

Reflect yourself!? Potential and Limits of a Critical Reflexive Public History

11th Workshop of Students and Young Professionals (SYP) in the Working Group Applied History / Public History in the Association of German Historians (VHD)

July 13-14, 2023, University of Erfurt, Historical Seminar

Deadline for submissions **April 12th, 2023**

How can I reflect on my role in the process of writing and communicating history, make it transparent and put it up for discussion? This question is gaining importance for critical historical work in both research and education; other disciplines have already been addressing this challenge for some time. How fundamentally is critical self-reflection embedded in the study, research, and practice of historical sciences? Does this question matter especially for public history – understood as thinking about history in, with, and for the public? Can public history function as a vantage point for interdisciplinary reflection? In our next workshop, we want to explore the opportunities and limits of a (self-)reflexive scientific practice across disciplines—taking public history as a starting point for discussion.

The workshop will take place from July 13th to 14th, 2023 at the University of Erfurt. It is organized by the Students and Young Professionals (SYP) in the Working Group Applied History and Public History in cooperation with the chairs of Medieval History (Sabine Schmolinsky), Modern, Contemporary History and History Didactics (Christiane Kuller) and History of Science (Bernhard Kleeberg). We cordially invite students, graduates, doctoral candidates and practitioners of public history, history, and other disciplines to submit papers that address issues of (self-)reflection in the process of work and research. Submissions from more established researchers are also welcome.

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In *History and Identity* (2022), Stefan Berger postulated a "self-reflexive turn" in historical scholarship. Since the 1980s, new approaches in historical theory and philosophy have critically explored the constructive character of historical narratives. Correspondingly, the legitimating function of historiography for collective identities has been increasingly problematized. At the same time, the situated character of identity and historical knowledge production has come into focus.

The situatedness and partiality of knowledge was captured by Donna Haraway in her essay *Situated Knowledges* (1988). She criticized the propagated objectivity of the sciences as a "god trick of seeing everything from nowhere" (p. 581) and contrasted it with an epistemology of partial perspective. Only partial, localizable, and critical knowledge that is able to bond with other perspectives, Haraway wrote, would tie knowledge production sustainably to empiricism—"a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a 'real' world" (p. 579). According to Haraway, grappling with the situatedness of one's own gaze makes it possible to stake a theoretically and empirically transparent claim to an informed interpretation of the past and to feed it into a multi-perspective, plural historical discourse. The work of researchers and mediators of history depends on collaboration, access to sources, and linkages to other perspectives to enable intersubjectively tenable statements. Yet Black Studies scholars have repeatedly questioned this notion of sovereign subjectivity (Spillers 1987; Hartman 1997) and pointed towards the incommensurability of subject perspectives (Lethabo King et al. 2020). It shows that the legitimacy of knowledge is based not only on theoretical soundness and empirical foundation, but also on the transparency of their embeddedness in epistemic and social networks.

From the perspective of public history, historical research is understood more sustainably in its social embedding as part of the public conversation about history. This includes in particular the reflection of (structural) privileges and an awareness of who is heard and who is not. Especially when it comes to questions of the politics of memory or identity, public history – in the sense of a positioned, self-conscious transparency – can contribute to an informed discourse about the past in a plural, democratic society.

Public history conceptualized as an investigation of social forms, formats, and communication structures of history, has, according to Christine Gundermann, the "potential to become a reflexive entity for other sub-

disciplines of historical research" (Gundermann et al. 2021, p. 15). In this sense, public history is by no means limited or limitable to historical questions that currently seem to be of public interest. Rather, it puts the focus on the interrelationship between academic knowledge production and public engagement with history in heterogeneous social contexts. To what extent public history has this potential and how it unfolds is one of the guiding questions of the workshop.

We invite researchers and practitioners to share and discuss ideas, reflections and experiences from their working contexts. Where and how does the notion of (self-)reflection play a role in daily research and work, and what follows from that? Does a reflection of one's own point of view occur more as a contingent moment or is it structurally anchored? How does an internalized critical attitude express itself? Is it a silent companion or is it constantly discussed and challenged? Does it sometimes even appear as an impediment to the process of researching, writing, and mediating?

Against this background, proposals for contributions might address the following topics:

- **Terms:** Cultural studies scholar Wanda S. Pillow defines three core elements of (self-)reflection in the research process: "critical awareness and transformation," "insights on power and privilege," and "understandings of researcher and subject self(ves)" (Pillow 2015, p. 423). What theoretical and methodological points of departure are to be found here for historical inquiry?
- **Practices:** In what contexts is reflection called for and by whom? Under what circumstances are self-reflective practices encouraged or prohibited? Must one be able to afford reflection? What conditions are necessary to make sure we cannot omit it?
- **Frictions:** How can one reflect on and assume responsibility for the situational power and impact of one's own actions? Who speaks and who is heard? Do all positions deserve equal attention? How to deal with historical revisionism?
- **Relationality:** Is it possible to stimulate others to self-reflect? Does this always presuppose one's self-reflection?
- **Power of the Archive:** Can (self-)reflection help to achieve an intersectionally informed view on sources, unequal access to knowledge/archives, and (global) hierarchies? Does it help to understand silences in historical narratives (Trouillot 1995)?
- **Critique:** Gender Studies scholar Carol Lynne D'Arcangelis writes: "[...] self-reflexivity is a fraught mechanism for grappling with and dismantling structural privilege" (D'Arcangelis 2018). Where does self-reflexivity reach its limits? Does self-reflection ultimately only serve a continuous self-preoccupation? Does the concept exhaust itself in a neoliberal call for constant reinvention and self-optimization?

We welcome proposals for papers or creative interventions in German or English. **Submissions** (abstract max. 500 words + short biographical note) **will be accepted until April 12th, 2023**. We will inform applicants by early May if their proposal has been accepted or rejected. The workshop will take place at the University of Erfurt; in exceptional cases a digital contribution is possible. In case of acceptance, we ask you to prepare a 15-minute presentation and to send a two-page abstract two weeks before the event to prepare for reciprocal comments.

Access provisions: We aim to make this workshop as inclusive as possible. Please do not hesitate to get in touch if you wish to attend and have corresponding needs. We seek to (partially) reimburse successful applicants' travel expenses.

We look forward to receiving your submissions!

Organizers

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