

PUBLIC HISTORY IN GERMANY AND THE UNITED STATES: FIELDS, DEVELOPMENTS, AND DEBATES IN PRACTICE AND THEORY

Conference at the Free University of Berlin, June 25-27, 2009. Co-sponsored by the GHI Washington. Conveners: Andreas Etges (Free University of Berlin), Paul Nolte (FU Berlin), Anke Ortlepp (GHI). Participants: Leora Auslander (University of Chicago), Lonnie Bunch (National Museum of African American History), Erik Christiansen (University of Maryland, College Park), Jacob S. Eder (University of Pennsylvania), Kathleen Franz (American University), David Glassberg (University of Massachusetts, Amherst), Christine Gunderman (FU Berlin), Joseph P. Harahan (U.S. Department of Defense), Hanno Hochmuth (FU Berlin), Arnita Jones (American Historical Association), Elizabeth H. Lambert (Indiana University), Jon Berndt Olsen (University of Massachusetts, Amherst), Hans Ottomeyer (Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin), Marcus Payk (University of Stuttgart), Dietmar Pieper (*Der Spiegel*), Katja Roeckner (University of Potsdam), Warren Rosenblum (Webster University), Martin Sabrow (University of Potsdam), Janet Ward (University of Nevada, Las Vegas), David Zonderman (North Carolina State University).

The conference provided a fresh look at Public History in Germany and the United States by exploring current fields of research, recent developments, and debates in both theoretical discourses and practical endeavors. It brought together an international group of scholars and practitioners from the United States and Germany.

The conference opened with a session on contested memories, history, and the public. Kathleen Franz gave “a report from the trenches,” in which she commented on training the next generation of Public Historians. Reflecting on the training recommendations of the National Council of Public History, she pointed out the strengths and shortcomings of current Public History curricula. She also discussed the value of on-site practical training for Public History graduate students, recommending the development of more integrated programs across the United States. Leora Auslander’s remarks focused on state-sponsored memorialization of domestic shame in Germany and the United States. Looking at the Jewish Museum in Berlin and the National Museum for African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) that the Smithsonian Institution is planning to open in Washington DC in 2015, she outlined the

museums' missions, their (prospective) exhibits, and historical narratives. Devoting most of her attention to the Jewish Museum in Berlin, since it is already open and accessible to the public, she investigated what is being commemorated and who the museum is addressing as an audience. Pointing to the museum's attempt to tell the long and complex history of Jewish Germans, she described the museum's methods for dealing with the Holocaust and the issue of national shame as effective. It remains to be seen, she pointed out, how the NMAAHC will deal with similar issues.

In his keynote address, NMAAHC founding director Lonnie Bunch talked about his vision for the creation of a national museum devoted to the history and culture of African Americans and the broader challenges of interpreting race in American museums. Situating the museum in the *lieu de mémoire* that the National Mall in Washington DC constitutes, Bunch elaborated on the plan to tell the story of one minority culture in ways that are meaningful to both its members and a broader American public. Hoping to attract millions of visitors of different backgrounds – like the other Smithsonian museums – he reflected on the particular challenges of portraying the history of slavery and of presenting the issues of victimization and perpetration it entails. Bunch also elaborated on the more immediate challenges of constructing an attractive museum building and assembling a collection.

The second session, on history in museums and exhibitions, opened with a paper by Erik Christiansen, who explored the Cold War origins of the Smithsonian's Museum of History and Technology (now the Museum of American History) and the history exhibits displayed at the Smithsonian between the end of World War II and the mid-1960s. Constructing and displaying a distinctly national history for American citizens to see and comprehend as their own unique and superior heritage, the museum and its history exhibits played a significant role in influencing contemporary political and economic thought. Its authoritative location, between the Washington Monument, the White House, and the U.S. Capitol, made it difficult to doubt the museum's content or interpretation, unless one was also willing to doubt the legitimacy of the government that surrounded and supported it. Jacob Eder explored West German efforts to promote a positive interpretation of German history in the United States during the 1980s – one that would be respectful of, yet not overburdened by, the legacies of the Holocaust. The

history of the Federal Republic was to be presented as a “success story,” characterized by a stable democracy, reliability as a military partner in the Western Alliance, a strong commitment to Israel, and restitution payments for the victims of National Socialism. Eder demonstrated how this interpretation of German *Zeitgeschichte*, championed by Helmut Kohl, collided with the growing impact of Holocaust memory on American historical consciousness, a phenomenon often referred to as the “Americanization of the Holocaust.” Warren Rosenblum discussed recent exhibits dealing with the history of justice and legal repression, focusing on exhibits such as “Im Namen des deutschen Volkes – Justiz und Nationalsozialismus,” (Ministry of Justice, 1989) and “Justiz im Nationalsozialismus – Über Verbrechen im Namen des Deutschen Volkes” (Ministry of Justice in Lower Saxony, 1999) in Germany and “The Story of We, the People” at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia. Rosenblum analyzed how and why these exhibits stirred up public discussions about the historic failures of the court system, particularly in regard to racial justice, and the fragility of legal norms during times of national crisis. The session concluded with Katja Roeckner’s remarks on industrial museums, institutions that present the history of industries and industrialization on industrial heritage sites such as former factories. Roeckner argued that these museums afford excellent opportunities to study how institutions of public history deal with historical change: As museums they conserve images of the past, while at the same time becoming agents of change in an environment of changing economic, social, and cultural parameters.

The conference’s third session focused on the connections between landscapes and memory. David Glassberg discussed his involvement in two projects of historic preservation and cultural-resources management conducted for the United States National Park Service. According to Glassberg, both projects, Pinelands National Reserve and Cape Cod National Seashore, initially failed to adequately take local residents’, government officials’, and tourists’ widely different perceptions of the environment and its future use into account. He showed how Public-History methods were employed to consider the different memories attached to the landscape in future planning efforts. Elizabeth Lambert explored the contested memory of Weimarer Klassik and Gedenkstätte Buchenwald. Contending that Weimar’s legacy reveals a great deal about the construction of postwar German national identity, she explored the polarity between

elements of the Weimar-Buchenwald complex resulting from the fact that the National Socialist and East German states designated Weimar as a central site of ritual connected to the different ways that each imagined and appropriated the city's past. She thus explored the challenges in separating culture from terror in order to elucidate the ways in which the landscapes, sites, and narratives of Weimar and Buchenwald have been marshaled to reinforce the dominant narrative of national identity. Janet Ward's paper investigated the interrelationship between two highly charged sites of urban trauma in the United States and Germany – the ongoing reconstructive transformations at the World Trade Center site in Manhattan and the postwar ruin and post-reunification rebuilding of Dresden's Frauenkirche, an emblem of the Allies' terror bombing of German cities during World War II. Comparing the two sites, she pointed out two key representational strategies of the memorialization of civilian sacrifice: rubble aesthetics, on the one hand, and redemptive reconstruction, on the other. She demonstrated how the commemoration of 9/11 at Ground Zero is, in part, a dialogic response to the rubble thematics and reconstructive practices that have served affected urban centers since World War II.

The fourth session dealt with the history of lost causes. John Berndt Olson analyzed German post-unification debates about places of memory in Eastern Germany including the Buchenwald memorial, the German Historical Museum, the monuments to Ernst Thälmann and to Marx and Engels in Berlin, and the planned "Memorial for Freedom and Unity" designed to commemorate the 1989 revolution and the 1990 (re)unification of Germany. Olson argued that these debates about the monuments, museums, and commemoration traditions of the GDR provide a unique point of departure for examining the role of history within the larger political and social debates surrounding the unification of Germany. He posited that new monuments will continue to be controversial as popular memories of the GDR are contested in the public sphere, although we might also see a ratcheting down of the debates generated by these sites of memory. David Zonderman's paper focused on the teaching of public history in the American South, which he described as a pedagogical project that challenges instructors and students to engage with the many myths surrounding the South. He argued that public historians must be trained to understand the roots of regional mythologies and their current expression in popular memory. Only then, he underlined, can they successfully guide their audiences

through the process of unpacking and understanding these myths in ways that respect regional identity, without letting that identity prevent serious engagement with historical facts and scholarly interpretations.

Session five pursued the connections between politics and public history. Joseph Harahan outlined the historical origins, development, and growth of Public History in the U.S. government. He maintained that governmental Public History mirrors the diverse interests of the institutions and bureaucracies carrying out the functions of a large democratic government. He also pointed out that the creation of this bureaucratic state came at a time (the 1940s) when dissemination of public information, victory in the global war, Cold War nationalism, and domestic imperatives led to the acceptance of employing historians to document, interpret, and publish histories of the federal government's events and programs. Arnita Jones reflected on U.S. Public History as policy history. She argued that in stark contrast to developments in the historical profession at large, where scholars have paid less attention to studying the institutions of government and political history, policy history has accelerated over the last several years, as exemplified by the work of the Kennedy Assassination Board, the 9/11 Commission, and the currently much discussed federal history critical of the American effort to rebuild Iraq. Martin Sabrow inquired into history politics in post-reunification Germany by looking at the issue of GDR *Aufarbeitung* and his own involvement in the debate about it. He detailed the work of the Sabrow Commission, a panel of scholars and public history practitioners appointed by the German Bundestag, and its recommendations for ways to deal with and explore the GDR past, which were widely read and discussed in the German public.

The conference's sixth and final session concerned itself with the marketing of history. Dietmar Pieper sketched the short history of *Spiegel Geschichte*, the history magazine series published by the German news magazine *Der Spiegel*. He detailed topics, approaches, and target audiences. Hanno Hochmuth's paper focused on the tourism industry in Berlin. He suggested that the city's booming tourism is largely based on Public History, demonstrating that the majority of Berlin's most visited museums exhibit contemporary history. Moreover, Hochmuth showed that a significant heritage industry has developed in Berlin. Supported by the local government of the post-Fordist city, both public and private players compete for

the visitors' attention. Hence, he concluded, they supply the tourists with what they seek most: Histotainment and authenticity.

The conference was characterized by lively discussion and exchange. It closed with a tour of the German Historical Museum led by the museum's director, Hans Ottomeyer.

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