

Public History at School; the role of students and teachers. An excerpt from a short-scale research on the Greek example

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ABSTRACT

In March 2020, an online survey was conducted on “Public History in the modern Greek School; dimensions, attitudes and limits”. The research was addressed to teachers of Primary and Secondary Education. In the case of Secondary -intentionally- not only to philologists or to ones who teach History, but to all the teachers, since the main goal was for the participants to express their opinion in their broader capacity, that of the active citizen. In this paper are mainly exposed the findings to a specific question (“You are given the view that ‘we must train people who will deal with Public History, but also train ourselves and others in the critique of Public History’. Do you agree or disagree with the above position and why?”.), followed by some basic comments by the author, which are based on relevant references.

KEY WORDS

Public History, School History, educational research, History Didactics.

INTRODUCTION

As Public History is considered any story that differs from the scientific-academic history. Public history is what "academic history" is not. It comes from non-historians and it is not formed exclusively by professionals, but by ordinary citizens, directors, tour guides, teachers, composers, the media, the internet, etc. and is projected through the movies, TV shows, comments on websites and blogs and generally from anything that takes place in the public, always non-academic, sphere. The field of Public History also includes everything that tells us a story about the past: a monument, eyewitnesses' oral accounts, films, views on events, personalities or phenomena of the past that affect everyday life in the present. The boundaries between academic and non-academic history are relatively blurred and the practices of the two can sometimes combine: A television documentary can draw ideas from academic research; a school textbook may refer to comics like Asterix to make its content more “attractive” for young readers (Korte- Paletschek, 2017: 192).

Public History seems to be directly related to memory, trauma and the expression of human emotions and human consciousness. It could also be described as an expression of people's memory and emotions. In that sense it is always related to nostalgia, melancholy, hope or consolation. Its peak coincides with the “affective turn” in the humanities and social sciences, in the mid-1990s. The emotional shift emphasizes the relationship among power, emotion and subjectivity in shaping individual and collective representations, as "the exploitation of fear by those in power, the necessity of grief and mourning and how they are related to history, the fetishism of trauma, the guilt and the shame, the enthusiasm and the fanaticism, the unexpressed emotions, terror, terrorism and torture, moral panic, the duty of memory, as well as many other versions of an 'emotional community' that insists, consciously or unconsciously, on resisting the rational standards of the modern world, are now peculiar and interesting research issues in the field of historical science (Smyrniotis, 2013: 68).

School History is a subject that remains between academic and public history. While monitoring the progress in historiography and periodically updating it by incorporating new

findings and new explanatory formats that are more widely accepted in the field of academic history, it must also adapt to the State Curricula that tend to reflect either the official State ideology or broader assumptions of a society's past. Consequently, the natural space of School History is this vague and ever-changing area, in which the two dimensions of History (academic and public) meet, penetrate and interact. In a sense, school history could in some ways be considered as an "official" public history. It is therefore crucial through the research to form an image about what the teachers in the two levels of education (primary and secondary) know, what they think of and how they want to handle Public History, and especially to understand the way they plan to help their students to deal with public history as it diffuses around them.

THE IDENTITY OF THE RESEARCH

Based mainly on the above, the survey was carried out in March 2020, under the title "Public History in the modern Greek School; dimensions, attitudes and limits". The research was conducted primarily to answer key questions about the knowledge of teachers of Primary and Secondary Education about the phenomenon of Public History (PH) and its parameters and extensions, but also to show the attitudes of the participants towards the overall handling of the phenomenon.

Seventy-nine (79) teachers of Primary and Secondary Education participated in the research. Eighteen (18) (22.8%) of them belong to Primary Education and the remaining 61 (77.2%) work in Secondary Education. Fifty-nine (59) participants (74.7%) are women and 20 (25.3%) men. Most participants belong to the age range of 51-60 years (31 people, 39.2%), only 3 people (3.8%) in the categories 25-30 and 60 and over, while two cumulatively large percentages are recorded in the categories 31-40 and 41-50, with 21 + 21 people in each category and a total percentage of 53.2% (26.6% + 26.6%). Most of the participants are quite experienced in educational field (33 people, i.e., 41.8%, with years of service ranging from 11 to 20), while 29 people (36.7%) belong in the next category, with experience of over 20 years, and 17 people (21.5%) in the smaller category, with experience up to 10 years. In terms of faculties, the participants cover a sufficiently wide range. Most are philologists (PE02) (56, 70.9%) of Secondary Education or teachers (PE70) (15, 19%) of Primary Education, apparently because they are mainly called to teach the subject of History in modern Greek school. However, answers were also given by kindergarten teachers (PE60), theologians (PE01), natural scientists (PE04), English (PE06) and German (PE07) teachers, Methodology of History graduates (PE33), social scientists (PE78) and theatrical studies graduates (PE91.01) [1 (1.3%) for each of the 8 scientific fields]. It is possible that teachers in these faculties be summoned to teach History as a second or third assignment, while others are not legally allowed to teach history; however, it is self-evident that they can have, and thus express, their opinion on the issues of the research, as citizens and members of the wider educational community. An important element, both for the research and for the general presence of teachers in schools, is the fact that 61 (77.2%) of the participants stated that they have completed postgraduate studies, while 18 (22.8%) only have a BA degree. Finally, regarding the place of residence/work of the participants, the answers are distributed as follows: from Athens 35 answers (44.3%), from Thessaloniki 4 answers (5.1%), from mainland Greece 29 answers (36, 7%) and from Greek Islands 11 answers (13.9%).

THE FINDINGS

The process of analyzing quantitative data based on responses could potentially lead to multiple different combinations and to different and useful conclusions. Twelve out of fifteen questions in the survey were closed-ended questions and required answers like "yes/no", "agree/disagree", etc. and/or multiple-choice answers based on specific data. These questions were quantitative requests, mainly related to the knowledge of the participants about Public History and its dimensions and were the main body of the research.

In this paper, though, is presented one of the three open-ended questions, which required the expression of the participants' opinion as well as discussion. The question is as follows: **"You are given the view that 'we must train people who will deal with Public History, but**

also train ourselves and others in the critique of Public History'. Do you agree or disagree with the above position and why?' It must be noted that this view has been expressed in a written published text by a Greek History professor, one of the most famous and acclaimed in the field. His name was not disclosed to the participants and his opinion was submitted anonymously, so that the answers would not be influenced by any positive or negative bias towards the specific researcher¹.

The question was answered by all 79 participants, so 79 answers were received. Only one of them was negative ("I do not agree with the position given to me"), while another one falls into the category of "I don't know/I don't answer", although he/she explains, not with sufficient argumentation, the reason why the participant answers in this way. The remaining 77 answers are in the same, positive, direction. There are answers (21), which simply state "I agree", without any justification for this position. The important thing, however, is the causal approaches found in the rest (56) of the positive answers.

In order to deal as best as possible with the material of the findings, we grouped the participants' approaches into four main categories:

Public History as a **contribution**: (answer 4) to the historical culture of students and citizens, (answer 7) to the historical consciousness, (answer 8) to a more comprehensive historical perspective, (answer 10) to individual and collective self-knowledge, (answer 14) to critical thinking and (answer 15) to the construction of the collective memory and identity.

Public History as a **scientific tool**: (answer 5) a need to preserve documentation in history, (answer 6) an opportunity for reflection and (answer 11) an important tool of historical knowledge. PH is also presented (answer 12) as a contribution to the expansion of historical knowledge and (answer 13) as protection of History from any political exploitation. Finally, PH is presented (answer 17) as, perhaps, the only true way to contact History.

Public History as an **educational tool**: (answer 1) how to be taught and to whom, (answer 2) dominates the body of students because it is more attractive, while (answer 9) teachers are for now generally ignorant or smatterers in their relationship with PH.

Finally, public history is presented (answer 3) as a **need** for the protection of academic history, but also (answer 16) as an integral part of everyday life.

DISCUSSION - SUGGESTIONS

The main points that, in our opinion, one should focus on, studying the data gathered from the answers to this question, are the following:

Public History already exists within the educational context in Greece, even if there are teachers who are unaware -more or less- of its existence and of the procedures of a correct approach. However, this happens unofficially, as we do not find references to any official History Curriculum, not even to the most recent (2021) ones. This is taking place despite the contrary proposals of the scientific community such as the increasingly strong view that History produced in the public sphere should be gradually integrated as content into School History (and possibly as a subject in the Undergraduate or Postgraduate Programs of the University History Departments) (Seixas, 2016) or the aspect that public history offers valuable teaching and thinking opportunities for the secondary school classroom. These come in at least two modes: curricula that puts the students in the role of consumer of public history, and curricula that situates the student as creator of public history (Martin, 2018: 19). In Greek, although references to individual articles or studies exist but are fragmentary, the publication of books on Public History that seek to enlighten students, teachers and the wider society are very few. Indicatively, from 2015 until today the books that have been published are Andreou, A. - Kokkinos, G. – Lemonidou, E. (eds) (2015). *The public history in Greece - Uses and abuses of History*, Thessaloniki: Epikentro, Kokkinos, G. (2018). *Traumatic memory and Public History: Distomo 1944-2018*, Athens: Taxideutis, Eleftheriou, X. (2019). *Public History as a controversial issue – The Holocaust of the Greek Jews on the internet*, Athens: Taxideutis and Exertzoglou, H. (2020). *Public History – An Introduction*, Athens: Twenty-First Publications.

¹ This concerns historian A. Liakos, in his study Liakos, A. (2010), "Will the philosophical schools survive?», 5-7 December 2008, Rethymno, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Crete, p. 62.

Public History in principle enjoys the appreciation of teachers, since it is treated as a contribution to the science of History, but also as a scientific and educational tool, which is now offered for use in the educational context. It is apt to observe that teaching public history does not only mean teaching pupils Public History, but also teaching them to deconstruct PH narratives, i.e., the representations of others (Bühl-Gramer, C. 2018: 203).

Public History is generally considered to be a component of the construction of historical culture and consciousness, of historical thinking and of collective and individual self-knowledge, actually almost to the same degree as academic history is, if not to a greater one, since it gives the opportunity for a more comprehensive and integrated approach to the past.

The research findings confirm the need for the future history teachers as public historians to offer their students narratives which provide some form of temporal commitment or historical orientation in which to know themselves as historical beings. There is also the need for critical perspectives that assist them to deconstruct the narrative 'truths' they have inherited and taken for granted (Parkes, 2018: 131). The research records as crucial for the educational system to have specialized training of teachers, apparently especially of those who teach -or are potentially called to teach- History in the Greek schools. This training must concern both the process and the content of the PH, because otherwise the teachers feel insecure and then run the risk of becoming victims of the particularities of the PH, but also of their own students.

As a result of the teachers' training the equivalent construction of knowledge and culture of students about PH will be possible, in a scientific and acceptable way, so that PH can be used in the teaching of History and engaging in it does not lead to strange and dangerous paths (extremism, racism, disrespect, arbitrariness, etc.). As Seixas states, there is unfortunately a "distance" of history teachers from the academic community, which makes them tend to see historical knowledge as being created by others. So, to the extent that they receive history as inert, opaque information, it is not surprising that they reproduce those presentations when they turn to face the students in the classroom (Seixas, 1993).

This paper concludes with G. Prokopowicz's interesting proposal, almost twenty years ago, regarding the teaching of PH: «a public historian must first be a historian. For me, this means that my teaching is divided between courses in my area of research interest (the Civil War era), survey courses, and public history courses. For my students in Introduction to Public History, this means that they start the course by writing a substantial research paper, to give them a grounding in historical research and writing, and to make sure that every student has some degree of understanding of a specific historical topic. For the rest of the semester, as we looked at different aspects of the practice of public history, in museums, archives, government, private practice, the media, education, and so on, the students had a foundation that they could apply to each of those examples» (Spence, 2004). It is self-evident that this proposal, which we obviously adopt, could be a useful guide for teachers, as it concerns students' engagement in Public History.

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