THE PROFESSION

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Historians and Their Publics

My grandfather once shared with me a saying that his own father had taught him: "Change comes from the stomach." The point, Grandpa explained, was that people were concerned first and foremost with their own survival. To persuade them, then, you had to appeal to their self-interest. I'm going to use this column to test Grandpa's theory—on you.

Over the past few years, we've all read periodic arguments about how historians have forsaken broad public audiences on behalf of narrowly academic ones. The author is often a professor who writes for the popular press, like I do. And that professor urges his fellow historians to cultivate lay readers, so the knowledge they create makes a difference in the real world.

I still believe that. But to be honest, I know that it usually falls on deaf ears. So lately I've been trying a different tack, especially with younger scholars. Producing history for audiences outside of our profession isn't just the right thing to do. It's also becoming a prerequisite for survival.

That's because an increasing fraction of academic historians will not be employed in the academy. To get jobs, they will need to know how to connect with readers and listeners beyond our guild. All of us know that, at some level. Yet we haven't changed our practices in accord with it. We're like a child who is trying to hide and closes his eyes, in the vain hope that nobody will be able to see him.

But graduate students understand—better, in fact, than many tenured professors do—that tenure-track university positions are, and increasingly will be, few and far between. So historians in the academy owe it to graduate students—and to themselves—to create an academic culture that prepares people for jobs outside the academy, not just within it.

As a first step, everyone who writes an M.A. or Ph.D. thesis should also be required to produce a piece of work about their project for public audiences. It could take the form of an op-ed—my own favorite medium—or a blog post; it could be a publicly available video lecture or presentation (perhaps in the style of a TED talk); it could even be a painting or a sculpture, depending on the student's topic. It would be presented at thesis defenses alongside the thesis itself, perhaps at the outset of the defense, as a way of getting the discussion going.

Most students who have included a public component as part of their degree requirements tell me that it actually makes their academic research much stronger, by forcing them to distill and clarify their central intellectual claims. It also makes them less reliant on verbiage and jargon, the crutch—and the Achilles heel—of every academic profession. You can't indulge in cant if your audience can't understand it.

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Second, we also need to insure that every student of history gets some kind of training in how to teach it. Back in 1999, a survey showed that just 2.7 percent of history graduate students in the United States had received formal preparation for classroom instruction. That fraction has risen since then, to be sure, but most students still leave history programs without any substantial understanding of pedagogical theory and methods.

That's especially galling, given the recent advances in the scholarship of teaching and learning. We have much more knowledge than ever before about how people actually learn—or not—in history classes. But most of us don't read teaching and learning literature or assign it to our graduate students, who have to learn how to teach the same way we did: on the fly.

That's not going to fly for much longer. With tenure-track university jobs drying up, many of our students will be seeking teaching positions at other kinds of institutions: high schools, community colleges, senior centers, correctional facilities, and so on. They simply won't be competitive for those opportunities if they haven't received sustained preparation for the classroom.

Rigorous pedagogical training will also make our students more attentive to popular audiences and—eventually—more adept at writing for them. Indeed, anyone who teaches already has a captive popular audience: their students. I'm always amused (and, I'll admit, a little appalled) when I hear a historian

disparage colleagues for writing op-eds or blog posts on topics they have never researched on their own. Historians of the United States should be, and are, generalists who have the expertise and authority to weigh in on any topic related to U.S. history. In our classrooms, after all, we routinely teach about many matters far beyond our academic specialties. Why should our writing be any different?

The founders of the modern historical profession didn't think it should be. Luminaries such as Carl Becker and Charles and Mary Beard did not use the term "public intellectual," but they took it for granted that historians should engage lay readers. "Research . . . will be of little import except in so far as it is transmuted into common knowledge," Becker wrote in "Everyman His Own Historian," his landmark 1931 address to the American Historical Association. "The history that lies inert in unread books does no work in the world."

As Becker's plea implied, plenty of historians were already writing exclusively for each other. "Can writers devoted to research and filled with the scientific spirit be true to their purposes, and at the same time write history that has the charm of literature?" asked historian John Spencer Bassett in 1926. Many members of our avowedly "scientific" guild answered "no," producing ever-more-obscure monographs and providing easy targets for satirists such as H. L. Mencken. "The professor must be an obscurantist or he is nothing," Mencken quipped. "He has a special and unmatchable talent for dullness."

In the postwar era, as Peter Novick and others have chronicled, the history profession forsook the mantle of scientific objectivity that had marked its birth. It also discovered a host of peoples and topics that had been neglected or ignored by earlier scholars. Becker's best-selling *Modern History* (1931) was really a European and North American history; indeed, its subtitle—*The Rise of a Democratic, Scientific, and Industrial Civilization*—suggested that other parts of the world did not have a past worth recounting.

But *Modern History* was also a textbook, written for high school students and dedicated to teachers "of whatever race or country" who "increase knowledge and promote wisdom in the world." That's still the mission of most historians, I'd guess, but our professional canons and practices don't recognize or reward it. The great triumph of the historical profession since the 1960s has been the integration of different publics into our national and global narratives. And its great failure has been the neglect or outright dismissal of these publics as audiences for what we do.

We can't all be Carl Becker or—in a later era—Richard Hofstadter, whose prizewinning *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (1948) sold more than a million copies. Nor can we all write with the felicity and imagination of historians such as James McPherson and Linda Gordon, who have authored sophisticated histories with substantial lay readerships. I've published four books, but they mostly lie inert and unread. Don't yours?

That's why I have also created a life in journalism, which lets me do more work in the world. Every week or so, I publish an op-ed that reflects on contemporary events in historical perspective; I do the same thing twice a month on WHYY, Philadelphia's National Public Radio affiliate. I still conduct original research, of course, which remains the backbone of our profession; without it, we can't learn anything new about the past. But I also think I have a duty to share this knowledge with audiences beyond the profession's narrow borders.

And now duty has become necessity. Many of the people entering our discipline will not have the luxury of writing exclusively for their colleagues.

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That was also the case in the era of Becker and the Beards, when Ph.D. historians commonly took jobs in journalism, diplomacy, civil service, and the private sector rather than in the academy. Then came the big boom in universities, which became our dominant employer for about a half-century. So you didn't need Becker's "Everyman" to read your work; all that mattered was whether historians did.

Let me be clear: like our Progressive Era foreparents, I believe that *all* historians—inside the academy as well as outside of it—should cultivate public readers and audiences. As governmental and foundation support for the humanities continues to shrink, all of us need to demonstrate why history is worth doing, and worth funding; why an informed citizenry needs it, and how our democracy will suffer without it.

We can't do that by writing exclusively for each other. And if we train our students to do the same, many of them simply won't find employment as historians. Engaging lay audiences isn't just the right thing to do, for our country and for our democracy. It's also the strategic thing to do, for our practice and for our profession.

So, please, my fellow historians: don't turn away from the public, as so many of us have been taught to do. The job you save may be your student's. Or your own.

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