Whose Public? Whose History? What is the Goal of a Public Historian?*

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The use of the possessive case in this title is not an accident. Neither is the particular use of the terms “public” and “history.” These words are here because I have the uncomfortable feeling that many people who use them these days have not quite thought out what they mean. And I am quite sure that those who use them are not at all comfortable with their use in the possessive. The present title, I think, allows us to raise the issue of turf but also to move beyond turf to the complexity of the questions raised by the public history movement—questions that go to the heart of the uses of history in the culture and the processes by which historical consciousness is formed and expressed.

The proponents of public history have mounted a sustained and important critique of the ways in which American historians have

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defined themselves as professionals, of the work they do, of the ways in which they organize professionally, and of the uses to which they have put their professional organizations. Despite the fact that the origins of the movement may have been quite humble—the thought that “maybe” historians could be useful in policy formulation—public history and those who speak for it have begun to articulate a much broader attack upon current modes of historical work. They have rebelled at the notion that historical training and historical work should be limited to the teaching of history at the university level, the training of future historians, or the publication of research results directed solely to other academic historians. Using the job crisis as a starting point, they have accused the profession of ignoring the possibility of opportunities outside of the academy and of monopolizing the ideological formulation of the role of the historian by accenting a narrow vision of the historian as researcher or university professor.

These are important issues, but the debates over public history have not been taken seriously enough or have been defined in much too narrow a framework, so that these issues have not received the attention they deserve. This is the case for two reasons. First, those of us who currently work in the field have not clearly defined what it is we do, why we do it, and why it is an alternative to other forms of historical effort. Second, the debates have taken place in a historical vacuum. To link and then frame these issues, we must define what we mean by “public” and how we as historians have related to and continue to relate to that public. If we do so we can begin to gain the needed perspective on public history and to assess its elements and its consequences.

It is probably obvious to point out that historians have always had a public. From its earliest times, the study of history has been a public act, although different historians at different times have had different publics. This is important to remember, for both the promoters of public history and their critics often assume that the attack upon the narrow definition of “public” promoted in the post-World War II years by academic historians is something new which speaks to a new reality.

Broadly defined and briefly noted, there are a number of major publics which the historian has traditionally addressed. In the mid-nineteenth century and continuing until today, many American historians have sought to address what granting agencies and
others have called the "broad, generally educated lay public," by and large the literate middle class. The work of such historians, generally narrative in form, has usually offered the book-reading and -buying public dramas of wide sweep and broad interpretation, up-beat pageants which trace a major theme in American culture and point to the inevitable success of the United States as a nation. The great epics of the so-called Middle period in American history (1820–1880) come immediately to mind, as does *Roots*.

As the historical profession emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the definition of the historian's public became somewhat narrower. Increasingly, until today's crisis, the dominant professional vision became that of a public of peers. Producing monographs of analytic sophistication and methodological elegance on ever smaller and more manageable topics in an effort to emulate "science," the professional historian in his research and writing began to speak to an ever narrower group of scholars, mostly other academic historians and graduate students. Isolated from the marketplace, these scholars became (and still are) dependent upon the academy rather than royalties for their livelihood. Thus they were called upon to address a second public: undergraduate students. It is not surprising, therefore, that much of the continuing debate over the role of the professional historian in the twentieth century addressed itself to the contradiction in how to reach and address two such disparate publics and the various solutions to that contradiction: the creation of research professorships, the bifurcation of the academy into research and teaching institutions, the view of students as potential scholars, and the search for the one gimmick which would blend scholarship and teaching.

At the same time that the historical profession moved to define itself in these narrower terms, and outside of the academy, another group of historians emerged to work with a non-college public: the local history movement. Generally addressing themselves to local amateurs and increasingly professionalizing themselves in a direction very different from that taken by academic historians, members of this movement spoke to and worked with a hodgepodge of potential publics ranging from the most reactionary local social elites, to grade-school children, to genealogists, to historical
buffs, to preservationists. Without the protection of the university and without the ethic of "academic freedom," these historians have related to their public in a quite different manner than have their academic peers.

Prior to the emergence of public history, it was the local history movement which offered the most thoroughgoing alternative to the historical work done in the academy. Partially organized to preserve the record of the past within the vaults of private historical societies, representatives of the local history movement gradually expanded their efforts in writing and presenting local history, and by the 1960s had built a surprisingly large network of historical workers in every state of the union. Never quite recognized as equal by the academy, these tens of thousands of workers—both professional and paid, and amateur and unpaid—have become by far the largest purely historical public in the United States.

In addition, since the Second World War, or the First World War if one considers the "Inquiry" made by a group of intellectuals to advise Woodrow Wilson on the Treaty of Versailles, some historians have, from time to time, worked for or advised various governmental or private agencies, thus dealing with yet another, albeit more restricted, public. In such roles they have testified in court and administered agencies or worked as consultants for those who do.

Other traditional publics for the historian would include grade-school or secondary students, readers of popular journals which present the work of journalist-historians, and the audience for historical novels or fictionalized media-made history.

To be sure, these categories cannot be and have not been rigidly defined. Gifted amateurs have often made substantial contributions to historical research. Some historians such as Allan Nevins, or Richard McCormick in New Jersey, or John Caughey in California, have moved with ease from one public to another. Others, like Thomas C. Cochran, spent their early years far from the academy. In addition, from the first days of the profession some of the giants of the field have spoken to a variety of publics in an attempt to raise the consciousness of the citizenry at large and make history relevant to social concern. Charles Beard wrote at times for his colleagues. He also co-authored one of the most important grade-school texts in American history, and with his wife pro-
duced enormously popular and influential narratives. He also worked directly with groups such as the National Municipal League for a variety of reforms. Other historians have involved themselves deeply in ancillary fields: Herbert Bolton in librarianship, and J. Franklin Jameson in archives management.

Beard's name is most important for our purposes here, for if he was easily identified as a committed historian, the attack upon him and his work in the late 1940s and 1950s was crucial to the development of a much more refined definition of the professional historian—the academic scholar—which came to dominate the field at that time; the definition which the public history movement now so vigorously rejects, but, ironically, not from a Beardian perspective.

This rejection of such a narrow definition is, however, not new. Throughout these last three or four decades others have pointed out the limitations of the emerging definition of the professional historian. Leaders of the state and local history movement, at least since the 1940s, have complained about their treatment at the hands of academic historians and their associations, as have high-school teachers and gifted amateurs.

It is especially important to note in this context the attack of the 1960s upon the academically-defined professional historian. To a generation tormented by the issues of racism, war, sexism, and class bias, the "new" professionalism seemed to have little to offer. Having scoured the profession clean of Beard, Farrington and Turner, the "consensus" school could offer only an abstracted neutrality which was sometimes revealed to be complicity with the agencies responsible for the public malaise of that decade, or a job-oriented cynicism. But the call of the sixties for professors to profess something and to make history relevant was also not a momentary concern. It too was part of a long-standing debate which continues in many forms today, especially as younger historians move into community projects, bringing a new set of concerns to local history and a new urgency to efforts of local agencies.

All of this background is necessary if we are to understand fully what is now termed "public history." It is not de novo. It is moving into fields long occupied by practicing non-academic historians. It is debating issues within a long tradition of debate. It is deeply embedded within a series of ongoing tendencies in the profession.
The current debates, however, have been so unhistorical, especially in their attempt to ignore the 1960s, that they have misled us into thinking we are being presented with something new.

What then is really new about public history? As it presents itself currently, several things are new.

1. In its accent upon training graduate students to prepare themselves for positions as archivists, museum directors, preservationists, etc., public history is an attempt to co-opt for the academy the traditional base of and therefore the public of the state and local history movement. It is this aspect of the movement which has so attracted academic historians and which has generated such deep antagonisms toward public history among the leaders of the state and local history movement.

It has attracted the academy because it seems to offer job opportunities in a time of a shrinking market, and promises once again to make history relevant. It has antagonized the local history movement by its early failure to recognize that such work was already being done and the landscape already occupied. Part of this antagonism is the conflict of two perspectives and traditions of professionalization. Especially in areas such as library science, archives and records management, preservation, and museum management, training programs as well as new standards for the profession have emerged outside of the university and in particular outside of departments of history. To move into these areas will take a great deal of tact and negotiation.

Public history has also remained largely ignorant of so-called community history projects. Although several public historians have worked on community history projects, there has been no attempt to link up with the various state or local agencies supporting these projects, no attempt to bring into the public history network these more popular types of efforts.

2. In many ways public history offers a definition of professionalism almost as narrow as that of the academy. In all prior debates, especially those of the sixties, there was a concern for history not only as a profession, but as a vocation—a calling. On both sides of that debate it was assumed that to be a historian was a special calling which led one to a deeper personal and
social insight that conferred upon one a special mission in the culture.

Throughout the bitter arguments of that decade, both within the Radical History Caucus and on the floor of the general meetings of most historical associations, whether the topic was the proper response to Viet Nam or civil rights or equal employment, everyone assumed that the interpretation of the past was more than "one tool in a bag of tools," and that there was more at stake than simply jobs for graduate students. This may have been the arrogance of the lumpen, but those positions involved questions of how historians related to the community, which community they should relate to, and how they were to act as historians and citizens. These debates were and remain significant for all historians, and especially those working with a non-university public.

Because the public history movement has ignored these debates, it seems to have accepted a much narrower idea of the profession and along the way some of its followers have embraced the most cynical view of professionalism propounded by the academy. To be a historian seems to mean to hold a job, to earn a living, to carve out a safe haven. It is remarkable how little of the populist rhetoric if not of the more programmatic ideology of the new left appears among public historians.

In all fairness it should be noted that the response of the more socially active historical network has generally been a somewhat automatic negativism when dealing with public history, but it is difficult oftentimes to find in public history that sense of mission that we find in local history at its best—the goal of which is to help people write, create, and understand their own history.

3. In some cases, especially in the so-called applied history programs, public historians seem to be elaborating what had always been a minor enterprise for historians—working for corporations or as government advisers or employees—into the major focus of historical efforts. Even at its worst, the older vision of professionalism allowed the historian a larger role. But too often the call for a relevant, socially significant history—a tradition from the Puritan divines of Massachusetts to Stafferton Lynd—has channelled public historians into the narrowest
of careers: working for those who rule and dominate the instruments of social power. It is one thing to say this is all we mean by public history, and another to say this is what public history means.

The definition of "public" has now, even in more broadly-based public history programs, been narrowed. There should be more discussion of union or community work as viable historical work. All efforts seem to have been directed to the corporate or governmental world. Given the economic facts of life, such a thrust is probably natural. But also at issue is the way in which only one public among many has become the public for public history.

The current growth of public history and the debate over the definition of the historical profession has taken place within the context of an ironic situation. The study of history is in almost total collapse in the academy, while the popularity of history with the public is growing everywhere. Those of us who work or have worked in local historical agencies have, of course, been the beneficiaries of this boom. We would not hold the jobs we do were it not for this popularity and the feeling among a number of publics that historical efforts are important and meaningful to daily life. But such work has also always combined a commitment to one's own research and a commitment to helping people do their own history, to involve themselves in their pasts, to increase their historical consciousness.

If the "new" social history has taught us anything, it is the basic correctness of the view of Marx that, within limits, people make their own history. Their actions count heavily in the process of ongoing change, be it incremental or structural. In addition, what we know about public historical activities as they now exist points to a similar correctness in Carl Becker's view that every man can become his own historian; that relatively ordinary people can seek and find knowledge of the world they have made or that was made for them, and that since history always has a social purpose—explicitly or implicitly—such knowledge shapes the way the present is viewed. Thus the task of the public historian, broadly defined, should be to help members of the public do their own history and to aid them in understanding their role in shaping and interpreting
events. Sometimes this merely means helping to bring to the front the information, understanding, and consciousness that is already there. More often it means a much more painstaking process of confronting old interpretations, removing layer upon layer of ideology and obfuscation, and countering the effects of spectacularized media-made instant history.

This is not to suggest that once a correct view of the past is reached, through the aid of benevolent, anti-corporatist public historians, history immediately becomes a weapon in the arsenal of those who struggle for social change; a position the English History Workshop Journal sometimes comes close to embracing. But it does mean that local or community history projects can play an important role in moving people to a clearer sense of the possibilities of social change and social action and their roles in such change.

By its name, public history implies a major redefinition of the role of the historian. It promises us a society in which a broad public participates in the construction of its own history. The name conjures up images of a new group of historical workers interpreting the past of heretofore ignored classes of people. It seems to answer the question of whose public? whose history? with a democratic declaration of a faith in members of the public at large to become their own historians and to advance their knowledge of themselves. If the public history movement lives up to its name, those of us who work in the field will recognize allies in the struggle to make historical consciousness a reality in American life. If it defines itself more narrowly, as it has tended to do so far, it presents us with very real problems.

The public history movement is still in its infancy and has before it the possibility of moving in many different directions. If, however, its spokesmen continue to ignore the historical circumstances of its birth, and the traditions upon which it can draw, the history of its history, and the efforts of those already in the field, it will offer us little that the academy does not offer, and, at worst, divert our energies into hucksterism for the status quo.