

# What is the Public of Public History? Between the Public Sphere and Public Agency

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**Abstract** Public history constitutes a historical field, it includes several related journals, membership organisations, research centres, undergraduate and graduate programs all over the world. Most importantly, Public History has been marked by growing historiography and an increasing public interest in history. However, there is a lack of research on the most important constituent element of Public History, the 'public'. The aim of this paper is to shed light on how Public History has approached the public in the last four decades. By focusing on the two different forms the public has taken, the public sphere and the public agency, the paper examines the notion of the public as it appeared in the historiography and how it determined the epistemology and methodology of Public History.

**Keywords** Public History. Public. Public sphere. Public agency. Historiography of Public History.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 The Public Before Public History. – 3 From Applied to Public History: Defining the Public. – 4 Between the Public and the Public Sphere. – 5 Conclusion: Future Orientations for the Studying of the Public.



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## 1 Introduction

In the last four decades, Public History has been institutionalised as a historical field. Public history includes its main journal, *The Public Historian*, which was published in 1978, its membership organisation, the National Council on Public History, which was created in 1980, its global membership organisation, the International Federation for Public History established in 2010, and Public History graduate programmes in several countries across the world.<sup>1</sup> However, the most important developments, which are essential for the field, are the growing historiography of Public History and the increasing public interest in history.<sup>2</sup>

The aim of this paper is to explore the historiography of Public History by focusing on the concept of the ‘public’, as it appeared in the historiographical production and debates of the United States. Since the seventies, several historians, philosophers, practitioners, archivists, preservationists, and social scientists have tried to define the public and its relationship to historical production. The conceptual idea of the public determines the epistemology of the field, so an exploration of its development over time is significant not only for the state of the field but mainly for future orientations. The public is not one single thing but takes different forms according to the approaches that historians follow and the broader political, social, and cultural context of the period. In the historiography of public historiography, the public has taken two forms, the public as individuals and the public as a public sphere. Before focusing on these two different approaches, I explore the concept of the public as it appeared, to which other concepts it was related, and how it determined Public History. My central argument is that in the historiography of Public History there are two main approaches of studying the public, one approach that focuses on the public itself and how it engages with history, and another that focuses on the public sphere. However, as I will show in this paper, there is a tendency of historians to approach the public by paying more attention to the public sphere instead of the public itself.<sup>3</sup>

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**1** See Greenberg 1998, 296; Conard 2003, 11; Meringolo 2012, xiv; Cauvin 2018, 3-26.

**2** Regarding the increasing interest of the public in history, see Rosenzweig, Thelen 1998; Groot 2009; Landsberg 2015; Groot 2015, 102-27.

**3** I want to clarify that I have not been able to include this forthcoming book in my study, which focuses on the public(s) and its role in Public History, see Wojdon, Wiśniewska 2021.

## 2 The Public Before Public History

Almost every study on Public History traces the roots of the field and the connection between history and the public to the article of Carl Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian" published in 1932. Becker, an American academic historian, saw the connection between historical knowledge and public audience in a radical way. He defined history as "the knowledge of the events that have occurred in the past" (222). However, he claimed that this kind of knowledge is not only placed in the archives, historical records, and documents of the past, as the dominant historiographical paradigm of the nineteenth and early twentieth century argued.<sup>4</sup> Instead, for Becker, historical knowledge has several characteristics and one of the most important is memory. Thus, history becomes "the memory of events that have occurred in the past" (222). He also clarified that historical events are not only the grand and spectacular events of history (222). In addition to that, Becker argued that "history is the memory of things said and done", and it does not refer only to the distant past (223). That perception of history constituted a significant discontinuity from Leopold von Ranke's view of history, which characterised historical studies in the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> For Ranke, historians had to look for the "particular", which exists in the historical archival sources (Iggers 2002, 237).<sup>6</sup>

Becker opened up history by enabling the public to engage with the past and, more precisely, to be part of the past through its memories. He challenged the nineteenth century paradigm that, as Georg Iggers wrote, made a distinction between history as a science practiced by professional historians and history as a literary activity practiced by amateurs (2002, 232). However, Becker did not use the term 'public', but the term 'Mr. Everyman' to signify that anyone makes sense of the past, otherwise they will not be able to understand the present and the future (1932, 223). His choice to use the term 'Mr. Everyman' signified an acceptance of the gendered and male-centric language of the period, however he saw history-making as a more democratic process.<sup>7</sup> According to Becker, the only difference between historians and Mr. Everyman is that Mr. Everyman is inter-

<sup>4</sup> I refer here to Leopold von Ranke's view of history as what happened in the past and his belief in the objectivity of historical knowledge. For more information on the historiography of historical studies, see Iggers 2002, 225-42.

<sup>5</sup> For the historiographical contribution of Leopold von Ranke to the historical studies, see Ranke 2010.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion on Public History and Ranke's view of history, see Storey 1992, 11-22.

<sup>7</sup> In his presidential address, William Cronon mentioned the gendered language of Carl Becker (see Cronon 2013).

ested in learning about events of the past related to his personal affairs (234). Therefore, Becker suggested historians to pay attention to Mr. Everyman, otherwise, as Becker argued,

he will leave us to our own devices, leave us it may be to cultivate a species of dry professional arrogance growing out of the thin soil of antiquarian research. Such research, valuable not in itself but for some ulterior purpose, will be of little import except in so far as it is transmuted into common knowledge. (234)

In other words, the stories of the public should not be neglected but have a place in history, as the public engages with the past actively in the everyday life.

However, Carl Becker's arguments about historical knowledge remained marginal for the next decades and there were not works that engaged with the concept of public. At an important extent, in the thirties, the historians of the French journal *Annales*, such as Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch, started to develop a similar view of historical knowledge by expanding history to include broader groups of the population (Iggers 2002, 237).<sup>8</sup> However, the focus of *Annales* school was not the public itself but the broader social processes and structures (237).<sup>9</sup>

In the sixties, while there was a broader democratisation of political institutions in the western world and more social groups were entering in the public sphere, the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas published the book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Habermas explored the terms 'public' and 'public sphere', and how these concepts changed from the seventeenth to the mid-twentieth century by focusing on the bourgeois culture (1991, 1). While most social scientists were defining the public as a 'state institution' or 'public authority', or 'public reception', Habermas defined it as "a carrier of public opinion" (2). In the mid-twentieth century, the public sphere signified a public domain of action versus the private domain (2). The main argument of Habermas, as the sociologist Craig Calhoun wrote, was that the bourgeois public sphere signified a public sphere of private individuals, who were participating in a debate of issues under the state authority (1996, 7).

The book of Habermas constituted one of the first works on the public and public sphere. His study has been perceived with both

<sup>8</sup> For some works of Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch, representative of *Annales* school, see Febvre 1985; Bloch 1966; 2014.

<sup>9</sup> This does not mean that Public History as it was institutionalised in the seventies was not influenced by the *Annales* school of historical thought. My point is that the public was neither the subject nor the object of their studies. For more information of the *Annales* school of historical thought, see Burke 1990; Iggers 1997.

enthusiasm and criticism by several social scientists.<sup>10</sup> It is interesting that most of those scholars were philosophers, sociologists, media, and communication scholars, while historians were absent from these discussions. Habermas brought the public sphere into the discussion as a social area, where individuals exchange opinions and develop political actions. Habermas managed to go beyond the Frankfurt school's focus on the proletariat as a vehicle for the societal transformation and focused on "the intersubjective communicative processes of bourgeois", as Calhoun has mentioned (1996, 5-6).

### 3 From Applied to Public History: Defining the Public

In 1978, in the first issue of *The Public Historian*, the historian Robert Kelley introduced the term "public" by arguing that "public historians are at work whenever, in their professional capacity, they are part of the public process" (Kelley 1978, 16 cited in Conard 2003, 11). This issue signified the emergence of a new field of history. However, the use of the term 'public' was novel during that time and aimed to replace the older term of 'applied history' (Conard 2003, 11). In the next issues of the journal, as Rebecca Conard wrote, several historians looked back at the term "applied history", which was introduced by Benjamin Shambaugh in 1909 and represented a product of a more scientific history (Conard 2003, 12). According to Shambaugh, 'applied history' was based on New History and signified discipline and objectivity in the method of historical research and aimed to make history useful (Conard 2003, 12). Thus, a debate among historians if they will use the term 'Public History' or 'applied history' started.

As Rebecca Conard wrote, many historians were against the term 'applied', as the historians who were working outside academy did not apply the theories of historical scholarship (2003, 13). They neither wanted to use the term 'applied' nor to follow a positivist view of history. Their argument was that history cannot become a hard science and integrate a "technical rationality" (13). People cannot use history to solve problems or predict the future (13). Also, the term 'applied history' was not compatible with the professional identity of historians during that time, which was strongly connected to the practices of researching, writing, and teaching (14). The term 'applied history' was based on the "practice of history" while the term Public History responded to the "study of history" (14). Another aspect of the transition from the 'applied' to the 'public' history is the broader historiographical developments of new social history, histo-

<sup>10</sup> See for example, Fraser 1990, 56-80; Cossley, Roberts 2004; Goode 2005; McKee 2005.

ry from below, bottom-up history that had taken place in the sixties (Cauvin 2018, 8).<sup>11</sup> Even if these historiographical trends were more dominant in Europe than in the US, they created a framework of discussion and influenced several historians in the western countries (Cauvin 2018, 8; Conard 2018, 30).

However, the domination of the 'public' over the 'applied' signified the creation of an epistemological framework for the field and took place through several historiographical discussions and publications. Many public historians, local historians, practitioners, archivists, preservationists, begun to discuss what Public History is, what the characteristics of Public History are, how it differs from academic history, what it aims to do, and how the public is related to the production of historical knowledge.<sup>12</sup> These discussions defined the methodology and the research interests of the field and its future orientations.

In that framework, Ronald Grele, an oral historian, and a former Director at the Oral History Program at UCLA, published the article "Whose Public? Whose History? What is the Goal of a Public Historian?" in *The Public Historian* in 1981. He pointed out that if we want to understand what Public History is and does, we should explore what the public is, as there is not much research on the public (41). Grele argued that historians always had a public, and history was always a public act. The point is how the public changed over times (41).

For Grele, Public History has three main elements: 1) the education of graduate student for jobs as archivists, museum directors, preservationists etc. This means that Public History attracted academy, as Public History could offer job opportunities (45). 2) Public History becomes more professional and acquires academic characteristics (45). For Grele, this is a negative characteristic, as the Public History movement follows a very narrow definition of what it is, very similar to the view of professionalism by the academy (46). The reason for that is that the Public History movement has ignored all those debates that took place in the sixties, so Public History has seen itself as just a profession and not as "a vocation-a calling", which was important characteristic of the local history movement in the sixties (46). 3) many public historians work as government advisers or employees, namely professions, which were not important for historians. Their older view of historical profession was not that narrow. They did not aim to work for those who rule and have the instruments of social power (46). Of course, some historians did that in the past, but they did not identify their profession as doing only that (47). Thus,

<sup>11</sup> Regarding the historiographical developments of new social history and cultural history between the sixties and the eighties, see Reddy 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Regarding the institutionalisation of Public History, see the following studies, Conard 2015; 2003; Cauvin 2018.

all the efforts of Public History have been related to the governmental world. In that way, for Grele the public of Public History has become just one public, among others. Public history should think the community work as an important historical work (47). Grele closed his article by arguing that the public redefines the role of the historians and promises “a society in which a broad public participates in the construction of its own history” (48).

The discussions about the epistemology of Public History continued and the definition of the public took different directions. In the same year, the urban and oral historian Michael Frisch published the article “The Memory of History”, in which he discussed the relationship between memory and history to show how a different view of the past can create the potential for a different future (1981). His argument was that there is more emphasis in the ‘how’ rather than the ‘why’ in Public History (9). Regarding the ‘why’, Frisch argued that most of the works in Public History point out the need to encourage a wider sharing of knowledge, a broader participation in the history-making, a challenge to conventional scholarship (9). For Frisch, the central issue for public historians is to examine the relationship between history and memory, both collective and individual (9). He suggested historians to remove Public History from “the circle of demand and supply”, and focus on the relation between memory and history, which can enhance our ability to imagine and create a different future (10).

Overall, Frisch followed Carl Becker’s suggestions for the importance of memory in the production of historical knowledge and pointed out that Public History cannot be public if it is not strongly connected to memory. For that reason, even if a memory is historical or ahistorical, public historians should activate the process of remembering and make the public able to encounter “the sense of their own past” (22). Regarding the ‘how’ of Public History, Frisch developed a methodology of doing Public History in his book, *A Shared Authority*, published some years later (1990).<sup>13</sup> He connected oral and Public History for the study of memory through the concept of shared authority (1990, xx). That method can challenge the historical authority. As Frisch argued, this authority “might be shared more broadly in historical research and communication rather than continuing to serve as an instrument of power and hierarchy” (xx). Public historians should not regard the public as not able to communicate its histories outside its own immediate experience and knowledge (xxi). Instead, public historians should understand that their methods can do more than just extract the knowledge from the people, and they

**13** Frisch has also analysed “shared authority” in other works. For a more contemporary view of “shared authority” in the digital age, see Frisch 2011.

should also realise that they can do more than just communicate the historical knowledge (xxii). For Frisch, public historians should create a space of collaboration between themselves and the narrators (xxii; see Cauvin 2018, 8).

Grele and Frisch, the first theorists of Public History, underlined the active role that the public – the individuals – should have to produce historical knowledge. Both scholars were influenced by earlier discussions in oral history, which had started in the thirties in the US but developed all over the world in the sixties (Cauvin 2018, 8). Oral history placed marginal social groups, communities, and individuals at the centre of the historical study. The method of oral history created terms, such as collective memory, which showed that history is mediated by the narrators' collective memories (8). Thus, the theories of Grele and Frisch, and more specifically the concept of shared authority, signified the collaborative relationship between the historian and the narrator to produce history and created a bridge between oral history and Public History (8).

Following the same line of thinking, the historian Douglas Greenberg discussed Public History and its function to communicate historical knowledge to a broader public (1998). His main point was that many historians have failed to communicate historical knowledge to a broader public (297). As he wrote, historians have rarely thought about their social responsibilities and their role in the society. At the same time, many historians ignore or diminish historians, who try to communicate their historical knowledge (297). The danger of that logic is that history will become a "luxury" (298). For Greenberg, the concept of public does not mean that historians should produce the historical knowledge that the audience wants and stop studying the "useless knowledge" (308-9). Instead, both academic and public historians should understand that there is a public audience "hungry for more and better history" (308-9).

All those studies placed the public at the forefront of Public History and defined Public History according to the agency of the public. These theories represented a broader transition from public historians who practised history and worked for governments, historical societies, and archives between the mid-nineteenth and the mid-twentieth centuries, to public historians who wanted to create a shared authority with the public and communicate history to a broader audience.<sup>14</sup> Presenting history and studying the public's use of history became more important than applying history (Cauvin 2018, 18; Knovel 2009, 8). These conceptual ideas determined the field of Public History and shaped its works in the following decades.

<sup>14</sup> For a genealogy of Public History between the mid-nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, see Meringolo 2012.



#### 4 Between the Public and the Public Sphere

In the historiography of public historiography, the public has taken two forms: individuals and the broader context in which the public acts, the public sphere. It is difficult to discern these two forms according to chronological periods, as there is not a transition from one form to the other. Instead, they coexist and constitute the two major approaches to do Public History. This section is not a complete historiographical overview of Public History works that engage with the public. I refer only to works that represent broader patterns and methods of approaching the public.

In 1998, Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, published one of the most influential works for Public History, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*. The two historians followed the method of survey and explored what Americans did know and think about the past, but also how they understand the past. Their study was based on the assumption that, even though it is widely believed that Americans do not know about the past, there is a growing public interest in history (3). They did not study how the past is represented in popular and public culture, but how the past is understood by people (4). Their findings challenged the common belief that Americans do not care about the past. They showed that American are interested in the past but not in history as it was defined in academic textbooks (9). For example, most of the interviewees felt strongly connected with the past at family meetings (177). Thus, by focusing on the public itself, the two historians showed that the public looks for a past that can respond to what Carl Becker called “the necessities” of the present (178).

In Rosenzweig and Thelen’s study, the agency of the public and its approach to the past was attached to two important concepts, “historical consciousness” and “historical memory” (3). The former term signified the public understanding of the past as it is defined by the experiences, interests of individuals. The latter was borrowed from Carl Becker’s and Michael Frisch’s works on the active process of remembering, which determined the perception of the past and the production of history. Both concepts offered two different approaches of how the public as ‘history makers’ actively engages with the past, while the book constituted a novel example of how historians can place the public at the centre of historical inquiry (Glassberg 2001, xiii).

Following a similar line of thinking, David Glassberg explored how Americans have understood and used the past in the twentieth century (xiii). He followed a distinction between the “interpretation of history” that professional historians do and the “sense of history” that the public has. The sense of history is a “perspective on the past at the core of who they are and the people and the places they care about” (6). Glassberg’s work did not follow the approach of Rosenz-

weig and Thelen's study, as Glassberg focused on the public perception of the past through war memorials, festivals, places, historical documentaries etc. and not on how people themselves understand and think about the past.

However, the next works of Public History that appeared focused more on the 'historical memory' of the public and ignored the active agency of the public in history making. More specifically, in her book, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, the historian Alison Landsberg explored how memory has changed in the transition from modernity to post-modernity (2004). Landsberg showed that memories do not belong to only one group, but through the technology of mass culture memories can be acquired by anyone (2). These are "prosthetic memories", memories that "emerge at the interface between a person and a historical narrative about the past, at an experiential site such as movie theater or a museum" (2). Landsberg used those spaces as public spheres, in which individuals become part of a broader and larger story, even they did not live during that period. As she mentioned:

[t]he person does not simply apprehend a historical narrative but takes on more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which he or she did not live. (2)

Even if her useful concept of "prosthetic memory" implied an active dialogue between individuals and the past, the scope of her study is not how individuals perceived the movies or the novels or the museum exhibitions, how they engaged with them, and what historical understandings they made. Instead, the public seemed dominated by the affective structures of the public sphere.

Memory remained a dominant subject of Public History. In her book, *The Emotional Life of Contemporary Public Memorials*, Erika Doss theoretically explored the contemporary memorialisation (2008). She explained why in the last years, there is an explosion of public monument-making in the US and Europe, but also a broader shift from monuments to memorials (5). The memory boom covers several cultural practices, such as artifacts, national narratives, from family reunions and scrapbook photographs to annual civic celebrations and aims to give voices and visibility to more and more social groups after their death (35). Memory is performative and experiential (35). Her main argument is that

today's 'memory boom' reflects less, then, a declension of historical consciousness than a cultural shift toward public feeling, toward affective modes of knowledge and comprehension. (37)

Her study is very interesting as she attached an emotionality to the public sphere and challenged Habermas's theory of public sphere as a place, where sensible citizens exchange ideas and unite in progressive actions (12). Instead, she argued that public life has emotional conditions, which mobilise and manipulate people on several debates (23).<sup>15</sup> However, in her study, the public appeared as a passive receptor of cultural changes that have given rise to memorials and the emotionality of the public sphere.

Important components of the public sphere have always been museums, historical, and heritage sites. In the historiography of Public History, several works have shed light on those public spaces.<sup>16</sup> A representative example is the book of Seth Bruggeman, *Here, George Washington Was Born* (2008). Bruggeman explored the history of Washington's birthplace during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and contextualised all the changes that took place in the historical site mentioning broader social, political, cultural, and intellectual developments. He referred to the explosion of popular patriotic symbols after the War of 1812, the archaeological excavations that questioned the authenticity of Washington's birthplace, the Cold War, and the use of the past against 'threats' to American democracy, the popularisation of history as a living experience in the seventies, the race and gender interpretations (20-3). The most interesting point of the book is the desire of people to encounter historic objects, even if they are not authentic. However, Bruggeman studied this strong desire for immersion in the past to reveal the ahistorical associations the public make and not to show how people perceived the past or responded to it and why they developed these connections with the past. Bruggeman's work reveals a broader tendency in the historiography of Public History to focus on the history of public institutions and skip the public experiences of visitors, who visit those institutions and engage with them.

A landmark study in the historiography of Public History is the book *Consuming History. Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture* (2009), in which the literature and Public History scholar Jerome de Groot connected public and popular history, and explored how the past is represented in public/popular forms of engagement (93-8). Groot studied several Public History activities, such as local history, genealogy, digital archives, encyclopedias, and websites, historical reenactment, historical video games, historical films,

<sup>15</sup> The work of Erica Doss is strongly influenced by the 'affective turn' in the historiography, which started in the mid-nineties, see Rosenwein 2002; 2006; Plamper 2010. For the term 'affective turn', see Clough, Halley 2007; Athanasiou, Hantzaroula, Yanakopoulos 2008, 5-16.

<sup>16</sup> See Linenthal 1995; Stanton 2006; Upton 2015; Roger 2015; Sodaro 2018.

TV shows, novels, plays, comics, and museums. As the title of the book reveals, his research scope focused on popular and public forms of historical engagement that the public 'consumes'. Individuals and social groups appeared as 'consumers' of the past and not as active participants in the historical engagement with the past or producers of historical knowledge.

Following a similar approach, the study of Erika Doss *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America* examined several statues, monuments, and memorials in the US and how modern America's obsession with commemoration developed and why it is so common today (2010, 13-15). For her, memorial mania is

an obsession with issues of memory and history and an urgent desire to express and claim those issues in visibly public contexts. (2)

Memorial mania is shaped by the conditions of public feeling in America, such as grief, gratitude, fear, shame, and anger (2). Erika Doss offered a great analysis on how memorials and other commemorative practices shape the public sphere. However, it would be interesting to show how the public expresses its emotions, how it codifies the past, perceives the memorials, and even more importantly, why the public has "obsession with issues of memory and history" (2).

A different approach to the study of the public and the public sphere is developed in the work of the historian, Tammy Gordon, *Private History in Public. Exhibition and the Settings of Everyday Life* (2010). Tammy Gordon focused on the exhibitions of small private museums, which displayed artifacts and history in a local context (4). She conducted several interviews with visitors and curators of the exhibits (10-11). In that way, she created a dialogue between the public sphere of small museum communities, which also included bars, restaurants, truck shops, schools, barbershops, and churches, and the people, who told and displayed their stories (5). In these stories, she detected their personal experiences, feelings, beliefs, and memories (5). Her approach to the public showed that both visitors and curators are important agents and determine the production of historical knowledge. In her work, both the public sphere (small private museums) and the public interact and shape public engagement with the past.

The public was placed at the centre of historical inquiry in the work of Benjamin Filene, "Passionate Histories: 'Outsider' History-Makers and What They Teach Us" (2012). Filene explored how the individuals, who work outside museums and universities without professional training and often without funding, approach history in a way that causes the interest of thousands (11). Those "outsider history-makers" (genealogists, reenactors, heritage tourism developers), as Filene called them, create passionate histories, and view the past not as an intellectual process but as a living and emotional resource

(11). For Filene, the public is not only an active producer of the past, but its interests and methods can constitute models for museums, historic sites, and other institutions.

The public gets a more diverse character in the study of Tammy Gordon, *The Spirit of 1976. Commerce, Community, and the Politics of Commemoration* (2013). Gordon explored the 200th anniversary of the American Revolution by focusing on social history, consumerism, distrust of federal government, cold war consensus, and individuality (3). According to Gordon, we cannot understand the collective, if we consider the public as one single thing. The public of 1976 was made of individuals who were promoting their geographical, religious, ethnic, and professional interests and based on those interests were making their own interpretations of the past. The crucial point here is that, focusing on the public, Gordon pointed out that consumerism did not homogenise the public, as many individuals criticised, but it gave individuals the tools to tell their stories and give meaning to the past (5-7). As Gordon mentioned, Americans were not passive receptors of what they were told, but they were

active participants, individuals with unique combinations of interests, looking for relevance in the birth of their country. (5)

The public is not one single thing. The public are the African Americans, women, American Indians, workers, and young people, who used the bicentennial to integrate their histories into the national narrative (4).

The contemporary mass-mediated public sphere has been the subject of Alison Landsberg's work, *Engaging the Past. Mass Culture and the Production of Historical Knowledge* (2015). She explored the consequences of prosthetic memories for what is history and how we have access to historical knowledge in the contemporary, mass-mediated public sphere (3). Landsberg focused on the popular modes of engagement with the past and examined the relationship between structures of looking and feeling, and contemporary ways of knowledge collection and production (3). Her main argument was that in the mass-mediated public sphere the production of history is based on the mobilisation of affect (178).

Following a similar line of thinking, the historian Malgorzata Rym-sza-Pawlowska used examples from popular culture to show that by the seventies Americans were more interested in the past than in the present or future (2017, 2). Rym-sza-Pawlowska showed that in the seventies there was a transition from a distant and instructive past to a more affective and personal past (2). She focused on public forms of engagement, such as TV shows, commemorations, museums, exhibitions, reenactments that shape the "historical consciousness" of the public (12). All these popular and public forms are not

just representations of the past but emotional and personal modes of historical engagement (2). The public seems trapped in a public sphere, where it consumes movies, tv series, museums, exhibitions without negotiating with them.

## 5 Conclusion: Future Orientations for the Studying of the Public

As shown above, there are two main approaches to the studying of the public. The studies that focus on the public itself and how the public consumes and engages with history and those that focus on the public sphere, on how institutions, popular forms of history or engagements with the past produce historical knowledge. Over the last three decades, there is not a transition from one approach to the other. Instead, they coexist and have developed the field of Public History at a great extent. However, most studies have focused on the public sphere (museums, historical sites, exhibits, movies, TV shows, commemorations etc.) and not on the active role of the public in its encounter with the past. The public is not absent from that discussion, but it is trapped in the structures of the public sphere. The public consumes and not produces history.

This is not a new argument, as since the early eighties Michael Frisch and Ronald Grele have showed the importance of a dialogue between historians and the public. Even earlier, Carl Backer underlined how significant it is for historians to study how Mr. Everyman makes sense of the past. Katharine Corbett and Howard Miller have also highlighted this lack of study on the agency of the public by arguing that public historians have done more history for the public instead of doing history with the public (2006, 36). As Corbett and Miller have mentioned, public historians have made little effort to share inquiry and authority with the public (36).

A transition from the public as an object of history to the public as a subject of history is more than necessary. By doing that, a new research era of Public History will emerge. If public historians realise that both professional historians and non-historians shape historical meaning together, they will better understand how the public perceives the past and why it engages with it. The public will no longer be a single homogenised unity, but it will reveal its characteristics. As the public historian David Dean has put it, the public will become “publics”.<sup>17</sup> In that way, public historians will be able to detect relations of power, and political, social, and cultural characteristics, such as class, gender, race, education that shape the “publics”. Pub-

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<sup>17</sup> See the chapter of David Dean on the use of “publics” instead of public (2018).

lic historians should turn their attention to a contemporary version of Becker's Mr. Everyman by bringing up its agency and diversity.

As the historiography of Public History shows, public historians should develop a dialogue between public sphere and public agency, instead of examining them separately. Therefore, public historians will develop a better understanding of how the historical consciousness of the public is formed and what factors enable or restrict the public to produce, consume, and negotiate with historical knowledge. The call for a dialogue between public sphere and public agency can be more feasible during the digital age.<sup>18</sup> Digital technologies provide the public with opportunities for both consumption and production of history. Several digital projects and platforms enable the public to explore the past, share its memories about the past, decodify the it, take part in discussions and debates about history, and contribute to the production of historical knowledge. Public history should be the field that will critically study these opportunities, beyond simplistic and naïve celebrations about openness and democratic participation. Public historians should focus on the agency of the public without ignoring the framework, in which this agency takes place.

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**18** For example, see the participation of the public in digital genealogy platforms (Groot 2015). Also, digital technologies offer new ways of doing Public History and sharing authority with the public (see Frisch 2011).

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