

David F. Labaree

Perils of the Professionalized Historian

Arja Virta's lovely essay got me thinking about the problem that professionalism poses for the academic historian. She reminds us that history is an intensely normative domain, full of emotion and bubbling over with value judgments. It tells us compelling stories about who we are, where we came from, what we stand for, and why we should feel proud of our country and our heritage. This is why the school history curriculum is so different from other core school subjects like math and science. They are about stuff; history is about us. We learn about other subjects, but we inhabit and even embody history. As a result, writers of history bear a peculiar burden – as potential molders of persons and peoples, shaping our past in order to frame our choices in the present and thus propel us into the future.

We academic historians are all too well aware that the misuses of history are legion. Every political movement crafts its own backstory, which makes the case for the problem that needs to be solved, the golden age that needs to be recaptured, the grievance that needs to be assuaged. The most effective demagogues are history mongers, and this makes us cringe. Our response is to try to set the record straight. Others may purvey myth and nostalgia in the name of history, but we hold ourselves to a higher standard, which is spelled out in the Principles for Professional Historians. One principle is empiricism: Root historical judgments deeply in the rich soil of archival evidence. Compile everything, read everything, and judiciously sort through the evidence. Then write a very long book that is half footnotes. Another principle is objectivity. The problem with this approach, as Virta suggests, is that it leaves the field of history wide open for merchants of nostalgia and purveyors of paranoia, who are more than happy to fulfill the public longing for a compelling moral narrative, un-freighted with rules of evidence and analytical rigor. Steel yourself against personal prejudice and received wisdom, instead pursuing the evidence wherever it leads you. Avoid characterizing actors as heroes or villains, and exercise judgment through rational analysis rather than through the application of values. In sum, remember that you're not a storyteller; you're a historian. A third principle is specialization. Aim to go narrow and deep into an issue. Focus on digging new ground, no matter how infertile, rather than plowing familiar terrain. At all cost avoid adopting the role of synthesizer, which is suitable only for textbook writers and "popular" (that is, widely read) historians.

Relentlessly analytical professional historians have left a narrative void, and ruthless amateurs are eager to fill it. Charles Tilly (2006) examines the roots of this problem in his book, *Why*. In it he makes the distinction between the way that experts and ordinary people construct explanations of events. The expert's argument is a technical account, which sets out to establish a valid and reliable explanation of cause and effect using specialized expertise and rigorous methodology. For non-experts, the standard account is a story, which focuses on actors and actions, traces a narrative arc, often involves heroes and villains, and usually carries a moral element of praise or blame.

Academic historians have adopted the voice of the expert, which satisfies our impulse to be recognized as professionals rather than bards. But this approach traps us in the zone of

expertise, talking to each other and leaving the zone of popular culture to the more narratively gifted and often less scrupulously accurate retailers of nostalgia. And the problem with adopting the voice of expertise does more than unnecessarily narrow our audience, since it also means that too often we are writing a gutless and bowdlerized kind of history, bereft of the values and characters and stirring tales that give history its meaning.

If we buy this analysis, however, it leaves us academic historians with a dilemma. We don't want to slide into popularization at the expense of validation. We don't want to be in the business of selling nostalgia and nurturing ideology. But I think there is a way out. We can reengage with the normative character of history in human culture and reestablish the norm that history is about storytelling. At the same time, however, we can avoid the populist impulse by deliberately seeking to address our histories of the past to the demands, anxieties, and dilemmas we experience in the present. This history for the present can still avoid the disingenuousness and deception of the populist histories that shape the story to meet the urgent demands of a particular program or prejudice. We can do this by providing the history that we currently *need*, not the history we might *want*. This kind of history taps into the normative and the narrative elements that are so quintessentially historical without pandering to political agendas and cultural fears. We can use the skills of the nonprofessional historian to provide inconvenient truths for the present.

References

Charles Tilly: *Why? What Happens When People Give Reasons ... and Why*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 2006

Prof. Dr. David Labaree, Stanford University, School of Education, 485 Lasuen Mall, Stanford, CA 94305-3096, USA, dlabaree@stanford.edu