

While I was Detroit's Planning Director and also briefly a member of the National Council for Public History, part of the latter's agenda pertained to application of history to all kinds of public policy at every geographic level from international to local. In 1963-1964, I had served as a special consultant to the California Assembly's Interim Committee on Revenue and Taxation and had written a pamphlet entitled Conformity of State Personal Income Tax Laws to Federal Personal Income Tax Laws published by the California legislature in September, 1964. Subsequently, conforming changes were made in California law. I had testified to a California Senate committee about Bay Area government. Later, out of Detroit, I was involved in U.S. policymaking concerning Japanese automobile import quotas and was frequently called upon to brief high-level foreign visitors about U.S. conditions and policy. As Planning Director, I was in the process of supervising, editing, and sometimes writing a 33-volume master plan for Detroit as well as numerous other policy documents. I chaired countless meetings about public policy and discussed public policy on television and radio for broadcast in Sweden, Germany, England and Canada as well as in the U.S. I had given papers on the subject in Yugoslavia and France, later in China, and at meetings of a large and varied assortment of professional associations in the U.S. Since I was an historian by profession, naturally I thought about applications of history to public policy. Following are some notes I wrote about the subject in April, 1982.

Some Thoughts on Relations Between History and Public Policy

The Applications of History as Policy

- a. To explain why public or quasi-public policy decision-makers in the past made the decisions they did.
- b. To describe and interpret what factors inherited from the past are relevant to present policy issues.
- c. History itself as a present issue:
 1. Historical preservation issues
 2. Archival preservation and access issues
 3. Policies concerning national and local government- or corporate-sponsored history and museums
 4. State laws affecting the teaching of history
 5. History as power—whose history is being perpetuated and emphasized in the schools, books, media, and monuments?

Historiographical Issues

- a. Public history as a policy discipline implies that the shaping framework that defines history should not only be taken to be 1) what concerns the origin, cohesion and survival of a polity, especially the nation-state, 2) or of sub-groups (e.g., labor history, business history, ethnic history, women's history), but also 3) the framework that applies to policy questions and issues that may not have been raised within or perceived by extant public or private governments or recognized social groupings.
- b. What differentiates the historian's approach from that of other social scientists?
 1. A necessary concern with the dimension of time and hence also with sequence
 2. An assumption of non-staticness
 3. Greater utilization of archives
 4. Some would argue: a greater concern with discrete facts. I do not agree. I believe the historian can and should use generalizable data within a systems analysis or other theoretical framework, encompassing a broad time frame. Decision-makers meld this kind of information together with information about sequential discrete events and actions. What is needed is a

better theory about how the two types of information do or should interrelate in the decision-making process and in the historical analysis informing the decision-making process.

Since many social science and systems analysis models deal inherently with blocks of time (and hence are static or assume continual return to equilibrium or deal with comparisons at different points in time), one serious intellectual problem is how the historian can modify such models to build in dynamism and change as integral aspects of the model. Also, since there is an implicit natural law assumption in many of the models, another serious problem for historically informed “scientific” decision-making is to pinpoint those temporal and intervention-prone spots in the system where decisions and actions can make a significant difference, and specify what the likely outcomes would be if different available decision and action options were exercised.

History as a policy science has to deal with probable or possible futures, as well as with the past.

It also should be thoroughly grounded in awareness of how different cognitive and value sets affect the kinds of policy issues raised as well as the range of possible answers to those issues. Intellectual history and understanding of the sociology, anthropology, psychology and even physiology underlying the evolution of knowledge are important tools for the historian advising policymakers.

The Sociology and Ethics of Professional Roles

The historian as policy-maker, or as administrator of an agency which is part of a policy-making system, is in a different position from the historian who administers a museum or agency specifically dedicated to history or one who serves as a consultant, archivist, historical filmmaker or the like.

The difference is that the first two named kinds of persons are not defined primarily as historians. They could just as well be lawyers, economists, or system analysts—or not have had any professional training at all. There is a difference between the role definitions and professional responsibilities and ethical canons applicable to the historian/policy-maker and those applicable to historians who hold their jobs because they are historians. There are probably also differences in the historiography underlying the history being applied under each of these different circumstances. These differences need to be understood better and analyzed in more detail.

All of this may seem very intellectual or abstruse to the public or the average member of the history profession. But the fact is that a clear and sophisticated set of answers to all of the above questions (and others besides) is important if a proper junction is to be effected between professional historical knowledge and skills and wise policy decision-making.

The subject of the relationship of history to public policy, of course, goes far beyond the scope of these notes made from a particular vantage point in a particular place, at a particular time. Questions about historical assumptions or efforts to effect the rewriting of history are inherent in numerous national policies and are profoundly related to issues in international relations. Conversely, when the historian far removed from a public policy-making role writes about policies that were made in the past, he/she needs to be aware of the role that perceptions of history played in that past policy-making.