“The Future of History in the Ruins of the University”
Special Issue of History of the Present: A Journal of Critical History

Over the past several decades it seems clear that two epistemological crises have informed one another, one concerning the state of historical knowledge and the other the discipline of history. As wilder and more egregiously false historical truth claims litter the public sphere, some academic historians have tended to imagine themselves as historical fact checkers in the service of liberal democracy. At the same time, the state of the discipline of history, inside the university, has been one of declining and now nearly absent job prospects, drying up research support, declining numbers of majors (and yet often steady course enrollments). Together, one might reasonably say, these two scenarios have reinforced each other to produce a reactionary and revanchist notion of history itself – in a defense of history, both in the public sphere and in the university, the story goes, scholars should produce historical work that informs the public in straightforward, accessible prose. A consensus has emerged, suggesting that not only the future of academic history but of liberal democracy itself rests on the ability to persuade the public of the vital necessity of historians. That there is little evidence that this has had much success seems not to be an impediment to the fantasy.

Of course, this is not simply a question of the discipline of history, but of the changing nature of the university itself. Any number of scholars have written on this, from Christopher Newfield to Timothy Kaufman-Osborn to Wendy Brown to the scholars working toward university abolition. An early, prescient, and influential account appeared in 1997: Bill Readings’s The University in Ruins. Readings’s central claim was that the university as we had known it in North America since the late nineteenth century, was over and a new institutional form had taken its place. As Readings puts it, “the University is becoming a different kind of institution, one that is no longer linked to the destiny of the nation-state by virtue of its role as producer, protector, and inculcator of an idea of national culture.” In place of the older University of culture is the University of excellence, where, as Readings writes, “What gets taught or researched matters less than the fact that it be excellently taught or researched…’Excellence’ is like the cash-nexus in that it has no content; it is hence neither true nor false, neither ignorant nor self-conscious” (13). If the central figure of the University of culture was the professor as researcher-teacher, the central figure of the University of excellence has become the administrator. We are likely all familiar with this scenario, which overlaps with terms like austerity and neoliberalism.
The posture of historians in recent years often seems to disavow this shift. Arguing as if the University of culture remains with us, they are perplexed when they find themselves with hundreds of thousands of followers on Twitter, but their own department has less faculty than it had a decade prior. In this special issue we ask you to address an open-ended question: what is history, or what can history be, in the ruins of the university? How, and under what conditions, might we reconceptualize historical knowledge, after the conditions that had secured it for a century, have crumbled? How, moreover, is this epistemological question wrapped up in the political and material questions of the institution of the University itself?

Essays for this special issue should be approximately 5000 words. We ask that potential contributors submit a 500-word proposal by May 1, 2024. Final essays will be due in January 2025. Please send all inquiries and submissions (as Word documents) to Brian Connolly (bconnolly@usf.edu).