http://chronicle.com/article/In-Ian-Morriss-Big-History/137415/))," stretching as far back as the origins of the universe.

Challenges to the Data

But does that narrative hold up?
To make their case about historians’ late-20th-century retreat from long-term thinking, Mr. Armitage and Ms. Guldi draw on dissertation data from a historian at Northeastern University, Benjamin M. Schmidt. But Ms. Cohen and Mr. Mandler argue that Mr. Schmidt’s data actually show a steady rise since the mid-1960s in dissertation time spans — in other words, the opposite of what *The History Manifesto* claims.

What’s more, Ms. Cohen and Mr. Mandler surveyed reviews published in *The American Historical Review* during eight sample years from 1926 to 2006 — a total of nearly 1,100 books. They found no evidence that historians had concentrated on long-horizon research before 1968 or retreated from it later. Again, just the opposite: The time spans covered increased steadily after 1975, they found, and the median more than doubled from 1966 to 1986.

"In sum, there is much more continuity than change across the twentieth century, and if anything, longer time scales had become more, not less, common as of 1986," they write.

The question of data takes on added significance here, because *The History Manifesto* argues for the importance of large data sets and the role historians should play in interpreting them.

Responding to *The American Historical Review* critique, Ms. Guldi and Mr. Armitage argue that precisely determining when long-term writing rebounded depends on which data you use. Their reply puts forward yet another large-scale sample of historical writing, based on date ranges in the titles of dissertations and other sources. It suggests that time spans "began to expand in the 1970s."

As Ms. Guldi sees the controversy, the critics "have made a very big deal out of a small point." The larger picture is clear, she contends: The time scales used by historians have fluctuated over the course of generations, with a retreat at some point in the 20th century followed by a return to longer horizons. That return — what it means, why it’s happening, how historians’ focus has changed — is "really what the substance of our book is about."

This dispute goes beyond the book’s substance. It’s also about the protocols of digital scholarship.

Unlike a traditional book, the online version of *The History Manifesto* displays some of the interactivity of a massive open online course, or MOOC. It features video content, a blog, a reader forum, event listings, and social-media posts from people who use the hashtag "#historymanifesto" to discuss the book on Twitter. In November, citing Twitter feedback, the authors announced changes in a graphic of Mr. Schmidt’s data. The correction, they [blogged](http://m.chronicle.com/article/Historians-Attack-the-Data-and/229207/?key=HGJwdwJkNSYVN3BgM2pEbWoDO3U5ME4mNnVKn3wIbfDFA==)
Historians Attack the Data and the Ethics of Colleagues' Manifesto - The Chronicle of Higher Education

(http://historymanifesto.cambridge.org/blog/2014/11/updating-visualizations-and-power-open-access-review/), underscored the opportunities for revising online works in dialogue with readers.

'Silent Changes'

Some readers accuse Ms. Guldi and Mr. Armitage of being less than transparent. On March 18, an anonymous blogger flagged more changes that had been made in the book, prompting Ms. Cohen and Mr. Mandler to investigate. What they found was worrisome.

Their American Historical Review article had accused the manifesto of distorting the work of economists and economic historians. It singled out this assertion: "The economists conclude that the nineteenth century led to gains in equality, opportunity, and nutrition." But the online version had been changed to this: "Some economists conclude that the nineteenth century led to gains in equality, opportunity, and entrepreneurship." A reader might think Ms. Cohen and Mr. Mandler had misquoted the book.

Or take another change. Ms. Cohen and Mr. Mandler had charged that Ms. Guldi and Mr. Armitage "misrepresent specific studies even as they attack the field of economics as a whole." The critique pointed out two studies that had been mischaracterized. Both had been replaced in the manifesto’s notes.

Ms. Cohen went public with her concerns in a March 23 post (http://www.deborahacohen.com/profile/?q=content/silent-changes-history-manifesto) headlined, "Silent Changes to The History Manifesto." Scholarly practice is to acknowledge errors significant enough to require amendment, she and Mr. Mandler wrote.

"The fact that they have now changed their website version of this book without signalling that they have changed it, raises issues about, frankly, their honesty," Ms. Hunt says of Ms. Guldi and Mr. Armitage. "If you’re gonna change what you’re claiming your book is, from one version to another, you ought to actually say that."

Which is what they had just done. On March 31, Mr. Armitage and Ms. Guldi published a blog post (http://historymanifesto.cambridge.org/blog/2015/03/history-manifesto-vision-and-revision/) and a revision notice (http://historymanifesto.cambridge.org/files/8014/2788/2157/RevisionNotice.pdf) outlining changes that had been made in the manifesto on February 5. They described these as "ten lines of tightened prose and five revised footnotes" — fairly minor edits, in their view.
They reminded readers of the November blog post, which, as they described it, had marked "an announcement of revision as a process." Any further changes in the online edition would be flagged, the revision notice promised.

"Nothing was hidden in this process," the authors wrote.

"It just alerts us to what is obviously going to be an ongoing question: What is the text?" says Robert A. Schneider, editor of *The American Historical Review*. "If it’s a changing entity, it creates certain problems that we’re going to have to address about protocol."

For all these new issues, some historians say much of this controversy feels familiar. The narrowing of history, its failure to address the general public, its declining influence — these are recurring themes. An old American Historical Association report, "The Writing of History," found that "history is less read to-day than formerly" and not in high demand among the "educated class." "Such was not the case forty years ago," the report lamented.

That was published in 1926.

Marc Parry is a senior reporter who writes about ideas, focusing on research in the humanities and social sciences. Email him at marc.parry@chronicle.com, (mailto:marc.parry@chronicle.com) or follow him on Twitter @marcparry. (https://twitter.com/marcparry)