

The Public Intellectual and The Marketing of World History

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Theme: [History](#)

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THERE IS a current trend in the way world history is manufactured that deserves closer scrutiny: It is the complete surrender of the humanities to marketing mechanisms and branding strategies.

We don't have to leave England to find the revolution. Niall Ferguson, the British historian – and now Harvard professor –, recently published an opinion article in the German Times in which he ruminates about '6 Killer applications' that the West invented to undo its competitors.

Ferguson goes on to say that, after having dominated world history for centuries, someone pushed the “wrong buttons” and we lost our pristine vantage. Meanwhile, the “new players in Asia” have picked up the rules of the game.

I dread to think it isn't quite as dramatic as the philosopher would have it: World history is still written by the Fergusons – and Harvardians – of this world. Social climbers from the east are rare in this sport. I agree, though, that indeed everyone seems to be talking about the rise of Asia these days.

What's also new is the trending of fashionable internet fads or business allusions toward world historical events. Public intellectuals these days enjoy a “the mass media” effect and have fully emerged into the world of blogging, vlogging, and social media.

The philosopher can be stalked on Big Think, TED Talks, YouTube, Newsweek, Bloomberg, his own blog, and, of course, Facebook and Twitter. Ferguson is a computer-savvy networker, or... at least his subordinates are. A Google search on his name spurns out four million hits (last access: Aug 2013) – and places Niall Ferguson's thumbnail alongside those of mighty Henry Kissinger, Paul Krugman, and John Maynard Keynes, no less.

About a hundred years ago, before the great wars, a rather pessimistic Oswald Spengler described 20th century civilization as ‘organic’ and apparently ‘dying’ in front of our bloody eyes. Ferguson is a man of his time, too. He describes 21st century civilization as ‘digital’ and apparently in danger of being unduly formatted, recklessly copy-pasted, or accidentally bunged at the desktop bin.

The iPad generation will find mass history hip and illuminating; at the very least they can relate because they too, exist digital. Like all ‘information’, history today seems more fabricated than ever and comes with a download button – it's the green one, Bob... below the commercial ads..., no, beneath those popup-windows!

According to Ferguson's fancy allusions, the West “downloaded” six “Apps,” became the

military and economic champion, and could easily out-perform grander and more mature societies such as the Chinese or Indian. [Now, it is their turn, he says]

As if this fragility of our current situation –Europe’s lack of self-confidence and America’s lack of vision- wasn’t enough wood for the pessimists to hackle, Ferguson hurries to explain that the Eastern folks –inspired by what Japan achieved in the 19th and 20th century of drawing level with Europe – have now irreversibly caught up.

The Asians have downloaded our freely available killer apps, and use them against the very inventors of modernity, as there are:

Killer-App One: The Institutions and Division of Powers.

Killer-App Two: The Scientific Revolution.

Killer-App Three: The State of Law.

Killer-App Four: Modern Medicine.

Killer-App Five: The Consumer Society.

Killer-App Six: The Protestant Work Ethic.

Ornamenting factual history with internet slogans or business credo may be invigorating to some; but it also tells about the shift of creativity and branding in today’s Google-based scholarship: The already lofty boundaries between history making and campaign marketing now seem to have completely vaporized. Mere history, facts plain and plane in space, is at best obscure and trivial unless it is branded and ambassadored by a famous person.

Niall Ferguson, the media sensation, says that a “good work ethic” (aka Max Weber’s Protestant Ethics) can be installed by anyone who has also uploaded – or updated – blueprints for institutions that “reward labor.” And while we are still digesting such profound insights, would you also subscribe to Ferguson’s blog, his Facebook page, his Youtube videos, and would you also be so kind as to re-tweet his words to all your Google Plus circles, please? At no time in history perhaps were historians more self-aware that they also must be sly entrepreneurs.

The global age is sure to replace former ‘national versions’ of history with one single HISTORY in with very few influential public intellectuals compete in ways whichever sell their personality best. Histories will be handed over from state propaganda to marketing departments. Lesser known histories and traditional scholars who don’t have the resources and influences to compete globally will be shoved away and down into internet oblivion.

Today, America’s world historians like Thomas Friedman, Francis Fukuyama or Jared Diamond travel like pop stars, command their own global brands – the media, the fans, the publishing cult. They can do literally whatever they want with world history; even occasionally –for sensationalism’s sake- declare “the end” of it, like Fukuyama did (and Immanuel Kant and Georg Hegel before him). Niall Ferguson is only the latest superstar. Together with only a few hundred others, those public intellectuals rule and divide world history among them.

Some critics have argued that public intellectuals misrepresent true scholarship, because public intellectuals talk a lot but don’t read as much. That’s why we have so many Middle East commentators whose only language is English; they never spent, say, then years of their life learning Arabic, Hebrew, Turkish, etc. Public intellectuals, by definition, must have outward personalities, over-sized egos, use slogans and create new words, flatter their

readers, and are – technically speaking – a breed of salesmen.

To their defense we may reply that most public intellectuals were humble scholars once, perhaps like Richard Dawkins, but who then decided to leave the ivory tower precisely because they want to make a difference in the world now. In contrast, mere scholars rarely make a difference during their life-time.

We cannot predict the future but we can influence it: Historians and public intellectuals have been known to employ whatever comes available to them in any given time to boost their sales and expand their personal brands.

Now unchecked capitalism, boundless egotism, and the digital age have given them unprecedented leverage. Youtube personalities like Niall Ferguson, but also Noam Chomsky, Tariq Ali, or Slavoj Zizek, no longer just command the public discourse – they have become 24/7 planetary visionaries.

The ‘version of history’ that’s on electronic offer, syndicated by millions of computers, is no longer political or propagandistic; it is about personality, about glamour and sales, vanity and influence, it is about being funny and being amazing at storytelling, about being controversial and relevant to as many people as possible. Only history that has a brand name to it and has been beaded through our machines and social networks will ever see a chance of going viral. @nfergus #KillerApps, Re-tweet.

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