

Working Group: Toward a History of Civic Engagement

This working group will frame a series of interlocking research projects that can challenge our understanding of “shared authority” and “civic engagement.” Each of us has an investment in the idea that public historians should put themselves in a position of service. Indeed, people have always used history as a way to give shape to a plan for addressing injustice. At the same time, the power dynamics in play in the field of public history can undermine true solidarity and derail the potential of historical inquiry to promote social justice and enable social change.

The long term goal of this working group is to begin to trace a new branch in the genealogy of public history, one that will lead us to a more critical understanding of how work in our field has been and/or can be a foundation for social activism. We want to more carefully define "civic engagement," turning our perceptions upside down to find historical precedents and case studies in which it was the popular history makers who leveraged public history in order to advance their own political goals.

Underlying this project are a series of fundamental, interlocking questions: Have scholars and practitioners successfully set aside authority, putting our expertise to work in ways that allow disenfranchised groups and individuals to shape a useable past? Have individuals, groups, or organizations effectively leveraged historical research and/or collaborated with public historians to put history to use for their own social justice agendas? How? When? Under what circumstances? What are the roots of this thing we have come to call "civic engagement" and how do we know when it is working?

In preparation for our meeting in Monterey, Working Group members have been grappling with a series of questions.

First Question Set: When you think about the aspects of your own research and work that seek to achieve “civic engagement,” what traditions do you draw on? What precedents or models do you recognize?

Second Question Set: What barriers limit the extent to which history has been or can be used as a foundation of social activism? How can we reframe our work to help breach those barriers?

Third Question Set: How does your research or could your research help us approach our core questions in a concrete way? How might you re-frame your research as an article or a chapter in a larger project to historicize, define, and theorize civic engagement or socially active public history?

These questions fueled a pre-conference conversation about our research and about our experiences in the field. Participants began to trace a timeline for the evolution of a public history practice engaged in the promotion of social justice. We also began to expose some of the larger challenges we face in our effort to theorize and historicize the place of political activism in public history.

Participants began to critically examine their icons and role models, in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of politically active public history. Because we wanted to explore difficult truths about our home institutions and our own research, we decided to keep our pre-conference discussions private. The creation of this safe space, allowed us to raise profound questions about institutional structures, the nature of activist relationships, and the role that experts play in them. Taken as a whole, our pre-conference conversation began the hard work of tracing a history of power that is deeply embedded in academic and cultural institutions and in our own practice as public historians.

There is still much work to do, and we invite you to join us in Monterey to enter into a conversation about where this inquiry should lead.