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Knowing about the Past vs Learning from the Past:

We Need to Do Both to Create Effective Policy

by Linda Silka

Maine Policy Review is concerned with policy. Why then would we devote an entire issue to the past, as is the case with this special issue focusing on Maine's bicentennial? A crucial reason is that the creation of effective policy calls for in-depth knowledge of the past. Yet a concern with policy all too frequently leads to a present-centric focus. In the urgency to create policy to solve today's problems, we forgo an in-depth analysis of the past.

When people do look at the past, too often they do so superficially, which leads people to engage in often paradoxical interpretations and conclusions. Sometimes people look at the past through rose-colored lenses. That is, we view the past with nostalgia, pointing to what we see as the state's esteemed history and celebrated past achievements. Or, we do the opposite. We say how much better things have become (for example, look at all the problems in the past that no longer confront us today).

Centennials can simply devolve into celebrations, but that is not the intent here. Indeed, this MPR issue is intended to call attention to the rigorous use of history in the development of effective, better-informed, and less shortsighted policy.

Obviously, part of the challenge is that the past cannot be brought back in its fullness, its complexity, and its ambiguity. What the past was like is far from self-evident despite our

occasional feelings that we know it well, for example, when we watch an engrossing contemporary movie supposedly capturing the past. Yet, as one book's title, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Lowenthal 1985), and content remind us, the past is far from easily represented or understood in the present.

So, how do we capture that complexity? How do we learn about the past? And how might we make use of that information to draw useful insights? How do we ensure the value of past information for policy creation and formation? In essence, it might be said that we need a toolkit or manual to help us learn from materials about the past.

We are fortunate in Maine in having available many sources of information about the state's past from which to learn. Part of a toolkit might teach us how to interrogate this information since few of us have the time and training to be critical readers. Writers have often spent years and sometimes even decades analyzing Maine's history. Indeed, a great way to spend the bicentennial might be to immerse oneself in these works. Just a few of the many examples you might encounter ranging across time, topic, and areas include the classic *The Maine Woods* (Thoreau 1987); *Maine: The Pine Tree State from Prehistory to the Present* (Judd et al. 1995); *Hidden History of Maine* (Gratwick 2010);

Coastal Maine: A Maritime History (Duncan 2002); *Twelve Thousand Years: American Indians in Maine* (Bourque 2001); *Of Place & Gender: Women in Maine History* (Weiner 2005); *A Day's Work: A Sampler of Historic Maine Photographs, 1860–1920* (Bunting 2003); *Tall Trees, Tough Men* (Pike 1967); *A History of Lumbering in Maine: 1820–1861* (Wood 1971); and *A Story of Maine in 112 Objects: From Prehistory to Modern Times* (Fishman 2019)

The book *Historical Atlas of Maine* (Hornsby and Judd 2015) illustrates strategies for conveying past and present information in thought-provoking ways. Across a range of topics, the illustrated volume presents side-by-side maps of the past and present on a range of critical topics. The book conveys information that engages readers and prompts their critical thinking about the information.

As readers, though, we also need to hone our analytical skills as we approach historical information. My studies of social cognition have investigated how people assess change in the presence or absence of various kinds of historical information (Silka 1989). This work has shown that people are often careless in their uses of information and, indeed, even sometimes infer change in the absence of key information about the past. How do we improve those skills? And are there ways we can present

historical information that take into consideration some of the slippage in judgments that can occur?

This is not an idle concern as we look at what we need to know about the past to make policy in the present. Current concerns about policies for dealing with climate change, for example, are illustrative. Policymakers in Maine and elsewhere are giving great attention to this topic, and Maine has recently established a climate council to make policy recommendations. The council and its working groups are assessing the implications of climate change for different elements of Maine's economy, livelihoods, and lifestyles. They are considering what policies Maine might need to ensure a future as viable as Maine's past. These efforts require that policymakers know the past and learn from the past, without assuming too much about the past.

This *MPR* issue is a part of many efforts to bring us up to speed in terms of knowing the past and identifying ways that this information can ensure that our policies are well founded and well constructed. Toward that end, we encourage you to learn from this issue and from the many stellar books aimed at assisting us in understanding Maine's past. 🐟

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