

The changing role of memory and history in public life

A guest lecture by Professor Paula Hamilton, University of Technology, Sydney

University of Helsinki, 3 December 2012, 10-12

Venue: The Swedish School of Social Science, Snellmaninkatu 12, Festival hall (133)

In the 1980s the French historian Jean Chesneaux asked the question: what is history for? His answer was framed by a lifetime of Marxist activism – but he had only added three little letters to the famous question ‘what is history?’ – asked years earlier by another Marxist sympathiser of the English-speaking history world, E. H. Carr. Both these men lived through and participated in defining moments of the twentieth century, and had major, though very different, careers in public life. Theirs was a grand notion that through the writing of history combined with involvement in public affairs, one could change the world and make it more equitable.

The last three decades has seen a remarkable shift in our understanding of the purpose of history in many parts of the world, particularly in terms of our relationship to the past, and the emergence of memory in public life. But arguably the most significant change has been at one level a question of prepositions – from history *for* the people, to history *with* and *by* the people. So, in the wake of several studies which have asked about the significance of the past in people’s lives and, how it is being used and made in all its myriad of forms, within a digital landscape that is transforming a sense of time and space, one might revisit the question – what is history for?

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Professor Paula Hamilton is Director of the Centre of Creative Practice and Cultural Economy at the University of Technology, Sydney, and Co-Director of the Australian Centre for Public History. She is a historian who has specialised in material culture, image and cultural memory. Professor Hamilton has published widely in memory studies internationally and has worked locally in a range of projects with community groups, museums, heritage agencies, and councils. She is an editor of 'Public History Review' and 'Locality: a community history journal', both of which act as a link between the academe and the wider community.

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Nordic Centre of Excellence NordWel (Nordic Welfare State – Historical Foundations and Future Challenges)

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