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Memory and History in American Culture

### Historians and Popular Historical Consciousness

Historians know more about the past than the general public. On the face of it, the truth of this statement is obvious. Historians' purpose is to learn about, analyze, and understand the past. An historian who does not achieve a greater-than-average knowledge of history is a poor historian indeed. Less obvious is whether a mastery of the past is sufficient for being a good historian. Are the best historians those who acquire the best knowledge and understanding of the past? While achieving such intellectual status is a worthy goal, it is not enough. Historians, like all scholars, have a responsibility to share their knowledge. Some of this, to be sure, can occur within the academic sphere, through class lectures, presentations at conferences, and journal articles. But historians should also engage with a wider audience. Besides a disparity in knowledge about the "facts" of history, there is also a considerable gap between academic and popular conceptions of the past. Historians face considerable challenges in bridging that gap, but by actively engaging the public and outlining the basic tenets of historical thought, historians can improve non-historians' knowledge and understanding of the past.

Increasing the general public's historical consciousness would have the inevitable (and positive) consequence of allowing more people to examine contemporary issues and problems in their historical context. Social history, for example, should "connect the structural conditions (expropriated labor and social hierarchies) and cultural patterns (deep-seated racism) of the past to those of the present."<sup>1</sup> Historians have a valuable lesson to teach: the present is, to a large extent, a result of the past. We may not have a complete understanding of the past or its effects

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Handler and Eric Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), 226.

on the present, but we would be making a huge mistake to presume that it is possible to attain a complete understanding of an issue without some comprehension of its historical background.

This is not to suggest that all academic history has something to offer in understanding present-day concerns. It is difficult to see the contemporary relevance of, say, silk production in 14<sup>th</sup>-century Florence. Nor is it the case that contextualizing present problems is sufficient, in of itself, enough to solve them. An in-depth understanding of how the Israel-Palestine conflict emerged, for example, offers no clear solutions. Instead, knowledge of history helps elucidate the details of present problems and provides a framework for understanding them.

Historians also have an important role to play as “remembrancers.” Whereas Herodotus saw historians as responsible for recording the glorious deeds of great men for posterity, Peter Burke offered an alternative vision of just what historians should be remembering. Burke preferred to see “historians as the guardians of awkward facts, the skeletons in the cupboard of social memory [...] people [...] would have liked to forget.”<sup>2</sup> Historians, in Burke’s view, have a responsibility to ensure that the past is not used irresponsibly. Just what constitutes irresponsible use of the past is, of course, a largely subjective question whose answer could vary considerably with the political leanings of the historian involved. Nonetheless, Burke’s charge to historians is a valid one.

A contemporary example demonstrates how historians can highlight these inconvenient facts. At a recent lecture at Swarthmore College, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. traced the tradition of wartime dissent in American history to argue, “Rallying around the presidents during wartime is

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Burke, “History as Social Memory,” in *Memory: History, Culture and the Mind*, ed. Thomas Butler, *Wolfson College Lectures* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 110.

not a historical precedent or requirement.”<sup>3</sup> Responsible historians challenge and disrupt the all-too-neat narratives that politicians create for partisan purposes.

Beyond these practical benefits to increased public historical consciousness, the goals of academic historians shaping popular historical consciousness and memory are more complicated and abstract. As several scholars have noted, it is not simply that historians know more about the past than non-historians. Historians think about the past in ways that are fundamentally different from popular conceptions of history.

David Lowenthal laid out the major “historical preconceptions” that the public typically embraces as follows:

“One is notion of a timeless past until recently devoid of change, save for trivial or cyclic operations. Another is of a past that mirrors the present and that should be read back from it, reflecting eternal and universal causes, virtues, and vices. The third is of an unprogressive past to be disowned as a swamp of stagnant tradition or superstitious error. The fourth comprises perspectives that sharply distinguish one’s *own* national or cultural pasts from those of other societies, enabling one *either* to extol traditional stasis *or* to deplore primitives’ lack of progress. [...] All of these perspectives are present-centered in a still broader sense; they misinterpret historical sources by viewing them through the categories, even if not the values, of the present.”<sup>4</sup>

In other words, popular conceptions of history are essentially presentist and fail to comprehend the past on its own terms. To a certain extent, all historians are also guilty of presentism; their interpretations of the past are necessarily made by using categories available to them in the present. The point, however, is that average people are more presentist in their understanding of the past than academic historians. Non-historians typically do not “conceive

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<sup>3</sup> Benjamin Kabak and Bree Bang-Jensen, “Historian Encourages Dissent in Wartime,” *Phoenix*, 12 February 2004.

<sup>4</sup> David Lowenthal, “The Timeless Past: Some Anglo-American Historical Preconceptions,” *Journal of American History* 75, no. 4 (1989): 1264.

history as contingent and unpredictable, or the past as a cluster of realms distinct from the present, each with its own mentalities and sociocultural determinants.”<sup>5</sup>

It is worthwhile pointing out that increased engagement with the past does not entail a decrease in these ahistorical attitudes. Many hobbies, like genealogy, antique-collecting, and historical tourism, encourage history professionals to adopt ahistorical views.<sup>6</sup> Spending time thinking about the past does not necessarily lead to sophisticated historical thinking.

The question, then, becomes whether it is the responsibility of historians to reshape popular conceptions of history. Taking a further step back, one can ask whether historians should be trying to influence public opinion and thought at all. It is possible to see attempts by professional historians to shape popular views on history as elitist. Some conservatives have advocated this view in their attacks on a putative liberal intelligentsia bent on subverting traditional American values and beliefs.

Such attacks ignore a crucial fact. “For better or worse, it is the historians, at the end of the day, to whom society delegates custodianship of the past.”<sup>7</sup> Historians have a keener understanding of history than the general public, not because they are inherently smarter or better people, but simply because they have special training and have devoted a considerable portion of their lives to achieving that understanding. It borders on the absurd to argue that the people who know the most about the past should not educate the public about the past. Historians teaching the public how they examine the past are no more elitist than doctors providing medical advice to their patients.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.: 1276.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.: 1277.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Boyer, "Whose Memory Is It Anyway? Memory, Politics, and Historical Scholarship," in *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past*, ed. Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996), 139.

This does not mean, however, that historians should ignore popular conceptions of the past. For one thing, historians seeking to transform widespread “misconceptions” of the past must understand the details of those misconceptions in order to best combat them. More importantly, historians should recognize the attractions of these views and the positive functions they can play in creating a sense of community. David Thelen got it exactly right when he argued that it is “crucial [...] that we interrogate and explore common ground from which to use the past to reshape the civic arena according to popular concerns.”<sup>8</sup> Historians fighting a solitary crusade against ahistorical understandings of the past are doomed to fail. It is through compromise that historians and non-historians can achieve an historical perspective that is both responsible and fulfilling.

Different historians, no doubt, have differing conceptions of what constitutes responsible, sophisticated historical thought. A few likely points of consensus can, however, be sketched out. It is worth noting that these points are related, as they all stress the interpretive nature of history.

First, historians do more than collect facts and put them in order. The production of history is a fundamentally interpretive act.<sup>9</sup>

Second, there is no such thing as a single, correct interpretation of the past. While historical events and trends did occur in a particular way, it is impossible for historians to capture them in their totality. Historical narratives are not discovered, but rather constructed from the available facts. Crucially, “History is not ‘the real thing’ but an interpretation of the past as we understand it now.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 203.

<sup>9</sup> John W. Dower, “Three Narratives of Our Humanity,” in *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past*, ed. Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996), 76.

<sup>10</sup> Handler and Gable, *New History in an Old Museum*, 223.

Third, history has an agenda. This agenda can be as benign as the desire to write the history of a previously unexplored period or as pernicious as the justification of institutionalized racism. In any case, history is a value-laden enterprise.

Finally, good history avoids the presentist assumptions described by Lowenthal above.

The goals of historians engaging in the public sphere, then, can be summarized as follows: increase knowledge of the historical context of contemporary issues, bring to light “inconvenient” facts that might otherwise be forgotten, and make the public aware of the interpretive nature of the historical enterprise.

Fine goals, but unrealistic ones if it turns out that historians lack the ability to shape popular conceptions of the past. Fortunately, there is substantial evidence that shows that historians have affected how people have viewed the past and that there continue to be outlets for historians to influence public conceptions of history.

As noted by Thelen and Roy Rosenzweig, professional historians have, in the past, made substantial contributions to how non-historians view history. These contributions, however, are of the sort that many historians now bemoan. In a symbiotic relationship that flourished throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century and has continued, to some extent, to the present, historians have “foster[ed] the idea of nationalism, and the rise of nationalism has in turn fostered the practice of professional history.” As noted by Eric Hobsbawm, “Historians are to nationalism what poppy-growers in Pakistan are to heroin-addicts: we supply the essential raw material for the market.”<sup>11</sup>

Independence Hall in Philadelphia provides the perfect example of how historians have contributed to national narrative histories. In the 1950s, Independence Hall National Park “represented a firm consensus that the nation’s principles enunciated in 1776 and 1787 could be

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<sup>11</sup> Eric Hobsbawm and David I. Kertzer, “Ethnicity and Nationalism in Europe Today,” *Anthropology Today* 8, no. 1 (1992): 3, Rosenzweig and Thelen, *Presence of the Past*, 123.

counted upon to shape and sustain the American national character.”<sup>12</sup> This feat was achieved by the implementation of a decision to interpret Independence Hall and its environs as the physical context for the political history of the early nation, especially as expressed in the two defining documents of the era: the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. In doing so, the interpreters chose to leave out Independence Hall’s role in the history of Pennsylvania and Philadelphia. Independence Hall was to be a shrine to the nation. Guides were urged to adopt “[s]implicity, brevity, and informality” as their watchwords.<sup>13</sup> In presenting the consensus view of American history to visitors in a decade of conformity, historians succeeded in shaping how Americans understood history.

There is considerable reason for professional historians to remain optimistic about their abilities to influence popular conceptions of history. In their extensive survey of how Americans engage with the past, Rosenzweig and Thelen found that college history professors were highly trusted as sources of knowledge about the past. “With a composite trustworthiness score of 7.3, [historians] averaged closer to eyewitnesses (7.8) than to books (6.4) or movies and television programs (5.0). Many people told us that they valued the dedication and study associated with scholarship.” Rosenzweig and Thelen’s respondents assumed that historians “sought to get as close as they could to actual experiences in the past [...] so they could engage things directly without intervention.”<sup>14</sup> In short, Americans look to professional historians as trustworthy sources of historical information who have a firm grasp on “actual experiences” based on

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<sup>12</sup> Charlene Mires, *Independence Hall in American Memory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 215.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 226-33.

<sup>14</sup> Rosenzweig and Thelen, *Presence of the Past*, 102-3. Lowenthal shares Rosenzweig and Thelen’s optimism about historians’ ability to engage with a wide audience. In responding to those who looked to the overspecialization and unpopularity of academic history in explaining why popular conceptions of history differ so greatly from academic views of the past, Lowenthal argued that “modern historians rival the media and the museums in bringing the past to life again. See Lowenthal, “Timeless Past,” 1278.

primary source research. This finding bodes well for any historian who hopes to transform what the public knows and thinks about the past.

Further findings of Rosenzweig and Thelen strongly suggest that museums serve as the best medium for historians to influence how average people conceive of the past. In fact, Americans trust museums more than any other source of information about the past. In discussing why this is the case, Rosenzweig and Thelen suggested a number of possibilities:

- Museums provide visitors with a sense of immediacy and personal participation
- Museums evoke “the intimacy of family gatherings”
- People associate museums with the research and peer evaluation that characterize the work of historians (seen, as discussed above, as trustworthy)
- “Americans believe they uncover “real” or “true” history at museums and historic sites.”
- Visitors can imagine they are “reexperiencing, for themselves – without mediation – moments from the past.”<sup>15</sup>

Americans feel connected to the past while visiting museums and they place considerable trust in the history presented in museums.<sup>16</sup> Historians interested in shaping popular historical consciousness should explore the ways in which museums are ideally suited to the task.

In a finding that likely disheartened many history educators, Rosenzweig and Thelen concluded that Americans view the presentation of history in schools as uninteresting, impersonal, and irrelevant. What emerged from their respondents stories was a “school-based history organized around the memorization of facts and locked into a prescribed curriculum.” Many saw this curriculum as presenting an excessively neat and rosy narrative of the past. The

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<sup>15</sup> Rosenzweig and Thelen, *Presence of the Past*, 105-08, 32.

<sup>16</sup> Publicly funded museums are seen as particularly trustworthy. See *Ibid.*, 183, Mike Wallace, “Culture War, History Front,” in *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past*, ed. Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996), 188.

emphasis on national history prevented many respondents from feeling any personal connection to the past, as did their teachers' unwillingness to encourage questioning or directly engaging with history.<sup>17</sup> While some historians believe that as "new [historical] interpretations filter into textbooks and classrooms, they may eventually modify the general public's historical understanding,"<sup>18</sup> Rosenzweig and Thelen's study strongly suggested Americans have little interest in history as presented in schools. Consequently, any shifts in popular understandings of history brought about by "classroom history" are likely gradual and shallow, as typical students only engage with the past in passive, superficial ways.

Professional historians, then, appear to be well situated to influence how the general public views the past. Historians are considered trustworthy sources in of themselves, and when historians' perspectives are presented in museums, those perspectives gain even more credibility in the public eye. That historians and museums are seen as valuable sources of information about the past does not, however, entail that historians are able to shape public conceptions of history along more academic lines. In fact, some of the features of museums that attract the general public museums run directly counter to academic conceptions of history.

The case of Independence Hall is telling. As discussed above, the 1950s interpretation of Independence Hall and its environs can be viewed as a success, as National Park Service historians sought to tell a particular narrative of the past and accomplished that task. Americans who visited Independence Hall in the 1950s came away with a conception of early American history that mirrored the contemporary academic consensus. Considering Rosenzweig and Thelen's conclusions about why people find museums and historic sites so engaging, it not at all surprising that Americans found the historical narrative presented at Independence Hall so

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<sup>17</sup> Rosenzweig and Thelen, *Presence of the Past*, 111-13.

<sup>18</sup> Boyer, "Whose Memory," 135.

compelling. Visiting the locations where key events in history took place allowed Americans to relive moments of the past. History came alive for visitors to Independence Hall in the 1950s.

In spite of this successful historical presentation, the Independence Hall of the 1950s provides little evidence that historians can transmit the fundamentally interpretive nature of history to the public. In their desire to present the history of Independence Hall in simple terms, guides had no choice but to ignore the complexity of the past. By highlighting a single portion of the past, National Park Service historians implied that the political history of the early United States was the “real history.”

Colonial Williamsburg was long decried as a “Republican Disneyland” that told an overwhelming optimistic story of the past that focused on the achievements of the colonial period (that is, independence) while ignoring “dirtier” facts like slavery. In recent decades, a new crop of historians have sought to tell a new history of Colonial Williamsburg, one that included the experiences of common people, not just the accomplishments of the political elite. Besides expanding the scope of history presented at Williamsburg, these social historians wanted to change the way Colonial Williamsburg and its visitors understood history itself. In moving away from the top-down history that had characterized Colonial Williamsburg since its inception, the new constructionist paradigm stressed the interpretive, subjective nature of the historical endeavor. In short, the new social historians at Colonial Williamsburg attempted to shape the public’s conception of history along the lines discussed above.<sup>19</sup>

However, as Richard Handler and Eric Gable demonstrated, the attempt to present constructionist history at Colonial Williamsburg was, at the time of their study, largely unsuccessful. Handler and Gable pointed to a number of factors to explain this failure. Chief among these was Colonial Williamsburg’s continuing devotion to mimetic realism, that is,

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<sup>19</sup> Handler and Gable, *New History in an Old Museum*, 4-5.

presenting the past “as it really was.” In the words of Handler and Gable, “Mimetic realism [...] destroys history. [...] It teaches people not to question historians’ stories, not to imagine other, alternative histories, but to accept an embodied tableau as the really real.”<sup>20</sup> The goal of achieving absolute authenticity is fundamentally incompatible with the notion that present conceptions of history are inevitably colored by present concerns and are therefore incapable of capturing the totality of the past. Handler and Gable also pointed out another problem caused by a commitment to mimetic realism. They argued that “if one’s entire energy is directed to the past as it really was, the present is erased completely, as are the relationships between past and present.”<sup>21</sup> Good historians point out the connections between the past and the present. By sealing off the past entirely, Colonial Williamsburg eliminated the possibility of the past informing the present.

In seeking to push Colonial Williamsburg towards a more constructionist presentation of history, Handler and Gable proposed the abandonment of mimetic realism as a dominant paradigm of thought. To do away with the authentic and the real, however, is to do away with the very things that attract many people to museums. As discussed above, museums provide visitors with the opportunity to directly engage with “real” history without mediation. The constructionist view of history, put simply, embraces and highlights the fact that “real” history is impossible, claiming instead that it is only through mediation that we gain any understanding of the past. It is a bit simplistic to claim that Americans want to hear a straightforward story when they go to museums or historic sites, but it does seem reasonable to argue that visitors typically believe that such a story exists. Handler and Gable seemingly failed to consider a potential negative consequence of moving away from mimetic realism, namely that many visitors come to

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 224.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 225.

Colonial Williamsburg expecting mimetic realism. This is not to suggest that historians and museum curators should give visitors exactly what they come to see, but rather that for history professionals to ignore the interests and expectations of their audience is to risk losing that audience. It seems far better to strike an engaging balance between mimetic realism and constructionism that fails to present all the implications of constructionist history than present a thoroughly constructionist history that fails to interest visitors.

The politically charged nature of history itself poses another challenge for historians seeking to engage a popular audience. As seen in the recent Smithsonian controversy over the exhibition of the *Enola Gay*, historians can prove vulnerable to political pressures. Following intense lobbying by the Air Force Association, Congress put considerable pressure on the Smithsonian to substantially revise the exhibition along the lines of the AFA's demands.<sup>22</sup> Paul Boyer outlined the circumstances in which similar controversies arise:

As historian Michael Kammen would write in the aftermath of the Smithsonian debacle and other cultural battles involving conflicting interpretations of the American past: "Historians become notably controversial when they do not perpetuate myths, when they do not transmit the received and conventional wisdom, when they challenge the comforting presence of a stabilized past" – and, it may be added, when news of what they are up to gets out.<sup>23</sup>

In the *Enola Gay* controversy, the failure of the historians to vigorously defend their position in the media contributed to the ultimate demise of the exhibition. It is the responsibility of historians to defend the validity of their work against non-historians who challenge it. To be sure, not all such battles can be won, especially when up against multi-million-dollar lobbying groups. But a failure to respond appropriately is an automatic admission of defeat.

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<sup>22</sup> For a summary of the controversy, see Edward T. Linenthal, "Anatomy of a Controversy," in *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past*, ed. Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996), 9-62.

<sup>23</sup> Boyer, "Whose Memory," 131.

Historians should not, however, be so sure of themselves that they cut off all discussion. After all, the essence of a constructionist view of history is that multiple, legitimate narratives of the past exist. A responsible museum exhibition should highlight the fact that the story it tells is but one of the possible narratives that could be presented. Historian Mike Wallace outlined possible steps for historians and museum professionals to encourage further discussion:

Museum planners should [...] identify groups that might be affected by, or have a particular interest in, an exhibition. Once identified, the institution should seek out and, where feasible, engage these groups in authentic dialogue. [...] There are [...] options that can enhance [...] discussion. One approach is to clearly label a given show as embodying the point of view of the curators. It would be presented as the analogue of an op-ed piece, or a column, rather than a news story. [...] Another strategy would be to incorporate differing perspectives into the exhibition itself.<sup>24</sup>

Historians who follow Wallace's suggestions, far from avoiding controversy and ambiguity, would be embracing both as part of the historical endeavor. By doing so, they would actively exemplify the principles of historical scholarship and thought that the wider public is currently unaware of.

Historians should do more than teach people what happened in the past. The best historians teach people how to think about the past in novel ways that mirror academic conceptions of history while recognizing that popular historical consciousness is a fundamentally different beast from sophisticated academic thought on the past. Historians, after all, have been trained to think of the past in certain ways. Those ideas cannot be transmitted *in toto* through a museum exhibition, no matter how carefully planned and constructed. Historians will, almost by definition, know more about the past than the average person. That a gap between the two is inevitable, however, does not require that the size of that knowledge gap remain static. It is the responsibility of historians to share their knowledge in the public sphere.

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<sup>24</sup> Wallace, "Culture War, History Front," 194-95.

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