

Remarks to the graduating UC Santa Cruz History Department Class of 2018

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. . . congratulations to the UC Santa Cruz History Class of 2018, as you embark upon what used to be referred to as the real world and now, well, whatever it is, I have been called here to say something to help you make that transition.

I should say that I'm trying to make it myself, too. To make sense of things, I have begun teaching a course on the history of conspiracy theories. It has re-branded me. Students drop by all the time now and say things like "Hey Lasar, I just saw something really strange on the Internet and immediately thought of you."

Following this flattery, we talk up the usual subjects: where is Elvis . . . how *does* one join the Illuminati? These topics invariably lead to the question du jour: what the President of the United States did or Tweeted today, and "what's with that?" as they say on Youtube.

Now, I don't want to dwell too much on President Whatswiththat here. But I do want to make some observations about the assumptions about history that I am hearing in these conversations.

There's a sense in our discussions that we have come to some very new, different moment in the history of this country, a place and time that somehow, thanks to our brave new digital social media world, and, well, President Whatswiththat, transcends the past and maybe even history itself.

I want to challenge that here. I think that our ability to get through this moment that we find ourselves in depends on our finding continuity, not discontinuity, with the past. And I want that observation to help you understand why you made a really good decision to study history here at UC Santa Cruz.

But, to begin, I'm going to discuss some aspects of my own past that may shed light on the problem.

There's an amusing t-shirt that I see in university town stores. It says: "College - the best six years of my life."

Back at the City College of New York in the 1970s, that was not just a t-shirt for me. That was a mission statement. That is, until, a nice lady called and asked for my presence at the Registrar's office. Humbly I entered into her domain and was informed that the taxpayers of Gotham could only subsidize so many arrested development specialists at any given higher educational moment.

She scanned my transcript: "hmmmm," she said, "let's see, history course, history course, history course, history course . . . Mr. Lasar, it appears that you are a history major. A few more requirements and you'll be done. You just need to declare."

And so, I left the Registrar's office with a piece of paper and went over to History Building to get it signed. Getting used to the history major idea, it suddenly felt like a milestone moment. While I was there, I thought, maybe I'd even visit some faculty, just to mark the occasion.

. . . and as luck would have it, there was a very striking professor sitting in his office. A husky man, he looked to be in his 50s and wore a leather jacket and *an ascot*. He reminded me a little of Rodney Dangerfield. I would not have been half surprised if he had started pulling on his

collar and declaring that he got no respect. In fact, in this instance, he seemed to be very nervously staring out the window and packing his things.

Then he looked up, at me.

“Who are you?” he demanded. The way he asked it, I almost thought it was a philosophical question. I had not figured that out yet. Finally, I just blurted “I’m Matthew Lasar.”

“Well,” the professor countered. “I’m Herbert Gutman and I’m in a lot of trouble right now. A lot of people don’t like me!”

I nodded my head obediently as he spoke. Maybe I’ll drop by some other time, I suggested as I slowly backed out of the office. So I went elsewhere and found a very youthful and friendly history teacher with whom I had already taken some courses. His name was and still is Eric Foner.

“What was THAT all about?” I asked Professor Foner. He showed me an article in *The New York Times* that professor Gutman had recently penned. Then I understood.

That summer, 1977, there had been an electricity blackout in New York City. And many black and Latino Manhattanites, bitter about inflated prices for goods in uptown retail establishments had broken into some of them. In response to this, a sea of outrage belched forth from the local press. “Animals!” a prominent behavior psychologist was quoted as saying.

To which, in an op-ed piece, Gutman shared another newspaper editorial with *New York Times* readers, one that had been written in 1902.

It too proclaimed that (and I quote):

“The class of people who are engaged in this matter have many elements of a dangerous class. They have no inbred or acquired respect for law and order as the basis of the life of the society into which they have come.”

Except, Gutman noted, that statement responded to a small army of Jewish immigrant women marching into New York butcher stores and trashing them to protest higher prices. The ladies literally tossed meat into the street and poured kerosene on it. The police beat them and threw them into jail.

Calling rioters in 1902 or 1977 names such as “animals,” Gutman’s op-ed column concluded, “distances the successful, the comfortable, and the powerful (‘us’) from what is social, and therefore’ human, in the behavior, of the very poor and powerless (‘them’) . . . It prevents us from understanding what they are telling us about themselves and their condition.”

For Herbert Gutman, with whom I studied for several years, history was a force for empathy. His 1976 study, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*, challenged myths of about “black pathology,” chronicling through statistics and anecdotes the struggles of black people before and after the Civil War to maintain kinship structures in the face of slavery and post-war white Supremacy. A labor historian, Professor Gutman strove to put readers in the shoes of slaves, of pre-Civil War dock workers, and of immigrant Jewish women. He wanted you to see the world as they saw it.

But many white people across the city of New York were not grateful for Herbert Gutman’s comments in *The New York Times*. The furious

letters poured in from the outer boroughs and the Times published them as well.

Here's the one I remember the most:

"I am a middle-class American woman who has been working since the age of 15. . . . There are many things the rich have that I too would like to have. I would like to have a color TV. I would especially like to have a job like yours, Mr. Gutman, so that I could have enough time, money and intellectual smugness to be able to sympathize with the looters of the blackout."

The hate mail piled up on the street in front of Professor Gutman's home. So much that the family fled elsewhere until the commotion died down.

As I read these letters, I could feel the arteries of our nation's body politic hardening.

Next came a controversial trial in which the jury acquitted of attempted murder a white subway commuter who had fired his gun point blank at four black teenagers.

Then an advertising campaign, in which a future President literally put a black man's face on a TV ad to scare voters away from his opponent.

Then the Central Park Five: five black and Latino teenagers wrongly convicted of a brutal rape and assault, their accusers, including, yes, President Whatswiththat, refusing to acknowledge their innocence to this day, even after they were all eventually acquitted.

And yet, when I follow discussions about how we got to this perilous moment, that history is rarely mentioned. Our questions now seem to

be informed by the assumption that the world began in the month of October, 2016.

How many Russian-purchased Facebook ads can you fit on the head of a pin?

What is the sound of one FBI memo clapping?

If a voter precinct falls in Michigan, does it make a noise that the Clinton campaign can hear?

In our distress at being in this moment, we seem to press the reset button on time itself on an hourly basis. And we seem to have gravitated towards three broad assumptions that cut us off from any connection to the deep past.

First, I come away from many conversations with the sense that somehow our world is more technologically consequential than ever before – and therefore uniquely more meaningful. Anyone can post something now that can explode on the 24/7 social media news nanocycle forty gazillion times and somehow, because of this, we have found a new locomotive of history.

To which I constantly remind students of the absurdly obvious yet apparently forgotten. George Washington did not post pictures of his victory at Yorktown on Instagram. The French Revolution was not broadcast on YouTube. The Bolsheviks did not have a single Facebook group.

We are entranced by these pretty toys, to borrow a phrase from Henry David Thoreau. We call them revolutionary, but we have yet to make any real revolution out of them.

Second, I constantly hear the word “unprecedented” bandied about these days. The Internet is unprecedented. The end of the Cold War was unprecedented. President Whatswiththat is unprecedented.

Never mind that we once had a President who travelled the country comparing himself to Jesus Christ, and another whose supporters basically called his opponent a hermaphrodite.

What our addiction to American exceptionalism does is to deny us any kinship with the rest of the world, which has been suffering and surviving deranged, wannabe dictators since the beginning of governments.

The “unprecedented” delusion denies us perspectives that we desperately need to get us through this moment. But this error pales in comparison to the third delusion of our digital age: that information is power.

Our obsession with what kind of fake news ads Americans saw on Facebook at, say, ten thirty AM on November 4, 2016, assumes a world in which whatever is being said now counts for everything and the past counts for little. In which we receive new data with new minds open to all new possibilities.

But we in this room, all of us historians, know that that is not true.

We know that information can function as a servant of power, but ultimately: power is power. And power often manifests itself far from the rational sphere. No one saw this more clearly than the Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal, who in his 1944 study of what he called “the White Man’s Mind,” found “mystical” beliefs of non-white inferiority that existed “totally independent of rational or irrational proofs.”

The children of that generation are still with us. They are what Forbes magazine writer Chris Ladd calls the last Jim Crow generation. And when President Trump says “Make America Great Again,” they know exactly what he is talking about without a byte of data.

We should remember the words of young theologian Reinhold Niebuhr in his think piece *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, in which he challenged the notion that knowledge and information and expertise possess unique progressive power.

“The selfishness of human communities must be regarded as an inevitability,” Niebuhr wrote in 1932. “It can be checked only by competing assertions of interest.”

“Competing assertions of interest.” A bit of an open-ended phrase, but if we look at our world as historians, an honest description of what is to be done. Read #metoo, #resist, Black Lives Matter, and #bluewave into that phrase. And read “history” into all those words. Because we know, you know, today, what time it really is.

What Herbert Gutman taught me is that history is not about deriving lessons from the past or insuring that one won’t repeat the past. Put all those bromides aside.

What history does is to show us that human communities are always making choices. Creating nations; creating ideas like romantic love or giving oneself to a revolution; creating the idea of marriage; recreating the parameters of marriage; establishing slavery; destroying slavery. These have always been choices.

The study of history defends us from the chaotic, conspiratorial, and deeply pessimistic mentality of our digital present: in which all that matters is what is happening *right now*.

History returns us to the stories of *our ancestors*. And in this context, when I mean our ancestors, I mean the champions of true, inclusive nationhood.

No one understood that better than the 16th President of the United States, Abraham Lincoln, speaking before Congress in 1862.

“Fellow citizens we cannot escape history; we of this congress and this administration will be remembered in spite of ourselves. No personal significance or insignificance will spare one or another of us. The fiery trial through which we pass will light us down in honor or dishonor to the latest generation. . . . We, even we here, hold the power and bear the responsibility.”

Now, you, the latest generation, even you here, hold the power and bear the responsibility. I know the question that most of you are asking at this point in your lives: what can I do with a history major? My answer is that you can start by helping to save the United States of America.

I know of no great leaders in our global past who were themselves not students of history. W.E.B. Du Bois. Ida B. Wells. Cesar Chavez. Betty Friedan. Nehru. Nelson Mandela. You know their writings because you have studied with us. Many of them wrote history themselves. All of them rose above the “stormy present,” as Lincoln called it. They knew what was possible now because they knew that it had been accomplished before.

And last but not least, here’s what nobody told you on Snapchat. You are them. And I don’t mean just everybody who is getting a diploma this year. I mean *you*. Because we are not in some new place in our

history. We are in an old place: the place where the world will once again be saved by historians.

Yes . . . now perhaps you see what an excellent decision you made to major in history at UC Santa Cruz. I expect great things of you because you, historians, are the ones who know what is possible, what has been done, and therefore what can be done.

So congratulations on your work. Congratulations on your degree. And congratulations to your parents.

I am sure that I speak for all the faculty and staff here in saying that we are proud of what you have accomplished . . . and will take full credit for everything that you are about to do.

Thank you.