

For a Definition of Public History of Education between Shared Authority and Memories: Re-Thinking the History of School

Giordana Merlo
Department of Philosophy, Sociology,
Education, Applied Psychology –
(FISPPA)
University of Padua (Italy)
giordana.merlo@unipd.it

ABSTRACT: Clarifying the public history of education and determining whether it is possible to provide a precise definition requires considering two interconnected conceptual planes relating to public history as an approach and a way of making history and a currently underway valorisation of historical-educational heritage. Education museums are seen as a privileged place in which to meet the past, in which shared authority can be realized brought to fruition in a historical-educational context, and a research space whose doors are open to the community and its contributions, research which makes use of the narrative dimension present in the sources displayed. Rethinking school history involves combining school memories and narratives in a shared authority context based on historical rigour.

EET/TEE KEYWORDS: Public History; School; Education; Heritage; Museums.

Introduction

This contribution is situated in a border area between two fields of study concerning thought still underway regarding the historiographical and methodological context underliving the public history of education. In fact, the public history of education relates, on the one hand, to Public History – an area of great interest and topicality which has been developing in the English-speaking sphere since Anglo-Saxon area since 1970s – on the other, to history of education, a discipline characterised by great epistemological complexity and long term developments. This work will thus focus on two issues. The first of

these regards what I consider to be a terminological and semantic clarification of considerable importance. I believe that the expression “public history of education” is not without its ambiguities and its principal characteristics thus need to be examined. After clarifying what I mean by public history of education, I will turn my attention to the potential for rethinking school history from the public history of education perspective. The history of school exemplifies the real potential for embarking on a dialogue between historical witnesses, memories, and the general public. The shared authority is characteristic of the public history. In fact, as I will try to clarify, talking of public history is more than simply a matter of bringing a historical event or memory out into the open because this only widens out to the presence of other historical witnesses. A public history perspective requires active public participation.

1. *Thoughts around defining public history of education*

The first key question concerns clarifying what is meant by public history of education or, rather since the reference is to public history¹ in any case, considering what, if any, specificities mark “public history of education” out from “public history”? It is the conceptual complexity of the cultural sphere that brings such issues to the fore.

¹ This work has been carried out under project PID2020-113677GB-I00, funded by MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033. The authors are members of the ISCHE Standing Working Group Public Histories of Education [<https://www.ische.org/about-ische/standing-working-groups/>].

Defining public history exactly and clearly is also problematic. Fifteen years ago, Robert Weible highlighted that «for all the talk of public history that we have been hearing for more than 25 years, it is a little awkward that historians are still uncertain about what public history might actually mean. So perhaps it is fruitless to seek consensus on a single definition». R. Weible, *Defining Public History: Is It Possible? Is It Necessary?*, «Perspectives on History», vol. 46, n. 3, 2008, <www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/march-2008/defining-public-history-is-it-possible-is-it-necessary> (last access: 10.01.2024). In fact, as the international debate demonstrates, definitions of public history are all linked to specific times and geographic contexts. These differences are highlighted by the different ways the English term “public history” is translated. In the Italian context, for instance, the English term is used. The translation of “public history” (storia pubblica) conjures up public use of history, but it is evident that its meaning is profoundly different. However, two key elements common to the various definitions of public history can be identified. The first regards the fact that public history belongs to the historical sciences fields. The second concerns the perception of public history as a process that includes distinct but connected practices. In this latter regard, Thomas Cauvin used a tree metaphor to show the complex interconnected systems characterising public history. See T. Cauvin, *New Field, Old Practices: Promises and Challenges of Public History*, «Magazén», vol. 2, n. 1, 2021, pp. 13-44, <<https://edizionicafoscari.unive.it/en/edizioni4/riviste/magazen/2021/1/new-field-old-practices-promises-and-challenges-of/>> (last access: 10.01.2024); Id., *Public History: A Textbook of Practice*, New York-London, Routledge, 2022².

First of all, let me highlight that the expression public history of education is to be understood as a terminological synthesis. It refers to a conceptual sphere structured by means of a repetition of terms such as “public history of history of education”. This repetition clearly makes no sense at the linguistic-formal level but a full awareness of it enables us to avoid losing sight of a key point in our discourse, the history of education with all the epistemological complexity that this expression conjures up² and whose consideration falls outside the scope of this contribution³.

The expression “public history” factually acts as a methodological adjective in reference to a specific approach. This methodological approach⁴, as great deal of reference literature has already highlighted⁵, refers to making history in the public arena, to bringing history out into the open and making it more visible, in proximity to the general public⁶. For Serge Noiret, it is not simply a

² The historical renewal that has marked historical-educational research in the last thirty years and the study of, mostly locally based, diversified source types belonging to a line of enquiry focusing on the recovery, conservation and enhancement of the historical and educational heritage. It is a material culture of education referring to multiple sources and including elements that can be traced back to the most recent commemoration as a historiographical commitment to the witnesses of the memory of school and teaching. M. D’Ascenzo, *Linee di ricerca della storiografia scolastica in Italia: la storia locale*, «Espacio, Tiempo y Educación», vol. 3, 1, 2016, pp. 249-272; R. Sani, *La ricerca sul patrimonio storico-educativo in Italia*, in A. Ascenzi, C. Covato, J. Meda (edd.), *La pratica educativa. Storia, memoria e patrimonio*, Macerata, eum, 2020, pp. 13-26; R. Sani, *L’implementazione della ricerca sul patrimonio storico-educativo in Italia: itinerari, priorità, obiettivi di largo termine*, in S. González, J. Meda, X. Motilla, L. Pomante (edd.), *La práctica educativa. Historia, Memoria y Patrimonio*, Salamanca, FahrenHouse, 2018, pp. 27-44; A. Barousse, T. De Freitas Ermel, V. Viola (edd.), *Prospettive incrociate sul Patrimonio Storico Educativo*, Brescia-Lecce, Pensa Multimedia, 2020.

³ It would seem to be important to remember the importance of history of education to academic pathways in professional education too. I am referring to the need to enhance historical knowledge in the field of education and educational skills. In fact, historical knowledge can encompass looking after socio-educational needs both present and past, to the extent of outlining synergies between formal, non-formal and informal education, between the world of research, other cultural institutes and society. G. Bandini, S. Oliviero (edd.), *Public History of Education: riflessioni, testimonianze, esperienze*, Firenze, University Press, 2020, p. X.

⁴ It is interesting to remember Italian historian Marcello Ravveduto’s definition comparing public history with an archipelago of small islands (the various practices) which are distinct but close to each other, connected by a sea (the methodology) M. Ravveduto, *Il viaggio della storia: dalla terra ferma all’arcipelago*, in P.B. Farnetti, L. Bertucelli, A. Botti (edd.), *Public History. Discussioni e pratiche*, Milano, Mimesis, 2017, pp. 131-146, in particular p. 136.

⁵ A by no means thoroughgoing list includes M.-R. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1995; O. Dumoulin, *Le rôle social de l’historien, de la chaire au prétoire*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2003; E. Ayers, *Everyone Their Own Historian*, «Journal of American History», vol. 105, n. 3, 2018, pp. 505-513; M. Demantowsky, *Public History and School: International Perspectives*, Berlin-Boston, De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2018; J. Wojdon, D. Wiśniewska (edd.), *Public in Public History*, London, Routledge, 2021; S. Noiret, M. Tebeau, G. Zaagsma (edd.), *Handbook of Digital Public History*, Berlin-Boston, de Gruyter 2022.

⁶ As I will try to clarify later, this bringing history closer to a wider public is substantiated by a specific meaning. I am referring to involvement as an element characterising public history that must be understood as emotional participation in something an emotional participation closely

matter of teaching or disseminating a certain type of history concretely applied to issues currently topical in the public arena and designed to reach the general public. It also means making history in direct contact with changes in the mentalities and sense of collective belonging of the various communities coexisting within the national space and the global village and enhancing the study of their identities⁷.

In my opinion, this engaging with a wider public has to keep well away from forms of folkloristic entertainment or historically inaccurate entertainment and express a deeper meaning that is always present however nonexplicit it may sometimes be. I am referring to the link between public history (as an approach) and the history teaching as knowledge which views human beings as «subject that is formed and educated in history»⁸.

History teaching interweaves the cognitive dimension (the production of knowledge of history and in history) with a perspective pertaining specifically to subjective knowledge, in which historical awareness is crucial to the humanisation of the subject⁹. It is important to stress that human development is possible only by means a full understanding of one's historicity as a human being. It is a recognition of each person's bond with life and the fulfilment of this formative connection with history which is the historical experience of life itself¹⁰. This evokes the potential for deepening our understanding of life by gaining knowledge of the forms that life has through history (in our specific case it is knowledge of the educational forms that life has taken through history). These forms are not limited to physical and material concreteness but also refer to other aspects which are immaterial or not immediately visible (this is why I see the narrative of materiality a very important).

Now, whilst historical awareness is a key element for in humanising the subject, the importance of broadening this historical consciousness is also evident and this even more true in educational contexts focusing on human beings, on their formation, namely humanisation¹¹. Once again, if the consciousness of history is fundamentally important and must be disseminated then the role of public history is clear. Such an approach is less straightforward than might

linked to the narrativity of the object, of the historical source.

⁷ S. Noiret, "Public History" e "storia pubblica" nella rete, «Ricerche storiche», vol. 2, n. 3, 2009, pp. 275-327.

⁸ P. Levrero (ed.), *Menschenbildung: l'idea di formazione dell'uomo in Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi*, Genova, Il Melangolo, 2014, p. 39.

⁹ P. Levrero (ed.), *Pedagogia della storia*, Genova, Il Melangolo, 2016, pp. 8-9. In this regard, Mario Gennari argues that full consciousness of human formation is impossible without consciousness of human life. A consciousness of history is indispensable to this, i.e. consciousness of personal history but also of the history of others which is human history of their lives and their education. M. Gennari, *L'Eidos del mondo*, Milano, Bompiani, 2012, p. 271.

¹⁰ Levrero, *Pedagogia della storia*, cit., p. 9.

¹¹ Bandini, Oliviero (edd.), *Public History of Education: riflessioni, testimonianze, esperienze*, cit.

seem, however. In fact, it is a minefield in which we must be careful not to lose sight of our objective, that is, historical awareness as contributing to humanising the subject through active participation in the process.

To move forward towards greater clarity of meaning requires paying attention to further terminological and conceptual clarification, which is both obvious and crucial. It is the word “history” which is the element common to the two terms “public history” and “history of education”. The word “history” refers humanity’s past, known and reconstructed through historiography¹², which is not memory of the past (here understood as the ability to remember) but science. It is a science which applies logical interpretation based on critical methods and documents to the task of reconstructing historical events, the process of reflection, research and knowledge related to history. Knowledge of the past involves seeking the past of a present with the starting point being the present, a historian’s knowledge and life horizons. A historian is a person who examines the past and illuminates «certain aspects of what has been, snatching them from the darkness of the unknown» and historiography is an indispensable tool with which the seeker of meaning «explores his or her living environment to attribute to it a meaning that it would be vain to seek only in the present»¹³. This is not a new concept and Jules Michelet argued that «anyone who wants to limit themselves to the present, to the present-day, will not understand the present», as far back as 1848¹⁴.

As historian, my action in the field of history of education focuses on educational events. In this specific case, a historian is person who examines the educational past with a view to shedding light on certain aspects of what education has been. It concerns snatching these events from the darkness of the unknown with a view to clarifying the educational present-day. These issues are certainly not new for professionals, but it is important to remember them when linking the history of education to the public history approach. In fact, its importance is bound up with the need to be clear that the public history of education should never be understood as popular entertainment about educational mores.

The wider public which is a distinctive element in public history is not simply a matter of activating a simple publicization process. It is not just about bringing something previously hidden away in restricted academic and elitist circles into the public domain and into the open. In fact, making something public and visible to everyone does not guarantee its sharing. In my opinion,

¹² In fact, H.-I. Marrou teaches us that historiographical theories are a form of knowledge developed by individuals who open up to the past and develop a historical consciousness. See H.-I. Marrou, *De la connaissance historique*, Édition du Seuil, Paris 1954.

¹³ E. Di Nuoscio, *Tucidide con Einstein? La spiegazione scientifica in storiografia*, Soveria Manelli, Rubbettino, 2004, p. 6 (my translation).

¹⁴ J. Michelet, *Le peuple*, Paris 1848, p. 49 (my translation). About Jules Michelet see F. Pintacuda De Michelis, *Alle origini della “histoire totale”: Jules Michelet*, «Studi Storici», vol. 21, n. 4, 1980, pp. 835-854 (my translation).

showing off alone is an impoverishment of history, because it reduces history to a set of witnesses which cannot account for the long time spans, great changes and dialogue between present and past¹⁵. The widespread presence of historical witnesses today does not guarantee a collective historical conscience which is ethical and civil. In fact, history does not become historical consciousness through osmosis.

What is needed is both a wider public and greater visibility without falling into the everyone can – make – history trap. Scientific methodology is ensured by the presence of a historian. Audience cannot itself build history because it lacks the necessary methodological tools with which to illuminate and interpret the facts. But there is more to it than this. The scientific work of historians in reconstructing the past must certainly be made public but public history requires something else. Historical witnesses are not sufficient on their own; without a historian, they are virtually insignificant. They are curiosities lacking in the character of meaning referred to above, which concerns history teaching as humanising awareness and decisive factor in setting public history processes in motion. Social issues and history's need for dissemination potentially find an echo in the scientific work of professionals capable of capturing the historical interests of the public and the community getting them involved.

Whilst it is true that the history set out in unread books is inert and does not act in the world it is equally important to acknowledge the need for living history. In this regard it is interesting to note Carl Becker's complex thoughts on the subject almost one hundred years ago, with their valuable implications for today. First of all, Becker took a minimalist approach to history, defining it as memory of things said and done, and then showing concretely how the memory of things said and done is essential to the performance of the simplest everyday tasks. Contrary to the prevalent belief that the past is dead, the future non-existent, and only the present real, Becker warns that «strictly speaking, the present doesn't exist for us, or is at best no more than an infinitesimal point in time, gone before we can note it as present»¹⁶. Nevertheless, he argues, the

¹⁵ Sociologist Paolo Jedlowski argued that memory and history are born from a resistance to oblivion, the forgetfulness seen as the worst of evils since Homeric antiquity. Thus «there is no doubt that biological evolution can be considered as a process of preserving and transmitting the memory of the species, but the characteristic evolution of the human species requires that the task of preserving social memory be transformed into an intentional activity, and this gives rise to specific institutions, techniques and tools. The cultural heritage that each society preserves and transmits from generation to generation includes every day and specialized knowledges, the arts and even the language itself, as well as skills and customs [...] The concept of collective memory thus tends to be understood as a set of social representations concerning the past which each group produces, institutionalizes, guards, and transmits through the interaction of its members» (P. Jedlowski, *Memory and Sociology: Thems and Issues*, «Time & Society», vol. 10, n.1, 2001, pp. 29-44, in particular p. 33).

¹⁶ C.L. Becker, *Everyman His Own Historian*, «The American Historical Review», vol. 3, n. 2, 1932, pp. 221-236, in particular pp. 225-226.

need for a present determines its creation through the appropriation of elements from the recent past and the pretence that these all belong to the realm of our immediate perceptions. Becker argues that the concentration of successive events into a single instant, which philosophers call the “specious present”, can be expanded because man alone is capable of deliberately and purposefully expanding, diversifying, and enriching the specious present. The extent of this expansion depends on knowledge and the artificial extension of memory, the memory of things said and done in the past and in distant places.

If on one hand the specious present is an unstable pattern of thought, incessantly changing in response to our immediate perceptions and the purposes arising from them, on the other at any given moment each one of us weaves the real or artificial memories needed to orient us in our little world into this unstable pattern. Linked to the capacity to orient us, this operation ultimately makes the real bonds between past, present and future clear «and the more of the past we drag into the specious present, the more a hypothetical, patterned future is likely to crowd into it also. [...] What I suspect is that memory of past and anticipation of future events work together, go hand in hand as it were in a friendly way, without disputing over priority and leadership. At all events they go together, so that in a very real sense it is impossible to divorce history from life»¹⁷.

According to Becker, the natural function of history is evident here. History reduced to its lowest common denominator and conceived as the memory of things said and done (either in our immediate yesterdays or in mankind’s long past), goes hand in hand with the anticipation of things to be said and done. «It must then be obvious that living history, the ideal series of events that we affirm and hold in memory, since it is so intimately associated with what we are doing and with what we hope to do, cannot be precisely the same for all at any given time, or the same for one generation as for another»¹⁸. As far as this individual history is concerned, we might wonder what role historians can play it. The profession of historian concerns this ideal series of events that is only of casual or occasional importance to others and historians work with «that far-flung pattern of artificial memories that encloses and completes the central pattern of individual experience»¹⁹.

The task of the historian, then, is not creation, but rather the maintenance and perpetuation of the social tradition, harmonising real and remembered events with a view to expanding and enriching the specious present that is common to us all, because society may measure what it is doing on the basis of its past actions and future intentions. The history that operates in the world

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

¹⁸ In this sense, all living history is contemporary. To the extent that we think of the past this becomes an integral and living part of our present world of appearances. *Ibid.*, pp. 227-228.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

is living history, a model of remembered events that enlarges and enriches the collective specious present. Each generation must make this great effort to understand the past and anticipate the future in the light of its limited experience.

This can then be the basis for an understanding of the educational dimension of history and its importance for each one of us, but it also shows us that historical witnesses can do nothing without a historian. If the goal of public history is to broaden awareness of history and accord greater meaning to the lives of all, then public history clearly has an educational dimension. This relates to a deeper meaning bound up with understanding of the way we all belong to history. As I see it an implicit rethinking of history from a pedagogical perspective comes across from this argument, a pedagogical profile which is not entirely new. In fact, it is the cornerstone to fundamentally important issues such as what history teaches us and what lessons we can learn from history and why.

This is the starting point for much needed reflection on the relationship between history, historians and the general public. The first point concerns the very reconstruction of history itself. The form and substance of historical facts is determined by the discourse they are part of. Reconstructing of dead events is reasoning that is closely bound up with historian's subjectivity, although it is constructed using a historical methodology. The change dimension is characteristic of historical interpretation. In fact, historians are themselves not always the same because their time and space change throughout their lives.

Now, without questioning the primacy of the need for historians, when we talk about public history, we must also refer to a reconstruction that requires the active participation of an audience. This does not justify approximation but must be seen in educational terms as the desire to disseminate a historical approach capable of according meaning. The task of the audience is not historical reconstruction in its essence (this is the task of the historian) but rather a potential contribution to the enrichment or revision of certain elements, associated with local or other specificities, with professionalism specificities as an example. To initiating this potential enrichment requires creating the appropriate conditions for an audience. Enrichment requires getting an audience involve, its emotional participation in something, committed participation on a spiritual or practical level, i.e. an emotional participation closely bound up with the narrativity of the object (of the historical source) as I will try to show below.

2. *What is "shared authority"?*

Talking about the narrativity of an object implies valuing the potential and diverse significances of this same object. The attention must thus focus on the qualification "narrative", i.e. the concrete potential for overcoming the idea of a passive observer.

The object taken as a historical source includes visible elements relating to its historical-formal dimension, but also invisible elements bound up with events impacting on it. If the former are sufficiently stable, the invisible elements are more closely bound up with the history of the object and events that have impacted it over time. This characteristic of objects lives is also related to those observing them, and this is an important element in our discussion. Attention must focus on the capacity of a document to recount and offer a range of stimuli. This capacity is based on the constantly varying relationship between object and observer. Objects can, in fact, generate diverse narratives, depending on the diverse emotional forces of observer's memories. This clarifies that an object's meaning is part objective (its substance, what it is physically) and part subjective. This latter concerns two levels of subjectivity. The first of these is bound up with the historian whose knowledge and understanding leads to a personal but always scientific interpretation. The latter relates to the observer who comes into contact with the object, activating memory-related emotions. These levels are not opposing forces and the second level can contribute to the interpretation, but always with the help of the historian's scientific methods. Paraphrasing Pomian, can be argued that documents are fragmentary, incomplete, and decontextualised, that they need the words of those capable of interpreting them but also those simply reacting to their presence. Historical knowledge (with scientific methodology) and emotions (with reference to subjectivity and memory) were long considered incompatible. But a more modern perspective, corroborated by the public history approach, makes agreement between them potentially useful²⁰.

It is the affirmation of a more participatory attitude from ordinary observers responding to a contemporary need for situations capable of increasing a collective and shared access which enables history to proceed via multiple decisions. In fact, this building process takes place on a materiality-immateriality dialogue plane. Objects' physical properties meet observers with all their emotional and cognitive baggage. Ordinary observers can offer personal interpretations regarding objects' vital or ritualistic components, and their contribution can supplement their sense of presence. Thus, the invisible as the shadow side of things finds a voice in the narratives potentially generated by documents' materiality. Potential narratives such as these in a shared authority contest can be defined as setbacks evocative of philological and scientific reconstruction, enhancing the imagination space²¹.

In my opinion shared authority is much more difficult to achieve than it appears. This gap enables us to understand what lies behind the term "public

²⁰ K. Pomian, *Musées d'histoire: émotions, connaissances, idéologies*, «Le Débat», vol. 177, n. 5, 2013, pp. 47-58, in particular p. 48.

²¹ P. Rosa, *Dai musei di collezione ai musei di narrazione*, «DISEGNARECON», vol. 4, n. 8, 2011, pp. 129-138.

history” and, to an even greater extent, public history of education. The word “public” can feel like a magical word encompassing everything, but it is not. When we limit our actions to history exhibits, such as setting up exhibitions on a particular subject, it cannot truly be said to be public history. A public history that does not allow visitors to express their opinions and engage in direct and participatory contact is not true public history. Without this potential for interpretative comparison, you remain entangled in the network of historical witnesses whose observing presence in no way guarantees historical knowledge and awareness.

Now, for the sake of convenience, we call “objects” historical witnesses. Taken on their own, these might seem inert matter, but they are really reserved witnesses waiting for someone to make them talk. Achieving this means acknowledging the life that such objects already have in their deeply evocative natures, but which needs to be rekindled. The expression “evocative life of the object” implies a broader range of knowledge possibilities than the scientific and methodological analysis historians employ on these however pre-eminent this may be. Continuing in this direction, whilst it is true that objects play a key role in the sedimentation process commonly referred to as memory and that some objects are more important than others, what needs stressing here is the sense of awakening objects’ evocative natures. This awakening is not a matter of an imagination space, as is the case in the arts²², for instance, but rather a broad interpretation space encompassing each observer’s intimate life and personal experience.

Historical knowledge begins with historians reading historical objects, but the emphasis here is on the potential for opening up to additional interpretative contributions. The aim is to redirect the attention towards disseminating history, resulting in varying outcomes. The results vary because a historical event that can be brought to the attention of those who are not historians (an exhibition, book, seminar, ecc.) – essentially to tell them what happened and why – is one thing, whilst presenting a historical event with a view to creating a sharing opportunity is quite another, with the latter being a first step setting in motion a process of awareness of the past that also involves understanding the present and enriching memory as belonging²³.

²² Without going too deeply into this argument, I will simply note that, in the arts, in addition to their own meaning, objects’ meanings depending on the use made of them. The choice of objects and their distribution in space does not depend on an interpretative will inherent in the life of the objects themselves. The aim is not interpretative-cognitive but imaginative. It is an attempt to represent the artist’s thought. Take the artistic avant-gardes of the early 20th century as an example. In this regard see C. Coppelli, *L’arte d’altra parte. L’arteterapia e I materiali artistici al servizio dell’educazione e della riabilitazione*, Roma, Armando editore, 2020, pp. 94-124.

²³ I do not want to get involved in a discussion which has significantly heated up the sector’s epistemological debate over the last forty years, and is bound up with connection between memory, as an act of reconstruction, conservation and dissemination of certain events, and history as investigation, interpretation and processing based on scientific and critical methods.

In this intersection space between the scientificity of historian and the curiosity of who like to know and understand active paths of shared authority can be generated. This expression made popular in 1990 by Michael Frisch, who saw it as «the capacity to redefine and redistribute intellectual authority» within the history-making process as a whole²⁴, refers to the increasingly widespread potential for abandoning exclusive academic pre-eminence in favour of joint working with those who are not exactly historians. On one hand, shared authority which removes or changes the usual hierarchy in cultural institutions and, on the other, a move away from a top-down approach, oriented to participative dialogue and engagement. But the institution, be it historians, museums or historical societies, ecc., retains a catalyst function for non-traditional participants contributing to the presentation of a body of information. Rather than passive historical consumers audiences are seen as participants and co-generators of historical content. “Shared authority” does not mean “sharing authority”, the words might be similar, but the meaning is profoundly different. While “sharing authority” does not imply modifying the usual top-down vision, in “shared authority” the emphasis is put on acknowledging that tra-

However whilst it is important to remember that memory is a representation of the past through extrapolation based on a selection of past events, it equally needs to be stressed that memory, and collective memory in particular, is not to be understood as a means of viewing reality. It is thus not a matter of the public use that can be made of memory, and which often takes the form of political legitimacy. This is a risky but not uncommon interpretation, as Marcello Flores pointed out, by which, in recent years, memory seems to have «progressively [replaced] history as the immediate point of reference to the past, above all that related to the 20th century, encouraging partial, decontextualized and simplified readings». M. Flores, *Cattiva memoria. Perché è difficile fare I conti con la storia*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2020, p. 8. Regarding the epistemological debate, see J. Le Goff, *Histoire et mémoire*, Paris, Gallimard, 1988; P. Nora, *Entre Mémoire et Histoire. La problématique des lieux*, in Id. (ed.), *Les lieux de mémoire*, Paris, Gallimard, 1984, Vol. I, pp. XV-XLII; K. Pomian, *De l'histoire, partie de la mémoire, à la mémoire, objet d'histoire*, «Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale», n. 1, 1998, pp. 63-110; A. Wiewiorka, *L'ère du témoin*, Paris, Plon, 1998; F. Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité. Présentisme et expérience du temps*, Paris, Le Seuil, 2003; E. Traverso, *Le passé modes d'emploi: histoire, mémoire, politique*, Paris, Le Fabrique, 2005; B. Bonomo, *Storia, memoria, soggettività, fonti orali: un nodo sciolto?*, «Meridiana», n. 106, 2023, pp. 253-266.

²⁴ M. Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1990, p. XX. The concept of shared authority was born in the field of oral history, but it has quickly concerned the wider field of public history and its rapid development. It should also be remembered that Frisch's concept proved to be very important in the subsequent understanding and definition of digital public history. Cf. M. Frisch, *From A Shared Authority to the Digital Kitchen, and Back*, in B. Adair, B. Filene, L. Koloski (edd.), *Letting Go? Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World*, Philadelphia, The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, 2011, pp. 126-138. We can talk of second life of the concept with the rise of the Web. 2.0 that allowed new forms of participation with an engagement of more people. So, the citizen scholars were able to take part in some historical projects and the crowdsourcing, the citizen science, and other user-generated content and projects are the results of a new methods founded, for instance, on collaborative transcription or creation of metadata. The concept of a shared authority demonstrated all its flexible and adaptable to a variety of collaborative and participatory uses.

ditional historical authorities and the public participate in the process of interpreting and creating meaning²⁵. Therefore, shared authority is not limited to the terminal phase of historical production but applies to the organisation of a research project, research requirements and collecting documentation all the way to interpreting the results of this collective participation. This shows that shared authority, by its very definition, has implications for the construction of historical knowledge.

A co-generator audience of this sort can use various types of intervention, which generally of a contributory, collaborative or co-creative nature. In the case of contributory intervention non-historians offer personal recollections, documents or family stories and share these materials in a public history project. When time is spent on bringing a project, or part of it, to fruition it is collaborative in nature. While in the latter case interaction is mainly creative as regards a public history project a historian proficient in public history is nonetheless needed. For Serge Noiret, historians are like Socrates, engaged with interlocutors in a collaborative questioning process.

Through precise demands, those talking with Socrates slowly revealed knowledge that was hidden deeply. This process of delivering knowledge, memories, or experiences, has been called *maieutic*, the capacity of giving birth to what individuals did not even know they had in their minds, a method used by Socrates to offer more concrete definitions to theoretical concepts. Such a process is dual, and Socrates used his authority to drive interlocutors in a collaborative creation of applied knowledge²⁶.

If we envisage historians, public historians, as engaged in a collaborative process of discovery, it should also be clear that shared authority has significant implications for the construction of historical knowledge. Our goal is to clarify this in the specific case of school history and its rethinking using the public history approach.

²⁵ «The difference I had in mind was this: the construction ‘sharing authority’ suggests this is something we do that in some important sense ‘we’ have authority, and that we need or ought to share it. A shared authority, in contrast, suggests something that ‘is’ that in the nature of oral and public history, we are not the sole interpreters. Rather, the interpretive and meaning-making process is in fact shared by definition. It is inherent in the dialogic nature of an interview, and in how audiences receive and respond to exhibitions and public history interchanges in general. In this sense, we do not have authority to give away, really, to the extent we might assume. Thus, I argued that we are called not so much to share authority as to respect and attend to this definitional quality. We need to recognize the already shared authority in the documents we generate and in the processes of public history engagement – a dialogic dimension, however implicit, through which ‘author-ship’ is shared by definition, and hence interpretive ‘author-ity’ as well. We need to act on that recognition». Frisch, *From a shared authority to the digital kitchen, and back*, cit., pp. 127-128. See also M. Frisch, *Public History is not a one-way street, or, from a shared authority to the city of mosaic and back*, «Ricerche Storiche», vol. 48, n. 3, 2017, pp. 143-150.

²⁶ S. Noiret, *Sharing Authority in Online Collaborative Public History Practices*, in Noiret, Tebeau, Zaagsma, *Handbook of Digital Public History*, cit., pp. 49-60, in particular p. 49.

3. *Shared authority for a re-thinking of the history of school*

Before delving into the theme of shared authority in rethinking the history of school in a public history dimension, a premise regarding museums is needed. This is because I believe that witnesses to the educational past are mainly, though not only, kept in education museums. Education museums are privileged spaces for encounters with the educational past in public. In them witnesses belonging to what we might call the educational heritage are preserved. The English term “heritage” is preferable, for example, to the Italian term *patrimonio* of Latin origins. The Italian word’s etymological origin deriving from the union of two Latin words *pater* (father) and *manus* (duty) is evident and it literally, means “duty of the father”, but by extension, represents all things belonging to the father that are left to his children. The English word, with its less economic and legalistic stress, would seem better suited to representing the content of an educational past. Thus educational heritage refers to something physically present (without forgetting the intangible aspect, as we will see) representing the historical legacy but it is, at the same time and undeniably, part of our present. To proceeding with this clarification, it is also useful to reiterate that the in-depth meaning of the word is inclusive of a material dimension (physicality) of an object and an immaterial dimension (its value, which can be historical, artistic, cultural, or other)²⁷.

As the terminological references dimply, when we talk about educational heritage, we are already in a historical dimension. A museum of education is, first of all, a history museum and the various materials belonging to it are historical witnesses to be interpreted and understood. Now if, playing the devil’s advocate, we were to agree with Ilaria Porciani’s arguments, it could be affirmed that all museums are historical museums since they also narrate the history of a specific topic, such as geography, art or science, however the specificity of historical museums must be highlighted. The design and construction of these places is designed to gather diverse and rich documentary materials replete with meaning. History museums mark themselves out by being backed up by a logical, complex, quasi-paradoxical procedure. For Krzysztof Pomian, this specificity is a matter of purpose for which a museum of history is designed, namely a desire to communicate a history at a high-level of abstraction. This raises issues about how to concretely showcase the past, which is, by definition, invisible, and the reasons for doing so²⁸. Such matters are relevant to history museums, but museums of education also look back to the more or less distant past and are specific spaces in which to safeguard educational heritage. The historical witnesses stored in these are not in themselves sufficient to develop

²⁷ See, R. Harrison, *Heritage: Critical Approaches*, New York-London, Routledge, 2013.

²⁸ Pomian, *Musées d’histoire: émotions, connaissances, idéologies*, cit.; Id., *Le musée, une histoire mondiale: du trésor au musée*, Paris, Gallimard, 2021, vol. 1.

and cultivate a historical awareness of education. What is needed is a history pedagogy space as we saw at the outset. The need to create the conditions for real human development requires an awareness of one's historical identity as a human being. The potential for in-depth understanding of life depends on each individual's bond with life and formative connection with history. This concerns knowledge of the forms life has taken over the centuries and, in our specific case, knowledge of the educational forms life has taken through history.

Since their origins in the second half of the 19th century, museums of education have taken a critical approach to the objects to be exhibited. This was visible even in Ruggiero Bonghi's *Report* on the Vienna Universal Exhibition. Starting from a comparison with other human activities and products, Bonghi asked to what extent education and instruction, as examples of human industriousness, can be concretely showcased and subject to examination, spectacle, and study outside the private or public spheres in which education and training takes place. For Bonghi, whilst an object such as a grey stone, for example, has something to tell about the value or significance of a mine, in the same way that an iron wire can narrate the value of a product, this is not true of educational objects.

In fact, it might seem that school objects can be separated from other objects and be considered in themselves, but this is not the case. A school object acquires utility and value only if two spirits external to it dialogue with those observing it, i.e. teachers and pupils. Bonghi's intuition implies that education, in the broadest sense of the word, cannot be fully understood in the exhibition as the spirit of the teacher which fills the classroom and meets the young minds in it is lacking. Something of the opposite movement is also missing, i.e. communication between the pupils and the teacher²⁹.

It is in the gap highlighted by an educational or scholastic object whose physical presence does not complete its significance and sense, leaving open any interpretation or understanding open, it is possible today to recognize that the shared authority activity space of shared authority can potentially be identified. This is possible within a perspective that consider which views museums as a research context, open to a narrative dimension, aimed at designed to building a discourse intended to reach a wide-ranging and pluralistic audience³⁰.

²⁹ In any event, Bonghi contends that showing a variety of school materials is essential to comprehending the various educational methods and comparing them, to the extent that this can be inferred from the objects. Therefore, he sees the potential of permanent exhibitions to act as concrete spaces for information and training on pedagogical and educational culture.

³⁰ It is worth recalling, in a broader perspective, that in Prague, on 24 August 2022, the Extraordinary General Assembly of ICOM approved a proposal for a new museum definition. «A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing». International Council of Museums, "Museum

A museum of education should thus be understood as a place for collection and exhibition, but also a dynamic place in which to elaborate narratives regarding education. It is a place in which traces of everyday educational life are collected and in which the conditions by which life is breathed into paths whose purpose is an in-depth knowledge of past educational events via methods and tools capable of making participants active protagonists are created. The approach used must be more experiential than ever, and visitors' roles must primarily be what we might call "emotional proximity". Educational experience is a shared experience, which all of us have had. A museum of education contains a wide variety of materials which conjure up visitors' memories, recollections and educational experiences, documents and objects whose physical fixity needs to be brought to life, opened up to the possible interweaving of historical flow. It is within this oxymoron, the immobility of the physical object and the dynamism of its experience, that the interweaving of the flow of history and its rewriting within a dimension of public history is potentially played out.

Museum objects' connection with the emotional network of each visitor's experience and with individual memories can generate further meanings that are, in turn, intertwined with the narrative of other visitors, in ongoing discovery pathways.

Visitors participate in and co-create an educational history by moving between materiality, reading, understanding and interpreting documents. It is then a matter of thinking of a narrative that can move on multiple levels and voices, in which the educational component can be blended with a more evocative and emotional component, the official history interwoven with personal stories and the scientific language harmonised with a more informal oral one.

Museums are not containers, and the meanings they embody need to be continually renegotiated in their relationship with the system and social structure of belonging. Where this occurs, they become places of mobile and fluid memory on the grounds of their connection with the present. It is within this construction of meanings that the potential for wider historical awareness is played out. Public historians play a fundamentally important role in making museum spaces into a public arena in which visitors can participate and collaborate in history. Using their professional scientific methods and practices, public historians take care of today's society's historical needs including those of educational professionals, for example. Their role is indispensable to integrating individual and collective memories into a community reconstruction of the past and tracing the identity of belonging. As a facilitator of historical memory they work to increase awareness of history and the permanence of collective memories, accompanying visitors on a cognitive, interpretive and participant journey and enabling them to interact with documents and move between past

and present, a complex task made possible by rethinking the implicit narrative of the objects exhibited and rethinking and reconstructing the meaning linking the present and past of education and its contexts. Understanding the problems of the present through historical awareness is a scientific practice capable of providing analytical depth in terms of events that can be contextualised and documented with sources³¹.

It is within this perspective that the shared authority triggered by the physical memory of an object and by visitors' emotional memories comes to fruition and achieves context and process re-signification. This is seen as a possible outcome of public history projects, collaborative processes in which a variety of voices and interpretations contributes to enriching a subject area³². In my opinion, such projects are not to be confused with teaching interventions or historiographic studies of sources and cannot be reduced to mere disclosure. Actions such as these can also be important but remain circumscribed to a sharing authority dimension in which a top-down vision is not overcome. On the other hand, it should also be noted that the task of defining public history collaboratively faces many fundamental challenges, of which the first concerns clarifying the time and space of this authority. This is uneven ground not suited to making fast progress, which is encumbered by a number of questions which cannot be answered in certain terms. These are questions regarding whether the authority of the various collaborators varies, or where authority lies when differences (subtle or profound) between them arise and, also, who is telling the story or whose history it is. However, general questions such as these are simplified to some extent in the case of the public history of education because the shared experience of education facilitates collaboration in a number of ways. Specifically, the history of school (nowadays everyone has had some school experience) can be thought of as a privileged field of study with which to activate public history projects. School is strongly linked to its temporal and territorial context in a broad sense. The difference between the official history of school (mandatory schooling) and real school is the first step in any public history of education project. School makes history in the sense of genuine research aimed at building local school memory. This knowledge is work-in-progress and needs the memory of those who truly experienced this specific school, who can narrate the real lives of specific objects or documents. We might say that

³¹ Without forgetting that public history also focuses on communication and media. The public history scholar must also learn the skills needed to collaborate with a range of partners and public groups and to communicate history to large audiences. Not all historians are necessarily suited to public history. If historians want to work in, and with, the public, they must learn, for instance, how to curate and design historical exhibitions, write panels or produce audiovisual projects. History is not communication, but it can learn from communication. Cf. Cauvin, *New Field, Old Practices: Promises and Challenges of Public History*, cit., pp. 33-36.

³² Whilst incredibly rewarding collaboration is not always an easy or natural process and raises many ethical issues, especially regarding definitions of expertise, authority and decision-making. *Ibid*, pp. 36-38.

there are diverse reading and interpretation levels because the levels of memory differ. For instance, teachers' contributions are likely to differ from those of other people, although this does not imply that the latter are less important.

It is the narrative which enriches the object and potentially facilitates re-thinking of the history of education and school, in the awareness that different contexts and actors create a multiplicity of differing stories. The history of a school is rethought via school objects exhibited, narrativity and school memories reawakened in a context of shared authority based on the scientific rigour of education, and public, historians, and the contribution of a story heard by individual visitors in contact with the objects on display³³. Past and present are connected through the objects exhibited and, specifically, through the *hic et nunc* of visitors who observe witnesses of the past and place them within the flow of their personal presents.

In the wake of Leibniz's exemplary declaration, «give me the education of a country and I will become its chief», the public history of education is opening up to a knowledge of legacies and warnings inherent in the history of school and, at the same time, promoting greater awareness of, and responsibility to, the present, planning the future and promoting civic awareness.

³³ Cf. J.H. Dekker, *Story Telling through Fine Art: Public Histories of Childhood and Education in Exhibitions in the Netherlands and Belgium C. 1980 – C. 2020*, in F. Herman, S. Braster, M. del Mar del Pozo Andrés (edd.), *Exhibiting the Past: Public Histories of Education*, Berlin-Boston, De Gruyter, 2022, pp. 157-176.