

POPULAR MEMORY IN PUBLIC HISTORY

A DISCUSSION



October 7, 2017

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HIS 660

Recently, representation in museums has become part of a larger debate over whether or not popular public memory should influence the writing of history and the construction of museum exhibitions. While it is important to note that history is not the same as collective memory, it is also important to realize that memory can help us find and create material that can be considered historical. The trick is to find a happy medium between acknowledging collective memory in history and also in using scholarship to help influence how those memories can help facilitate multiple interpretations of history. Rinjiro Sodei says that people who make history differ from those who write it; thus, it also seems appropriate to say that those who write history differ from those who read it, hear it, or view products of history, such as museum exhibitions. Using the failed Enola Gay exhibition of 1994 as an example will thus help illustrate the pitfalls in trying to both appease public memory while at the same time implementing objective, multifaceted scholarship in a government and publicly funded institution.

Susan A. Crane uses her article “Memory, Distortion and History in the Museum” to discuss what happens when museum-goers and professionals alike believe that their expectations are being ‘thwarted.’ She describes this distortion as being “related to memory and history in the museum is not so much of facts or interpretations, but rather a distortion from the lack of congruity between personal experience and expectation, on the one hand, and the institutional representation of the past on the other.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Of course, visitors to museums have a “right” to expect to be taught something new when they visit such an institution. What seems to cause the major conundrum in the argument about popular memory in historical museum exhibitions is that visitors may not realize the main goal of curators: “to ask visitors to think about how knowledge is constructed, both by curators and by the audience.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Instead, when visitors feel that their visions of history have been distorted, they start to feel skeptical about the museum as an institution of truth and trustworthiness. Both the general public and professionals feel negatively about having their expectations and personal interpretations refuted. The conflict of memory and experience with knowledge is when Crane insists that public controversy really starts to build.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Wulf Kansteiner’s article encompasses the nature of collective memory and how, though not historical in itself, it can influence knowledge. When memory and history collide, Kansteiner says that historians becomes “memory experts” who “explore the social impact of rapidly evolving communication technologies, the uncertainties of collective belonging after the end of the Cold War, and the challenges of coming to terms with war and genocide.”[[4]](#footnote-4) In other words, it is memory that helps both the public and professionals come up with interpretations of history based on the actual facts of what happened, who was responsible, and when it occurred. The problem with instilling popular collective memory in historical exhibitions is that “it often privileges the interests of the contemporary” which “can only be observed in roundabout ways, more through its effects than its characteristics.”[[5]](#footnote-5) The most important thing for both the general public and professionals to keep in mind is that popular consciousness and historical consciousness are two different things, and that, while one may influence the other, they should ultimately remain separate in a finished project.

Rinjiro Sodei writes in his article about the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the controversy over the Smithsonian’s Enola Gay exhibition that one of the pitfalls in writing “acceptable” history is that “each side cancels out unpleasant parts of its own history.”[[6]](#footnote-6) This seems to be where the interference of popular collective memory in historical representation truly presents an ethical problem to historians and curators. The problem here perceived by the general public is that to reveal unpleasant aspects of history is to victimize or demoralize themselves as citizens of a proud nation. Japanese critics would have criticized the exhibition because they see themselves as innocents. History dictates, of course, the opposite. Still, the bombings represent another kind of Holocaust for the Japanese, because “civilian victims died horribly, and survivors are still haunted by their encounter with hell on earth.”[[7]](#footnote-7) On the reverse side, American critics believed that the exhibition should focus on maintaining a commemorative aspect to it and leave historical analysis for the professionals to engage in. They believed that history should make Americans feel proud of themselves and their past; that it should boost confidence rather than make general citizens feel poorly about themselves for decisions made in the past by the government and military officials of the nation. What both sides have in common is that they are both allowing their own collective memories to come before historical integrity and truthfulness.

Sodei says that “any decent presentation of the past will provoke controversy, and only through open and honest discussion can we attain higher understanding of the record of human conduct we call history.”[[8]](#footnote-8) History and memory are two completely different intellectual entities who keep fighting to reside in the same spaces, both in the minds of individuals and in the presentation of history in museums. Kansteiner believes that experience cannot be entirely separated from perception because both are derived from what “we have learned from our immediate and wider social environments.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Both of these things are conditioned by society and popular consciousness. Crane reminds us that for the general public museums are relied on for learning the truth about our human past. She says that memory operates on multiple levels, both as a resource and a fluctuating final product, in which the historical process “is frequently interrupted by interpretation to create the present.”[[10]](#footnote-10) The role of museums and historians is to create “historically conscious individuals” out of the general public. To do this productively and effectively, Crane states that historians must realize the time and patience it will take to engage with the publics they are trying to reach, as well as the personal memories they believe should be part of the production of history.[[11]](#footnote-11)

In all, historians and museum educators need to find better strategies for engaging in discourse with the public and with other professionals about the presence of popular memory in history and whether or not it aids or hinders the presentation of history. History is not supposed to cater completely to public interest, but educate. Ultimately, the role of public history, as put by Sodei, “is to help people look back freely on the past in order to understand the murky present, and we may hope that such understanding will illuminate the path toward a yet unknown future.”[[12]](#footnote-12) If historians and museum educators are constantly trying to accommodate public memory into historical presentation and scholarship, then they will not be able to objectively achieve this goal.

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