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The Role of Public History Within and Outside the United States: Critical Reflections

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In the words of historian Robert Kelley, who invented the phrase "public history" and co-founded the journal *The Public Historian* in 1978, "in its simplest meaning, Public History refers to the employment of historians and the historical method outside of academia."[1] A product of the radicalism of the 1960s, Public History was born in the United States and Britain as an attempt to make the scientific study of history a more democratic, popular, accessible and innovative practice. According to Thomas Cauvin, the immediate impulse for the field's institutionalization was the shrinking of academic positions in the United States in the 1970s. The attempt to bring the historical method outside academia was in line with the spread of local history societies on the one hand and experiments in the popularization of historical research, like the History Workshop Movement started by Raphael Samuel at Ruskin College (Oxford) in 1967, on the other. At its core, Public History was the natural continuation of the innovations brought by social history and "history from below" in the 1960s. If it was imperative to put common men and women at the center of academic historical narratives, it was simply illogical that these narratives continued to be written by academics in their ivory towers. History was a discipline for everyone; therefore, everyone had a right to learn the historical method and write history.[2]

1. Robert Kelley, "Public History: Its Origins, Nature, and Prospects," *The Public Historian*, 1 (1978): 16-28. For critical reflections on the foundation of *The Public Historian* and the role of the National Council on Public History in the establishment of Public History as a discipline, see the special issue "The National Council on Public History: Reflections on a Twentieth Anniversary," *The Public Historian*, 21 (1999): 1–192.

2. Thomas Cauvin, *Public History: A Textbook of Practice* (London: Routledge, 2016), 1-26; James Gardner and Paula Hamilton, "Introduction: The Past and Future of Public History", *The Oxford Handbook of Public History*, ed. James Gardner and Paula Hamilton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

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Decades after its foundation, Public History is more relevant than ever. The extensive controversies over the falling of statues in the United States, Britain and across the world, which started in the early 2010s and culminated during the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, signaled the importance of the use of the historical method in public debates. The spread of historians in non-academic institutions, such as historical societies, national parks, museums and private companies, the multiplication of Public History and oral history projects, and the success of degrees and courses in Public History attested to the growth and consolidation of the field.[3]

At the same time, the role of Public History and its disciplinary boundaries remain hotly contested. "History" is everywhere, in trade books, documentaries, podcasts, magazines, and newspapers. While Public History has contributed to this success, the boundaries between the rigorous work of public historians and commercialized products of dubious historiographical quality have become hard to discern to the non-trained eye. "Public" is a vague term that often has led to mixing up Public History with any sort of "history in public" initiative. Public History has had to confront multiple ways in which history has been used for ulterior motives, such as corporations hiring private historians with specific agendas in mind or for commercial enterprises like themed parks. Moreover, the culture wars and the political uses of history—full-fledged during Trump's second presidency but already present for decades—have contributed to making Public History projects a constant site of harsh political confrontation.[4] From its foundation, Public History had a symbiotic relationship with related fields, such as memory studies and oral history: innovative methodologies of study which have provided much of the primary material explored in Public History projects. These close ties, however, have made the boundaries of Public History even harder to detect.[5] Lastly, the development of Public History has been uneven across the world, with countries like the United States and Britain leading the way and other parts of the world following suit, each according to their specific national histories, processes of memorialization, cultural tendencies and academic contexts. Italy, for example, was at the forefront of the development of oral history, with scholars like Alessandro Portelli and Luisa Passerini pioneering the use of oral interviews in social history projects. Nonetheless, the foundation of a Public History association ("Associazione Italiana di Public History – AIPH"), advancing the discipline in all its aspects, did not take place until 2016.[6]

The goal of this issue was to reflect on the "state of the art" of Public History as a discipline within and outside the United States, paying particular attention to how Public History about the United States was conducted by scholars outside the country. The response to the call took us in unexpected directions, which allowed us to broaden our geographical focus to the Western hemisphere and to suggest reflections on what Public History is and how it has been interpreted across time.

Some articles test the limits of what Public History is and what its relationships with other fields are. Daniel Scroop's essay on William E. Leuchtenburg covers a long chronological arc and discusses how Public History developed alongside forms of "history in public" practiced by professional historians, like Leuchtenburg himself. Darius Wainwright analyses the political use of US history done by US diplomacy in Iran in 1950–1965, showing its strengths and limitations. Andreas Etges compares the processes of memorialization of General Robert E. Lee and Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, delving into

3. Cf. a recent state of the field in Thomas Cauvin, "New Field, Old Practices: Promises and Challenges of Public History," *Magazén* 2 (2021): 13–44.

4. Trump's second presidency has been characterized by open attempts to decide the correct interpretation of US history via Presidential executive orders. See "Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History," March 27, 2025, https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/03/restoring-truth-and-sanity-to-american-history/. For a critical analysis of the role of Public History at a time of post-truth, cf. Liz Sevčenko, *Public History for a Post-Truth Era: Fighting Denial through Memory Movements* (London: Routledge, 2022).

5. On the relationship between Oral History and Public History, see Jill Liddington and Graham Smith, "Crossing Cultures: Oral History and Public History," *Oral History*, 33 (2005): 28-31; on Public History and Memory, see David Glassberg, "Public History and the Study of Memory," *The Public Historian*, 18 (1996): 7–23, and the replies to this article in *The Public Historian*, 19 (1997).

6. Luisa Passerini (ed.), *Memory and Totalitarianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," in Robert Perks, Alistair Thompson (eds.), *The Oral History Reader* (London; New York: Routledge, 1998), 48–58; "Il Comitato Costituente dell'AIPH," AIPH – Associazione Italiana di Public History, accessed April 13, 2025, https://aiph.hypotheses.org/comitato-costituente

the public dynamics of selective celebration and forgetfulness characterizing complex figures like the American and General military officers. The articles by Deivison Amaral and Jimena Perry, Maria Elena Bedoya Hidalgo and Sebastián Vargas Álvarez, conversely, offer an in-depth overview of the spread of Public History in Latin America. Perry, Hidalgo and Álvarez discuss three case studies from the Andean region, proving the role of Public History projects in contesting official narratives and promoting social change. Amaral presents a case study that mixes Public, Labor and Digital History, arguing that, in Brazil, Public History has mostly developed in academia and has been a tool to resist misinformation and the political uses of the past. The issue ends with a contribution by Alessandra Lorini for our section "Bringing the History Back In", where she reflects on her own training as a public historian between the United States and Italy.

The opening essay by Daniel Scroop (University of Glasgow), "William E. Leuchtenburg: The Professional as Public Historian," delves into the life and work of William E. Leuchtenburg, a scholar, the author argues, able to navigate between academic scholarship and the public sphere long before Public History emerged as a distinct academic subfield. Throughout an extraordinarily long intellectual career spanning eight decades, Leuchtenburg combined his role as a trained historian with an ongoing engagement in political life and the promotion of historical awareness among the public. Leuchtenburg's public presence—from the Civil Rights Movement to the Trump era—and his collaboration with Ken Burns' renowned documentary series on PBS appear to be at odds with his otherwise orthodox belief that historians must take a detached perspective on contemporary events. This attitude led to a rift between him and the student movement at Columbia University in the 1960s (where he taught), and underscores the marked contrast with some of his most prominent students, such as Howard Zinn. The article traces the roots of Leuchtenburg's conception of the historian's role in society back to his Progressive Era models, from Charles and Mary Beard to Vernon Parrington, and the formative influence of his mentor at Columbia, Henry Steele Commager. While he never fully shared the idea—embraced by Zinn and other New Left historians—of history as primarily a tool for political activism, the essay suggests that Leuchtenburg sought to reconcile professional detachment with effective public engagement. In this light, Leuchtenburg's intellectual life—though not that of a public historian in the strict sense—challenges narrow definitions of the boundaries between academia, political institutions, and Public History.

Darius Wainwright (University of Bristol) takes us away from the long gestation of Public History as a discipline toward the political uses of history in foreign policy. "Showcasing U.S. History in Iran and American Public Diplomacy's Limitations, 1950–1965" addresses a gap in scholarly literature regarding US public diplomacy efforts in Iran during the decades following World War II, with particular emphasis on the underlying motivations and rationales driving these initiatives. The article examines two key programs: the United States Information and Education Exchange (USIE), with its book translation and mobile film unit programs (1951–1953), as well as the Smithsonian Institution's early exhibitions in the 1960s. Wainwright analyzes how both programs utilized representations of US history as part of their public diplomacy efforts during the early Cold War period. In the early 1950s, USIE's activities focused on promoting Anglo-American culture through radio broadcasts and book lending, but these efforts were halted following the Anglo-Iranian oil crisis. In response, USIE shifted to the mobile film unit program, which showcased short films intended to portray the daily lives of working-class individuals in the Northeastern United States. The goal was to resonate with Iranian urban workers and deter them from embracing communism. However, the stark socio-cultural differences between US and Iranian citizens, particularly at the working-class level, fostered resentment towards the United States. The Smithsonian's exhibitions, launched in the early 1960s, relied on showcasing American natural landscapes and wilderness, starting in 1865. Yet, Wainwright argues that the goals of US officials were often misaligned with the experiences of those implementing the exhibitions on the ground, leading to a failure to engage the broader Iranian public. The article ultimately illustrates how US public diplomacy efforts were predominantly driven by a desire to present the country's history and heritage, but these endeavors consistently failed to engage wider audiences and instead resulted in superficial, colonial-style initiatives.

Andreas Etges (LMU München) confronts contemporary debates over memorialization. His article undertakes a comparative analysis of General Robert E. Lee and Field Marshal Erwin Rommel,

as they have both been publicly portrayed as "honorable men." His article sheds light on the mechanisms of memory and forgetting about these two historical figures. Both Lee and Rommel are widely regarded as effective military leaders who served lost or evil causes. One of the most interesting issues about these two soldiers is the fact that they received tributes not only from their own ranks but also—perhaps more significantly—from their military enemies. While in recent years monuments to both Rommel and Lee have faced intense criticism and, in some instances, have been removed or destroyed, the persistence of their honorability as a public image cannot be fully accounted for by collective amnesia alone. The enduring nature of their narratives points to more complex processes of historical representation and myth-making that have shaped their legacy over time.

In their essay "What Makes Latin American Public Histories Different? Dialogues, Debates, Perspectives", Jimena Perry (Iona University), Maria Elena Bedoya Hidalgo (Honorary Research Associate at The University of Manchester) and Sebastián Vargas Álvarez (Universidad del Rosario) aim to highlight the critical role of Public History in Latin America since the 1970s, focusing on its contribution to democracy and pluralism. The article challenges perspectives that reduce Public History narratives to mere commodities, emphasizing instead their potential to foster a more inclusive, socially engaged understanding of the past. It presents three case studies from the Andean region—Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Colombia—showcasing the innovative use of non-fiction comics, oral history, and social museology as key vehicles for public historical practices. These case studies are selected for their methodological originality and their diverse narrative strategies, which include visual, oral, and exhibition-based approaches. The article first explores the significance of non-fiction comics as tools for political activism, especially in Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru, where they have been pivotal in disseminating grassroots narratives of resistance and social justice. It then turns to the Andean Oral History Workshop (THOA) in Bolivia, which has played a foundational role in reconstructing indigenous struggles through collaborative oral testimonies. Lastly, the article examines a 2010 exhibition at the National Museum of Colombia, which used the life story of a demobilized guerrilla leader to exemplify how museums can act as agents of social change. Through these examples, the authors underscore how Public History practices in Latin America challenge dominant historical narratives, amplify the voices of marginalized communities, and contribute to ongoing processes of social transformation.

The essay by Deivison Amaral (Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro), "Labor as Public and Digital History in Brazil," also brings the issue beyond the geographic boundaries of the United States, to show how US conceptions and practices of Public History have been received and adapted in the context of contemporary Brazil. The essay maintains 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. While Labor History in Brazil is a well-established academic field, the integration of public and digital methodologies has become increasingly important in response to the spread of historical misinformation, the political misuse of the past, and neoliberal reforms—especially the 2017 deregulation of labor laws. After reconstructing the origins of Public History in Brazil and the main debates concerning it, the article focuses on the experience of the LEHMT-UFRJ (Laboratory of Studies on Worlds of Labor History at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro), which has developed a range of digital and public-facing initiatives—such as YouTube videos, podcasts, workshops, and the "Workers' Places of Memory" project—to make labor history accessible, inclusive, and socially relevant. LEHMT-UFRJ demonstrates how public engagement can serve not only to disseminate academic knowledge but also to foster historical consciousness and combat negationist narratives promoted by far-right groups. The article also situates Brazil's Public History movement in international perspective, comparing it with similar developments in Europe and the United States, while emphasizing its unique features, such as its strong academic origins and focus on historical literacy. Ultimately, the author presents Public Labor History as both an academic practice and a form of political activism addressing to the urgent need to defend historical knowledge and ensure its role in shaping democratic public discourse.

Lorini's piece aptly wraps the issue by using her own scholarly trajectory to show how Public History has developed alongside the study of racial, gender and class conflicts in public spaces. Through a reconstruction of the various steps that brought her to understand herself as a public historian, Lorini

indicates a way for historians today to be a constant presence in the public debate while engaging with political content and retaining a rigorous methodological approach. Her analysis comprises visual sources, monuments, and written texts, starting from her doctoral research at Columbia University to her most recent research as Professor at the University of Florence and beyond. In a sense, her article seems to suggest that more than spending time trying to define what Public History is, it is more useful to look at what public historians do.