

Book Review

Review of Berber Bevernage and Lutz Raphael (eds.), *Professional Historians in Public. Old and New Roles Revisited* (De Gruyter, 2023).

Reviewed by **Petros Apostolopoulos**, Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History (C²DH), University of Luxembourg, Belval, Luxembourg, E-mail: petros.apostolopoulos@uni.lu

<https://doi.org/10.1515/iph-2025-2001>

Technological developments over the last two centuries have changed the teaching, research, and outreach practices of historians, a topic that has been widely explored in the historiography of digital history. However, there is a lack of research on how the growing public interest in history and the increasing demand for public-oriented historical narratives have influenced the work of professional historians. The collective volume, *Professional Historians in Public. Old and New Roles Revisited*, edited by Berber Bevernage and Lutz Raphael, invites philosophers and theorists of history, historians of historiography, and contemporary historians to explore the diverse roles that professional historians have played in the public sphere. The book examines the challenges these historians have faced and how those challenges have shaped and reshaped historical scholarship. It offers a thought-provoking reflection on the evolving roles, demands, expectations, and practices of historical scholarship within the global public sphere.

As the editors describe in the introduction, from the 1960s to the 1990s, historians were marginalized as postwar society became increasingly focused on presentism and futurism. During this period, historians seemed to lose the societal prominence they had held since the professionalization of history in the late 19th century. In response, historians began critically engaging presentism and attempted to reclaim their position within both education and culture. They attempted to demonstrate the relevance of their profession in various ways, underlining the educational, societal, and cultural significance of studying the past. Other historians argued about the value of studying history, arguing that the past should be studied for its own sake, even in the absence of direct relevance. The past should be the subject of study even if there is no direct relevance. Despite the challenges historians faced during the period of modernization, historical scholarship managed to survive, adapt, and evolve significantly. In recent years, the “modernization-style dislike of history” has disappeared in most parts of the world, and public interest in history has grown. At both national and institutional levels,

this interest has taken different forms, including efforts to understand past traumas, engage with colonialism, study memories, and examine issues like slavery and genocide. The public engagement with history now extends beyond politics and activism, including art, films, TV shows, literary fiction, video games, tourism, and many others. However, it is worth mentioning that growing public interest in the past does not necessarily mean increased interest in the academic study of history. This shift, from a society in which historians held a marginal role to one where historical topics have become central, has introduced new challenges, demands, expectations, and roles for professional historians and, therefore, has reshaped historical scholarship. In the book, the authors present a wide range of case studies to explore and trace these transformations.

Covering a broad geographical scope, the case studies go beyond the Western canon of the Global North, focusing on regions such as Asia and the Pacific, Latin America, Africa, and Europe, all examined from a global perspective. The content is organized into five parts. The first part, *Histoires Engagées: A Critical Look Back*, explores the work of professional historians like Eric Hobsbawm, who challenged mainstream academic positions through their academic and public practices. These historians were politically active and questioned the dominant Eurocentric, colonial, and nationalist historiographical paradigms. The second part, *Law and Historical Expertise*, examines the various challenges historians face when getting involved in legal initiatives, such as international war crimes tribunals or national truth and reconciliation commissions. All these initiatives determine the way professional historians share their historical knowledge. The third part, *Old and New Political Demands on Professional Historians*, studies the impact, challenges, and opportunities of political demands on professional historians from both state authorities and grassroots political movements. The fourth part, *Public History in New Media*, investigates how different media, such as TV, video games, blogs, etc., have influenced the historical profession and scholarship, as they require a different type of communication than traditional academic media. These platforms challenge traditional academic communication while offering new opportunities for historians and other experts to share their knowledge. In the fifth part, *Perspectives: Moral, Epistemic, and Political*, the authors examine different standards that can help historians better respond to the new demands and serve as role models for the historical discipline.

The main strength of this book lies in the fact that it is not written by the ‘usual suspects’ of public history but by scholars whose expertise is in the theory and history of historiography. This brings a novel, more theoretical perspective to the topic. This is the result of both the methodological approaches and the bibliography that the authors draw upon. At the same time, in some chapters, a more in-depth examination of the existing historiography of public history and its intersections with related fields, such as digital history, could have placed some arguments into ongoing discussions.

Overall, the book makes a significant contribution to the field of public history by placing professional historians at the forefront of historical inquiry and examining how their practices have evolved over time, and more importantly, how historians are forced to adapt to public-oriented demands and funding requirements. In the same way digital tools have transformed how professional historians do history, the public sphere creates new roles, expectations, and needs that historians embrace.