

EVERYDAY HISTORIANS?

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On first encounter, the research interrogatives of Social Anthropology may seem perplexing, but they are actually continuous with the sorts of questions anyone might ask when meeting people from different cultures, or while travelling abroad. What institutions organize social life? How do other people view the world? Perhaps we are all anthropologists, just not professionals. This question of how academic disciplines connect with or radically depart from everyday thought might be a worthwhile matter for all social scientists to consider. As a brief illustration of what such an inquiry might look like I consider the case of History, a discipline with obvious connections to everyday practice. When the electricity bill delivers a shock one might rifle through past bills, and even look at the usage for that same month in a previous year. People habitually consult historical archives in compiling a tax return or in browsing a family album. We swim in the water of historical records ranging from sports statistics to meteorological data. Carl Becker famously captured this situation in the title of his 1931 Presidential Address to the American Historical Association: 'Everyman His Own Historian'.¹

We are everyday historians, however, not just because we ask historical questions and answer them using recognizable historical methodologies and resources such as archives. People form relationships with the past in a multitude of ways not all of which belong to the repertoire of disciplinary history. Some exploration of these apparent divergences enables a critical view of the relationship between everyday historical practices and professional historiography. Consider the following example from Greece where, with the loss of jobs and salary cuts following the 2009 financial crisis, people began to contemplate the possibility of hunger. This propelled many to think of the famines endured in Greece during the World War II German occupation. As a 77-year-old woman remarked to Daniel Knight:

1. Carl Becker, 'Everyman His Own Historian', *American Historical Review* 37 (1932): 221–236.

I now see that some people are going hungry. I notice that some children have been looking through rubbish bins in Trikala for scraps of food to eat. I even saw a man chasing a duck on the river. The hunger has returned; my children feel it too. Despite the fact that they have food to eat, we must now be careful. We do not want to become part of the starving population. The crisis [21st-century economic crisis] has returned us to the dark days of the 1940s where we must fear for our very survival. The crisis has ripped us up and thrown us back in time to a previous era.²

Granted the widespread opinion in Greece that Germany drives EU monetary policy the threat of starvation could easily be associated with a second ominous German incursion. Additionally, one of the few ways for the inhabitants of the Trikala area to make money during the crisis involved renting their farmland to entrepreneurs who installed photovoltaic panels over their fields. This undercut not only their food self-sufficiency, but also their ownership of the land. As Knight also documented, this impelled many locals to think back to a different historical phase, to the Ottoman period, when they worked as landless serfs on large estates in the region. The current crisis had thus compacted two dystopian pasts into their present. Knight terms such historical compression where life conditions at different points in time come to resemble each other 'cultural proximity'. To use Knight's terms again, the Greek situation exemplifies a 'topological' history where the past has been folded in such a way as to touch the present, or hover above it, casting a shadow. This temporal topology emerging from communal apprehension, and occasionally concretized in outright fear, provides one illustration of the ISRF Workshop theme, 'Relating Pasts and Presents'.

Unlike Becker's 'everyman', who recognizes the separation between past and present, and answers historical questions using documentary evidence, the denizens of Trikala did not intentionally choose to investigate the past, nor could they keep separate from it. It crept up on them uninvited and collapsed their world in a temporal tangle. Walter Benjamin pictured this type of scenario as 'a secret agreement

2. Daniel Knight, *History, Time, and Economic Crisis in Central Greece* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 69.

between past generations and the present one'.³ In his messianic Marxist vision the victims of past struggles spring to mind to galvanize those in the present, furnishing a moral sword to fight off oppression. I mention this to make the point that affective historical analogizing is not limited to Greece.

In the widespread practice of historical reenactment affect plays a different role. The quote below comes from an African-American man who participated in the reenactment of a slave auction in St. Louis at an event commemorating the 150th anniversary of the start of the American Civil War:

I can't explain it, something happened to me up there, standing on that block. I looked out there, and it wasn't just my eyes I was seeing through. I was seeing what somebody else saw, a long time ago, being torn away from everyone they loved. I felt what my ancestors must have gone through. . . . Up there on that same block, I guess you could say I was touching the past and, the past, well, it was touching me.⁴

Unlike the Greek case, here participants actively cultivate the experience of horrific past historical moments, yet rather than inducing depression or fear the reenactment produces senses of control and self-enrichment. In the case of American Civil War reenactors studied by Handler and Saxton⁵ participants may meticulously assemble their uniforms and paraphernalia consulting history books for accuracy. Yet they know that their reenactment will not successfully achieve historical authenticity. At a certain point, they disregard the history books in order to feel whatever comes up in the immersive activities of camping, marching, and mock-battling. They do not strive to test historical hypotheses, or provide new evidence, but rather to feel

3. Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', in his *Selected Writings*, Vol. 4 (1938–40) (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 390.

4. Mark Auslander, 'Touching the Past: Materializing Time in Traumatic "Living History" Reenactments', *Signs and Society* 1 (2013): 161–183.

5. Richard Handler and William Saxton, 'Dyssimulation: Reflexivity, Narrative, and the Quest for Authenticity in "Living History"', *Cultural Anthropology* 3 (1988): 242–260.

the past from the inside through what they term 'magical moments'. These exhilarating experiences of ecstatic trans-historical identification arguably make history a medium for something akin to a New Age therapeutic exercise in self-fashioning. Therein lies the authenticity they value.

The appeal to emotions, disregard of objective evidence and violation of linear chronology which appear in popular historical practices were all rejected by the historical profession as it constituted itself in the nineteenth century. Historians are meant to take a dispassionate attitude toward their research; maintain a distinction between themselves as thinking subjects and their evidence, which should be available in the public domain; and to avoid anachronism at all costs. This overview allows the preliminary conclusion that only some of everyday historical practice is compatible with disciplinary history; much is incompatible and rightly rejected by historians. This brief anthropology of history nonetheless raises other questions. Professional historians spend formative periods of their lives as lay people and occasionally they too are driven by sentiments that should not, technically, have any place in their discipline. Michelet heard voices emanating from the dusty archives, and the Dutch historian Huizinga confessed that he was occasionally overcome by experiences of 'historical sensation' in which he felt himself merge with the past. It would be interesting to know how many historians chose their careers motivated by such magical moments early in life, and if such experiences continue to sustain the profession.

The examination of continuities and disjunctions between everyday and professional historical practices prompts fresh understanding of what History currently does and aims to do. It is clear that history holds enormous interest for the public as attested by the consumption of historical fiction, documentary film, and indeed, Hollywood films 'based on a true story'. The history profession must continue to support specialists capable of reading the languages and accessing the sources that will give us new data on the past. There can be no doubt about that. At the same time historians are well aware that the public want history in forms that activate the senses and the emotions. Already in 1931 Carl Becker exhorted his colleagues: 'If we remain too long recalcitrant Mr. Everyman will ignore us, shelving our recondite

works behind glass doors rarely opened.⁶ I am suggesting here that historians already possess the necessary sensibility and communicative tools. An investigation of the epistemological ecosystem within which the discipline now lies—including technologies such as social media, online gaming and virtual reality—will help them to define their current role and objectives. Such an investigation might renew the other social sciences as well by allowing professionals to see themselves as engaging in practices and participating in sensibilities shared with the surrounding society.

6. Becker, 'Everyman His Own Historian', p. 235.