



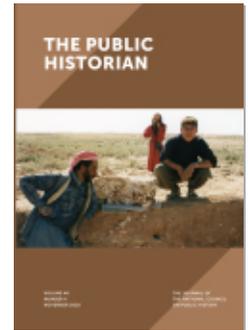
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Public History as a Thesaurus?

Ricardo Santhiago

While reading Jacqueline Nießer and Juliane Tomann’s informative and thought-provoking essay “Public and Applied History in Germany: Just Another Brick in the Wall of the Academic Ivory Tower?,” I could not avoid feeling a strong sense of familiarity with their main remarks on the recent development of what they call public and applied history in their country. In a continent and a hemisphere somewhat distant, Brazilian public history has been confronted with quite similar challenges concerning the collision between established, native practices and the prevalent US public history model, the bonds between public history and history education, and the conceptual and terminological challenges to an ever-growing field. These are among the issues that can be viewed much more clearly in a comparative perspective, such as the one offered by this timely forum.

I find it interesting that the article’s first topic is the teaching of history, or history education in a broader sense—as the very term *Geschichtsdidaktik* conveys—since the connection between it and public history is highly revealing of the key features of the latter. The authors draw this connection in arguing that history didactics was the subdiscipline in Germany that first caught, and created conceptual frameworks for, the growing public interest in the past. In Brazil, education retains the same agility: as I have myself argued,¹ it is—along with oral history and digital history—one of the areas that has fostered the practical and conceptual development of public history in a more emphatic and resonant way. All of these practices imply a direct contact (and, in the first two cases, face-to-face-contact) with the people we vaguely call “publics.”

In the Brazilian case, however, such a relationship is not primarily theoretical. Concepts bequeathed by *Geschichtsdidaktik* have been quite inspiring, encouraging analysis of the different media and places through which historical knowledge—or,

¹ Ricardo Santhiago, “Can we speak of a Brazilian public history?,” *Que história pública queremos? What Public History Do We Want?*, ed. Ana Maria Mauad, Ricardo Santhiago, and Viviane Trindade Borges (São Paulo: Letra e Voz, 2018), 331–38.

if you prefer, the “culture of history”—circulates, boosting investigations on how the school system dialogues with public narratives that often acquire hegemony and ubiquity, influencing how society makes sense of historical events and processes.² But, it is in the school room that the relationship between public history and education takes place in a concrete and productive way: in committed teacher training; in reflexive intervention and action-research projects, through partnerships between public universities and schools; in the understanding of the classroom as a place to create a school-based historical knowledge; in the acknowledgment of the different skills brought into contact in the relationship between teacher and student; and, not least, in the collective struggle for free speech in the classroom, considerably threatened in Brazil after the 2016 democratic rupture.³ In sum, in a history teaching that, by fostering critical thinking, makes the classroom a place for public history to flourish.

It is not surprising that, in a country with marked socioeconomic and educational inequality, public history arose in public (free) universities and acquired a civic dimension, closely linked to the realities that surround it—in Nießer and Tomann’s words, more concerned with making citizens than with making money.⁴ Such an inclination towards a practice intended to create historical awareness and promoting the epistemological democratization of history certainly contributed to making the debates about an “applied history” (which for us sounds much more like a client-oriented history, such as the histories commissioned by companies) rather alien. Indeed, there is no major concern in Brazil about that rarely employed term.

Nießer and Tomann trace—in a situated way, as they rightly acknowledge, firmly grounding their article—the conceptual genealogy of the term “applied history,” which is far from enjoying an unequivocal meaning. In contrast, they assume “public history” as a given, drawing on an entire pedagogy materialized in certificates and graduate programs and in the publication of methodological texts—guides and textbooks directly aimed at teaching—and anthologies and readers aimed at stabilizing the theoretical and conceptual canon of the area. Even so, the very diversity of these materials shows that public history is also a contentious concept.

I was struck by the authors’ argument that “public and applied history do not split the field and that they are two parts of one phenomenon,” in which the first is attached to the *forms* and the second, to the *agents* of history.⁵ Both would need,

2 For a review on the relationship between *Geschichtsdidaktik* and Brazilian public history, see: Sonia Wanderley, “Narrativas contemporâneas de história e didática da história escolar,” *História pública no Brasil*, ed. Ana Maria Mauad, Juniele Rabêlo de Almeida, and Ricardo Santhiago (São Paulo: Letra e Voz, 2016), 207–17; Sonia Wanderley, “Didática da História escolar: Um debate sobre o caráter público da história ensinada,” *História pública em debate*, ed. Juniele Rabêlo de Almeida and Sônia Meneses (São Paulo: Letra e Voz, 2018), 95–108.

3 Rodrigo de Almeida Ferreira, “What is the Relationship between Public History and the Teaching of History?,” in Mauad and Santhiago, *Que história pública queremos?*, 39–48.

4 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, no. 4 (November 2018): 11–27.

5 Nießer and Juliane Tomann, “Public and Applied History in Germany,” 24.

according to them, to work together to ensure the renewal of historical science. In principle, there is nothing to disagree with in such a position, more concerned with the ultimate ends of both “parts”—changing, invigorating, and diversifying historical practice—than with the labels attached to them. Nevertheless, from the standpoint of someone who has analyzed and criticized my own context, I wonder if the authors’ assumption in their description of “public history” is one I would endorse, and if the very terminological (and, ultimately, procedural and professional) distinction between public and applied history is useful and desirable. Let me bring two domestic examples to the scene.

Brazil has a strong presence in the area we call *divulgação científica*, “science dissemination,” which deals with the challenges involved in communicating scientific knowledge and creating scientific literacy by means of popular publications, art, media, museums, etc. There are innumerable books, journals, and events on the theme, as well as strong undergraduate courses and graduate programs throughout the country. Major Brazilian funding agencies have consistently supported initiatives in the field, which have brought together communication specialists (journalists, public relations, publicists, etc.) and researchers from the hard sciences (such as chemists, physicists, biologists, and, most remarkably, health professionals) in a shared effort towards the construction of a “scientific culture,” which implies “the active participation of citizens in this broad and dynamic cultural process in which science and technology are increasingly entering our daily lives,” as Carlos Vogt wrote.⁶

Discussions of the specifics of science dissemination can be, and have been, extremely valuable for public history practice in Brazil. However, there is a crucial difference between the two: whereas the first deals with the challenge of facilitating specialized discourse on the hard sciences to lay audiences, the second is not (at least not entirely) about language and the re-standardization of discourses. It is about a complex process of knowledge construction. Working as a disseminator of others’ findings, rendering jargon into a fluid (textual, visual, filmic, etc.) language, producing cultural goods for broad consumption—all this is just the veneer of what public history can do. Reducing the public historian’s role to that of a mere “translator” and his/her sphere to “the *forms* of popular history” seems to me an inaccurate representation of what public historians do, resulting in an impoverishment of the debate.

“Science dissemination” was, furthermore, an artificial barrier erected in the not-so-distant beginnings of the Brazilian public history movement. Why, one might then ask, should we speak of public history, given that there is already a label for it, which appears simpler? It took some effort to make a distinction and to clarify that public history is not always (though it can be) a nicely packed “history-to-go.” The same has happened with other labels, including those positioned at the opposite end of the inclination towards technics: Theory with a capital T, having

6 Carlos Vogt, *Cultura científica: Desafios* (São Paulo: Edusp, Fapesp, 2006), 25.

little or no connection with what actually happens within the historians' workshop. In an intellectual scene in which the European historiographical tradition is prominent—an ongoing joke has it that, even as a French historian is signing his new book in Paris, it has already been translated, published and gotten book reviews in Brazil—the ubiquitous phrases “uses of the past,” and more recently “practical pasts,” have been employed for much the same disparaging ends. The recent translation (and warm reception, within Theory circles) of a book by the French historian Olivier Dumoulin, which often depicts public history in a dismissive, derisive way, is indicative of this attitude.⁷ Why bother talking about public history if we are already discussing the uses of the past?, Dumoulin's allies would still say, only to then leap to allegedly groundbreaking debates that public historians have long been concerned with.

On the other side, we Brazilian historians have repeatedly promoted public history as a platform for observing the ways in which social subjects relate to their past, thus enabling them to participate in an authoritative way in discussions of the interpretations of their and their society's history. It is one platform among many, claiming neither prerogatives nor superiority, but amenable to connections with others, with science dissemination's concerns with clarity and immediacy; the comprehensive analysis implied by studies on the uses of past; the horizontality of participatory research practices; the feedback provided by audience studies and approaches to the popular perception of history; and so on. A generous understanding of public history as a label that encompasses, rather than repels, multiple perspectives on the relationship between history and its publics seems to offer more promise. And the very lack of precise definitions is, in the case of a vital and ever-changing practice such as public history, quite welcome.

The liminality of language can be seen not as a problem to be overcome, but as an indication of the liminality of the reality it seeks to name, a reality that tends to become even more blurred as the spheres of production and reception of cultural goods converge into collective intelligence practices and a participatory culture. Reports from the field tell us that the label “public history” has a unique virtue: wherever it arrives, it names preexistent “stuff” and it boosts the rise of new “stuff.” Making this name as robust as we can, highlighting not the divisions but the permeability among public history and other concepts, seems to be a more promising path if our ultimate goal is to change historical studies as a whole. Don't we have reasons enough to believe that historical knowledge gains in depth and perspective when it is a good public history *product* and results from an accessible public history *practice*? Don't we suspect that a dialogic, participatory construction of knowledge allows for bolder, innovative, and more potent aesthetic creations? Don't we agree that a sophisticated analysis of the public uses of the past undergirds better solutions to impact public memory?

⁷ Olivier Dumoulin, *O papel social do historiador: Da cátedra ao tribunal* (Belo Horizonte: Autêntica, 2017).

Those many “this-is-public-history” and “this-is-not-public-history” declarations, implied in labels and expressed in textbooks; those numerous and varied terms for baptizing quite similar or related practices, add far more to disputes for recognition and legitimation in the academic field—as Pierre Bourdieu brilliantly taught us—than to the creation of a public, participatory historical culture, or to the impact that public history can (and should) have in historical studies.

A public historian’s toolkit should not comprise a field thesaurus. Words are powerful, but a multifocal historical action is much more so.

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