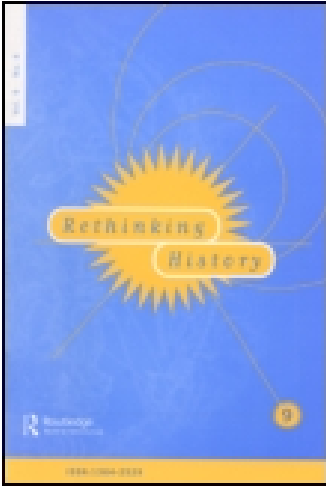


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Editorial

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Editorial

Several books have been published recently accounting for various elements of popular and public history. These books demonstrate a keen interest in new media forms and television, new heritage debates, historical novels, television history and re-enactment. They also show an increased awareness of the international dimensions of the phenomenon and address, in part, an increasingly global compass in terms of engagement with popular forms (Davies 2010; de Groot 2009; Gray and Bell 2010; Korte and Paletschek 2009; McCalman and Pickering 2010; Schlehe, et al. 2010; Schneider 2011; Taddeo and Dvorak 2009; Waterton and Watson 2010). Similarly, work is increasing to expand awareness of the ways in which history has worked in popular culture in modernity more generally and into the early modern period (Melman 2006; Burnett and Streete 2011; String and Bull 2011). The central problems of the ways in which peculiarly popular historical elements such as affect, empathy, enactment and authority work in different cultures and across cultures are crucially important in conceptualising, theorising, and modelling popular history – both in the contemporary, global/glocalised world, and when considering moments in the past. The dialogue between ‘official’, academic, professional history and ‘amateur’, ‘public’, ‘popular’ history is ongoing. It is similarly clearly the case that there is no simple binary between these conceptual locales, that (to take an example) professional historians write historical novels, and that this has been the case since ‘professional’ history began to define itself in the early nineteenth century.

This issue began with the portfolio ‘Popular and public history’ and, when editing it, I saw my brief as focusing on some of the following issues: how study of popular history might work in the future; new ways in which the terms ‘popular’ and ‘public’ might inform one another and nuance scholarship; transnational, intercultural models of pastness; globalisation and public history; cultural translatability. In my own work I had observed variously: the ways in which work on public history often lacks an international dimension; the demand for high-quality work on new technologies and history; the way in which study of public or popular texts invoked multiple historiographies, but also shifted the epistemological ground on which those theories were manifest (also shifting their inherent qualities); our need to think about public and popular aspects of the past in new, ‘emerging’ locales – China, Eastern Europe, South America – while

also remembering that popular history is not simply a contemporary phenomenon.

However, in the locating of scholars and the evolution of the completed project, it has become about many more things, demonstrating, I hope, the flexibility, protean qualities and diversity–centrality of the set of concerns relating to history that we call ‘public’ or ‘popular’. In particular, I think, what the following essays do is demonstrate the ways that the study of history is popularly imagined by various audiences, and, in particular, how historical artefacts, texts and discourses demand a hybrid approach when studying their effects and purposes.

What this collection manifests as, then, is as an iteration of the diversity of historical thinking now. The ways in which scholars here model the historical imaginary or conceptualise experience (and plan for the future) demonstrates the protean nature of cutting-edge historiographical work at present. This is the reason for publishing shorter, ‘intervention’ pieces discussing a side issue, meditation or innovation. In the main, the works presented here engage with questions of nationhood and memory, popular/public and the influence of changing questions and definitions of identity on understanding and interpreting the past.

Thus, the two interventions on China (Müller) and Cuba (Hamilton) remind us that models of the ‘popular’ and the ‘public’ need to be attuned to and sensitive to domestic and local details. ‘Public’ history in the United States means something very different to what it might signify in the Cote d’Ivoire or Cyprus. Indeed, it might be possible, or even preferable, to conceptualise ‘public’ and certainly ‘popular’ history as something particularly, peculiarly western, at least insofar as it is studied in the academy or engaged with internationally. Is popular history something that is specifically ‘western’? Is the desire to understand it globally a means of inscribing an Anglophone model onto other cultures, an attempt at globalising itself? Certainly, popular historical texts are often used to express nationhood and, when deployed by the carrier of a dominant culture – Hollywood, for example – they are the means of creating an imagined global historicised community driven by western models and ideals. Gotelind Müller’s paper demonstrates that, in order to understand public and popular history, it is necessary to comprehend the entire way in which history pervades culture, from history as import to historical education. Müller’s analysis of history in Chinese popular culture exposes some of the faultlines of standard, Anglocentric considerations of the ways in which history works in society by arguing that most of the terminology we might use, as well as the assumptions we might deploy, are predicated upon western models of society, culture and education (as well as of globalisation, aesthetics, historiography and the public sphere).

Similarly, James Opp and Alison Oram show a concern with new directions in heritage studies and, in particular, the ways in which

ephemerality and locale are conceptualised within public history debates. In particular, both these writers pinpoint the ways in which 'heritage' has developed and evolved as a mode of study over the past two decades, encompassing a more theoretically and politically assertive mode of investigation (see Gillman 2010, 174–99; Kymlicka 2001). Both register the concerns of domestic and specific 'place' and 'locale' in identity formation and in contemporary work in the field, in contradistinction to the global. Michelle Arrow's paper points out the nationalism inherent in much popular and public history, but, similarly, the potential for dissident and complicating readings here. History can be used to create a national characteristic which disavows other cultures and attacks alienness; it can also inform a complicated, fragmented sense of ontological fragility which challenges such striving for legitimacy. Hoda Elsadda elucidates the work that popular versions of the past can do in undoing the mythos surrounding nationhood or ideologies of representation. Her paper reminds us that there is still much work to do uncovering testimonies and situating memory (as Hamilton points out, too), particularly in contexts outside the mainstream, such as the mass-marketed memoir.

The papers by William Turkel and myself offer thoughts for the future, wondering just how historians will engage with, on the one hand, emergent technologies, and, on the other, the multiplying ways in which the past is now reinscribed and reconfigured within the public imagination. Taken as a whole, this set of essays seems to me to demonstrate that the discipline is in rude health and expansive mood, confident and interrogative, and more than equipped to deal with the challenges ahead.

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