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ARTICLES (PEER REVIEWED)

For a New International Public History

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The way we communicate and engage with knowledge has greatly changed in the last few decades. The rise of the Internet, the spread of digital devices and the use of new media have made much easier the production and sharing of contents. This revolution of communication has many consequences on the way we produce, share and consume information. The impact is not limited to medias and communication but affects many academic disciplines such as history. In many aspects, the growing interest in public history reflects new understanding and practices of knowledge production.

First used in print in eighteenth century England, ‘public history’ had initially a very political dimension, connecting history with national identity building.¹ A modern approach to public history developed in the United States in the 1970s and has now an international presence. The map from the International Federation for Public History (IFPH) lists dozens of programs and centers all around the world.² If public history developed largely in North America and Europe, growing numbers of projects and networks appear in Latin America and Asia. Ten years after the creation of the IFPH in 2011, the field of public history is now richer, more diverse but also more complex. In this article, I discuss the different processes of internationalization since the development of the public history movement in the United States in the 1970s. I argue that we are currently witnessing a new phase of international public history based on collaborative adaptations between international discussions and local existing practices.

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How Old is Public History?

Answering this very simple question depends on how one defines public history. If public history is the practice or the communication of history in a public space, then there are very old examples. For instance, museums have displayed historical objects for different publics at least since the nineteenth century – and the birth of public museums. Likewise, if one considers collecting and archiving documents as doing history for the public goods, then very old sites such as the Library of Alexandria (created in the third century BC in Egypt) of public history exist. Rebecca Conard shows that the development of public history in the United States had very pragmatic roots connected to local and applied history.³ However, those examples are evidence of certain practices – perhaps public historical practices – but not of an identified self-aware field of knowledge production.

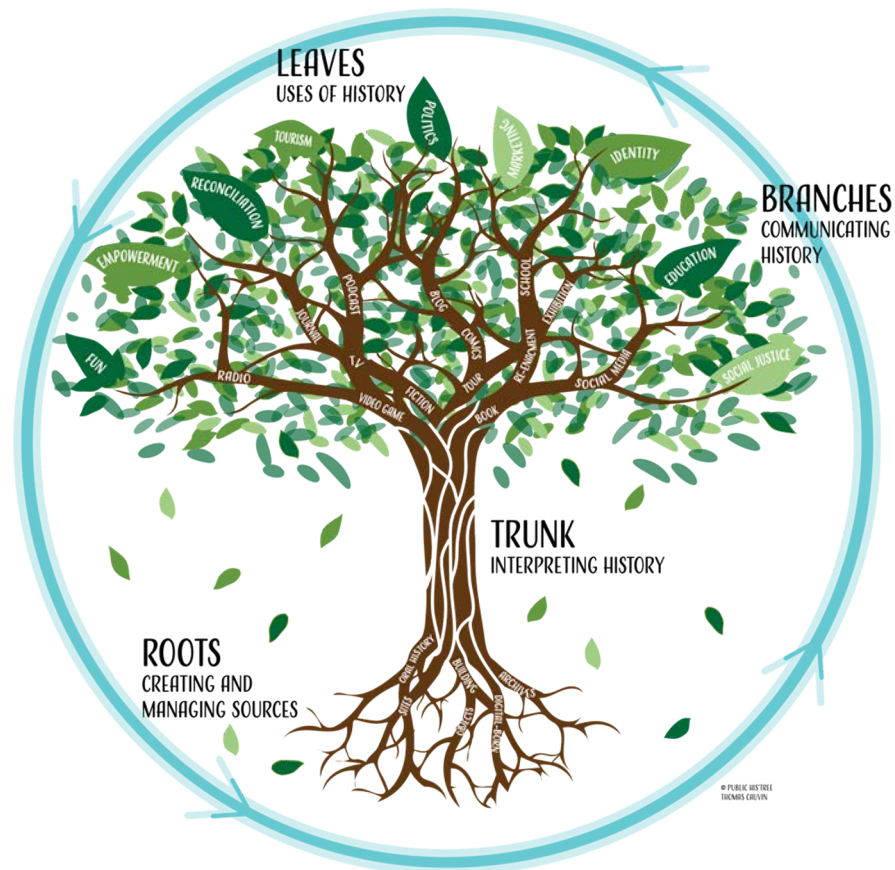
If one considers public history as a structured field with identified practices, methodology, training, theory and institutional development (journals, university programs, conferences), then its development is far more recent. Robert Kelley used public history as an identified set of practices in the 1970s. Professor at the University of California at Santa Barbara (UCSB) in the United States, environmental historian, consultant and expert witness on matters related to water rights, Kelley represented an attempt to redefine the history profession to include more practical applications.⁴ The first university program in public history opened at UCSB in 1976, the academic journal *The Public Historian* appeared in 1978 and a series of public history conferences were organized in 1979 and 1980, leading to the creation of the National Council on Public History in 1979.⁵ The new association, the journal and the creation of university programs institutionalized public history as a specific field of study, research and practice.

Defining public history has not been an easy task and its definitions have also evolved since the 1970s. Defined initially as the history done outside of the classroom, more complex approaches have since appeared.⁶ I have recently used the metaphor of a tree to define public history as a process based on certain steps.

The roots represent the creation and preservation of sources (oral history, archiving, historic preservation for instance), the trunk gathers the acts of interpreting sources (the traditional tasks of historians), the branches are the many ways of communicating history through various medias while the leaves are the different uses of history among public groups and individuals.

As every metaphor, the *Public His'Tree* bears some flaws: for instance, it could let us think that there would be a straight process from creating to using history whereas the process is in fact more complex with some influences from public demands on the decisions to preserve some sources (and buildings) and not others. Nevertheless, the comparison with a tree raises important points. First, the public history process may very well go beyond the simple act of interpreting sources. Historians can work and collaborate with archivists, curators, and other agents to preserve and communicate history to large audiences. The multiple branches of the tree represent the wish to make history more accessible and available to different publics. Second, public history has at its core a deep participatory approach that invites to work with a variety of partners, including members of the public.

In addition to debates over its definitions, public history also raises questions regarding its spatial and cultural origins and development. If the term 'public history' was first used in the United States in the 1970s, was there a single model? Would international public history be the mere spreading of practices from the United States to the rest of the world?

Public His 'Tree'²

From the Unites States to the Anglosphere: the First International Public History

It is almost impossible to identify clear-cut specific national productions of knowledge. Any national framework would be overtly simplifying very complex processes and exchanges. French history may relate to the study of the past for what has now become France. But it is by no mean a single way of doing history in France. Similarly, it would be futile to gather all approaches, definitions and practices from one country into a single model. In the book 'What is Public History Globally?', various authors propose chapters on public history in different countries – including the United States, Canada, Germany, China and Indonesia.⁸ However, much more than identifying a single concept, the chapters rather attempt to highlight some specific issues, approaches and practices of doing public history in certain countries.

Despite the challenging attempt to divide the field into strict national currents, one can wonder whether the rise of public history reflects specific approaches of history. Would public history be a cultural approach associated with the United States where it was first used? In 1984, French historian Henry Rousso perceived public history as being very much connected to the context in the United States. He therefore doubted the possibility to develop it in France.⁹ This perception of public history as a phenomenon from the United States was reinforced by the presentations given all around the world in the 1980s by some founding members of the movement. Wesley G. Johnson – one of the tenants of the movement in the United States – was a restless advocator for public history. He toured Europe – Italy, Germany, France and Holland – several times in the early 1980s to both introduce public history and to evaluate the opportunities for collaboration.¹⁰ Johnson's involvement into public history in Europe was such that Dutch historian

Paul Knevel compared him to a public history ‘missionary’,¹¹ bringing – almost in a religious manner – knowledge to other parts of the world.

Initial international development of public history took place through English-speaking networks. Johnson was in contact with British historian Anthony Sutcliffe to develop a public history program in Britain. If the creation of a public history program ultimately failed, their collaboration contributed to the organization of the first conference of Applied History (co-organized by the British Social Science Research Council) – another name given to public history – in Rotterdam, Holland, in 1982. Likewise, historians from the United States Jan Warren-Findley and Jim Gardner worked with colleagues in Australia (Paul Ashton and Paula Hamilton) to establish collaboration between the two countries. A public history program was set up in 1988 at the University of Technology Sydney and the *Public History Review* was launched in 1992. The collaboration within English-speaking networks unsurprisingly led to public history resources and literature being almost exclusively published in English.

The reception of public history in Britain matched local debates. Although the expression public history was not used until very recently in Britain, new approaches of public participation emerged in the 1970s.¹² Raphael Samuel created the History Workshop at Ruskin College (a trade-union, adult-education institution, Oxford, Britain). The approach he adopted came from a ‘desire to lessen the authority of academic history and thereby further a democratisation of the study and uses of history.’¹³ It is no coincidence whether the first master of public history in Britain was created in 1996 at Ruskin College – where Samuel had been based. By the end of the 1990s, the extreme majority of public history programs, journals, projects and conferences had taken place in the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, and Australia. If the first process of internationalization of public history largely developed from the United States to the Anglosphere, the situation clearly changed in the last decade.

What’s New in International Public History?

As a pretty young and dynamic international field, public history is fast changing – so in that sense, a new international public history is pretty much stressing the obvious. Supporting a new international public history is not asking for a brand-new field but to highlight specific aspects of the process that make public history more diverse and more collaborative. While acknowledging and praising the passionate work done by tenants of public history in the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s, this first process of internationalization of public history was rather a spread of a phenomenon limited to some English-speaking countries. What we have been witnessing since the late 2000s is rather an increasingly decentralized and participatory international public history. This new international public history allows for broader discussions on what it means to do, communicate and share history in contemporary societies.

A FALSE START OR A NEW SYNERGY? THE NEW INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC HISTORY IN THE AGE OF INFANCY

Whereas public history developed almost exclusively in the Anglosphere in the 1980s and 1990s, things started to slowly change in the 2000s. However, the change was initially not obvious, repeating previous steps. During its 2004 annual conference, the board of the National Council on Public History (NCPH) created a sub-committee to explore options of international public history. The sub-committee received the support of many historians – like Connie Shultz, Rebecca Conard and Mark Tebeau – who were either interested or already part of international networks.¹⁴ It took a few years but in 2009 an International Task Force was created within the NCPH with Anna Adamek – curator at the Canada Science and Technology Museum – as chair. She explains ‘the NCPH Board had just voted to establish the task force to achieve greater visibility for the NCPH globally, and identify ways in which NCPH, as the leading professional organization in the public history field, could better serve historians outside the U.S.’¹⁵ What looked like

a repetition of the 1980s – a spread from the United States to international English-speaking networks – turned ultimately out to be more complex.

Unlike the 1980s, there was a growing interest in public history coming from outside the United States, especially among European historians. Adamek stresses that ‘they (European historians) were not ready to join what they perceived as an organization focused on predominantly American issues.’¹⁶ The international interest was not in ready-to-use models of public history but rather in broader international discussions on how to conceive, develop and practice a public history. However, under the guidance of Adamek – born and raised in Poland – the task force quickly turned into a true international discussion. The task force proposed a working group on the Internationalisation of Public History for the NCPH’s 2010 conference. Rather than North Americans meeting to discuss how to spread public history, the working group included historians from Italy, Germany, Romania, France, Czech Republic, Cambodia, Bangladesh and China who put forward proposals. This led to the creation of the International Federation for Public History in 2011 with a very international board.¹⁷ In many ways, the Federation helped international public history to move from the age of infancy to an age of maturation.

INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC HISTORY IN THE AGE OF MATURATION

In 2019, I gave a presentation in Japan about international public history. After the talk, I received one comment that I was presenting a very western definition of (public) history that was also a form of new imperialism. Working in the United States after an education in Europe, I could see some valid questioning on the type of history I was presenting. If I could totally concede the need for questioning, the reference to imperialism was the opposite of what I have been calling for.

For one, the talk was given at the annual meeting of the Japanese Association of Public History that, since its creation in 2019, gathers scholars and professionals interested and practicing public history in Japan. I was therefore not importing public history as a missionary but rather proposing avenues of discussions for what public history meant in various contexts. More broadly, the field of international public history had greatly changed since the 1970s. The very structure of the International Federation for Public History (IFPH) symbolizes the wish to set public history into a multilateral international framework of discussion. It was created in 2011 as an affiliated association to the International Committee of Historical Sciences (ICHS) that itself works as an umbrella for historical associations all over the world. Although originally connected, the IFPH emancipated from public history in North America. The first conference of the IFPH took place in Holland in 2014, followed by a second international meeting in Jinan (China) during the 2015 International Committee of Historical Sciences meeting.¹⁸

Another symbolic aspect of the maturation of international public history has been the creation of national groups and associations. Beyond the very established National Council on Public History in the United States and the Japanese Association of Public History that formed in 2019, there are today national groups in Brazil, Spain, Italy and Australia and New Zealand. Some initial discussions exploring the possible creation of an Italian association of public history took place in China (Jinan) during the 2015 IFPH conference. This decentralized international public history is crucial. Created in 2016, the *Associazione Italiana di Public History* was one of the first official examples (with the case of the Brazilian network of public history) of a public history network in a non-English speaking country. In this new decentralized international public history, projects, approaches or understandings of public history coming from the United States merely represent some of the many international voices.

The constant relations between the local, national and international discussions create interesting public history frameworks. Previously presented in a chapter on International Public History, the ‘glocal’ concept invites to relate local and global perspectives and seems appropriate to define the current status.¹⁹ The glocal scope represents very much the development of public history in Italy. On the one hand, the link

with the development of public history in the United States is openly acknowledged in the very title of the *Associazione Italiana di Public History* (AIPH) by the use of the English expression.

The choice of the English term ‘Public History’ is motivated by the explicit intention to refer to a vast international movement and to a discipline that has its origins in the late seventies in the Anglo-Saxon world.²⁰

However, the English expression is by no means a simple use of a North American model but rather a conscious selection, adaptation and reinvention. The Italian Association wrote a Manifesto in 2018 that sheds light into the new international public history. It highlights the ‘National approach to international field.’ In this glocal process, the specificities of the local and national Italian contexts framed the development of public history. If public history is a new field, it connects to long existing Italian practices. The Manifesto pointed out:

The acknowledgement and the ties with important Italian traditions are explicit. In our country there are many cultural institutions that can proudly claim a long activity of civil commitment and of history practices in the public and with local communities, and that have contributed to innovating with originality the forms of communication of historical knowledge.²¹

Another reason to develop public history in Italy was, according to the Manifesto, the previous development of oral history – and their collaborative practices – as well as the lessons of microhistory that had profoundly impacted how history has been practiced in the country. Whereas the public history movement in the United States in the 1970s highlighted its differences with traditional practices, the development of public history in Italy also stresses the fact that historians, institutions and projects had been doing public history without the name.

The glocal approach also means that local practices can affect international public history discussions. Translated in English, the Italian Manifesto has been presented and used in other countries – testifying of the new decentralized international public history. Other national associations look at it as possible examples for their own local development. The specificity of the Italian context – with its classical heritage – contributed to the relevance of public archaeology in the broader development of public history. This appears particularly insightful for countries such as Greece, Egypt or the United Kingdom where public archaeology has become popular. Besides, international public history can develop from local disconnected examples. For instance, the multiple local and national examples of increased political pressures on historians and on the public uses of the past – including but by no means limited to Brazil, Colombia, Poland or the United States – led to international discussions on how they affect public history.²² In this case, local decentralized practices enrich international public history.

EAST AND SOUTH OF THE WEST: BURGEONING OF PUBLIC HISTORY IN OTHER PARTS OF THE WORLD

International public history moved from a rather negative process of definition – what public history was not – to a more confident acceptance of the multiple approaches. In the 1970s, tenants of the public history movement in the United States argued for the validity of the field by defining public history by what it was not. For instance, Kelley and Johnson viewed public history as being practiced outside of the classroom – therefore as not only being driven by educational standards – as well as in opposition to traditional practices of historians viewed as isolated in their ivory tower.²³

Defining public history was also marked by recurring controversies. In 2007, a new proposed definition by the NCPH led to intense controversies. Many opposed the term ‘mission’ used in the proposal because they thought it was a top-down approach going against the collaborative construction of public history.²⁴ Given the many different approaches and contexts of practice, defining international public history – or

defining public history in an international framework – could have led to many bitter disagreements. However, the amount of controversies has remained rather limited. Certainly, some criticisms against public history have emerged, but few disagreements appear about what public history is or should be.

This rather appeased framework of discussion comes partly from the absence of any unilateral and strict definition of public history. For instance, the International Federation for Public History does not propose a single – one for all – definition of the field. It presents instead some of the core issues for those who practice, teach or research public history. Unlike the spread of public history from the United States in the 1980s and 1990s, the new international public history provides frameworks to collaboratively construct public history approaches.

The age of wisdom is also symbolized by its multilingual dimension. Whereas the majority of resources and publications about public history had, until very recently, been in English, there is an increasing number of works in Portuguese, Spanish, German, Italian, Chinese, Japanese, French and Polish among others. The fact that the English expression ‘public history’ does sometimes not translate well in other languages has actually led to rich debates on what the core issues of the field are. In several places – Japan and Poland for instance – the expression history in the public space or public sphere is more easily translated.²⁵ Writing, debating and practicing public history in different languages is not only about linguistic concerns, but it contributes to better constructing the field itself. The IFPH has therefore been encouraging events, discussions and publications in Spanish, Italian or Polish for instance.

In a similar vein, international public history should very much accept the multiple understandings of what ‘public’ means. A recent conference organized in Poland – and soon to be published – a book explored the multiple approaches and understandings of the term ‘public’ in ‘public history’.²⁶ Debates are not only about different translations but also from various understanding of whom the public(s) is/are and their roles in the process. For some public history projects and actors, public history consists very much in communicating history to a large and non-academic audiences.²⁷ For others, the public(s) take a much more active role, contributing to the production of history. For other projects based on socio-economic activism, history serves as a source of empowerment for public groups.²⁸

To conclude on a dynamic and fast-changing field such as international public history, it is always useful to go back to what historians do best: contextualizing. International public history has undergone several different stages and processes. Whereas the initial phase that followed the creation of the movement in the United States in the 1970s was driven and influenced by the United States and the Anglosphere, the new international public history appears more interactive and multilateral. It is striking to see how international public history is today as much impacted by projects in Europe, Latin America and increasingly Asia as it was by North America in the 1980s. At the image of a field that encourages collaborative production, the new international public history is a constant collaborative appraisal of what history is, what historians can do, and how the term ‘public’ affects the whole history discipline. Decentralizing international public history allows for the inclusion of sometimes long-existing practices into our understand of the field.

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