Searching for Usable Pasts: Rethinking the Rust Belt Template
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Twelve years ago, I came to St Louis to make a presentation about regionalism, sponsored by the Missouri Historical Society.

Afterward, I took questions on a radio call-in program.

A gentleman called and said that in 1876, St Louis City had, by its own choice, separated from the County and the Region. Now, St Louis wanted more cooperation regionally. Why should the rest of the region respond positively since the City created this separation in the first place?

I believe I responded by asking why, if that separation was a mistake more than a century ago, would he want to duplicate the error now? I doubt that my comment changed his mind. (If
that gentleman is here today, I’d welcome the opportunity to meet and chat with you after this session.)

The gentleman who called in had a kind of “usable history.”

We all have usable histories --- stories and analyses about the past that consciously or implicitly shape or support our views about current affairs and our visions of what the future could be.

Carl Becker, a major historian and thinker about history in the first half of the 20th century, famously put it this way --- 

Everyman is his own historian. Becker thought that history is a way of thinking, and he distinguished two roles in which people practice history thinking:

• Professional historians --- people whose job is to do history.

• Everyday, practical historians –
  o To explain this concept, Becker tells a complicated story about Mr. Everyman paying a bill for a delivery of coal. (This was 1935.)

Everyman asks questions; he and various
people check their records --- i.e., their evidence; he asks more questions; and he finally gets the story straight enough to pay the bill. Becker says that this way of proceeding is a fine example of historical reasoning.

- Two notes about all this
  - Ms. Everywoman probably kept the family’s records. This gender bias is reflected in Becker’s aphorism too. What Becker called elsewhere the “climate of opinion” about gender was different in 1935.
  - Becker neglects the possibility that businessman Mr. Smith might lie and accept the money for something he did not do. [This points to the role of skepticism in historical research]

- I’d like to add a category that I reckon fits most or all people here today, regardless of occupation --- the civic or citizen Everywoman historian. This role can be implicit and casual; or it can be explicit and purposeful; or anywhere in between. The role aims
at creating usable histories about public topics rather than private affairs.

I propose to explore this Everyperson citizen role here today:

• By reviewing some themes of recent American urban histories and policy research, themes that have been a dominant frame for the ways that observers have looked at the past, present, and future of St Louis and other city-regions; and
• By reflecting a bit about what we are doing when we are, as my title puts it, “searching for usable pasts.”

On this broad view of who does history, active citizens cannot escape doing usable histories. But we can escape doing them poorly. This is a responsibility of citizenship and participation in the community; it has important implications for the conduct of public affairs and for the condition of our democratic practice.

**Searching**
The title for my presentation refers to “searching” for usable pasts.
Maybe “creating” would have been a better word choice. “Creating” is closer to what historians --- both the Everyperson sorts and the professional sort --- actually do.

“Searching” suggests that the usable history is “out there” somewhere and you just need to go find it; that there are “facts” lying around on the ground that will provide you a story. Not so. Your story emerges from your give and take with evidence (whether that is an original document or a deeply researched, scholarly article or a conference presentation.) The history results, in other words, from applying your framework of significance --- that is, the ideas and concerns behind your questions --- to the information you select.

(I believe this description applies to social science and indeed to all knowledge and knowledge-seeking. But that’s a larger topic, and as Scarlett O’Hara said, I’ll think about that tomorrow.)

To illuminate this history way of thinking, philosopher R.G. Collingwood offered a brief --- and not entirely fair --- contrast between two great fictional detectives, Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot. Collingwood declared that “you can’t collect
your evidence before you begin thinking”, that is, before you begin asking questions. He therefore cited approvingly Poirot’s critique of Holmes’ approach: Poirot [he wrote] “pour[ed] scorn on the ‘human bloodhound' who crawls about the floor trying to collect everything, no matter what, which might conceivably turn out to be a clue.” Poirot’s declared approach -- - as the mystery story readers among you already know --- was to cause “the little grey cells to function.”

In short, a history is a history and a fact is a fact and evidence is evidence only in the context of the framework of significance that the historian or the policy analyst brings to the investigation.

During my graduate school years, for example, a great hubbub occurred in the history guild when some professional historians began to offer up what they called “social history” and “history from the bottom up” (instead of from the top down.) These histories asked questions about the lives of what were called “ordinary people.” This was in contrast to the then-dominant framework of significance that focused on leaders and political/diplomatic narratives. By now, the changed climate of opinion accepts both approaches and indeed others.
Another way of seeing this point would be for you to visit Washington DC and to walk east on Q street from Connecticut Avenue, until you come to the row house where my friend Allan lives. Beside the front door, a plaque proclaims that “At this site on this date in 1897, nothing happened.”

This is amusing but it’s obviously not true. What is true is that whatever happened then and there is presumed to be now of little or no significance. But let us imagine a fellow developing his family tree who has reason to believe that his great-grandfather lived there in 1897. Or imagine an historian of the Spanish-American War of 1898: she suspects that a group of Federal government employees conspired to promote a war with Spain, and that they secretly convened in that very building. Both historians would find significance in what happened in that row house in 1897.

**Rust Belt and re-thinking frameworks of significance**

More directly relevant to our concerns here today, is one of the more powerful frameworks of significance that have influenced thinking about American cities for 50 years.
Many histories and policy studies of American cities and regions in the twentieth century --- both professional histories and practical Everywoman civic histories --- treat St. Louis in the category of the larger urban places in the Northeast quadrant of the United States. This is the area that became known in the late 20th century as the Rust Belt or Snow Belt, from Boston to Baltimore and westward to Chicago and Minneapolis and St Louis. This area is contrasted with the so-called Sun Belt which consists of the continental U.S. south and west.

Historians and other analysts evolved what we might call a Rust Belt template of urbanism.

(Let us pause here and acknowledge that by now, much more than 80% of US residents and economic activity are located in metro areas nationally. So it’s often hard to separate “national” from urban and metropolitan, but that makes it all the more important to make crucial distinctions where we can.)

Everyone here probably has some more-or-less detailed images and ideas related to the Rust Belt template; so I will just outline four major themes briefly.
First, Radical economic changes, including
- industrialization and the rise and then the devastating decline of manufacturing
- globalization and international competition
- loss of business firms and difficulty of attracting new investment
- persistent unemployment and underemployment

Second, Problematic governance
- multiplicity of governmental units and fragmentation of the region’s governing capacity.
- Severe fiscal challenges since at least the 1970s. Especially in central cities.
- Substantial Federal intervention and financial expenditures in 1950s, ‘60s and 70’s and then Federal retreat 1978 to the present.

Third, inequality --- racism, class, segregation, poverty
- especially, the black/white region --- racism, segregation and racialization of many issues and white flight
- disproportionate central city poverty
- stagnating wages since 1970

- Finally, Shifts in demographic and land use patterns
  - Dramatic central city population loss
  - Equally dramatic suburban population increases
  - Strong locational effects of the Interstate highway system, especially the “Beltways” around metro areas
  - sprawling regional settlement patterns

Narratives that weave these four main themes together have often been colored as “the urban crisis” and “distressed cities.” Since at least the 1960s, these ideas have been a key part of urbanist thinking. They certainly constituted a powerful mindset among city officials during my tenure at NLC. There’s no doubt of the often extreme difficulties cities and urban areas and the people who lived and worked there have
experienced. It’s been a long, grueling history. As to St Louis, Professor Primm notes that a late 1970s Brookings study labeled St Louis City the nation’s most distressed large city and East St Louis the most distressed small city.

For several reasons, I think it’s long past time to re-consider the Rust Belt template (and, for that matter, the Sun Belt as well.) I do not propose to develop here a revision or replacement; I commend those chores to this audience.

I should emphasize here that I am not suggesting that we do away with “templates” or other generalizations and categorizations. Rather, I’m urging that we regularly re-examine the ones we use to make sure they remain useful.

The first reason for re-consideration is that any strong generalization can take on a life of its own. It then orients us to the template rather than the conditions on the ground. It focuses us on shared characteristics among places and it veils differences and unique conditions. Although it has by now perhaps diminished in strength, the template attained the status of a conventional wisdom. Last October, at the University of Pittsburgh, I opined at length to a wondrously
tolerant audience that any idea that has become conventional wisdom is an excellent candidate for “re-thinking.” Even if the idea is re-confirmed by a process of serious challenge, the process vivifies our understandings. Re-thinking is always a good option.

A second reason for re-consideration is that over-using the “crisis” perspective paints everything and every place with the same urgency and significance and thus diminishes its analytic value. The associated gloomy outlook seems also to elicit --- from those inclined to see silver linings in clouds --- a tendency to over-react to positive events: thus we have been treated to recurrent talk over three and more decades of “revival” and “comeback cities”, talk that then goes sheepishly quiet when negatives reassert themselves.

Finally and most important, recent decades have brought new elements to what’s happening in cities and regions in “the Rust Belt.” Here are some of these newer developments, roughly organized under the four themes of the template. (You may want to add to or revise this list from your experience or studies.)
- Economic matters:
  - rapid technological change, effects of information technology and the Internet, innovation, and new industries
  - the so-called “creative class” policy discourse
  - environmental concerns directly related to effects of economic activity
  - dramatic and continuing effects of the recent financial system collapse and the Great Recession

- Governance
  - increases in the amount of inter-local governmental collaboration and regional problem-solving
  - anti-government attitudes and political actions
  - spread of fiscal stress to suburban jurisdictions

- Inequality ---
- changing status, roles, and conditions of women, African-Americans, Hispanic immigrants, and gay and lesbian people
- over the past decade, increased attention to the issue of inequality, especially wealth and income and schooling

- **Demography and settlement patterns**
  - effects of immigration in some of these city-regions
  - the emergence of “sustainability” as a policy concern, including “smart growth,” energy, and climate change
  - gentrification in downtowns; expressed preferences for “urban” living
  - suburbanization of poverty
  - the “aging in place” phenomenon
  - development of multiple centers throughout the metro area

I leave to you and others the question of whether to jettison the Rust Belt template or to re-specify it. For our purposes
here, my point is the importance of reflecting upon and being skeptical about the ideas/images/concerns that we carry in our minds when we formulate questions and topics about St Louis and other places.

This self-reflection and re-thinking of our own “frameworks of significance” are among the responsibilities and opportunities we shoulder as Everyperson citizen historians.

We also have other such responsibilities and opportunities, and I’d like to explore a few of these with you.

**General/specifc**

You will have noted that the themes in the Rust Belt template and the newer changes --- are generalizations from the evidence from many city-regions.

But St Louis is, of course, a unique and specific place. So are each and all of the other cities and regions in the Northeast quadrant of the US. On the other hand, they often share important characteristics and they are often subject to similar underlying factors.
During my tenure at NLC I often witnessed this tension twixt the general and the specific. We frequently arranged for researchers to present findings to convenings of city officials. Invariably, one or more of the officials responded to the carefully crafted research generalizations with “well, I guess my city is unique and here’s the way it works where I come from...” Both they and the researchers were correct, but usually neither group had a fully “usable” view.

The real challenge was how to usefully relate the general and the specific. That paradoxical relationship is a key aspect of what could make any history --- including the Rust Belt narrative -- “usable” to St Louis or any other place.

**Plural pasts**

For each topic about a city, there are likely many different, relevant, and often conflicting “facts,” analyses, and narratives. All these together constitute the Everyperson historian’s picture of the whole St. Louis.

You can appreciate what a huge challenge Professor Primm had in writing his general history of St Louis “Lion of the Valley.”
We need not despair, however, about the plural-ness of the past in the sense of the multiple and often conflicting historical narratives we may confront.

You probably noticed that the “past” in the title of this presentation is plural. We have many ‘pasts’ and none of them are true in the sense that they tell us exactly “how it was” because that is not possible. So our histories usually differ in important ways.

Let’s say you want a usable past that will help you think about a proposal for redevelopment of a section of the City. If your usable history is about real estate development and your friend’s usable history is about low income housing, the two of you will likely have different frameworks of significance and different stories to tell. Both of you will have a responsibility to widen your story to adjust to the other story. Add in other frameworks --- say, city planning or transportation and mobility and so on --- and the burden becomes large.

But that’s what the search for “usable” entails. If my history or my views on a public issue are based upon a narrow focus --- if
they don’t tell “the whole story” --- they may be technically correct but nonetheless wrong and certainly not “usable” for the public discourse.

So, usable is as usable does.

**Facts and findings**

The historian --- Everywoman or professional --- is also not free to make up, borrow, or select just any so-called fact that she wants. She is responsible *to* the evidence. She is responsible *for* the questions she is asking.

Thus, some histories are better than others, and it is reasonable and feasible and necessary to assess their quality and their utility.

How do we do this? A long time ago, Arthur Bestor outlined three “levels” of historical reasoning.

- The first is about “hard facts” --- these are derived from reasoning about evidence. The difficulties of this are exhibited regularly in the “Fact Checker” or “Pinnochio”
articles in the Washington Post newspaper where abuses of alleged facts by public officials are analyzed.

• Second is “generalizations” --- these are developed by reasoning about relationships among and across those facts. The Rust Belt template is a very large illustration.
• And the third is “causality” --- a special and “very high order” of generalization based on reasoning about the reasons for change across time.

EM Forster wrote some good novels and he knew a lot about this causality matter. In his wonderful Aspects of the Novel, he explains that “the king died and then the queen died” is a mere story. But “the king died and the queen died of grief” is a plot -- - the cause of the queen’s death was “grief.”

When that queen is in a fictional work, the author can decide what caused her death. When we’re working with our past, the causal claim is a huge deal and requires a lot of work to figure it out.

All this “reasoning” may seem daunting. But you are already doing it. Maybe you are even now digesting what you heard yesterday at this conference, and you are figuring out how the
pieces fit --- or don’t fit --- with the usable histories you’ve already got in your head.

Two big name scholars, Richard Neustadt and Ernest May, wrote a book in 1986 called “Thinking in Time.” It was intended to help public leaders make better use of history in decision-making. And so it contains many good stories and many usable lessons and guidelines. A summary of their recommendations would be --- “always ask more questions.”

In effect, that’s what Bestor’s outline of the levels of reasoning --- and every other description of the historian’s task --- add up to.

Doing good and usable history involves acts of imagination, hard intellectual work, and discipline.

**Relativism**

Many in this audience will by now have noticed that all this talk about “Everybody being their own historians” implies a degree of “historical relativism.” Relativism is a fancy way of saying that your history --- usable or otherwise --- is a reflection of
your values and interests. In our roles as Everyperson citizen historians, we may frequently be challenged in this way.

Carl Becker was an exemplary voice for relativism and modesty about ultimate claims of “truth.” He truly meant that what historians find in the past reflects the “climate of opinion” around them and their concerns in the present.

Many others find this view too extreme. JH Hexter, in an elegant essay called “The historian and his day”, offered a gentle and genial response. He said that his “day” is spent immersed in centuries-old documents and that he may even seem a bit “absent-minded” because his head is really in another century. So he had little patience with the accusation of presentism.

Inevitably, there is the middle ground. EH Carr in his classic “What is History?” emphasized the discipline of historical reasoning and imagination --- somewhat along the lines that Prof Bestor outlines --- as the process that is the firm path through these philosophical swamps.
I think Carr has it about right. Because we can only do our history from where, when and who we are, we must be modest about our findings. Therefore, we must be rigorous in our research and thinking, always conscious of the influence of our framework of significance and cheerfully aware that someone’s new set of questions may already be slouching toward our topic. Thus, if we are diligent and careful we can be reasonably confident about our histories. But we cannot be certain and thus we must be open to engaging with opposing views, to on-going discussion, and to changing our views. We must, in a word, act like good democratic citizens.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, I will say that, for me, the great value of the *Everyyperson citizen historian approach* is

- that it makes public and democratizes the process of doing and understanding history.
- It thus provides additional dimensions in which citizens can communicate with other citizens about their shared concerns.
- And it facilitates the utility or usable-ness of historical work.
• Furthermore, it is skeptical of claims about “the truth.”
• And it lays substantial burdens of quality upon the citizen historian to deal with the “responsibilities” I have mentioned here and others as well. On this account, people are prohibited from selecting only those facts and stories that support a view that they already hold.

“Great history”, the above-mentioned EH Carr wrote, occurs “precisely when the historian’s vision of the past is illuminated by insights into the problems of the present.” History thinking can also be great when the Everyperson historian’s vision of the present is illuminated by insights into the problems of the past.

Perhaps we will not all achieve “great history.” We need not grieve over this. As a parent, however, I have always been comforted and encouraged by Bruno Bettelheim’s nice prescription that we cannot be perfect parents but we can aim to be “good enough” parents.

So, I wish you well in your roles as “good enough” Everyperson citizen historians.
And I wish you well in your roles as responsible citizens who will apply your usable histories to creating a greater St Louis. Thank you for your time and attention.

[END]