

Colombian Historians and the Public

Catalina Muñoz

The practices we have come to name “public history” are characterized by their diversity. Furthermore, they have changed over time and have had different national or regional trajectories and connotations. Having an umbrella term can be useful insofar as it enriches local experiences in conversation with distant ones. However, it is crucial to understand local developments in their own terms when entering conversations with the wider field so as not to sacrifice depth. This is precisely what Jacqueline Nießer and Juliane Tomann accomplish in their article. Although the authors recognize the influence of US public history on the development of the field in Germany, and that the “broadening of focus in historical science that takes into consideration nonacademic, public uses of the past”¹ is a global phenomenon, they explain the particular shape that the field has adopted in Germany as firmly grounded on local trajectories.

In Germany, they explain, public and applied history emerged as two distinct fields. The authors track the use of these two terms in the titles of courses, emerging professorships, publications, and in the names of academic programs. They find that those who use the term public history tend to approach the practice in terms of using different communication strategies to present historical knowledge to the public. Whereas their interaction with the public concentrates in *presenting history to* them, applied history on the other hand has been distinctive for *doing history with* the public. The authors note that the term applied history was also used to refer to the marketing of history, but that it refers more often to the horizontal civic engagement of historians with local communities. The configuration of these two forms of relating to the public results from the division within German historical sciences between two camps: research and teaching. Public history derived from the former, *Geschichtswissenschaft*, the sub-discipline in which historians concentrate on researching and producing narratives about the past. For its part, applied history was tied to *Geschichtsdidaktik*, the denomination of professorships

¹ 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, quote 12.

concentrating on the teaching of history and the advancement of historical consciousness through education, museums, archives, etc. The development of public and applied history in Germany thus makes sense in the context of the particular structures that have forged the historical discipline there.

Although there is a tension between public and applied history in Germany, the authors argue that this tension should not be interpreted as a schism because both are part of a single phenomenon: a transformation in the historical sciences which have grown more interested in the public sphere. This is true of other sciences as well. The authors refer to the idea of “citizen science” which has relatively recently acknowledged the potential of opening up the process of scientific production to the public. The goal is to unlock the ivory tower, and the authors argue that both public and applied history—as defined in Germany—are necessary in this process.

I find this conversation useful, even though the local context in which I practice what could be called public history by international standards is far removed from the situation described by Nießer and Tomann. In Colombia, and to the best of my knowledge this applies to the rest of Latin America, there are no public history programs. The term has indeed begun to be used—the third conference of the International Federation for Public History (IFPH) in Bogotá in 2016 convened around “public history” practitioners from the region and beyond—and courses are slowly opening in different universities.² The practices that now begin to fall under that name are quite old but have undergone a recent resurgence that, while tied to local trajectories, is not foreign to the process described by Nießer and Tomann.

Before describing the development of Colombian historians’ interest in being of use outside the ivory tower, I want to clarify that I am going to omit writing about the many instances in which individuals and institutions outside academia have participated in the production of narratives about the past in public.³ In Colombia, the institutionalization of history as a discipline only happened in the 1960s through the creation of university programs. The first generation of professional Colombian historians embraced Marxism both as an analytical tool that provided solid academic grounding to their work and as political ideology. They were critical of power and approached their academic work as an instrument for the transformation of social, economic, political, and cultural structures. The first generation of Colombian historians—including Germán Colmenares, Álvaro Tirado, Marco Palacios, Margarita González, Jesús Antonio Bejarano, Salomón Kalmanovitz, and of course Jaime Jaramillo who trained them all—combined rigorous historical

² Some universities that have offered public history courses, seminars, and conferences in the region, although not always called “public history,” are Universidade de São Paulo, Universidade Federal Fluminense, and Universidade Regional do Cariri in Brazil; Universidad Católica de Chile; Universidad del Valle, Universidad del Rosario, Universidad de los Andes and Universidad Nacional in Bogotá; UNAM and Universidad Autónoma de Chihuahua in México; and Universidad de Buenos Aires in Argentina.

³ For a book that traces the use of the past in Colombia between 1930 and 1960, before the professionalization of the discipline, see Sandra Patricia Rodríguez, *Memoria y olvido: usos públicos del pasado en Colombia, 1930–1960* (Bogotá: Editorial Universidad del Rosario, 2017).

scholarship with a leftist political commitment to change. They understood historical knowledge to be valuable beyond academia.⁴

During the decades of the 1960s and the 1970s, these historians produced rigorous social and economic history, displacing the patriotic political histories produced in the previous decades mostly by lawyers who were amateur historians and wrote about the deeds of national heroes. The rise of professional history in Colombia coincided with a broadening of access to higher education and with it an increasing demand of social analysis by middle class university students, also eager for transformation. Professional historians found an avid readership, and works of historians like Álvaro Tirado became bestsellers.⁵ Contact between academic historians and the general public was natural back then.

However, there emerged a tension between the rigorousness of academic work and the political inclinations of historians. Historians like Jaime Jaramillo, Germán Colmenares, and Jorge Orlando Melo were critical of the work of people like Indalecio Liévano, historian and also consultant to president Alfonso López Michelsen, whose widely read *Los grandes conflictos sociales y económicos de nuestra historia* traced Colombian history in terms of the struggle between the “pueblo” (the common people) and the “oligarchy” in a fashion his critics—who shared his political inclinations—found populist and not rigorous.⁶ Retiring to the ivory tower seemed to some the remedy to populist scholarship lacking solid methodological grounding.

By 1990, some historians mourned the languishing of political commitment among their peers. This was the case of Jesús Antonio Bejarano, one of the members of that first generation. He attributed this shift to “the collapse of great political projects and utopias that illuminated the questions history should answer.”⁷ The fall of the Soviet Union and closer to home the fall of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua discouraged historians’ trust in Marxism, and hence the fading of aspirations that their work could help bring about change. The discipline’s early commitment to civic engagement waned as historians retreated to their campuses.

Yet, the tradition of making the discipline relevant beyond academia may have weakened but did not disappear. This happened in at least three different ways. First, historians like Mauricio Archila, Fernán González, Medófilo Medina, and José

4 Jorge Orlando Melo, “Medio siglo de historia colombiana: notas para un relato inicial,” *Revista de Estudios Sociales*, no. 4 (1999): 9–22; Andrés Botero-Bernal, “Saberes y poderes. Los grupos intelectuales en Colombia,” *Revista de Pensamiento Jurídico*, no. 30 (2011): 161–216; Alexander Betancourt, *Historia y nación. Tentativas de la escritura de la historia en Colombia* (Medellín: La Carreta Editores, 2007).

5 The editorial success of the first professional historians is explored in Jorge Orlando Melo, “La literatura histórica en la última década,” *Boletín cultural y bibliográfico XXV*, no. 15 (1988): 59–69.

6 These criticisms are described in “Medio siglo de historia colombiana: notas para un relato inicial,” 13. For Melo’s 1969 critique see “Los estudios históricos en Colombia: situación actual y tendencias predominantes,” *Revista de la Dirección de Divulgación Cultural*, no. 2 (1969): 37–39.

7 Jesús Antonio Bejarano, “Guía de perplejos: una mirada a la historiografía colombiana,” *Anuario Colombiano de Historia Social y de la Cultura*, no. 24 (1997): 292–93.

Antonio Ocampo kept alive a scholarly tradition of commitment to both civic engagement and rigorous research on crucial social issues. Second, some historians sought to communicate their knowledge to the general public through films like *Colombia, rebelión y amnistía 1944–1986* (1987) and *Protagonistas* (1989), or television series like *El pasado en presente* (1978–1993), *Revivamos nuestra historia* (1979–1986), and *Lado B de la historia* (2008). Third, historians have participated in government efforts to understand the armed conflict and suggest actions for peace. This materialized in the formation of expert study commissions.⁸ The 1987 Comisión de estudios sobre la violencia (Commission for the Study of Violence), led by historian Gonzalo Sánchez, was created by Colombian President Virgilio Barco to assess the armed conflict and formulate recommendations. Twenty years later, President Uribe created the Subcomisión de memoria histórica (Subcommission on Historical Memory) again under the leadership of Sánchez. The subcommission’s mandate was to document—using archival sources and also oral testimony—human rights violations in the context of a peace agreement reached with paramilitary groups that terrorized the Colombian countryside for years. The subcommission later became the *Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica*, which currently has the mandate to contribute to the reparation of victims and reconciliation by defending the right to truth.

Memory work in Colombia has actually been dominated by political scientists, sociologists, and anthropologists, and the few historians who have participated, including lead figure Gonzalo Sánchez, have received harsh criticism from their academic peers. Renán Silva, widely respected for his thoroughness as a historian, raised his voice against Sánchez and memory work in general for blurring the distinction between memory and historical analysis, and thus threatening objectivity. In his review of Sánchez’s book *Guerra, memorias e historia*, Silva criticizes not only Sánchez but also Colombian intellectuals Alfredo Molano, Arturo Álape, and Orlando Fals Borda—who have used testimonies as well as nonacademic forms of communication—reproaching their lack of rigor, empirical verification, and critical judgment.⁹ The old qualms that antagonize academic production with civic engagement remain very much alive.

As I mentioned above, practices that can fit into the international definition of “public history” have existed for a long time in Colombia. However, they do seem to be gaining momentum. Historians are beginning to teach courses on the subject, participating in museum exhibitions, disseminating their work in different formats for nonacademic audiences—including graphic novels, radio shows and audiovisual products—getting involved in oral history and memory projects, and producing local histories with communities.¹⁰ In my own department, close to 50 percent

8 See, for example, Jefferson Jaramillo, “Expertos y comisiones de estudio sobre la violencia en Colombia,” *Revista Estudios Políticos*, no. 39 (2011): 231–58.

9 Renán Silva, “Reseña de ‘Guerras, memoria e historia,’” *Análisis Político*, no. 51 (2004): 93–97.

10 The list here is long, and it aims only to provide some examples rather than to be exhaustive. Recent exhibitions curated by historians include *Palabras que nos cambiaron*, curated by Margarita Garrido at Biblioteca Luis Ángel Arango (2010), *Habeas Corpus*, co-curated by Jaime Borja at Museo

of the faculty members have been involved in public history projects of some kind. The current challenge of building peace in a society marked by deep structural and historical inequalities after the signing of the peace agreements with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), a guerrilla movement dating from the 1960s, makes it even more pressing for historians to engage and make themselves relevant. Will old confrontations spark again? The work of historians using new communication formats is not threatening and does not cause concern. But when engagement involves including the general public as more than audiences, the ivory tower trembles. Can we produce public history that is based on active civic engagement and does not sacrifice rigorous scholarship? We certainly can and I believe this is the challenge. As Nießer and Tomann suggest, we can begin by configuring the field in an integrated manner and not around an unnecessary schism.

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de Arte del Banco de la República (2010), *¡Mandinga sea! África en Antioquia*, co-curated by Adriana Maya at Museo de Antioquia (2013–2014), *El reino frente al rey*, curated by Daniel Gutiérrez at Museo Nacional (2017), and the exhibition *Justo Arosema y su tiempo*, curated by Marixa Lasso at Biblioteca Nacional de Colombia (2018). Historians have also explored alternatives to exhibits to get their research to wider audiences, using tools such as graphic novels in association with illustrators; see for example Muriel Laurent, Rubén Egea, and Alberto Vega, *El antagonista. Una historia de contrabando y color* (Bogotá: Ediciones Uniandes, 2013). The history department of Universidad Nacional produces a radio show titled *Autores de historias* where historians are interviewed about their recent work. The third National Meeting of Oral History and Memory in 2017 was a huge success showcasing dozens of oral history projects with communities under its main theme: the uses of history for peacebuilding. The group “Historias para lo que viene” seeks to use history for peace building through initiatives like offering university classes in public space, creating short animated videos explaining the historical roots of the conflict, and producing workshops where historians and the general public debate around contentious issues of Colombia’s past.