Perhaps because of the ongoing protests for racial justice in the United States; perhaps because of the news of extremist groups who terrorize, torture, silence, and kill people in parts of Asia and Africa; and, most recently, in Europe as well, many historians who attended the AHA's 2015 annual meeting asked: What is the historian's role in relation to social justice?

At the Committee on Women Historians breakfast, Jacqueline Jones argued that historians should not apologize for their historical work, or for their commitment to social justice (see Debbie Ann Doyle's report on the talk in this issue). Historians can take a more active role in learning to communicate with journalists, she said, because "a keen understanding of history presents solutions to problems" that the public should know about. In sharing their knowledge with members of the media, and consequently with a larger number of members of the public, historians could make a difference. At the same time, Jones cautioned that historians "work more deliberately and we are more attuned to nuance; at times it is not possible to give the media what they want and stay true to the evidence."

Jones's question about whether historians can in fact combine scholarship with activism reminds me of John Fea's book Why Study History? Reflecting on the Importance of the Past. In this work Fea admits that the combination of scholarship and activism has a volatile history, but can be a moral stance nonetheless. He argues effectively that the work of the historian is fundamental to democracy, and believes that the world can be changed with the study of even the most obscure of histories.

Fea points to the tension between historicism—looking at history according to its own terms—and activism. He writes, "Good scholars of the past must, at some level, practice historicism. By trying to understand the past on its own terms, the historian treats it with integrity rather than manipulating it or superimposing his or her values on it to advance an agenda in the present." In practicing historicism, historians must understand and accept that they have no control over the outcome of their research. They must be open to the possibility that the truth might not support their cause.

For the historian, Fea argues, changing the world is a by-product of careful study. When the historian takes on the role of "a tour guide through foreign cultures"—cultures from the past—that has the best potential to transform our lives and the lives of those around us," he writes. "It is our engagement with the otherness of these lost worlds, that, ironically, prepares us well for life in the present."

When history is practiced in a responsible manner, Fea argues, it allows us to develop and acquire virtues that are important in civil society. These virtues are needed in a democracy but have impact on the world at large. As historians encounter foreign settings, people, and actions, we develop empathy, even with characters we might otherwise find repulsive. This skill to empathize is required in civil society, and without it people become divided. Building community among people who have different beliefs, backgrounds, and inclinations requires this skill.

When historians remember that every human has faults and makes mistakes they are more likely to be compassionate in their study of historical actors, and this compassion translates into everyday life; actors in our own time are equally imperfect, and equally worthy of respect and dignity.

Fea further argues that historians must take into account the viewpoints and actions of actors who are not traditionally seen as "important"—namely, those who were not the victors, who were not in the upper classes, and whose voices were suppressed. At the annual meeting panel "Experiencing Revolutions," speakers Wendy Pearlman and Lillian Guerra modeled this. Pearlman talked about her interviews with Syrian refugees who have been experiencing one type of fear after another, and asserting their agency and ethical outlooks through protest. Some said that "they felt like a citizen for the first time" when they demonstrated. In her talk, Guerra discussed her analysis of essays written by K-12 Cuban students. She came to interesting conclusions about the role of education in spreading ideologies and even instilling in young people a will to die for the revolution.

The panel on revolutions examined issues related to social justice through the lens of emotions. Other panels at the annual meeting dealt with social justice while engaging with other disciplines. In the roundtable discussion "Capitalism, Global Business, and Inequality," Barrow Jerome Elmore talked about studying the history of Coca-Cola from an environmental and a business perspective. His book, Citizen Coke, was published this year and was reviewed by the New York Times. It does exactly what Jacqueline Jones hopes that history books can do—reach a wide audience while presenting historical context for important social issues. (Jones's own books have been published by commercial presses; A Dreadful Desert: The Myth of Race from the Colonial Era to Obama's America was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize.)

Finally, in a panel organized by the American Society of Church History, the speakers discussed the history of hell from a time (in the fourth century) when it was imagined by Christians in Egypt as a physical place, to an era (the Gilded Age) when that vision of hell was seen by some American theologians as unjust, and punishment in the afterlife as cruel and obsolete. Panelists showed that the definitions of justice and injustice are ever-changing. That Christians were sometimes seen as heretics for raising ethical questions proves that the act of defining and redefining a concept—a scholarly pursuit—can be a courageous act with wide-ranging and lasting implications for society.

This issue of Perspectives on History deals with the issue of social justice through the forum "People's Histories in the 21st Century." We've also published Sarah Fenton's report on the AHA panel on Ukraine, which highlights the important role historians play in the fight for social justice. We hope that you enjoy these articles and find them useful as you think about your own relationship to social justice. Please share your thoughts with us at perspectives@historians.org.

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