Because History Matters

The events of 2017-18 made it abundantly clear that history matters. Historians have been asked time and time again to dissect and help explain our current political, economic, and social moment, which at times can feel overwhelming and unprecedented. Over the course of the year, the Department of History used its platform to speak to this moment in many important ways: from classes designed to help students reflect and think critically about the present to community events such as the hugely successful Lecture Series and the Why Race Matters Panel (now in its second year).

Reflecting Communally

The 2018 History Lecture Series, Speaking Truth to Power: Protest and Dissent in Modern History, was a great example of how the past can be used to unpack the present. This year’s theme was informed by the current climate of political activism in an increasingly agitated and divided nation, and aimed to trace connections between historical and contemporary movements and struggles. What lessons might the activists of today learn from those in the past who, in the name of social justice, spoke truth to power?

Professor Josh Reid brought the series to a close with a stirring question: “Where do you sit in supporting indigenous communities’ efforts to speak truth to power?” It was a powerful end to an event that saw respected and award-winning faculty from the Department of History take the stage over four weeks in Kane Hall. Topics ranged from Gandhi and the history of his nonviolent ideals of protest to modern-day indigenous efforts to stop commercial salmon farming in the Pacific Northwest. Each week, a packed audience listened to faculty share their expertise on important protest efforts throughout history.
First to speak was Professor Anand Yang, whose talk on Gandhi focused on the history of the revered activist’s life and the germination and impact of his ideals of nonviolent protest. Professor Yang painted a colorful and vibrant image and spoke about many of Gandhi’s subtler forms of protest, such as his use of clothing to make pointed political statements against the continued British occupation of India.

The following week Professor Laurie Marhoefer made her debut at the lecture series with a thought-provoking talk on popular protest in Nazi Germany. She drew attention to the somewhat surprising success of some efforts, such as the 1943 Rosenstrasse protest, which was led by non-Jewish wives and mothers in reaction to the rounding up of their Jewish children and husbands, presumably for deportation. This successful street protest resulted in the release of those who had been taken. Professor Marhoefer asked, “What might the success of this protest, and others, under such an authoritarian regime as Nazi Germany, reveal about the potential power of mass demonstrations? Especially in a democracy? And perhaps more poignantly, why, if Germans knew that they could successfully protest the regime’s policies, are there not more examples of efforts to do so?”

Next, Arbella Bet-Shlimon took audiences on a journey through the history of dissent in the Middle East to better understand and unpack the Arab Spring. This talk highlighted the deep roots of Middle Eastern protest and its links to the region’s colonial past, and asked how an event like the Arab Spring—which promised democracy—could lead to the rise of regimes such as ISIS?

Professor Reid invoked similar themes during his talk on Native American protests in the era of Standing Rock. He discussed how “sovereignty and self-determination infuse Native activism, and reiterated that,” though the optics and tools of activism in the modern era may appear new, contemporary activists are in fact building on decades of Native resistance to external powers that would impinge on their historically confirmed rights.

All lectures were recorded live and are available online.

Compelling Classes

Students had many opportunities this year to take classes that helped them critically reflect on their current moment. As always, the department offered a diverse range of undergraduate and graduate classes spanning a myriad of geographic locations, time periods, and themes. In every class, students soon realized the explanatory power of history, often in ways they might not have expected. For example, in winter quarter, Professor Bruce Hevly challenged students to historicize such unquestioned phenomena as gravity in HSTCMP 313: Science in Civilization: Physics and Astrophysics since 1850. When asked about his motivation for this course, he replied, “To be able to understand the history of science is also to understand the modern world.”

Professor Margaret O’Mara made a similar point when discussing her new spring 2018 course, HSTAA 345: U.S. Political and Economic History, 1920—Present. She explained that, although the course goes up to the present day, “this is not a current events class but a chance to think historically about the recent past.” This is why she is so excited to teach it. She continues, “A course like this one is a very powerful way to show students how history matters, because historicizing concepts, structures, and ideas that continue to shape our world can help students to better navigate their present.”

Other events that spoke to the moment this year included the second Why Race Matters Panel, where an interdisciplinary panel of UW faculty and graduate students discussed issues of racial justice before a packed audience of undergraduates. Also popular was the #historyconnects series of talks, which were designed to trace connections between past moments and the biggest social questions of today. Altogether, it has been a year of thought-provoking and engaging discussion in the Department of History, which has sought to show just how much history matters.