

Christine Gundermann et al., Key Terms of Public History, Berlin, Boston (De Gruyter Oldenbourg) 2025, 292 p., 7 ill. en coul. (Public History in European Perspectives, 2), ISBN 978-3-11-126253-6, DOI [10.1515/9783111460727](https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111460727), EUR 59,95.

rezensiert von | compte rendu rédigé par
Serge Noiret, Bologna

Key Terms of Public History (now PH) is the second volume in the series *Public History in European Perspectives*, with the publisher De Gruyter-Oldenbourg as an English translation of *Schlüsselbegriffe der Public History* (2021). This series of ten essays, published in 2025, is also [available in open access on the OAPEN Foundation platform](#). An impressive international bibliography completes the book. Each chapter can be read independently of the others. Essays are structured similarly: they begin with an example and »take a brief historiographical look at the term and the concepts behind it«.

Eleven authors from different humanistic disciplines highlight how PH has become strongly transdisciplinary in Germany and beyond. What distinguishes this book from other PH-textbooks is that each chapter is not directly signed, but we know which authors are mainly responsible for the key terms. Christine Gundermann appears to be the primary editor of the project, as her university supported the Public History Network administratively, while the German Research Foundation (DFG) sponsored it.

The volume is »aimed at students, teachers and practitioners who deal with history in the public sphere and offers approaches to the theoretical foundation of PH«. It examines some of the best academic practices in PH from a German-speaking perspective. The choice of key terms fosters a particular theoretical and academic view of PH, which is understood as the study of the communication of history and is described as a transdiscipline and a sub-discipline of academic history. The book has been deeply influenced by how history didactics hegemonize – also in its theoretical premises – the field of PH in Germany.

The project required considerable effort to develop complex theoretical ways that describe how history is communicated. The concept of authenticity in historical representations across different media, the role of emotions and experience in historical engagement, and the dynamics of historical culture and memory are transversal to all chapters. The key term »historical culture« refers to the process of communicating history, which is also achieved by enlightened amateurs practising PH and enriching the field beyond scholarly practices – a point that isn't explicitly stated in the essays. PH practitioners address social, cultural, and ethical issues related to the communication and use of the past in



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris |
publiée par l'Institut historique
allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

the public sphere. Would these practitioners be accepted here as public historians, even with no academic background?

The book states that applying historical thinking to PH ensures that engagements with the past are not a passive consumption but an active, critical, and reflective process that empowers individuals. The key term »Historical thinking« fits very well into history didactics. It means fostering a reflective historical consciousness, which enables people to understand their past from a present-day perspective influenced by contemporary motivations.

In total, the book provides ten key terms of PH that are considered »a building block for its theorisation«, which, strangely, avoid confronting its proposed guidelines with other international interpretations. Understanding the relevance of public participation to the study and production of history is central to the field of PH. Nevertheless, the concept of mediation (authority sharing) has been avoided on purpose. How historians, as mediators, interact with communities in search of their history is not contemplated in the book, even if questioned transversally in many chapters. Mediation determines the specificity of PH, based on participative original research and the creation of new archives through crowdsourcing procedures and forms of authority sharing. Even avoiding writing about mediations, the book's approach to historical thinking remains quite subtle when it supports the fact that the making of history should be more accessible, more participatory, and more connected to present-day public engagement with the past. Nonetheless, the key term of historical thinking aims to provide tools and a transparent normativity for PH empirical research, listing criteria for evaluating »good« representations of the past in specific learning contexts.

One of my preferred key terms in the book is »Performativity« and how historical performances, such as reenactments, illustrate how the past can be made alive and reinterpreted through various cultural products. The act of doing history (the performative production and appropriation of history) is a cultural practice occurring within a social system in which the production of a narrative allows for a participative construction of historical meanings generated through interactions between performers and audience through a performance. Performativity offers a theoretical framework for understanding how history is actively produced and received in the public sphere. It speaks to a wide range of multimodal, multimedia, and performative phenomena that are crucial to PH.

»Memory« is also a very central key term in PH and is thought independently of the German concept of *Erinnerungskultur*, although it draws heavily on such an academic approach. In contrast to history that aims to describe the totality of past events, memory is used here as a metaphor through which individual remembering characteristics contribute to the construction and reproduction of collective identities within »communities of memory«. PH should approach the study of memory by critically

19.–21. Jahrhundert – Histoire contemporaine

DOI:
[10.11588/frrec.2025.4.113988](https://doi.org/10.11588/frrec.2025.4.113988)

Seite | page 2



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris |
publiée par l'Institut historique
allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

evaluating different approaches to memory across various academic disciplines. Memory is not a passive metaphor or storage unit made of interdisciplinary theories, but an empirical, dynamic, negotiated, cultural, and political concept that shapes identity through media, rituals, and institutions.

The key term »Reception« is a crucial heuristic and analytical concept for understanding how the past is consumed, interpreted, and ultimately shaped in the public sphere. The chapter frames reception in dialogue with other concepts used in PH, not merely as passive consumption of historical narratives, but as an active process of meaning-making that directly influences the creation of PH products. The German concept of transformation in the field of cultural heritage suggests a conscious action, whereas the key term reception emphasises the unconscious reproduction of already established expectations. Reception focuses on the mechanisms of recognition associated with public expectations. Ultimately, the chapter on reception serves as a theoretical building block for the theorisation of PH by emphasising the necessary shift from focusing solely on historical content to critically analysing the intricate processes by which diverse audiences encounter, understand, and reproduce the past.

The key term »Heritage« is one of the book's most significant contributions, positioning cultural heritage not as a static historical object, but as a dynamic social practice and a critical object of research for PH. Heritage is identified as one of the four basic concepts underpinning the theorisation of PH in this volume, alongside memory, historical culture, and reception. The authors describe how the intangible nature of cultural heritage arises solely from an »attribution of value« by heritage communities rather than from the materiality of the object itself. Absent here is a needed reference to the 2005 Faro Convention,¹ which redefined heritage as part of inheritance communities, citizens as active participants in constructing meanings and directly engaging with the management of their historical sites.



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris |
publiée par l'Institut historique
allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

¹ European Council. [Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society](#) (Faro Convention, 2005). Faro, 27 October 2005.