

Teaching Global and Comparative Public History

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For over two decades I have been offering core readings courses in our public history program. Many focused on local and regional history, especially community and state- and town-level studies of labor and business history. Last year, however, I began to consider how the teaching of public history might be enriched by bringing in a more cosmopolitan and comparative perspective, offering students an opportunity to explore their field through a wide-angle lens that takes in the whole world. Such an approach, I felt, would augment the more micro-historical training and perspectives often characteristic of public history programs. The end result of this thinking was my creation of a new course, first offered in the fall of 2010: “Readings in U.S. and Global/Comparative Public History.”

The course focused broadly on how historical knowledge and historical interpretations were shaped by different political, cultural, and ideological milieus in various national and regional contexts. Students examined popular narratives, textbooks, media, exhibitions, memorials, and various other forms of public history. Around half of the semester was devoted to coverage of public history as practiced in the U.S.—utilizing well-known books and articles by Mike Wallace, Edward Linenthal, James Loewen, Tony Horwitz, and others. Once grounded in domestic soils, we spent the rest of the semester taking a comparative approach in surveying the history, theory, and practice of Public History in Asia, Africa, South America, Great Britain, Eastern and Western Europe, and in Australia.

We often looked back over our shoulders and compared controversies over nationalistic narratives, ethnic and racial histories, and historic sites abroad with similar ones in the U.S. For example, the Smithsonian Enola Gay controversy was linked to our discussion of Japanese memorials and exhibits in Hiroshima and Nagasaki—covered in Daniel Seltz’s essay in Daniel J. Walkowitz and Lisa Maya Knauer, eds., *Memory and the Impact of Political Transformation in Public Space*. Similarly, the points of contention summarized in Linenthal’s overview of the creation of the U.S. Holocaust Museum were compared to controversies over Holocaust memorials in Europe and to debates over memorials to other victims of mass murder and genocide in Asia and Africa. Site discussions in James Loewen’s *Lies Across America* were often brought up in our discussion of critiques of exhibits and sites in Australia and South Africa—the covered in “Places of the Heart: Memorials in Australia,” a special issue of the Australian Center for Public History’s *Public History Review* (vol. 15; 2008) and in Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee, eds., *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa* (2008).

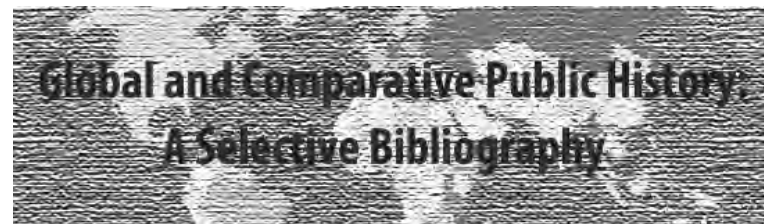
In addition to monographs and articles, the course’s growing resource bibliography (tapped by students for their final papers and available on line at: <http://www.albany.edu/history/comparativepublichistory/>) included visual and aural material especially appropriate to many of the themes we were exploring. For example, I used the excellent Australian four-part radio series “History Under Siege: Battles Over the Past,” produced by Michele Rayner of *Hindsight* (an Australian Broadcasting Corporation – Radio National series). I had scheduled the series for broadcast on our weekly radio show, *Talking History* (www.talkinghistory.org). The series’ focus on public history debates in four nations—France, Australia, Japan, and Argentina—and on historical representations and debates over imperialism, war and militarism, colonialism, and racism in school textbooks, museums,

memorials, and other public venues was precisely what we were examining in the course. I also used Trey Kay’s “*The Great Textbook War of 1974*,” a radio documentary that had just won a 2010 Peabody Award. Focusing on a 1974 Kanawha County, West Virginia cultural war over the adoption of controversial history and civic textbooks, Kay’s piece was the basis of our discussion of textbooks as forms of public history. This worked especially well in conjunction with our reading of selections from Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History* and Larry Schweikart and Michael Allen, *A Patriot’s History of the United States*—as well as with *Hindsight*’s “History Under Siege” Japan segment, focusing—in part—on debates on school textbook treatments of Japanese imperialism in China and Korea.

The course was clearly successful; class discussions were often lively. The final assignment, a comparative and lengthy essay looking at any public history controversy or theme across national boundaries, yielded some imaginative work. One student compared public exhibits, popular literature, and art in South Africa focusing on the Anglo-Zulu war of the 1870s with their counterparts in the U.S.—devoted to western U.S. military campaigns against the Lakota Sioux. Another—in an exceptional 35-page essay—examined legal and public policy, exhibits, media, and textbooks related to the histories of Indian residential schools in the U.S. and in Canada.

I would say the course more than achieved its aim and, informed by feedback from the class, I intend to refine it and offer it again next year.

Gerald Zahavi is professor of history at the University at Albany, State University of New York. He founded Talking History, an aural history production center with a weekly FM radio program that is also broadcast over the Internet (www.talkinghistory.org), co-founded the Journal for MultiMedia History, and helped establish the interdisciplinary Documentary Studies Program at the University at Albany, a program which he now directs.



See the linked resource bibliography to this article and my course at <http://www.albany.edu/history/comparativepublichistory/>