

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS: EVERY HISTORIAN A PUBLIC HISTORIAN

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It has been the tradition for the giver of this talk to discuss her or his scholarly work but I have decided that I am not going to do that this afternoon. In part that is because I am just finishing a book on the history of business schools and I feared that topic would put too many of you to sleep. More than that though, I have spent the last eighteen months or so wondering what a historian ought to do in our current political moment and I bet a number of you have been tortured by the same question. And so I feel compelled to talk about that instead.

I should start with apologies to Carl Becker. It is pretty obvious that I have stolen the title of this talk from Becker's 1931 address to the American Historical Association "Everyman His Own Historian." You have all read it. You read it in grad school. Maybe some of you have even assigned it in your own classes. Becker got a standing ovation back in 1931—probably the only time that's happened at an AHA convention—and it is, by one count anyway, the most quoted speech in the AHA's archive.

If it has been a while, you may want to read the speech again. It is filled with wit and provocation and quotable quotes. Let me give it a quick gloss for you here. Mr. Everyman has to engage in the most quotidian task of paying for a delivery of coal to his house. In order to do this job, as Becker lays it out, Mr. Everyman functions exactly like historians do. He consults his memory. He refers to notes he's made to himself. He consults the ledger book of Mr. Brown who delivered the coal in the first place. And after laying all this out, Becker concludes, "Mr. Everyman would be astonished to learn that he is an historian."

Becker seems to use this admittedly tedious tale to set up the warning he issued toward the end of his talk. We had better attend to Mr. Everyman's historical needs, Becker says, or risk becoming entirely irrelevant. "Berate him as we will for not reading our books, Mr. Everyman is stronger than we are, and sooner or later we must adapt our knowledge to his necessities." And then in a knife-twisting line that has haunted me every time I've written a book, Becker told his fellow

historians, “The history that lies in unread books does no work in the world.”

I said “seems” just now because in fact Becker’s essay is filled with contradictions and takes the reader in multiple, different directions—in that sense there’s something almost Emersonian about it. In the years since its publication, some have taken Becker’s speech as a challenge to produce “relevant” history; others have found in Becker an inspiration for identity history—Every Group its Own Historian. But I suspect many have read Becker as a call for a radical democratization of the practice of history altogether: Everyone can be their own historian! And for some of us the advent—onslaught?—of the digital age promises to fulfill that dream. As the late Roy Rosenzweig, a pioneer of digital history, once put it, “The web takes Carl Becker’s vision of ‘everyman a historian’ one step further—every person has become an archivist or a publisher of historical documents.”

It is certainly true that now every person is just a few points and clicks away from being his or her own historian. Look no further than the explosion of digital genealogy—which occupies the second largest chunk of bandwidth on the web now—for proof that millions of people have a deep interest in their personal history at the very least.

But while many of us might publicly celebrate the proliferation of amateur history-making that has taken so many forms, privately I suspect many of us are uneasy about the darker variants of this phenomenon. Now any troll in a basement with internet access can throw up a history website that looks indistinguishable from any other. Witness the website devoted to Martin Luther King, Jr. created by the white supremacist group Stormfront. I think, nearly 90 years after Becker gave his address, it is fair to ask whether Everyman ought to be his own historian, or perhaps better, what is the cost to our common discourse when anyone can proclaim themselves a historian?

The answer to that question matters in our current political moment, when the political use and misuse of history is both so prevalent and so charged. It is, of course, too late to put the digital genie back in the bottle, and I am not sure I would want to even if we could. So instead, I am offering as an antidote that all historians should start thinking about themselves as public historians. We need to consider our public role more broadly and embrace it more energetically.

What on earth does that mean?

Let me start by reviewing the history of public history. Until the latter 1970s, there was no such thing as public history as a sub-field within our discipline. The journal *Public Historian* published its first issue in 1978 and the National Council on Public History held its first conference the following year. Looking back, there was something a tad bitter and a little unhappy in that founding moment, something that sounded vaguely like a divorce. As G. Wesley Johnson wrote in that inaugural issue of *Public Historian*, “Increasingly the academy, rather than the historical society or public arena, became the habitat of the historian, who literally retreated into the proverbial ivory tower.”

At this parting of the ways, academic historians would labor in the groves of academe while public historians—archivists, museum curators, oral historians, documentary makers, government historians and many more—would get their hands dirty in the real world and they would do so as professionals now. Public historians set up all the apparatuses of professionalization: a journal, a national association, an annual conference, and a proliferation of degree programs in this new thing called public history.

Whatever benefits this professionalization may have brought to public history, it has had the unintended consequence, I think, of hardening the split between the ivory tower and the public arena. Put bluntly, college and university historians like me no longer had to think much about interacting with the public if we did not want to—we had trained public historians to do that now! And we did not see one another much anymore—we worked in different places, published in different journals, and went to different conferences. Call it the perils of professionalization.

I do not think it is entirely coincidental that too much academic history writing has drifted into abstruseness, obscurantism, and often even mere trivia as the split between the academic and public worlds of history widened. As Becker predicted to his colleagues back in 1931, if we do not pay attention to Mr. Everyman, “he will leave us to our own devices, leave us it may be to cultivate a species of dry professional arrogance growing out of the thin soil of antiquarian research.” Ouch.

I do not mean to be too polemical, nor to draw too stark a picture here, but I do think the stakes are high. Like nature, the political discourse abhors a vacuum, and fools rush in where historians fear to tread. Bill O’Reilly, who fancies himself a historian, springs quickly to mind.

But not just fools and knaves. As G. Wesley Johnson noted in his editorial for *Public Historian*, “if the historian does not respond to these signals of distress, other disciplines will quickly respond.” And he noted that sociologists and political scientists “have made the transition from the academy to the public arena easily and without compromise.” And maybe worst of all, economists have also made that transition!

Many of you are familiar with Steven Levitt, the University of Chicago economist and, even if you do not recognize his name, you certainly know the name of his book franchise: *Freakonomics*. I will pick on Levitt as exemplary of the success economists have had in convincing us all that every challenge, issue, and policy choice we face is, at its root, an economic problem to be solved by extension through economic thinking. The book is modestly sub-titled *The Hidden Side of Everything*.

I will not pause to debate whether that very premise is silly or not, though I will note that most economists hardly even paused in 2007 when the world built on their economic theories came crashing down. Instead, I will insist that the slogan the American Historical Association has recently adopted is correct: “Everything has a history.” None of us in this room would dispute that but let us extend this truism further. If everything does indeed have a history, it means that every choice we face in the present has a historical dimension. And if we do not understand and discuss that historical dimension, we are not likely to make smart choices. For that reason, I believe that historians have a special and particular public obligation to introduce that historical context as we confront any number of difficult decisions in the wider world.

But we have not been nearly as successful as our social science colleagues at interjecting our voices into the town square. There are surely a number of reasons for this but among them, I think, have been the way we have been trained, the way we have been professionalized, and the reluctance both have bred in us to acknowledge and realize that we have important things to say. We do. And we need to say them out loud.

How to do that most effectively is the challenge, and I don’t stand in front of you offering a magic formula. Instead, I’ll offer a few thoughts about how we all might conceive of ourselves more as public historians.

We can certainly communicate more effectively, and that is a bit ironic to say given that what many of us do for a living is some

combination of writing and teaching. Yet, I suspect, we do those things largely on our own terms, not necessarily on Mr. Everyman's. But there is a pretty clear path to his door, or at least to his desktop. For example, about 20 years ago I tried my hand at writing newspaper op-eds to put current events in historical context—big ideas reduced to about 700 words—and I've been writing them ever since for newspapers like the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Dayton Daily News*, and even until recently for the online blog *The Huffington Post*. It has been a really interesting and rewarding part of my professional life. I do not know if Mr. Everyman still reads a newspaper anymore, but if he does, every so often he has read a piece by me even if he has never picked up one of my books.

Likewise, we ought to heed the words of Henry David Thoreau. At one point in *Walden* he writes, "Our life is frittered away by detail." That line haunts me, too, especially when sifting through archival boxes or reading books that seem to be drowning in their own details. But later in that paragraph he tells us: "simplify, simplify!" Yes, history is complicated and messy and open to different readings but that does not mean we cannot simplify our historical insights without compromising our intellectual integrity. Put it in the other direction. How effective do you think we can be at addressing important questions when we begin our answers with: "Well, it's really complicated." We have lost Mr. Everyman—and many other listeners—right there.

I suspect many of us think of our own scholarly work as part of conversations among other scholars working on related subjects around the country and around the world. And that is all to the good. Yet, at the same time, we probably ought to think of our work in more local terms and for more local audiences. "Cast down your buckets where you are," Booker T. Washington, another great 19th century figure, said and we ought to consider what that might mean. We interact with our colleagues in various places regularly. How often do we communicate with the local high school teacher or school board member or county commissioner? Yet we have things to say to all of them.

For those of us who teach classes, maybe this means thinking about a more place-based, problem-based curriculum. In the classroom, we want to introduce students to historical ideas and historical methods but we do not take them out of the classroom often enough to give them a chance to apply what they learn to real-world problems. I will

borrow another slogan, this one from the environmental movement. We need to train our students to think historically and act locally.

I have asserted that we as historians have an obligation to speak up and speak out and to bring our particular, vital expertise to bear on any number of choices we face as a democratic citizenry. And, I have also asserted that there is an urgency to this. I'm sure you all understand what I have been referring to but, while it is probably unnecessary, let me state it explicitly. The campaign of 2016 was run on an implicitly historical argument: Make America Great Again. There are lots of reasons that slogan appealed, certainly, but I think we have to acknowledge that historians did not have a compelling counter to that particular historical narrative of conspiracy, treachery and decline. Nor, I would assert, did we try hard enough.

That same campaign was aided and abetted by all measure of dishonesty and fakery, the extent of which we still do not know. But if, as the cliché goes, journalism is the rough draft of history, then does that mean that today's fake news will become tomorrow's fake history? If so, I put the question to you, what are we going to do about that?

One part of our response has to be to re-stake our claim to the historical truth. Yes, the past is complicated and messy and there might be several different ways of looking at it, but that is not the same thing as saying that the historical truth does not therefore exist. There is a critical distinction between a history that acknowledges competing truths and a history built on falsehood and lies.

I will underscore that point with a story from 30 years ago and from a country that no longer exists.

On November 2, 1987, Mikhail Gorbachev, in front of the Soviet Communist Party Congress and surrounded by the leaders of virtually all of the Soviet client states, addressed the nation on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. His subject was history: "Many thousands of members of the Party and nonmembers were subjected to mass repressions," Gorbachev lectured. "That is the bitter truth." He wasn't finished. "Even now," he continued,

"we still encounter attempts to ignore sensitive questions of our history, to hush them up, to pretend that nothing special happened. We cannot agree with this. It would be a neglect of historical truth, disrespect for the memory of those who found themselves victims of lawlessness and arbitrariness."

Gorbachev was, in effect, asking Soviets to now live in truth.

Seven months later, and with Gorbachev's approval, the national end-of-year exams in history were cancelled for students aged 6-16, all 53 million of them. The reason was as straight-forward as it was extraordinary. "Today, we are reaping the bitter fruits of our own moral laxity," *Izvestia* editorialized in announcing the news. "We are paying for succumbing to conformity and thus to giving silent approval of everything that now brings the blush of shame to our faces and about which we do not know how to answer our children honestly." *Izvestia* was merciless in describing Soviet crimes against history. "The guilt of those who deluded one generation after another, poisoning their minds and souls with lies, is immeasurable," the editors thundered. Why, after all, test students on their mastery of lies?

It is our job to tell the historical truth, and it is just as important that we call out historical lies.

In the end, as I ask you all to consider yourselves public historians, I am asking us all to re-assert our expertise. It is not simply that we know more about the past—although we do—but we know how to think about the past in ways that most others do not. That is what we have to offer to the public debate and I urge you all to find new ways to do it.

Thanks so much.

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