Review Article

Applied History

Past, Present, and Future

Harm Kaal | ORCID: 0000-0003-4416-3023

Radboud Institute for Culture and History, Radboud University, Nijmegen,
The Netherlands
harm.kaal@ru.nl

Jelle van Lottum | ORCID: 0000-0003-0534-4745

Huygens Institute for the History of the Netherlands, Royal Netherlands
Academy of Arts and Sciences, Amsterdam, The Netherlands;
Radboud Institute for Culture and History, Radboud University, Nijmegen,
The Netherlands
jelle.van.lottum@huygens.knaw.nl

Received November 2021 | Accepted November 2021 |

Published online December 2, 2021

Abstract

The past few years, the field of applied history has witnessed the publication of several manifestoes, the establishment of dedicated research centers, and the foundation of an academic journal. Conceptual discussions about the notion of applied history and the very fact that the methods and techniques of applied history are now part of the discipline of history provide further evidence of the field's maturity. By offering an historiographical overview tracing the roots of applied history, this article will show that both discussions about the contemporary relevance and application of historical thinking, and the actual application of history to current events, possess a long history:

applied history has been part and parcel of history writing since ancient times. Moreover, the article offers a discussion of recent debates about the concept and methods of applied history and concludes by mapping the trends that are shaping its current development.

Keywords

applied history – historical culture – historiography – conceptual history – public history

1 Introduction

The past few years, applied history has received a great deal of scholarly attention. Several manifestoes have laid out the purpose, approach and relevance of applied history,¹ dedicated research centers and platforms across the globe have been established,² and a journal solely focused on applied history has been founded.³ Moreover, the existence of conceptual discussions about the notion of applied history and the very fact that the methods and techniques of applied history are now part of the discipline of history⁴ provide further evidence of the field's maturity and ongoing development.⁵

In this article, which consists of two parts, we discuss and contextualise these recent developments in an effort to arrive at the core of what applied history is (or could be). In the first part, in sections 2, 3 and 4, we offer a histori-

1 Graham Allison and Niall Ferguson, "Applied History Manifesto." <https://www.belfercenter.org/project/applied-history-project#!manifesto>, October 2016 (accessed October 15, 2021); Beatrice de Graaf, Lotte Jensen, Rina Knoeff & Catrien Santing, "Aan de slag! Een manifest voor 'applied history'. Wicked problems en de noodzaak van een diepe blik." <https://www.historici.nl/aan-de-slag-een-manifest-voor-applied-history/>, May 13, 2020 (accessed October 14, 2021); and, although they do not use the concept of applied history: Jo Guldi and David Armitage, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

2 Harvard's Applied History Project: <https://www.belfercenter.org/project/applied-history-project>; History & Policy (UK): www.historyandpolicy.org; Australian Policy & History: <https://aph.org.au/>; Department of Applied History, National Chiayi University (Taiwan): https://www.ncyu.edu.tw/ncyuhg_eng/index.aspx; Corvus (Belgium): <https://www.corvushc.be/>.

3 *The Journal of Applied History* was founded in 2018 by the authors of this article. The first issue was published the following year.

4 See for instance: "Applied History." <https://www.arts.kuleuven.be/nieuwetijd/onderzoek/appliedhistory> (accessed October 15, 2021).

5 See section 4 of this article.

ographical overview in search of the historical roots of applied history. We find several ways that societies (and historians in particular) have sought to make knowledge about the past meaningful for the present and discuss the position of applied history within the wider discipline of history. In the second part (sections 5 and 6) we zoom in on recent debates about the concept and methods of applied history and related notions such as public history, and we conclude by mapping out the relationship amongst applied, public and academic history in the present.

2 From *Historia Magistra Vitae* to Nineteenth-Century Historicism

In a recent handbook on the philosophy of history, the Dutch historian Herman Paul combines the work of Jörn Rüsen and Mark Day to identify five relations to the past that reflect different reasons for people to engage with it: a material, an aesthetic, a political, an epistemic and a moral relation to the past.⁶ Here, we will highlight the last two. The *epistemic* relation to the past is characterised by a search for knowledge and insights. For historians this evidently is (or should be) the overriding relation that defines how they navigate their other relations to the past. Particularly relevant for our discussion of applied history is the *moral* relation to the past, essentially the idea that the past can guide our behaviour in the present, that we can draw lessons from the past. Here, recalling Cicero's famous quotation, *historia* presents itself to us as *magistra vitae*. Such a moral relation to the past was prominent throughout the ancient, medieval and early modern periods and existed side by side with an "unapplied", descriptive, chronicle approach to history as *notitia nudi facti*.

The idea that the past provided a reservoir of exemplary behaviour for the general public but more especially for statesmen aligned with a cyclical perception of time: if people followed the examples set by their forebears, the glory of the past could return. The Roman historian Livy (59 BC–17 AD) provides an early example of this conception of historical time in history writing. In *Ab Urbe Condita*, Livy narrates the history of Rome as a story of rise and fall and refers explicitly to the past's "instructive examples". In his *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben* (published in 1874), the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche labels this approach "monumental history": a history that can inspire us to great achievements in the present.⁷ The past, however,

6 Herman Paul, *Key Issues in Historical Theory* (London: Routledge, 2015).

7 Chiel van den Akker, *The Modern Idea of History and Its Value. An Introduction* (Amsterdam: AUP, 2020), 16–17, 20.

offered not only examples worthy of imitation but also lessons that could be drawn from past mistakes. A sense of urgency, the need to learn from the past, is at the heart of the work of the Athenian general and historian Thucydides (c. 460–c. 400 BC), particularly in his writings on the Peloponnesian War, a war he witnessed firsthand. The main goal of his *History of the Peloponnesian War* was to warn future statesmen about the sort of mistakes the war's leaders had made, particularly among the Athenians. Thucydides was primarily interested in human behaviour within a political context in matters of power, leadership, war and political institutions. The behaviour and actions of the Athenian general Pericles, marked by high morals and a lack of fear, self-interest and vanity, was for Thucydides the epitome of political leadership.⁸ The impact of Thucydides' work still resonates, as is exemplified by the recent book on great power relations written by Graham Allison, one of the founders of Harvard's Applied History Project.⁹

A moral relation to the past and a cyclical notion of time persisted throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Working in the tradition established by Herodotus (c. 484–c. 425 BC), Thucydides and Livy, the Florentine diplomat, historian and philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli (1496–1527) applied history to the present in his classic work *The Prince* and his equally important *Discourses on Livy*. Both works, written against the background of continuing power struggles in the city-states of Northern Italy, show Machiavelli using the past to provide a manual for effective political leadership and statecraft in the present.¹⁰

With the emergence of a scholarly approach to history, first spurred on by the teachings of Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886), an epistemic relation to the past eventually became the overriding principle for historical research: a search for knowledge and insights based on the historical method. The past, Ranke posulated, needed to be understood in and of itself. Through empirical research, historians were supposed to fathom the unique *Zeitgeist* of each period they were studying. Ranke's historicism was closely connected to a new conception of historical time, a new "regime of historicity", in the words of the French historian Francois Hartog, that emerged in the wake of the French Revolution. Historians were now studying a past that had broken off from the present. The notion of progress and an acceleration of time opened up the past for historical

8 Ibid., 31–33.

9 Graham T. Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

10 Margaret MacMillan and Patrick Quinton-Brown, "The Uses of History in International Society: From the Paris Peace Conference to the Present," *International Affairs* 95 (1) (2019), 181–200, 181.

research by providing the historian with the necessary “distance”—a prerequisite for “objective” research—and simultaneously made it less useful as a body of knowledge for the present: the past was now, in the novelist L.P. Hartley’s famous phrase, a “foreign country”.¹¹ The German historian Reinhart Koselleck (1923–2006) argued that people’s “sphere of experience” (*Erfahrungsraum*) no longer matched their “horizon of expectations” (*Erwartungshorizont*). As a result, as the American historian Carl Schorske (1915–2015) claimed, “thinking with history” yielded to “thinking without history”.¹² The past no longer a locus of orientation, people were now left “stranded in the present”.¹³

At first sight, Ranke’s historicism seems to leave little room to draw lessons from the past.¹⁴ After all, the moral relation promoted by Livy, Machiavelli and others was based on the idea that past and present belonged to the same sphere of experience. Yet, Paul argues, one can also maintain that our ability to draw lessons rests precisely in the fact that the past is different from the present and therefore can provide us with inspiration and new perspectives on present-day issues. Furthermore, applying our present-day moral frameworks in our search for “good” and “bad” examples from the past appears to run counter to the obligation of the historical scholar to study the past “*wie es eigentlich gewesen*” (how things actually were). Rather than dismissing the usefulness of knowledge of the past for the present altogether, however, we are reminded of the need to keep our eyes open to the differences between past and present, to display historical empathy and to reflect upon the contexts and value systems affecting our historical research.¹⁵ Moreover, the past does not present straightforward, universal lessons for us in the present: anyone and everyone can find something to fit their own distinct purposes. And given the differences between past and present, there are no “timeless” moral issues and topics to supply the impetus for a meaningful direction for our present attitudes. These objections misunderstand where the actual benefits of historical insight reside: not in the identification of some sort of generic moral guidebook, but rather in a deepened understanding of the human condition. Paul’s reference to the work of the British philosopher William H. Walsh is worth repeating:

11 L.P. Hartley, *The Go-Between* (London: H. Hamilton, 1953).

12 Carl E. Schorske, *Thinking with History. Explorations in the Passage to Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

13 Peter Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present. Modern Time and the Melancholy of History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004).

14 The following is based on the arguments set out by Paul, *Key Issues*, ch. 10.

15 O.L. Davis, E.A. Yeager, and S.J. Foster, eds., *Historical Empathy and Perspective Taking in the Social Studies* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001).

It consists in the concrete grasp of such things as: how human beings with specified characters and specified aims react to situations apprehended under this or that description; what sorts of obstacle people encounter in pursuing goals of certain kinds in certain describable conditions; what sorts of consequences, other than intended consequences, human actions can have, again in circumstances of particular kinds; what general possibilities of action are open in determinate situations and what possibilities are closed?¹⁶

Alternatives to Rankean historicism were particularly strong among British historians led by the influential Cambridge historian J.R. Seeley (1834–1895). According to Seeley, present relevance should guide the work of historians, hence his use of the term “present history”.¹⁷ Seeley’s work had strong *historia magistra vitae* connotations. Famously regarding history as “the school of statesmanship”, he believed the study of great statesmen’s lives should be essential to the training of people with ambitions on the political stage.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, history conceived as a school of statesmanship faced increasing competition from the emerging social sciences. Western societies experienced a “scientization of the social” (Lutz Raphael) roughly from the 1880s onwards. This process entailed “the intended and unintended consequences that the continuing presence of experts from the human sciences, their arguments, and the results of their research had in administrative bodies and in industrial firms, in parties and parliaments”.¹⁸ The scientization of the social was not only catalyzed by the establishment of the social sciences within academia but also resulted from an increasing demand for scientific input on the part of a growing state apparatus. A sense of crisis due to the broad societal impact of modernization and the world wars gradually pushed states towards the adoption of planning policies based on scientific research.¹⁹

16 Paul, *Key Issues*, 127.

17 John Tosh, “Public History, Civic Engagement and the Historical Profession in Britain.” *History* (2014), 191–212, 199.

18 Benjamin Ziemann, Richard Wetzell, Dirk Schumann, and Kerstin Brückweh, “Introduction: The Scientization of the Social in Comparative Perspective.” In *Engineering Society. The Role of the Human and Social Sciences in Modern Societies, 1880–1980*, eds. Benjamin Ziemann, Richard Wetzell, Dirk Schumann, and Kerstin Brückweh (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 1–40, 2.

19 *Ibid.*, 32.

3 Applied History on the Margins, c. 1900–1980s

The rise of the social sciences exerted an impact on the discipline of history and seemed to open the door for applied perspectives. Inspired by, and in an attempt to keep up with, the social (and natural) sciences, historians, particularly those of the positivist bent, promoted the scientification of the discipline, which *inter alia* amounted to a focus on the practical value of scientific research and a belief in science's ongoing contribution to human progress. In the United States the historian Benjamin Shambaugh (1871–1940) actively encouraged the use of historical knowledge, insights and perspectives amongst policymakers, using the term “applied history” in reference to his appreciation of “the past as a vast social laboratory in which experiments in politics and human welfare are daily being set and tested on a most elaborate scale”.²⁰ He characterized applied history as an example of “scientific history”, which signals the impact of positivist thought on historical study and in practice represented a turn away from Rankean historicism. For Shambaugh historians were to begin “interrogating the past in the light of the conditions of the present and the obvious needs of the immediate future to the end that a rational program of progress may be outlined and followed in legislation and administration”.²¹ Rebecca Conrad, in her biography of Shambaugh, stresses that he was a “practical” scholar more interested in the context of application and less in the promotion of rigorous, historical scholarship.²² Shambaugh, indeed, had been highly motivated to convince state authorities to invest in the scholarly education and training of individuals for public service and administration, and via his edited collections of applied historical research he aimed to reach an audience of public officials.²³

Yet despite such efforts applied history was, in the early twentieth century, far from an acknowledged field of history, and it had not made much of a name for itself within the state apparatus. What was more, the destructive impact of National Socialism made it suspicious to apply history in a political context. Early twentieth-century German proponents of a highly exclusionary, nationalist interpretation of history had coined *Angewandte Geschichte* (German for “applied history”). Here, the end result of thinking with history

20 Benjamin F. Shambaugh, ed., *Applied History* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1912), vii.

21 Ibid., ix–x.

22 Rebecca Conrad, *Benjamin Shambaugh and the Intellectual Foundations of Public History* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002), 35.

23 Shambaugh, *Applied History*, xii and xiv.

was the promotion of exclusionary, xenophobic notions of national identity. In this context history could legitimate a politics of persecution and—in the most extreme form of such legitimation—the Holocaust.²⁴ The politicisation of thinking with history also manifested itself throughout the twentieth century in the alignment of historians with political regimes and ideologies: the historian as “fellow traveller”.²⁵

Although such politicisation worked to the discredit of the notion of applied history, historical knowledge and insights did still find their way into the thinking and acting of policymakers and other state officials for much of the twentieth century. But these public actors could not fall back on a recognized, established and widely supported method or approach, nor enlist the active engagement and reflection of academic historians.²⁶ The situation changed in the 1970s. In 1973 Ernest May published his critical account on the use of history by the US federal government: *“Lessons” of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy*. In his book, May unpacks the often impressionistic use of history in the American policy context to make the case for a systematic and critical application of historical insights to current issues. In the 1970s and 1980s, May and his colleague Richard Neustadt, a former advisor to President Kennedy, taught seminars at the Harvard Kennedy School, a prominent training ground for future politicians and civil servants, in which students traced the history of present-day policy issues back in time, critically reviewing the decisions of the past and investigating historical precedents and analogies. With their edited collection *Thinking in Time. The Uses of History for Decision-Makers*, published in 1986, May and Neustadt aimed to convince a Washington audience that policymaking would benefit from an improved sense of historical consciousness.²⁷ “We sensed around us”, the authors state in their preface, “a host of people who did not know any history to speak of and were unaware of suffering any lack, who thought the world

24 Juliane Tomann, Jacqueline Nießer, Anna Littke, Jakob Ackermann, and Felix Ackermann, “Diskussion Angewandte Geschichte: Ein neuer Ansatz?” Version: 1.0, Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte, http://docupedia.de/zg/Diskussion_Angewandte_Geschichte, February 15, 2011 (accessed October 15, 2021).

25 David Caute, *The Fellow Travellers. Intellectual Friends of Communism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988); Ingo Haar, *Historiker im Nationalsozialismus: Deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft und der Volkstumskampf im Osten* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000); Niklas Lenhard-Schramm, *Konstrukteure der Nation. Geschichtswissenschaften als politische Akteure in Vormärz und Revolution 1848/49* (Münster: Waxmann, 2014).

26 David Lowe, “Applied History Today.” *Journal of Applied History* 1 (1–2) (2019), 42–52, 48.

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

was new and all its problems fresh". At the same time, many Washington decisionmakers "actually used history in their decisions ... whether they knew any or not".²⁸ Although the authors explicitly shy away from offering a "capital-M Methodology" for applying history in a policy context, they do provide a "checklist", which boils down to the establishment of facts, presumptions, and uncertainties with regard to a particular problem at stake, the identification of helpful (and the discarding of unhelpful) analogies, and the providing of contextualisation by asking "journalist questions" such as what, when, why and how.²⁹

Overall, however, as the British historian John Tosh has argued, the rise of postmodernism in the 1970s and its scepticism towards generalisation and truth claims slowed down or even halted the development of applied history into an accepted field within the historical profession in Western academia. Meanwhile, *public history* did take off. We bring it in here because from early in the 1970s onwards, what we have discussed thus far as "applied history" was now placed under the rubric of public history. Particularly in the American context, the concepts of applied and public history have often been used interchangeably. On top of that, the notion of public history emerged as an umbrella for "all the ways in which history is made available to a non-specialist public", including applied history.³⁰ The field of public history took shape from the 1970s onwards on a wave of calls within the historical profession to leave the "ivory tower", to write "history from below", to work with the public in studying the past and particularly to engage marginalised groups in the writing of their own histories, for instance in the context of the history workshop movement. Throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s public history gradually emerged as a distinct field, though it regularly faced criticism from those who claimed that it lacked academic rigour.³¹ In 1978, the first issue of *The Public Historian*, a journal issued by the American National Council on Public History, was published.³² In the 1980s and 1990s, universities across the globe established public history programmes.

28 Ibid., xi–xii.

29 Ibid., xv–xvi.

30 Tosh, "Public History," 192.

31 Irmgard Zündorf, "Public History und Angewandte Geschichte—Konkurrenten oder Komplizen?" In *Angewandte Geschichte. Neue Perspektiven auf Geschichte in der Öffentlichkeit*, eds. Jacqueline Nießer and Juliane Tomann (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2014), 63–76, 65; John Tosh, "In Defence of Applied History: the History and Policy Website." <https://www.historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/in-defence-of-applied-history-the-history-and-policy-website>, February 10, 2006 (accessed October 13, 2021).

32 For a succinct discussion of public history, see: John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History. Aims,*

The emergence of public history and its evolution into a distinct field of history can be seen as an expression of a new regime of historicity: a new way of thinking about the relationship between past, present and future that Francois Hartog has labelled “presentism”. A key feature of presentism is a focus on manifestations of the past in the present. Instead of having been broken off from the present, the past in fact remains “present” in the present, resulting in what Margaret MacMillan has described as a “history craze”. She explains history’s contemporary omnipresence as a search for orientation in a world defined by rapid change.³³ Within the historical profession, oral history, the memory boom, heritage studies more generally and the prominence of contemporary history can be seen as signs of the presentist mindset and at the very least, obviously, prompt historians to reflect on their relationship towards the wider public and open up opportunities for the wider public to be involved in explorations of the(ir) past.³⁴

4 Applied History Coming into Its Own, c. 1990s–Present

After slowly (re)gaining a certain degree of prominence from the late 1990s onwards, the concept of applied history truly came into its own only in the past decade. Historiographically this newfound centrality can be related to postmodernism and its “relativist approach to historical knowledge” (Tosh) losing its grip on the profession, as well as to calls, most prominently in the *History Manifesto* (2014), to replace the short-termism that supposedly characterised historical scholarship in an age of presentism with thinking with history in a more long-term perspective.³⁵ Moreover, the field of applied history has emerged out of a sociopolitical context marked by a range of more or less systemic crises and threats, such as (fears of) the global spread of terrorism after 9/11, the 2008 global financial crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic. Thus scholars of international relations now play a very prominent role in the field, amongst them Michael Howard (1922–2019), Margaret MacMillan, Niall Ferguson, Beatrice de Graaf and Hal Brands, and accordingly several of the papers published in this journal up to now have discussed international relations top-

Methods and New Directions in the Study of History, 6th ed. (London: Routledge, 2015), 50–52.

33 Margaret MacMillan, *The Uses and Abuses of History* (London: Profile Books, 2009), ch. 1.

34 Chris Lorenz, “Blurred Lines. History, Memory and the Experience of Time.” *International Journal for History, Culture and Modernity* 2 (1) (2014), 43–62, 51.

35 Tosh, “Public History,” 206; Guldi and Armitage, *The History Manifesto*.

ics and the pandemic.³⁶ In addition, one of the key applied history research projects being conducted at the moment lies within the field of international relations: the Engelsberg Programme for Applied History, Grand Strategy and Geopolitics, established in 2018 as a joint effort of the Centre for Grand Strategy at King's College London and the Centre for Geopolitics at Cambridge University.³⁷ As has been convincingly argued in various applied history manifestoes, in crisis situations "historical knowledge ... was at a premium"³⁸ because using history as a "citizen's resource" gives us access to "social adaptive strategies from the past"³⁹ that can be helpful in overcoming crises in the present.⁴⁰ Furthermore, new research funding policies have pushed *all* academics, including those working in the humanities, in the direction of valorisation and knowledge utilisation. The EU has played a major role here, mainly with its Framework Programmes, now known as the Horizon funding scheme, that invite scholars to contribute to the tackling of "global challenges" and to help boost economic growth.⁴¹ Finally, applied history can be regarded as a response to the ignorance or misuse of history on the part of political actors or in public debate. In the US and in Canada such criticism, voiced amongst others in Margaret MacMillan's seminal study *The Uses and Abuses of History* (2009),⁴² was a continuation of the mission of May and Neustadt; in Britain it was a result of discontent with New Labour's lack of historical consciousness.⁴³

36 Beatrice de Graaf, "Taming Pandemics in International Relations: Why Do States Cooperate in Transboundary Crises? An Applied History Perspective." *Journal of Applied History* 2 (1–2) (2020), 36–61; Albert Wolf, "The Iran Nuclear Crisis, the Lessons of Westphalia and the Value of Biased Mediation." *Ibid.*, 75–84; Derek Croxton, "The Historical Context of 'A Westphalia for the Middle East?'" *Ibid.*, 85–97; Graeme A. Thompson, "Applying Global History. Globalization, Geopolitics, and the U.S.-China Rivalry after Covid-19." *Ibid.*, 3 (1–2) (2021); Bram de Ridder, "When the Analogy Breaks. Historical References in Flemish News Media at the Onset of the Covid-19 Pandemic." *Ibid.*, 2 (1–2) (2020), 1–16; Nathaniel L. Moir, "To Boldly Remember Where We Have Already Been: Revisiting the Cutter Polio Vaccine Incident during Operation Warp Speed." *Ibid.*, 17–35.

37 "Applying History to 21st Century Problems." <https://eahp.info/> (accessed October 15, 2021).

38 Allison and Ferguson, "Applied History Manifesto."

39 Beatrice de Graaf, Lotte Jensen, Rina Knoeff, and Catrien Santing, "Dancing with Death. A Historical Perspective on Coping with Covid-19." *Risk, Hazards and Crisis in Public Policy* 12 (3) (2021), 346–367, 352.

40 See also: De Graaf et al., "Aan de slag."

41 "What is Horizon Europe?" https://ec.europa.eu/info/research-and-innovation/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe_en (accessed October 15, 2021).

42 MacMillan, *The Uses and Abuses of History*.

43 Tosh, "Public History," 206.

In 2002 a group of British historians launched the History & Policy initiative, “inspired by the belief that history can and should improve public policy making, helping to avoid reinventing the wheel and repeating past mistakes”.⁴⁴ Over the past two decades, History & Policy has published on its websites no fewer than 235 policy papers, all based on peer-reviewed scholarly research, and it has successfully developed a network in Westminster in order to facilitate discussion between historians and policymakers about the application of historical insights. In her 2016 book *History, Policy and Public Purpose: Historians and Historical Thinking in Government* the British historian Alix Green has taken this initiative one step further by shifting the focus to how historical knowledge and skills can be applied in a policy context. Green’s main goal is to embed a historical approach within the policymaking process, though this is to be effected neither by commissioning professional historians as outside experts nor by establishing an advisory council but rather by making thinking with history an integral part of thinking about policy. For Green the proper orientation boils down to possessing a keen eye for complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty as opposed to embarking on a quest for closure, reductionism and finality—a disposition that Aroop Mukharji and Richard Zeckhauser have also underlined in their contribution to this journal.⁴⁵ The ultimate aim is for there to be policymakers who have internalized, as part of their repertoire, a historical way of thinking about policy.⁴⁶

Also in 2016, the US historians Hal Brands and Jeremy Suri published *The Power of the Past. History and Statecraft*, a book in the May-Neustadt tradition that also picked up on issues raised by MacMillan in her 2009 book. Brands and Suri argue that in times of uncertainty, Washington tends to cling to the past, or a particular understanding of the past, without a thorough understanding of the applicability of this past to the present.⁴⁷ They show how first the 1938 Munich Agreement and subsequently, from the 1970s onwards, the Vietnam War acted as the key reference points for American foreign policy, although these historical events were often misleading analogies when applied to the international crises of the present. The same lack of genuine historical consciousness in the corridors of power prompted the British-American historian

44 “Who We Are.” <https://www.historyandpolicy.org/who-we-are> (accessed October 3, 2021).

45 Aroop Mukharji and Richard Zeckhauser, “Bound to Happen: Explanation Bias in Historical Analysis.” *Journal of Applied History* 1 (1–2) (2019), 5–27.

46 Alix R. Green, *History, Policy and Public Purpose. Historians and Historical Thinking in Government* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 65–91.

47 Hal Brands and Jeremi Suri, eds., *The Power of the Past. History and Statecraft* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2016).

Niall Ferguson and his American colleague Graham Allison, both affiliated with the Harvard Belfer Center, to publish their *Applied History Manifesto*, again in 2016.⁴⁸ A U.S. government in need of a well-thought-out strategy for stability in the Middle East cannot do without a thorough analysis of past interventions in this region and their effects, Ferguson and Allison argue. Yet, “key decision-makers know alarmingly little not just of other countries’ pasts, but also of their own”. Like Green, they make the case for integrating historical analysis into the policy-making process. Their solution is first and foremost an institutional remedy: the establishment of a Council of Historical Advisors by the president. In their manifesto the authors speculate about the assignments the president could give the members of this council for input on topics such as the financial crisis, the rise of ISIS, and U.S.-China relations. The latter issue is also the subject of a book published by Allison in 2017. In *Destined for War. Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?* Allison offers a historical investigation into wars between established and emerging world powers analogous to Thucydides’s analysis of the military conflict between Athens and Sparta in the fifth century BC.⁴⁹ He asks what triggered these wars and how they might have been prevented, bringing the results of his historical analysis to bear on the current strategic competition between the US and China. What should the US government do in order to prevent an escalation?

Another body of recent literature is dedicated to (more and less helpful) conceptual reflections on applied and public history and alternative concepts such as “history with a public purpose” (Green), “practical history” (Rüsen) or “critical public history” (Tosh).⁵⁰ In essence all these notions refer to the same field of work: the application of historical expertise “to the understanding of current politics and other areas of social concern”.⁵¹ Tosh has characterised applied history—a concept he also uses himself—as an example of “practical historicism”. While sticking to the “core principles of the discipline” the main goal of applied history is to put these principles to use in a practical setting.⁵² The classroom is one of the practical settings that has drawn much scholarly attention. Scholars working in the fields of history teaching and education and pedagogy more broadly have studied thinking with history

48 Allison and Ferguson, “Applied History Manifesto.”

49 Allison, *Destined for War*.

50 Green, *History, Policy and Public Purpose*; Professor Jörn Rüsen in Gespräch mit Juliane Tomann, “Geschichtskultur und Angewandte Geschichte.” In *Angewandte Geschichte*, 58–62; Tosh, “Public History,” 192; see also Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, 50–51.

51 Tosh, “Public History,” 192.

52 Tosh, “In Defence of Applied History.”

in relation to topics such as citizenship education, or as a coping mechanism for coming to terms with a multiple and diverse past for an equally diverse present.⁵³

Some of the discussions in the literature have zoomed in on the relationship and demarcation between public and applied history. A case in point is a 2018 roundtable on Public and Applied History in International Context published in *The Public Historian*, most of which is dedicated to a discussion about the use of the notions of public and applied history in the German context and its wider relevance.⁵⁴ In their opening contribution to the roundtable, the German historians Jacqueline Nießer and Juliane Tomann, in an effort to disentangle public and applied history, propose to use the former in reference to the different *forms* in which the past is presented to a wider public and the latter in reference to practices of cooperation between historians and the wider public (*agents*) in doing history. Although they present some German examples of the application of historical methods and ways of thinking in a policy context, the authors heavily lean towards a presentation of both applied and public history as articulations of what they call “popular history”: the use of “popular forms such as films and games” *to present history to* a wider public, and *doing history with* citizens, often in a local setting.⁵⁵ In their account the authors, however, ignore the long historiographical tradition of applied history *beyond* popular history.⁵⁶ Since applied and public history have emerged from two distinct historiographical traditions it makes sense to conceptually separate the two lineages and reserve the notion of applied history for historical research that aims to “illuminate current challenges and choices”, often in a political and policy context.⁵⁷

53 A recent example is: Bjorn Wansink, Beatrice de Graaf and Elke Berghuis, “Teaching under Attack: The Dilemmas, Goals, and Practices of Upper-Elementary School Teachers When Dealing With Terrorism in Class.” *Theory & Research in Social Education* (2021), <http://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2021.1920523>.

54 Roundtable Public and Applied History in International Context, *The Public Historian* 40 (4) (2018).

55 Jacqueline Nießer and Juliane Tomann, “Public and Applied History in Germany. Just Another Brick in the Wall of the Academic Ivory Tower?” *The Public Historian* 40 (4) (2018), 11–27, 20.

56 See the criticism raised by Alix R. Green, “From Cultural Case Studies to Global Conversations: Towards an Interconnected Community of Enquiry in Public History.” *The Public Historian* 40 (4) (2018), 56–60, 58.

57 Allison and Ferguson, “Applied History Manifesto.”

5 Methods and Approaches in Applied History

The German historian Marcus Ventzke has rightly stressed that applied history does not encompass a new episteme; it falls within the epistemic approach of history as such. The adjective “applied” is commonly used in scientific research to refer to a field within a broader discipline that is focused on applying its key aspects—theories, methods, techniques, concepts and findings—in a practical setting.⁵⁸ The “applied” variant often stands in a hierarchical relationship to the “core” of the discipline (alternatively: the discipline in its “pure” or fundamental sense).⁵⁹ Applied history seems to fit this schema: according to Tosh it has “generally been regarded by the historical profession as suspect and inferior”. Tosh goes on to counter these sentiments by showing that the papers published on the History & Policy platform, as key examples of applied history, “adhere to the *fundamental canons* of historical thinking” [our italics].⁶⁰ Indeed, most scholars working on applied history have presented the uncontested and well-known repertoire of historical thinking, or “thinking with history approach” (De Graaf et al.⁶¹), as the methodological backbone of doing applied history. The “toolkit” (Green⁶²) historians bring to their work in applied history is made up of elements with which every history student is familiar: 1) historians’ ability to analyse many sources of various kinds in a critical manner and to present the results of this analysis—a synthesis—in a readable narrative; 2) contextualisation: historians have keen eyes for the conditions under which events happen and take the different perspectives and interests of (groups of) historical actors into account; 3) historians’ appreciation of complexity and contingency as opposed to a reduction of the past to fit a theory, law or model; 4) and, finally, historians’ sensitivity to temporality in the shape of chronology and periodisation, continuity and change, cause and effect.⁶³

Yet, on closer inspection, particular ways or modes of historical thinking in applied history do stand out. In his analysis of the papers published on the History & Policy platform, Tosh identifies two modes of doing applied his-

58 Marcus Ventzke, “Ursprünge und Antriebe der gegenwärtige Debatte über Angewandte Geschichte.” In *Angewandte Geschichte*, 15–36, 15.

59 See for instance the discussion in Christopher L. Colvin and Paul Winfree, “Applied History, Applied Economics, and Economic History.” *Journal of Applied History* 1 (1–2) (2019) 28–41, 30.

60 Tosh, “In Defence of Applied History.”

61 De Graaf et al., “Dancing with Death,” 353.

62 Green, *History, Policy and Public Purpose*, ch. 4.

63 Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*; Tosh, “Public History”; Green, *History, Policy and Public Purpose*; Schorske, *Thinking with History*.

tory.⁶⁴ First, the “processual mode”, an attempt to understand and explain the present from a diachronic perspective as the outcome of historical processes. The added value of this mode lies particularly in its going back in time a bit deeper than is usually the case in public and policy discussions. Such a “deep look into time” also helps us, the authors of a Dutch applied history manifesto argue, to reflect on the possible long-term impact of events and developments in the present: looking backward in order to look forward.⁶⁵ The main challenge is to avoid teleological reasoning and to keep an eye out for contingency.⁶⁶ In the second, analogical mode, past and present are brought together in a comparative framework while maintaining a keen awareness of the differences between the historical and the present context. Historians can use this mode to critically engage with false or distorted analogies that emerge in public debates or a policy context—the abuse or misuse of history—or to present inspiring examples from the past along with reflections on the degree to which they can be of use in the present.⁶⁷ When historians assess the value of these practices for the present, they fall back on the key tenets of historical thinking: identifying continuity and change, explaining why and under which conditions X happened in the past and could happen today, and tracing the historical trajectory of ongoing developments.⁶⁸

For Jo Guldi and David Armitage, the authors of the *History Manifesto*, thinking with history is an asset because it enables us to escape the “spectre of the short term” and develop meaningful connections spanning past, present and future over a longer timeframe.⁶⁹ Moreover, they argue that a historical approach enables us to see the present through a new perspective that brings with it a sense of amazement and curiosity. Our understanding of the differences between past and present can help us to critically examine the present, to question things that seem “obvious” or “natural” now but have not been so in the past—an approach the authors refer to as “counterfactual thinking”. Allison and Ferguson make a similar case in their *Applied History Manifesto*: asking the “what if” questions, in combination with historians’ “sensibility” for the “long-term rhythms, strategic surprise, and daring coups de main that run through history”, can help develop informed speculation about the future impact of par-

64 Tosh, “In Defence of Applied History.”

65 De Graaf et al., “Aan de slag!”

66 Mukharji and Zeckhauser, “Bound to Happen.”

67 For a discussion of distorted analogies in public debate, see for instance: De Ridder, “When the Analogy Breaks.”

68 Tosh, “Public history.”

69 Guldi and Armitage, *The History Manifesto*, 1.

ticular political decisions and interventions.⁷⁰ In this sense, studying the past can contribute to a sense of agency, to the belief that we are not “stuck in the present” but are ourselves able to make history. The differences between past and present make us aware of the dynamics of time and of the present being part of the flow of time. From this perspective, things and situations in the present that might seem static and immovable become fluid and malleable.⁷¹

6 Applied History: Recent Trends and Future Developments

We opened our article with the statement that in recent years applied history has become an acknowledged field of history. By offering a historiographical overview tracing the roots of applied history, we have shown, however, that both discussions about the contemporary relevance and application of historical thinking, and the actual application of history to current events, possess a long history: applied history has been part and parcel of history writing since ancient times. With the rise of academic historical scholarship in the nineteenth century, the ambition to bring knowledge about the past to bear on the present came under close (historicist) scrutiny. Yet, at the same time, the epistemological development of history as a discipline over the past two centuries has given applied history a solid *scholarly* foundation, moving beyond the primarily *moral* relation to the past that had previously dominated “thinking with history”.

It is time to assess the balance and to see what lies ahead: how can we position the field of applied history within the broader discipline and the wider historical culture, defined by Jörn Rüsen as “all cultural practices using the past in order to adjust to the present, and by providing future perspectives for human action”?⁷² What trends appear to be defining its future development? Figure 1 is an attempt to give a schematic overview of this position and of these trends. In the figure we situate various forms of historical output both in terms of their *research aim*, on the horizontal axis, and their *audience*, on the vertical axis. With regard to the research aim, we use the common distinction in academic scholarship between *fundamental* and *applied* research. The main aim of fundamental historical research is to improve the state of the art in terms of historical knowledge, methods, techniques and theory. Applied historical research, on the other hand, aims to bring this state of the art to bear on issues

⁷⁰ Allison and Ferguson, “Applied History Manifesto.”

⁷¹ Guldi and Armitage, *The History Manifesto*, 10.

⁷² Rüsen quoted by Nießer and Tomann, “Public and Applied History in Germany,” 12.

FIGURE 1 A schematic overview of the position of applied history within the discipline of history and the wider historical culture

and discussions in the present. As far as the audience is concerned, we differentiate a mainly *academic* audience, on one side of the spectrum, from a chiefly *popular* audience on the other. We would like to stress that the differences we make here are stylised and far from perfectly map onto a reality which is of course far less dichotomous than the categories in Figure 1 suggest.

We define four quadrants. *Quadrant 1* (Q1) concerns the field of chiefly fundamental historical research for a primarily scholarly audience, published in academic journals, or monographs. *Quadrants 2 and 3* represent two segments of the aforementioned historical culture. Q2 is usually referred to as *popular history*, a field characterised by historical studies that to some degree have their roots in (or are adaptations of) fundamental research and are mainly aimed at the broader public. Their dissemination usually occurs through popular history books but also through programmes on (modern) media such as television, streaming services and podcast platforms. These products often find them-

selves under close scrutiny by academic historians for the degree to which they meet academic standards. Yet those historians themselves often face criticism from outside academia for being “boring or out of touch with what interests people today”, as Elizabeth Norton noted in a blog post (!) on popular history.⁷³ In Q3 the target audience is still largely non-academic, but here the main aim is to treat them to a discussion of historical insights in relation to present concerns and matters of current public interest in a more or less accessible manner. The means of outreach can vary here, too: from publications that are aimed at a wide audience, like newspaper contributions, Op-Eds or blog posts, to more targeted output like policy papers, such as those published on the History & Policy platform, professional programmes for educational purposes (teaching history for civil society) or internal memoranda in a policy environment. Finally, Q4 represents applied history as a field within the historical discipline. Unlike Q3, the main audience is the academic community itself, which is treated to historical research with the primary aim to gain insights into current matters and to reflect on the concepts, theories and methodologies of applied history. Many of the articles we have discussed here belong to this quadrant, and the same goes for the *Journal of Applied History* itself. Historians, however, can cross the fluid boundaries between these quadrants; the work and careers of historians like Margaret MacMillan and Niall Ferguson represent some of the more notable examples.

This brings us to an answer to the second question we posed above: What are some of the recent trends that have pushed historians towards an engagement with applied history and the wider historical culture? In Figure 1 we identify three such trends: vectors a., b., and c. First, the trend of valorisation and knowledge utilisation, triggered by the demands of research funding schemes, is pushing academic historians in the direction of the other quadrants, particularly Q2 and 3 (vectors a. and b.). Connected to this are the increasing cross-disciplinary activities of historians who work with scholars of International Relations, Public Management, Social Science or Social Psychology to operationalise the application of history through specific social interventions, action research or policy and educational programs. Second, the rise of new media—notably social media, streaming services and podcasts—has resulted in the commodification of historical research assuming novel forms, with academic historians in the role of commissioned experts and sophisticated fact checkers (again, vectors a. and b.). Finally, and here we touch upon vector c., we

73 Elizabeth Norton, “Writing Popular History: Comfortable, Unchallenging Nostalgia-Fodder?” <http://www.historymatters.group.shef.ac.uk/popular-vs-academic-history/>, August 28, 2013 (accessed October 15, 2021).

identify a trend towards applied history within the wider discipline of history, as well as within a policy context that has contributed to its coming into its own. The accumulation of crises in the new millennium, as well as the omnipresence of the instrumentalisation—and abuse—of history and historical claims in a highly polarised political climate may have increased public awareness of the value of historical thinking for the present, but these developments have also made such awareness more urgent. The current state of affairs, in turn, asks for increased reflection (and self-awareness) on the part of academic historians about what, amidst these circumstances, applied history is, could be or should be. With this journal and the reflections we have presented here, we aim to contribute to this endeavour.

Harm Kaal and Jelle van Lottum are the founding editors-in-chief of the Journal of Applied History

Acknowledgments

We thank Professor Beatrice de Graaf and Dr Nathaniel L. Moir for their valuable comments on the manuscript, and our colleagues and students at the Department of History, Art History & Classics, Radboud University for the many inspiring discussions on the topic of applied history.