Pasts Revisited: The Rise of Public History through Epistemological and Technological Transformations

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ABSTRACT: The rise of public history is the result of an unfolding technological-epistemological transformation. Gradual changes in media technologies, historiography, museology and museography until well into the 1970s can be considered as a pre-history of public history. During the last third of the twentieth century the rise of memory and related historiographical changes went hand in hand with an increased influence of analogue and digital media that impacted communication, documentation and preservation. Overall, it will be argued that the transformation of historiographical approaches, a focus on memory and the rise of participatory historical research were brought about through shifts in media technologies.

EET/TEE KEYWORDS: Public History; Education; Historiography; Memory; ICT.

Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past.

Pierre Nora, 1989

Public Historians work in cultural institutions, museums, archives, libraries, media, in the cultural and the tourism industry, in schools, and are engaged in cultural volunteering and social promotion and in all fields where the knowledge of the past is required to work with and for different audiences. Likewise, also academic historians who have chosen Public History as a research and teaching subject are Public Historians, as those who make history

interacting with audiences outside the academic community (history applied outside the university is sometimes called "third mission", after teaching and research).

The Italian Public History Manifesto, 2018

Introduction[1]

This article is about the impact of media technologies and historiographical approaches on the different ways in which we perceive and analyse the past. I would suggest that the rise of public history is the result of a slowly unfolding technological-epistemological transformation that was influenced by shifts and turns in historiography, communication technology, museology, museography, the role of archives and our understanding of how history and memory relate to each other. I will therefore look at the different transitional phases in which historical knowledge has been produced, put on display and made accessible for and in collaboration with various audiences or publics.

I will begin by briefly exploring the history of museums and their role in society and practice. I will examine how, from the end of the eighteenth century onwards, the "exhibitionary complex", a term coined by Tony Bennett, gradually forged bonds with citizenship education, popular culture, oral history, history from below and the historical workshop movement of the 1970s, and how historiographical shifts influenced this process of transformation[2]. I will then reflect on the interrelationships between archive, history and memory, and the way in which technologies of display, recording and archiving have influenced and inspired public history[3]. I will go on to discuss public history as a twilight zone between history and memory. In a concluding section, I will argue that a co-production of histories of education can inspire and transform academic research. Overall, it will be assumed that the transformation of historiographical approaches, a focus on memory and the rise of participatory research were

[2] T. Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*, London-New York, Routledge, 2009.

[3] The following publications offer some insights into media history and its relevance for the development and display of historical narratives: U. Hägele, *Film und Foto – die Ausstellung des Deutschen Werkbundes 1929 in Stuttgart*, «Schwäbische Heimat», vol. 70, n. 4, 2019, pp. 437-442; S. Noiret, M. Tebeau, G. Zaagsma (edd.), *Handbook of Digital Public History*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2022; K. Priem, I. Grosvenor, *Future Pasts: Web Archives and Public History as Challenges for Historians of Education in Times of COVID-19*, in F. Hermann, S. Braster, M.d.M. del Pozo Andrés (edd.), *Exhibiting the Past: Public Histories of Education,* Berlin, De Gruyter, 2022, pp. 177-196.

brought about through shifts in media and communication technologies in the analogue and digital eras.

1. *Transitioning Regimes of Power: A Pre-History of Public History*

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, strong nation states engaged in fierce competition by erecting national museums, establishing national archives and participating in international exhibitions to demonstrate their power, knowledge, progress and cultural assets that they wanted everyone to see and admire[4]. It was not just achievements in the arts and sciences, political superiority, imperial expansion and national grandeur that were put on display; trade and production, technological progress and social-educational reform were also showcased, to be seen by various audiences including sightseers and other international visitors. Museums, art galleries and exhibitions of various kinds played a central role in the formation of citizenship and the making of distinctive nation states and strong empires. Exhibitions were seen as an educative force that would forge a shared perspective by means of spectacular displays, designed and created by a social elite for multiple publics.

Accordingly, museums were erected as an instrument of public education; they were intended to structure the public gaze and to define what should be seen and known, thereby transforming undifferentiated publics into citizens. Museums were intended to become not only institutions of moral and cultural instruction but also spaces of civilised behaviour shared by all visitors including the working classes. Despite these anticipated educative and formative effects on society, cultural and political elites were afraid of unruly crowds who would destroy and question what had been carefully designed and assembled. Museum guards and other supervisory and administrative staff were therefore given the task of overseeing and managing the buildings, the collections and the flow of visitors.

However, it must be stressed that the "exhibitionary complex" did not fully abandon the rather hedonistic aura of former popular fairs and activities designed for leisure, pleasure and amusement (e.g. the public display of monstrosities and curiosities); instead it explored different ways of combining popular pursuits with the education of both citizens and consumers[5]. These

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[4] On showcasing education reforms at world exhibitions see K. Dittrich, *Konkurrenz imperialer Gesellschaften: Die Darstellung nationaler Systeme von Primärschulbildung auf den Weltausstellungen der Jahrhundertwende*, in M. Caruso, T. Koinzer, C. Mayer, K. Priem (edd.), *Zirkulation und Transformation. Pädagogische Grenzüberschreitungen in historischer Perspektive*, Cologne, Böhlau, 2014, pp. 51-73.

[5] Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, cit., pp. 74-75; K. Priem, C. Mayer, *Learning How to See and Feel: Alfred Lichtwark and his Concept of Artistic and Aesthetic Education*, «Paedagogica

efforts can be attributed to a shift in perspective. Starting in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, some scholars had already set out to broaden the definition of culture at the international level. These initiatives included Aby Warburg's iconographic and cultural studies as well as several works in cultural sociology and philosophy associated with such well-known names as Georg Simmel, Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, Maurice Halbwachs and the French Annales School. From this wider perspective, "culture" referred to the traditions and ways of life of different social strata, to social groups and their mentalities, to the link between culture and society, to the symbolic meaning of everyday objects, to consumption, tastes and lifestyles, and to popular culture, mass media and their conditions of production[6]. The focus of this research was on the different ways in which culture was made and produced. Museums and exhibitions – including trade fairs, fine art exhibitions, exhibitions of folkloric art, exhibitions on the Classical era, ecc. – gradually adopted this broader view of culture and extended their mission to educating visitors *and* buyers and enhancing their appreciation and understanding.

Nevertheless, until well into the twentieth century, traditional national museums were linked to nation states. Culture and cultural heritage were assigned a unifying and value-defining role within a national framework of reference. It was only in the early 1970s that major transitional shifts in the societal role of museums started to occur. These transitions were initiated by historiographical turns and the fight of women, workers and so-called minority groups for their right to be seen and heard in history. While social history has tended to focus on the working classes and the effects of hierarchical societal structures, therefore often adopting the perspective of a history from below, the scope of the new cultural history was everyday practices, mentalities and related identities, material and visual culture and the anthropological foundations of human life; it was strictly focused on the meaning-making activities of historical actors and communities[7].

The history of everyday life is another important historiographical turn. Inspired by ethnological or cultural anthropological research (for example by Edward P. Thompson and Carlo Ginzburg) as well as women's history, the term *Alltagsgeschichte* (history of everyday life), for example, emerged in the

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Historica», vol. 53, n. 3, 2017, pp. 199-213.

    [6] C. Honegger (ed.), *M. Bloch, F. Braudel, L. Febvre u. a. Schrift und Materie der Geschichte. Vorschläge zur systematischen Aneignung historischer Prozesse*, Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, 1977; U. Raulff (ed.), *Mentalitäten-Geschichte. Zur historischen Rekonstruktion geistiger Prozesse*, Berlin, Wagenbach, 1989 (2nd ed.), pp. 127-145; U. Daniel, *Kompendium Kulturgeschichte. Theorien, Praxis, Schlüsselwörter*, Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, 2010; S. Samida, M.K.H. Eggert, H.P. Hahn (edd.), *Handbuch Materielle Kultur. Bedeutungen, Konzepte, Disziplinen*, Stuttgart-Weimar, J. B. Metzler, 2014.

    [7] On the material history of education see e.g. the special issue K. Priem, G. König, R. Casale (edd.), *Die Materialität der Erziehung: Kulturelle und soziale Aspekte pädagogischer Objekte*, «Zeitschrift für Pädagogik», vol. 58, 2012.

West German context in the late 1970s[8]. The term is rarely used today, but its focus has been adopted by new cultural history approaches. A peculiarity of the history of everyday life is its success outside academia, where "history workshops" have enjoyed wide popular appeal. This development has coincided with a growing interest in local and regional history and in those social groups and strata whose lifestyles and historical significance do not fit into national narratives of modernisation, reform and progress. A significant characteristic of the history of everyday life has been the introduction of oral history[9]. In the same way as the invention and popular use of photography, technical developments have facilitated the widespread use of portable recording devices. The ability to collect data even where there are few or no sources has paved the way for an enormous expansion of historical research, especially on social groups who left behind only indirect traces or no record in the archives at all. Oral history and its interview techniques also highlight individuals' constructions of meaning, revealing individual memories and biographical milestones as seen by the interviewee. The North American historian Ed Ayers' characterisation of our digital present as "Everyone their own historian" is already hinted at here[10].

The approaches that have caught on as part of the new cultural history also include the research by Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault on cultural sociology[11]. Bourdieu puts the spotlight on what he calls habitus, on the perceptions, actions and dispositions of specific social groups, and on related processes involving the internalisation and incorporation of social power relations, and Michel Foucault sees historical developments as complex processes, as products of a wide variety of discursive practices and everyday usages. The British cultural studies approach that emerged in the early 1960s certainly deserves equal treatment in this context. The movement was concerned with the analysis of subcultures, with popular culture as an authentic means of working-class expression and a form of protest[12].

As varied as the historiographical approaches presented so far may be, they are united by an expanded understanding of cultural production and a desire to break down and question the determinism and essentialism of national culture and historical master narratives. Instead, these new approaches focused on how

[8] J. Kuczynski, *Geschichte des Alltags des deutschen Volkes,* 5 voll., Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 1982-1983; R. Van Dülmen, *Historische Anthropologie. Entwicklung, Probleme, Aufgaben,* Cologne, Böhlau, 2000; C. Wulf, *Einführung in die Anthropologie der Erziehung*, Weinheim, Beltz, 2001.

[9] One of the first oral history studies on the history of education in Germany was by S. Mutschler, *Ländliche Kindheit in Lebenserinnerungen*, Tübingen, Tübinger Volkskundliche Vereinigung e.V., 1985.

[10] E. Ayers, *Everyone Their Own Historian*, «Journal of American History», vol. 105, n. 3, 2018, pp. 505-513.

[11] P. Bourdieux, *La distinction: Critique sociale du jugement*, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 1979; M. Foucault, *Surveiller et punir: La naissance de la prison*, Paris, Editions Gallimard, 1975.

[12] R. Lindner, *Die Stunde der Cultural Studies*, Wien, Edition Parabasen WUV, 2000.

various historical actors, groups and communities were making meaning out of their experiences, daily lives and struggle with social power relations. It was only during the last few years of the twentieth century that human agency, power relations and cultural diversity were acknowledged and museums started seeking to become transparent and interactive places.

These historiographical changes went hand in hand with the emergence of new media, initially analogue and later digital, for communication, documentation and preservation. Both developments must be perceived as a prerequisite for public history as a participatory form of historical work. It must also be noted that the spread of photography, film and radio at the beginning of the twentieth century accelerated the expansion of the concept of culture and contributed to an explosion of media production. In historical studies, however, this was only acknowledged much later.

The emergence of public history in the 1970s was caused not only by technical and historiographical change but also by changing perceptions of the interrelationship of history and memory, with an emphasis on memory – a development that has recently gained new momentum with the emergence of digital archives and memory banks[13].

2. *An Entanglement of Histories and Memories: Public History as a Twilight Zone*

In his book *The Age of Empire*, Eric Hobsbawm briefly wrote about three different kinds of history. First, he mentioned two opposing concepts that in his view sometimes also complement each other: the "scholarly" versus the "existential", or, in other words, the "archive" versus "personal memory"[14]. Hobsbawm stressed that the value of memory should be respected by professional historians because, as he goes on to explain, «everyone is a historian of his or her own consciously lived lifetime inasmuch as he or she comes to terms with it in the mind – an unreliable historian from most points of view, as anyone knows who has ventured into 'oral history', but one whose contribution is essential». This echoes Pierre Nora's notion of memory as life, of tying history to the present[15]. But Hobsbawm also mentioned a third kind of history that he called the "history of the twilight zone", which for him was different from both personal memory and archive. He described it as «an incoherent, incompletely perceived image of the past, sometimes more shadowy, sometimes apparently

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[13] See Priem, Grosvenor, *Future Pasts*, cit., pp. 177-196.

[14] E.J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire, 1875-1914*, New York, Vintage Books, 1989, pp. 4-5.

[15] P. Nora, *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire*, «Representations», vol. 26, 1989, p. 8.

precise, always transmitted by a mixture of learning and second-hand memory shaped by public and private tradition»[16]. What Hobsbawm describes may have much in common with how history and memory interact and how this relationship may influence public history.

In *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time*, historian François Hartog declared the victory of memory over history. He wrote: «No century can rival the twentieth for its fascination with the future, for building and butchering in its name; ... But, especially in its last third, it was also the century in which the category of the present expanded most sharply. The present became something immense, invasive, and omnipresent, blocking out any other viewpoint, fabricating on a daily basis the past and the future it needed. The present was already past before it had completely taken place»[17]. The 1970s that Hartog was referring to was a time of societal and economic crises. The decade marked not only a shift in historiography but also a turn from history towards memory – both of which, in my opinion, had an impact on the societal role of museums, on museography and the emergence of public history at an international level. Memory making during the 1970s implied abandoning a vision of time and history that was related to progress, reform and expansion. Different publics emerged that were keen to explore their shared memories and look at traces of the past that could not be found in national archives. The past has therefore not been abandoned but rather revived and diversified, by looking back differently and stressing the memories of those social groups that were previously marginalised, forgotten or omitted by national master narratives and have now become the focus of new approaches in historiography and museology[18].

Different pasts have emerged and the tremendous expansion of memory making by various publics, cultures and communities has been critically described not only as a boom and fever but also as an epidemic[19]. Furthermore, terms like memory market and memory industry have been coined to underline that memories can be handled as commodities; they can be produced, distributed

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[16] Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire*, cit., p. 5. Recent examples that have instantly become history are 9/11 and the COVID-19 crisis. These existential crises were also imagined as future pasts to be remembered by future generations.

[17] F. Hartog, *Présentisme simple ou par défaut?*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2003 (en. transl. by Saskia Brown: *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2017, p. 185).

[18] K. Myers, I. Grosvenor, *Birmingham Stories: Local Histories of Migration and Settlement and the Practice of History*, «Midland History», vol. 36, n. 2, 2011, pp. 149-162; G. Bandini, *Educational Memories and Public History: A Necessary Meeting*, in C. Yanes-Cabrera, J. Meda, A. Viñao (edd.), *School Memories. New Trends in the History of Education*, Cham, Springer, 2017, pp. 143-115.

[19] See S. Macdonald, *Memorylands: Heritage and Identity in Europe Today*, London, Routledge, 2013, pp. 1-5.

and consumed on a massive scale[20]. However, very much like the "exhibitionary complex", the "memory complex" is a meshwork of intentions, concepts, practices and rationales. While the "exhibitionary complex" of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reflected the power of political and cultural elites, the "memory complex" instead seems to stem from participation, diversity and sometimes even conflict and disruption[21]. It is important to emphasise that memory making has been accelerated not only by the emergence of mass media but also by a threatening present, a loss of hope in future progress and a fear of self-extinction in the Anthropocene that together have resulted in an urge to fight amnesia and collect as many voices as possible in order to connect with and reflect on the past in a different way[22].

Over the long term, the rise of new technologies increasingly influenced the way in which professional historians, archives and museums communicated and interacted with the public and which sources were considered relevant. Initially, analogue media such as documentary and amateur film, photography, recording devices as well as radio and television offered a wide range of new possibilities for preserving, collecting and interacting with the public sphere. As already mentioned, the scope of what was considered a historical source broadened significantly in the 1970s and many social groups were able to contribute historical sources and artefacts that were once considered nostalgic or subjective. Alongside visual and oral testimonies, newly ennobled sources of public memory were everyday objects, private correspondence, diaries and other personal belongings. Museums gradually started to organise themed public history harvests to encourage various publics to enrich museum and archive collections. However, it was the digital turn that brought about the most significant advances in turning museums into collaborative and interactive spaces. Almost everybody everywhere now produces their own daily digital memories or archives by using audiovisual applications on their smartphones. The World Wide Web and social media such as Facebook, Twitter or X, Bluesky and Instagram represent some of the biggest digital archives in existence – yet they also harbour considerable risks because of their commercial background and ethical challenges. Historical gaming, 3D animations, AI-generated content and chatbots like Character.ai and Historical Figures Chat will change the role of professional historians and necessitate digital literacy[23]. In addition, it has become important for traditional archives to offer public access to the digital

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[20] *Ibid.*, p. 3.
[21] Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, cit.; Macdonald, *Memorylands*, cit., pp. 5-7.
[22] Z.B. Simon, M. Tamm, *Historical Futures*, «History and Theory», vol. 60, n. 1, 2020, pp. 3-22; Priem, Grosvenor, *Future Pasts*, cit., pp. 186-187; K. Priem, *Emerging Ecologies and Changing Relations: A Brief Manifesto for Histories of Education after COVID-19*, «Paedagogica Historica», vol. 28, n. 5, 2022, pp. 768-780.
[23] See for example <https://beta.character.ai/> and <https://www.hellohistory.ai/> (last accesses: 10.01.2024).

versions of their paper collections. Some archives and museums invite members of the public to share expertise (e.g. by tagging sources online), and many themed open access web archives and memory banks ask audiences to share their memories by submitting their digital productions. These new practices and technologies are influencing not only how historians do their work but also the role and work of museums.

In conclusion, I would like to stress that public history is indeed a kind of twilight zone, an entanglement of histories and memories, a social and media network, where professional historians and various publics interact. Public history therefore connects history with storytelling, professional historians with communities, and archives with memories. Public history always results from exchanges, from communication and mediation processes, and it makes use of various technologies to this end[24].

Conclusion: Towards Public Histories of Education

My paper has offered a brief history of historiography, museology, museography and public history. I think it is safe to say that museums from the late eighteenth century onwards were seen as institutions of public education. This role still seems to be key; however, one can observe a transition from authoritarian to reciprocal interactions with various publics. This shift happened after cultural and oral history approaches had highlighted the abilities and possibilities of human agents to create, appropriate and interpret their living conditions. I believe that these shifts in historiography, along with the rise of media technologies, initiated the first steps towards sharing authority in the making of history.

What do we gain by sharing authority? The research agendas within our field clearly indicate a turn towards cultural and oral history approaches. Many projects are now designed to include participatory research and to be put on public display[25]. In addition, many historians of education have become involved in the work of school museums or started their own collections and websites about school memories with the support of their universities and/or national research foundations[26]. Other projects have resulted in public histories

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[24] The networked structure of public history is further described by T. Cauvin, *New Field, Old Practices: Promises and Challenges of Public History*, «Magazén», vol. 2, n. 1, 2020, pp. 13-44.

[25] Herman, Braster, del Pozo Andrés, *Exhibiting the Past*, cit.; M.d.M. del Pozo Andrés, S. Braster, *Pictures at an Exhibition: Images, Stakeholders, and a Public History of Education*, in F. Comas Rubí, K. Priem, S. González Gómez (edd.), *Media Matter: Images as Presenters, Mediators, and Means of Observation*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2022, pp. 93-115.

[26] E.g. <http://museodellascuola.unimc.it/en/>, <https://memoriascolastica.it/> and <https://bbf.dipf.de/en?set_language=en> (last access: 01.10.2023).

of educational reform that have opened up new research perspectives[27]. The Library of Birmingham has hosted groundbreaking public history projects on children and war, and the history of photography has opened up new avenues of research by including public voices and public expertise when tracing the multifaceted stories behind pictures and their photographers[28]. Finally, I want to mention the recent past, which has seen various publics producing their own digital memories on distance learning, childhood, youth and family life and uploading them as community responses to digital archives and memory banks[29].

I believe that we should welcome these public interventions into our field, embrace the opportunity to share authority, seek to become more aware of unheard voices and forgotten contexts, be open to technological change, and thus accept the constant metamorphoses and revisiting of our understandings of the past.

[27] Del Pozo Andrés, Braster, *Pictures at an Exhibition*, cit.
[28] See https://www.voicesofwarandpeace.org (last access: 01.10.2023); K. Priem, *Beyond the Collapse of Language? Photographs of Children in Postwar Europe as Performances and Relational Objects*, «Paedagogica Historica», vol. 53, n. 6, 2017, pp. 683-696; C. Naggar, *Tereska and Her Photographer*, New York, Russet Lederman, 2019.
[29] Priem, Grosvenor, *Future Pasts*, cit.