

Memory politics, statebuilding and social movement identity

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Memory politics, statebuilding and social movement identity

The politics of rhetoric of commemoration: how the Portuguese parliament celebrates the 1974 Revolution, by Michael Billig and Cristina Marinho, London, Bloomsbury, 2017. Pp. viii + 198 + bibliography + index. £95.00 (hbk). ISBN 9781474297738.

Fragile memory, shifting impunity: commemoration and contestation in post-dictatorship Argentina and Uruguay, by Cara Levey, Oxford, Peter Lang, 2016. Pp. ix + 261 + bibliography + index. £42.00 (hbk). ISBN 978303594955.

Becoming a movement: identity, narrative and memory in the European Global Justice Movement, by Priska Daphi, London, Rowan & Littlefield International, 2017. Pp. xi + 115 + acknowledgements + appendix A + appendix B + bibliography + cited GJM documents + index. £80.00 (hbk). ISBN 9781786603791.

How states, organisations and individuals deal with the legacy and memories of troubled pasts has been the focus of various scholarly studies in recent decades. Some authors even believe that there is an *obsession* with the past, which acts as a replacement for the emergencies of the present or as a rejection of an anticipated unstable future (see for example Rousso and Conan, 1994). Such *memorial obsession* is characterised by projecting into the past the social identities of the present in order to achieve ethical and political support for current socio-political struggles. In this context, it is possible to find public manifestations of memory that are contradictory, anachronistic and that misrepresent the past by simplifying or distorting it.

The three reviewed volumes connect different fields in the study of memory politics – psychology, cultural studies and social movement studies – and showcase different methodological approaches – critical discourse analysis, ethnography and narrative analysis. Billig and Marinho’s volume focuses on how state representatives in Portugal engage in organised remembering and forgetting during the parliamentary celebration of the day of the revolution; Levey’s volume is a hybrid, focusing both on state and civil society memory politics regarding commemorative sites; while Daphi examines non-state collective memories and how they constitute the building blocks of movement identity.

Throughout the three reviewed volumes, the fact that memories are fluid and changeable over time and space is underlined. Thus, memories should be linked to their contexts and should be expected to change over time, according to the specificities and needs of the present. In addition, Billig and Marinho's and Levey's volumes point out that past events are used both by those who did and those who did not live through them, who engage in debates and controversies regarding who and what should be remembered, celebrated or excluded, as well as how to (re)present troubled pasts and how to promote societal engagement. However, a troubling feature of these controversies, which are typical of memory politics, is that they can actually obfuscate remembrance of individuals and events -- advancing the politics of the day, but leaving some sourness among those affected or excluded from the collectively evoked narrative. Daphi's volume, meanwhile, takes a different standpoint by taking into account the perspectives of non-state actors, and by focusing more on agreement rather than conflict in terms of how to interpret the past. However, its fresh perspective on how group memory in its narrative form influences the creation and maintenance of movement identity is much appreciated.

Michael Billig and Cristina Marinho's volume, *The politics of rhetoric of commemoration: how the Portuguese parliament celebrates the 1974 Revolution*, showcases a fascinating political discourse analysis of the ceremony that is held every year (since 1977) to celebrate the Portuguese revolution of 1974, known as 25 April or as the Carnation Revolution. Billig and Marinho analyse not only what is being said and done at the ceremony, but more interestingly, what is *not* being done or said by the deputies taking part in the celebration. Through these lenses, throughout the volume, they explore aspects of rhetoric, politics and collective remembering.

Rhetoric theorists spanning Aristotle to Burke are drawn into the analysis of the ceremony celebrating 25 April, where the focus is on epideictic rhetoric, which is the type of rhetoric used when everyone is gathered to praise an event. In this context, the authors argue that the language of high politics (including the language of common values and shared identity and the use of maxims) would be expected to take place. However, in the Portuguese case they also found the language of low politics (including the language of partisan politics).

Different speeches delivered over the years by different deputies representing different parties are analysed, as well as the beginnings and endings of the ceremony itself. The links between rhetoric and persuasion are thoroughly investigated, since in the literature they tend to be connected. However, the authors demonstrate that party politicians might have other rhetorical objectives in mind than just persuasion, as evidenced by the fact that they are

talking to same party members who are already persuaded, as well as to opposite party members who are non-persuadable. In this vein, performance, and not persuasion alone, is raised as an important aspect to be taken into account when looking at modern democracies. Thus, it is put forward that persuasion and performance can walk hand-in-hand when deputies are meant to be speaking for the nation, but are actually speaking for their own party, showcasing “that the political party itself has accomplished its own self-persuasion” (p.62). The authors find that speeches not only contain views on the event, but also links to current party’s politics. In the end, such ceremonies are not only acts of collective agreement, where national identity takes precedence over political identity -- as we would expect them to be -- but are actually highly political. Both unity (national unity) and division (partisan politics) are built into the structure of the occasion, resulting in a ceremony that is not apolitical, so much so that parliament deputies without parties do not have the opportunity to talk. This leads Billig and Marinho to argue that the context surrounding the epideictic rhetoric is deeply political as speakers commemorate the past in political partisan speeches. In this sense, the authors believe that existing rhetoric theories should be adapted to deal with the modern political discourse, which uses the celebratory rhetoric of common values to opportunistically pursue partisan interests.

In terms of collective remembering, it is important to highlight that the authors explicitly distance their work from the field of research focused on collective reconstructions or representations of the past, which are commonly known as “collective memory”. This decision is justified by the assumption that such a focus would prevent the identification of what is not happening and “how little remembering is going on in these ceremonial speeches” (p. 4). Additionally, the authors want to avoid turning complex acts into things or, in other words, turning how the collective remembers into “collective memories”, treating them then as objects in themselves. Once more, they are not looking for representations of collective memory according to the political position of the speaker, but they want to understand what the speaker is doing with the words of remembrance in the context of the ceremony. In this way, they turn the spotlight back onto the people, presenting them as the agents of the collective remembrance. In this vein, Billig and Marinho examine how the left- and the right-wing remember and forget the day of the revolution. They describe how the left-wing deputies, for instance, ignore what happened on the full day of the Revolution, only mentioning the dawn and the morning, as well as what came before and after it, adding a good dose of mythical and magical thinking to support the enthusiasm with which they embrace the celebration. The authors identify the strategies that allow the left to portray such selective remembering, as well as what politics are involved in such a choice. In this context,

Billig and Marinho present a very interesting discussion which questions whether what the left is doing can be considered collective repression or motivated forgetting. They also observe the absence of descriptions of what happened on 25 April 1974 in the speeches delivered by the right-wing deputies. However, the reasons for this absence on the right-wing speeches are clearly different compared to the reasons motivating the left-wing deputies, since the two parties on the right side of the political spectrum are clearly ambivalent regarding the revolution (which they prefer to see as an evolution). Thus, it is shown how these deputies use “presentism” to take part in the celebration without embracing it unreservedly, as well as how they use myth for their own purposes, mythologizing for instance the date of the counter-revolution (25 November 1975), rather than 25 April 1974.

All in all, looking for what is *not* being said and done in order to better understand what *is* being said and done in how the Portuguese parliament celebrates 25 April is a key-feature of this volume, which makes it a very interesting and valuable read. The stimulating writing style, punctuated by thought-provoking questions and the authors’ affable sense of humour, contribute to its value. One point that deserves greater scrutiny, however, is how conscious and intentional deputies are regarding what they are doing and saying (or not), and how they would justify their decisions. While the sections on collective repression or motivated forgetting, and on manipulating and celebrating, put forward some interesting view on this topic, it would be useful to know what deputies, particularly younger generations, think about such a structured ceremony and such a structured partisan way of approaching it. Do they not question it? What makes them keep to tradition? That said, such questions may be beyond the remit of this volume to explore this further, since other methods beyond discourse analysis would have to be employed (e.g. interviews).

Conversely, Cara Levey’s *Fragile memory, shifting impunity: commemoration and contestation in post-dictatorship Argentina and Uruguay* aims to frame the struggles for memory within shifting contexts of impunity, focussing particularly on the cases of Argentina and Uruguay and how they have dealt with some of their memorial sites. She wants to understand the extent to which such struggles constitute a form of non-institutional, reparative or societally undertaken justice, or whether they contribute directly to legal accountability and the post-dictatorship struggles for justice. Levey focuses her analysis on six commemorative sites, three from each country under analysis, in order to delineate how commemoration (of certain historical events, periods or protagonists) is created, what and who is remembered, and how different societal actors attempt to reach consensus on the past, specifically on what happened and what should be remembered. She highlights the mid-twentieth century turn from having history written by political leaders and elites, to giving

space to ordinary people's voices in the historical narrative through considering memoir and testimonies as legitimate discourses that should be included in the historical reconstruction. This is particularly relevant in contexts of post-authoritarianism and state repression. Here, memory can work as resistance and as a tool to challenge human rights violations, official histories, and institutional attempts to control or manipulate the past.

This volume sits in the memory studies arena, but it is located more precisely by the author in the subfield "politics of memory" (p.5), since it explores the relationship between memory, the actors involved, and the wider debates regarding justice and impunity. Levey carried out ethnographic research in the countries under analysis, which encompassed semi-structured interviews with key state and society stakeholders, aimed at understanding the rationale and decision-making process behind commemoration; site visits in order to track the progress of commemoration initiatives over time; participant observation of the *escrache*, which are demonstrations where the addresses and workplaces of people accused of human rights abuses are made public; and archival research on the legislation of the different sites and on the meetings minutes of commemorative commissions and human rights organisations. Levey convincingly argues that an interdisciplinary and actor-centred approach, which takes into consideration the activism and controversies in relation to broader debates on memory, better serves her research aims.

Levey does a great job setting out the study's theoretical framework, engaging with very relevant and interesting debates in the field of memory studies. In particular, she explores how memory is treated by and treats history, how it is constructed and its dialectical nature, how it relates to commemorative sites, and how some of these debates apply to the Latin American Southern Cone. However, she is not as capable in presenting the study's contextual framework. She sets out to cover the contrasting experiences of state terrorism in Argentina and Uruguay, how these countries have been dealing with the crimes committed by past governments, and how impunity is blatant in both contexts. Although these aspects are covered, for those who are only superficially acquainted with the case studies -- as many of the readership may be -- Levey goes into too much historical detail, jumping from one context to the other and clouding the insights that could clearly shed light on the analysis that follows. One other feature that is in evidence both here and throughout the volume, which hinders its smooth reading, is the overuse of direct quotations, words and expressions in Spanish. It is unclear what point this serves, as Levey does not do any text analysis or highlight what the person meant by a certain word or expression in Spanish. Instead, the reader is left with chunks of text in Spanish followed by the translation in English or with

Spanish expressions with no translation, such as “jefe de gobierno” (p. 147). This does little to enhance the volume’s readability.

The analysis of the commemorative sites is divided into three chapters. In each chapter, Levey compares the history of two monuments, one from each country under study, and builds a narrative based on scholarly literature, media debates and her own ethnographic research. She highlights the dynamics between the different actors involved with the sites in question, particularly local and national government representatives and civil society activists. In her analysis it is clear, for instance, that national governments often want to move on, even if it means giving way to judicial impunity, while social and local government actors do not agree with such a move and often run unofficial initiatives to prevent societal forgetting, which can also act as alternative discourses to official state narratives. She also traces the nature of each site (e.g., intentional versus unintentional – that is, built on purpose to be a commemorative site or repurposed as a commemorative site), as well as the main debates and challenges faced by each commemorative site, which involve processes of conceptualisation, management and administration. Levey argues that such processes can threaten sites of memory, and represent the wider struggles for memory and justice in Argentina and Uruguay. Nonetheless, on the topic of justice, Levey considers that commemorative sites do have an impact on justice, both directly -- such as being living proof of sites where human rights abuses have been committed – and indirectly, by keeping debates regarding legal impunity alive and maintaining pressure on the state. Thus, while she argues that sites of memory do not replace justice through trials, she also argues that they are a linchpin in the justice-seeking process by, for instance, giving a voice to the experiences of the victims. In addition, she underlines the importance of the official nature of such sites, which adds to their reparative benefits, since “state sanctioning of commemorative initiatives functions as a form of official acknowledgment of state wrongdoing” (p. 257).

The volume’s main virtue is undoubtedly its attempt to explore the governmental and societal dynamics that surround sites of memory in post-dictatorial contexts, which have also been contexts of shifting impunity until the present day. Such dynamics represent the struggles for memory in Argentina and Uruguay, but also the struggles for justice in these countries. A step forward that could be taken in this analysis would be to elaborate more on the concept and conceptions of truth, which is referred to throughout the volume, since this is closely related to the justice process but also to the contestation of sites of memory. In addition, from an ethnographic study I would also expect more non-academic voices to be heard. While the space given to the work of Latin American scholars and media is very valuable, the voices of the so-called actors are sparse, and it is not actually clear who they are

and why their perspective was sought above that of others. Finally, for a full picture, it would have been interesting to also include the views of some of the perpetrators accused by the *escrache*, for instance, or of individuals who, for some reason, do not agree with the commemorative sites under examination.

Finally, Priska Daphi's volume, *Becoming a movement: identity, narrative and memory in the European Global Justice Movement* sets out to investigate the role of narratives in building movement identity. Daphi aims to better understand the processes underlying the formation of collective identity in social movements, and what specific qualities a narrative requires to foster such identity. In order to do so, she looks at the particular case of the Global Justice Movement (GJM), which was organised around cycles of mobilisation from the 1990s until 2000s, protesting against neoliberal globalisation and its consequent economic, social and environmental injustices. The GJM is a transnational movement organised around networks, characterised by geographic dispersion and diversity of groups. Daphi sees these aspects as key to studying formation of collective identity, because by taking into account the heterogeneity of the GJM, she is able to shed light on which processes bridge differences and build commonalities across a variety of sectors, also in relation to other social movements. Thus, through the study of three specific national constellations of the GJM – Italy, Germany and Poland – Daphi aims to come up with new insights into the formation of GJM identity by studying how activist cooperation copes with differences in political traditions and local contexts, illuminating national differences and cross-national similarities in the formation of transnational movement identity.

Conceptually, Daphi explores how collective identity is built and maintained by highlighting the interplay of identity's cognitive, relational and emotional dimensions. According to the author, this prevents the fragmentary conceptualisation and one-dimensional analysis that is usual in the study of movement identity. She also demonstrates the centrality of group memories to understand movement durability and tactical decisions. In this sense, her focus is on the meso-level, on the collective narratives activists tell about the movement's shared past. Analytically, Daphi uses content and structural narrative analysis to examine the data collected through seventy-one interviews with GJM activists, fifteen interviews with experts familiar with the GJM, three focus groups and selected GJM publications. She explores the plots within the collected material, distinguishing between the order in which events are recounted and the characteristics, meanings and consequences attributed to these events. In this sense, she makes a distinction between two levels of narrative meaning making: the events and the evaluations. The events are the sequences of single actions, while

the evaluations are the reflections on the events, which tend to bring up the narrator's cognitive, emotional and moral interpretations.

While previous research has shown that GJM identity largely focuses on activists' shared cognitions of problems and goals, Daphi's research also shows that GJM identity centrally drew on a shared narrative about its activities that provided a notion of joint experience and agency, as well as on social boundaries and emotional proximity. The way Daphi presents the shared narrative is particularly interesting, because she demonstrates how it integrates the country- and sector- specific experiences and perspectives into a shared plot with a sequence of four episodes. However, she also highlights that such a narrative is only shared by activists who felt like part of GJM at large, and not by those who primarily considered themselves part of a specific GJM group or who no longer felt part of the GJM. In regard to the interplay of identity's cognitive, relational and emotional dimensions, Daphi argues that cognitions do not need to be formulated explicitly, but can also be expressed more implicitly through narrative plots; that there were clear social boundaries between the GJM (us) and other actors (others) in the GJM activists' narrative; and that both GJM narratives of shared hardship and shared triumph fostered and expressed emotional proximity between GJM activists. Finally, Daphi found out that the specific quality a narrative requires to foster movement identity is the need to be based on group memories with a specific plot. In this sense, she argues that "[n]arratives creating a sense of collective history are very powerful in forming collective identity" (p. 111). Thus, it makes a difference when the movement's story is told in the first person.

Despite having a strong focus on identity and narrative, which yields very interesting and insightful findings, the third element of the volume's title – memory – is not equally well served. Memory is undoubtedly present across the volume, since it is inherent to the nature of the research itself. However, it is almost an implicit presence, which is slightly strange, since it is acknowledged as the ingredient that when shared by a group and presenting a specific plot actually fosters movement identity. Thus, I would expect more engagement with how and why this is the case from a memory studies perspective, drawing, for instance, on how autobiographical memory is used in the present to preserve a valued individual, but also group, identity.

Yet in spite of this, I believe that Daphi's volume makes an important empirical contribution to a more complex understanding of the role of narrative in the formation and maintenance of movement identity, which is interesting beyond social movement and narrative studies.

In the three volumes analysed, memory and memory politics are the main subjects explored from different angles (e.g., state and non-state actors), locations (Portugal, Latin America – Uruguay and Argentina – and Europe – Italy, Germany and Poland), and methodologies (discourse analysis, ethnography and narrative analysis). I believe that these is the strength of looking at the three volumes as a whole, because the reader is able to grasp the contextual richness and diversity, but also how transversely mnemonic processes can be and how different methodologies enable the exploration of different perspectives and issues. This said, I think that all three volumes are of interest to memory studies scholars, in general, and to scholars interested in specific methodologies and other area studies, in particular. Billig and Marinho's volume is a very good example of the application of discourse analysis to existing documents, resorting to the field of psychology to back up their arguments; Levey's volume showcases a comparative ethnography of commemorative sites, meeting the current scholarly interest around such matters; and Daphi's volume examines narratively the identity construction within a social movement, giving an important contribution to both the arenas of narrative identity and social movement studies.

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Notes on contributor

Raquel da Silva is a British Academy Research Fellow in the International Development Department, University of Birmingham. Her research interests include political violence, with a particular focus on the experiences of former militants and foreign fighters. She also focuses on critical approaches to terrorism, with a specific interest in narratives, life stories and the dialogical self.

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