



Serge Noiret:
(European University Institute)



**"Public" and "digital" history":
from England to the USA and back to Europe ?**

in

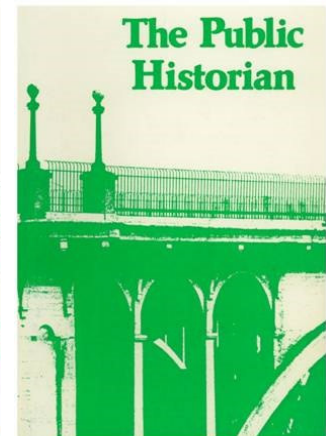
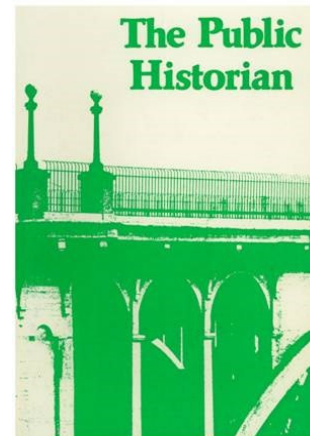
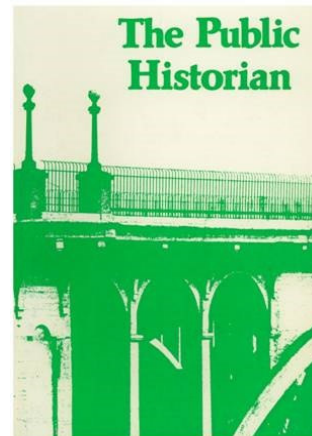
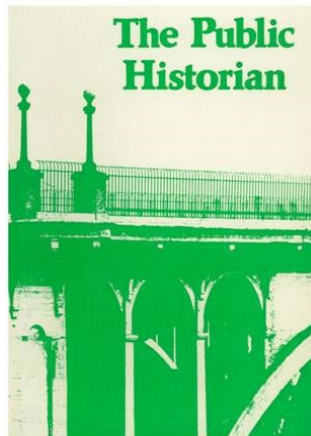
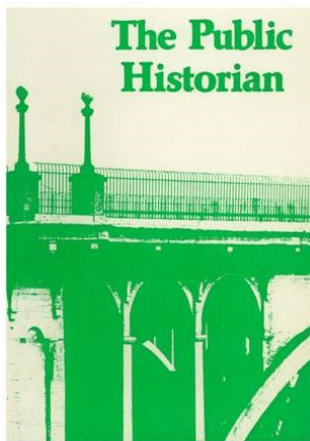
New History? Contribution to the Definition of the Epistemological Statute of the Digital History

Università degli Studi di Macerata, 18 settembre 2009



UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI DI
MACERATA

Dipartimento di Scienze dell'educazione e della formazione



Why speaking about the epistemology of Public and Digital History ?



- Public History generated a digital history approach because of the use of all media to communicate “history”
- Interest for PH was born together with the project *La Storia a(l) tempo di Internet*, 2001-2003.
- PH is not about ideological and political use of history as described in Nicola Gallerano’s *l’Uso pubblico della storia*, from a conference held in Rome in 1993: it is not about reinventing history to serve a cause (*Historikerstreit* in Germany)
- One of the most important innovation in the historical profession starting in the 1970’s.
- The Italian journal *Ricerche Storiche* will publish an essay on *Public History e Storia Pubblica nella rete* in September 2009



1. What is Public History all about ?



“...Il faut essayer de parvenir à ce que ceux qui vous entendent se sentent concernés intimement et collectivement par le passé de ceux qui ont vécu avant eux.”

Arlette Farge, entretiens avec Jean-Christophe Marti: *Quels bruits ferons-nous ?*, Paris: Les Prairies ordinaires, 2005, pp.28-29.



PH: Innovating professionally in communicating History



- PH is more than 30 years old
- It has become an academic discipline in many countries
- Museum, archives, libraries, private and public institutions are practising PH worldwide
- PH uses systematically all other media to communicate history
- The WWW cannibalizes all other media and is a fertile space available to develop PH projects

What are some aims of PH ?

1. Making history for the widest public possible
2. Making history outside the university as professional historians with university degrees
3. Doing history close to communities of people
4. Reconstructing memories and identities at different scale
5. Doing interactive History together with common people
6. Performing collaborative and interdisciplinary history projects
7. Spreading History in society using all possible media and activities



A Public Historian should be able to:



- offer scholarly history essays,
- (re-)create primary sources,
- use professionally the media,
- build complex web sites to disseminate the presence of history in our societies,
- help in keeping alive our collective memories,
- use of popular history methods and writings (“divulgazione”),
- research and teach history for private and public employers
- Collaborate with other professions reate a “collective” and collaborative work.



What is part of PH projects ?



- Reenactement and living history
- History parks and environmental parks
- Memory museums and exhibitions
- Creation of archives and sources together with “ordinary” people
- Oral history methods
- Urban restauration projects
- History projects in physical and virtual spaces
- Heritage preservation, etc..

Brief History of Public History

- In the UK without using the same terminology “PH” during the post-68 cultural movement. Raphael Samuel a socialist “public historian” invented the *History Workshops* at Ruskin College, Oxford, to bring history outside universities. He used of public lectures and intellectual debates with Union and working class members. He captured individual and collective popular memories and founded the *History Workshop Journal* in 1976 connecting history to recent political issues in a so-called “Public History Movement”.
- The idea was to “democratize” history using all means and sources: photography (family albums as sources), cinema, theater, literature (“writing myself into history”), oral history enquiries, etc..
- In 1996, the Ruskin College created a *Public History Master* based on Samuel’s earlier workshops: “The MA ... emphasises people’s own engagement with the past through orality, memory and family and local history and ... the contested nature of historical knowledge, the relationship between the past and the present, and the role of the historian in creating history.”



History Workshop Journal's PH without using the name



“like the Workshops, like the pamphlets, like the books in the Workshop series, the journal will be concerned to bring the boundaries of history closer to people's lives. Like them, it will address itself to the fundamental elements of social life — work and material culture, class relations and politics, sex divisions and marriage, family, school and home. We are concerned at the narrowing of the influence of history in our society, and at its progressive withdrawal from the battle of ideas. This shrinking of stature cannot be ascribed to a decline in popular interest. Throughout British society a desire for historical understanding continues to exist; and it is only sometimes fulfilled by the manufacturers of part series, popularizations, television entertainment, and so forth. 'Serious history' has become a subject reserved for the specialist.”



Birth of a University PH field in the USA



- Birth as a discipline with the name PH in 1978-1979 at UCSB, University of Southern California at Santa Barbara.
- G.Wesley Johnson founded “The Public Historian” in 1978
- 1979: creation of the *National Council of Public History* (NCPH)
- Why ?
 - Lack of University jobs
 - Bringing history to local communities outside the university
 - To public and private institutions, private firms, government administration at all levels
 - To understand better contemporary social, economic, environmental problems: using the past for understanding the present
 - Historians should be on the “frontline” in the media to participate to public debates when there’s a “need for history”



Defining PH is possible ?



- Australian Centre for Public History at the University of Technology (Sidney, Australia):

“What is Public History ? Public History in Australia has been defined as 'the practice of history by academically trained historians working for public agencies or as freelancers outside the universities'. Public historians may work in heritage conservation, commissioned history, museums, the media, education, radio, film interactive multimedia and other areas. They are people who have asked: 'What is history for?' And they are concerned with addressing the relationship between audience, practice and social context. Public history, however, is an elastic term that can mean different things to different people, locally, regionally, nationally and internationally. The democratisation of 'history making' and the rise of professional historians' associations have also blurred simple definitions. Public representations of the past, official or otherwise, which marginalise or abuse history raise other vital questions for all concerned with public histories.”



NCPH definition of PH and bylaws



- “a movement, methodology, and approach that promotes the collaborative study and practice of history; its practitioners embrace a mission to make their special insights accessible and useful to the public”
- Annual NCPH congresses starting 1979 defined bylaws (revisited 2007): objectivity, responsibility v. public/private employer, clients and within the profession and with colleagues



Lynn H. Nelson pioneer “digital historian”’s definition



- "Public History in the United States means *the presentation of History to an audience not familiar with the subject being presented*. [...] In short, the public historian is the means by which historical actuality is made attractive and understandable to the American public [...] that is deeply ignorant of its nation's history and geography, and that sees little value in the study of, much less the appreciation of, History [...]. People trained in Public History expect to obtain jobs as historical museum curators, managers of public archives (such as the national and state archives, educational consultants for History curricula at the primary and secondary level, directors of state (or large local) historical societies, Army, Navy, Marine and Air Force historians, managers of re-enactment organizations and/or events, staffing the national and state historic parks and cemeteries, historical monument commissions, historic preservation boards, and the like, or as self-employed historians seeking government grants or writing such grants for local authorities, or a writers of popular historical accounts."

A field, a movement, a method ?

Historians and their various publics collaborates in trying to make the past useful to a wider public but the methods are as any other academic historian but when using the “new media” technologies in digital history. Wesley Johnson spoke in 1978 of different “sectors” of PH:

1. Public institutions
2. Firms and business enterprises
3. Consultancies for other professions (lawyers, doctors, etc..)
4. Media (and today new digital media)
5. Heritage (“conserving” the past)
6. Teaching local history problems through local history societies
7. Managing and creating archives
8. Teaching Public History at Schools and Universities

PH common activities (Wesley Johnson at USCB in 1978)

1. Working collectively and within groups with different professional skills and training
2. Working only when PH projects are financed and sponsored
3. Combining empirical research and conceptual writings
4. A PH is not only a teacher but also a professional historian making original research: “historical skills are just as important and usable whether one is called educator, research director, communications specialist, corporate monitor, records manager or Public Historians”.

Open problems in the PH field

- What is objectivity in PH works ?
- Which kind of public should be served ?
- Which kind of activities should be performed as PH ?
- In which physical/virtual spaces performing PH ?
- Which appropriate media should be chosen ?
- How to integrate memory and identity studies



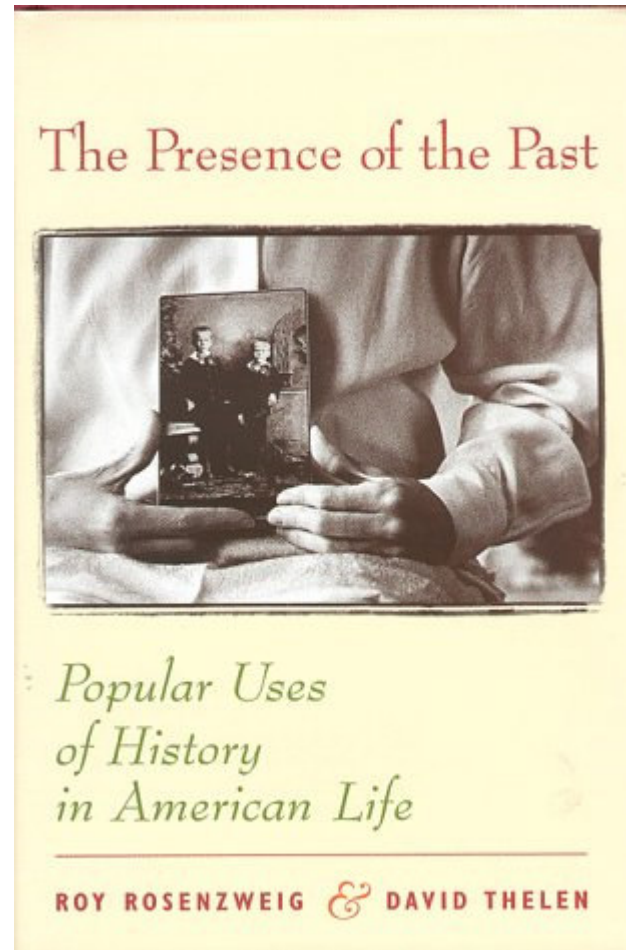
The “numbers” of PH today in the USA



NCPH survey of 2004:

- 17% of the AHA members (around 2.500) are PHs
- 85% of AHA members declare to have done PH at least once in their career
- “The 12.5 percent of AHA members who are principally employed outside the academy can further be characterized as follows: Many of them are self-employed (32 percent); others are employed in business or industry (17.6 percent), U.S. government (12 percent), nonprofit organizations (10.5 percent), and research centers, libraries, or archives (10 percent). “

From Public to Digital Public History: professional historians as mediators



Everyone a Public Historian ?

- Arnita Jones (AHA) said in 1979: *“PH is done anywhere outside the classroom by anybody who’s not employed in a university”*
- *Everyone a (Public) Historian ?* Not at all answered David Thelen and Roy Rosenzweig: PH needs the mediation of professional historians to work together with “ordinary people”.
- This conception was already developed by the social historian Raphael Samuel in Oxford in the 1970’s during his “History Workshops”



Presence of the past in American Society



- “What counts [for Thelen and Rosenzweig] is the uses of the past in the present: that is, the availability of usable pasts rather than the pastness of history”. (Bernard Eric Jensen: “Usable pasts: comparing approaches to Popular and Public History.”, in Paul Ashton e Hilda Kean (a cura di): *People and their pasts: public history today.*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp.42-56)
- For doing this a PH is using the methods of any other professional historian
- PHs should also be trained to use TV, radio, web and all other media’s and acquire a professional role of mediator
- PHs should be trained to design complex web sites through digital history practices thinking about: accessibility, interoperability, sustainability, use of specific methods for interacting with diverse publics.