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Public History between the Scylla of Academic History and the Charybdis of History as a Show: A Personal and Institutional Experience

Abstract: This text constitutes a personal reflection on the practice of public history during the last thirty years in a specific academic-institutional and social context: that of a region – Murcia – located in Southeast Spain. After some general considerations on the nature of public history and the tension generated by its intermediate status between the academic world and the world of entertainment, some individual activities by public historians carried out from the academic world are presented, as well as two collaborative ones made between 2004 and 2020: the Virtual Museum of History of Education (MUVHE) and the Center for Studies on Educational Memory (CEME) of the University of Murcia. Additionally, a collective activity has been carried out annually since 2015 from the union teaching field entitled “An Education for the 21st Century. Views from the Sciences and the Arts”. The final reflections deal, from this double experience, with some of the questions posed to academic historians by the practice of public history.

Keywords: public history, educational museums, school memory, *centro de estudios sobre la memoria educativa* (CEME), *museo virtual de historia de la educación* (MUVHE)

Introduction

“Until I heard the phrase ‘public historian’, I hadn’t realized I’d been doing it all my life. Now I’ve got a label”.¹ Despite my being an already-retired academic historian, I feel that I can appropriate this phrase, which Liddington attributed to all those who, without being academic historians, work in some way with

¹ Jill Liddington, “What is Public History? Publics and Their Pasts, Meanings and Practices”, *Oral History* 30, no. 1 (2002): 84.

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the past and at a certain point realize that there is something that historians call Public History. In the same way, we could apply to the Spanish case – within the realm of history in general and the history of education in particular – the subtitle given to an article by Noiret about the discipline’s practice in Italy: “No longer a field without a name”.² I can finally, after all these years, put a name to these activities – mine and those of my colleagues – that involve practicing history outside of the “ivory tower” of academia, or at least presenting and sharing it, under different guises, to broad swaths of the public and in collaboration with a variety of social groups.³

Within Sayer’s double characterization of public history as “the communication of history to a wider public or the engagement of the public in the practice and production of history”,⁴ most of my own activity as a public historian aligns more neatly with the former description – communicating about history with the public outside of the academic setting – than with the second, that of practicing and producing history together with certain social groups. Perhaps for this reason, as well as the fact that I was born in 1943, I have always been more of a “historian working with the digital” than a “digital historian”.⁵ However, given that “public historians are currently the most auto-reflexive that they have been in the profession’s history”,⁶ and that there is a broad diversity of national and sectorial traditions in this field,⁷ I believe that the auto-reflection about my experience as a public historian in which I am going to engage here may be of interest as we reevaluate the role and the identity of the historian in society, the practice of history and the uses we make of the past. I would hope that it could at least lead us to reflect upon matters such as: veracity and evidence in history; shared authority and collaborative practice; historians’ commitment and activism; and

2 Serge Noiret, “An Overview of Public History in Italy: No Longer a Field without a Name”, *International Public History* 2, no. 1 (2019), 1.

3 James B Gardner and Paula Hamilton, “The Past and Future of Public History. Development and Changes”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Public History*, eds. James B. Gardner and Paula Hamilton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 2.

4 Faye Sayer, *Public History: A Practical Guide* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, 2nd edition), 6.

5 Serge Noiret, “Historia digital e historia pública”, in Juan Andrés Bresciano and Tiago Gil (eds.), *La historiografía ante el giro digital: reflexiones teóricas y prácticas metodológicas* (Montevideo: Ediciones Cruz Del Sur, 2015), 73.

6 Paul Ashton y Meg Foster, “Public Histories”, in Sasha Handley, Rohan McWilliam and Lucy Noakes, *New Directions in Social and Cultural History* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 160.

7 Thomas Cauvin, “El surgimiento de la historia pública: una perspectiva internacional”, *Historia Crítica* 68 (2018): 3–26, and Gardner and Hamilton, “The Past and Future of Public History”, 1–2.

especially, the tensions that rise to the surface in public history between education and consumerist entertainment and between academic history and history as a show.

Academic History, Public History and History as a Show

The genesis and consolidation of public history is linked to a series of critiques of academic history. For public historians, whether or not they work in the domain of academic history, the latter exists in an ivory tower, where it is content to stare at its own belly button and ignore the historical work posed by the demands of marginalized and colonized groups whose accounts of the past have been silenced by the academic world. What's more, academic history only shares its products with its own peers. Its work has "more footnotes than readers: but no matter".⁸ And yet, we are told, the past as history is a social construction, one in which the professional historian is just another element. All societies recreate their past and create collective memories, and if the academic historian alluded to turns inward, retreating into himself, not only will he end up isolated and disconnected from the process of (re)constructing a social and historical memory; he will lose social relevance. Conclusion: the historian needs to go outside and face his or her task with these collective memories and recreations of the past.

Nor is there any lack, on the part of academic history, of criticism and admonitions about the perils of public history. Those who practice public history – we are warned – fail to maintain the necessary critical distance regarding the social uses made of history. They fall victim to presentism. They are more concerned with the funding linked to commemorations and fashions than with the demands of historical production itself, more attentive to the ways in which they can show, sell and publicize the product than to the content of the product and how it is produced. The medium and the audience condition the message. Liddington remarks that "some American academics remain cynical about public history, seeing it as a dumbing-down or as opportunistic". And this despite the fact that, as he affirms, "the public history movement does provide excellent examples of creative practitioner-academic collaboration".⁹

⁸ Liddington, "What is Public History", 90.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 86.

The reality is a bit more complex. Among the fields in which one can engage in public history activity, its practitioners include, of course, traditional endeavours such as oral dissemination or written accounts pertaining to the academic realm – conferences, texts published in journals or in the daily press, exhibitions, interviews aired on radio or television, etc. But there are more novel forms of involvement in public history: as advisor for films and documentaries where more and more we find an intermingling of past and fiction, of historical images and imaginary representations of the past; or when we work for public entities, such as in judicial cases or in advising on possible changes of street names, for example; or for private entities, whether in the domain of a family, a business or of specific social groups or communities. These myriad enterprises are accompanied nowadays by a vast digital world comprised of websites, blogs, apps, forums, museums, on-line exhibitions, social networks and platforms that allow varying degrees of interactive and/or creative collaboration by users. And finally, there is the extensive field having to do with all aspects of cultural heritage and touristic patrimony which includes everything from historical settings to theme parks or to the creation of interactive museums.

As if this weren't enough, the public historian must never lose sight of the fact that the digital medium is by nature vulnerable to narcissism – of those who are only interested in telling “their” story – and that in every society there are taboo subjects, the “difficult past”¹⁰ that people would rather not speak about, as well as controversial ways of approaching certain topics. The past is continually recreating itself and constructing itself. It constitutes a non-place of struggles, negotiations and confrontations, where proposals, questions and answers – as well as silences – impose themselves upon one another; it is into this amalgam that the professional historian – for material reasons or out of pure vocation – ventures, as a balanced mediator, as a filter, as an expert or as a committed activist. In one way or another this historian will have to bear in mind that each society not only recreates its past but that each “present” of this past harbors its own beliefs, myths, invented traditions and hoaxes, which are passed on as historical truths, and that these beliefs, myths, traditions and hoaxes reflect and help to propagate certain social relationships ultimately linked to issues of domination and identity, i.e., to social inclusion and exclusion.

If we agree that “what is in play is the debate about our memory in which a broad range of actors with different interests is going to participate” then it all comes down to determining whether “our current challenge” as historians should include – or not – “reminding people of that which society would prefer

10 Thomas Cauvin, *Public History: A Textbook of Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 222.

they just forgot”.¹¹ Or, taking it one step further: if we ought to perform a historical revision of all of the different beliefs and “suspicious truths” from our past.¹² The problem arises when, as we shall see, it is the people themselves, or a great many of them, who prefer to forget or would prefer to stick with a comfortable past more to their liking. Here I would like to offer two concrete examples of recreations of the past. One, very popular with the public, involved a theme park, while the other focused on the traditional festivities of one of Spain’s autonomous regions. Both initiatives relied on the advice and/or silence of academic historians.

Puy du Fou is a theme park in the outskirts of Toledo that in August 2019 presented a 90-minute audiovisual show on the history of Spain starting with King Recaredo’s conversion to Catholicism in 589 and culminating in the beginning of the Spanish Civil War in 1936 – this last event summarized in the space of a Tweet: “a struggle of brother against brother”. The production featured “nearly 200 actors recreating some 2,000 characters decked out in 1,200 historical outfits on a set of 3,900 square meters with 30 galloping horses and water spewed from 60 dispensers.” Naturally, the organizers assert that “they are not historians” and that they simply hope that “people will come away with a sense of pride about their ancestors.” The fact that two academic historians should remark, after seeing the spectacle, that the account is full of “stereotypes” and that “history and legend are mixed together” is not likely to concern the show’s four thousand spectators.¹³ Especially taking into account the fact that, as had been announced beforehand in an economic-business journal, it had received oversight from the Royal Academy of Fine Arts and Science of Toledo and had been sponsored by the Castilla-La Mancha Council of Economy, Business and Employment and by the Municipal Government of Toledo as well as the Federation of Businessmen and the city’s hotel and crafts associations. The debut took place in the presence of a variety of political figures.¹⁴

11 Amada Carolina Pérez Benavides and Sebastián Vargas Álvarez, “Historia pública e investigación colaborativa: Perspectivas y experiencias para la coyuntura actual colombiana”, *Anuario Colombiano de Historia Social y de la Cultura* 46, no.1 (2019), 326–327.

12 Raimundo Cuesta, *Verdades sospechosas. Religión, historia y capitalismo* (Madrid: Visión libros, 2019).

13 Manuel Morales, “España contada a través de fuegos artificiales y danzas,” *El País*, September 1, 2019, 37.

14 Ana Delgado, “Puy de Fou convierte a Toledo en el epicentro cultural de España”, *El Economista*, September 1, 2019, accessed June 21, 2020.

https://www.eleconomista.es/comunidades_autonomas/noticias/10062266/08/19/Puy-du-Fou-convierte-a-Toledo-en-el-epicentro-cultural-de-Espana.html.

The Context of My Activity As a Public Historian

I should begin by stating that Murcia – like so many regions in Spain and in other countries – can be viewed, over the course of a given year, as one great theme park where, in this case, a Catholic-conservative ideology prevails. This touristic-patrimonial-cultural park includes celebrations and popular parades – processions for Holy Week or other Catholic holidays, Moor and Christian commemorations, pilgrimages, the “burial of the sardine” and the “Garden Parade” both observed after Holy Week, “Carthaginians and Romans”, etc. I find nothing to object to in this kind of syncretism. However, when all is said and done and the spectators have, for instance, finished applauding wildly at the final scenes, where the parade of Christian and Kabyle forces culminates in the Arab Emir’s peacefully handing over the keys of the city to the Christian King, this is how the spectators remember it: as a festive event of good will, with no trace of a siege, fight or conflict of any kind.¹⁵ Again, there is nothing wrong with any of this. Except for the fact that the myths and legends recreated this way are taken as irrefutable historical truths, truths that support current identities which result in social inclusion and exclusion, together with processes of social domination. But all people want to do – one might answer – is dress up, have some fun and enjoy themselves. Just because the Christian cathedral was built after razing the existing Mesquite, which had probably been erected upon the ruins of a paleo-Christian church, which in turn had taken the place of a Roman temple, where before there had been. How does any of this matter? The vision of the past as a story of conflicts and of the domination and exclusion of some social groups by others is too disconcerting and hard to bear; no wonder people reject it.

Not only do we fail to accept or acknowledge the past; we also dress it up. And any historian who goes picking apart these recreations is doomed to failure and to ostracism by the social groups controlled by the socio-political powers-that-be. Far better to stay on the sidelines and, at most, research and write or talk about such things with your peers – as long as these peers are not somehow involved in lending historical credence to these beliefs, myths and legends. What we have here are taboos and imaginary spaces, and the historian must choose between declining to make his work public or becoming a *persona non grata*, marginalized by a large part of his community.

¹⁵ Valenmurciano, “Moros y Christianos de Murcia 2018. Representacion de la Embajada de la Entrega de Llaves de la Ciudad de Murcia,” Youtube, September 10, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PO8re10u3dw>.

Then we have the academic context, which also has its share of myths and hoaxes. Here I'll focus on one case. The institutional coat of arms of the University of Murcia includes the figure of the king of Castille, Alfonso X (1221–1284). He is shown sitting on a throne, around him the inscription "Universitas Studiorum Murciana. Anno MCCLXXII". This date, 1272, which would place the University of Murcia among the oldest in all of Europe, has no basis in fact whatsoever. Historical falsehoods aside, it is at this university, in the Department of Theory and History of Education – part of the Education Campus – where I have carried out the activity in public history which I will be describing below. In some cases, these activities, which I have been involved in since 1979, have been solitary ventures and in other instances I have worked with colleagues from my faculty or from other faculties or universities, as well as with people from outside of the world of academia. An overview of this activity will help in understanding the nature and context of this type of endeavor, which I will reflect upon in my final conclusions.

Individual Activities in Traditional Public History

I'm not certain exactly when I began partaking in activities of public history, that is, sharing and disseminating knowledge about topics – with a reasonable standard of historical rigor – relating to the history of education with diverse audiences and with the public at large. It may have been in the late 1970s, when I participated in a round table in the summer courses organized by the Movement for Pedagogical Renovation (MPR) of the region of Murcia. Since then, I have given numerous oral presentations at round tables and conferences and have published texts in specialized journals targeted to professors as well as in the daily press. To a lesser degree I have given interviews on the radio and the television and have shared-divulged to a great variety of audiences my knowledge in the field of education accumulated over all these years. There are two reflections that I would like to share here.

The audiences to whom I have spoken have for the most part consisted of people involved to some degree with the world of education, and my public interventions have usually been in response to petitions from teachers' unions, parents' organizations, teacher training centers, primary or secondary schools, municipal corporations, associations of school principals or inspectors, *ateneums*, or cultural societies. On other occasions I have been contacted by groups – I am referring mainly, though not exclusively, to round tables and conferences on education during Spain's Second Republic (1931–1939), the

pedagogical exile, the teacher purges brought on with the Civil War and Francoism – linked to what has come to be known as the “historical memory.”¹⁶ These groups include organizers of acts in commemoration of some of these historical events, of the creation of new schools or of tributes to specific teachers. Finally, there is another, newer sort of demand, especially from the media: for guidance regarding the veracity of the innumerable statements, information and hoaxes circulating on social media, and about historical-educational matters in general. It seems that in this realm we have a new challenge in public history.

Perhaps I should note that in dealing with topics of current-day interest, I have always made a point of introducing a historical perspective. This is especially important in those texts – 21 of which appeared in *Cuadernos de Pedagogía*, the leading journal of the MRPs, along with others published in the teachers’ union or the Spanish Confederation of Parent-Teacher Association journals and in the daily press – that were briefer and unencumbered by the academic “baggage” of the more “scientific” work carried out in the university context. In many cases it was precisely these texts that were most widely read and shared by professors and by the public with an interest in education.

It is not easy to assess the reach and the repercussion of this sort of individual public-historical activity. Given that much of it was done in response to demands from specific groups or audiences interested in the subject or that it appeared in non-academic media with a wide readership, we can probably assume that it reached a broader audience than if it had appeared in an academic journal. Beyond this observation, I can only think of one example. In one of numerous conferences on education under the Second Republic, I alluded to the aid that Murcia received from the Quakers during the Civil War and to what was known as the “English Hospital,” created to attend to the child refugees in the city. I pointed out that this building – now in possession of the municipal government – had been identified through photographs found in a book by Francesca Wilson,¹⁷ a discovery made possible owing to Siân Roberts’ stay in Murcia as she prepared her doctoral thesis on Francesca Wilson.¹⁸ I remarked

16 This expression refers to the systematically ignored law from December 26, 2007 which “acknowledged and expanded the rights of, and provided means for, measures in favor of those who suffered persecution and violence during the Civil War and under the dictatorship”.

17 Francesca Wilson, *In the Margin of the Chaos. Recollection of Relief Work in and between Three Wars* (London: John Murray, 1944).

18 Siân Lliwen Roberts, *Place, Life Histories and the Politics of Relief. Episodes in the Life of Francesca Wilson, Humanitarian Educator Activist* (Doctoral Thesis, School of Education, University of Birmingham, 2010).

on the fact that there was no plaque or acknowledgement of any sort of the assistance offered to refugees by the Friends' Religious Society in Murcia during the Civil War. A plaque was subsequently approved by the municipal government and installed shortly afterwards, a plaque which – although nothing too serious – had historical inaccuracies of its own.

Collaborative Activities in Public History: The Virtual Museum of History of Education (MUVHE) and The Center for Studies on Educational Memory (CEME) (2004–2020)

In this section, I will relate some of the collective activities in public history that I have been involved in with the MUVHE and the CEME. These activities were made possible by public funding for four research projects – carried out between 2004 and 2017 – dealing with different aspects of the preservation, study and dissemination of the educational patrimony and of the school memory and the teachers' memory.

The MUVHE opened its doors to the public in February 2010. I should acknowledge up front that the idea for its establishment, in 2003, owed to the fact that we did not have the physical space for an actual museum. We had no choice but to make virtue out of necessity; we were determined to create a museum of the history of education, even if it had to be virtual. I should also recognize – in the way of an explanation for the seven-year span between its inception and its opening – that those of us involved in the project lacked experience in such matters, at a time when virtual historical or educational museums of this kind were practically non-existent in Spain. Nor did the private business sector on which we relied for the museum's design and creation have experience in such initiatives. Many meetings were held, much debate and second-guessing took place, and many decisions were made on the spur of the moment. The long, drawn-out process – in which professor Pedro Luis Moreno played a prominent role – unfolded without our being certain about the advantages and drawbacks of the different options we were considering. Years later I summed up this experience, together with that of the CEME, as an “academic-scientific-museumism” adventure. I could well have added the adjective “public-historical” had I known what the term entailed.

From the time of its creation the MUVHE has been located on the server of the University of Murcia (<http://www.um.es/muvhe/user>). It features four galleries,

with various sub-galleries, focused on “School buildings and spaces”, “Furnishings and equipment”, “Scientific and Pedagogical material” and “Library.” There are 19 thematic tours and a fifth gallery containing, at this moment, seven virtual exhibits. Over time the MUVHE has enjoyed a positive, growing trajectory in terms of the number of visits and people registered as well as in the array of the countries of origin of these users. In general, the thematic visits and tours and the online exhibits are the result of studies forming part of research projects and of physical exhibitions held at the CEME. As the MUVHE’s opening coincided with the creation of the CEME, the former operates somewhat independently of the latter, but is functionally connected to it. An effort has been made to ensure that all of the activities carried out by the CEME have a repercussion or reflection in the MUVHE.

The existence of the MUVHE provided the research group with a virtual medium, one accessible to all kinds of audiences, in which to share – with due rigor and combining texts with images – the results of their research on historical-educational topics. However, something was missing. This something was the Center for Studies on Educational Memory (CEME), which was founded in May of 2009 for the purpose of promoting, preserving, cataloguing, studying and disseminating the educational memory and patrimony in general, and that of Murcia in particular (<https://www.um.es/web/ceme>). Featuring a multidisciplinary structure, the CEME is made up of some twenty educators, some retired, from different departments and areas of the Education Faculty at the city’s university, the site of its physical location. It consists of several spaces for the conservation and display of its own and other collections and includes commercial catalogs of school material, didactic-scientific material, prints, maps, textbooks, notebooks, students’ works, photographs, postcards and teachers’ personal files; in this latter case, in collaboration with the University Archives. There are also facilities for hosting activities. Leaving aside for the moment the endeavors of a more academic-formational sort as well as those involving research, cataloguing and the study of material and immaterial educational patrimony, I would like to focus on the two activities that could be considered to pertain more strictly to the concept of public history,

The first of these two activities has to do with exhibitions – of which we have had eight so far –, some of which have traveled to other cities in the region and beyond. In general, online versions have been made available to the public through the MUVHE, while collaboration has included, along with loans of material from the CEME collections, guidance in an advisory role to exhibitions organized in schools, generally for anniversaries and commemorations.

The other activity consisted of the opening of a collaborative and participative public history involving groups unrelated to the CEME. The objective here was not to simply disseminate the history of education among a broad audience

or to preserve, catalog, study and share an educational patrimony; we were seeking to involve a certain, interested contingent of people in actually practicing and producing history – their own history. The chance to do this arose practically by happenstance in the course of a research project on the historical-educational patrimony in the region of Murcia and on the educational memory that was carried out between 2007 and 2010. One of the activities planned as part of this project had to do with a study of the MRPs – especially of the *Movimiento Cooperativo de la Escuela Popular* (Cooperative Movement of the Popular School, MCEP) – that were active in the 60s, 70s and 80s of the last century in the Murcia region and which shared many features with those held throughout the rest of Spain. This group of teachers, who were either retired or close to retirement age, had lost none of their robust sense of associative, union-oriented commitment to their mission as teachers. From the very start of this investigation, we knew that we must implicate this group in the production of their own history. All we had to do was put them in front of the camera and have them – with a minimal amount of guidance and direction – (re)create their own histories. The results can be found in seven recordings made by the technical services of the Murcia university television (TV.UM). The same format, in which the protagonists are encouraged to produce their own history, was used for two other longer recordings dealing with the genesis, evolution and activities of two collectives with a lengthy trajectory in the domain of adult education in the Murcia region. The footage on the dissemination in Murcia at the end of the last century of the ideas and techniques of Freinet served as the basis for the filming of a documentary in 2015 by Alfonso Burgos Risco. Titled *La memoria de las manos. Ecos del legado pedagógico de C. Freinet en Murcia* (*A memory of the hands. Echoes of the pedagogical legacy of C. Freinet in Murcia*), the film, which combines interviews, reenactments and animation, has been shown in different forums and has received various national and international awards.

Public History in a Collective Activity: “An Education for the 21st Century: Views from The Sciences and the Arts” (2015–2020)

There is a clear relationship between what I have expounded upon in the previous section and what follows. This connection stems from the participation-collaboration in the *Sessions*, an event which, under the heading “An education for the 21st century: perspectives from the sciences and the arts”, has been held

in the city of Murcia and in several other of the region's municipalities from 2016 until the present. These Sessions are organized by different components of the collective, alluded to above, that at the end of the last century included the MRPs in Murcia, members of the Union of Education Workers of the Murcia Region (STERM) and the Teachers' Federation of the workers' union *Comisiones Obreras* (CC.OO.). Today it also includes the recently created association *Futuro de la Educación-Región de Murcia* (AFEREM).

While it may have been overwhelmed by the present and the future, it all began with the past, that is, with history. From January 12th through February 13th of 2015 the University Museum of Murcia hosted a reduced version of an exhibit that had been organized in Madrid in 2006 by the National Society for Cultural Commemorations. The subject of the exhibition was the Pedagogical Missions carried out by the Second Republic between 1931 and 1936. The show in Murcia was organized by the retirees and pensioners of the STERM and was sponsored by, among other entities, the University of Murcia; collaborators also included the CEME and the association Historical-Memory-Murcia. The exhibit, which featured documentaries by the photographer of the Missions, Val del Omar, was accompanied by musical and theatrical activities, organized school visits, and a series of talks that included members of the CEME.

The reach and popularity of this diverse array of activities – cultural, pedagogical, historical, etc., – for a diverse public was what gave the organizers the idea of establishing annual Sessions in a similar vein. Under the title “An education for the 21st century: perspectives from the sciences and the arts”, the year 2020 saw the celebration of the series' fifth edition.

As regards to its diffusion and reception, suffice to say that whereas in the first edition, in 2016, activities were programmed in the city of Murcia as well as in nine other of the region's 45 municipalities, in 2020 this number reached 18 municipalities (40% of the total), including the region's largest. Where the organizing entities of the first edition consisted of the Association of retirees and pensioners together with the University of Murcia and the Museum of Science and Water, for the fifth edition of 2020 the Polytechnic University of Cartagena and the Regional Library joined in. As for the number of collaborating entities, the 26 from the first edition had nearly doubled by 2020, to 51. These included, along with the CEME, university campuses and departments, municipal governments, unions, and parent-teacher associations, together with a broad array of cultural, scientific and educational associations, collectives and athenaeums. The territorial expansion of these Sessions, along with the volume and diversity of activities and of the attending public – which includes people of practically all ages, interests, and professions – has also resulted in an extension of its length; where the January-February Session of 2016 lasted slightly

over a month, the 2020 edition, held from January to March, lasted over two months.

The subjects emphasized in the latest editions of the Sessions tend towards those considered of current interest: feminism and gender, ecology, environment and climate change, neuroscience, philosophy, technology, economy, music, theatre, and education – including its methods, innovation, professorship, curriculum, educational policy, sexual education, etc. All of this is presented in a diversity of formats, from talks, round tables and debates to workshops, courses, narrations and storytelling, documentaries, exhibits, concerts, interviews in the media, etc., all for different audiences of different ages. Notwithstanding this engagement with “current” issues, it is also true that history and the past, whether in talks or specific workshops or activities, whether going back in time or finding a novel perspective on certain topics and themes, is always present throughout the Sessions.

Of the many exhibitions, one from the 2018 Sessions deserves special mention. Conceived and put together by the group in charge of organizing the Sessions, the idea behind this exhibit – entitled “The Public School. The Future of Education” – was to provide an overview of some of the key historical moments of the public school in Spain, especially in the 20th century, culminating in a section dedicated to its current situation and its future. Some of the organizing group’s members, who were affiliated with the STERM, had been involved in an exhibit in 1998 titled “Yesterday’s School”, which took place in the framework of a seminar on “Reevaluating the teacher’s work.” I myself had participated in this event with a talk and in selecting other speakers.

In the 2018 exhibition I collaborated as an advisor and observer, doing my best to keep a judicious distance from the organizing group and thus ensure that they were the ones making the decisions about the design and structure of the show. I only intervened in exceptional cases, pointing out possible anachronisms or inaccuracies, for example, or loaning or proposing the use of object or materials. As a rule, my involvement was at the organizers’ request. The petition for my input had arisen in an informal conversation held in the early stages of the design and installation of the exhibit in which we discussed some of the most relevant legal and political milestones in the history of education in 20th century Spain. A chronological review of these landmarks figured prominently on a panel at the entrance to the exhibit.

The structure and distribution of the exhibition space consisted of an “old-fashioned” classroom with the students’ desk in rows, another “modern” classroom where the desks formed a U-shape, a section with a sample of didactic material related to concrete methodologies – Freinet, Montessori, experimental science – and another dedicated to technologies – from the analogical blackboard

to the digital one. In a final section the visitor was presented with “the classroom of the immediate future”: virtual reality and robotics.

Final Reflections

Between the Scylla of the academic historian, closed up within his ivory tower in the generally safe company of his peers, and the Charybdis of history-as-entertainment, ready to entrap anyone daring to venture into the field of public history, there is yet a considerable margin, one whose suitability depends on personal options and on one’s surroundings. In the following lines I would like to offer a few reflections stemming from my own experience as an historian who has tried to juggle – especially in recent years – his academic work with that of a public historian.

The material and digital public history activities carried out in a strictly academic context – the MUVHE and CEME – owe their success to a laudable commitment and effort on the part of everyone involved. Until recently, activities such as organizing exhibits or creating museums or centers for memories, whether virtual or physical, have received virtually no academic recognition. In the criteria considered by universities for promotions and for teacher evaluations – for teachers who often bear onerous class loads – written scientific production constitutes the sole criteria. Activities involving public dissemination simply do not count, nor does anything outside of the context of the university and of the results of research. To say nothing of participating in activities with non-academic audiences, working in an advisory role or divulging scientific knowledge. This reality makes it harder for an academic historian to participate in public history.

Secondly, the path is made by walking. As related above, the first steps of both experiences were taken with trepidation, with doubts about what kind of problems we would encounter and what possibilities might open up before us. With time, and with the human, physical and financial resources available, we began to discover these possibilities. We have all learned from one another. And of the many things I have learned there is one that I would like to focus on: a pedagogical museum or a center for a school memory should tell its own story; it should contain something that distinguishes and identifies it, a common thread that brings together the disparate elements that it contains. The same is true with what is being displayed, especially if we are talking about an exhibition or route through different galleries and sections. The exhibit has to be more than a simple collection of objects for cataloguing, studying and

keeping. For there to be diffusion, there must be a narrative and a story, goals and objectives and specific ways of showing and conveying that part of reality contained in the material and immaterial educational patrimony.

Finally, some reflections relating to the collaboration-participation as a historian working in collective activities in public history. One thing that I have learned over the years is that there are historical subjects and issues that are untouchable, sometimes even in the academic realm. In a society characterized by certain beliefs regarding the past – especially beliefs relating to identity –, to hold that these beliefs, or others, are not irrefutable historical facts but rather beliefs, with their own genesis and evolution over time and therefore susceptible to being studied historically and treated like other aspects of our lives, is a Herculean task. The idea of using history as a science to stand up to recreations of an invented past which, encouraged by certain political, religious, and socio-economic powers, forms the basis for popular ceremonies and celebrations promoted by these same powers, is to run into a wall. We have alluded to how public history, especially in its digital version, can run the risk of stirring up motivations of the wrong sort; instead of “striving for popular participation in the construction of a collective memory and in historical discourse by means of digital technology”, there are those who, thanks to the “narcissist potential of the Web”, simply want to publicize their own individual or group story, “their” own version of the past.¹⁹ We find ourselves with an additional task here, when as professional public historians we are called upon to act as mediators or negotiators of competing historical versions/interpretations.²⁰ In my opinion, and based on my personal experience, there is a certain naivety to this vision, at least with regard to certain contexts and subjects.

There are walls of silence, where the problem resides not so much in what is said but rather in what is hushed and goes unsaid, knowingly, or otherwise. Over the course of my professional life I have encountered cases of glaring silence relating to certain individuals. I have also witnessed resounding collective silences. In one way or another, when up against a wall of traditions, myths, invented legends, and silences, you have no choice but to look for openings, cracks, places in which to create other spaces. Context is decisive in allowing for certain possibilities and closing off others, in providing us with orientation in one direction or another. Subsequently, there should be nothing too surprising about the entities and institutions I have worked with, either

¹⁹ Noiret, “Historia pública e historia digital”, 87–88.

²⁰ Sayer, *Public History*, 17; Ashton and Foster, 158.

because they sought my collaboration or because I was more disposed to work with them. These include, above all, parent-teacher associations from the public-school sector, public schools, teacher groups or unions and cultural or debate societies such as those constituted in the wake of legislation concerning the “historical memory”. Neither should it come as a surprise that every year around April 14^{th21} I’m called on to talk or write something about education and culture during the Second Republic. While your academic interests may lie elsewhere at the time, there is a kind of debt that you feel with certain audiences who look to you for your knowledge of a matter and your way of presenting it. To be certain, the way in which you present it is not always going to be to the liking of part of your audience or readers.

It is this confluence of interests that explains my collaboration-participation with those sectors of teachers who in the final years of Francoism and the beginning of the “Transition” were active in the MRPs and, in democratic Spain, in leftist unions. This collective was made up of teachers – most of them primary school instructors – who were either retired or close to it and who were actively committed to matters of education and to controversial issues such as ecology, feminism, the environment, and the historical memory. From the start of my work with the organization of the Sessions described above, as merely another collaborator – although this wasn’t quite the case – I was aware of how my involvement was serving to confer a sort of academic-university credential to the project. I was also aware – and continue to be so – of the fact that with a group such as this, my presence gradually became less visible and less necessary, required only in certain specific instances.

These experiences have also made me see something that has been pointed out by many public historians: the rewards afforded by holding one’s vision/s of the past up against those of other collectives and examining the coincidences and differences between. Not only has this given me the opportunity to rethink my position on certain matters and topics – among these, historical work itself –, but it has also made me see how the past can be recreated differently by non-academic/university historians. In this case they were primary and secondary school teachers, including instances of history graduates. This group, now constituted as an association (AFEREM), is active today and has its sights set on the future. Standing in stark ideological opposition to the conservative block that currently dominates Murcia, AFEREM seeks to disseminate its own (re)creation of the past, in opposition to others, naturally. This includes plans for the founding of its own pedagogical museum with exhibits, visits, workshops, etc.

21 Day of the proclamation in 1931 of the Second Republic.

This particular experience in the collaboration-participation in (re)constructing the past, together with my experience overall, has made me realize how important it is that academic-professional historians reserve the time and energy necessary to practice history as a science. This is especially true in these digital times in which the acceleration, the spectacle and the audience can prevail over the rigor and the altogether different rhythm required for study, reflection and the sedimentation of knowledge. As Liddington put it, with public history, “what historians gain includes enhanced production skills and wider public reach. What they lose is control over the piece of work, becoming caught up in other people’s agendas, funding, time scales, arguments”.²² Maintaining a balance between what you win and what you lose comes down to individual decisions conditioned by context. From my own, non-transferrable experience, the combination of academic work and divulgation/opening to different audiences reminds me, in part, of the differentiation that Weber established between the politician and the scientist. Except that in this case we would have to make the distinction between history that is academic – and therefore supposedly scientific – and history that is public. I would not say that the time and energy spent on one works to the detriment of the other. But they do require different mentalities, approaches, and work modes, and this is especially evident when a professional historian is making his or her living from the very start in the realm of public history. In such a context, the pressure of the media and the spotlight together with the continued, obligatory engagement with “social networks” constitute a fundamental part of the activity. This is where, to my mind and from my experience, the weakness lies, and where public history risks becoming superficial and disconnected if it is not grounded upon a prior, established practice of history as science.

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²² Liddington, “What is Public History”, 90.

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