

HISTORY LAB 2 Transcript

How much time has to pass before something is considered history?

Ask a
Historian



Emily Tran: From the University of Wisconsin–Madison, this is *Ask a Historian*'s History Lab, a mini-series about how to do history for Wisconsin students and teachers as they prepare for National History Day.

Today on the show: How much time has to pass before something is considered history?

My guest is Professor Richard Keller.

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Richard Keller: Hi, I'm Richard Keller. I'm a professor in the Department of History at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

Emily Tran: Professor Keller, Welcome to *Ask a Historian*.

Richard Keller: Thanks so much for having me.

Emily Tran: So our question today is about when something becomes history.

Connor: Hi, my name is Connor, and I am 12 years old and from Milwaukee Fox Point. My question is, how long ago does something have to have happened in order for it to be considered history?

Emily Tran: I thought I'd take this question to you because I think that you are the historian in our History Department whose research has come closest to the present.

In 2015, you published a book called *Fatal Isolation: The Devastating Paris Heatwave of 2003*. But your earlier work was about colonial North Africa and took the 19th century as a starting point. Why did you decide to shift focus from the temporally further away past to the more recent past?

Richard Keller: Sure. I had the maybe good, maybe bad fortune to be in France doing research on my first book in the summer of 2003, and it was unbearably hot. Everyone was talking about these record-breaking temperatures; everyone was talking about the potential for human health impacts of these record-breaking temperatures.

And when I got home at the end of the summer—I spent a couple of months there—I started learning about this immense death toll that had unfolded in the month of August in France and Paris in particular. And the significance of this disaster just was overwhelming to me.

And so, it was really just the, the accident that having lived through this historically important moment and having really experienced it only peripherally, having experienced this moment that

suggested to me that there was something significant here to dig into. So, really, it was completely opportunistic.

Emily Tran: So, you said it because you experienced it, when you came home and saw the huge death tolls, you clued in that this was a historically important moment. Why do you consider things that happened relatively recently—so this was in 2003—to be history?

Richard Keller: Sure.

I think that even if something appears to be happening in our present, it doesn't mean that it doesn't have a history. And that's precisely what I sought to investigate when I looked at the 2003 heat wave.

Now, mind you, this was something that I debated really hotly with a number of people in my department, you know. A number of my colleagues had said, 'This isn't history. This just happened.' And, you know, this is an ongoing debate, I think, that we have. And it's a fair debate to have, right? Is something journalism, is it history, is a sociology, is it anthropology?

I would argue that something that happened half an hour ago we could consider history or at least we can set it in its historical context. And so, that's precisely what I was trying to do.

As I started doing research on the project, I started examining the 2003 heat wave as a historical phenomenon in 2004, right away.

Emily Tran: Oh, wow.

Richard Keller: I spent about 10 years doing it, though. It took till about 2015 for the book to come out.

What I was trying to argue in the book, and I think it does so successfully, is that while the 2003 heat wave disaster was something that we could consider a contemporary crisis, it was something that wasn't without an important historical context.

There are a number of factors, a number of things that took place in the past—some things taking place as far back ago as the mid 19th century—that basically established conditions on the ground that allowed for this disaster to take place. Now, I don't mean to say that decisions made in the 19th century meant that this disaster was inevitable, but it certainly created the conditions in which it was possible.

So, just to give you one or two quick examples. The heat wave killed people unequally. It tended to strike people who were elderly and in particular elderly women, and it tended to strike down people who lived in cities rather than rural environments or suburban environments.

And so, if we just look at those two disparities, how can we use in the historian's skill set try to figure out why that might have come to pass? So, in terms of urban planning, there were major decisions that unfolded in the middle of the 19th century in Paris for security purposes but also to make the city healthier. The city had suffered from epidemics of cholera, typhus, bubonic plague, a

whole range of diseases throughout its history, and in an effort to basically clean up the city, the city was largely bulldozed and rebuilt in the middle of the 19th century.

But at the same time as it solved a number of, sort of, health conditions that had rendered the city so sick in the past, it actually created the possibility for new ones.

So, if you can picture—if you've been to Paris or if you've seen a movie or photographs of Paris—a picture of the typical Parisian building is about six or seven stories tall and tends to be kind of narrow building, right on the sidewalk, there might be a restaurant or a shop and the ground floor.

But what happens is, as you go up the staircase inside the building, the apartments get smaller as you climb higher. This is, of course, because basically rich people didn't want to climb seven stories of stairs in a pre-elevator era, right? So, the apartments that are located in the tops of the buildings are actually in these tiny little attic spaces, they tend to be about 100 square feet, and they are right under uninsulated zinc roofs.

And what happens is, in the middle of the summer, those apartments become essentially ovens. They can be 120, 130 degrees when it's 95 degrees outside. And so those tend to be extremely dangerous spaces in particular for the elderly.

Now, if you're a college student who lives in one of these places because it's pretty cheap rent, it's not as big a deal. It's plenty uncomfortable to be sure, but you're young, you're in good shape, you trot down the staircase and go meet your friends in the park. It's a totally different story if you're an 80-year-old woman who has a broken hip, or who has arthritic knees, where that staircase represents essentially a barricade.

And so, those are just a couple of the ways in which the way in which the city was built 150 years ago is still having important health outcomes at the present. There is a, I don't want to say historical determinism to how this happens. But basically, historical decision-making produced the conditions in which this is possible.

Emily Tran: Right, so it was very contingent, it wasn't inevitable—

Richard Keller: Exactly.

Emily Tran: —that things turned out this way.

You mentioned that when you started this project you got into many debates with people in the department about how this project was different from— or your approach as a historian was different from that of, say, sociologists, journalists, anthropologists. Can you talk more about how the historian's approach to something like the Paris heat wave and your focus on historical context, how that led to different methodology, sources, or analysis than a sociologist or journalist might take?

Richard Keller: So, I'm glad you asked this question because I, you know, while I kind of tried to impersonate a sociologist or an anthropologist while doing the project, I'm sure I won't convince any sociologists and anthropologists that I did so particularly well, you know. I'm not trying to pretend to be something I'm not. I wrote this very much as a social historian of public health.

So, at the same time, that means that the sources are different, right? Just like, if somebody is doing a project on ancient Egypt or ancient Rome, they are going to use a very different archive from the typical archive that somebody is using to do a project on 19th-century Britain, France and the United States. You can't just go to the Wisconsin Historical Society and find the records, right? So, they wind up using, typically, you know, something that looks more like archaeological methods, but they're not archaeologists, right, they're thinking as historians, but maybe adopting some of those methods.

I would argue the same thing applies to doing the history of the very recent past. So, the kinds of sources I was looking at included, you know, typical sorts of things that a historian looking at these phenomenon 100 years from now, if somebody wants to revisit this crisis, might use.

So, those were papers from the Ministry of Health, for example. One of the cool things about doing very recent history is you can do a lot of it without leaving your desk. So, I was able, through the National Assembly's website, to find all of the discovery documentation that supported the hearings of the French National Assembly into crisis, including every single email that went in and out of the Ministry of Health during the heatwave disaster. And you know, I did that right from my desk in Madison, like 500 pages of emails. So that was pretty convenient.

In order to try to figure out how the media were covering the disaster, I went to the French national media library, which has everything that's ever aired on French radio and television, since the beginning. It's all available to stream it right there in the library at a workstation. So, there are ways in which this can be a really convenient process.

That said, I also wanted to look at the spaces in which people not only died but in which people lived their lives. So, I was able, through some pretty extensive detective work, to find the addresses of about 100 people who died during the disaster. They were people who were buried at public expense in a cemetery in the outskirts of Paris. I was able to get their names and dates of birth and death from their headstones, and then wrote to public records offices to try to determine where they, where they were when they died.

And I visited every single one of their addresses, at least all that I was able to find—there were four cases of people who were homeless, who had no record of any recent address. The reason I wanted to do this is I wanted to look at the living conditions. I wanted to try to look at spaces that people had inhabited, to try to think about environments of particular kinds of vulnerability. And that was incredibly telling part of the story.

It was an incredibly rich resource that, you know, really showed me that we need to think creatively about the kinds of sources that we're using. This was a way of reflecting not only on what politicians or epidemiologists or journalists said about, about the disaster, but indeed, by interviewing their neighbors, by interviewing shopkeepers that might have known them to try to piece together a social history of what this person's life was like—not only how they died alone but how they lived alone. And that's indeed where the title *Fatal Isolation* comes from.

Emily Tran: It sounds like by studying the recent past, there's so many opportunities. The archive is readily accessible, you can go into these spaces and meet the friends and neighbors of the people

that are in your history. But what are some challenges that students might face if they're trying to study the recent past as a historian?

Richard Keller: Yeah, there are certain things that are much easier. The records, the sources tend to be more readily available.

However, you know, unlike the dead people many historians typically study, when you work on the very recent past, people can talk back to you and they can contest your interpretation of what's happening. So, one needs to be ready for that, right?

When you're working on subjects who are still alive, even when you're working on people who died but who knew people who are still alive, when you're talking to ministry officials who, you know, you might find botched a certain situation, well they have the opportunity to answer you, which they don't, if you're doing a project on the Civil War or the French Revolution where debates tend to be among scholars, so I can talk to other experts in that field and we can argue about what the sources are telling us.

But here, the sources have a way of talking back to you directly. So, that can be incredibly fruitful, but it can also present some challenges. But it certainly does keep you honest as a historian.

Emily Tran: If we go back to Connor's question, then, if you are a student that's putting together a history project—maybe you have three or four months to do it—how close to the present can we get as historians? You said earlier, something that happened an hour ago is history. But if you are a student making a project, how close to the present would you be willing to go?

Richard Keller: I think this is something that a student needs to discuss with their teacher, because as I indicated earlier, right, historians have different ideas about how to answer that question. I would say anything goes but indeed you've got to please your teacher, right, so I would you know get prior approval. I would not ask for forgiveness after the fact.

But, you know, if I were to do a history of the very recent past, so let's say something like something we've just been through: the presidential election. Well, there is very much a history of this presidential election, even though it is ongoing, right, and still under challenge, depending on who you talk to.

Well, how would I approach this as a historian? I would try to think about other close or potentially contested elections. I would try to think about the history of political rhetoric. Why is one side contesting the election? And to what end, I would try to look at other elections in the past and U.S. history and think about what kinds of lessons they might have for us when looking at this contemporary election. I wouldn't try to write a history of the 2020 election, so much as I would try to set it in its historical context. So that's I think an important distinction.

The same thing with something like the COVID-19 pandemic, which we are certainly in the middle of living through. Well, what is it that prior pandemics can tell us about the experiences we might be having now? What is it that prior pandemics CAN'T tell us about the sorts of experiences we're having now, right? We can look to the 1918 flu pandemic and learn a lot about societies coping with isolation, societies coping with shutdowns, with fear of the unknown. But they didn't have Netflix to help them through it.

So, there are certain things about our contemporary pandemic that are really dramatically different from what unfolded in the past. It doesn't mean we can't think about this contemporary pandemic and through a sort of historian's lens.

Emily Tran: Right. So, pick a moment right now that you are really interested in, and then think about how the past can shed some light on this moment without necessarily studying this exact moment.

Richard Keller: That's exactly right. Yes.

Emily Tran: So, my final question before I let you go: What was the earliest history research project that you remember working on when you were growing up?

Richard Keller: Oh, gosh. I did not participate in National History Day when I was when I was a kid, although my son is a freshman in high school now and he's doing it as we speak.

I am trying to think. I, you know, certainly took world history courses where I had to look at things in the ancient past as a middle school or high school student. But in terms of, you know, real research, I'd say the late 19th century is about—since I've been a university student and in graduate school—I would say about as far back as I've ever gone is the 19th century.

Emily Tran: Professor Keller, thank you so much for being on the show.

Richard Keller: Excellent, thanks so much for having me Emily. I appreciate your questions.

[MUSIC begins]

Emily Tran: Students and teachers, do you have a question about how to do history? Record a voice memo, send it in and we'll take your question to a UW historian. Our email address is outreach@history.wisc.edu.

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Thank you for listening.