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Special issue: Contemporary Uses of the Past. Politics of Memory and Oblivion.

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Editorial

Politics of Memory and Oblivion. An introduction to the special issue

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Abstract

This editorial sets the context for the special issue on memory and oblivion and introduces the contributions. By interpreting the contemporary uses of the past, the editorial underscores the relevance of the study of memory and oblivion in today's heated and antagonistic debates. The politics of memory and uses of the past often coincide with efforts of reducing the past to legitimize the current authorities and tend to create new gaps in memory that contribute to the polarization of societies. The special issue consists of six articles that scrutinize the consequences of the intertwining of memory, oblivion and political power in European countries. Based on two main approaches, the contributions explore the diverse meanings given to practices of memory in contemporary contexts that shape remembering for communities and nations alike. One approach shows how in the context of memory politics, public, national and collective memories are utilized, interpreted, and revised to fill in gaps and absences, while the other approach focuses on exploring continuities, transformations and ruptures in the construction of national memory.

Keywords: past, memory; oblivion; politics; Europe

This special issue is a result of the Symposium ‘Uses of The Past – Menneisyysspolitiikat’ that took place in November 9-10, 2017 in Jyväskylä, Finland. The symposium brought international scholars from a wide variety of academic fields together to discuss the intersection of the past, present and future and to discuss new ideas and perspectives related to the explorations of cultural memory, power relations and identity projects, and the diverse meanings given to practices of memory in contemporary contexts. This special issue offers novel viewpoints for a very topical issue, namely the uses of the past in the politics of memory and oblivion in European countries. We explore the interrelationship between remembrance and purposeful oblivion as active processes that serve particular interests and ideologies in the present and affect people’s sense of belonging, sometimes at the cost of historical accuracy (Lowenthal 1985).

Jan-Werner Mueller (2002, 1-2) argues that despite the growth of interest towards memory, there have been "almost no studies of the nexus between memory and political power, especially if one defines politics rather narrowly as the output of political institutions." Outlining the fields of study in which the connections between memory and politics have been addressed, he mentions research on nationalism, ethnic identity and the politics of recognition as well as numerous studies on memorializations and monuments and other products of cultural memory. However, he concludes that an explicit interest in the role of memory in political actions was missing. A closer attention is needed on the consequences of the intertwining of memory, imagination and political power.

The opening decades of 2000 have witnessed an upsurge in the number of scholarly publications dealing with memory. Still, Jan-Werner Mueller’s remark on the importance of scholarly interest in the real consequences of the nexus memory-political power remains topical. The authors of this special issue explore the political uses of the past in terms of a conscious choice to reactivate or overlook memories. In these processes, certain elements of the past are selected as reference points for the promotion and legitimization of contemporary political projects and goals.

The volume consists of six articles that make explicit the continuous importance of explaining the political uses of the past in the spheres of political, educational and culture. Against existing scholarly work, this special issue can be seen as an extension of the discussion towards established areas of inquiry, such as the constitution of national memory in myths, party politics or in the form of constitutional memory (Miklóssy & Nyysönen, 2018). In this context, museums and other memory institutions play a key role in the production of selective forms of remembering and forgetting (Verbeeck in this issue).

The authors scrutinise in their contributions how political actors revise, contest, and make use of the past to validate political processes and legitimize future scenarios in different parts of Europe and beyond. Although the articles approach the use of the past from different starting points, they ultimately link to current political debates through an emphasis on the political revision of the past, thereby helping to understand current developments. Since the pasts and cultures of these countries have been shaped in interaction with each other (Delanty 2017), there is a mutual influence and layering of concurrent histories and politics.

The contributors seek to account for the different uses of the past through case studies that exemplify the appeal of tenacious myths, recurring narratives, and reproduction and mobilization of notions that are used to sanction, endorse, or reinterpret political processes in the framework of a vacuum and an absence of shared memories and remembrances (Littoz-Monnet 2012). For instance, the period from the early 1990s to the beginning of the new millennium is often characterized as optimistic and bright after the collapse of the Iron Curtain. A special emphasis is usually placed on the triumph of liberal values and objectives that helped overcome the East-West divide. However, multiple crises and problems in the last decade have suspended the shared political and historical goals of European countries and made space for the rise of a political vacuum that has facilitated the re-emergence of old national tensions and new dynamics related to the interpretation and accountability of the past (Zhurzhenko 2007). In this respect, attempts to challenge liberal democracy, which contribute to the

development of individual rights rather than to the promotion of a shared sense of community, can be seen as an example of how certain forces aim to ‘fill in’ these gaps (see the article of Korhonen). The ongoing debates over Europe’s colonial past is another example that argues for the centrality of the historical legacy in contemporary politics of memory and oblivion (see article of Verbeeck). Furthermore, the special issue analyses how intertwined public, national, and collective memories have become entangled in texts of remarkable societal importance, which include among others constitutional preambles, school books, speeches, political documents, and the archive of a national memory institute, in endeavours to objectify, challenge, or institutionalise these memories. The volume shows that an analysis of various approaches dealing with the absent memories of certain events and actors is necessary to understand the various relationships and meanings that form the selective perceptions of the past (Mouffe 2005; Smith 2006) and relate to the twofold political processes of interpreting and using the past.

Geographically the cases of the special issue represent a cross section of Europe that includes Northern Europe (Ahonen; Korhonen), Western Europe (Verbeeck), Southern Europe (Lleshi) as well as Eastern Europe (Linchenko and Anikin; Nyssönen and Metsälä). By exploring the struggles in smaller countries and countries that are situated in peripheral locations outside of the European ‘core’, the special issue offers a novel perspective to the discussion about memory and oblivion. The dissonant use of the past manifests in different approaches, as exemplified in contributions about post-socialist Albania (Lleshi) and Russia (Linchenko and Anikin), and in Belgium’s ways of coming to terms with its colonial past (Verbeeck). Bringing different countries into comparison, Nyssönen’s and Metsälä’s article unpacks the ‘constitutional memory’ as displayed in the preambles of post-communist constitutions. Finally, the articles focusing on Finland (Ahonen; Korhonen) address tensions of the past and present and explore the identity politics and ideological viewpoints in a country that is traditionally torn between the East and West.

From the perspective of usage of the past, the six articles can be divided into two analytically separated categories, which both consist of three articles. The first three articles of this special issue (Lleshi, Verbeeck, Korhonen) analyse how the past is utilized, interpreted, and revised to fill in gaps and absences in terms of memory politics that shape remembering for communities and nations alike. They show how the past is used to revise collective memory and to make certain absent issues visible by reconciling memory with history (Delanty 2017). In remaining three articles, the contributors (Metsälä and Nyyssönen, Ahonen, Linchenko and Anikin) focus on exploring continuities, transformations, and ruptures in the constructions of national memory.

During the recent decades, national memory institutes have been opened in former socialist countries to preserve and promote particular (national) remembrances of the past. However, one of the most influential scholars on memory institutions, Mink (2013), argues that these institutions that were established in place of truth commissions, have mainly failed in their efforts to come to terms with the communist past. Sokol Lleshi's contribution focuses on the case of Albania, where a national memory institute was established similar to other post-Communist countries. Unlike most of these institutes, the Albanian Institute for the Study of the Crimes and Consequence of Communism is run by a group of people who share a similar origin and cultural past. The institute draws on the experiences of these members of 'bourgeoisie', a group that was politically persecuted during the Communist regime in Albania, to create a narrative of the past. On the basis of ethnographic fieldwork conducted at the Institute, Lleshi shows how instead of advancing a plural society with a dialogical approach to the past, the institution promotes a social memory of this particular group.

Memory issues, especially the ones related to the colonial past, are increasingly topical in the Western European countries. The violent colonial regimes are examples of 'dark heritage', which always contain an "element of physical conflict, destruction, forced internment or other kind of atrocity, which may include but also go beyond other, less physically violent or event-related controversies." (Thomas 2019, 115). In this volume, Georgi Verbeeck focuses on the process of entangled forgetting

and remembering in the endeavours of Belgium to deal with its contentious past. Belgium forms an interesting case, since compared to neighbouring countries, public and scholarly debate concerning the colonial past was opened relatively late in the country. Similar to Germany, the Belgian colonial past has also attracted less attention in the international scholarship of postcolonialism than for instance in France, the UK or the Netherlands. By analysing three cases, namely the historiographical debate on colonialism and genocide, the Lumumba Commission and the renewal of the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Brussels, Verbeeck sheds light on the transformation in Belgium that has moved from a culture of denial of its colonial past to recognizing and embracing a more critical narrative.

While both cases above focus on dealing with difficult past from contemporary perspective, the article of Kuisma Korhonen exemplifies how the past symbols are selectively used to legitimise present political objectives. In his article, Korhonen focuses on the (mis-) use of symbolic meanings in the context of the rise of the radical right in Finland. He discusses the example of how Finnish far-right movements make use of torches during the 612-event on occasion of the Finnish Independence Day, which has been organised every year in the Finnish capital of Helsinki since 2014. As controversial symbols with multiple cultural and political meanings, torches have been used throughout the centuries and all over the world, including for organising the rallies of the Ku Klux Klan or in 20th century Nazi Germany. Against the historical controversies related to the usage of torches, his article analyses the struggle over meaning making in contemporary Finland. Korhonen juxtaposes the organisers' claims of the event being non-political but 'solely' patriotic and commemorative with their references to the more radical ideology, which he terms as an example of 'doublespeak' that aims to address both the general public and the far-right activists by sending different messages to distinct groups.

The article of Jussi Metsälä and Heino Nyssönen offers a good example of entangled continuities, transformations and ruptures in the constructions of a national memory. The authors use a

comparative approach to analyse the preambles of the constitutions of twenty-nine former socialist countries as a form of public and institutional memory. The article is a good example of memory politics, i.e. exercising political control over memory (e.g. Grinchenko and Narvesius 2018). By scrutinising the use of history in the preambles of these countries, the authors show how this is done for the purpose of “identification and identity building, which can even compromise critical academic historiography”. Similar to other authors of the special issue, Metsälä and Nyssönen advocate for a “broad and balanced narrative of the past” that stems from and includes various competing viewpoints and opinions, instead of narrowing to a single imagination of the nation.

Sirkka Ahonen brings the same issue forward by analysing the contribution of Finnish history textbooks for deconstructing grand narratives and national myths in terms of “vernacularly and transgenerationally fostered narratives of the past”. Her focus is on the relationship between historiography and history education. Ahonen shows how the deconstruction in the field of history has led to the negotiation of the uses of the past and contributed to emphasise the multiperspectivity of meanings given in this process. While a global gaze is already widely adopted in historiography, school textbooks in Finland continue to mediate a narrowly framed and biased view on the past that restricts history to a national gaze. Ahonen argues for rebuffing the national frames in history education and calls for the necessity of integrating a more global and open view on the past that would allow to transmit and develop a global historical awareness.

While political changes result in the revision of the past, as indicated by several of our authors, revising the past may also include a potential for bringing about political change. Since legitimisation of politics implies a balance between forgetting and remembering (Olick 2016, 2003), the past can be used beyond revising collective memory for creating oblivion by helping to silence formerly remembered ones (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983; Passerini 2003). According to Wijermars (2018), the political uses of cultural memory have played an essential role in legitimising political actions and silencing oppositional voices in Russia since the first inauguration of Vladimir Putin as president in

2000. This is well exemplified by the article of Andrei Linchenko and Daniil Anikin, which explores the current formation of a controversial framework of remembrance and oblivion of the October Revolution 1917 in the Russian party politics, where the right-wing and centrist parties tend to frame the Revolution as an undesirable event. By analysing parallel images of the revolution and the dissonance that is embedded in their uses, the article indicates that history does not become a field of reconciliation of various political forces in Russia. Rather, the purposeful selection of certain events in lieu of other results in the creation of a paradox that intertwines Soviet nostalgia with a neglect of precisely this event, which led in the first place to the establishment of the Soviet Union.

As the special issue shows, memory work is a broadly applied and controversial process, in which the deconstruction of grand narratives and national myths often coincide with efforts of reducing the past to legitimise the current authorities. Therefore, the politics of memory tends to implicitly and explicitly create new gaps in memory that contribute to the polarization of societies. The study of memory and oblivion in the context of the political uses of the past are even more relevant and topical in today's heated and antagonistic debates.

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