

ORAL HISTORY AND THE COMMON GOOD

BY ALEXANDER FREUND

05 JAN 2016



In my last blog post, I wrote about the Oral History Centre's motto of "democratizing history." Today, I continue this idea by asking how the notion of the **Common Good** can help us understand oral history's democratizing potential.

The phrase "Common Good" has a quaint ring to it. Indeed, at the end of twentieth century, the U.S. American political scientist Thomas Smith concluded that "talk about the Common Good has been all but abandoned." **The basic idea of the Common Good** is that people in society should work not only for themselves or specific interest groups but also toward the greater good of society, benefiting everyone (or nearly everyone). This can only be achieved through contributions to society, united work, and solidarity. In an article Smith published in the *American Political Science Review* in 1999, he wrote that the idea of the Common Good dates back to Aristotle. It was revived by the monk Aquinas in the thirteenth century. By the 1900s, Smith writes, only Catholic social and political theorists were interested in the concept.

The Common Good sounds like a fundamental idea for the functioning of democracy. So why did it go out

of fashion? According to Smith, the concept lost much of its appeal when liberal philosophers pointed out that the Common Good can never be defined by all, but will be imposed by powerful individuals or groups. From Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and John Stuart Mill to John Rawls and others, liberal theorists argued that it is better to ensure that every individual can pursue the good that he or she prefers. This kind of individualism emerged from the Enlightenment, but, **as I have argued elsewhere in the context of oral history**, has seen a sharp turn to uncaring selfishness and cold egocentrism with the rise of neo-liberalism since the 1970s.

This turn to hyper-individualism has been countered by many critics, including social historians, who have pointed to many examples of solidarity and social movements around the world in the past and present. Many social historians relied on eyewitness accounts of those involved in labour organization and strikes, movements for civil rights, social justice, and human rights, but also on the testimonies of those who had suffered the most from the economic and social marginalization, political oppression, and cultural assimilation of the mid to late twentieth-century global order.

Oral historians, like **Alessandro Portelli**, our recent visitor to the Oral History Centre, have documented the memories, stories, and songs of the working-class to juxtapose their rich history and culture with hegemonic narratives often pushed as “official history.” The stories Portelli collected both in Terni, Italy and in Harlan County Kentucky, USA pay tribute to both the hurt inflicted by state and corporate actions against the Common Good and the benefits and pride men and women derived from working for the Common Good.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, it can be difficult to make out a strong belief in the Common Good. Yet, it exists in various forms. The belief in the Common Good is institutionalized, for example, in the tax system, which serves to create a common wealth that helps everyone to advance “our own potential and ambition.” In countries with weak tax systems, it may also be found in the form of organized charity and other forms of voluntary contributions to society. Other pillars of a strong belief in the Common Good are a universal, public education system and solidarity-based systems of health care and welfare. Sporadic and more lasting discontent with the lack of state engagement in the Common Good has more recently led to the Occupy movement, student protests from Chile to Quebec, and protests in Greece, Spain, and elsewhere in Europe against the politics of austerity and the destruction of welfare systems, which has come as a result of the “disaster capitalism” described by Naomi Klein and other critics of neo-liberalism. Former U.S. president Bill Clinton forcefully argued that Americans should work toward the Common Good through donating their money, time, and other resources. In Canada, the Citizens for Public Justice and Canada25 published reports that highlighted the importance of the Common Good in public life.

In an age of partisanship, special interest groups, and competition, the Common Good can be difficult to achieve. Writes **William Galston** in 2013: “As individuated beings, our separate existences generate clashes of interest, and our liberty gives rise to competing conceptions of the good... In face of difference, the common good is an achievement, not a fact.” In the struggles to achieve the Common Good, history has played an important role. History

helps us understand several issues regarding the Common Good: first, how our ancestors have understood the Common Good and resolved attendant conflicts; second, history as a practice reminds us to distinguish between opinions and evidence-based claims; third, history as a discussion about what society should remember lets us participate in civil discourse. The third aspect is particularly important if we consider Galston's warning that there is "a continuum of contestation, from clashes that can trigger civil war to the disputes that characterize everyday political and social life."

Even if we have achieved the Common Good through civil discourse rather than civil war, writes Galston, it "is no guarantee of social and political harmony... We disagree, of course, about how different sectors of society are to divide the burden of maintaining a free and well-functioning political community." Here, history as practice enables us to constructively engage in discussions about the Common Good by making sound arguments based, at least in part, on historical evidence. History as practice contributes, however modestly, to a process of "**civic engagement** [that] can enrich, empower, and foster a sense of belonging" for individuals and "promote innovation, democracy, inclusiveness, and unity" for communities.

Oral historians have been at the forefront of documenting and organizing against the human, social, and political costs of the widening gap between the powerful rich and the powerless poor.

From **Groundswell** to **Voice of Witness** and in many individual oral history projects, oral historians have used oral history to document the stories of those commonly kept out of the history books. They have

also brought people together in workshops and projects, following the basic idea so well articulated by [Canada25](#): “Good things happen when people engage with others... The quality of relationships and friendships brings happiness, support, and love. Reading widely and discussing ideas with others bring knowledge.” By bringing people together, oral historians have provided opportunities for marginalized, oppressed, non-hegemonic groups to learn to write themselves into history and to critically engage with dominant historical discourses.

At the Oral History Centre at the University of Winnipeg, we share these ideas. We believe that history—both our acts today and how we remember them in the future—is a Common Good. It is a Common Good not as one solid, monolithic narrative about the past that claims there is no other truth. Rather, history is a Common Good because it is an ongoing debate about what and who it is important to remember, what stories our children should learn in school, what values we should uphold. Oral history is an entry into such debates, because it teaches that history is not the property of paid professionals, governments, or corporations but rather a public discussion about who we should be and what we should do as a society. Furthermore, oral history as a history-as-practice creates a space where people can gather to learn with each other and create together. This is visible in the many small community projects that have been done at the Oral History Centre, where people came together and used their common interest in history to learn about their community, to bridge gaps across generations and ideologies, to create archives, and to share their histories with others. These projects show that oral history can be a forum where people join together to build

something that is bigger than the sum of their individual contributions: the Common Good.