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Global Labour History: Perspectives from East to West, from North to South



James B. Gardner and Paula Hamilton, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Public History*

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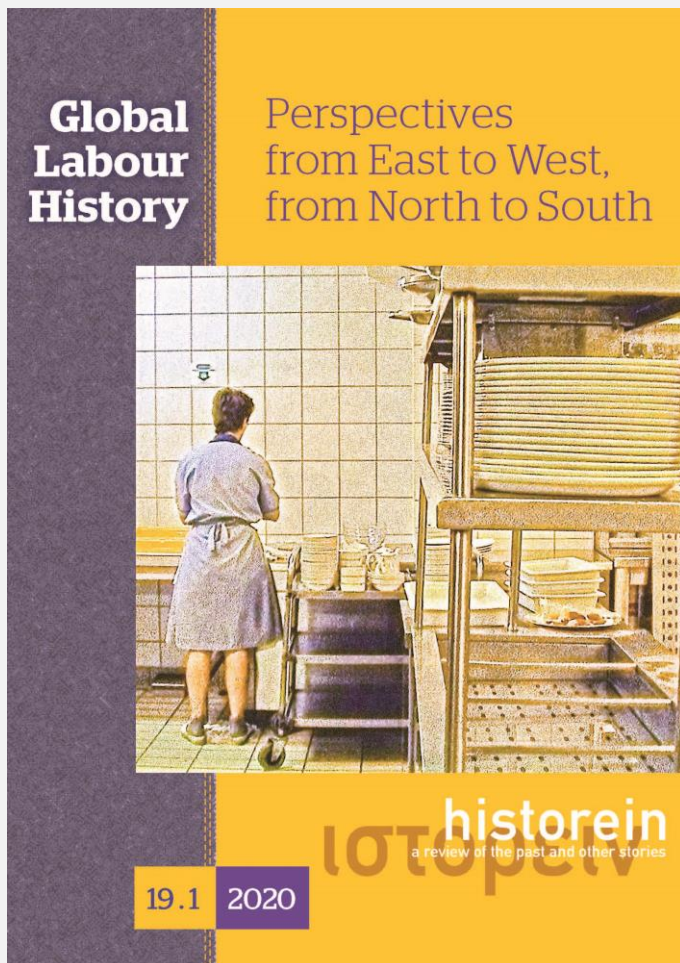
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James B. Gardner and Paula Hamilton (eds.)

The Oxford Handbook of Public History

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Public history is by no means a new practice. Historians have been engaged in communicating and diffusing knowledge, and especially discourses, about the past since at least the nineteenth century, in the context of establishing national ideologies. Nevertheless, it was only during the 1970s that public history was consolidated into an academic field, marking not only the practice of public engagement with the past but also a theorising of this engagement. This consolidation meant that the field was gradually institutionalised by the development of an infrastructure that entailed organising conferences, publishing journals, monographs and edited volumes, establishing academic programmes and institutions. The relatively recent publication of handbooks, textbooks and practical guides on public history is a very welcome addition to organising and establishing the field.¹

The *Oxford Handbook of Public History*, edited by James B. Gardner and Paula Hamilton, is part of the development of such an infrastructure – central to critically defining and theoretically updating the field. The volume consists of six parts, each of which sheds light on a different aspect of public history. By conceiving and analysing public history as an intellectual field, an academic discipline, a historical practice and an institutionalised form that facilitates our relation with the past, the contributors of this volume engage with a wide range of breakthroughs and challenges, continuities and disruptions connected to the renewed interest in public history.

In their introduction, Gardner and Hamilton engage with the taunting question of what public history is. Moving away from a negative definition of the concept, they attempt to define public history as a discourse and as a practice, both by historicising it and by exploring its contemporary functions. By taking into account the vast variety of practices that are understood as public history, the authors offer a new conceptualisation of the term that resonates with its current uses.

Part 1 is dedicated to “The Changing Public History Landscape”. Namely, it delves into the turns and trends that are connected to the internationalisation of the field and the

development of history in the digital environment. The two chapters, the first by Serge Noiret and Thomas Cauvin and the second by Sharon M. Leon, engage with the theoretical question of how to conceptualise public history and what doing public history actually means if we move from the context of national states to international and digital environments.

The second part, “Doing Public History”, is dedicated to political, economic and cultural conducts that are connected with the practice of public history. This part takes up the discussion of challenging issues that are at the forefront of theoretical and methodological dialogue in the field. How is public history in practice related with decentralisation, self-identification and democratic representation, especially in a context where new nonhierarchical research and writing community-based methodologies encounter an expanding globalisation? How could public history reconnect with its progressive and grassroots past and rescue from the shadows the history of groups that remain marginalised and unseen? Where do public and popular history intersect and what does this intersection mean for the way we understand the past? How can we imagine history as a profession and its economic implications in the market field?

Part 3, on “Pushing the Boundaries of Public History”, speaks about the contemporary debates on public history, bringing back history to the burning political discussions of the present. Human rights, the environment, historical justice, sexuality and food activism are the main topics around which this part is developed. At the core of the problematisation is the way public history can play a role in civic life, bridging the local with the international and the global, in a dynamic balance where the two ends are mutually enriched. Therefore, the networks and partnerships established between public history (and historians) and organisations, the model of their engagement in civic life, the way professionals that are used to working in reference to the past can leave the security of the archive and actively contribute to issues connected with human rights, justice and activism, the encounter between academic history and public history programmes so as to secure the preconditions for identity visibility in marginalised identities (in this case sexual), the transnational directions that environmental issues and climate change dictate to public history, and the way that public history can engage with a critical view on economic practices despite its partial dependency on state support are among the challenging issues discussed in this part. The social and political significance of public history in practice is also underlined, as is the challenge to promote the public discussion of long-suppressed truths, integrate multiple narratives and build a mode for a dialogue that will facilitate democratic engagement.

The fourth part explores the relation between public history and the state. Do states and institutions have a memory? And if so, can public historians help to shape their memory and what are the political implications in doing so? How do cultural institutions enter the

scene of defining the public perceptions about the past? How can we reflect on national, ethnic and local identities in the context of global and transnational history and how can these reflections take shape in relevant practices of public history?

Part 5, “Narrative and Voice in Public History”, explores how public history can become a social form of knowledge, especially through institutions and cultural organisations, such as museums and cultural institutions. Its contributions elaborate on how history can become outward-looking and attend to critical issues of the present such as reinforcing social cohesiveness without, though, suppressing or silencing identities that either are not mainstream or are not aligned with dominant narratives. Although historians have engaged with such issues in different contexts and previous decades, especially within the framework of cultural, social and oral history, the prospect and possibilities that such participatory and grassroots historical research and practice opens for crafting new shared meanings of the past remain to be explored in the context of public history. In the same token, the role of cultural institutions and museums are reexamined under the light of promoting a critical and inclusive gaze towards mainstream narratives. The central issue addressed here is how public historians can contribute not only to the inclusion of social subjects in the historical narrative and representation, but, by engaging with the political conduct, in the history-making process as well.

The final part addresses the challenging issue of “difficult” public history. How are difficult pasts dealt with, especially those that undermine the collective process of identification? What can be done with divided memory and how do history wars emerge? Nazism and totalitarianism, slavery, colonialism and genocide are the defining aspects of the past for this matter. In the case of colonialism, for example, what is the role of public history in creating a shared narrative about the past, which respects and represents both the voices of the colonisers and the colonised and still manages to retain social cohesiveness? Moreover, could one speak about a shared past or about a shared narrative of a past with multiple aspects and visible power relations? Or, in the case of slavery, does transforming the past into a commodity of the tourism industry not significantly undermine the political power that public history could claim and impose? How can public history contribute to working through difficult emotions that are often connected with the past, such as shame and guilt, so as to avoid their haunting the present as spectres is also discussed.

Overall, the edited volume is an important contribution to the scholarly production on public history, not only because it contains original contributions from leading scholars of the field (Gardener, Hamilton, Noiret, Cauvin, Leon, Barbara Franco, Jocelyn Dodd, Ceri Jones, Richard Sandell, Kees Ribbens, Brian W. Martin, Liz Ševčenko, Trudy Huskamp Peterson, Jeffrey K. Stine, Kevin P. Murphy, Jennifer L. Pierce, Alex Urquhard, T. Allan Comp, Cathy Stanton, Lisa Singleton, Arnita Jones, Donald A. Richtie, Jonathan Sweet, Fenqui Qian, Jannelle Warren-Findley, Benjamin Filene, Christina Lleras, Paul Williams, Graham Smith, Anna Green, Hilda Kean, Steven High, Udo Gößwald, Boris Wastiau, Bayo Holsey, Socheata Poouv, Paul Ashton, Kresno Brahmantyo, Jaya Keaney) but because it

sets important questions about what a contemporary and critical public history is about, both as discourse and as a historical, political and cultural practice. Often, when grassroots research methods and practices become mainstream and are institutionalised, they lose their radicality and political engagement. For public history, this would mean that the price of the field's institutionalisation would be to abandon its critical engagement with the political debates of the present and to limit itself to normalised and mainstream representations of the past for nonprofessional historians. This seems to be what is currently at stake, and is an issue that is addressed by all contributions, both those of a more theoretical orientation and those that elaborate more specific case studies. In other words, the edited volume brings back to the core of the debate about public history the need to reflect on its social role and on the way it engages with its political agency, through socially and culturally constructing knowledge about the past. By reconnecting public history with its critical and grassroots background, *The Oxford Handbook of Public History* reminds us that the practice of history is above all a social and cultural practice that belongs to and is accountable to the present.

¹ See, for example, Hilda Kean and Paul Martin, *Public History Reader* (London: Routledge, 2013); Thomas Cauvin, *Public History: A Textbook of Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2016); and Faye Sayer, *Public History: A Practical Guide* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).