

History as Social Activism

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The Lower East Side Tenement Museum is an institution that strives to combine my two interests, social justice and American history. It is an example of a working institution to which I can point, when well-intentioned friends ask me why I'm spending my energy studying the problems of the past. This Museum is leading a pioneering effort that challenges the traditional objectives of history museums. It utilizes the historical narrative as a starting point to promote increased understanding and engagement with contemporary social issues. The concept of a useable past is key to the philosophy of the Tenement Museum. I will examine the idea of usable history and its implications for both the museum world and the field of history.

The problem of historic sites, and the stories that they tell and that they don't tell, has been the subject of numerous critical works. In his book *Lies Across America*, James Loewen writes, "the history written on the American landscape is largely the history of the federal governments...and particularly of their wars."¹ According to Loewen, by omitting sites and histories of importance, such as those of Native American resistance, and instead focusing on sites that uncritically celebrate American nationhood we "end up with a landscape of denial."²

Since the social history movement gathered steam in the 1970s, many historians have called for a greater engagement with the social and political issues of the present. As Howard Zinn wrote in 1970, "the historian by habit is a passive reporter, studying the combatants of yesterday, while those of today clash outside his window. His preferences are usually private. His business is history."³

But for every challenge such as this there are, of course, counter positions. Not all historians believe that history should be made relevant to modern times. In his article "Pitfalls Along the Path of Public History," Terence O'Donnell rejects what he sees as the commodification of history. He fears insisting history be usable, compromises the field and threatens academic integrity.⁴

A usable history by definition must have a political or social slant to it. The historian of the usable past must approach their subject armed with an ideology. In other words, usable history cannot be objective. To those who believe that history can and should be objective, this fact characterizes their biggest concern with the idea of usable history. However, other historians recognize that history can never be truly objective, nor should it try to be. To those who have tried to discredit his works as biased, Howard Zinn replies, "The worst thing is to claim to be objective. Of course you can't be. Historians should say what their values are, what they care about, what their background is."⁵

The history portrayed at the Tenement Museum is not objective, nor could it be. The narratives presented through the different tours are portrayed through the eyes and experiences of immigrant families. These immigrants are the formerly unsung heroes of the narratives and receive the sympathies of the visitors. This in itself is not a bad thing, as it would be impossible to present history with the social objective of promoting tolerance and remain neutral to the experiences contained within.

I would now like to turn my attention to a particular way in which history is used at the Tenement Museum. On one tour I attended of the tenement at 97 Orchard Street my guide had visitors stand in a circle and state our ancestors' countries of origin. I tried to get out of it, stating that my family was from all over. However, as the guide insisted that it was

important, I proceeded to list off the numerous northern, western, and eastern European countries that constitute my mixed-up pedigree. The others did the same, with everyone able to identify relatives that had at one time been immigrants. The objective of this exercise was to remind us that most Americans could trace their lineage out of the country. The re-created apartments that we then entered offered a nostalgic look at modest dwellings that may have been similar to the homes of our distant immigrant relatives.

Roy Rosenzweig's 1998 study of how Americans engage with history dispelled a widespread belief that Americans have no interest in history. Rosenzweig found that Americans are actively connected with the past, although the mediums for involvement often did not include the professional historian. Study participants felt most "connected to the past" at family gatherings. As Rosenzweig puts it, "almost every American deeply engages the past, and the past that engages them most deeply is that of their family."⁶ By focusing on the experiences of the families that once lived at 97 Orchard Street and setting up a scenario whereby participants are actively reflecting on their own family histories, the Tenement Museum benefits from American engagement with family histories. Ideally this then creates a setting in which the audience becomes involved with the narratives and is then willing to absorb the social messages of the museum. By creating a narrative in which visitors are encouraged to contemplate immigrant experiences in their own family history, the museum hopes this personal connection will engage the audience and help them to understand the museum's message of tolerance. The challenge that the Tenement Museum faces is to move its participants from historical remembrance to a place of contemporary social engagement.

Regarding the larger field of American professional history, many historians today would consider their profession in a crisis of relevancy. Kenneth Jackson addressed this concern in his presidential speech to the Organization of American Historians in 2002. His address, "The Power of History: The Weakness of a Profession," outlines his plan for saving a "flunking profession."⁷ Particularly relevant to this discussion is the need for a public to understand "the power of history," to comprehend why history is important in their lives. But how can knowledge of history lead to a greater understanding of the present? Jackson states:

After all, in a world of pierced ears and pierced tongues, of elaborate video games and spectacular special effects, and of fast cars and faster women, who cares what James Madison thought about separation of powers, who cares about crop rotation or the westward movement of the antebellum cotton economy...We care. But if we want young people to care, we have to demonstrate how history connects to their lives.⁸

Jackson expresses the need for historians to prove to their publics how history is usable in modern life. The Tenement Museum strives daily to make the connections that Jackson is calling for. That is, to put history to use.

The success of the Tenement Museum speaks to the public desire for a different style of museum. Perhaps the status quo histories presented in traditional museums do not interest a new class of visitor who has come to expect a more sophisticated analysis. As Rosenzweig states, "there is some evidence that conventional and celebratory narratives of the nation state – the ones that have generally organized our basic courses – are losing some of their appeal."⁹ Whatever the case, in their willingness to experiment with a new subject and type of mission, the Tenement Museum founders have shown that indeed there is a market for museums that depict "how the other half lives." Not all museum audiences are scared

away by narratives dealing with the difficulties of life such as poverty and disease. In fact, some are drawn to it.

¹ James W. Loewen, *Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000, p.19.

² *Ibid.*

³ Howard Zinn, *The Politics of History*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1971, p.1.

⁴ Terence O'Donnell, "Pitfalls Along the Path of Public History," in *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public*, Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier and Roy Rosenzweig, eds., Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986.

⁵ Zinn, p.13.

⁶ Rosenzweig, p.266.

⁷ Kenneth T. Jackson, "The Power of History: The Weakness of a Profession," *The Journal of American History*, 88.4, May 20, 2002, available at "<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jah/88.4/jackson.html>," accessed 11/17/03, p. 16.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁹ Rosenzweig, p.208.