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“And what Do You Do, Exactly?” Comparing Contemporary Definitions and Practices of Applied History

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Abstract: In the last few years, the notion of applied history has seen a notable rise in interest among historians. Arising out of questions related to contemporary concerns, such as political extremism and Covid-19, several projects have taken up the challenge to address these questions and other issues by looking to the past, thereby furthering the idea that applied history warrants the attention of professional (academic) historians. The concept of applied history itself is, however, not new, begging questions of how these new projects use the term and how this usage relates to older definitions and methods associated with the term. This article shows that much of the most recent ‘wave’ of applied history has tended to present itself as closely related to history and policy, distinguishing itself by either drawing a hard line between public and applied history or by ignoring public history altogether. On the other hand, some have defined applied history as an approach or sub-field of public history, sometimes leading public historians to assume that these new groups are merely, and unhelpfully, putting a new logo on an old brand. This article offers a thorough overview of these contending developments and argues that the current conceptual and methodological confusion about applied history is detrimental to anyone relying on the term. Essentially, when a non-historian seeks the assistance of an applied historian and asks the logical question “and what do you do, exactly?,” the current uncertainty can result in major and off-putting confusion about what the term actually means.

Keywords: applied history, history and policy, concept, methodology

In October 2016, just before the US presidential elections of that year, Graham Allison and Niall Ferguson launched the

Applied History Manifesto.¹ With this online publication, they highlighted the start of the *Applied History Project* at Harvard Kennedy School’s Belfer Center and pleaded for better cooperation between policymakers and historians. Most notably, they argued that historians should advise the new president once they came into office via a ‘White House Council of Historians,’ echoing a 2007 British proposal for the appointment of a ‘Chief Historical Advisor.’² Allison and Ferguson’s paper attracted much attention and renewed a much older debate about the role of history in politics and policy. However, the focus on a White House Council obscured the fact that their manifesto mattered first and foremost with regard to the term ‘applied history.’ The manifesto’s first line stated that applied history “is the explicit attempt to illuminate current challenges and choices by analyzing historical precedents and analogues,” a definition that quickly became a focal point for historians interested in the concept.³

With their opening statement, Allison and Ferguson indeed offered their own definition of applied history and created an impetus for a broader debate about what the term stands for, what practices it covers, and who can be considered an applied historian. Yet, almost six years and one presidential election later, that debate has not really taken off. Although the start of the Applied History Project coincided with efforts by other academics in the ‘field’ of applied history, an extensive international discussion about the term is only beginning to mature. A 2018 roundtable in *The Public Historian* initially did little to bolster the conversation, and

1 Graham Allison and Niall Ferguson, “Applied History Manifesto,” Belfer Center, October 2016, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/applied-history-manifesto>.

2 “Call for Government to Appoint Chief Historical Advisers,” *History and Policy*, December 4, 2007, http://www.historyandpolicy.org/docs/chief_historical_adviser_release.pdf.

3 Olga Manoljlovic Pintar, “On Public/Applied History,” *Currents of History* 3, (2018), 171–92; Jeremy Adelman, “Who Needs Historians,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 9, 2016; Harvey Day, “Does the President need help from historians? Top academics propose new ‘historical council’ to help the White House avoid mistakes like the Iraq war,” *The Daily Mail*, August 24, 2016; Gillian Tett, “History lessons for the White House,” *Financial Times*, September 2, 2016; Moshik Temkin, “Historians Shouldn’t be Pundits,” *The New York Times*, June 26, 2017; Priya Satia, “The Whitesplaining of History is over,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 28, 2018.

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subsequent seminars and workshops have not yet led to major publications.⁴ A substantive overview of the past, present, and future of applied history only appeared in December 2021, when Harm Kaal and Jelle van Lottum included such a summary in the third volume of their new *Journal of Applied History*.⁵

This absence of deeper debate is not only unfortunate from a scholarly perspective but also poses a practical problem. Given that applied history is directed towards non-academic audiences, those audiences are first in line to ask “what do you mean by applied history?” and “what can an applied historian do for me?” Yet, due to the lack of a proper definitional and methodological discussion amongst its practitioners, the answer that currently best describes applied history is akin to “you’ll know it when you see it,” reflecting an earlier and generally rejected definition of public history.⁶ Particularly unhelpful thereby is the fact that applied history is regularly framed as just another name for public history, contrasting the heavily policy-focused definition of Allison and Ferguson.

This article discusses the origins and effects of this terminological confusion and offers an additional starting point for further conversation about the field. It does so by drawing from parallels with existing ‘history and policy’ and ‘public history’ approaches, while the central question posed is the same as the one that all public historians sooner or later face from their audiences: “what is it that you do, exactly?”⁷ The text seeks to answer this question by analyzing several applied history initiatives, focusing on the more recent projects but including older ones as well. Importantly, this analysis does not seek to determine which types of applied history are ‘better’ or ‘worse,’ but it does mention some of their individual benefits and disadvantages. Similarly, the article does not aim to arrive at an overarching synthesis about what applied history stands for (which has already proven difficult for public history),⁸ but it does attempt to summarize, categorize, and streamline what is currently covered by the term. In this sense, the article provides a much-needed handle for researchers who are new to applied history and offers a point of discussion for more ‘senior’ groups involved in the topic.

⁴ Applied History Roundtable, *The Public Historian* 40, no. 4 (2018), 11–63.

⁵ Harm Kaal and Jelle van Lottum, “Applied History: Past, Present, and Future,” *The Journal of Applied History* 3, (2021), 135–54.

⁶ “About the Field,” *National Council on Public History*, accessed February 11, 2021, <https://ncph.org/what-is-public-history/about-the-field/>; Thomas Cauvin, “New Field, Old Practices: Promises and Challenges of Public History,” *Magazén* 2, no. 1 (2021), 17.

⁷ Todd Shallat, “We Who Would Sell History?,” *The Public Historian* 1, no. 1 (1978), 81.

⁸ Cauvin, “New Field,” 16.

1 Applied History, or History and Policy?

In order to understand what applied history is today, it is important to recognize its connections to contemporary crises. Almost all recent applied history projects have their roots in current events and in historians’ motivation to get involved with situations or evolutions that (parts of) society deem problematic.⁹ Applied history projects, such as the one at the Belfer Center, indeed benefitted from the large-scale uncertainty following the unforeseen results of the Brexit referendum and the lasting competitiveness of the Trump campaign.¹⁰ The emergence of Covid-19 only added to this fertile ground, as the pandemic encouraged another round of initiatives. For instance, in May 2020, Dutch scholars Beatrice de Graaf, Lotte Jensen, Rina Knoeff, and Catrien Santing launched their own applied history manifesto in the Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*, arguing that historical insights should be considered when tackling ‘wicked problems’ such as the Corona crisis.¹¹ Similarly, the *Journal of Applied History* included three open-access articles on pandemics in 2020, giving the newly established publication immediate and concrete relevance to policymakers.¹²

The fact that most recent applied history projects have their origins in current events ensures that they share some

⁹ Often, this involvement is seen as connected to the recurring job crises in academic history, although not everyone agrees that this is a relevant factor: “First National Symposium on Public History: A Report,” *The Public Historian* 2, no. 1 (1979), 7–8, 19, 55; Benedetta Giuliani, “Dalla public history alla applied history: Ruolo pubblico e funzione politica della storia nel recente dibattito storiografico angloamericano,” *Diacronie* 32, no. 4 (2017), 6–10; Henry Rouso, “Applied History or the Historian as a Miracle-Worker,” *The Public Historian* 6, no. 4 (1984), 68, 72–73.

¹⁰ Bram De Ridder, “En plots belde iedereen een historicus,” *De Stand-aard*, February 13, 2017; Temkin, “Historians Shouldn’t be Pundits.”

¹¹ Beatrice de Graaf, Lotte Jensen, Rina Knoeff, and Catrien Santing, “Dossier Toegepaste Geschiedenis – Aan de slag! Een manifest voor ‘applied history,’” *Historici.nl*, May 13, 2020, <https://www.historici.nl/aan-de-slag-eeen-manifest-voor-applied-history/?type=bijdrage>; Jo Guldi and David Armitage, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

¹² Bram De Ridder, “When the Analogy Breaks. Historical References in Flemish News Media at the Onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Journal of Applied History* 2, (2020), 1–16; Nathaniel L. Moir, “To Boldly Remember Where We Have Already Been. Revisiting the Cutter Polio Vaccine Incident during Operation Warp Speed,” *Journal of Applied History* 2, (2020), 17–35; Beatrice de Graaf, “Taming Pandemics in International Relations. Why Do States Cooperate in Transboundary Crises? An Applied History Perspective,” *Journal of Applied History* 2, (2020), 36–61. “Journal of Applied History,” Brill, accessed February 11, 2021, <https://brill.com/view/journals/joah/joah-overview.xml>.

basic features. Although de Graaf, Jensen, Knoef, and Santing did not cite Allison and Ferguson directly, both the 2016 ‘American’ and the 2020 ‘Dutch’ manifestos argued that applied history is mainly about addressing a lack of historical insight in policymaking. Allison and Ferguson deplored “the fact that key decision-makers know alarmingly little not just of other countries’ pasts, but also of their own,” while the Dutch scholars criticized their prime minister for stating that “one should be careful not to have a jurist or historian making all the decisions.”¹³ Their manifesto argued that “the Netherlands are internationally far behind when it comes to involving humanities scholars in policy and government,” despite the staggeringly high number of Dutch politicians with history degrees.¹⁴ De Graaf, Jensen, Knoef, and Santing hailed Germany as a leading applied history nation, primarily on the grounds that an important German Covid-19 advisory council included three academic historians.¹⁵ The American and Dutch manifestos indeed shared the viewpoint that a lack of historical expertise in policymaking currently exists; that such historical expertise would be valuable for public policy; and that academic historians therefore deserve a seat at the governmental table, or at least close to it. This version of applied history currently features most prominently in academic publications, whereby it has given rise to the caricature of the power-hungry and elitist applied historian.¹⁶

¹³ This criticism of policymakers has been regularly repeated by historians. See for example Margaret Gowing, *Reflections on Atomic Energy History: The Rede Lecture 1978* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); David Lowe, “Politicians, History and Policy,” *Australian History and Policy*, November 13, 2017, <https://aph.org.au/2017/11/politicians-history-and-policy/>.

¹⁴ Bram De Ridder, “Dossier Toegepaste Geschiedenis – De (on)macht van historici,” *Historici.nl*, September 4, 2020, <https://www.historici.nl/dossier-toegepaste-geschiedenis-de-onmacht-van-historici/?type=bijdrage>. An explanation for this discrepancy between the number of trained historians in politics and the lack of historical thinking in their work is offered by Yaacov Y. I. Vertzberger, “Foreign Policy Decisionmakers As Practical-Intuitive Historians: Applied History and Its Shortcomings,” *International Studies Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (1986), 223–47.

¹⁵ “Dritte Ad-hoc-Stellungnahme: Coronavirus-Pandemie – Die Krise nachhaltig überwinden,” Leopoldina: Nationale Akademie der Wissenschaften, April 13, 2020, https://www.leopoldina.org/uploads/tx_leopublication/2020_04_13_Coronavirus-Pandemie-Die-Krise-nachhaltig-überwinden_final.pdf; David Matthers, “Germany enlists humanities scholars to end coronavirus lockdown,” *World Economic Forum*, April 26, 2020, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/german-humanities-scholars-enlisted-to-end-coronavirus-lockdown/>; For political critique of their involvement, see “heute journal 14 April 2020,” ZDF, April 14, 2020.

¹⁶ Marijke Huisman, “Uit de redactie: Publieksgeschiedenis,” *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 134, no. 3 (2021), 359.

Beyond such unfortunate stereotypes however, critics of the recent initiatives were right to highlight that longstanding practices of using history for policy-making might in fact obfuscate the need for ‘applied history’ altogether (why use a fashionable new word for something old?) or, vice-versa, that applied history is irrelevant because academic historiography has long surpassed policy-oriented research (why use a new word for something non-important?).¹⁷ The authors of the manifestos preempted both of these critiques by stating that applied history is indeed a cover term for several activities that have existed for a long time but that were only recently pushed out of mainstream historiography.¹⁸ Graham Allison and Niall Ferguson argue that applied history “had been a major strand in mainstream history until recent decades” and traced its origins “back at least to Thucydides,” while Ferguson and Robert Crowcroft considered Oxford scholar R.G. Collingwood as a modern founder of applied history.¹⁹ Their Dutch counterparts agreed with the ancient origins of applied history and identified Cicero and Jacob Burckhardt as potential predecessors, much like Leonardo Bruni and Lodovico Guicciardini had earlier been identified as predecessors to public history.²⁰ Both manifestos agreed that contemporary academic historians had simply denounced and then forgotten the value of history-inspired policymaking, a situation that should now be reversed by “revitaliz[ing]” and “think[ing] more systematically” about applied history.²¹

Considered from this vantage point, many new applied history projects indeed share a focus on ‘history and policy’ or perhaps more accurately labelled, ‘history in policy.’ Although both manifestos consider applied history a ‘big tent’ and suggest that the label should not be

¹⁷ Adelman, “Who Needs Historians”; Emma Hakala, “Applied History or Inflated Expectations – How to Use History (and Historians)?,” *Historians without Borders*, August 17, 2017, https://historianswithoutborders.fi/en/applied_history/.

¹⁸ Kaal and van Lottum, “Applied History,” 137–138. See also Robert Crowcroft, “The Case for Applied History: Can the study of the past really help us to understand the present?,” *History Today* 68, no. 9 (2018), <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/feature/case-applied-history>.

¹⁹ Niall Ferguson, “Niall Ferguson. Speech – ‘Historians Against Brexit,’” *Historians for Britain in Europe*, May 24, 2016, https://web.archive.org/web/2021*/http://historiansforbritainineurope.org/; Robert Crowcroft, “The Case for Applied History.”

²⁰ Paul Knevel, “Public History. The European Reception of an American Idea?,” *Levend Erfgoed. Vakblad voor public folklore & public history* 6, no. 2 (2009), 4–8.

²¹ Allison and Ferguson, “Applied History Manifesto”; De Graaf, Jensen, Knoeff and Santing, “Aan de slag!”

used for policymaking alone, it is clear that they deem applied history's connection to matters of government its main aspect. This tendency is found across the field: through projects such as "A Westphalia for the Middle East" the Engelsberg Programme for Applied History is soundly policy-oriented;²² while the academic *Journal of Applied History* was preceded by *Geschiedenis en beleid* (a Dutch website supported by the Royal Netherlands Historical Society [RNHS] that aimed to use historical research as a basis for critical reflection on contemporary policymaking).²³ Moreover, nearly all of these history and policy projects are currently housed at academic institutions, creating the somewhat ironic situation that the supposedly highly societal practice of applied history is still firmly buttressed within university walls, despite growing interest by non-academic organizations.²⁴

The conflation of 'applied history' with 'academic history for policymaking purposes' has deep roots, both in an American and in a European context. Possibly the earliest proponent of the term 'applied history' was Benjamin Franklin Shambaugh, head of the Political Science Department at the State University of Iowa (now University of Iowa). In the preface to his *History of the Constitutions of Iowa* (1902) Shambaugh remarked that "a more intimate knowledge of the political history of our own Commonwealth will not only inspire local patriotism, but give us a better perspective of the political life of the Nation."²⁵ He was able to put this ambition into practice when, in 1912, he launched the Applied History Book Series via the State Historical Society of Iowa, of which he was also a founder. Following Shambaugh's definition of applied history as "the use of the scientific knowledge of history and experience in efforts to solve present problems of human betterment," the series informed legislators on a wide range of political and social issues.²⁶ Shambaugh and his students sought to maintain a firm connection between

university and public policy, putting their historical research to work in service of the State's policymakers, an approach that is mimicked by the current applied history manifestos.

Still, this early and continuing connection between 'applied history' and 'history and policy' does not mean that both terms are always used interchangeably. One example of this is with Alix Green, who, in 2016, commented extensively on the role of historians in government but preferred to label this as "history with a public purpose."²⁷ Yet another term was provided by Carolyn Holbrook and David Lowe, who argued in early 2021 that 'policy history' might perhaps be too narrow a term but that 'Public History,' 'Applied History,' and 'History in the public interest' are all too broad and do not convey a sense of urgency.²⁸ Perhaps the best example of this terminological flexibility is the aptly named and widely cited History and Policy initiative, founded in 2002 by British historians. It has never fully embraced the label 'applied history' although it is "inspired by the belief that history can and should improve public policy making, helping to avoid reinventing the wheel and repeating past mistakes."²⁹ In 2006, John Tosh argued that "the influence of the History and Policy (H&P) website depends to a considerable extent on the reputation and credibility of applied history, the genre to which it unquestionably belongs."³⁰ Yet the H&P website actually mentioned 'applied history' only three times between 2002 and 2019, and less than a handful of papers openly considered history as something that can be 'applied.' Likewise, the Australian Policy and History website has no more than four papers referring to the 'application' of historical insights,³¹ and similar observations can be made for the History Forum of the Körber Stiftung (Hamburg), the National History Center (Washington, DC), the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS, Washington, DC), the UCLA Luskin Center for History and Policy (Los Angeles), and the Albert Lepage Center for History in the Public Interest (Villanova),

²² "Applying history to 21st century problems," Engelsberg Applied History Programme, accessed February 11, 2021, <https://eahp.info/>.

²³ "Geschiedenis en beleid," Historici.nl, accessed February 12, 2021, <https://www.historici.nl/geschiedenis-en-beleid/>.

²⁴ Jacob Forward, "Historians and Think Tanks: Lessons from the U.S. Marketplace of Ideas," *History and Policy*, October 20, 2021, <https://www.historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/historians-and-think-tanks-lessons-from-the-u.s-marketplace-of-ideas>.

²⁵ Benjamin Franklin Shambaugh, *History of the Constitutions of Iowa* (Des Moines: The Historical Department of Iowa, 1902), preface.

²⁶ Quoted in *The American Historical Review* 18, no. 2 (1913), 445.

²⁷ Alix R. Green, *History, Policy and Public Purpose. Historians and Historical Thinking in Government* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 14–15.

²⁸ Holbrook and Lowe, "Can historians influence," 11.

²⁹ "What we do," *History and Policy*, accessed February 10, 2021, <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/about-us/what-we-do>; "Who we are," *History and Policy*, accessed February 10, 2021, <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/who-we-are>.

³⁰ John Tosh, "In defence of applied history: the History and Policy website," *History and Policy*, February 10, 2006, <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/in-defence-of-applied-history-the-history-and-policy-website>.

³¹ For example, Lowe, "Politicians, History and Policy."

all of which offer history-inspired advice to policymakers.³² The notion of applied history is also largely absent from the field of transitional justice, despite the strong connections between history, law, and politics in the activities of, for example, the Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation in The Hague.³³

Lastly, it should be noted that some of these recent initiatives have been subject to controversy, as they became involved in matters of politics rather than policy. Especially in the US, applied history became enmeshed in on-going ideological debates over diversity and identity, sometimes echoing conversations held earlier in public history.³⁴ Notoriously, a 2018 applied history conference at the Hoover Institute at Stanford University was criticized for being overly white and nearly exclusively male, a situation that organizer Niall Ferguson agreed was problematic and needed to be addressed in the future.³⁵ In 2021, Ferguson moreover connected his applied history scholarship to the ‘History Reclaimed’ movement of British academics and to the foundation of a new university in Austin, Texas, both initiatives that explicitly targeted the alleged dangers of ‘woke’ ideology.³⁶ These activities

polarized non-academic views about Ferguson’s applied history on social media, exemplified by tweets such as “applied history = lebensraum.”³⁷ The politicization of the field is however regularly criticized by applied history scholars themselves and it should be stressed that engagement with and views about diversity policies are in fact highly project-specific.³⁸ While it is not difficult to find, for example, applied history projects where male contributors clearly outnumber women, focusing on such groups would obscure the fact that the Dutch Manifesto was written exclusively by female academics, just as it would ignore the key influence of scholars like Margaret MacMillan or the (near) gender parity achieved by the Cambridge Centre for Geopolitics and many other applied history groups in Europe.³⁹

2 Applied History, or Public History?

The similarity between ‘history and policy’ and applied history is not the only reason why confusion exists about the concept. So far, the largest discussions over the term’s resurgence have involved scholars in the field of public history, whereby applied and public historians sometimes seem to compete with one another.⁴⁰ Although neither of the two manifestos mentioned public history, the notions of applied and public history have coexisted for around half a century and have been regularly treated as synonyms. Comparable to how John Tosh argued that history and policy is enveloped by applied history, Peter Stearns and Joel Tarr argued in the 1980s that applied history is in turn enveloped by public history.⁴¹ Yet, this interpretation remains subject to discussion: in 2016 professor of public history Thorsten Logge stated that it is “not helpful to introduce a new term like applied history. Public history

³² “Körber History Forum,” Körber Stiftung, accessed April 14, 2022, <https://www.koerber-stiftung.de/en/koerber-history-forum>; “About,” National History Center, accessed February 11, 2021, <https://nationalhistorycenter.org/about/>; “About,” UCLA Luskin Center for History and Policy, accessed February 12, 2021, <https://luskincenter.history.ucla.edu/about/>; “Project on History and Strategy,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, accessed February 11, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/programs/brzezinski-institute-geostrategy/project-history-and-strategy>. The CSIS does have a Graduate Student Prize in Applied Military History, but does not use the term to promote its own publications; “The Albert Lepage Center for History in the Public Interest,” Villanova University, accessed February 11, 2021, <https://www1.villanova.edu/villanova/artsci/lepage.html>.

³³ “IHJR in Brief,” IHJR, accessed August 25, 2021, <https://ihjr.org/ihjr-in-brief-2/>.

³⁴ On the ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ traits of the development of public history in the US, see Denise D. Meringolo, “Capturing the Public Imagination: The Social and Professional Place of Public History,” *American Studies International* 42, no. 2/3 (2004), 114–116.

³⁵ Claire Wang, “History conference draws fire for featuring 30 white men as speakers,” *The Stanford Daily*, March 17, 2018, <https://www.stanforddaily.com/2018/03/17/all-male-history-conference-stirs-controversy-over-lack-of-diversity/>; Maya Salam, “Stanford History Event Was ‘Too White and Too Male,’ Organizer Admits,” *The New York Times*, March 17, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/17/us/stanford-conference-white-males.html>.

³⁶ “Why We Are Reclaiming History,” History Reclaimed, accessed December 21, 2021, <https://historyreclaimed.co.uk/why-we-are-reclaiming-history/>; Niall Ferguson, “I’m Helping to Start a New College Because Higher Ed Is Broken,” *Bloomberg*, November 8, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-11-08/niall-ferguson-america-s-woke-universities-need-to-be-replaced>.

³⁷ @byzantinologue, November 11, 2021, <https://twitter.com/byzantinologue/status/1458680095229554690>.

³⁸ Kaal and van Lottum, “Applied History,” 142.

³⁹ Margaret MacMillan, *The Uses and Abuses of History* (London: Profile Books, 2009).

⁴⁰ Irmgard Zündorf, “Public History und Angewandte Geschichte: Konkurrenten oder Komplizen?,” in *Angewandte Geschichte: Neue Perspektiven auf Geschichte in der Öffentlichkeit*, eds. Jacqueline Niesser and Juliane Tomann (Schoeningh: Paderborn, 2014), 63–76. See also Thorsten Logge, “Public History in Germany: Challenges and Opportunities,” *German Studies Review* 39, no. 1 (2016), 143.

⁴¹ Peter N. Stearns, “Applied History and Social Sciences,” *Social Science History* 6, no. 2 (1982), 219–226; Peter N. Stearns and Joel A. Tarr, “Curriculum in Applied History: Toward the Future,” *The Public Historian* 9, no. 3 (1987), 111–25.

already includes the notion of civic engagement; there is no need to split the field and waste resources by drawing needless frontiers.”⁴² Likewise, Serge Noiret, former president of the International Federation for Public History (IFPH-FIHP), stated in September 2020 that applied historians were “again reinventing the wheel,”⁴³ while the *Associazione Italiana di Public History*, which Noiret currently presides, encompassed in its 2018 “Public History Manifesto” exactly those types of policy practices that some applied historians recently promoted as something separate.⁴⁴ Harm Kaal and Jelle van Lottum, for example, disagreed with such views, arguing that public and applied history stem from different historiographical roots, reserving the term applied history exclusively for “historical research that aims to ‘illuminate current challenges and choices,’ often in a political and policy context.”⁴⁵

These contending descriptions of applied history are mostly aspirational, as several projects do not conform to the idea that applied history is either entirely similar to or entirely different from public history. For one, the Jean Monnet Applied European Contemporary History Network (AECH), operational between 2016 and 2019 and grouping scholars in Germany, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Poland, and Serbia, considered applied history a ‘subordinate field’ of public history. As many of AECH’s members had prior experience in the field of public history, the group argued that public history is “the broad and overarching concept that deals with the uses of the past in public,” while applied history deals with four specific questions: 1) how historical knowledge is made; 2) how interpretations of the past impact society; 3) why there is a societal need to deal with the past at all; and 4) what effect these issues have on the scientific methods of historical research.⁴⁶ In a similar vein, the Centre for Applied History at Macquarie University in Australia states that applied history “explores the production and consumption of history outside universities,” adding that the Centre “is a hub for researchers working in public history.”⁴⁷ Still, others see public and applied history

as different but equal: Jacqueline Niesser and Juliane Tomann, convenors of the roundtable on applied history in *The Public Historian*, defined the relation between public and applied history as a conjoined door hinge.⁴⁸ And, through this all, there remains a large group of scholars that simply operates within a fluid framework that seeks to bind different forms of non-academic history together, regardless of the preferred terminology.⁴⁹ The US-based National Council on Public History website, for example, currently states that “although public history has gained ascendancy in recent years as the preferred nomenclature, especially in the academic world, applied history probably remains the more intuitive and self-defining term.”⁵⁰

This complex relation between applied and public history is again not without precedent.⁵¹ Similar discussions were held in the 1970s when the University of California, Santa Barbara, launched a degree in Public Historical Studies while the Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania started an Applied History Program for PhD students and an applied history sub-major for undergraduates. The Californian program prepared historians for a career in administration, politics, business, or industry, while the program in Pittsburgh focused specifically on history and public policy.⁵² For different reasons, allegedly including the fact that the founder of the Santa Barbara program, Robert Kelley, “vehemently opposed” the term applied history, the Californian terminology eventually became more prevalent in the US.⁵³ From there,

⁴² Logge, “Public History in Germany.”

⁴³ @thomascavuin, September 3, 2020, <https://twitter.com/thomascavuin/status/1301511497521278976>.

⁴⁴ Walter Tucci, “Il Manifesto della Public History italiana,” AIHP – Associazione Italiana di Public History, September 3, 2018, <https://aiph.hypotheses.org/3193>.

⁴⁵ Kaal and van Lottum, “Applied History,” 148.

⁴⁶ “Applied European Contemporary History,” University of Jena, accessed February 21, 2021, <https://aec-history.uni-jena.de/>.

⁴⁷ Centre for Applied History, Macquarie University, accessed February 21, 2021, <https://www.mq.edu.au/research/research-centres-groups-and-facilities/resilient-societies/centres/centre-for-applied-history>.

⁴⁸ Niesser and Tomann, “Public and Applied History,” 20, 24–25; Niesser and Tomann, “Die Ironie der Praxis,” 109.

⁴⁹ Thomas Cauvin and Ciaran O’Neill, “Negotiating public history in the Republic of Ireland: collaborative, applied and usable practices for the profession,” *Historical research: the bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 90, no. 250 (2017), 810–28; Thomas Cauvin, *Public History: A Textbook of Practice* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 12–14.

⁵⁰ “About the field,” National Council on Public History, accessed February 11, 2021, <https://ncph.org/what-is-public-history/about-the-field/>. See also Arendes, “So, What Difference,” 51.

⁵¹ See “First National Symposium,” 7–83; David Dean and Andreas Etges, “What Is (International) Public History?,” *International Public History* 1, no. 1 (2018), online publication; Thomas Cauvin, “The Rise of Public History: An International Perspective,” *Historia Critica* 68, (2018), 3–26.

⁵² Jacqueline Niesser and Juliane Tomann, “Public and Applied History in Germany. Just Another Brick in the Wall of the Academic Ivory Tower?,” *The Public Historian* 40, no. 2 (2018), 14; Peter N. Stearns and Joel A. Tarr, “Curriculum in Applied History: Toward the Future,” *The Public Historian* 9, no. 3 (1987), 112.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 121; Jack M. Holl, “Cultures in Conflict: An Argument Against ‘Common Ground’ Between Practicing Professional Historians and Academics,” *The Public Historian* 30, no. 2 (2008), 29–50; Otis L. Graham Jr., “Robert Kelley and the Pursuit of Useful History,” *Journal of Policy History* 23, no. 3 (2011), 230.

public history spread internationally, overtaking the notion of applied history which originally had been more popular in Europe. American observers quickly rebranded the 1982 “Social Science Research Council Anglo-Dutch Seminar on Applied History” as the “the first European conference on Public History,” and nowadays the notion of *publieksgeschiedenis* is much more prevalent in The Netherlands and Belgium than the recently reintroduced term for applied history, *toegepaste geschiedenis*.⁵⁴ In a similar vein, Benjamin Shambaugh was turned from an explorer of applied history into a pioneer of what would only later become public history, while some library search engines (such as the one used for this article) now automatically equate a query for ‘applied history’ with one for ‘public history’ without doing the reverse.⁵⁵

The two terms can moreover mean one thing in one country and something else in another, depending on how local historians used, interpreted, and translated both concepts over time.⁵⁶ As it is impossible to provide a full overview of such national developments, the German-speaking world will serve as a case in point, primarily because it is one of the more prominent cases: the Universities of Zurich and Munich offer training in applied history; the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt has a history education course in *Angewandte Geschichte/Public History*; the University of Heidelberg has a *Professur für Angewandte Geschichtswissenschaft – Public History*; and the German Historical Association has a working group *Angewandte Geschichte/Public History*.⁵⁷

As in the US, the German variant of applied history, *Angewandte Geschichte*, emerged in the early twentieth century, yet it did so in a more politically extreme environment. The term’s primary user, Heinrich Wolf, published six volumes on the topic of applied history

in order to support the antisemitic and pan-German nationalistic ideologies of the interwar period – his fifth volume carrying the revealing title *Angewandte Rassenkunde. Weltgeschichte auf biologischer Grundlage* (Applied Racial Studies. World history on a biological basis).⁵⁸ The term was therefore rapidly discredited after the Second World War, and from the 1960s onwards historical culture and historical consciousness became the preferred term for non-academic history, complemented in the 1990s by memory and remembrance studies.⁵⁹ Only since around 2010 did public history gain a serious foothold in Germany, mostly by using the American model and even the English-language terminology.⁶⁰

Prior to this turn towards public history, in the early 2000s, German-speaking historians had however already re-introduced the concept of applied history. This development was partly connected to history for profit, also known as history marketing or history on demand, mimicking commercial history research in the US and France.⁶¹ One of the most explicit institutions to use the term applied history for such activities was the *Zentrum für Angewandte Geschichte*, founded in 2005 as commercial venture by history professor Gregor Schöllgen of the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg. Schöllgen was very outspoken about the purposes of his project, repeatedly declaring “Wir kapitalisieren Geschichte (We capitalize history)” and stressing that all historians are service providers in an open market.⁶² He took particular pride in the fact that the *Zentrum* was able to do history without the support of public funding while maintaining the quality and independence of academic research – at least in his view, as there remains controversy around both Schöllgen’s person and his methods.⁶³ Despite recurring criticism on history for profit, a 2009 anthology

⁵⁴ Knevel, “Public History,” 13–14.

⁵⁵ Rebecca Connard, *Benjamin Shambaugh and the Intellectual Foundations of Public History* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002).

⁵⁶ Serge Noiret, “Internationalizing Public History,” *Public History Weekly* 2, no. 34 (2014), <https://public-history-weekly.degruyter.com/2-2014-34/internationalizing-public-history/>. For a short overview, see Cauvin, “The Rise of Public History,” 3–26. For a French perspective, Rouso, “Applied History”: 65–85. Further information on France and Italy is offered by Angelo Torre, “Public history e patrimoine: due casi di storia applicate,” *Quaderni storici, nuova serie* 150, no. 3 (2015), 629–59.

⁵⁷ Niesser and Tomann, “Public and Applied History,” 14–16. See also in this respect Cord Arendes, “So, What Difference Does It Make?,” *The Public Historian* 40, no. 4 (2018), 52.

⁵⁸ Heinrich Wolf, *Angewandte Rassenkunde (Weltgeschichte auf biologischer Grundlage)* (Leipzig: Theodor Weicher Verlag, 1927).

⁵⁹ Niesser and Tomann, “Public and Applied History,” 11–13.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 14–15.

⁶¹ Rouso, “Applied History,” 65–85; “First National Symposium,” 14–15; Cauvin, “The Rise of Public History,” 14–15.

⁶² See in this respect also James W. Cortada, “The Case for Applied History in the World of Business: A Call for Action to Historians,” *The Historian* 62, no. 4 (2000), 835–47.

⁶³ Gregor Schöllgen, “Die Dienstleister. Von den Aufgaben der Geisteswissenschaften in der modernen Welt,” In *Glanztlichter der Wissenschaft. Ein Almanach* (Deutscher Hochschulverband: Saarwellingen, 2008); Rainer Blasius, “Der Historiker als Dienstleister,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, February 7, 2010; Olaf Przybilla, Uwe Ritzer, and Willi Winkler, “Was darf die Geisteswissenschaft?,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, September 15, 2019.

of *Angewandte Geschichte* still carried the provocative title *History Sells!*, further testimony to the sometimes highly commercial attitude to applied history in Germany.⁶⁴

Other German proponents of applied history took a radically different view and remained closer to the British History Workshop Movement of the 1960s and 1970s and the Californian approach to public history. The *Institut für angewandte Geschichte*, founded in 2001 in Frankfurt am Oder, argued that “the public historian interprets history in popular forms for nonexperts, whereas the applied historian facilitates nonexpert participation in the production of historical knowledge.”⁶⁵ While Schöllgen primarily wanted to forge bonds with politicians and businessmen, the historians at the Institute sought to explore local history along the German-Polish border in order to create bottom-up and cooperative initiatives that connected the past with the present. Niesser and Tomann therefore summarized the differences between the *Zentrum* and the *Institut* as “one makes money, the other makes citizens,” succinctly illustrating the starkly contrasting definitions and practices that accompany *angewandte Geschichte* today.⁶⁶

Broadening the view again, the variety in meanings and practices illustrated by the German case is further exemplified by the current worldwide diversity in educational programs. Effectively, it should be remembered that the most important audiences for applied history have so far been history students: applied history curricula were already considered highly important in the 1970s and 1980s, and this consideration is again high on the agenda today.⁶⁷ In the United States, Waynesburg University, Lebanon Valley College, Appalachian State University, Baldwin Wallace University, Dominican University, and Southern Illinois University Edwardsville all offer or

offered undergraduate majors in applied history, while Shippensburg University created a master’s degree, and Slippery Rock University and Youngstown State University provide continuing education certificates.⁶⁸ Globally, similar degrees in applied history are, or were until recently, available at the Higher School of Economics in Saint-Petersburg; the University of New England in Australia; the Chinese University of Hong Kong; the University of Waterloo and the Université de Montréal in Canada; and Örebro University in Sweden.⁶⁹ What is

64 Wolfgang Hardtwig and Alexander Schug, eds., *History Sells!: Angewandte Geschichte als Wissenschaft und Markt* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2009); Cauvin, “The Rise of Public History,” 14–15.

65 Niesser and Tomann, “Public and Applied History,” 20, 24–25. Reference to Jacqueline Niesser and Juliane Tomann, “Die Ironie der Praxis: Angewandte Geschichte ander Oder,” in Jacqueline Niesser and Juliane Tomann, eds., *Angewandte Geschichte: Neue Perspektiven auf Geschichte in der Öffentlichkeit* (Schoeningh: Paderborn, 2014), 109. For a similar view, see Zündorf, “Public History,” 63–76.

66 Niesser and Tomann, “Public and Applied History,” 17.

67 Kendrick A. Clements, “Promotion and Tenure Criteria for Faculty in Applied History,” *The Public Historian* 6, no. 2 (1984), 51–61; “First National Symposium,” 20–41.

68 “Applied History, MA,” Shippensburg University, accessed February 12, 2021, <https://www.ship.edu/programs/applied-history/>; “Applied History,” Slippery Rock University, accessed February 12, 2021, <https://www.sru.edu/academics/certificates/applied-history-certificate/>; “Certificate in Applied History,” Youngstown State University, accessed February 12, 2021, <https://catalog.yzu.edu/graduate/graduate-programs/certificate-applied-history/>; “Public and Applied History,” Waynesburg University, accessed February 12, 2021, <https://www.waynesburg.edu/academics/departments/humanities/undergraduate-programs/public-and-applied-history/>; “Applied History,” Lebanon Valley College, accessed February 12, 2021, https://web.archive.org/web/2021*/https://www.lvc.edu/academics/undergraduate-studies/applied-history/; “Specializations – Applied Historical Methods,” Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, accessed February 12, 2021, <https://www.siu.edu/academics/undergraduate/degrees-and-programs/historical-studies/specialization-applied-historical-methods.shtml>; “History – Applied and Public History Concentration, BS,” Appalachian State University, accessed February 12, 2021, http://appstate.catalog.acalog.com/preview_program.php?catoid=1&poid=188&returnto=53; “Applied History – School of Humanities,” Baldwin Wallace University, accessed March 9, 2021, <https://www.bw.edu/academics/undergraduate/applied-history/>; “Applied History,” Dominican University, accessed March 9, 2021, <https://www.dom.edu/academics/majors-programs/applied-history>.

69 “Master’s Programme, Applied and Interdisciplinary History ‘Usable Pasts,’” HSE University, accessed February 12, 2021, https://web.archive.org/web/2021*/https://spb.hse.ru/en/ma/apphist/; “Graduate Diploma in Local, Family and Applied History,” University of New England, accessed February 12, 2021, <https://www.une.edu.au/study/courses/graduate-diploma-in-local-family-and-applied-history/>; “Applied History Studies,” Chinese University of Hong Kong, accessed February 12, 2021, <http://scs-hd.scs.cuhk.edu.hk/en/programmes/languages-history/applied-history-studies/>; “New – MA in History, Applied History Option,” Université de Montréal, accessed February 18, 2021, <https://histoire.umontreal.ca/english/programs/graduate-programs/ma-in-history-applied/>; “Applied History,” University of Waterloo, accessed March 9, 2021, <https://uwaterloo.ca/history/program-requirements/specializations/applied-history/>; “Introduction to Applied History of Education,” Örebro University, accessed March 9, 2021, https://web.archive.org/web/2021*/https://www.oru.se/english/study/doctoral-education/doctoral-courses/humus/introduction-to-applied-history-of-education-75-credits/.

being taught at these institutions varies to a significant extent: most degrees have a focus on archives, museums, and heritage conservation, but some teach about the communication of historical knowledge to different audiences, or allow for specializations into business, law, teaching, communication, and public policy. Reflecting the importance of education to the ‘new wave’ of applied history projects, in 2020, the Stockholm School of Economics (SSE) launched a course called “Applied History: World Orders & Present Challenges,” funded by the Ax:son Johnson Foundation for Public Benefit and organized together with the policy-oriented applied history initiatives at the University of Cambridge, Johns Hopkins University, and King’s College London.⁷⁰ Similarly, the Erasmus University of Rotterdam launched in 2022 a brand new Master’s Degree in Applied History, featuring the tagline “Analyse contemporary challenges through a historical perspective”.⁷¹

3 Applied History and its Many Methodologies

If historical trajectories are one way to distinguish between different forms of applied history, another way is through methodology. As the variety of claimed methodologies is even greater than the current variety in definitions, this section can only offer a starting point for a broader assessment, and it does so under the clear caveat that the in- or exclusion of a specific method does not imply a judgement about its validity or value. It also needs to be stressed that applied history is methodologically speaking still in its infancy, despite its acclaimed ancestry and despite efforts in the twentieth century to give it a firmer footing.⁷² Even today, most methodological reflections still start from a 1980s vantage point, leading several projects, especially in the Low Countries, to focus on updating this element: the Dutch manifesto explicitly called for further methodological renewal; the Dutch-led *Journal of Applied History* wants to be a free haven for methodological experimentation; and the Belgian project Corvus has taken up the evaluation and

development of suitable new methodologies as its core task.⁷³

The existing methods of applied history can be distinguished by the audiences they target and by their way of making history ‘usable.’ Applied historians of the ‘history and policy’ type have a logical focus on policymakers, politicians, and government officials, leading to a preference for the sort of output these audiences know best: policy papers, policy briefs, research reports, and different forms of talks and debates. Several of these groups also have a strong methodological identification with a handful of (past) policymakers who are considered laudable historical thinkers. In this respect, Cold War veterans especially have gained prominence, at least in the United States: the Applied History Project at Harvard heralds Henry Kissinger as a key methodological example, while the researchers at the think tank CSIS prefer Zbigniew Brzezinski as their applied history role model.⁷⁴

History and policy initiatives further share a strong reliance on historical analogies, supplemented by the typical *fortes* of historians: periodization, contextualization, and counterfactual history (although the names for these activities vary). H&P’s main methodological paper noted that the central lines of applied inquiry involved reasoning by process (periodization), critiquing the new (contextualization), and, preeminently, arguing by analogy.⁷⁵ Likewise, Allison and Ferguson promoted the so-called May method, referring to the 1986 book *Thinking in Time* written by Harvard Scholars Ernest May and Richard Neustadt. This is an overall standard text for applied historians working with policymakers, as the book primarily offers insight into handling historical analogies.⁷⁶ Turned into practice, CSIS’s 2020 report on the future of international order started by constructing ‘historical narratives,’ meaning that it (re)explained well-known historical cases

⁷³ De Graaf, Jensen, Knoeff and Santing, “Aan de slag!”; “Journal of Applied History,” Brill, accessed February 11, 2021, <https://brill.com/view/journals/joah/joah-overview.xml>; “About,” Corvus Historical Consultancy, accessed February 12, 2021, <https://www.corvushc.be/about>.

⁷⁴ Graham Allison, “The Key to Henry Kissinger’s Success,” *The Atlantic*, November 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/11/kissinger-ferguson-applied-history/417846/>; “Project on History and Strategy,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, accessed February 11, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/programs/brzezinski-institute-geostrategy/project-history-and-strategy>.

⁷⁵ Tosh, “In defence.”

⁷⁶ Ernest May was also the preferred methodological reference point for the applied history of David McLean and Ian Gray, “History for policy: What is the value of history for the in-principle assessment of government intervention in rural Australia?,” *Rural society* 21, no. 3 (2012), 190–97.

⁷⁰ “767 – Applied History: World Orders & Present Challenges,” Stockholm School of Economics, accessed December 23, 2021, <https://pcw.hhs.se/course/767>.

⁷¹ “Applied History,” Erasmus University Rotterdam, accessed June 7, 2022, <https://www.eur.nl/en/master/applied-history>.

⁷² Giuliani, “Dalla public history,” 15–16; Stearns and Tarr, “Curriculum,” 114, 117, 123.

such as the Peace of Westphalia or the Congress of Vienna.⁷⁷ On the basis of these analogies, some contributors drafted concrete policy lessons, guidelines, or recommendations, while others foreshadowed the continuation of a centuries-old pattern (periodization), and still others used the past to better understand the context of current challenges (contextualization).⁷⁸

Few history and policy initiatives have, however, offered clear methodological guidelines to other applied historians, nor have they intricately addressed the ethical conundrums associated with advising on (and thus influencing) concrete policy choices.⁷⁹ The reasons for this are understandable, as the combination of academic with non-academic ambitions can put a limit on methodological openness. Besides being one of the best-known university professors in the field of applied history, Niall Ferguson is also the managing director of the macroeconomic and geopolitical advisory firm Greenmantle, logically requiring him to keep a competitive advantage over other consultants claiming to use history.⁸⁰ The same applies to groups such as CSIS and the UCLA Luskin Center. Although the former is a nonprofit organization, it relies on corporate grants for around 30% of its revenue, and it sees itself as “a marketplace where policy-oriented historical scholarship is made accessible and useful.” Similarly, the Luskin Center wants to “provide historically informed policy analysis to private and public sector clients,” underscoring that it too seeks to explore options in an open consultancy market.⁸¹ It was therefore no coincidence that, in the wake

of the Covid-19 pandemic, the consultants Caroline Morris and Jack Fiorini titled their career advice for historians leaving academia “The Business of Applied History.”⁸²

Interestingly, commercial considerations have hampered the methodological debate over applied history less in Europe, even though several of the historians involved also operate on the boundary between academia and consulting. The Belgian project Corvus explicitly uses the notion of ‘historical consultancy’ and aims to create a (non-profit) spin-off organization, while the Radboud University in the Netherlands established the *Advies&Actualiteit*-platform for ‘commissioned research.’ Yet their members also openly work on the methodological development of applied history in the Low Countries, eagerly contributing to the rich online dossier on applied history created by the RNHS. In less than six months, the RNHS gathered over a dozen contributions dealing with methodologies such as ‘learning histories,’ case- and precedent-based analyses, or the past as inspiration.⁸³ Although there are no guarantees that this openness will last, it is remarkable that up till now not only research results are being shared in the dossier but also concrete methods and tools.

Additionally, several contributions to the dossier focused on the civic and critical aspects of applied history. In this capacity, the Belgian-Dutch debate currently acts as a bridge between the narrow ‘history and policy’ and the broader ‘public history’ approaches to applied history. The EU Horizon 2020 project Religious Toleration and Peace (RETOPEA, coordinated by the KU Leuven) has a predominantly educational focus but combines this focus with an advisory role towards national and EU policymakers.⁸⁴ Additionally, initiatives such as the AECH offer via Belgium a strong connection between the Low Countries and the German *Angewandte Geschichte*, more specifically the approaches preferred by the mentioned *Institut*. In terms of methodology, the AECH brings high-level non-academic and academic stakeholders together in conferences, workshops, and project

⁷⁷ The exception was a paper by Hillary Briffa, who did not start from a single narrative but instead immediately identified three different strategies for actors to use and added the historical examples to them: Hillary Briffa, “Small States and the Challenges of International Order,” in Seth Center and Emma Bates, eds., *After Disruption. Historical Perspectives on the Future of International Order* (CSIS: Washington DC, 2020), 50–59.

⁷⁸ Seth Center and Emma Bates, eds., *After Disruption*. See also Bernhard Forchtner, *Lessons from the Past? Memory, Narrativity and Subjectivity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

⁷⁹ Stearns and Tarr, “Curriculum,” 113. Here Alix Green does offer part of a new answer: Green, *History, Policy and Public Purpose*.

⁸⁰ “Greenmantle,” Greenmantle, accessed February 12, 2021, <https://www.gmantle.com/>. For such competitors and their books, see John C. Hulsman, *To Dare more Boldly: The Audacious Story of Political Risk* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018); Sam Wilkin, *History Repeating: Why Populists Rise and Governments Fall* (London: Profile Books, 2018).

⁸¹ “Project on History and Strategy,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, accessed February 11, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/programs/brzezinski-institute-geostrategy/project-history-and-strategy>; “About,” UCLA Luskin Center for History and Policy, accessed February 12, 2021, <https://luskincenter.history.ucla.edu/about/>.

⁸² Caroline Morris and Jack Fiorini, “The Business of Applied History: What Brand Historians Do,” *Perspectives*, April 8, 2021, <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/may-2021/the-business-of-applied-history-what-brand-historians-do#.YG-EJxxTBQ.twitterhttps://engelsbergideas.com/podcasts/ei-weekly-listen-iskander-rehman-why-applied-history-matters/>.

⁸³ “Dossier Toegepaste Geschiedenis,” *Historici.nl*, May, 2020.

⁸⁴ “RETOPEA A project to promote religious peace and tolerance through history,” RETOPEA, accessed February 12, 2021, <http://www.retopea.eu/s/start/page/home>.

visits, usually with the aim of evaluating existing practices and learning from each other’s experiences in dealing with the public ‘consumption’ of history. Groups that operate close to public history frequently prefer such a hands-on and bottom-up methodology whereby, in the words of Niesser and Tomann, “the applied historian facilitates nonexpert participation in the production of historical knowledge.”⁸⁵ In practice, this implies a method of empowerment, engaging with people from all walks of life to establish local heritage routes, conservation projects, exhibits, guided tours, and low-key workshops in historical research.⁸⁶ Applied historians in the Low Countries indeed currently combine these insights from public history and history and policy, relying on practices of both traditions to reach out to their non-academic partners and clients.

4 The View from Beyond the University

Finally, what does the above terminological and methodological complexity mean for the future of applied history? It certainly seems that the field will continue to be diverse. Despite the fact that the Low Countries form a hybrid place of experimentation, there will probably remain a difference between applied history as ‘history and policymaking’ and as ‘history for/with the public.’ In fact, these two strands might splinter even further. Discussions are already set to take place over applied history as a form of scholarly activism or community-engaged research;⁸⁷ over the potential equation between applied history and contemporary history;⁸⁸ over the involvement of non-academic stakeholders in ‘doing applied history’;⁸⁹ over sub-subfields such as applied legal history, applied business history, applied medical history, and

applied military history;⁹⁰ and, most crucially, over non-American and non-European applications of history.⁹¹ Some historians have also remarked that applied history is, in its broadest sense, not so different from what all historians are taught to do, leading Jörn Rüsen to state that ‘practical history’ is perhaps the better-fitting term, complementing other recent terms such as ‘new applied history’ or ‘applied public history.’⁹²

These conversations again run parallel with the terminological debates over public history, discussions that are frequently considered parochial and overtly academic as there is simply no definition that can accommodate all the different activities and persons associated with the term. Yet, as Thomas Cauvin noted, this (intentional) lack of clarity also comes with a risk because the intended audiences of public history might be discouraged by its opaqueness. The same risk exists for applied history today.⁹³ If one reads this article from the viewpoint of a non-historian trying to decide whether or not applied history is relevant for them, it immediately

⁸⁵ Niesser and Tomann, “Public and Applied History,” 25.

⁸⁶ Stephan Felsberg, “Angewandte Geschichte?,” Institut für Angewandte Geschichte, Tätigkeitsbericht 2010, 2; Niesser and Tomann, “Public and Applied History,” 19.

⁸⁷ Audra A. Diptee, “The problem of modern-day slavery: is critical applied history the answer?,” *Slavery & Abolition* 39, no. 2 (2018), 405–28; “Applied History Network,” Applied History Network, accessed February 12, 2021, <https://appliedhistorynetwork.wordpress.com/past-events/>.

⁸⁸ Irmgard Zündorf and Hanno Hochmuth, “Public History als Zeitgeschichte: Version 1.0,” Docupedia.de, https://docupedia.de/zg/Zuendorf_public_history_v2_de_2016#:~:text=Der%20Begriff%20%E2%80%9EPublic%20History%E2%80%9D%20kommt,Abgrenzung%20zur%20akademischen%20Geschichtswissenschaft%20genutzt.

⁸⁹ Niesser and Tomann, “Public and Applied History,” 23–24.

⁹⁰ Alfred L. Brophy, “Introducing Applied Legal History,” *Law and history review* 31, no. 1 (2013), 233–40; Pierre-Yves Donzé, “Global value chains and the lost competitiveness of the Japanese watch industry: an applied business history of Seiko since 1990,” *Asia Pacific business review* 21, no. 3 (2015), 295–310; Takeo Kikkawa, “International Competitiveness of Japan’s Petroleum Industry: A View from Applied Business History,” *The Kyoto economic review* 81, no. 1 (2012), 4–13; Irawan Imam and Alfons Labisch, “Species sanitation of malaria in the Netherlands East Indies (1913–1942) – An example of applied medical history?,” *Medizinhistorisches Journal* 41, no. 3–4 (2006), 291–313; David S. Jones, Jeremy A. Greene, Jacalyn Duffin and John Harley Warner, “Making the Case for History in Medical Education,” *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 70, no. 4 (2015), 623–52; Anna Sofie Hansen Schøning, “Descriptive and Applied Military History – debating the utility of military history in Danish officer education,” *Eesti sõjaajaloo aastaraama* 9 (2009), 151–70.

⁹¹ “Department of Applied History,” National Chiayi University, accessed February 21, 2021, http://www.ncyu.edu.tw/ncyuhg_eng/gradation.aspx?site_content_sn=7996; Xupo Ding, Jiahong Zhu, Hao Wang, Huiqin Chen and Wenli Mei, “Dragon’s Blood from *Dracaena cambodiana* in China: Applied History and Induction Techniques toward Formation Mechanism,” *Forests* 11, no. 4 (2020), 372–85; S.A. Shokpeka, “Myth in the Context of African Traditional Histories: Can it be Called ‘Applied History’?,” *History in Africa* 32 (2005), 485–91.

⁹² Niesser and Tomann, “Public and Applied History,” 22; Jörn Rüsen, “Die fünf Dimensionen der Geschichtskultur,” in Niesser and Tomann, *Angewandte Geschichte*, 59–60; “Applied Public History,” University of London, accessed March 9, 2021, <https://london.ac.uk/courses/applied-public-history>; Christopher L. Colvin and Paul Winfree, “Applied History, Applied Economics, and Economic History,” *Journal of Applied History* 1, (2019), 28–41.

⁹³ Thomas Cauvin, “New Field,” 17.

becomes clear that the answer to the question “what is applied history and how can it help me” depends entirely on the applied historian one encounters. A political analyst who associates applied history with the bottom-up approach of the *Institut für angewandte Geschichte* might decide not to get involved with the Belfer Center, even though this would be a perfect match. Or, someone designing a community project dealing with local histories might not involve the members of the AECH if they presume that applied history is only about the large-scale wicked problems that underpinned the Dutch manifesto. This is certainly no argument for ostracizing the ‘wrong’ type of initiatives, but it should be underscored that the present variety could be managed better. Perhaps some groups will soon return to the labels of history and policy or public history, while others might settle on a relatively shared definition of applied history. But regardless of how this plays out in the future, the clients and partners of applied historians will certainly demand increased clarity about what the term exactly stands for.

The importance of such clarity becomes especially apparent if one looks to one of the main sources of information for non-academics, namely Wikipedia.⁹⁴ In February 2021 the online encyclopedia defined applied history as “the effort to apply insights grounded in the study of the past to the challenges of the present, particularly in the area of policy-making,” a definition that is quite easy to understand and is very close to the one offered by Allison and Ferguson.⁹⁵ Potentially interested parties would simply need to pose the question “what is history applied to?,” whereby the answer would be “the challenges of the present in a policy-making context,” and then they have identified an applied history project. The Wiki-definition thereby indeed highlights three aspects that seem to be part and parcel of most new initiatives: 1) applied history is foremost about the *application* of the study of the past and not merely about its communication or public consumption; 2) this application of history is directed towards the present or the future and not towards the past; and 3) the application of historical insight is primarily intended to deal with (perceived) challenges, issues or

problems, and not with particular audiences, objectives, or interests.

Yet, this Wiki-definition is only the endpoint of a larger unmentioned process that illustrates the tensions and confusion that surround applied history. Although the current Wiki-definition offers a possible starting point for understanding the most recent initiatives, the article thereby also focuses heavily on the ‘history and policy’ side of the field. This situation is however a radical reversal of the first version of the Wikipedia page, which explained applied history by relating it to museums, archives, and heritage sites. The original 2007 Wiki-definition written by Jeremy Boggs of the University of Virginia Library, stated that applied history “is history taught in a way to incorporate historical events in a hands on environment encouraging historical analysis, investigation, museum studies, archival work, historic preservation, documentaries and firsthand experience.” Boggs’ interpretation was further reinforced in January 2010, when an anonymous contributor added that applied history is “widely known as public history,” reflecting the idea that public and applied history are interchangeable terms with the former one being preferable.⁹⁶ That description was miles removed from the current version as it did not mention policymaking at all.

It was not until April 2017 that another anonymous user changed the Wiki-definition by combining the 2010 version with excerpts derived from Allison and Ferguson’s manifesto. This mixed version rather confusingly stated that “applied history, also widely known as public history, is ‘the explicit attempt to illuminate current challenges and choices by analyzing historical precedents and analogues. [...]’ Applied history incorporates historical events in a hands-on environment encouraging historical analysis, investigation, museum studies, archival work, historic/heritage preservation, documentaries and firsthand experience.” This combined definition offered a first example of the recent turn towards applied history as history and policy, a shift that was finalized in March 2018, when an anonymous “history professor researching women’s history, museums and historic preservation” removed nearly all references to museums, archives, and heritage sites and replaced them with an anthology of applied history focusing on Shambaugh and several history and policy-related projects. Although in this last version the bond with public history was still recognized, it severely downplays

⁹⁴ See Neil Thompson and Douglas Hanley, “Science Is Shaped by Wikipedia: Evidence From a Randomized Control Trial,” *MIT Sloan Research Paper No. 5238-17*, September 17, 2017.

⁹⁵ “Applied history,” Wikipedia, accessed February 25, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Applied_history.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, all changes made to the definition can be accessed via the Wikipedia page itself.

elements of heritage, museums, and archives, comparable to how the initial 2007 page ignored applied history’s history and policy component. In summary, an interested outsider who visited the ‘applied history’ Wikipedia-page before April 2017 would simply not recognize the definition offered in March 2018, potentially leading to major confusion about why this subfield could change so radically and so rapidly.

5 Conclusion

In 2004, Denise Meringolo wrote that “the lack of any working definition or set of definitions resting on [...] an alternative narrative [to academic history] places public historians in an untenable position. They find themselves struggling to meet often competing demands from audiences, potential funding agencies, research subjects and academics.”⁹⁷ More than a decade later, those working in the field of applied history find themselves in a similar position, as they collectively send highly contradictory messages about what that term stands for. For some, this lack of unity does not need to be a problem: as long as applied history remains a ‘big tent,’ it can accommodate a

wide range of practical, methodological, philosophical, and ethical points of view.⁹⁸ Yet, as this article has demonstrated, it then needs to be accepted that non-historians might still see a Janus-faced profession: one face oriented towards high-level history and policy and one oriented to the shared practices of community-engaged public history. Effectively, while academic historians logically prefer to add complexity and nuance to the topic of applied history, non-scholars who wish to engage with applied historians obviously have an interest in the concept’s clarity and utility. So, even if applied history remains an open label that includes different activities, there still needs to be a coherent narrative about why and with whom interested non-historians should get involved. Exactly because applied history wants to talk to people outside of academia, those using the term should try to make clear what can and cannot be expected from the subfield as a whole. As Alix Green put it in her book on history, policy, and public purpose, “there is, finally, some persuading to be done,”⁹⁹ but such convincing cannot happen without at least some agreement on what people need to be persuaded about.

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⁹⁷ Meringolo, “Capturing the Public Imagination,” 89.

⁹⁸ Jacqueline Niesser and Juliane Tomann, “On ‘Big Tents’ and ‘Umbrellas,’” *The Public Historian* 40, no. 2 (2018), 61–63.

⁹⁹ Green, *History, Policy and Public Purpose*, 12.