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What Is (International) Public History?

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Abstract:

What is Public History? And why do we need a new journal? Co-editors of IPH David Dean and Andreas Etges introduce this new international journal and discuss their thoughts in why it is a timely intervention in the field. They explain the many unique features of IPH and review the contributions to this, the first issue.

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In 1961 the English historian E.H. Carr famously asked: “What is History?” Generations of history students within and beyond the United Kingdom have read and critically discussed his essays which seem somewhat inadequate today, not least because Carr assumed historians would be male. Yet, in writing against what he saw as a “nineteenth-century fetishism of facts,” Carr emphasized a number of points that are still valid today. “History,” he argued, “means interpretation.” And even though historians “view the past, and achieve our understanding of the past, only through the eyes of the present” they should have “an imaginative understanding for the minds of the people” they are dealing with.¹

While we do not know if anyone really had posed the question “what is history” to Carr, the question “what is public history” can frequently be heard from people inside and outside academia. Many attempts to answer that question have been given, and as Rebecca Conard has recently observed, we are still searching for certainty and clarity.² Suffice it to say that there is no universally accepted definition, that answers depend on who is being asked, where that person lives, and what language he or she speaks – as can also be observed in the different articles in this issue. While the American term “public history” has become the dominant one – often used without translation in non-English speaking countries – one can find variations on the theme such as practical, applied, or activist history.

None of these terms are perfect. They all emphasize somewhat different, but important aspects that together might come closest to a definition. Of central importance is the “public” – or rather many different “publics” – that serve both as audience for historical representations or who are engaged in the making of them.³ It is practiced and applied in many different ways whether one has in mind museums, archives, films, theatre productions, walking tours, digital apps, and oral history projects. And it is practiced in many different places, in homes and in the streets, in cities and national parks, in government agencies and corporations, at the national level and in every imaginable locality. In practice public history is often, but not always, a collaborative enterprise and again often, but not always, carries a certain political or cultural purpose. And yes, public history takes the form of books and scholarly articles that are the bread and butter of academia, as indicated by Cataline Munoz’ review of three major new books in the field in this, our inaugural issue. Publications are not the only thing public historians and more traditional academic or mainstream historians have in common, and while there clearly is a major difference whether the audience is mostly academic colleagues or a larger “public,” or whether one writes texts during many lonely hours at the desk or “applies” history as part of a team and in “practical” ways, the lines should not be drawn too strongly and the focus should not too exclusively be on certain products and formats or a certain practice. In her article Arnita Jones shows how the term “public history” was created in the United States in the 1970s with a specific purpose in a certain historical situation. But neither in North America nor anywhere else will everyone who we consider to be a public historian have heard of the term or necessarily self-identify as one.

Much of the work public historians are doing is not new, however, but can be traced across time and across cultures. Museums and archives, historical preservation and conservation, memorialization and reenactments have been in existence for a long time, and internationally there are innumerable special degrees or training schools and programs for those planning to work in those fields all over the world.

One recent change, though, is the creation of university programs from the BA to the Ph.D. levels all over the world that are labelled “public history,” often even using the English term in non-English speaking contexts. The movement to give future generations of historians additional skills and help them get into and open up new fields of employment outside of academia and high schools started in the United States in the 1970s and in the

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last ten years has become a global development. We will trace that development with a special article in each issue that focuses on one nation or region. Our Japanese colleague Michihiro Okamoto wrote the inaugural contribution to the series we have internally tagged as “public history and public history education around the world.”

The world’s largest public history organization, the primarily North American National Council on Public History (NCPH) helped spawn this development and supported a more formal internationalization initiative that began in 2009. Out of a working group and task force grew the plan to create a new international organization, founded in 2011–12 as the International Federation for Public History-Fédération Internationale pour l’Histoire Publique (IFPH), which has been recognized as an internal commission of the International Committee for Historical Sciences (or CISH, Comité International des Sciences Historiques). In her article Arnita Jones reflects on all of these developments. She is uniquely suited to do this, having been “present at the creation” or rather two creations, those of both NCPH and IFPH.

With this new journal IFPH is taking a major step forward. “International Public History” will fill a void and we are convinced that it will serve as an important additional international and comparative stimulus to the field. As a peer-reviewed journal it will add additional publishing opportunities for scholars and practitioners all over the world, helping to further establish the academic credentials of public history on a global scale and also contribute to the professionalization of the field. At the same time, the journal will reflect how and in which ways public history has been growing internationally.

IPH will feature a mix of theoretical, empirical, research based and “practice-oriented” scholarly articles, conversations, interviews and reviews on topics ranging from description and analysis of history projects to debating theories, methods, approaches and problems of doing public history and engaging publics. In its pages readers will encounter discussions about the public and political uses of history, oral history, public archeology, heritage, digital (public) history, history and memory, exhibiting and curating, collecting and preservation, access and open access, sharing and shared authority, teaching public history, performance, and many more issues and topics, occasionally brought into sharp focus through special thematic issues. Beginning with issue number 2 there will be regular review sections discussing new museums and exhibitions, films, websites, apps, performances, and so on. The fact that IPH is an e-journal makes global access much easier. It also offers many multimedia opportunities (images, films, sound) that add an additional dimension to the issues discussed.

We are aware that internationalizing public history is a major challenge. While the global composition of the editorial and the international advisory boards reflects a broad range of expertise and of language skills, that alone does not make the journal “international.”⁴ Learning and hearing how others are dealing with the challenges of their local, regional or national histories is one way to do it. In a review of the ground-breaking project “Present Pasts: The Memory of Slavery in Brazil” Larissa Moreira Viana and Juniele Rabêlo de Almeida describe how communities more informally wrestle with remembering a difficult past – and also how public historians sometimes “wrestle” with the publics to find a common ground. Another way could be more comparative, glocal approaches that Thomas Cauvin and Serge Noiret have called for.⁵ Here we ask, can we move beyond nationally-centered case studies across the globe to exploring comparative approaches and move even further to engage in transnational public history, to make them interconnect and more than “just” an accumulation? It is our intention and hope that IPH will provide a forum for such new ways of thinking through the field.

There are already signs that such developments are under way, shifting from the traditional exclusiveness of local, regional and national stories to more global ones. Two articles in this issue particularly show this. In his contribution “Changing the Game: Public History and the Space of Fiction” Jerome de Groot critically reflects on international and transnational public histories which have characterized his recent work as a public historian. The interview with Polish historian Paweł Machcewicz shows how both the founding of the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk and the firing of founding director Machcewicz by a new national government in Poland which had national and international motives and ramifications cannot be understood without the deep interconnectedness of the histories of European countries – and to some degree even the diasporas beyond Europe. That story is also in many ways a tragic example of the many challenges faced by public historians all over the world wishing to engage with critical history in a time when there is a growing number of autocracies and increasing limitations placed on open public discourse.⁶

Then again, is the emphasis on open public debate a manifestation of an “inherently Western concept of public history” as Paula Hamilton and Jim Gardner recently asked?⁷ Regardless of the answer, we emphatically endorse open public debate as a crucial element of public history and want the journal to provide a new international platform. But we are aware of the fact that not every public historian will be ready or able to speak as openly as Paweł Machcewicz about political conflicts or censorship. And we also know that in the pages of this journal the limits of what can be said in a given historical and political context might sometimes only indirectly be visible.

The fact that English is the current lingua franca has made an international conversation easier, but it also places limits on it. IPH seeks to take one step at least to address the latter by offering authors the option of publishing their original contributions online in their language of choice in addition to having it published in English. We commend the pioneering work that *Public History Weekly: The International Blogjournal* has done in this regard, as Thomas Cauvin attests in his review.

In his play *As You Like It* William Shakespeare famously wrote: “All the world’s a stage; And all the men and women merely players; They have their exits and their entrances.” We hope that many players from all over the world will join us on the new stage that IPH offers: to share thoughts and reflections, stories and experiences, the serious and the humorous, the sad and the tragic ones, colorful as well as dark, inspiring or disheartening, in monologues, dialogues and group “performances” – and interacting with their audiences. Let’s raise the curtain ...

Notes

1 E.H. Carr, *What is History?* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), 16, 23–24.

2 See Rebecca Conard, “Still Grappling with the Definition Question”, *The Public Historian* 40.1 (Feb. 2018), 115–119. A section on the website of the National Council on Public History tries to give some answers.
<http://ncph.org/what-is-public-history/about-the-field/>.

3 See David Dean, “Introduction”, *The Companion to Public History* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018).

4 For a list of members of the editorial board and the international advisory board see <https://www.degruyter.com/view/j/iph>

5 Thomas Cauvin and Serge Noiret, “Internationalizing Public History” in James B. Gardner and Paula Hamilton, editors, *The Oxford Handbook of Public History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 27.

6 Cf. Bertelsmann Stiftung, ed., *Transformation Index BTI 2018: Governance in International Comparison* (Gütersloh: Verlag Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018). See the executive summary: http://www.bti-project.org/fileadmin/files/BSt/Publikationen/imported/abstract/ABS_978-3-86793-797-9_1.pdf

7 Gardner and Hamilton, “Introduction: The Past and Future of Public History: Developments and Challenges”, in id., eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Public History*, 1–22, 14.