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Nießler, Jacqueline; Tomann, Juliane

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On “Big Tents” and “Umbrellas”

Jacqueline Nießer and Juliane Tomann

Presenting ideas about public and applied history in an international context and having them evaluated by scholars active in the same field but with different national or disciplinary angles is an exciting endeavor. We are very thankful to all colleagues for their time, thoughts, and insights about our take on public and applied history in the German context. Thomas Cauvin pointed out that internationalization “triggers questions regarding the definition, approaches, and limits to the field” (42) and in these concluding remarks we would like to pick up on some of the questions raised. The most important insight we gained from this stimulating read is the emphasis on the shared authority approach, which seems to be common in public history programs across the world. Co-creating knowledge, being grounded in a community and in activism, as well as having a social impact are mentioned throughout the papers as common features of public and applied history. This understanding highlights the relationship between professionals, their subjects of study, and their audiences for which Steven Lubar’s metaphor of “Us, Them, and You” offers a simple formula for a sophisticated process (34). The triangle engages with the self-reflexivity of public historians and their understanding of audiences as well as with basic social scientific standards such as methodological transparency, accurateness, and objectivity that often are challenged while working outside academic settings.

The Columbian example illustrates this challenge and has resonated with the authors who have had similar experiences of living and working in a context of rapid political and social change, including observing the German and European unification process from the perspective of the German-Polish border and researching the aftermath of socialist regimes. Muñoz reminds us of how history can become a public battlefield after significant national change, and how gaining authority for historians over the process of defining the past without complying with one political side can become a difficult task. Particularly when pursuing a global perspective on public and applied history, more reflections about common challenges may be fruitful.

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Our American and British contributors view public and applied history in a “big tent” (Dickey, Lubar). To them, the field emphasizes application and calls for investigating practices in order to further reflections about public history as “a framework for integrating engagement into the research process itself” (Green, 57). The “the big tent theory” also embraces the public “when they realize that they are part of a larger story and that the history tent is big enough for us all.” (Dickey, 41).

In her analysis of the German case, and focusing on practice, Alix Green’s reminder “that the difference between ‘sharing authority’ and ‘a shared authority’ is not merely one of grammatical nuance” proves productive (60). Green refers to Michael Frisch to assert that “sharing authority” still confirms the authority of the historian as a professional who can dictate the process, whereas a “shared authority” approach also will include the authority of those other than the historian in the meaning-making process.¹

In the German context, it seems that the “shared authority” approach is not yet in sight. Although public impact, participation, and communication are considered important in German academia, the practice in research and teaching resembles “sharing authority”: that is, historians performing as experts while providing space for participation and dialogue with nonhistorians. Those nonhistorians are either othered as nonprofessionals, or in case academics from other disciplines, regarded with a soft paternalism. Furthermore, publications about German public and applied history suggest an assumption of continuing to be strongly associated with history departments. A “shared authority” approach would imply more conversation with other fields of inquiry such as philosophy, sociology, geography, anthropology, and archaeology as Green proposes, or with the students as future public agents as Lubar emphasizes. How much the field of German public history is at all interested in such a conversation needs to be seen.

In the meantime, the institutionalization of public history is going on in Germany and a handbook on public history in German came out in March 2018.² The book offers an overarching survey of the developments in Germany, but merely mentions the term applied history without exploring or engaging with it at all. Although the new handbook prefers public history as the one and only term, in his commentary another German stakeholder, Cord Arendes, values making distinctions (between public and applied history) on a theoretical level because they help sharpen the concepts. It seems as though the discussion is far from coming to an end. We might perceive of it as part of the change we were advocating for in the initial article. We would be glad to keep up this stimulating process of (self)reflection and we suggest continued thinking about how to bridge the gap

¹ Michael Frisch, “‘Public History Is Not a One-Way Street,’ or from a Shared Authority to the City of Mosaics, and Back” (Keynote address, International Federation for Public History conference, Ravenna, Italy, June 7, 2017). See also Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990).

² Martin Lücke, Irmgard Zündorf, *Einführung in die Public History* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018).

between the analytical approach of scrutinizing and critically assessing public representations of the past and the activist one of engaging with the public. An integrated approach that values and takes into account both sides, that provides training for students in both realms, and that develops analytical skills as well as methods as to how to engage with the public would be the ideal.

We are glad that the metaphor of a hinge, which helped to describe the two existing concepts in Germany as one part of a device has triggered a reflection about the use of public and applied history in the English-speaking context too. We might conclude that applied history has become important for historicizing the field, taking into account articulations of applied history more than one hundred years ago in the United States and the UK. For current practice, it seems that the “umbrella term” of public history is most productive to further international exchange about different local, regional, and cultural trajectories.

It is most likely that these developments will be related to history departments where most public and applied historians see themselves. But wouldn't the “shared authority” approach be better institutionally reflected by integrating public and applied history into area studies or interdisciplinary research fields (such as memory or gender studies)?³ If we follow Green's suggestion to seek “greater interplay between the conceptual and the cultural strands of enquiry into public history,” (59) we may ask whether perhaps the answers to this question differ in different academic cultures. If not, then keeping a constant critical eye on imbalances, paternalisms, and unchallenged authority of historians in a collaborative endeavor of public historical meaning making is a must.

³ A promising development in this direction may be the new “Master Public History and Cultural Agency” at the University of Regensburg which started in October 2018 at the Chair for Comparative European Ethnology. <https://www.uni-regensburg.de/sprache-literatur-kultur/vergleichende-kulturwissenschaft/studium/studiengaenge/master-public-history-und-kulturvermittlung/index.html>.