



Applied History

A Corvus Working Definition

Applied history is a practice whereby historical expertise and knowledge about the past are applied to contemporary problems and challenges, in an effort to help address those issues by offering advice, inspiration, and support

Applied History: What is it?

Applied history is a practice, meaning that it forms the combination of thought and activity. It is not a theory, not a method, and not a philosophy, although applied history can have associated theories, methods, and philosophies.

Applied History: How Does it Work?

Applied history relies on historical expertise and knowledge about the past. Historical expertise can be defined as expertise in handling both sources from the past as well as the contemporary appearances and representations of the past. This in turn implies that knowledge about the past should not be mistaken for knowledge of the past: at its core, applied history relies on insight into what has (possibly) happened before and how we know this, and on an understanding of what can and cannot be gained from this insight in order to deal with the present and prepare for the future.

Applied History: What is it Applied to?

The term 'applied history' begs the question 'history applied to what?'. The answer is contemporary problems or challenges, which translates into 'any problem or challenge that is defined as such in the present'. This can, for example, include individual or collective problems; major or minor challenges; well-defined or vague challenges; problems with an immediate or a future impact; and problems with their presumed origins in the past, the present, or the future. The only thing that it is not, is a problem/challenge in or about the past itself: applied history does not try to address problems in the past, nor does it aim to expand our understanding of the past. That first task is left to counterfactual history; the second to academic history.

Applied History: What is it for?

It being a practice, applied history also has a purpose. That purpose is simply enough to help address the contemporary problems and challenges to which history is applied. Applied history is



therefore not, or at least not primarily, for communicating knowledge about the past to a non-specialist audience, although applied history can be considered a form of public history and shares its ambition to increase public awareness about the past and its many uses.

Applied History: What are its boundaries?

The use of the (presumed/imagined) past in applied history is not without boundaries. The three central limitations are:

- 1) Efficiency: the problem or challenge at hand needs to be addressed as efficiently as possible, even if that begs the conclusion that historical expertise and knowledge about the past have little to offer. This limitation is included to avoid a scenario whereby one feels that history *must* be applied – the utility of applying history needs to be assessed for each problem individually, and might in certain cases be irrelevant.*
- 2) Beneficence: the problem or challenge needs to be addressed in the most beneficial way possible, meaning that it maximizes benefits and minimizes harm. This limitation is intended to counterbalance the first one, as the most efficient way to approach an issue is not necessarily a ‘good’ one.*
- 3) Ethics: in order to be able to identify a ‘good’ approach to applied history, this application also needs to be ethical. To a certain degree this requires an individual judgement, but two general elements are a) truthfulness towards historiography and historical scholarship and b) openness and trustworthiness towards partners, especially the persons and organizations involved in the problem or challenge at hand.*

Applied History: Who is it for

Applied history is for everyone who falls within the scope of the above three boundaries. It is not, or at least should not be, for those who want to apply history for the sake of applying history; those who want to maximize (personal) gain regardless of (collective) harm; those who disregard historical research and scholarship; or those who seek to mistreat partnering persons and organizations.

Applied History: what can and cannot be expected

By applying history one can expect to have gained advice, inspiration, and support in addressing the general or specific problem(s) and challenge(s) at hand. (Applied) historians should however never be considered omniscient savants, beset with an intimate knowledge of all things past, present, and future. Rather, they are experts in analysing, proposing, and designing concrete uses of the (presumed/imagined) past, whereby they know where to find and employ the best available historical expertise and knowledge about the past to address issues in the present or about future.