

## So, What Difference Does It Make?

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Cord Arendes

The question I raise in the title of my response to Juliane Tomann and Jacqueline Nießer's article on public and applied history in Germany appeared as the name of the third single by the British rock band The Smiths back in 1984. The band's lyrics gave a simple but concise answer: "It makes none."<sup>1</sup> However, this answer is likely to be *too* simple with regard to the contextualization of public and applied history both within the German higher education system as well as in relation to history as a business or history as a variation of citizen science. Should we simply accept that there are at least *two* "indicators of change in German historical sciences,"<sup>2</sup> or should we deny any possible differences and instead refer to public and applied history as (one and) the same thing? In this short commentary, I will discuss the strong image chosen by Tomann and Nießer of public and applied history as "two sides of a hinge."<sup>3</sup> By doing so, I will argue that public and applied history—at least in the specific German context characterized by a short history of existence *and* a broad field of experts outside the profession—have more than just a common core and could or should, therefore, be used interchangeably.

Like the two authors, I am writing as a participant observer of the rapidly growing field of public history in Germany. The designation of my own professorship at Heidelberg University, "Applied History *and* Public History," follows the double denomination that characterizes the German field.<sup>4</sup> As a field of academic teaching and research, public and applied history in Germany owes its

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<sup>1</sup> The Smiths, "What Difference Does It Make/Back to the Old House," was released by the London based independent label Rough Trade Records on January 16, 1984, as catalogue number RT 146.

<sup>2</sup> Juliane Tomann and Jacqueline Nießer, "Public and Applied History in Germany. Just another Brick in the Wall of the Academic Ivory Tower?" *The Public Historian* 40, no. 4 (November 2018): 11–27, quote 11.

<sup>3</sup> Tomann and Nießer, "Public and Applied History," 24.

<sup>4</sup> For more detailed information concerning the professorship, see "Professur für Angewandte Geschichtswissenschaft–Public History," Heidelberg University, <http://www.uni-heidelberg.de/fakultaeten/philosophie/zevk/histsem/mitglieder/arendes.html>.

establishment, on the one hand, to the so-called Bologna process<sup>5</sup> and, on the other hand, to current responses to the still existing gap between history (*Geschichtswissenschaft*) and history teaching (*Geschichtsdidaktik*). The seven German professorships are divided between history departments (in Heidelberg and Hamburg), and history education departments (in Cologne, Flensburg, Munich, Bochum, and Tuebingen).<sup>6</sup> Even though not all of the professorships mentioned above have their own master's degree program, they are nevertheless hot spots of a consolidating or, depending on the perspective, an expanding area of research and teaching.<sup>7</sup>

Thomas Cauvin and Ciaran O'Neill recently defined the three overarching main principles of public history as the "focus on non-academic audiences, an interest in the present-day uses and applications of the past, and the development of collaborative practices."<sup>8</sup> This concern for the transfer of historical knowledge has always been a general issue within the historical sciences and, at the same time, has formed the heart of the field of history teaching at German universities. Nießer and Tomann rightly argue that public and applied history have recently "emerged somewhere in between the frontlines" of history and history education.<sup>9</sup> The emergence of a new subsection does not necessarily indicate an urgent need for self-positioning or even a fundamental change of attitude towards one's own field of work. However, it at least highlights a kind of dissatisfaction with traditional lines of argument regarding the relationship between history and the German public.

In summary: The actual place of public and applied history at German universities is marked by several fields of tension: theory versus practice, history versus history education, global aspiration versus local realities, to name just a few. Sharp-tongued critics may argue that acting between the lines in the worst-case scenario can mean staying forever in a kind of no-man's-land. I think quite the opposite is true: In Germany, public and applied history is in a good, perhaps even a very good, starting position to react to the new requirements of today's higher education and science system *and* to changes in the historical sciences. With regard to the fields of tension, public and applied history hold

5 Bob Reinalda and Ewa Kulesza, *The Bologna Process—Harmonizing Europe's Higher Education* (Opladen et al.: Barbara Budrich Publishers, 2005); *European Journal of Education*, special issue: "Ten Years of the Bologna Process—'What future?'" 45, no. 4 (December 2010): 529–623.

6 Except the professorships in Heidelberg (Applied History and Public History), Munich (History Education and Public History), and Tuebingen (History Education and Public History), all positions carried the main workload of training students and were until recently temporary posts.

7 The description of the state of the field as presented in the new Oxford Handbook is unfortunately lagging far behind reality. See James B. Gardner and Paula Hamilton, "Introduction: The Past and Future of Public History: Developments and Challenges," in *The Oxford Handbook of Public History*, ed. Paula Hamilton and James B. Gardner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1–22; 6.

8 Thomas Cauvin and Ciaran O'Neill, "Negotiating Public History in the Republic of Ireland: Collaborative, Applied and Usable Practices for the Profession," *Historical Research* 90, no. 250 (November 2017): 810–28, 811.

9 Nießer and Tomann, "Public and Applied History in Germany," 11.

a position of mediation: they are able to build the necessary bridges between the many institutions, subdisciplines, and agents involved.

Tomann and Nießer's image of public and applied history as two inherently interconnected sides of a hinge seems to point in the same direction. Their discussion provides us with a lively picture of the status quo of and the debate on public and applied history in Germany. To me, the distinctions of *forms* from *agents* of popular history, *translators* of historical knowledge from *moderators* of the processes of participation and creation of this knowledge, and, therefore, the distinction of aspects of a *merely public* from aspects of a *merely applied* history seems quite convincing. Similarly, I also do not hesitate to agree that most issues that either were or still are being discussed as at the core of international public and applied history can be summed up under catchphrases like "participation" and "collaboration" or within the wider framework of concepts like "citizen science" and "open science."<sup>10</sup>

Analytically, it is very helpful to distinguish between public and applied history. This separation assists us in reflecting more intensively on certain aspects of both "variants." But: Variants of what? Variants of history, of history in an era of massive change, or only variants of public history? A hinge holds something together while it also facilitates movement for times and things to come. From my point of view, based on my own experiences in research and particularly in *teaching* and doing public history in a local environment, all issues mentioned by Tomann and Nießer, which either refer to a strengthening of the public or the applied side of the hinge, are genuinely inherent to public history as a whole.

I will briefly elaborate on this idea: My interpretation refers far less to the function of "public history" as a mere umbrella term.<sup>11</sup> Instead, it emphasizes the fact that it is impossible to convey history *to* an audience or a public without doing so *together with* or even in *accordance with* the public in question. The only difference between public and applied is then marked by the character and intensity of the "with" or rather its definition. Let me give an example: Every well-prepared lecture on a historical topic for a specific audience or every collaboration in a historical exhibition have at least *some* participatory elements or *traces* of shared authority. Even on the most basic levels, historians interact with the public in two ways: explicitly through conversation and implicitly through the selection of their topics, research approaches, or forms of representations. In general, the latter are in line with some specific form of public interest.

Public history's importance is that it creates dialogue between academia and society. That is, public history helps eliminate existing barriers between experts and politically conscious and historically interested citizens. Public history is all about

<sup>10</sup> Cord Arendes, "Historiker als 'Mittler zwischen den Welten'? Produktion, Vermittlung und Rezeption historischen Wissens im Zeichen von Citizen Science und Open Science," *Heidelberger Jahrbuecher Online* 2 (2017): 19–58, <http://dx.doi.org/10.17885/heiup.hdjbo.2017.o.23691>.

<sup>11</sup> Marko Demantowsky, "Public History?—Sublation of a German Debate?" *Public History Weekly* 3, no. 2 (January 2015), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/phw-2015-3292>.

the relationship between public historians and the audience in the framework of a collaborative practice. Of particular relevance here are the feedback effects between creators of knowledge, the communicators of knowledge, and the recipients of knowledge (that is to say, members of the public sphere).

If public history in Germany is located somewhere “in between” history and history education *and* if public and applied history should indeed be analytically separate from each other, we should probably take into consideration yet another image for the position of public history in Germany. I would thus like to draw attention to a philosophical consideration recently developed by the French philosopher and sinologist François Jullien while writing on the question of possible shared cultural identities.<sup>12</sup>

This idea should help to shed light on the intermediate realm of public history and to reduce the possible tension(s) that might exist between public and applied history in Germany. Instead of the supposed major *differences* in the triangle of history, history education, and the mentioned varieties of public history, we should productively grasp and interpret the *distances* between the respective fields of work. We tend to increasingly isolate areas when discussing *differences*, but the clarification of an *existing* distance helps us to better identify and illuminate the areas of tension in which public history primarily operates. This seems to be the correct approach in the case of history and history education and it may work elsewhere. An *actual* or even an *imaginary distance* helps to clarify specific arguments and ways of thinking. The field “in between” thus mainly stands for a productive state of tension and is actively connoted as a permanently reflective space. While necessarily interacting, both sides have to move beyond their limitations and describe their status quo always in relation to the other. The active exploration and use of distances allows us to (re-)discover resources that we have perhaps not considered before. This process is an important part of public history’s procedural character as a shared working process *and* a reflective practice.

Finally, we have to ask which specific description could make it easier for scholars and laypersons to join forces and spawn new types of dialogue while dismantling barriers among historians, practitioners, experts, and interested members of the public. One answer might be to merge the multiple perspectives of historians, including history and history education as well as public and applied history. Many historians in Germany already situate themselves in this hybrid zone between research and teaching on the one hand and practice and becoming involved with the public on the other. It is common for them to practice diverging roles: They act—alternately or even simultaneously—as academic historians (in their respective fields of specialization), as public historians (whose principal goals are to acquaint the public with the processes and mechanisms involved in studying

<sup>12</sup> François Jullien, *L'écart et l'entre. Leçon inaugurale de la Chaire sur l'altérité* (Paris: Galilée, 2012) and *Il n'y a pas d'identité culturelle* (Paris: Éd. de l'Herne, 2016). Both works have not yet been translated into English.

the past), and as practitioners/experts (in projects, such as exhibitions).<sup>13</sup> In the last case, they even change the process of teaching and learning.

Public history thus can provide the necessary contact zones within which the professional handling of history will have to take place in the future. And the future will belong to a public history which is able to include different agents and forms and which is capable of functioning in a variety of different academic and professional contexts. Given the specific German background, the foreseeable future of a unified public history (including applied history) can be described as an interdisciplinary, cultural-historical inspired field of work at the many crossroads of contemporary history, local history, history education, and citizen science.

This specific German version of public history (as a union of public and applied history) will make a difference: When we emphasize the impossibility to convey history *to* an audience or a public without doing so *together with* the public, we gain a strong argument why, in any given case, it is necessary to define the character and intensity of the “with.” This united public history will turn out to be exactly what we need to ensure the future of historical studies in the twenty-first century. Active historians in Germany have embarked on this path and already completed a number of stages. However, despite the will of many people involved, integrated practice is still a long way off for public history in Germany.

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*Cord Arendes* is professor of applied history and public history at Heidelberg University. He has previously worked as lecturer (Free University of Berlin, University of Greifswald), and as assistant professor of contemporary history at Heidelberg University. His main research and (project-)teaching interests focus on public and applied history, audiovisual aspects of history, historical exhibitions, citizen science, history of Germany in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and the political and juridical handling of the National Socialist past in Western Europe. He has edited and published books on the global history of the twentieth century, European commemoration of the World War I, the press coverage of regional Nazi proceedings, and on the treatment of Eastern European Jews in the early period of the Republic of Baden, 1918–1923.

<sup>13</sup> Cord Arendes, “Who We Are: Public Historians as Multiple Personalities?” *Public History Weekly* 3, no. 36 (November 2015), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/phw-2015-4908>.