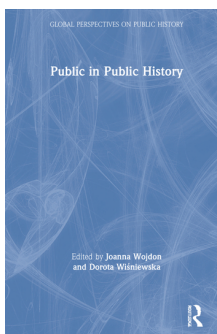


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Joanna Wojdon, Dorota Wisniewska (eds.)
Public in Public History

Review by: Serge Noiret



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This very welcome collection of essays collected by Joanna Wojdon, an Associate Professor at the Institute of History of the University of Wrocław together with a research assistant, Dorota Wiśniewska, has been published in the Routledge Global Studies on Public History series. They deal with the concept of «public» which characterizes Public History (from now on PH) as a sub-discipline inside history[1]. The book chapters are based on papers derived from a conference which took place in Wrocław in 2019 within the framework of the Jean-Monnet Network for Applied European Contemporary History, coordinated by the University of Jena. The conference «The Public in Public and Applied History» dealt with history that is made, performed, and applied for and in the public realm: «history for the public, by the public, with the public, about the public or in the public sphere».

Seventeenth authors, both scholars and PH practitioners, wrote sixteenth essays which focus on how PH projects, in different contexts, interact with their public when representing the past through different kind of historical narratives and media and when publics actively participate to PH projects. Who is or who are the public(s) is a question each author answers in her/his specific case study but is elegantly and insightfully discussed in an important introductory chapter written by David Dean (Carleton University, Canada) that should become a must-read for all public historians worldwide. This essay on the theory and epistemology of public participation in PH is based on his keynote during the 2019 conference. It analyzes the definition of publics and revises, in the light of a PH context, the Habermasian concept of «public sphere», its history and criticism.

The book regroups its case studies in four areas: museums and their publics, publics in commemorations, digital publics, and publics in PH research. Each area has chosen contains national examples (Brazil, Croatia, India, Ireland, Japan, Russia, USA), with more essays dealing with PH in Poland. The conclusion has been co-written by the two editors. All other essays but Alexander Khodnev on PH in Russia, come from papers written by young scholars after their participation to the 2019 second PH Summer School directed by Joanna Wojdon in Wrocław. Interdisciplinarity of methods and dialogues between disciplines characterize the field of PH and are well present in the book: theories of memory and commemoration, pedagogy and psychology, sociology and even history didactics (also PH of education), museum studies, media and social media studies, oral history and digital PH transversally characterize many chapters.

In the context of the book, the public is not only about public historians' communication to the public and interaction with the public, but is also about history made directly by the public without the contribution of a professional historian. Barbara Franco's definition of identified «publics» in museums is quoted by Agata Moskva as «audience (for the public), participants (with the public), activists (by the public), and public as a subject (about the public)» (Franco, 1997).

This important series of essays tells us that PH has at least two different meanings based on their relationship with the public. One that we could define as being «purist» and restrictive, which highlights the specificity of PH confronted with other forms of history. It is about the making of history together with the public in museums, in the digital realm, around monuments and realms of memory, through different forms of commemoration, and having a goal that is only achieved through a different level of authority-sharing and the direct participation of concerned communities. PH is made here only with and by all kind of publics and, sometimes, without public historians as moderators. The second meaning is about the ability of public historians to communicate, to understand the type of publics to which they are delivering historical narratives on issues dealing with memory, heritage and with what can be called «the public and common sense of history». Here we make instead PH in and for the public.

Publics and audiences can be very differently defined by scopes and geographical scales, by location like national, regional, and local, or by their racial, ethnic, and religious connotation, by their collective memories and political approaches to the past, by profession or social classes, by languages and communities' intangible cultural heritages, but also by age and, of course, by gender or ethnic diversity. Some of the authors of the book analyzed the role of national publics while others examined sub-national communities and, on the contrary global publics.

In their conclusion, the editors quote the debate about differences between «public & applied history» that have been at the core of the discussions during the 2019 conference. At the University of Jena, partner of the conference and of the book, an Applied European Contemporary History Association^[2] has been founded and a manifesto of applied history has been promoted in Holland as a legacy of the old discussion that emerged during the creation of the PH field in the USA in the late 1970s. (De Ridder, 2022). Digging into the role of the public in PH is anyway the key question when focusing on eventual differences. It can be stated that some forms of PH communication especially in the «history and policy» field, are «applied» to publics when, on the contrary, collaboration with publics would define the way public historians engage with communities as partners. PH, as a broader label and field, is fair enough to include all kind of practices when a public is concerned. Such a broad interpretation of PH as an umbrella sub-discipline of history includes both the communicative process serving public needs in different contexts and the application of the knowledge of the past to contemporary policy issues. It supposes that the sharing of an authority takes place.

As a conclusion, even if many things could be said about each chapter, one may ask about the differences that can be thought of between the very generic concept of public declined in so many ways in the book and the more narrowed, and circumstanced concept of «communities» which is often used when public historians and identified groups of interrelated people interact with each other. Such a query has not been dealt with in the book. Few authors use the word without defining it, like a synonymous of the many different declinations of the word «public». Marta Kopiniak quotes a ICOM definition of museums stating the need to «work actively with communities»; Ricardo Santhiago speaks about «communities of audiences» in his paper about the National Museum in Rio de Janeiro; Linda S. Thomas speaks about «indigenous communities»; Caitlin White does mention three different communities: local, imagined, and dominant; Ewa Wozniak-Wawrzyniak's chapter deals with «Jewish communities» and uses the term «multiple communities» and «communities or publics» which does not implies differences between the two terms; Dorota Choinska's chapter is about «online communities», local communities, and «communities historical consciousness»; Jakub Šindelár considers the «German-speaking communities» and «language communities» and, finally, Sugandha Agarwal the concept of «marginalized communities». All these quotes are never exploited to involve the reader into a conceptual discussion about a term ignored in a book that dedicates all its attention only to the question «who are the publics».

[1] For an in-depth analysis of such topics, see B. De Ridder, «And what do you do, exactly?» *Comparing*

Contemporary Definitions and Practices of Applied History, in «International Public History», 5, 2022, 1, pp. 29-41, <https://doi.org/10.1515/iph-2022-2038> ; B. Franco, *Public History and Memory: A Museum Perspective*, in «The Public Historian», 19, 1997, 2, pp. 65-67, here p. 66.

[2] <http://aec-history.uni-jena.de/>