

## Introduction

Henry Ford was and remains a paradoxical and contested figure. Despite the plethora of studies concerning the man, his company, and the 'ism' that came to bear his name, Ford's life and legacy remain central to questions concerning the history of management thought and practice (Wood & Wood, 2003; Wren, 2005). In popular management textbooks, he is portrayed as an archetype of modern American industrialism: the man who intensified F.W. Taylor's scientific principles through technological applications of various kinds. Such readings might suggest that Ford's place in management history and the history of management thought is settled. However, Ford's life, career and management style remain subjects of sustained fascination because his motivations and actions are shrouded in paradox (Muldoon, 2018). At various points during Ford's life and since, he has been deemed 'ignorant', 'genius', 'idealist', 'reactionary', 'capitalist', 'socialist', 'anarchist', 'pacifist', 'anti-Semite', 'industrialist', 'naturalist', 'internationalist', 'isolationist', 'paternalist', 'welfare capitalist', 'union basher', 'philanthropist', 'villain' and 'hero' (to name but a few). These contradictory labels have informed various studies and scholarly preoccupations, all of which bind larger questions regarding management history to the personal paradoxes of one man's complicated life.

Alongside Ford's contested place in management history are questions regarding his *relation to and understanding of* the past (Butterfield, 1965; Swigger, 2008). Indeed, Ford's understanding of history itself contains many of the paradoxes named above. On the one hand Ford is known to have claimed that "history is more or less bunk", leading to charges that he lived his life with a general ignorance of the past and animosity toward historical details. Yet on the other hand, he was an enthusiastic antiquarian credited with providing a key contribution to America's historical experience. Between 1919 and 1929, Ford embarked on a personal project to procure and display the 'greatest single collection' of 19<sup>th</sup> century Americana in the world (Greenleaf, 1964: 85). Through this, his Greenfield Village (opened in 1929 and consisting of 90 acres of nearly 100 historic buildings) became America's first 'living history' site (Herhold, 2019), which (alongside The Henry Ford Museum) remains a popular attraction today (The Henry Ford, 2019). The man who was reported as saying that "history is bunk" was the same who provided the basis on which the genre of 'living history' has proliferated globally (Leon & Piatt, 1989; Swigger, 2008).

Ford's seemingly contradictory position on what constitutes 'history' is the focus and starting point of this paper. The aim is to explore this specific paradox by arguing that Ford's public decry of history through his claim that "history is more or less bunk" was not merely a philistine remark, but in fact a statement that points to a specific historiographical position that informed the basis of America's first 'living history' site and his management philosophy more generally. To make the case for this alternative perspective, Ford's claim is considered as a gesture of allegiance to a deeper cultural sensibility that was informed by the popular philosophical and theological thought of the previous century. This paper therefore builds on studies that have considered Ford's industrialism to have been rooted in 'transcendental' rather than ostensibly 'secular' and 'materialist' practices (Watt, 2020). By providing an overview of this thought and accounting for Ford's engagement with its key tenets, his claim that "history is more or less bunk" is understood as part of wider efforts to understand the influence of Ralph Waldo Emerson's transcendental philosophy on his personal worldview and industrial philosophy (Nye, 1974, 1979). By addressing the context and historiographical tensions in Emerson's own writing on history, the paper explores the extent to which Ford's Emersonian understanding of 'history' was the basis on which we might reconcile the paradox behind him making the claim of "bunk" and in turn embarking on his own historical projects. The paper draws on biographical detail, secondary criticism, and primary archival evidence, to consider the following questions: What was Ford's historiography? How did it influence his historical projects? What does it tell us about the organisation, work and technology so commonly associated with his name? What did he mean when he said that "history is more or less bunk"?

### **"History is more or less bunk": Contextualising Ford's claim (1916 - 1919)**

In 1916, *The Chicago Tribune* published a series of weekly articles based on interviews Charles Wheeler had conducted with Henry Ford. In the fourth and final interview of the series, Ford made a statement that has been repeated and discussed in its paraphrased form ever since: "History is bunk" (Wheeler, 1916a; Swigger, 2008). At the time, his purported claim that "history is bunk" (as it was expressed in various newspaper headlines of the day) was received as proof that Ford was a simple, uneducated man, and therefore the hegemonic ramifications of his personal convictions and management methods were premised on a philistinism that represented a cultural

danger to American life. These were significant charges, not only for contextualising the meaning behind the claim, but also for how the utterance was received.

As Butterfield (1965) has emphasised, even Ford's full statement (that "history is more or less bunk", rather than the 'folkloric' version "history is bunk") was not uttered 'without some determined prodding.' (ibid, 53) Likewise, although the reports did not distort Ford's testimony, the headline writers and editorialists from several national papers reduced his claim to 'history is bunk', which became fixed in Ford legend (ibid, 56).

Three years after the first publication of these words, Ford appeared as a witness in a libel lawsuit he launched against the *Tribune*. The libel in question was an editorial article entitled "Ford Is An Anarchist", which described him as an 'ignorant idealist' (Wheeler, 1916b). Due to an early error by Ford's legal team at the start of the trial, the inquiry pursued the claim that Ford was "ignorant about most things" making the case of libel one that concerned whether or not Ford was "a well-informed man, competent to educate the people" (Nevins & Hill, 1957: 136), rather than whether he was instead 'an anarchistic enemy of the nation'. This exposed Ford to questions about historical facts, revealing the limits of his education and knowledge of American history.

At the time of the trial Ford was at the height of his celebrity and considered one of the most popular people in the world. This was due to the success of his mass-produced automobiles and the recent introduction of his Five-Dollar Day living wage (announced on January 5<sup>th</sup>, 1914). The Five-Dollar Day divided the political terrain of the period (Raff, 1988: 387–388) due to its perceived radicalism and socialistic orientation (see McCraw, 1997: 264; Swigger, 2008: 46). The outlets that pursued Ford on account of his 'profit-sharing scheme' contributed to his growing legend and celebrity, so much so that it has been argued that '[b]y the time the newspapers were finished with the Five-Dollar Day, Ford's image was permanently established and would be presented to the public time and again over the decades to come' (Alvarado & Alvarado, 2001: 25).

The divisive nature of public opinion surrounding Ford at this time contributed to Richard Hofstadter's conclusion that Ford was the 'last businessman' to enjoy a national reception and a

‘heroic image’ (Hofstadter, 1964: 235). While for many, Ford’s *curriculum vitae* from simple ‘farm boy’ to successful ‘industrialist’ embodied the emergent rags-to-riches narrative of the American myth of entrepreneurial success (Weiss, 1988), others framed his conduct as a consequence of ruthless greed, capitalist exploitation and philistine pragmatism. This split in public perception fuelled the media coverage that gave further prominence to the ‘Ford legend’ fascinating the nation. Except for President Calvin Coolidge, between 1916-1929 more *New York Times* articles were written about Henry Ford than any other living American (King & Fine, 2000: 73). This was something Ford courted to the benefit of his company, personal reputation and the causes closest to his heart (Wik, 1972: 44).

With public attention acutely focused on the sensibilities of the man whose production-line techniques (the moving assembly-line), labour relations policies (Five-Dollar Day) and affordable mass-produced products (the Model T) promised to change both the industrial means of mass production and global consumption, Ford was becoming increasingly outspoken on many issues of the day. This included America’s involvement in World War I, which he viewed as an ostensibly “European” conflict. Ford openly contested America’s preparedness movement, issuing pamphlets and opinion pieces to make his case for pacifism. At the heart of this view was a concern for the wastefulness he associated with war’s impact on American industry and his own business in particular. Ford combined this concern with his distrust of New York bankers (and by association the “Jews” against whom he would develop a more direct and systematic attack in the years to come) whom he saw as orchestrating America’s involvement for their own financial gain (Brinkley, 2004: 191).

The issue of preparedness led to his highly publicised and ultimately failed ‘peace ship’ mission of 1915 (Hershey, 1967; Kraft, 1978). Ford was profusely derided for his pacifistic position across many regional and national media outlets. It was this that ultimately culminated in his partly successful attempt to sue the *Tribune* for defamation of character after the editorial was printed on June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1916 alleging he was “not merely an ignorant idealist, but an anarchistic enemy of the nation.” (June 23, 1916, excerpted at “Henry Ford Libel Lawsuit Against the *Chicago Tribune*, 1916-1919,” 2011). Due to the political climate at the time, the *Tribune*’s personal attack on Ford can be interpreted as part of a more extensive campaign to undermine his broader opposition to

preparedness (see Brinkley, 2004: 229–234). By casting Ford as a man with a profound ignorance of America’s past and place in the world, the *Tribune* could propagandise a narrative that aligned pacifism and anti-preparedness to a deep-seated ‘anti-American’ sensibility (Butterfield, 1965).

Following the widespread newspaper coverage of his revolutionary Five-Dollar Day, Ford’s statement received extensive media attention and public intrigue (King & Fine, 2000; Lewis, 1976). The simplicity of his statement – paraphrased and reported as, “History is bunk” – led to a reductive commentary and depiction of Ford as an ignorant, philistine, and an ostensibly anti-historical and anti-intellectual figure (Baldwin, 2001: 87). However, while the newspaper-reading public were told about the apparently ignorant mind of the eccentric tycoon, it’s very simplicity also cemented his heroic image as an American folk hero (Lewis, 1976). Rather than damage his public image, the extensively reductive and partisan nature of the newspaper reports were perceived by many as an ‘elitist’ and ‘establishment’ assault on the uneducated musings of the humble farm-boy whose products had brought many freedom from the drudgery of agrarian work, and his narrative one of hope (Wik, 1972). In 1919 the *New York Times* suggested Ford was the only man in America’s history to make farmers happy (Wik, 1972: 34). This was not just a populist sentiment held by agrarian workers and aspiring industrialists, whom Ford considered ‘the real people of the world’ (Lane, 2015). As Butterfield has suggested, the shortened version of Ford’s claim – that “History is Bunk” – became a ‘folklore version’ that furthered his heroic image and public reception (Butterfield, 1965: 53). Indeed, Ford’s claim of “bunk” was not a straightforwardly anti-intellectual position, but rather one that aligned him to an established strain of historical thinking. In Richards’ (1948) account of the trial, Voltaire, Plutarch, Goethe and Thomas Jefferson are listed as four figures who had also said, ‘in so many words, that history was bunk’. And yet, for some reason,

‘when Ford testified ... there was much excited slavering and pointing of fingers in his direction. He was scoffed at by those who scoff easily, but as a poultice for his sores, if he needed any, he had many letters from people who said he was right and offered proof of what they thought historical misstatement – a list of dark spots in the past which later-day bookkeepers had white-washed, and stories which seemed

to bear out the thesis that recorded history was a cracked and convex looking-glass.’  
(ibid: 171)

Beyond the superficial depictions of Ford in the press, there appeared to be more to Ford’s claim than a statement of his ‘ignorant idealism’. At the time of its utterance, the claim resonated with many Americans who heard a nuance to his words that they felt cut through the establishment noise of political debate. As with many populist slogans, what was deemed as overly simple by one faction of the population provided a nodal point around which another could form its antagonism and support. For Ford, those who ‘scoffed’ at his statement and rendered it evidence of a low-minded ignorance were part of the very “bunk” he appeared to have ascribed to history itself. These, he later clarified, were the “few people who think they want war—the politicians, the rulers, the Big Business men, who think they can profit by it...” (Lane, 2015 [1917]) Through these words, Ford cast the *Tribune* as the media extension of the very elite that carried out these few people’s bidding. After all, it was this very media that shortened his claim from “history is more or less bunk” into the pithy three-word paraphrase it is commonly remembered as today (see Butterfield, 1965: 53).

By delving deeper into Ford’s convictions and the context from which they developed, his utterance can be read as a gesture with more significant implications than a mere philistine remark. This ultimately culminated in Ford’s own contribution to the historical experience of America through his Museum and living history site, Greenfield Village (Swigger, 2008). To this end, the paper seeks to offer an alternative understanding of the claim itself, by considering how it formed the basis of his Greenfield Village, and relates to his wider worldview and philosophy of industry (i.e., Fordism). For Ford, “bunk” was not just limited to ‘academic scholarship’ or ‘book’ history, but a plethora of further actors, agents and institutions that undermined what he felt to be right, American, and the very values he espoused and was seen to embody. As Ford clarified at the trial, “I did not say it was bunk. It was bunk to me ... I did not need it very bad” (as quoted in Nevins & Hill, 1957).

**Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Ford: Historical context and/as Analytical Framework**

Before providing an account of what I have termed ‘Ford’s relation to the past’ and an alternative interpretation of his claim that “history is more or less bunk”, this section focuses on the figure that informed Ford’s position on the subject: the American Transcendentalist, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882). This section provides an account of Ford’s engagement with Emerson’s work by drawing on secondary biographical sources and primary archival evidence. A framework for understanding the context of the statement is provided by giving an overview of Emerson’s own historiographical position, which forms the basis through which Ford’s ‘relation to the past’ and his understanding of “bunk” will be examined in subsequent sections.

### ***Ford’s encounter with Emerson’s writing and thought (1913)***

Ford was introduced to Emerson’s writing and ideas by the American literary naturalist John Burroughs in 1913. Ford had instigated the meeting with Burroughs upon learning that the naturalist had developed a ‘grudge’ against modern industrial progress, and believed that Ford’s mass-produced automobile encouraged ‘vulgar people to despoil the lovely countryside’ (Ford, 2012: 70). Ford sought to change Burroughs’ viewpoint by presenting him with ‘a Ford automobile all complete’ so Burroughs could experience his technology as one that was in harmony with the natural landscape rather than its potential ruination (Brinkley, 2004: 123–124). Ford believed firmly that his industrialism was in harmony with the natural world rather than a movement against its order and beauty; something he emphasised in his personal writing (Ford, 2012 [1922], 2002 [1926], 1929).

Upon receiving Ford’s invitation (in a letter dated December 6<sup>th</sup>, 1912), Burroughs dictated his terms that ‘[t]here shall be no publicity in connection with it’ (Barrus, 1925: 185). Ford agreed, emphasising his aim was to convince Burroughs that his commercial technology sought to serve both everyday Americans and the natural world by opening up America’s environmental wonders to ‘the people’ through an affordable means of private transportation (Burlingame, 1970: 20): “I am doing things that I know ought to be done, and that are making the world better”, Ford explained six years later to another critic, the American author, Upton Sinclair: “Above everything else, transportation. I believe that transportation is the great secret of progress. Transportation makes it possible for us to exchange ideas and to understand one another.” (Sinclair, 1919: 129)

After making Ford’s acquaintance, and learning more of the man, his machinery, and the logic and convictions that lay behind their generation and organisation, Burroughs and Ford became friends, and their extended ‘vagabonding’ trips (made possible by the automobile gifted to Burroughs by Ford) were documented in Burroughs’ subsequent letters and literary journals (Burroughs, 1921). It was on one of these trips that Burroughs suggested that Emerson’s *oeuvre* on individualism, nature and God were in line with Ford’s personal ideals and convictions, particularly his understanding of the relationship between Nature and Technology. As Ford would later write, ‘If [Burroughs] talked more of one person than another, it was Emerson. Not only did he know Emerson by heart as an author, but he knew him as a spirit. He taught me to know Emerson.’ (Ford, 2012: 71)

Through Burroughs it is understood that Ford became a ‘devotee’ of Emerson and symbolically fashioned his management philosophy on Emerson’s ideas: ‘Ford and Emerson were in accord in believing machines like the motorcar were in harmony with nature as long as they were designed and used with integrity’ (Palestini, 2011: 90). Ford declared that at both a personal and a spiritual level he found in Emerson’s work a ‘source of solace and spiritual renewal’ (Renehan Jr., 1992: 25) and he carried a ‘small, light-blue paperbound two-inch-square pamphlet of Emerson excerpts, titled *Gems*, to be pulled from his pocket for inspirational reference as needed’ (Baldwin, 2001: 46). In addition to anecdotal correspondences detailing Ford’s engagement with Emerson, there is also archival evidence that from 1913 onward Ford acquired private copies of Emerson essays. In the archives at the *Benson Ford Research Center* there are numerous listings of Emerson’s works in Ford’s private library and annotated copies of Emerson’s work confirmed as written in Ford’s own hand (See Table 1.)

*Table 1: Markings in Ford's copy of Emerson's Essays: First and Second Series (Henry Ford Archives, Accession 1, boxes 14-7)*

<b>Emerson Essay</b>	<b>First Series (1841) or</b>	<b>Pages referenced or marked by Ford</b>	<b>Additional words or comments</b>

	<b>Second Series (1844)</b>		<b>(i.e., written in the dust-jacket in Ford's hand)</b>
<i>History</i>	First	✓	
<i>Self-Reliance</i>	First	✓	
<i>Compensation</i>	First	✓	
<i>Spiritual Laws</i>	First	✓	✓
<i>Love</i>	First	✓	✓
<i>Friendship</i>	First	✓	
<i>Prudence</i>	First	✓	
<i>Heroism</i>	First	✓	✓
<i>The Over-Soul</i>	First	✓	
<i>Circles</i>	First	✓	✓
<i>Intellect</i>	First	✓	✓
<i>Art</i>	Second	✓	✓
<i>The Poet</i>	Second	✓	
<i>Experience</i>	Second	✓	
<i>Character</i>	Second	✓	
<i>Manners</i>	Second	✓	
<i>Gifts</i>	Second		
<i>Nature</i>	Second		
<i>Politics</i>	Second	✓	
<i>Nominalist and Realist</i>	Second		

These details have been the basis for scholarly and biographical considerations of Ford's principles being cognate with an interpretation of Emerson, even if it is not possible to infer a direct influence. As detailed above, markings in Ford's private copies of Emerson's *Essays: First and Second Series*, show Ford's personal engagement with Emerson's 'early writings'. This collection includes Emerson's discourse on 'History' (1841) as well as other commentaries on the subject, which will be addressed in greater detail below.

### *Emerson's Historicism*

Emerson's published works began in 1836 with his essay *Nature*, however he was most prolific as a writer and public intellectual from 1841 – with the publication of his 'First Series' of *Essays* – to 1870, with the publication of *Society and Solitude*. This placed his most productive years towards the end of America's antebellum period. This period saw a substantive shift in understandings of the 'American identity'. Central to this were questions and challenges related to American notions of destiny, history and character. Hobsbawm (2010 [1962]) has described this period as being defined by a 'dual revolution' between industrialisation and political liberalisation, which saw 'the greatest transformation in human history since the remote times when men invented agriculture and metallurgy, writing, the city and the state' (Hobsbawm, 2010: 1).

Emerson's life and work were therefore of a time 'when capitalism came of age and entrepreneurship became the primary model of American identity' (Sandage, 2005: 3). Likewise, many Emerson scholars contextualise his works as exploring the emergent tension between traditional notions of self-culture and spiritual enlightenment with the new demands of an emerging market-based economy (Sellers, 1992; Teichgraeber, 1995; Plotica, 2017). This context has key implications for understanding Emerson's *relation to* and *understanding of* 'history'. In the opening lines of *Nature* (1836 [1969]), Emerson's position against history as a sacrifice of individuality for tradition is made clear:

Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an *original relation to the universe?* (ibid: 3 emphasis added)

Emerson believed that there was a guiding principle through which the American individual could realise his inner potential (or 'genius') and bring it forth into the world. This was predicated on that individual's 'reliance' on their personal beliefs and private convictions, described above as an 'original relation to the universe'. This notion formed the basis of his foremost doctrine of 'self-reliance' (as articulated in his well-known essay of this title in 1841 [1969]) which further

articulated his idea that what is true for one individual in his or her private heart is not merely a private conviction but is revealed as true through its recognition in humanity at large. In the opening to 'Self-Reliance', Emerson writes, 'To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, - that is genius' (ibid: 265), before adding that this is why '[i]n every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts.' (Emerson, 1969: 165) Through these words, Emerson put forward an understanding of 'the self' that has become central to the Modern Age, and the foundations on which the 20<sup>th</sup> Century came to be understood as 'the American century' (Evans, 2000; Banham, 2002). This articulated the emerging sense of the 'American identity' being increasingly defined by its cultural *preoccupation with* and historical *commitment to* innovation and progress (Hughes, 2004). For many, Ford was an archetypal embodiment of this new identity (Lewis, 1976). Indeed, the proliferation of Ford's ideas and products via his mass production methods have been read as the materialisation of this foremost Emersonian notion (Nye, 1974, 1979; Watt, 2020).

It was also through his guiding principle of self-reliance that Emerson developed his two-fold critique of 'institutional religion' and 'academic history'; both of which he saw as encouraging a passive engagement with past traditions and events. To overcome this, he called on his own and future generations to behold 'God and nature face to face', rather than live a life built on the 'sepulchres of the fathers' (Emerson, 1969: 3); to consider oneself as *a subject of* and *in relation to* history rather than a passive element. This doctrine of non-conformity was also the basis of his 1838 'Divinity School Address', which shocked of the Unitarian establishment through his critique of 'historical Christianity'. However, this position was not a straightforward rejection of historical thought or the past. As Dolan (2014) has explained, Emerson's critical stance towards established historical record and interpretation was one that sought 'historical attunement rather than denial ... [inveighing] against history more from fear of oversaturation than from lack of interest.' (ibid: 109) Other critics have suggested the same, describing his essay 'History' (1841) as 'one of the cornerstones of the Emersonian world view', which should be considered alongside 'Nature' (1836) and 'Self-Reliance' (1841) (two of his most celebrated essays and concepts) as central to his transcendental philosophy (Pearce, 2007: 41).

Although largely understood as a treatise on individualism, ‘Self-Reliance’ also addressed the social significance of historical understanding through individuals’ relations to the past. Emerson considered all the great movements and institutions that had shaped humanity’s historical unfolding beginning with the self-reliant convictions of key individuals:

*‘Every true man is a cause, a country, and an age ... A man Caesar is born, and for ages after we have a Roman Empire. Christ is born, and millions of minds so grow and cleave to his genius, that he is confounded with the virtue and the possible of man. An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man; as Monachism, of the Hermit Antony; the Reformation, of Luther; Quakerism, of Fox; Methodism, of Wesley; Abolition, of Clarkson. Scipio, Milton called “the height of Rome”; and all history resolves itself very easily into the biography of a few stout and earnest persons.’* (Emerson, 1969: 174 emphasis added)

This passage sees Emerson put forward an initial critique of history being understood as the linear unfolding of chronicled events through time. Emerson aligned his view of history with the European Romantic sense that there is a transcendental relation between ontological binaries: the infinite and the finite; God and man; the material and immaterial; the individual and the social; and – regarding Man’s historical being in the world – the ‘hours of our life and the centuries of time.’ (Emerson, 1965a: 140) As Marwick points out, this ‘common European Romantic idea’ sought to ‘[wrestle] the history of the common man back from dominant chronicle history of dates and battles and into the arena of the individual. But it is not a rejection of history *per se*.’ (see Marwick, 2001; referenced in Pearce, 2007: 44) For Emerson, ‘[e]very reform was once a private opinion, and when it shall be a private opinion again it will solve the problem of the age.’ (Emerson, 1965a: 140) In this sense, Emerson’s understanding of history provides a point of entry into his wider philosophy. Indeed, it has been said of Emerson that he ‘wanted to get his whole philosophy into each essay’ (Baym et al., 1994: 992) and ‘History [the essay] is certainly no exception’ (Pearce, 2007: 43). The essay is found in the same collection as ‘Self-Reliance’ (1841) (see table 1), which also outlines his transcendental view of the past by aligning it with his belief that history contains an innate ‘Humanity’ common to all individuals and therefore must be ‘explained from individual experience’ (Emerson, 1965a: 140).

Emerson's account and valuation of history was therefore premised on its potential for humanity to relate to it through individual experience: lending itself to a 'social' rather than an ostensibly 'heroic' theory of history. This understanding was expressed through his early writings and became a sustained theme in an *oeuvre* 'largely directed towards constructing "an original relation with the universe"' which he reverted to time and again: "beware of tradition"' "forget historical Christianity"; "lop off all superfluity and tradition, and fall back on the nature of things"' (Lewis, 1955: 23). Emerson's conceptualisation of history can therefore be interpreted as the basis on which human and cultural needs can be understood afresh, thus empowering the American individual to do the same (Pearce, 2007). Throughout his writing, Emerson exhibited a secular sense of history which was in keeping with Protestantism's emphasis on the individual believer '[to look] to the inner energies of the self rather than to institutions or collectivities as the primary instruments of such progress' (Dolan, 2014: 110–11). This has clear implications for Ford, his understanding of history as it relates to his industrial and managerial practices, and indeed his claim that 'history is more or less bunk', which will now be addressed in relation to Emerson.

### **Emerson's American history, Progress, and Fordism as 'cause, Country and Age'**

As one of America's foremost 19<sup>th</sup> Century thinkers, the legacy of Emerson's thought has important implications for the central ideas underpinning American life in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries. This applies to both the history of philosophy and ideas, as well as the influence of his thought beyond purely intellectual domains of activity. Henry Ford's life, work and industrial philosophy is a pertinent instance of the latter (Nye, 1974, 1979). To this end, this section will delve further into Emerson's understanding of history as a means of interpreting Ford's claim that "history is more or less bunk", and consider the implications of this statement more broadly from an Emersonian perspective.

Initially, Emerson's calls for an 'original relation to the universe' suggests an 'a-' or 'anti-historical' sensibility. It is indeed possible to mobilise some choice lines from his *oeuvre* to mount a rejection of the past as mere tradition, heritage, and a sentimentality that inhibits individual, cultural, national, and moral progress. However, such a reading would be a gross oversimplification. Emerson's historical convictions place his relation to history into what Graham

(1997) calls the common category of ‘history as progress’ (Pearce, 2007: 44) Indeed, the history of America – both in terms of its civil unfolding, and in terms of its position in the shaping of the West more generally – has been considered a history *of* modern ‘progress’. The ideas underpinning this were not entirely new: Emerson’s conception was based on two Scottish ideas; “moral sentiment” and “conjectural” (or “stadial”) history. The latter was a philosophy of history based on a four-stage theory of human progress, culminating in the “commercial” stage of development Emerson witnessed during his lifetime as the emerging market-economy of the late Antebellum period (Dolan, 2014: 113).

Correspondingly, Ford’s claim that ‘history is more or less bunk’, was not an outright dismissal of the past. Like Emerson, Ford aligned his historical sensibility to a concern *for* progress, rendering all that falls outside of this modern ideal as ‘more or less bunk’. Ford’s statement therefore invites us to consider it in relation to two categories: first, how his view of history might be understood as a constituent of his wider understanding of ‘bunk’; and second, what aspects of history he did *not* deem ‘more or less bunk’, but rather of value. As Butterfield (1965) has addressed, the term “more or less” leaves a multitude of historical writings, thoughts and perspectives that he did not deem ‘bunk’ at all (Butterfield, 1965: 53).

Emerson and Ford’s shared belief in history as progress provides an entry-point to consider this. In the same manner that Emerson’s philosophy can explain the interconnected logic of Ford’s industrial philosophy (Nye, 1979: Watt, 2020), his ideas also provide a contextual ground and conceptual means of addressing the contradictions at the heart of Ford’s position *on* and seemingly *against* history. Throughout his life, Ford espoused his belief in progress through a series of interviews and co-authored publications (Ford, 2012 [1922], 2002 [1926], 1929); thus, aligning his own industrial activities to ‘the progressive era’ imperatives of the day (Haber, 1973). These were premised on the Progressive belief that the power of technological innovation was a primary force for moving society forward (Hughes, 2004).

Through Emerson, one can read Ford’s claim of history being “more or less bunk” as a gesture towards the past being comprehended as a potential resource for ‘progress’ rather than retrospection (nostalgia), dates (and the memory thereof) or tradition (i.e., conformity to society’s

established institutions). To understand the implications of this, the private sensibilities of Ford need further consideration, specifically his Emersonian conviction that a self-reliant belief in one's private thoughts are the basis on which institutions come to be established. For Emerson, the genius of the individual is determined by the reliance of that individual on his private beliefs: that what is true in his or her private heart is true, by virtue of it being deemed true, by society at large. Even those who contend that Ford was not strictly original in his industrial practices and products, recognise that 'everything new' about 20<sup>th</sup> Century America (i.e., his country and age) were rightly associated with his name (Smith, 1993: 15). By addressing Ford's claim in this way, the interrelation between what Emerson describes as 'cause, country and age' can come to be understood as a parallel basis on which Ford interpreted "history" as "more or less bunk". As his full statement suggests:

"What do we care what they did five hundred or one thousand years ago? It means nothing to me. History is more or less bunk. It's tradition. We don't want tradition. We want to live in the present and the only history that is worth a tinker's dam is the history we make today. That's the trouble with the world. We're living in books and history and tradition. We want to get away from that and take care of today. (Wheeler, 1916a).

With Emerson's historiographical position in mind, Ford's alignment of 'bunk' with 'tradition' contains deeper implications and a more nuanced perspective than a mere or total dismissal of the past. Whether purposefully or not, his words resonate with Emerson's idea that for history to be beneficial to the 'over-spirit of Man', it is necessarily 'biographical' in the sense that the 'common man' can relate to it through his own experience and in the service of his present. Although Ford's words were not delivered with the same articulacy as Emerson's, his sentiment suggests a shared affinity with Emerson's critique of recorded history. Like Emerson, Ford was concerned with the relevance of the past being brought into the 'arena of the individual' (Marwick, 2001; referenced in Pearce, 2007: 44). Indeed, when Ford publicly defended his claim in 1919 he did so by challenging the prosecutor's notion that historical knowledge was a matter of 'education', 'reading' and 'memory'; specifically, his capacity to recall historical facts and dates. He did this by considering this perspective as an intellectual abstraction, removed from the instrumental value

of things, and therefore in juxtaposition to the progressive industrial virtues of ‘action’, ‘industry’ and ‘production’. He repeated this again in his *My Life and Work* (1922), explaining ‘[a]n educated man is not one whose memory is trained to carry a few dates in history – he is one who can accomplish things’ (2012: 73). At the trial, an aspect of what Emerson called the history of ‘kings and their henchmen’ was similarly dismissed by Ford. After haphazardly admitting to using the term ‘bunk’ (albeit not in the manner first put to him by the prosecution), he said something that confused even the prosecutor:

Henry Ford (HR): ... History didn’t usually last a week.

Prosecutor (P). What do you mean, ‘History didn’t last a week?’

HF. In the present war.

P. You mean that history didn’t last – what history?

HF. Airships and things we used were out of date in a week.

P. What has that to do with history? (*Tribune Suit Record*, pp. 5728-5732., Accession box 53)

Although the prosecutor’s confusion may have been a rhetorical ploy, it could equally have been a genuine response to Ford’s attempt to articulate his historiographical convictions about recorded history. The history he described as not ‘usually last[ing] a week’ spoke to his alternative concern for history in terms of technological innovations and their manifestation as technological artefacts. Through such attempts at clarification, Ford’s claims of history as “bunk” must be considered more fully as something greater than a mere rejection of the past as such. Rather, he sought to discredit certain approaches and sources deemed significant to historicist understandings. Such a claim can also be seen as an attempt to position himself (and therefore his organisation and the technology it produced) on the side of American progress rather than dead facts, tradition and the inferior technologies produced for the war effort.

Ford’s declaration that certain forms of historical record and understanding were “bunk” can therefore be understood as a statement specifically regarding ‘book’ or ‘academic’ history, which he felt superfluous to the demands of industrial progress and 20th Century American life (Hughes, 2004). This aligns his perspective to broader considerations of Ford’s industrialism being premised

on a transcendental view of technology (Nye, 1979; Greenleaf, 1964), wherein industrial advancement was understood as the foundation of social and moral progress (Lewis, 1955; Marx, 1999). For Ford, the challenges facing Progressive Era America required the industrial imperatives to which his organisational framework was aligned (i.e., Fordism). In this sense, the worldview that informed Ford's industrialism was the same that underpinned his view that certain forms of historical understanding are "more or less bunk". For Ford, it was through industrial and technological progress that the social, economic and moral needs of America could be met: like Emerson, Ford 'revered the great ideals of Progress with a decidedly capital P' (Baldwin, 2001: 46), espousing his belief in technological progress as the foundation of his 'philosophy of industry' (Ford, 1929: 81 – 107) and the basis on which history should be understood, enjoyed and mobilised.

### ***The Alignment of "History as More or Less Bunk" with Ford's Wider Industrial Worldview***

In further alignment with Emerson – who warned against viewing books as mere repositories and records of past thought – Ford's sentiment was that recorded history failed to pay heed to America's rural and industrial heritage, and therefore contained very little transcendent significance to present and future Americans. Like his mass-produced automobiles, which were created for 'the people' – and can be understood as a massification of Ford's own individual genius (Wik, 1972: 11) – the claim that historicist concerns for the dates and the events of 'kings and dukes' ran counter to Emerson's imperative for 'students to read history actively and not passively' (Emerson, 1965a: 142): to have an active engagement with the past, present and future.

Further support for the suggestion that Ford's perspective of 'bunk' alluded to a deeper historical sensibility can be seen in the onus he placed on understanding the mechanical workings of 19<sup>th</sup> Century technological artefacts. For instance, Greenleaf (1964) has argued that Ford's view of technology was a central justification and rationale for his poor knowledge of historical 'facts' and 'dates' (ibid: 97). Quoting William J. Cameron (the editor of Ford's *Dearborn Independent*), Greenleaf suggests that Ford possessed a unique hermeneutic capacity when it came to technological artefacts, observing that for Ford 'machines were his library':

He could read in an old machine what the man [i.e., its creator] had, what idea he had when he started it, what he had to work with, and just where he stopped and couldn't go any further because the methods weren't yet discovered or the material wasn't yet discovered. He could read those things; they were living things to him, those machines. He was really a poet. Everything spoke to him. He had a queer feeling about machines just as some men have about horses. (ibid: 97).

In them, Greenleaf suggests,

Ford discerned how man had responded to the challenge of environment and reorganized the materials of nature. Here was a story that went back to the first dim understanding man had formed about the possibilities of creating things; and in every machine, old or new, Ford saw the mark of progress and a lesson of human triumph. "That's the way to study history – by noting evolutionary processes," said Ford (ibid: 97).

This Emersonian sentiment was taken further by Ford in his 1929 publication, *My Philosophy of Industry* (published the same year as the opening of Greenfield Village). At various points in this text (which was an edited account of interviews conducted with its editor, Ray Leone Faurote), Ford gestured towards Emerson's self-reliant imperative to enjoy 'an original relation to the universe' and to articulate an individual 'philosophy of insight and not of tradition' (Emerson, 1969: 3). Ultimately, this text, alongside Greenfield Village and interviews he gave at the time, provide evidence of Ford's awareness of his own place in America's historical unfolding and go some way to clarify the sentiments underpinning his claim that history is "more or less bunk". They suggest that Ford's clear ignorance of historical dates and facts was not without justification or alternative, even if it was something he only sought to justify to himself. At the very least it lends legitimacy to consider seriously what Ford meant by the claim, even by his own account. As one biographer put it, Greenfield Village can be interpreted as an attempt by Ford show what he meant by this seemingly antihistorical utterance:

‘No one knew what, during the years or so following the libel suit, went on in the extra-curricular thought of this true revolutionary. It has been said that he consciously determined to prove what he had meant. Possibly, as the word *history* repeated itself in his mind, he was persuaded to inquire what it truly was. It is not likely that he knew of the historians’ change of mood, of the growing American cultural self-consciousness, or of the effect of new discoveries in archaeology. The fact remains that a kind of history presently engaged countless hours of Henry Ford’s attention and that a considerable segment of opinion had become ready to accept that kind.’ (Burlingame, 1970: 16)

Although Emerson never directly suggested technological artefacts could serve as an alternative to ‘book history’, he had once noted that ‘transcendentalism and machinery agree well’ (Emerson, 1984: 307). Indeed, the historical progress of civilisations is marked and measured by material artefacts (Hesseltine, 1982). By bringing attention to the artefacts of America’s past, Ford could trace and display the basis on which his own historical significance for his ‘cause’ (progress), ‘country’ (America) and ‘age’ (the Automobile age) was based. In the name of progress Ford brought the automobile to the American masses, and sought to do the same with an artifactual display of historical record. Through Greenfield Village, Ford would curate and display his view of history and further his legacy by placing an emphatic onus on the ‘artifactual’ as an alternative approach to the history he deemed “more or less bunk”.

### **Greenfield Village and the Meaning of ‘Bunk’ for Ford**

In one sense, this paper concludes with the end of the trial in 1919. Having been put on the witness stand and questioned about his knowledge of historical facts and dates, the court ruled in favour of Ford’s claim of libel, awarding him six cents. The rest, as it were, is a matter of historical record: having uttered those fateful words, Ford is still remembered as the outspoken industrialist who considered history as “bunk”. And yet, this wasn’t Ford’s final say on the topic. In the years following the trial Ford embarked on a series of curatorial projects, to “show just what actually happened in years gone by” (Accession 65, *Liebold Reminiscences*: 309) and what he really meant by, and considered, “more or less bunk”. This principally took the form of his living historical site, Greenfield Village, which opened in 1929 and was one of the first “living history” sites. As one of

the largest collections of Americana and technological innovation it set a precedent for the pedagogical genre (Schlereth, 1992; Barthel, 1996) which celebrates America's past ingenuity (Hosmer, 1981). By addressing the ideas behind Ford's claim that "history is more or less bunk", and the events leading up to Greenfield Village's creation, this paper has outlined the contextual and conceptual means by which what came next for Ford might indeed be interpreted from a specific – albeit, a somewhat confused and contestable – historiographical standpoint.

Following his trial Ford's attention became focused on attempting to articulate what history meant to him, and the public embarrassment he endured through the trial formed the basis on which his various historical projects started. On the witness stand Ford had clarified that he "did not say [history] was bunk", but that "It was bunk to me ... I did not need it very bad" (Anon, 1919; referenced in Butterfield, 1965: 56). One can therefore see the nature and scope of his historical projects as an attempt to articulate, curate and display a history in contrast to what was "bunk" to him. On his way home from his humiliating ordeal Ford had said to his business representative and private secretary, Ernst G. Liebold, "You know, I'm going to ... give the people an idea of real history. I'm going to start a museum. We are going to show just what actually happened in years gone by". This correspondence led Liebold to conclude that Ford's

'idea in creating the Museum was to show the results of industrial progress in the United States from the earliest conception of industry. That is why the Museum started. [...] I believe that the statement, "History is bunk," may have been brought out in the trial. The idea to have the Museum came at the same time.' (Accession 65, 309).

There is further evidence of this. Speaking in 1935 about Greenfield Village, Ford returned to the notion of "bunk" again, explaining:

"What they call history IS bunk. Once I went to history books to find out what kind of a harrow people used to cultivate their land. Couldn't find it. Nothing but kings and battles. That is the kind of history I think is bunk. The real story of humanity is how the people lived and grew." (Jenkins, 1935: 3 emphasis in original)

Again, some fifteen years after the trial, Ford invokes the Emersonian notion of ‘kings and dukes’ (as ‘kings and battles’) to dismiss ‘book’ history. The ‘they’ are the academics and scholars who write such histories, rather than the ‘people’ for whom he targeted his own historical displays. Like Emerson, Ford emphasized key individuals’ ingenuity (Thomas Edison, for instance) without succumbing to a strictly ‘heroic’ understanding of history (Greenfield, 1964: 96). As he had explained some years earlier, with further Emersonian sentiments of serving the ‘private genius’ of the self-reliant American individual:

“This is the only reason Greenfield Village exists – to give us a sense of unity without people through the generations, and to convey the inspiration of American genius to our young men. As a nation we have not depended so much on rare or occasional genius as on the general resourcefulness of our people. That is our true genius, and I am hoping that Greenfield Village will serve that.” (Vlissingen Jr: 1932)

Since Ford first embarked on what would become Greenfield Village, his motivations have been sought and contested (Simonds, 1928): suggestions have included his sense of “guilt” regarding the impact his industrialism had on the natural landscape (Phillips, 1982: 11); a disenchantment with the present (Wallace, 1986); ‘an artifactual projection of ... his nineteenth-century agrarian boyhood in the Middle West’ (Schlereth, 1992: 121)’; and a populist gesture of national pride (Barthel, 1996: 20). It may have been any combination of these. Ford certainly felt that the *Tribune*’s attack on his character was an attack on his industrialism and therefore American progressivism itself. For Burlingame, Greenfield Village’s ‘whole extravagant display ... is supremely American: in its vastness, its democracy, and above all in its naïve, inarticulate, and disordered reaching into the past that the books have ignored’ (Burlingame, 1970: 20). In this sense, the challenge of gleaning a historiographical position from Ford’s words might be further sought in the physical formation of Greenfield Village.

Whatever his actual motivations and despite the incoherency of their articulation and display, Greenfield Village ‘made several serious and innovative contributions to the study of history’

(Lacey, 1986: 247). This paper's interpretation adds credence to this consideration by delving further into the case that many of these historical ventures, 'stem from Ford's own peculiar genius' and Emersonian 'preoccupations' (ibid: 247). Whether Ford was directly influenced by Emerson or consciously sought Greenfield Village to be an Emersonian venture remains debatable. The context and parallels discussed in this paper have sought, at the very least, to trace the contours of these ideas and their shared sensibility. What is clear is that Ford's historical projects offered a historical perspective that stands against the 'books', 'facts' and 'dates' concerning the chronicled accounts 'kings and their henchman.' In their place, he displayed 'all American things – domestic and mechanical', 'the general resourcefulness of people' (Butterfield, 1965: 66), 'not antiques as such', but 'the history of our people as written into the things their hands made and used' (Hamilton, 1931: 773). Such artefacts not only serve to tell a 'people's history' and chart America's 'social progressivism' (Barthel, 1996: 69), but also challenge the very historicism Ford regarded as "more or less bunk". As Hesseltine (1982) has considered, material artefacts challenge the historicist position and reliance on 'literary remains' (Hesseltine, 1982: 124). It is based on this that Schlereth has considered Greenfield Village an exemplary case-study in the 'pedagogical potential of historical museums and of the artifacts that such institutions usually house' to provide 'cross-disciplinary, comparative, experiential learning environment[s]' (Schlereth, 1992: 120).

By exploring Ford's engagement with history in this way, further studies could scrutinize how, in both word and deed, Ford inherited and channelled a specific notion of America's history; its experience, and how it informs the understanding many of its citizens continue to align to their own sense of national identity today. Despite the ridicule that Ford experienced during the trial and in its immediate aftermath, he did not admit or feel defeated regarding his historical standpoint and denunciation of 'history' as he perceived it. On the contrary, he stood fast in his convictions; and the '[c]ontradictions that he had once feared' and were made public through the *Tribune's* publication and subsequent trial, became central to his own role in America's self-understanding of the past. Through this we might hear a final resonance with Emerson, whose own historicism was of 'an understanding of the distinctive "spirit" of one's "age" as a source of orientation to the future.' (Dolan, 2014: 15) As Ford himself put it in the years between the end of the trial and the opening of Greenfield Village: "I don't read history ... That's in the past. I'm thinking of the future..." (Lochner, 1925: 18).

## **Concluding Remarks**

This paper has offered an alternative interpretation of Ford's claim that "history is more or less bunk". It has been an attempt to argue that these words should not simply be dismissed as a philistine remark, but that they speak to a sensibility articulated in the writing and thought of Ralph Waldo Emerson. By accounting for the affinities between Emerson and Ford, and drawing attention to Ford's accord with Emersonian thought, it is intended that this paper offers more than just an alternative understanding of Ford's personal defence. Greenfield Village can be read as the material legacy of Ford's specific understanding of history. The basis of this is rooted in a contextual account of the cultural milieu from which Ford came to what for many was a confused, contestable and ignorant perspective on the value of history. There is therefore a further contribution, rooted in but not limited to this idiosyncratic counter-reading of a nominal event in the history of Ford's life. As I addressed in the opening section of this paper, the basis of this counter-reading builds on recent considerations of Ford's industrial philosophy being premised on 'transcendental' rather than strictly 'secular' and 'materialist' notions of organizing 'man' and 'machine'. There are therefore parallels to be drawn between Ford's historiographical perspective and legacy (i.e., his claim that "history is more or less bunk" and Greenfield Village) and his wider industrialism (i.e., Fordism) and place in the history of management. This is not least because the history of management thought remains under the shadow of the tensions, confusions and contradictions that lie at the heart of Ford's private convictions and sentiments. A further conclusion to be drawn, therefore, is regarding this paper's method and contribution to understanding Ford more generally in relation to the history of managerial practice and thought. Like his products (themselves now material artefacts displayed at Greenfield Village), the processes of their manufacture, and his radical approach to labour relations, Ford's historiographical position and legacy were rooted in understanding artefacts as imbued with Emersonian notions of self-reliance and individual genius. As he did with his Model T, Five-Dollar day, and moving assembly-line, Ford's historical ventures were a concerted attempt to move history away from the reserve of a privileged few towards a mass consumer market. This paper therefore sits tangentially alongside concerted attempts to challenge taken-for-granted narratives in the history of management thought more generally. The contradictory nature of Ford and many of the managerial and historical legacies of his position remain central to debates in the history of

management. Attempts to reconcile and unpack the nature and implications of these contributions is a task beyond the economy of a single paper, however it is my hope that this paper has gone some way to furthering the discourse around these considerations and has offered further credence to the legitimacy of such projects.

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