



Historian Twitter and Me

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When I was in high school, the political historian Kevin M. Kruse went viral for some Twitter threads in which he rebutted Dinesh D'Souza's claim that the "party switch" of the mid-twentieth century is a myth and that the GOP remains Lincoln's party and the Democrats McClellan's. Kruse's threads were formidable in both their cogency and their evidentiary ammunition, and they represented a level of argument I was unused to seeing on the internet, even in newspapers' op-ed sections. (Those last five words, which seem absurd to me now, I would have said with perfect seriousness then.) I felt as though I were being let in on a new and slightly secret way to talk about politics, and the world, and I wanted more.

Kruse was not, of course, the only historian with a Twitter account, and his replies and retweets were filled with other scholars of history—professors, postdocs, grad students, and others—who were part of what I came to know as "historian Twitter." I don't remember if discovering historian Twitter made me want to become an historian, or if it simply compounded an existing desire. Either way, by the time I got to college I not only wanted to get a history PhD but had a well-developed idea of what the world of history PhDs looked like.

Well-developed but not, alas, well-formed. Historian Twitter wasn't all bad: among other things, it got me reading books of historical scholarship, starting with Kruse and Julian E. Zelizer's *Fault Lines: A History of the United States Since 1974* (2019). But the sense I formed from it of what history was, as a field, was severely distorted. Of course it was. Historian Twitter possesses—or at least it possessed, when I was in high school; I haven't been on the site since 2023—many of the vices of online spaces more generally: a tendency toward conformity and ritual displays thereof, a taste for viral punchiness over nuance, and a predominance of grousing. (It was conversations with some of my TAs in college that made me realize that some people actually enjoy graduate school.) The problem, as in other online spaces, wasn't so

much this or that person as a combination of selection bias and the system of likes, replies, and retweets. Case in point: Kruse's threads were excellent, but no doubt much of their appeal as "content" arose from the gladiatorial-audience thrill of witnessing an online "dunking." Certainly that was part of their appeal to me.

What worries me is the prospect of lots of other people coming to college, like me, with their notions of what academia is—and therefore of how to approach it—formed online. It is just so easy to find a corner of Twitter, and so easy to get sucked in. The site is designed precisely for the purpose of finding you and sucking you in, and designed very well. JSTOR cannot compete on UI; and Twitter is free. But there is a reason that academics use journal articles and books rather than social media posts as their primary professional medium. Medium is message, and one of these is much better than the other for advancing the collective endeavor of organized thought. And while I managed to lose my misconceptions, it seems frighteningly plausible to me that I might not have. In theory, everybody knows that the world is wider, deeper, more various and more free than what one sees online. Hence the refrain, "Twitter is not real life." But the scroll has a way of making itself seem total, and speaking only for myself I did not see that I had built walls around myself until I realized that they didn't need to be there. I am almost certain that there are eighteen-year-olds today who have a similar outlook to mine then, and I wish I could tell them what I am now telling you.

As it happens I switched from history to American Studies in sophomore year and from American Studies to English as a junior. But because the pitfalls of historian Twitter arise systemically from the form of the website, I strongly suspect that I would have found much the same dynamics had it been literary scholarship Twitter—or whatever catchier name it is called—I landed on in high school. And, for that reason, I'm glad it wasn't. I'm very grateful for the world, the wide, deep, various and free world, that I found in college. I only wish I'd known about it sooner. ●