

The Berkeley-Berlin-Freiburg-Istanbul-London-Vienna Early Modern History Exchange 2022

The Public Sphere and Early Modernity

CEU, Vienna, 14-18 August 2022

The 2022 edition of the [Early Modern History Workshop](#) brought faculty and students from the University of Berkeley, Humboldt University Berlin, Kings' College London, Sabanci University Istanbul, and the University of Freiburg to Central European University in Vienna. The topic this year was public history and the role of the early modern period (ca. 1450-1800) in public debate both past and present. The participants engaged in discussions about the production of historical narratives, the distinction between public and popular history, and propaganda, as well as the role and responsibility of professional historians in the production of public historical knowledge. Relying on three seminal texts (Marko Demantowsky, Albert Howard, and Michel-Ralph Trouillot), the conversation explored collective memory and national identity, political and cultural discourses within which historical knowledge is being produced, and the power employed to shape narratives and to administer silences upon the past. Central to the discussion were questions about the sites of public history – museums, textbooks, national celebrations, and social media – as well as the place of historians within these sites when producing or challenging the “basic narratives” of public history. Debates also revolved around the multifarious nature of the public, or rather: the “publics”.

The participants also addressed these questions from the perspective of their own research. For example, the participants talked about authorship and knowledge production in early modern recipe books (Julia Martins, London) or the body and sexuality in private and public spheres (Aydin Baran Gurpinar, Istanbul); about images of the historical “other” in contemporary national identity-formation (Oana Avram, Vienna) as well as identity-formation in intercultural encounters with the “other” (Dan Rafiqi, London); about the role of humour in the use of historical memory in today’s public sphere (Oleksii Rudenko, Vienna), and the role of graffiti on public buildings and in self- and group representations (Nimet İpek, Istanbul); about gender and agency in the early modern political space (Nadine Rüdiger, Freiburg), about symbolic performativity in the pre-modern public sphere (Kirsten Becker, Münster), and the relationship

between “private interest” and “public office” and their role in early modern political discourses (Andreas Häckermann, Berlin).

During a field trip to Vienna’s Neidhart Festsaal (Wien Museum) the participants had the chance to witness first-hand the transformation of a little-known frescoes room into a space of public history. One of the curators of the room and head of education at Wien Museum, Nathaniel Prottas, talked about the dedication and preparation that it took to turn the Neidhart Festsaal into an attraction not only for art and poetry lovers but for broader audiences, including groups of schoolchildren and families. In order to tell the story of Neidhart and of the wall frescoes, the curators installed interactive screens, headphones with early-fifteenth century music, and wood tablets with information regarding early modern cuisine, clothing, work and festivities. The conversation in the Neidhart Festsaal unfolded around the criteria and strategies based on which museums turn their space into sites of public history, how they address different audiences, and build historical narratives in dialogue with them; how this involves work with focus groups, museologists, art and literary historians. The Neidhart Festsaal is an example of how a fifteenth-century space represented in bits through various incomplete mural scenes can be made stimulating and intellectually available to groups of various ages and interests.

The Wien Museum’s experience also informed the debates in the workshop. Without defining the concept of public history and hence constraining it to a particular theory, the workshop concluded with an array of intellectually challenging questions, most of them methodological, that prompted everyone to consider their research from a new angle. Having set several parameters for future reflection, this year’s discussion examined the role that early modern history has in public imagination and hence the importance to address its deployment in political and cultural discourses.