

Review

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The Geo-Politics of Public History: A Review Essay

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Cauvin Thomas, *Public History. A Textbook of Practice*. New York: Routledge, 2016.

Lyon Cherstin M., Nix Elizabeth M., Shrum Rebecca K., *Introduction to Public History. Interpreting the Past, Engaging Audiences*. Lanham, MD: Rowman Littlefield, 2017.

Gardner James B., Hamilton Paula (eds). *The Oxford Handbook of Public History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Public history can be an uncomfortable occupation. For most traditional academic historians exposure is minimal. Their research tends to concentrate on the study of people long gone, and produces interpretations about the past addressed to their peers. As a result, heated responses to their work are likely to come only from colleagues. Those of us who have been there know that this can also be scary, but on the whole the audiences for academic work are small and the stakes are mostly intellectual. Public historians are interested in the ways in which the past is present in people's lives and this makes them accountable to a much larger group, that is not only invested intellectually: history matters to people on many other—often deeply personal—levels.

There are however different ways in which public historians face that risk. Some seek to control it by embracing methodological rigor as a defense: they aim at impartiality, strive for inclusiveness, and get involved in dialogue about the past as mediators seeking consensus. Others are more comfortable with the risk and messiness that public history work can entail. While they also embrace academic rigor, they historicize it, and pose questions about the nature of historical knowledge, its socially grounded and constructed character, its limits and possibilities. They are suspicious of the possibility of being impartial, are more willing to take a position, embrace social justice as a goal of their work, and participate in dialogue in which arriving at an agreement is not necessarily the objective. Underlying these different forms of practicing public history is a fundamentally different approach to power: while some strive to preserve neutrality and remain cautious of position-taking and political involvement, others are attracted to public history precisely because its practice is contentious, political, and potentially transformative. This differentiation is not new and has been addressed by practitioners previously.¹ And as usual, there are many positions in between. These different approaches to public history are evident in the three recently published volumes I will review in what follows.

Thomas Cauvin's *Public History. A Textbook of Practice* seeks to offer a comprehensive, and practical guide to the field in a single volume. It is a brave and ambitious undertaking when most of the existing publications are specific monographic case studies, essay collections, or concentrate on a particular field such as museums or digital history. Cauvin tries to bring it all together in a single volume that aims at delineating the skills required by public history practice. It will certainly become a mandatory reference.

In the introduction, he outlines a history of public history and offers a definition around a shared goal: "Public history has at its core a consideration for popular non-academic audiences."² For Cauvin the separation of public history work from academia, implicit in Robert Kelley's 1970s definition, is problematic because it assumes public historians are free from professional standards. There is a reason why this book is built as a methodological guide: the author stresses that sound method is fundamental to practice.

For Cauvin, public history should not be thought of as a separate field but as part of the professional historian's job. He presents public history as a development of disciplinary history that he traces back to its nineteenth century roots, which called for a strict differentiation between past and present and privileged facts over opinions. The way he presents this history is very meaningful and sets the foundation for his approach to public history in the volume. As Denise Merignolo has suggested, how we lay out the history of the field is inextricably related to how we understand its practice today.³ The historical lineage set by Cauvin stresses that public history needs to be based on the professional standards of sound methodology and rigorous objectivity, and downplays other traditions—scholarly and non-scholarly—of public engagement with the past. The need for rigorous methodological grounding would hardly be contested today; however, the way of working through

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the requirements of sound scholarship and a critical involvement with contemporary issues is open for debate. Cauvin is wary of activist public history and while he devotes one of the last chapters to civic engagement and social justice advocacy, he warns his readers: “it is necessary to stress that historians’ activism is controversial since it is often based on their personal convictions.”⁴

The book is divided into three parts that focus on what makes public history different. Part I deals with public history’s particular relation to sources which includes not only interpretation but creating, collecting, managing, editing, curating, among others. Part II explores public history’s diverse forms of narrating the past including historical novels, children’s literature, comics, digital texts, exhibitions, radio, film, videogames and performance. Part III approaches public history’s collaborative component and considers the public’s multiple uses of the past. Ethics and management skills awkwardly coexist in this part. The three parts as a whole cover the diversity of the field in a thoughtful and well-articulated manner.

The fact that part III is separate and not integral to the practices of collection and storytelling delineated in parts I and II is telling of the way in which the author understands public history. For example, the input of public historians to collection management in part I is explained in terms of identifying areas for collection in an inclusive manner that seeks to cover underrepresented populations as well as to include audiences in the process. While very rich in terms of outlining key skills and processes, this part does not mention the politics present in any collection enterprise. Ethics is tied to rigorous work and neutrality, and controversy is awarded little space.

Overall, the strength of this textbook is the richness of resources it offers its readers. It will become a required reference for anyone getting started in many of the spheres of practice of public history. Readers will find the key bibliography, references to other projects, and a thorough guide of steps to follow and issues to keep in mind. Cauvin asserts a particular view of how public history should be practiced while recognizing the diverse forms of approaching it in a very comprehensive volume.

Lyon, Nix and Shrum’s *Introduction to Public History* is also a very valuable tool for the teaching of public history. Each chapter includes discussion of key concepts, case studies to help students appreciate the complexities of public history at work, carefully designed activities for the classroom, and a breadth of useful bibliography. This textbook does not aim at comprehensiveness: the forms of practice of public history are so diverse that the authors chose to target crucial questions, challenges and dilemmas to equip students with the core values of the field. Chapters end up addressing some of the common areas of practice like collection management, museum exhibitions, community-based participatory research, and oral history. However, the novelty is that they do so by focusing on case studies that showcase the challenges, questions and dilemmas of practices like interpreting contested and difficult pasts or deciding what to preserve in a collection. Controversial cases like the *Baltimore ’68 Project*—which used community-based participatory research to inquire about the 1968 disturbances that followed the assassination of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr in Baltimore—or the commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the Whitman massacre—when thirteen white missionaries were murdered in the Pacific Northwest of the United States in the context of the expansion of white settlements—expose readers to the messiness and challenges of doing public history.

In the introductory first chapter, they define public history as “history that people encounter outside the classroom and beyond the traditional history text.”⁵ The particularities that set it apart from academic history are first its audience, which is public and not academic; second the collaboration both with the public as stakeholders and with professionals of other disciplines; and third a reflective practice. Like Cauvin, they assert that the work of all historians, public or not, needs to be based on solid historical method. They devote the second chapter to explaining the historical method to a general audience in an effort to provide the readers with tools to produce sound historical interpretations.

While the authors are keen on showing the political significance of public history work for audiences who are empowered by it, the public historian is in some ways left out of the politics. In the preface the authors declare that they espouse a “progressive public history” out of a conviction that “it has the ability to make our world a more just and ethical society.” Public history can do this, they argue, because it can give people solid tools of historical interpretation that can be “liberatory.” Historians, guarded by methodological rigor, seem to be outside of the power structures that audiences can be liberated from. “Progressive public history,” they add “can approach activism, but the public historian is always bound first and foremost to the ethics of the historical profession.”⁶ In the chapter about source collection for example, they explain public historians must strive for collecting that is systematic, transparent, representative, and accessible. But what does it mean to be systematic, transparent, representative or accessible? Are the standards for these practices unchanging? Can they ever be neutral? While the authors do mention examples that problematize this, the public historian is left on the margins of these political matters and assumed to be apolitical. In the chapter “Interpreting and exhibiting history,” upon discussing the frequent conflicting interpretations among stakeholders, they assert that the role of the public historian must be one of uninvolved mediation: “the best public history professionals adeptly address the most pressing concerns of these complex and sometimes contradictory opinions to produce

an end product that will appeal to multiple, diverse audiences.”⁷ Is mediation always the most ethical position? Would it be the case when dealing, for example, with a past of human rights violations?

Lyon, Nix and Shrum offer cases that show that public history can be uncomfortable; that it will certainly set you up for difficult encounters and conversations. Within the limits of a textbook, they signal the risks and rewards. The volume is stimulating, and it raises the question of how these difficult questions can be taken further in more challenging cases such as genocides or slave trade. Public history of difficult pasts can call for a reflective practice that does not stop at thinking carefully about what we do, but goes beyond to pondering on the why. Public history practice is also historical, and as such we need to critically contextualize ourselves as both experts—that hold particular tools—and social beings inevitably tangled in power structures.

Liz Ševčenko has pointed out that public history in the United States is more hesitant about its role in promoting civic engagement—and in particular about intervening in contemporary issues—than is the case elsewhere.⁸ A quick look at recent conference programs of the NCPH and the IFPH evidence this. Activist public history examples can be found around difficult pasts like the legacy of World War II in Germany or Italy, apartheid in South Africa, the Indian Residential Schools in Canada, or memory work around dictatorship in Central and South America. That is not surprising. In facing issues like murder, forced disappearance, torture, sexual violence, dispossession, political repression, persecution of minority groups, and extreme inequality, ethics acquires a larger meaning that goes beyond carrying out historical interpretation with integrity and striving to represent cultural diversity. In cases like these, activism seems the ethical path to take.

These are issues taken up in several of the sections included in *The Oxford Handbook of Public History*. Edited by James B. Gardner and Paula Hamilton, the *Handbook* brings together 28 texts that address the field’s crucial debates, current challenges, transformations and areas of expansion. The editors did a masterful work in the selection of a wide array of contributors who share thought-provoking case studies from all over the globe—many from the global south—written by practitioners inside and outside academia. They succeed at evidencing the complexities and promise of public history.

An introduction that provides unity and coherence, which one could expect of an edited volume, is out of the question here. Instead, the editors discuss some of the problems in defining such a diverse field, the state of the field around the globe, and point to new trends including internationalization, the impact of late twentieth century political events, the challenges of memory for the practice of public history in our contemporary world, and the possibilities opened by new media. Finally, they pose the question of how the shifting balance of world power with the growing power of China, India, Russia or Brazil will impact public history; it is a pity that little is included on public history from these areas of the world in the volume.

The book is organized in six parts that sometimes feel arbitrary, as some chapters could have been placed in one or another, but this only speaks of their quality and theme connections in the field. Since it would be impossible to review all chapters here. I will limit myself to pointing at how some of the authors invite us to a public history practice that is aware of the power of history and call for a reflective and engaged practice.

Two of the contributors emphasize that public history is at the vanguard of the recent transformations in historiography. Barbara Franco argues that public history in the twenty-first century is not at the margins but at the core of historiography. She stresses that the decentralization of culture that followed the rise of the New Social History and the postmodern turn brought community history to the fore. Janelle Warren-Findley also links the changing theories of history of the 1970s and 1980s to the practice of public history. As national identities began to be interpreted as unfinished, contested, and contingent, the role of public historians also shifted to become “often about power and place” (311). She stresses that public historians started recognizing their frameworks to be as much political as intellectual.

The volume is full of examples of public history of politically charged issues. Liz Ševčenko inquires about the different forms of approaching dialogue and democracy in diverse settings like Argentina, South Africa, Russia or the U.S. She stresses the power of history to promote dialogue on divisive contemporary issues. Trudy Huskamp Peterson studies archives of human rights in places like Guatemala, Argentina, former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, and Canada. She reminds us that archives are about much more than managing sources and providing access; they are about “the right to know” and can help societies heal trauma and defend human rights. Kevin Murphy, Jennifer Pierce and Alex Urquhart present LGBTQ history as a case in which it was community activists who opened the road to public history, and academics followed. Even today, with a strong collaboration between community and academics, the field remains deeply committed to political activism.

Environmental public history is treated in three chapters that evidence the relevance of history to address pressing environmental issues. Jeffrey K. Stine stresses that public history needs to be sensitive to the moral and political dimensions of environmental challenges like global warming, which need to be informed historically. T. Allan Comp explores how the civic engagement with history can help fix the legacy of acid mine drainage that contaminates water supplies in Appalachia. Cathy Stanton argues that public historians can partner with small-scale local agriculture in a civic project to understand current environmental and economic challenges and adapting to globalization.

Some of the authors point out the limitations of the quest for inclusive multiculturalism in collections and exhibitions. Benjamin Filene argues that the efforts to make visible identities like Latino, African American or American Indian risk essentializing them, and overlooking internal diversity, conflict, and change. Cristina Lleras discusses the controversies that arise when museums become multicultural, and calls museums to focus more on the processes of construction of identities than on identities themselves.

The last part gives examples of public history that cannot remain neutral. It is the case of German efforts to deal with history in postwar Europe studied by Udo Gößwald, of the need for critical perspective on colonial collections identified by Boris Wastiau, and the need for more radical interpretations of the history of slavery that Bayo Holsey studies around slavery tourism in Ghana.

As the three reviewed volumes show, the diversity of public history goes beyond the multiple areas of practice and its plural definitions. Public historians from different parts of the globe have different ways of understanding and practicing civic engagement, reflexivity and ethics. The field has flourished in recent years despite this, and perhaps even because of it. One of the trends of public history that all authors acknowledge is internationalization. The growing knowledge about how public history is approached in places with different histories and disciplinary trajectories will only make more evident the geo-politics of public history. This will certainly be interesting and will provide challenges and opportunities for practitioners that also face shared challenges in a globalized world. Who is entitled to produce history and why? What histories are legitimate? What is the significance of our work? What do we do it for and for whom? What is the public history our communities need? What is the public history our globalized world—facing challenges from the crisis of democracy to global warming—needs?

Notes

- 1 See for example: Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1990), xv-xxiv; Cathy Stanton, *The Lowell Experiment: Public History in a Postindustrial City* (Minneapolis: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006), 8-16; Liz Ševčenko, "Public Histories for Human Rights: Sites of Conscience and the Guantánamo Public Memory Project," in *The Oxford Handbook of Public History*, ed. James B. Gardner and Paula Hamilton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Cathy Stanton, "Between Pastness and Presentism: Public History and Local Food Activism," *ibid.*
- 2 Thomas Cauvin, *Public History. A Textbook of Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 11.
- 3 Denise Meringolo, "The American Civilization Institute: A case study in radical public history education." *History@Work*, 25 January 2017, <http://ncph.org/history-at-work/the-american-civilization-institute-a-case-study-in-radical-public-history-education/>.
- 4 Cauvin, *Public History. A Textbook of Practice*, 231.
- 5 Cherstin M. Lyon, Elizabeth M. Nix, and Rebecca K. Shrum, *Introduction to Public History. Interpreting the Past, Engaging Audiences* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 1.
- 6 *Ibid.*, x.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 104.
- 8 Ševčenko, "Public Histories for Human Rights: Sites of Conscience and the Guantánamo Public Memory Project."