



The Historian as Artist, Activist, and Amateur

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Last year I was flattered by an invitation to take part in a panel discussion on "Careers In and Out of the Academy" at the OAH annual meeting in Los Angeles. I accepted immediately, but suffered a fleeting identity crisis when the chair, Spencer Crew of the Smithsonian Institution, e-mailed me asking for biographical information for his introduction. Providing such information is usually a perfunctory matter, but the request made me pause because it raised a question that was at the heart of the panel: What exactly is it that makes me a historian?

Is it my degrees? Surely, having the proper credentials is necessary to making a legitimate claim to a profession. Yet, I was "doing" history years before I entered graduate school. I had published articles based on archival sources, oral history interviews, and documents obtained under the Freedom of Information Act. I had produced a historical documentary that examined the backlash against Vietnamese refugee fishermen in my hometown of Monterey, California, in light of the violence and racism experienced by earlier Chinese and Japanese American fishermen. I used to joke that I was caught practicing history without a license and sent to graduate school. So, no, it is not my Ph.D. that makes me a historian.

Is it my job? Is it the fact that I have taught history at several universities? Perhaps, but I was then teaching writing at Colgate University, a gorgeous liberal arts college in New York state, and was seriously considering quitting my job. My wife had just accepted a tenure-track position in history in the New York City area and we didn't fancy living six hours apart with two teenagers in high school. Was it my turn to be the trailing spouse? ("The question is," one of my colleagues asked, "what do you want to jeopardize, your marriage or your career?") I worried that if I quit I might never get another tenure-track job. I might be leaving academia forever, and maybe stop being a historian. So I asked myself again, what is it that makes me a historian?

Ultimately, being a historian is not a matter of degrees or jobs or what departments or professional organizations we belong to. It all comes down to the words we put on the page. My work makes me a historian, no matter where I produce it. It is what I write, not whether I am employed. It is my compulsion to look to the past to understand the present and for the pure antiquarian pleasure of it.

This may sound like the declaration of a scholar on the verge of career suicide. But I am not offering anyone career advice. I am fairly clueless about how to build a career in or out of the academy. On this point I take heart from the artist John Sloan, a member of the "Ash Can" school of urban impressionism in New York City in the early 1900s. Sloan, who taught for some thirty years at the Art Students League, used to tell his students at the outset that if anyone in the room was interested in career counseling, art-market strategies, or commercial art techniques, he or she should leave now and register with another, more appropriate teacher. "I cannot teach you how to make a living at art," he said. "There are no formulas, no little secrets and short cuts to making art. There is no one right way to do it." Sloan urged his students to think of art not as a career but as a calling, and to think of themselves as people who were not in competition with other artists but answerable only to themselves. Eliminate any thoughts about whether you are making "works of art," he told his class; create paintings that interest you, that show some "consciousness of life" and the rest will follow (1).

I think those sentiments make just as much sense if we replace the word art with history, if we think about history—both the teaching and writing of it—more as a calling than a career. Sloan's advice invites us to rethink the whole concept of a career and to challenge the very idea that academia is something we are either in or out of. Instead, I suggest that

we think about three alternative ways of being a historian: as artist, as activist, and as amateur.

First, the historian as artist. We all know people—painters, musicians, novelists, independent filmmakers—who live their lives in order to do their art. Some survive on a shoestring budget. Others earn enough to buy homes and send their kids to college. These artists usually have a partner who brings in a more reliable income. Together they agree that this is what they will do for their art. That's what I did in the 1980s when I produced my video documentary and wrote a young-adult novel. I had a part-time job and a working mate, but no professional affiliation to speak of. I didn't get a national air date for the documentary until after it was done. I didn't get an agent for the novel until after it was written. It was all a big gamble, yet I did not give anyone the power to say, okay, you can be a filmmaker or you can be a novelist. I didn't think of my work as a job or a career; they were just projects I had to finish.

If we think of history as our art rather than our profession, then such gambles and sacrifices are not humiliating signs of failure or marginalization. If history is our art rather than our profession, then no search committee or promotion and tenure committee can ever stop us from pursuing it.

A friend of mine has been on the academic job market for three years; he's had several adjunct positions and got very close to landing a tenure-track job last year. He went to an on-campus interview and came in a close second. Afterwards he e-mailed his friends saying that he was leaving the profession and would explore other career options. His other friends supported that decision, but not me. I think it is a tragedy of the first order to let anyone stop us from doing history, from doing our art.

Another friend from graduate school had trouble landing a teaching job and now works for a professional organization. On the first day of the OAH meeting he said to me, "I see you're on a panel for people who can't be real historians." It was a jab from a classmate who, contrary to Sloan's advice, has always thought he was in competition with other historians. We all know people like that. He can't help but think of history as a hierarchical profession; there are the winners who teach at top-notch research institutions, the less fortunate who work at lesser institutions, and the losers who make do on the fringes of the profession. Such thinking is an unfortunate consequence of seeing history as a profession rather than as an art form or calling.

This brings me to the historian as activist. Teaching and writing history are profoundly political acts. They are important forms of consciousness raising, of getting people to think differently about themselves and their world, and, perhaps, to act differently. I agree with the last line of Karl Marx's "Theses on Feurbach": "Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, the point however is to change it" (2). If you ever visit Marx's grave in London's Highgate Cemetery you will find that motto chiseled on the marker.

This idea of history as a form of activism is not just advocated by radicals. The American pragmatist John Dewey put forward a similar idea in his 1929 book, *Experience and Nature*. Dewey asked if the scholar's special knowledge, when related to ordinary life experiences, "render them significant and more luminous, and make our dealings with them more fruitful? Or does it terminate in rendering the things of ordinary experience more opaque?" (3). Dewey's ideal scholar was an activist. He urged scholars to look around themselves for interesting objects of inquiry and repair. Inquiry and repair! What needs fixing? What misconceptions need correcting? What historical processes need illuminating?

As we think about our careers and navigate through the shoals of the academic job market, I think it is important to remind ourselves why we went into history. Was it to get a tenure-track job? I for one didn't know what a tenure-track job was when I entered graduate school. I didn't know the difference between an adjunct and an emeritus professor. I am confessing my ignorance because it reminds me why I went back to school: to read rigorously and systematically, to learn what historians knew about research that I hadn't yet learned as a journalist, and to get the credentials I needed to teach courses from time to time. Above all, I went to graduate school so that I could help people understand and change their lives for the better. I still believe in the benefits of social history, of documenting the lives of ordinary people and analyzing their contribution to the making of America. My writing, documentary work, and teaching are all a kind of social activism.

Last year as a research fellow at the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Massachusetts, my housemate was Dennis Brutus, a South African poet who organized the Olympic ban on South Africa and Rhodesia in the 1960s. He took a bullet for his troubles and served eighteen months hard labor on Robbin Island. Still agitating for social justice in his late seventies, he took part in the World Trade Organization protest in Seattle in 1999. Now there is a life-long activist! Getting to know Dennis

made me wonder why the curriculum vitae of most academics does not include a section listing our arrests for acts of conscience or poems written in jail while being processed through the system. Why are those kinds of accomplishments unthinkable in a section on "Professional Activities?" One reason may be that historians have accepted all too readily conventional notions of what it means to be a professional.

Hence the need for the historian as amateur. By amateur I mean someone who is motivated by a love of the subject, but won't necessarily work for peanuts and letterhead. The historian as amateur is self-consciously anti-professional; he or she does not get wrapped up in the trappings and status of academia. The amateur is that friend, partner, or colleague who talks a little too animatedly about history at the dinner table, who shows excessive passion or delight in their subject. University faculties contain fewer and fewer of these embarrassments.

There are many tangible benefits to being a college professor, such as getting money to do research and attend conferences like the OAH annual meeting. These are no small perks. But ultimately professionalism is death. I had a nice office with a window. I had a secretary, business cards, and a travel budget. I have enjoyed marching in convocations and feeling a part of a guild. (I still have my cap and gown.) But it's easy to think that those things make us historians when they can actually prevent us from taking a true measure of our lives and our work. The robe, the office, the business cards, the travel account don't make anyone a historian. It is what we put in the mail—the articles and books we write, the films and exhibitions we create, the collections and journals we edit—that make us historians.

It is also the students we teach, the lectures we present, the material we assign, and the questions we ask. But teaching history is not the only way to be a historian. My first history department chair told me he thought teaching was a "marginally satisfying" profession. From my fresh-faced perspective teaching history seemed like a dream job, but to him, with twenty years experience, it was not. Teachers at every level can be heard kvetching about their "dim bulb" students and "dead wood" colleagues (terms I learned in graduate school). In fact, the best thing many teachers can say about teaching is that they don't have to do it all the time, that they get long breaks and summers off.

Teaching can be discouraging, but how else will young people get the history they need and in some cases want? The university is still the center of intellectual life in this country. It is a privileged place to work

and study. But it is clearly not the only place to do those things. The historian Thomas Bender noted that research and advocacy groups are undermining the university's presumed monopoly on knowledge. More authoritative knowledge is being developed outside of universities in opportunistic, interdisciplinary settings with different intellectual styles of making and disseminating history. This is an inevitable and essentially positive reaction to academics having made themselves irrelevant to their local communities. Beware, says Bender, if we cannot explain our work or its potential benefits to our non-academic friends and relatives (4).

One antidote to this problem, besides speaking plainly and writing in accessible and involving ways, is to collaborate and interact with non-academic talent—with scientists and lawyers, poets, and longshoremen, to bring them into the academy and to venture out ourselves. There is a reciprocal benefit. Ideally, such contact can strengthen and sharpen the historical work of non-academics and enrich our own efforts to make sense of the past.

In sum, it's time we begin to think differently about what it means to have a career in history—and to explode the notion that academia is something we are either in or out of. Not only is it possible to have a satisfying, engaged, and productive life as a historian on the margins of academia, but in so doing we can help to redefine and revitalize the historical profession.

Endnotes

1. John Loughery, *John Sloan: Painter and Rebel* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), 293.
2. Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in Eugene Kamenka, ed., *The Portable Marx* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), 158.
3. John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1929), 9-10.
4. Thomas Bender, "Locality and Worldliness," American Council of Learned Societies Occasional Paper No. 40, "The Transformation of Humanistic Studies in the Twenty-first Century: Opportunities and Perils," (1997). <<http://www.acls.org/op40ben.htm>>.

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