

History and Policy

Annotated Bibliography

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Introduction

The idea that ‘history matters’ for a raft of present-day concerns is nothing new; it has become the first line of defence for historians challenged by journalists, politicians, business leaders and others to explain the value and relevance of a history degree for contemporary society. The ways in which historians explain how and why history matters tend to cluster around two themes: heritage, identity and belonging on the one hand, and the insights that the past can offer the present on the other. Writing on history and policy falls most clearly in the latter cluster, often with historians calling attention to the ‘uses and abuses’ of history by policymakers. However, there is considerable overlap between these two themes, not least because of the importance of historically rooted claims (whether based in evidence or in myth) to present-day policy issues and challenges.

The terms ‘public history’ and ‘applied history’ circulate in this shifting space. The former is the more capacious ‘umbrella’ term and covers the work of historians in government and policymaking and as expert advisors within legal processes as forms (among many) of historical practice in the wider world. Public historians have also been interested in community-level responses to historical injustice, discrimination and marginalization, so from a ‘bottom-up’ rather than a ‘top-down’ perspective. The latter term has gained most traction in North America and tends to be more closely associated with policymaking, and particularly international relations (a noteworthy trend has been the development of methods to analyse historical ‘data’ by political and social scientists, taking much ‘applied history’ work outside of, and sometimes making it unrecognizable to, the discipline of

history). Both ‘public’ and ‘applied’ history can be useful search terms to identify work on ‘history and policy’ but it is important to note that policy relevance can be contingent and transient; the emergence of a particular issue or challenge can suddenly boost a historical specialism to the top of the political agenda, to which historians – who may not see themselves as practitioners of ‘history and policy’ – then respond. These complexities, as well as the range of forms history and policy take in different national contexts, make it difficult to select pieces for a bibliography but the list below offers some starting points.

Why history matters in the present

Margaret MacMillan, *The Uses and Abuses of History* (London: Profile Books, 2009).

An accessible read aimed at a broad public audience, this book is both a manifesto for the societal importance of history done carefully and well, and a warning about the ease with which the past can be abused: manipulated, distorted or falsified to justify ‘just about anything you want to do in the present’. MacMillan, as a specialist in international and imperial history, ranges widely in her examples, making this a good and engaging introduction to how history and the political world connect. The short conclusion outlines ways in which history and historians can help make sense of the present world, including by giving context and examples, considering alternative perspectives and examining assumptions. ‘Humility, scepticism and awareness of ourselves’ are what (good) history can encourage in all of us. A useful companion to this is John Tosh’s *Why History Matters* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). Chapter 4, ‘Parallels in the past’, tackles one of the most prominent issues relating to history and policy: historical analogy.

The importance of history and policy: overviews

Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers* (New York: The Free Press, 1986).

In the Anglophone world, this is a foundational text for history and policy. It is based on a course for high-level military and political officials and their aides, taught by the authors at the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard, which gives practical instruction on how to make use of history in decision-making. This context helps explain the structure and tone of the book. It is a manual that provides a framework and a set of tools (or ‘devices’) that can be learned and then put to use in any decision-making setting. It can feel a bit programmatic and the examples (the Cuban Missile Crisis, Bay of Pigs,

Vietnam War and the swine flu scare) reflect the time and the place in which the course was devised and delivered. However, it is worth dipping into for the clarity with which the components of historical thinking are articulated and the application to political decision-making demonstrated. Francis J. Gavin's article 'History and Policy' (*International Journal*, 61:1 [2008]), offers a more recent version of the case for policymakers seeking (and historians offering) historical insight. He calls for both sides to recognize that they 'share important interests and concerns, and are far better off with each other than without'.

Pamela Cox, 'Debate: The Future Uses of History', *History Workshop Journal*, 75 (2013), pp. 125–45.

This article is one response to a call for historians to find ways to 'inform [...] public discourse and public policy about urgent contemporary issues'. Cox addresses the notion of evidence-based policymaking, 'what counts' as policy-relevant evidence (privileging quantitative methods), and the policymaker's desire for certainty that is at odds with the historian's critical and sceptical mindset. Particularly useful in the first half of this article is the discussion on the work of diverse historians and political and social scientists. The second half offers two case studies of integrating history and policy – on youth justice in East Asia and child protection in East Anglia – which show how that historian's mindset can be applied to present-day challenges with integrity.

Alix R. Green, *History, Policy and Public Purpose: Historians and Historical Thinking in Government* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

This short-form book lays out the case for historians to engage more openly and seriously with policymaking as a legitimate and valuable domain of historical practice (a form of 'history with public purpose'). A chapter on the policymaking process aims to demonstrate the affinity of history and policymaking, arguing that historians – accustomed to handling an incomplete evidential picture, complex contextual factors, the conflicting agendas of individuals and groups, and elusive subjective matters such as beliefs and values – are well-equipped to inform the 'messy' business of policymaking. The 'historian's toolkit' aims to map core historical skills and habits onto the needs and demands of the policymaking process.

Case studies

Virginia Berridge, 'History in Public Health: Who Needs It?', *The Lancet*, 356:9245 (2000), pp. 1923–5.

This short article offers a cogent argument for the value of historical evidence and argument in public health policy, aimed at medical audiences

(it is published, notably, in one of the most important medical journals in the world). Berridge argues that ‘Public health and health policy generally could take on historical interpretation as an analytical tool’, drawing on histories of licit and illicit drugs, public education campaigns and government regulation. She also calls for historians to ‘expand their own boundaries’ and work more in the inter- and transdisciplinary settings in which major social challenges, such as public health, are addressed. Indeed, Berridge’s own longstanding affiliation with the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine is testament to how historians can not just contribute to, but lead on such responses.

Michael Woolcock, Simon Szreter and Vijayendra Rao, ‘How and Why Does History Matter for Development Policy?’, *Journal of Development Studies*, 47:1 (2011), pp. 70–96.

This article makes the case that if institutions matter – as is the consensus ‘across the social sciences and among development policy-makers’ – then so too must history (understood as both ‘the past’ and ‘the discipline’). We can’t understand present-day institutional performance without identifying ‘when, where and why given institutions came to take their particular form, and how these have changed (or not) over time’. Building on the work of Neustadt and May, the authors aim to open and sustain a constructive dialogue between history and development policy. A fuller exploration of these issues can be found in the associated edited collection published the same year: C. A. Bayly, Vijayendra Rao, Simon Szreter and Michael Woolcock (eds), *History, Historians and Development Policy: A Necessary Dialogue* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011).

Conclusion

This selection is skewed to the UK–US world, where the author’s experience lies. *Public History Weekly*, the multilingual international academic blog-journal, is a useful access point to a much wider range of perspectives, and spans the cluster of issues to do with heritage, identity and belonging and those that are more clearly policy-focused.

Additional citations

C. A. Bayly, Vijayendra Rao, Simon Szreter and Michael Woolcock (eds), *History, Historians and Development Policy: A Necessary Dialogue* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011).

Francis J. Gavin, ‘History and Policy’, *International Journal*, 61:1 (2008), pp. 162–77.

Public History Weekly: <https://public-history-weekly.degruyter.com/>.

John Tosh, *Why History Matters* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).