

What Public History Do We Want? Views from Germany

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Jacqueline Nießer and Juliane Tomann's article demonstrates a "change in German historical sciences" through the growth of public and applied history.¹ More broadly, the article reflects both the current internationalization of public history and global questions about the changing role of historians. For instance, the International Federation for Public History (IFPH), created in 2011, has tried to connect historians with each other, and has encouraged conversation about new courses and programs in public and applied history all around the world.² However, as Nießer and Tomann's article explores, this internationalization triggers questions regarding the definitions, approaches, and limits to the field.³

The reactions to, and the development of, public history around the world are very interesting as they tell us about specific national contexts and historiographical traditions, in this case, about Germany. The article proposes an extremely rich bibliography to study in order to understand the rise—and limits—of public history as an official academic discipline in Germany. In comparison with North America, the German—but also broadly European—debates focus more often on historiographical and epistemological issues. In that spirit, the authors connect the rise of public and applied history to older research on cultural representations and to memory studies. An interesting bridge between this older and more recent work could be to compare the latter with David Glassberg's article (and the following discussion in *The Public Historian*) on the relations between public history and memory.⁴ Another

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 11.

2 For more details, see the IFPH website: <https://ifph.hypotheses.org/>.

3 On the internationalization of public history, see Serge Noiret and Thomas Cauvin, "Internationalizing Public History," in *The Oxford Handbook of Public History*, ed. James B. Gardner and Paula Hamilton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 25–43.

4 David Glassberg, "Public History and the Study of Memory," *The Public Historian*, 18, no. 2 (Spring 1996): 7–23.

point that I find particularly interesting is the authors' discussion of the links between public history and didactics, in other words, how public history and teaching methodology connect. In a similar vein, a few months ago, Joanna Wojdon and David Dean published an article on public history and history didactics.⁵ The relations between historians/researchers and historians/teachers shed light on internal tensions and development on the different ways to apply history outside academia. I would even invite the authors to clarify and distinguish between public practices and university training.

For instance, the view that public history is an "American phenomenon" is not new—French historian Henry Rousso expressed a similar understanding in his 1982 article—but should be refined.⁶ Actually, historians' public practices were neither brought to nor received in Europe in the 1980s and 1990s; they had been around for centuries but were not called public or applied history. What developed since the 1970s is merely the institutionalization of public history in academic and professional programs. The distinction—and the fact that many historians were doing public history without calling it that—may contribute to explaining current debates on how to better connect historians and audiences.

The authors' arguments over the terminology—in this article between public and applied history—are symbolic of debates over the implementation and development of the field. Similar discussions took place at the origins of the National Council on Public History (NCPH) as well as during the first conferences of the IFPH. These discussions are necessary, but the article could be placed in a longer and broader context. The authors are right in saying that public history is, globally, much more often used than applied history. However, centers of applied history exist all over the world, in Australia, in Russia, and in the United States.⁷

It is very interesting to read about the development of applied history in early twentieth century Germany, but this was not unique to the nation and in fact was part of broader trend in making the social sciences utilitarian. For instance, Harvard University developed the business history movement in the 1920s to apply history to contemporary economic issues. Even the term applied history existed. Rebecca Conrad has explained how some historians such as Benjamin Schambaugh developed and used applied history as early as the 1900s in the United States.⁸ Applied historical studies also developed in the United Kingdom in the late 1960s and resulted

⁵ David Dean and Joanna Wojdon, "Public History and History Didactics: A Conversation," *Public History Weekly*, 5 (2017) 9, DOI: [dx.doi.org/10.1515/phw-2017-8656](https://doi.org/10.1515/phw-2017-8656).

⁶ See the English translation, Henry Rousso, "Applied History, or the Historian as Miracle-Worker," *The Public Historian* 6, no. 4 (Autumn 1984): 65–85.

⁷ See the Center for Applied History at Macquarie University (Australia) the Applied History Center at Perm State University (Russia), or the Applied History Project at Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs (United States).

⁸ Rebecca Conrad, *Benjamin Shambaugh and the Intellectual Foundations of Public History* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002).

in the first conference of public history in Europe (Rotterdam, Holland, 1982).⁹ Interestingly, unlike what the authors find in the German case, public history in North America and in the United Kingdom initially focused much more on applications than communication. The first programs in the United States (University of California, Santa Barbara and Carnegie Mellon University) did not promote communication to audiences nor history in cultural institutions such as museums, but rather they emphasized applications of history in public policy, consulting, and the federal government. In his introduction to the first volume of *The Public Historian* in 1978, G. Wesley Johnson (one of the founding members of the movement in the United States) listed the eight sectors in which public historians usually worked. He included history-linked institutions such as museums and archives, but he clearly stressed governmental administration and corporate business as the two main fields.¹⁰ This focus on public policy and corporate management reflected the profile of the founding fathers who had much more experience as consultants (usually in addition to holding academic positions) than with heritage management.

Although the discussions on the terminology are common practice, the approaches proposed by the authors as to the relations between public and applied history seem rather specific. Dividing between public history being about the “forms of history” and applied history being about “the agents” is quite uncommon on the international scene.¹¹ When they write that “public history presents history *to* the public (using popular forms), applied history works by doing history *with* the public,” the authors offer a very personal definition that would, if I am not mistaken, be questioned by public history programs in Australia, Ireland, or more recently China, that propose a shared authority approach, doing history with the public. Even though both public and applied history programs co-exist, they usually all accept the two definitions—forms and agents or history *to* or *with* the public. As far as I know, public history and applied history programs in North America insist (one way or the other) on participatory processes and shared authority. Should the distinction between public history and applied history be so clear-cut in Germany, this would represent a very interesting case study for international discussions. On the other hand, I really appreciate that the authors tackled the practical, collaborative, and activist aspects of public and applied history in Germany. Too often, European historians tend to limit the discussion on the empirical and epistemological issues at stake in public history. For instance, during his tour of Europe in the early 1980s, Wesley Johnson noticed a general reluctance from European historians—especially in Germany and France—to discuss the pragmatic applications of history.¹² The article offers therefore a much-needed anchor for discussion.

⁹ Michael Drake, *Applied Historical Studies: An Introductory Reader* (London: Methuen, Milton Keynes, Open University Press, 1973).

¹⁰ G. Wesley Johnson, “Editor’s Preface,” *The Public Historian* 1, no. 1 (Autumn 1978): 6.

¹¹ Nießer and Juliane Tomann, “Public and Applied History in Germany,” 20.

¹² G. Wesley Johnson, “An American Impression of Public History in Europe,” *The Public Historian*, 6, no. 4 (Autumn 1984): 86–97.

Finally, I truly agree with the authors' exploration of key issues in the last part of the article. For instance, discussing the links between public and contemporary history is crucial and reflects national contexts. The German focus on contemporary history seems to be similar to that of the United States where the last two centuries occupy the great majority of public history projects. However, this is not true for every national context—such as in Italy where a national association of public history was created in 2017 and where antiquity and public archaeology offer many opportunities.¹³

On that issue I would agree with Stefanie Samida, quoted by the authors, who wants to broaden the topics engaged in public history. Internationalizing the field allows to put into conversation different approaches of public practices, but also different currents of the humanities such as public archaeology, paleography, material culture, or family history that can enrich public history.

Another issue—although briefly mentioned—deals with ethics in historical public practices. Ethics have been part of the discussions in North America—the NCPH actually proposed codes of ethics as early as the mid-1980s—but it seems to me to be very symbolic of the current debates about public and applied history in Europe. For instance, in January 2018, the public history program in Paris (University Paris-East Creteil) proposed a one-day conference entitled “Can Public History be Critical?” that wondered if and how forms of critical discourses are possible throughout public history practices.¹⁴ Those later points in the article may reveal a new trend of discussion about the epistemological consequences of public history practices. This was actually an objective of the founding members of the public history movement in the United States who hoped, in the 1980s, for international discussions in which the skill-oriented public history from North America could be associated with the European epistemological debates to create a balanced and mutually informed international public history. This essay may be another step in that direction.

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¹³ See for instance, *Medievalism, Public History, and Academia: the Re-creation of Early Medieval Europe, c. 400-1000* (Malmö University, September 26–28, 2018), <https://www.mah.se/Nyheter/Kalender/Conference-Call-for-Papers-Medievalism-Public-History-and-Academia-the-Re-creation-of-Early-Medieval-Europe-c-400-1000/>.

¹⁴ Bazin, J. “L’histoire publique peut elle etre critique?” January 29, 2018, <https://histpubliq.hypotheses.org/348>.