

Labor as Public and Digital History in Brazil

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Abstract

This article examines public, digital, and labor history in Brazil, highlighting the challenges of constructing a public labor history amid neoliberal deregulation, technological changes, and the silencing of workers. It is argued that the practice of Public History should be encouraged as a professional duty of historians and that, in the Brazilian context, Public Labor History emerged as a practice motivated by the pressures of an unfavorable political climate.

Keywords: Public history; labor history; digital history; labor history workshops; Brazil.

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The field of Labor History in Brazil is well-established and supported by a substantial body of historiographical work.¹ Debates surrounding Public History and Digital History as distinct fields are much more recent, but also outstanding.² The intersection of these fields has, nonetheless, given rise to recent projects that allow for a broader reflection on the reach of academic knowledge and its capacity to intervene in public debate. This article analyses the relationships between public history, digital history, and labor history in Brazil. Taking the experience of the *Laboratório de Estudos de História dos Mundos do Trabalho* (Laboratory of Studies on Worlds of Labor History) at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (LEHMT-UFRJ), it explores the methodological, theoretical, and political challenges of constructing a public history of labor in an era of neoliberal deregulation, profound technological transformations, changes in labor relations, and the silencing of workers as political actors in the public arena.

The digital turn has posed new epistemological questions on historians. The world of digital information, with its rapid circulation, brings significant changes to historians' professional practices to the point of speaking of a new historicism.³ It is essential to reflect on the impacts of the digital age on history—or digital history—on traditional forms of research and dissemination of knowledge for public debate. Certainly, the ease of disseminating individual memories on the internet, often lacking historical consciousness, challenges the role of the professional historian. Digital history, consciously conceived and presented as narrative, is digital public history today.⁴ It represents a conscious effort to engage with these shifts, ensuring that history remains relevant and accessible in a digital age. Regarding labor history, in the context of labor market transformations, engaging in public debate on digital spaces—practicing what can be called digital public history—becomes the duty of the labor historian.

Established in 2019, the LEHMT-UFRJ portal (<http://www.lehmt.org>) stands out for the diversity of its productions (audiovisual series, articles, didactic manuals, news, suggestions for books/series/movies, publications of short articles, among others), aiming to elaborate, in accessible language, content of various formats about the experiences of workers in Brazil. By seeking to democratize access to academic knowledge in this field of study, LEHMT-UFRJ has invested in social networks and other channels for scientific dissemination. Thus, the “Labuta,” the Laboratory’s YouTube channel, and the “Vale Mais,” the Laboratory’s podcast, serve as important tools in this endeavor. Original articles are also produced, such as the *Workers’ Places of Memory* series, which has already mapped and analyzed more than a hundred places of memory and whose content was recently published in a book.⁵

Furthermore, the Laboratory produces content based on archives of labor history throughout the country. In line with recent debates in this field of study, the production of LEHMT/UFRJ has strongly engaged with discussions on global history, considering multiple experiences and forms of work, with particular attention to the mechanisms of articulation and construction of class, gender, and race/ethnicity identities in Brazilian and Latin American contexts in general. The Laboratory’s projects have created opportunities to produce knowledge and disseminate it with shared authority with the public, since the interaction between researchers and the audience has fueled the production of content. In addition to the simple dissemination of knowledge, in recent years the Laboratory has organized open workshops for workers, trade unionists and students in order to provide specific training, but also to open channels for debate with the non-specialist community.

1. Paulo Fontes, Alexandre Fortes, and David Mayer, “Brazilian Labour History in Global Context: Some Introductory Notes,” *International Review of Social History* 62, n. S25 (2017): 1–22.

2. For instance: Juniele Almeida, Marta Rovai, eds., *Introdução à História Pública* (São Paulo, Letra e Voz, 2011); José Barros, ed., *História digital* (Petrópolis, Vozes, 2022); Bruno Leal Pastor de Carvalho, Ana Paula Tavares Teixeira, ed., *História pública e divulgação de história* (São Paulo, Letra e Voz, 2019), 160.

3. Andreas Fickers, “Towards a new digital historicism? Doing history in the age of abundance,” in Andreas Fickers, Sonja de Leeuw, eds., “Making sense of digital sources,” *Journal of European History and Culture* 1, n. 1 (2012): 12–18.

4. Serge Noiret, “Digital Public History,” *Liinc em Revista* 11, n. 1 (May 2015): 28–51.

5. Paulo Fontes, ed., *Lugares de memórias dos trabalhadores* (São Paulo, SP: Alameda, 2023), 400.

1 Public and Digital History.

Public History, broadly stating, can be understood as the result of historians' work outside the university. When the term was coined in the 1970s, it served as an umbrella for several issues.

In the inaugural issue of *The Public Historian*, Robert Kelley defined Public History:

In its simplest meaning, Public History refers to the employment of historians and the historical method outside of academia: in government, private corporations, the media, historical societies and museums, even in private practice. Public Historians are at work whenever, in their professional capacity, they are part of the public process. An issue needs to be resolved, a policy needs to be formed, the use of a resource or an activity needs to be more effectively planned—and an historian is called upon to bring in the dimension of time: this is Public History.⁶

The concept itself has evolved over the years, especially when considering the digital era and the potential to expand public debate, reaching more people faster. Moreover, it is essential to highlight the potential of Public History to enhance the quality of public debate on topics related to historical knowledge.

In Brazil, Public History closely aligns with scientific literacy in history. Most authors who discuss the topic emphasize the importance of engaging non-specialist audiences with historical knowledge in a critical manner, aiming to make it useful in decision-making on a wide range of political, social, economic, and cultural issues. An interesting definition is provided by the Brazilian historian Bruno Leal Carvalho:

Personally, I understand Public History as a way for a professional historian to engage diverse non-specialist audiences with historical knowledge in a critical, participatory, and emancipatory manner, using a wide range of technological and methodological resources. Public History, in this sense, has many homes. And in this regard, it seems that historians generally agree: it is now understood that Public History can (and should) be practiced in the streets, in the media, in museums, galleries, archives, schools, libraries, and even within private organizations.⁷

In a way, the idea of scientific literacy, or the literacy of history itself, is not necessarily the same as Public History. The literacy of science produced in universities usually occurs through printed or digital articles and books, with the goal of circulating knowledge. Outside the universities, it could be just the dissemination of historical knowledge. The connection with Public History arises from the need for knowledge to circulate in order for it to be publicly debated. For Public History to achieve its goal of playing a role in public debate, it must circulate and reach non-specialist audiences. The main issue in this matter is the ability to critically understand and apply this knowledge, fostering a deeper and more informed understanding—an aim that aligns closely with the goals of Public History.

The debate among specialists already benefits from the academic infrastructure and the publishing market for circulation and dissemination. To go beyond this, the use of appropriate languages is essential, particularly without the erudition of traditional academic writing. In this regard, Public History and the literacy of history closely align. This is a characteristic that is quite evident in Brazil. In a certain way, it is about translating historical knowledge to a broader audience.⁸ Carvalho himself is a professional historian and university professor who began his career as a disseminator of history through online projects. Along with Ana Paula Teixeira, he edits *Café História*, the most important site

6. Robert Kelley, "Public History: Its Origins, Nature, and Prospects," *The Public Historian* 1, n. 1 (1978): 16.

7. See: <https://www.cafehistoria.com.br/historia-publica-biblio/>; see also Bruno Leal Pastor de Carvalho, Ana Paula Tavares Teixeira, eds., *História pública e divulgação de história* (São Paulo, Letra e Voz, 2019), 160. All quotations translated by the author unless stated otherwise.

8. About the idea of translating history, see: Pamela Cox, "Translating Labor History for Television," *Revista Mundos Do Trabalho* 10, no. 19 (April 17, 2019): 17–30.

for the dissemination of history in Brazil, which has been active since 2008.⁹ His journey as a public historian started with the dissemination of history, an activity he continues to pursue alongside his academic activities. In Brazil, similarly to the case of Carvalho, it is possible to name several professors working on Public History side projects.¹⁰

In a related analysis, British historian Jill Liddington evaluates the practice of Public History as a “popular presentation of the past to a range of audiences,”¹¹ which relates to how we acquire our sense of the past. According to the author, it is crucial to place the audience at the center of the stage.

Public—as opposed to private—historians will be aware of audience—and will probably, from the beginning of an idea or project, want to have an eye to widened audiences or readerships, in order to increase public access to the past [...] But it will not be wider-audiences-at-any-cost, but rather an awareness of communicating appropriately to ‘the public’.¹²

The issue at hand is the role of Public History in the public debate about history and, moreover, the political uses of the past in society, and the function of the public historian as an active mediator contributing to the formation of historical consciousness. It is well-known that historiography, in general, is predominantly produced for an academic audience. In Brazil, this is likely more pronounced than in countries like the USA, France, and England, where there are more examples of historians practicing in the public sphere. In Brazil, for instance, it is common for academic historians to question the quality of historical content available on the internet, on TV broadcasts, and in best-selling books. However, there do not seem to be many historians producing content for these media platforms. Despite the growing potential of digital tools for reaching broader audiences, the involvement of historians in these spaces remains limited.

Over the past decades, most of the best-selling history books of Brazilian history have been written by journalists. This is not to say that only professionally trained historians have the capability to produce historical knowledge; such a claim would assert a market monopoly that would not necessarily lead to higher quality. The issue is that a public debate about history cannot be conceived without a significant participation of historians. Literature produced by non-historians has become editorial successes selling tens of thousands of copies but often fails academic scrutiny and causes controversy among experts.¹³ Here lies an ambiguity: professional historians produce little content in language that reaches a wider audience but are critical of the poor-quality content that gains public attention. The criticism mainly lies in the lack of rigor and academic form, which is an inconsistency.¹⁴ In this sense, historical knowledge produced at Brazilian universities, which has high academic quality, ends up having less impact on the public debate than questionable-quality content produced by others. Thus, it must be said that, in Brazil, historical consciousness has been more influenced by knowledge that does not stem from academic production.

What is the concept of historical consciousness used here? The philosopher Sara Albieri presents a very useful conceptualization:

9. See: <https://www.cafehistoria.com.br/category/english/>

10. For instance, Samantha Quadrat's Project on places of memory https://www.instagram.com/lugaresdememoria_/ and Paulo Gomes' project on the history of the dictatorship <https://www.historiadaditadura.com.br/>.

11. Jill Liddington, “What Is Public History? Publics and Their Pasts, Meanings and Practices,” *Oral History*, 30, n. 1, “Women's Narratives of Resistance” (Spring 2002): 84.

12. Liddington, “What Is Public History?”, 83–93.

13. For example, in the first decade of the 2000s, Eduardo Bueno published a series of books on the history of Brazil explored as anecdotal, episodic, factual, uncritical history. Similarly, Laurentino Gomes published a series of books following the same pattern of Bueno, however adding a psychological approach to historical characters emphasizing heroes and antiheroes. In both cases, the construction of the Brazilian nation is an unsuccessful project with no future solution. Historical processes are simplified. There remain the so-called great men, the masters of history. In brief, an old fashion way of writing history using a very captivating language.

14. See an interesting analysis in Jurandir Malerba, “Acadêmicos Na Berlinda Ou Como Cada Um Escreve a História?: Uma Reflexão Sobre o Embate Entre Historiadores Acadêmicos e Não Acadêmicos No Brasil à Luz Dos Debates Sobre Public History,” *História Da Historiografia: International Journal of Theory and History of Historiography* 7, no. 15 (May 8, 2014): 27–50.

The expression designates the way human beings interpret the temporal evolution of themselves and the world in which they live. [...] the use of the notion of historical consciousness allows us to philosophically ground the passage from academic history to public history [...] we think and speak historically, and this is the way in which we position ourselves in culture. This is how we identify the world around us; this is how we build our identity: always with the awareness of time, always elaborating some kind of narrative that involves the past and refers to the future.¹⁵

This framework creates a great deal of concern for academic and practicing historians. There are always ethical challenges when historians must face the public debate about history, especially when they intersect with politics. The work of the historian has very clear political consequences. There is no shortage of examples of distortion or denial of history to meet current political agendas. In Europe, the USA and Brazil, history has been used as a political weapon by the far right to justify political interventions. Here are some brief examples.

In Hungary, the government led by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has invested in interpretations of the past that minimize the role of Jews and alliances with Nazis. One example is the memory debate sparked by the construction of a monument that sought to relativize the country's sensitive past—meaning the collaboration with the regime.¹⁶ The monument installed in Budapest evoked Hungarian people as victims of foreign invaders—Germans, Russians, Turks, and tried to erase the memories of the collaboration, especially the Miklós Horthy period, the dictator who began persecuting socialists, liberals, and Jews even before World War II, in what became known as the “White Terror.”

In Brazil, the history of the Dictatorship (1964-1985) has never been peaceful in the public debate. The lack of effective transitional justice implied a herculean task for historians. Despite a vast and definitive historiography that has uncovered the horrors of the authoritarian regime led by military and civilians, the public debate on the subject forces historians to climb mountains frequently to contradict falsifications of history that deny the 1964 *coup d'état* and the horrors of the dictatorship. Negationist arguments are a political weapon of the far right, which seeks to construct a falsified memory to justify authoritarian public policies. This and other examples from Brazil will be taken up later to explain the motivations of the public history project of LEHMT-UFRJ.

And therein lies much of the ethical and political challenge for historians in the public debate. History is consumed in various ways, in books, TV broadcasts, social networks, websites, etc. If the content is predominantly falsified, there will be a major problem of understanding the past and, consequently, of public debate about the present. In this sense, Jerome de Groot has been discussing the dilemmas of the consumption of history.¹⁷ The author argues that as citizens and scholars, it is necessary to acknowledge this use of the past and become aware of the profound impact that popular history has on historical imagination. How citizens understand the past is of significant importance. The way we are taught to reflect on the past is crucial, whether through a teacher, a book, a social network post or a videogame.

The digital turn is another factor that complicates the issue of historians' public engagement, as well as the way historical knowledge is consumed and debated in the public arena. On one hand, the digital revolution has expanded the possibilities for public debate on history and, in a way, compels historians, particularly public historians, to engage with various media. All of this occurs at a speed of information circulation that was unimaginable not too long ago. On the other hand, the ease and speed of circulation of information—and historical debate—can also lead to the widespread dissemination of poor-quality or even negationist history, which, so to speak, contaminates historical consciousness. The consequences of this can be disastrous.

15. Sara Albieri, “História Pública e Consciência Histórica”, in *Introdução à História Pública*, ed. Juniele R. Almeida, Marta G. O. Rovai (São Paulo, Brasil: Letra e Voz, 2011), 25–27.

16. About the topic, see: Ágnes Erőss, “In Memory of victims: Monument and Counter-Monument in Liberty Square, Budapest”, *Hungarian Geographical Bulletin* 65, n. 3 (2016): 237–54.

17. See: Jerome de Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and heritage in contemporary popular culture* (London: Routledge, 2009), 305. See also: Interview with Jerome de Groot, “Consumindo História: genealogia, História Pública e outros engajamentos com o passado (Entrevista)”, available on: <https://www.cafehistoria.com.br/historia-publica-consumindo-historia/>.

Thomas Cauvin, when discussing the transformations of Public History, emphasizes the consequence of the digital turn.

[...] the fact that public history includes old practices is also a sign of the times; it reflects a changing context in the ways we preserve, research, interpret, study, communicate, use and consume the past. One of the most visible changes, the rise and use of the Internet, has revolutionized how people access and communicate knowledge. History is not immune to these profound changes, nor should it be.¹⁸

In order to share historical interpretation (trunk) with audiences, practitioners make use of a broad range of communication tools including radio, books, exhibitions, journals, tours, fiction, comics, and more recently digital and new media. A willingness to communicate beyond academic peers and a consideration for new modes of communication and how they affect content are crucial for the development of the field.¹⁹

The conclusion that can be drawn is that historians, whether public practitioners or not, have always had to engage with their audience. In the case of strictly academic historiography, a smaller audience is expected, as the focus is on producing knowledge and debating with specialists. Public History, however, encourages communication with larger, often non-academic, audiences. Given the political complications arising from the political use of the past by negationist groups, as argued above, communicating with non-specialist audiences by fully utilizing the potential of new digital media is more than just an option for historians concerned with public historical debate. It is a professional duty—a defense of history.

2 Public history in Brazil and Abroad

“Public history is built on an apparent paradox: it is a new field based on old practices.”²⁰ It is important to note that the practice of Public History predates the field itself. Therefore, the account of the emergence of Public History in Brazil, which will be presented below, refers specifically to the consolidated field and not to its practitioners. Despite the strength the field has gained in Brazil, its influence came from abroad.

In England, public history emerged as a politically and ideologically driven practice. Actually, there was an activist bias among historians, particularly in those associated with social history or history from below, who envisioned history’s potential as a builder of collective identities and the power history could have if constructed as public knowledge. Not coincidentally, one of the most notable British historians, Edward Palmer Thompson, never fully established himself as an academic historian and worked in evening classes for workers for a long time. Another example is the *History Workshop Journal*,²¹ which is the result of the History Workshops conducted in Oxford for the local community. Essentially, the idea is that public history has the power to make the past useful for the present and to influence the formation of historical consciousness within society. This is very important to this article’s argument and will be developed further in this text. In Europe, more broadly, another issue arose in the post-war period, namely the concern with the political uses of the past and particularly with the memory of the Holocaust, which dominated public debate, and in this context, historical knowledge played an essential role.

In the USA, Public History gained prominence at a time of concern over the job market and the opening of new professional opportunities for historians. Hence, it emerges as a proposal to combat the employability crisis. The field was quickly consolidated, and in 1979, the National Council on Public History (NCPH) was created, linked to the American History Association (AHA) and currently

18. Thomas Cauvin, “New Field, Old Practices: Promises and Challenges of Public History,” *Magazén* 2, n. 1 (2020), 14.

19. Thomas Cauvin, “New Field, Old Practices”, 24.

20. Thomas Cauvin, “New Field, Old Practices”, 14.

21. “Editorial Collective,” *History Workshop Journal* 1, n. 1 (Spring 1976): 1–3.

a reference in the area in the USA and in the world. The NCPH has prominent projects, such as the *History@Work* blog, the Best Practice Guides for Public History, and *The Public Historian*, one of the most important journals in the field. In addition, the USA is the country with the largest number of training programs in Public History with hundreds of programs at different levels of training.²²

Internationally, the most significant effort to promote Public History is the International Federation for Public History (IFPH),²³ established in 2011. The IFPH regularly organizes conferences and discussions in the field. Its objectives are to create an international network of public history programs, scholars, and professionals, and to facilitate the international exchange of information concerning the teaching, research, and practice of public history.

How did Public History emerge in Brazil? Although it is difficult to pinpoint the exact origins of Public History practitioners, the field began to solidify in 2011 when a group of professional historians organized the first Public History course at the University of São Paulo (USP), aimed at training and encouraging practitioners. This course led to the publication of the pioneering book *Introdução à História Pública*, edited by Juniele Almeida and Marta Rovai.²⁴ This course served as the catalyst for the establishment of the Brazilian Network for Public History (*Rede Brasileira de História Pública* - RBHP) in the following year, an organization that has been fostering discussions in the field in Brazil. In addition to the RBHP, the National Association of History (ANPUH) has been periodically promoting public debates on history through its online communication channels, with the goal of leveraging historical knowledge for public discourse on politics, culture, society, and other topics. The historiography produced since then is very rich, and it dialogues with international production, but it is still very inward-looking. There are very few studies published in English, which still places Brazilian production in a marginal position in this debate.

Public History in Brazil possesses its own unique characteristics while also engaging with international experiences. Perhaps the most distinctive feature is that the primary debates and projects in Public History have emerged from initiatives sponsored by academic historians. This does not imply that there are no Public History practitioners; they do exist and are active in literary production, professional institutions, archives, museums, and notably in social media and the podcasting sphere.²⁵ However, these practitioners have not organized themselves to strengthen the field. The biggest encouragement comes from academic historians. For instance, the historians involved in founding the Brazilian Network for Public History (RBHP) were university professors in Brazil or became such later on. The first Public History course mentioned above was held at the University of São Paulo (USP), the largest Brazilian university. They have a more academic profile than that of a practitioner, although they maintain public history projects alongside their academic research.²⁶ There is not enough space in this article to explore this debate in depth, but it appears that there is a need for greater engagement and, above all, for Brazilian universities to offer more graduate courses and training programs in Public History, and consequently encourage more historians to become professional practitioners of public history. Currently, there is only one master's program in Public History in Brazil, at the State University of Paraná (UNESPAR). There is an employment crisis for historians in the country and those who have ventured into jobs different from the usual ones (schoolteacher and academic historian) do not find many training options.

It is also important to highlight some elements that connect the Brazilian experience with international cases. Just as in the United States, where the issue of employability motivated the structuring of Public History, the employment crisis in Brazil led ANPUH (National Association of History) to launch an intense campaign for the professionalization of the profession as a historian. This cam-

22. <https://ncph.org/program-guide/>

23. <https://ifph.hypotheses.org/sample-page>

24. Juniele R. Almeida, Marta G. O. Rovai, eds., *Introdução à História Pública* (São Paulo, Brasil: Letra e Voz, 2011).

25. For instance: the Instagram profile *Gole de História*, led by Julia Costa and Jerson Filho available at <https://www.instagram.com/goledehistoria/>; *Provocação Histórica*, a weekly interview show on YouTube hosted by the historian Lindener Pareto; Luis Antonio Simas, public historian and writer with broad public activity; the podcast *História Preta (Black History)*, by the historian Thiago André, available at <https://historiapreta.com.br/>.

26. It is the case for most of the historians involved in LEHTM-UFRJ projects.

paign resulted in the legal recognition of the profession through Brazilian law.²⁷ This did not change much for historians already established in academic or educational jobs, but the law defined several new areas²⁸ of activity, such as working in museums, historical heritage services, and various public services—essentially, jobs that directly engage with the public dimension of historical knowledge. Additionally, the law now allows various public sector agencies to hire professionals trained in history, which was previously not possible.

Another important dimension of the recent debate on Public History in Brazil is the issue of the political uses of the past and the role of historical knowledge. In recent decades, the intensification of political disputes between the political left and right wings has led to controversial debates in which historians have been compelled to intervene. The case of former President Jair Bolsonaro (2018-2022) is particularly notable. Associated with the far-right, Bolsonaro is a prominent historical negationist who has made numerous speeches disseminating historical misinformation. For instance, he denied the violence of the military dictatorship (1964-1985), contradicting well-established historiography on the subject.²⁹ Therefore, similar to the European context, concerns about the political uses of the past—that is, the public dimension of history—have been a motivating factor for the public engagement of historians, whether they are academic or practitioners. For this reason and others, historians have sought to occupy spaces for public debate to counteract historical misinformation and, notably, to activate the social duty of their profession. It is important to note that this is not simply an action by left-wing historians against the far right. It is a reaction of professionals who have seen their field of knowledge falsified and transformed into a political weapon for unethical purposes. In most cases, this falsification of history fuels hate speech and justifies policies of social exclusion, prejudice and racism.

3 Public Labor History

One of the arguments developed in the previous sections is that public debate on history is not driven exclusively by professional choices made by historians. There is a certain activism that can be motivated both by the defense of knowledge produced with ethical commitment and grounded in academically based historiographical practice, as well as by the fight against negationism and the political misuse of the past. Labor history, especially within the framework of the social history of labor, is essentially a field shaped in the past by political motivations.

It has already been mentioned that Edward Palmer Thompson spent most of his career outside the university, teaching evening classes for workers. It was through this work that he developed one of his major books, *The Making of the English Working Class*, published in 1963 and motivated by his experience teaching adult workers. He wanted to understand the history of the formation of the English working class to teach it to the workers, providing historical elements that would feed their class identity. Therefore, it is not a book that emerged from traditional academic pursuits, such as a doctoral program or a research project conducted within a university setting. Similarly, the experience of the History Workshops in Oxford, led by Raphael Samuel starting in 1966, had a similar type of motivation and helped shape the field. Inspired by the debate on “history from below,” the History Workshop was founded on the idea that the production of historical knowledge should be a collective task, engaging both the public and the historian. This reflects a principle very similar to that of Public History—the concept of shared authority. Equally important was the activist motivation to make historical knowledge useful and open to public debate.³⁰

27. Law 14.038/2020.

28. Of course, Brazil had historians working in state museums and historical heritage services before the law, but they were hired as technicians in general specialties and could not be hired with the requirement of a degree in history.

29. For instance: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/29/world/americas/jair-bolsonaro-brazil-profile.html>.

30. Other similar example: *Dig Where You Stand* is a book by Sven Lindqvist, published in Sweden in 1978, and the name of a popular movement where around 10,000 worker groups researched and documented the history of their trades, workplaces, and life experiences.

In Brazil, there are several relevant examples to understand the relationship between publicly debated historical knowledge and political issues involving labor history.³¹ The first and perhaps most notorious case is the influence of studies on slavery in Brazil, particularly from the centennial of abolition in 1988, which renewed academic interest in portraying enslaved people as active agents in their own history. Clearly, the English-influenced approach to social history played an important role in this change. This new perspective directly influenced public policies,³² such as the 2003 law mandating the teaching of African history in schools,³³ and affirmative actions that seek historical reparations, such as the case of reserved quotas for the black population in public universities³⁴ and public sector jobs.³⁵

All these public policies resulted from the political maturation fostered by public debate on the history of enslaved labor. On one hand, these studies have definitively revealed the pernicious legacy of modern slavery, which has created a structurally racist society with persistent racial inequality, despite the fact that more than half of the country's population now identifies as Black.³⁶ On the other hand, these studies have emphasized the African cultural heritage as constitutive of Brazilian culture and the necessity of teaching this in schools to foster, from an early age, a historical consciousness that is inclusive rather than racist and exclusionary. Clearly, this is an ongoing social process, and the formation of an inclusive and anti-racist society remains a challenge. However, the role of public debate on labor history has been essential. There is a connection between these studies and the debate on affirmative actions, pointing to growing awareness of racial discrimination in Brazilian society and the need for reparatory policies. Historians have positioned themselves as interlocutors with jurists³⁷ and public opinion, engaging in politics and public education cultural projects.³⁸

The second case of Public History debate and political issues involving labor history did not end with improvement in legislation or even in a growing awareness of the historical approach to the issue, as the previous one. Brazilian labor legislation underwent a profound reform in 2017, which ended a labor tradition that had prevailed since the 1930s. In this case, there was a lack of deep debate on the subject, and the change in legislation occurred amidst a serious political crisis that facilitated the law's approval. In summary, Brazil abandoned the protectionist model in which the state acted as the guarantor of labor relations, opening the door to direct negotiations that, in most cases, are detrimental to workers.³⁹ This occurred during the political crisis that led to the impeachment of the elected president representing the Workers' Party (PT), Dilma Rousseff, in 2016. Her removal was followed by far-right governments under Michel Temer (2016-2018) and Jair Bolsonaro (2018-2022), who took advantage of the situation to profoundly alter protective social laws. It was essentially a case of neoliberal deregulation. In the case of labor legislation, there was no broad societal debate,

31. On Brazilian labor history, see: Paulo Fontes, Alexandre Fortes, David Mayer, "Brazilian Labour History in Global Context: Some Introductory Notes," *International Review of Social History* 62, n. S25 (2017): 1–22.

32. On the role of the social labor history in these public policies, see: Sidney Chalhoub, Paulo Fontes, *História Social do Trabalho, História Pública* (Perseu, 2009), 219–228.

33. Law No. 10.639/2003 made it mandatory to teach Afro-Brazilian history and culture in public and private elementary and secondary schools. The law also included Black Awareness Day in the school calendar.

34. Law No. 12.711/2012 reserves slots in federal universities and institutes, eligible for students who have attended public high school, people who identify as Black, Brown, or Indigenous, and people with disabilities.

35. Law No. 12.990/2014 reserves 20 percent of the vacancies offered to fill effective positions and public jobs within the federal public administration.

36. In 2022, the Brazilian Census indicated that 56.5 percent of the population declared itself as non-white.

37. Historian Luis Felipe de Alencastro, for example, was summoned by the Supreme Court to prepare an opinion on the historical legacies of slavery in order to support the Court's final decision on racial quotas in universities. See: Luis Felipe de Alencastro, "Affirmative Action: An Opinion Submitted to the Brazilian Supreme Court in the Case ADPF/186," *Translating the Americas* 1 (2013): 6.

38. For instance, the project coordinated by the historians Hebe Mattos, Martha Abreu, and Milton Guran. They mapped the historical itinerary of Little Africa, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The research also generated the mobile app with the Afro-oriented route in the port region of the city, specifically the area around Valongo Wharf, the largest slave port of the Americas, where about one million enslaved Africans arrived during the 19th century.

39. Law No 13.467/2017.

and political groups favoring the changes capitalized on the political disarray of the left at the time. Additionally, these changes were supported by an intense negationist campaign from the far right, which used historical distortions to discredit the existing legislation and justify the reforms.

One of the most notorious examples of negationist campaigns occurred on the internet, social media, and other digital platforms. A veritable army of digital influencers began advocating for the changes, arguing that the labor laws had been created by former President Getúlio Vargas, who they labeled a fascist dictator. While it is true that Brazil's main social legislation was introduced during Vargas' dictatorship (1937-1945), the labor laws reformed in 2017 were not the same and had undergone numerous modifications. Furthermore, Vargas was a dictator, but the legislation itself was not authoritarian. Another prominent strategy is being employed by the documentary production company *Brasil Paralelo*, which is linked to the far right and maintains a streaming service online. All the content produced by this company focuses on history and politics, but with no commitment to historical accuracy. The slogan of one of its documentary series was "the series that will debunk your history teacher." This company is essentially negationist and produces content aimed at using the past for political purposes. Not coincidentally, during the same period when labor laws were being altered, *Brasil Paralelo* released the documentary *Vargas Era: The Twilight of an Idol*, which devotes 85 minutes to discrediting academic research on the topic and demonstrating that Vargas' legacy, particularly his labor laws, was harmful to workers.⁴⁰ There is a vast historiography about the Vargas period that, essentially, highlights the ambiguities of the authoritarian period, but which contradictorily made possible advances in social legislation.⁴¹

Unlike the case of legislation on affirmative action and racism, historians rarely had the opportunity to participate in the broader public debate of the labor legislation reform. And when they did, they were not as successful. The recent political context was very different, and academic historians as well as public history practitioners were not prepared to deal with the strategies of social media use that dominated the debate and convinced a significant portion of workers that life with fewer protection rights would be better.⁴²

As it was not possible to react in time to qualify the historical arguments about labor legislation, the response from the community of labor historians was to initiate a series of debates on public history projects as a strategy for fostering historical awareness. These debates highlighted the need to leverage the potential of digital communication tools, creating online projects and social media content aimed at a non-specialist audience to participate more actively in the public debate. In short, to promote a *Public Labor History*. One of the most ambitious projects is the LEHMT-UFRJ, which emerged in the immediate aftermath of the labor law reforms while in the same year the far right won the 2018 presidential election.

4 LEHMT-UFRJ as a practice of Public Labor History

Launched in 2019, the LEHMT-UFRJ portal (<www.lehmt.org>) distinguishes itself through a diverse range of content, including audiovisual series, articles, educational resources, news, and recommendations for books, series, and films, as well as short publications. Its mission is to make information about the experiences of Brazilian workers accessible through various formats and plain language. Committed to democratizing academic knowledge in this field, LEHMT-UFRJ has leveraged social media and other science communication platforms. Key initiatives include *Labuta*, the Laboratory's YouTube channel, and *Vale Mais*, its podcast, both of which play a central role in this effort. The lab also produces original content, such as the *Workers' Places of Memory* series, which has mapped and analyzed over a hundred historical sites, recently culminating in a published book.⁴³ There are about

40. Available on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FRzjxqqZgr4&t=19s>

41. See, for instance: Ângela de Castro Gomes, *A invenção do trabalhismo* (Relume-Dumara, 1994), 343.

42. And it was not better: during both far right governments mentioned above, unemployment rates significantly increased. Official data can be found here: <https://www.ibge.gov.br/en/statistics/social/labor/16809-quarterly-dissemination-pnad2.html?lang=en-GB>.

43. Paulo Fontes, ed., *Lugares de memórias dos trabalhadores* (São Paulo, SP: Alameda, 2023), 400.

25 historians with different levels of training involved in the projects.⁴⁴ The Laboratory has already held 3 editions of free courses on the history of workers in Brazil. The audience of the course was composed of high school and university students, trade unionists and professionals from different areas.

LEHMT-UFRJ has been producing video series for the *Labuta* YouTube channel. The video series maintains a more academic standard but aims to leverage the potential of online video consumption to disseminate the latest historiographical debates. Among the video projects are the series *Gender and Labor History* and *Racism and Labor History*, live streaming broadcasted at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020; *Worlds of Labor and Independence*, which capitalized on the celebrations of the bicentennial of Brazil's Independence to discuss the history of labor in that context; *The Working Class and the CLT*, which marked the 80th anniversary of the publication of the Brazilian Consolidation of Labor Laws (CLT) to debate the topic; and finally, *The Workers and the Coup of 1964*, a series that took advantage of the 60th anniversary of the *coup d'état* to examine how the dictatorship impacted labor relations in Brazil.⁴⁵

Vale Mais is a podcast from the Laboratory. The objective is to discuss history, labor, and society, reflecting on contemporary themes from the perspective of social history. Over the years, several series have been produced, including: *Affected Workers: Corporate Collaboration with the Dictatorship*; *Communist Voices*; and *The Birth of the Unified Workers' Central*, along with dozens of episodes addressing topics central to labor history, such as gender, racism, labor rights, and social security, among others.⁴⁶

The *Workers' Places of Memory* series aims to give visibility to this social geography of work, to stimulate a reflection on the spaces and sites, and how their history and memory are treated. The understanding of these places of memory is broad. They represent sites of political and social action, leisure, protest, repression, rituals, and the creation of social bonds. The series started modestly, with around 20 invited authors writing short texts in non-academic language about workers' places of memory. After this initial push, LEHMT-UFRJ began to be approached by authors interested in writing about these sites. As a result, by the time of writing this article, the series includes 132 texts, with the first 100 being converted into a book. Additionally, there is an ongoing project to geotag workers' places of memory on the Google Maps platform. This series has generated significant interest from the audience and created a natural demand. While the texts in the series have defined authorship, the series as a whole has shared authorship, as the Laboratory has received texts from spontaneous submissions by the audience. The result is an important qualitative and quantitative database of memory places of the working class.⁴⁷

Lastly, since 2017, even before the creation of the internet project, the Laboratory organized 5 workshops on the history of labor in Brazil. The courses are aimed at students, workers and trade unionists. Three editions were held in partnership with other universities, such as university extension activities and the other two in partnership with trade unions. In a context of deregulation of labor rights, and without much public debate on the subject, the historians of the Laboratory understood that, in addition to producing content for the internet, it would be useful to hold the workshops in order to debate the history of workers and the struggle for rights. The debate focused on the complexity of labor, gender and race relations in the History of Brazil in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the objective was to offer elements for historical reasoning about the changes in the world of work in recent years. It was also an opportunity to dialogue with the audience and understand it better. The interaction with the labor movement during these workshops was quite productive and many trade unions use them to share labs' content in their social media and also send contributions to be published.

The Laboratory's work has been based on the use of digital tools for the dissemination of knowledge over the Internet. Since its creation, dozens of undergraduate, master's and doctoral students

44. See: <https://lehmt.org/pesquisadores/>.

45. See: <https://lehmt.org/category/labuta/>.

46. See: <https://lehmt.org/category/valemais/>.

47. See: <https://lehmt.org/category/lugares/>.

have worked in the Laboratory, involved in the production of podcasts, video documentaries,⁴⁸ geo-referencing, website and social media management,⁴⁹ audience data studies, among other activities. In this aspect, they were trained to develop work with digital tools that are useful for research and for knowledge dissemination activities.⁵⁰ Qualitative results have already been discussed above, but it is also interesting to note that the audience data are very encouraging, considering the circumscription of the labor history field. The website started with 25 thousand views and 20 thousand visitors in its first year to 80 thousand views and 50 thousand visitors in 2024. On the social network Instagram, in 2024, published content reached 32 thousand users having around 5 thousand interactions.

As mentioned above, LEHMT-UFRJ has other projects such as educational resources for teachers, news, book video reviews, video series, as well as short article publications. There is no space to analyze them all here. With all these areas of activity, the Laboratory's project is to occupy spaces and proactively contribute to the public debate on labor history. By positioning themselves in this role, the historians involved in the Laboratory's projects aim to fulfill their professional duty of producing knowledge and disseminating it as broadly as possible, reaching an audience beyond the walls of the university. In doing so, they place Public Labor History at the service of shaping historical consciousness in society. This may be the best way to counteract negationist projects and prevent them from gaining traction in society. Equally important, it is a way to promote historical knowledge by disseminating it more broadly and by opening channels to dialogue with the audience.

5 Conclusion

This text argues that public engagement should be encouraged as a professional duty of historians. Although Public History is not necessarily a political field, public debate about history is often closely related to current political decisions. In the Brazilian context, Public History has a clear connection to history literacy for non-specialized audiences. The field has grown in recent years due to the activism of historians in defense of the field, in order to put their knowledge at the service of public debate. LEHMT-UFRJ is the case analyzed in this article, but not at all the only initiative out there.⁵¹

In the specific case of Public Labor History, the political motivations that have engaged historians in the LEHMT-UFRJ project are evident and relate to Brazil's recent political context. The deregulation of the labor legislation played an important role indeed, but a red light came on with the diagnoses that historians were not called to participate in the discussion even though historical arguments (mostly falsified) were used to justify the new legislation. Thus, it was also a call to defend the historical knowledge itself more than just be in favor or against the deregulation. At the same time, the digital age and new technologies compel academic professionals to explore new ways to disseminate knowledge, making it more accessible and useful to society. In this sense, the Public Labor History practiced in the Laboratory emerged from both the political context and the professional. The audience's engagement is achieved through a website and social media profiles, digital environments that allow different communication styles. It is for sure an example of academic engagement in digital media to ensure that high-quality historical knowledge is accessible to the public, exploring the growing potential of digital tools for reaching broader audiences.

Public Labor History emerged in Brazil as a practice driven by the pressure of an unfavorable political climate. This context has created an urgency for historians to engage with wider audiences and actively participate in public debates, particularly as political challenges and the distortion of historical narratives call for a more proactive role in shaping historical consciousness. In this sense, Public Labor History serves not only as an academic endeavor but also as a response to the broader social and political environment that has been subjugating historical knowledge in general to a position of inferiority.

48. For instance, the documentary *The workers and the 1964 coup d'État* is available at <https://youtu.be/daLHo4Hmamc>.

49. Instagram profile: https://www.instagram.com/lehmt_ufrj.

50. For example, in 2024, there was a training course for students about Heurist database tool: https://heurist.huma-num.fr/Heurist_Contacts/web/5417/10746&rec_id=.

51. To mention some: *Café História*, *História da Ditadura*, *Box de Humanidades Digitais*.