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Reflecting on Public History: A German Perspective

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Mots-clés :
Public History

Key Terms of Public History is the second volume in the series *Public History in European Perspectives*, edited by Thomas Cauvin, Karin Priem, and Sandra Camarda at the *Luxembourg Centre for Digital and Public History* (C2DH), published by De Gruyter Oldenbourg. This volume is an English translation of the 2021 German book *Schlüsselbegriffe der Public History* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht). Published in 2025, the series of ten essays is available in open access under a Creative Commons 4.0 license through the OAPEN Foundation (Open Access Publishing in European Networks), a not-for-profit organisation based at the National Library of the Netherlands in The Hague[1].
The essays are supplemented by an impressive bibliography that includes both international and German-oriented literature relevant to the field (pp. 259–284). Each of the ten chapters contains its own notes, which primarily cite German references, and

concludes with a selection of three to five suggested works as “introductory literature” for the respective key term. The individual chapters follow a consistent structure: they begin with an illustrative example, followed by a brief historiographical overview of the term and the concepts underlying it. Information boxes summarise each author’s understanding of other concepts and show how these relate to the ten key terms, enabling readers to quickly grasp essential connections and deepen their comprehension of the subject matter. This structure enables each chapter to be read independently while still contributing to the overall coherence of the collective work.

The volume is “aimed at students, teachers and practitioners who deal with history in the public sphere” and offers approaches to the theoretical foundation of Public History (PH). It seeks to engage a German-speaking audience with a theory-oriented perspective and to support universities’ PhD programs through a complex reflection on the key concepts that, according to the authors, define the field of Public and Applied History. Eleven different contributors - mirroring the authorship of the original German edition – are university professors and researchers from a variety of disciplines, including history didactics, ancient, modern, and contemporary history, archaeology, ethnology, anthropology, film, and cultural studies. Only Christine Gundermann, Thorsten Logge, and Astrid Schwabe hold professorships specifically in PH at German universities. This diversity underscores how PH has become strongly transdisciplinary in Germany and beyond. What distinguishes this book from other PH textbooks is that none of the ten chapters, nor the introduction outlining the book’s project, is individually signed. The authors explain that they chose to “publish our work in the form of a collective monograph as this best reflects our working process.”

Each author is presented at the end of the book (pp. 285–286), with a note indicating the chapter for which they were primarily responsible. The ten chapters and the introduction were not produced through entirely shared authorship. Notably, the chapter titled *Heritage* does not list a specific author and can be regarded as a collaborative effort. Furthermore, not all contributors are members of the German Public History Network (*Angewandte Geschichte* Committee), which is affiliated with the German Historical Association (*Verband der Historiker und Historikerinnen Deutschlands*, VHD). Several contributors are active members of the International Federation for Public History (IFPH). Christine Gundermann (University of Cologne) serves as the principal editor of the volume, with administrative support from her institution and funding provided by the German Research Foundation.

The book's comments are divided into a general critique of all essays and notes on selected key terms relevant to disciplines that study history in the public sphere. As explained in the introduction, the “volume seeks to provide … basic conceptual schemas and theoretical approaches within PH … [and] facilitate cooperative and reflexive communication across disciplinary boundaries, … strengthen PH as a scholarly discipline and ultimately enrich the practices of PH” (p. 8). The selection of key terminology promotes a specific theoretical and academic perspective of PH, positioning it as the study of historical communication within a transdisciplinary and sub-disciplinary framework of academic history. (p. 3) The significance and necessary effort to establish a comprehensive and global theoretical approach are apparent, considering the academic complexities inherent in examining the role of history in the public sphere as

well as the methods by which history is utilised and disseminated.
In this volume, PH is confined to forms of historical communication, and the book lacks a clear definition distinguishing the role of a public historian from that of an academic historian, as both are currently described as types of academic historians. The definition is taken from Faye Sayer, Professor of Heritage and History at the University of Birmingham, who maintains that public historians are those engaged in the practice of communicating the past to the public. (p. 2) This interpretation aligns closely with the central argument of the book, which conceives PH primarily as the dissemination of historical knowledge to diverse audiences. Such an emphasis on the communicative function of history appears to extend Marko Demantowsky's 2015 observation that Public History represents an 'ideal compromise' within the long-standing and often confusing German debate between the notions of 'culture of remembrance' and 'historical culture'[2]. Demantowsky argued that the teaching of PH within universities would train professional public historians to operate beyond the academy, particularly in the media, thereby addressing the long-debated question of who qualifies as a public historian.
However, suppose PH is understood exclusively as the communication of history. In that case, empirical observation reveals that historical narratives in the media are frequently produced by individuals unaffiliated with universities or the discipline of history, and often without formal training in PH through academic programs. Instead, such narratives may stem from informed amateurs whose contributions expand and enrich the field beyond strictly scholarly aims and methodologies. Public History practitioners – more precisely, public historians – are also compelled to engage with the social, cultural, and ethical dimensions of how the past is represented and mobilised in the public sphere. Yet the question remains: should all these practitioners be recognised as public historians? The authors of *Key Terms* refrain from adopting a definitive position on this issue.
What is noticeably absent is a discussion that articulates and promotes the role, as well as the defining characteristics, of the professional figure in public history. By contrast, Martin Lücke and Irmgard Zündorf's introduction to Public History – published in the same series as the original German edition of – *Key Terms in Public History* – offers a slightly different perspective on the field. Here, professional pathways and career opportunities for future public historians are presented as central to understanding the emergence of Public History in Germany, particularly in relation to museums and the broader memory sector. Zündorf, for instance, emphasises that public historians must be equipped with historical methods and specific competencies to 'make complex scholarly findings accessible to audiences without historical training' in a manner that is not only accurate but also engaging and adapted to the media through which it is conveyed[3].
The absence of a key term devoted to the professional background and role of the public historian – who may also be an 'amateur' historian employing universal and critical historical methods – as well as the omission of entries on 'profession' or 'professional activities,' is particularly striking given the book's emphasis on the central role such figures play in the public sphere and the media. Equally noteworthy is the lack of engagement with the question of which professional skills are required to recognise

the fieldwork contributions of public historians who are not always academically trained, especially in their capacity as mediators of the past for diverse audiences. This silence stands out considering the extensive international historiography on professionalisation in historical practice. More broadly, the participatory ethos, the emphasis on collaborative approaches to history, and the engagement with the past in the public sphere are widely acknowledged as defining characteristics of PH as a transdisciplinary field at the global level.

The selection of ten key terms reflects and promotes a specific theoretical and academic orientation toward PH. Ultimately, although the book advocates for transdisciplinary, cooperative, and reflexive scientific communication across disciplinary boundaries to consolidate PH within the framework of educational history, it remains profoundly shaped by the hegemonic influence of *Geschichtsdidaktik* (history didactics) on the theoretical foundations of PH in Germany. The volume demonstrates how history didactics frames PH as an object of inquiry through its own '*key theorems and principles … in the belief that this is the best way to analyse qualitatively – and more richly configure – educational products, specifically in the field of PH*' (p. 7). This orientation is evident in recurring themes across the chapters, such as the concept of *authenticity* in historical representation across media (film, museums), the role of *emotions* and *experience* in historical engagement, and the interplay of *historical culture* and *memory*. Moreover, the book asserts that the application of '*historical thinking*' – another central key term – to PH ensures that encounters with the past are not acts of passive consumption but instead critical and reflective processes that empower individuals to navigate and interpret their present. Put differently, the argument suggests that historians engaging in PH should adopt the analytical framework of history didactics, which provides a critical method for examining how the past is used across contexts, domains, and epochs. Yet one may ask: is this perspective truly distinctive to PH? Or is it, instead, a methodological orientation shared by many historians more broadly, and thus not peculiar to the field of PH? Public historians should engage with the full scope of the Anthropocene to address public concerns through historically grounded narratives that provide comprehensive frameworks for understanding the past in relation to the present.

What would be distinctive to PH in this context – yet remains unexamined in the book – is the role of historians as mediators who collaborate with communities in the pursuit of their histories. Significantly, the concept of *mediation* – understood as the sharing of authority – appears to have been deliberately omitted: "*after careful consideration, we have opted not to present mediation (in German Vermittlung) as a key concept of PH here, in full awareness that this oscillating term designates a crucial field of activity for public historians outside research institutions and is promoted as such. Instead, we focus on historical thinking, a term we believe currently best captures how people systematically appropriate or engage with history*" (p. 6). Perhaps the absence of '*mediation*' – arguably one of the most essential concepts in PH – from the list of key terms is due to its transversal presence across many chapters of the book. Mediation defines the participatory processes through which communities actively shape history, fostering interactions around their pasts, memories, and the construction of what Bauman has described as liquid identities in diverse historical contexts[4]. It is mediation

that distinguishes PH from other forms of historical practice: it is grounded in participatory research, the creation of new archives through *crowdsourcing*, and the *sharing of authority* between professional historians and the public.

Without an explicit engagement with *mediation*, the notion of *historical thinking* in the public sphere remains somewhat attenuated. It risks being reduced to an ideal of accessibility and participation without fully acknowledging the unavoidable negotiation between public historians and the communities they serve. In the book, *historical thinking* appears to be mainly framed through the perspective of academic historians who continue to observe society and the public sphere from above, even when addressing new media and the transmedia communication of history. By contrast, the C²DH in Luxembourg has introduced the notion of 'thinkering' as a hermeneutic practice – an informal mode of learning-by-doing that connects ideas to fieldwork, and theory to applied practice in the making of history[5]. Within such a framework, historical thinking can be reconfigured as a concept that moves beyond a positivist, top-down dissemination of the past and toward the construction of individual and collective historical consciousnesses. Yet, as presented in the book, this pivotal concept lacks what is distinctive to Public History: the explicit intention to engage diverse communities and publics, empowering them to become active protagonists in the research and narration of their own pasts.

The ten key terms are presented as '*a building block for the theorisation*' of PH (p. 5). Yet, this selection reflects a theoretical orientation that avoids confronting its proposed guidelines and terminology with alternative international interpretations. Notably absent are concepts of *shared authority* with social groups and communities embedded in specific territorial contexts. In other national traditions, the hermeneutics of PH is framed through additional key terms such as communities, identity, participation, minorities, activism, the commons, open science, oral history, and, crucially, critical reflections on the limits of *shared authority* – limits that determine the degrees of mediation between historians and the public. It is insufficient to argue that 'we are aware that this selection [of key terms] allows us to make no claim to exhaustiveness and that others would have made a different choice' (p. 7). Such a selection is not neutral: it has been deliberately shaped to guide the teaching of PH in schools and universities. It corresponds to the theoretical orientation adopted in the book, which at times sidesteps systematic engagement with fundamental PH concepts debated internationally. Moreover, this restricted set of terms has not fostered internal diversity or debate within the volume itself.

The enrolment of communities in historical practice first emerged in the United Kingdom with Raphael Samuel's *History Workshop* – an activist vision of public history – followed by Brazil's pioneering use of oral history with marginalised communities, and later Italy's development of participatory forms of public history in education and cultural heritage management. Notably, in both Brazil and Italy, these approaches to public history evolved independently of formal institutionalisation within university programmes and preceded the establishment of their national associations in 2012 and 2016. It could be argued that English-speaking countries, Brazil, and Italy might adopt a more critical stance regarding how the *Key Terms of Public History* define and present the field. A comparative debate on how applied history and public history are enacted in

different national and cultural contexts would have been essential to fully articulate the characteristics of the vibrant and complex German discourse. In this regard, other German scholars, such as Jacqueline Nießer and Julian Tomann, have explored alternative forms of public history that extend beyond the historicization of public communication and the didactics of history. This is evident in an essay on the field's development in Germany, published in the Californian journal *The Public Historian*[6].

The key term '*perspective*', by engaging with the history of scholarship, offers diverse interpretations of how the past is represented and negotiated in the public sphere. It foregrounds the production of historical knowledge by highlighting research questions and methodological approaches. However, this theoretical and intellectual framing overlooks the underlying motivations and mechanisms that inspire public participation in historical research. While concepts such as *historical thinking* – understood as the skills and habits of mind necessary to analyse and interpret the past – are intended to offer practical tools and clear criteria for empirical research in PH, they often stop short of addressing why the public chooses to engage in these processes. Consequently, although *historical thinking* seeks to establish transparent standards for evaluating 'good' representations of the past within specific learning contexts, it does not sufficiently interrogate the drivers of public involvement. Many public historians would find such a definition limiting, given the significant evolution PH has undergone globally over the past fifty years. This evolution has been shaped by a range of cultural and geographical contexts, memory institutions, collaborations with local communities, and participatory activities mediated across diverse forms of media – particularly with the transformative role of the web. The communicative skills cultivated by academic public historians through university PH programmes, and informed by the theorisation advanced in this book, tend to prioritise making history public for diverse audiences rather than fostering direct, reciprocal engagement with those publics.

One of the key terms in the book that I find particularly compelling for understanding public history as a field of study is *performativity*. This concept captures both historical performances and the processes of historical reception, illuminating how the past is interpreted, preserved, and continually reimagined through diverse cultural forms. *Performativity* provides a central theoretical framework for analysing how history is actively produced, mediated, and experienced within the public sphere. It encompasses a wide array of multimodal, multimedia, and performative phenomena that are essential to public history, and in the words of Jörn Rüsen, are always approached through an "always present-day perspective" (p. 232)[7]. *Performativity* refers to "*certain symbolic actions that do not express or represent something predetermined, but that generate the reality to which they refer*" (p. 218). The act of doing history – the performative production and appropriation of the past – constitutes a cultural practice situated within a social system, where the creation of a narrative enables a participatory construction of historical meanings. These meanings emerge through interactions between performers and audiences within the context of a performance, such as various forms of reenactment (pp. 226–229). This approach implies that meaning-making is not a purely top-down process but rather a bottom-up activity that inherently engages with forms of shared authority and mediation, even if such dynamics are not explicitly addressed in the chapter.

"*Memory*" constitutes a central key term in PH. As such, it is treated here independently of the German concept of *Erinnerungskultur* (culture of remembrance), although it clearly draws on this academic tradition. Unlike history, understood as the academic discipline describing the totality of past events, memory is employed here as a metaphor for how individual acts of remembering interact with collective processes, contributing to the construction and reproduction of collective identities – a concept rooted in Maurice Halbwachs's notion of *mémoire collective*, developed in the 1920s. As the book notes, "*individual memory works quite differently from the 'memory' of a group. The memory metaphor helps homogenise a heterogeneous group by converting the diverse and contradictory memories of its members into a uniform memory*" (p. 185), a process identified as the creation of a "community of memory."

The chapter examines memory through a range of disciplinary perspectives, from Halbwachs's *collective memory* to Aby Warburg's notion of *visual memory*. *Cultural memory*, as theorised by Aleida and Jan Assmann, is explored through the role of media – literature, comics, film, and the growing influence of social media – in the remembrance of past events. Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* is also discussed, particularly regarding its role in forging national identity and its resonance in Germany, as well as in more universalised forms of remembrance framed as "cosmopolitan memory" (e.g., the Holocaust), which centre moral and humanistic values. The chapter further engages with the concept of "multidirectional memory" (p. 204), recognising how distinct traumatic events generate their own public memories – such as the Italian paradigm of victimhood (*paradigma vittimario*)[8] – which shape forms of collective remembrance.

Nevertheless, one may question whether the metaphorical framing of memory chosen here offers a foundation for a specific theory of memory within PH. Perhaps the chapter's emphasis ultimately leads to the conclusion that such a theory remains absent, supplanted instead by an empirical description of how different media within various PH projects construct forms of collective remembrance. In the authors' view, the plurality of disciplinary approaches to memory offers valuable perspectives that must be engaged with critically (p. 210). They suggest that PH should approach memory by selecting from these diverse "theoretical conceptions of remembrance or memory [which] help clarify the diverse perspectives available to those seeking to implement PH projects" (p. 204). In this framing, memory is not conceived as a passive metaphor or an inert repository, but rather as an empirical, dynamic, negotiated, cultural, and political concept – one that shapes identity through media, rituals, and institutions.

As with other chapters in the volume, the authors addressing "*reception*" begin by defining it as "*a heuristic tool for investigating the mechanisms underlying the recognition or acknowledgement of historical representations by a given (target) audience or for factoring them into the planning of PH products*" (p. 235). *Reception* emerges as a crucial heuristic and analytical concept for understanding how the past is consumed, interpreted, and ultimately shaped within the public sphere. The chapter frames reception not as passive consumption of historical narratives but as an active, constructive process of meaning-making – one that directly shapes the creation, design, and impact of PH products. A central contribution of the concept of reception to PH is its capacity to reveal the "horizons of expectation" (*Erwartungshorizonte*) that audiences

bring to representations of the past. This shifts the perspective from merely consuming history to actively engaging with it, offering guidance for practitioners seeking to design more compelling historical experiences. The chapter situates reception in dialogue with other concepts in PH, clarifying its theoretical boundaries. It contrasts reception with the German concept of “historical transformation,” which centres on the deliberate adaptation of a historical model – such as the reinterpretation of a Greek temple for a new context (pp. 242-243). *Reception*, in contrast, emphasises the often-unconscious reproduction of pre-existing expectations rather than intentional transformation. A telling example of reception is the resemanticisation of Roman history in Fascist Italy[9].
The discussion also distinguishes reception from the “uses of the past,” which refer to conscious narratives and representations designed to achieve specific purposes – such as the creation of collective identity. While the uses of the past focus on intentional appropriation, *reception* centres on the mechanisms by which audiences recognise, interpret, and internalise historical representations. Ultimately, the chapter on *reception* offers a theoretical framework for PH that moves beyond the mere production of historical content to critically analyse the complex processes through which diverse audiences encounter, interpret, and re-produce the past.
Other *key terms* could be analysed, but I will conclude this review by examining the key term “*heritage*”, which is one of the book's most significant contributions, probably written collectively here. *Heritage* is identified as one of the four obligatory key terms or basic concepts central to the theorisation of PH in this volume, alongside *memory*, *historical culture*, and *reception*. The introduction states that "heritage" and "cultural heritage" are used synonymously (p. 3). The chapter on *Heritage* engages with the field of PH by positioning cultural heritage not as a static historical object, but as a dynamic social practice and a critical object of research in the discipline. *Heritage* is defined as a cultural process explicitly defined not as a "bounded entity" but as a "social practice". This practice involves material and immaterial cultural objects being detached from their original context, rearranged, staged, and consequently valorised (a value is attributed to them) for a community. The authors describe how the intangible nature of cultural heritage arises solely from an "attribution of value" by communities, rather than from the materiality of the object itself. *Heritage* mediates between the past, present, and future of communities, and is always a process of "becoming" rather than enjoying a fixed status (p. 95). As in other chapters of the book, the communication of the history of cultural heritage is framed as an active engagement with the past, accomplished through practices, performances, and representations.
The chapter examines how different actors mobilise cultural heritage for political purposes, the construction of historical narratives, or economic aims such as tourism. Heritage is shown to be deeply connected to other key concepts in PH: for instance, the *authenticity* of heritage sites often hinges on their “historicity” or, as the authors note, the “aura” attributed to such sites – especially memorial sites (pp. 84-85). The notion of “metacultural operations” is introduced to describe the reflexive process of detaching cultural heritage from its historical context and valorising it for political or economic purposes. According to the authors, this process gives heritage sites – including those associated with difficult or “dark” history – a “second life” as tourist destinations. They distinguish between *valorisation* – the symbolic creation of value centred on a cultural

asset– and *valuation* – the economic creation of value from heritage sites – while emphasising how these dimensions interact, particularly when heritage tourism becomes part of a broader "heritage industry" (p. 89).
The chapter situates its analysis within the framework of *Critical Heritage Studies* (CHS) (p. 91), offering a transdisciplinary approach that conceives heritage as embedded in power relations and dominant historical narratives. This perspective reveals how heritage is defined, used, and managed in ways that can reproduce structures of nationalism, colonialism, and elitism. The authors observe: "*while heritage may serve as a political instrument of both inclusion and the promotion of cultural diversity, it may also be used to exclusionary and discriminatory end*s" (p. 102). The chapter further proposes *Actor-Network Theory* (ANT) as a conceptual tool, underlining that non-human entitiestermed "actants" (such as historical ruins or objects) – possess what is described as "actional potential". This framework enables a deeper understanding of how the constitution of heritage extends beyond human agency, highlighting the intangible dimensions of heritage sites. Ultimately, the authors affirm that PH investigates the formation of "heritage communities" while critically scrutinising claims of ownership and divergent interpretations (e.g., local versus national) of heritage sites (p. 79).
What is unfortunately missing in this discussion – particularly when dealing with the concepts of *heritage community* and *community of practice* (pp. 92-93) – is any substantial reference to how heritage engages with communities within a participatory definition of PH. The chapter does not address how the fundamental contribution of the 2005 *Faro Convention* could be applied to a PH-oriented definition of heritage. The Council of Europe's *Faro Convention*[10] offers a crucial framework for understanding heritage as a collective process, introducing the concept of a *community of inheritance*. This concept foregrounds the active role of citizens as participants in constructing meanings and directly engaging in the preservation, interpretation, and management of their local cultural and historical heritage. Incorporating such a framework would enrich the theorisation of heritage in PH by explicitly linking heritage to participatory practices and shared authority, thereby situating heritage as a collaborative, civic and democratic endeavour rather than a solely academic or institutional process.

[1] Christine Gundermann et al., *Key Terms of PH*, Berlin-Boston, De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2025, https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/102371.
[2] Marko Demantowsky, *"Public History" – Sublation of a German Debate?*, "Public History Weekly", 3 (2015) 2, DOI: dx.doi.org/10.1515/phw-2015-3292.
[3] Martin Lücke, Irmgard Zündorf, *Einführung in die Public History*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018, p. 2.
[4] Zygmunt Baumann, *Identity*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2004, pp. 13-14.
[5] https://www.uni.lu/c2dh-en/thinkering/ (See Andreas Fickers, Tim van der Heijden: *Inside the Trading Zone: Thinkering in a Digital History Lab,* "Digital Humanities Quarterly", 14/3, 2020, https://dhq.digitalhumanities.org/vol/14/3/000472/000472.html).
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[7] Jörn Rüsen, *Historik : Theorie der Geschichtswissenschaft, Köln, Böhlau Verlag, 2013,*

translated into English as Evidence and Meaning. A Theory of Historical Studies, New York/Oxford, Berghahn books, 2020.

[8] Giovanni De Luna, *La Repubblica del dolore: le memorie di un'Italia divisa,* Milano, Feltrinelli, 2011.

[9] Massimo Baioni, *Romanità e dintorni. Letture e usi pubblici dell'antico nell'Italia fascista*, "Italia contemporanea", 308 (2025), pp. 253-272.

[10] European Council, *Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (Faro Convention, 2005)*, Faro, 27 October 2005. URL, https://www.coe.int/en/web/culture-and-heritage/faro-convention.