

Memory Studies – Development, Debates and Directions

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Memory Studies – Development, Debates and Directions

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Abstract

This chapter introduces the reader to the field of Memory Studies. It traces the emergence of memory as a topic of investigation and gives an overview of the development of the field. It highlights the main actors and institutions, describes the most influential debates that have shaped the field and illustrates the institutional structures that sustain it. In doing so, it argues that Memory Studies has started to display all the features characteristic of an established discipline.

Keywords

Memory Studies · Interdisciplinarity · Institutionalisation · Development · Debates

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1 Introduction

Memory is a key area for interdisciplinary research. Memory Studies is thus not only a multidisciplinary field but fundamentally an interdisciplinary project involving fields as diverse as history, sociology, international relations, art, literary and media studies, anthropology, philosophy, theology, psychology, and the neurosciences. It thus brings together the humanities, social studies, and the natural sciences in a unique way. It is an incoherent and dispersed field that is trying to grasp a multifarious notion by using a term that is often used in an ambiguous and vague way. If we talk about memory, we could mean myths, monuments, historiography, rituals, invented traditions, heritage, commemoration, conversational remembering, configurations of cultural knowledge, and neuronal networks. Because it is a relatively new area of study and because of its interdisciplinary nature there are still many disagreements, for example on the proper unit of analysis (individuals, groups or nations). The fact that it is being investigated by scholars coming from different disciplines and national academic cultures with their own vocabularies, methods and traditions, further complicates the picture. Theories or hypotheses to guide inquiry into this topic are very scarce and there is currently no uniform vocabulary for analysing the process of confronting the past. This makes for its terminological richness, but also for its disjointedness. More than once Memory Studies has been criticized for being a “nonparadigmatic, transdisciplinary, centreless enterprise” (Olick und Robbins 1998, p. 105). The following can thus only be a small attempt to give an overview of the different currents, actors, institutions, and topics that have influenced and continue to shape the field of Memory Studies.

2 The Emergence of Memory as a Topic of Investigation

Memory Studies is a phenomenon of the last quarter century despite the fact that memory has been a topic of investigation since the Greeks (Yates 1966). Yet it emerged as a distinct research matter only in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Scholars such as Sigmund Freud, Emile Durkheim, Maurice Halbwachs, Aby Warburg, Arnold Zweig, and Walter Benjamin were the first ones to investigate the intersections between culture and memory. Despite increasing interest in Memory Studies especially in sociology, one had to wait until the 1960s before not only particular memories but memory itself became the subject of intense public as well as scholarly debate (Ginzburg 1997). The ‘memory boom’ that begun originally in the humanities has since then spread to the social sciences and gained momentum in the 1980s and 90s not only in the academic world but also in the political arena, the mass media, and the arts (Huysen 1995; Roediger und Wertsch 2007).

The reasons for this increased interest in the past 20 years are manifold but all of them can be traced back to a number of prominent historical and political changes that became a catalyst for the development of Memory Studies as a research field. Michael Kammen identified in 1995 nine reasons for the widespread interest in memory discourse (p. 247-251). His list, however, is specific to the US and played

less of a role in Germany for example. If we take a step back to distil factors that hold also transnationally, we can distinguish four broad developments. The arguably biggest influence was played by the greatest catastrophe of the 20th century – the Holocaust, whose shadows continued to exert its impact until today. The fact that most countries only started to face questions of the full scale of their responsibility and collaboration in the 1990s, required new ways of thinking about the past. At the same time, a major change in the forms of cultural remembrance occurred with the generation that had witnessed the Shoah fading away. Issues of trauma and witnessing came to the fore and a new urgency to retain the memory of survivors breathed new life into the main questions of the discipline. The second factor for the emergence of Memory Studies has been the end of the Cold War and the transformation from totalitarian or authoritarian forms of government to democracy in Argentina, Chile, El Salvador, South Africa and in the countries of Central Eastern Europe. The question on how to deal with perpetrators and victims of injustice triggered new ways of thinking about the past and turned into a new area of research. The third significant factor has been the process of decolonization. It had very significant repercussions—not only for the previous colonizing powers, in particular Britain and France—but also for the previously colonized powers, i.e. countries in Africa and India, who sought to re-appropriate their own memories, whereas for the previous colonizing powers, what has emerged is what might be described as a politics of nostalgia (Blight 2009). A fourth factor are the changes in technology and popular media. The possibility to store great amounts of data and get instant access to large digital archives stands in sharp contrast to the ‘looming danger of cultural amnesia’ (Erl 2011a, p. 4).

Some scholars (Garton Ash 2002; Lorenz 2014) take a more philosophical stance and believe that the reasons for the emergence of Memory Studies lie much deeper. They argue that the increased interest in the past has to do with the future not having the power any more to integrate. It stopped providing the glue that holds communities together. Or in other words: ‘since we do not believe any more in being able to improve the future, we try to improve the past’ (Lorenz 2014, p. 9) by installing truth commissions, taking decisions on reparation payments, setting-up historical commissions etc.

3 From Field to Discipline

Memory has been investigated by sociologists (e.g. Zerubavel 2003), anthropologists (e.g. Cole 2001), psychologists (e.g. Middleton und Brown 2005; Pennebaker, Paez & Rimé 1997), historians (e.g. Bodnar 1992), literary analysts (e.g. Young 1993) and others but there has been very little contact or coordination between them. For many years, Memory Studies was considered a field of research. Scholars understood themselves mainly as historians, sociologists, political scientists, literary scholars etc. with an interest in memory. The term ‘memory scholar’ only appeared in the last decade. Most researchers of memory issues still possess one main disciplinary identity but on top of that consider themselves memory scholars with

more than a simple interest in memory issues. Indeed, in the introduction to *The Collective Memory Reader*, the editors argue that ‘far from declining in relevance, many of the analytical frameworks with which scholars have approached the issues highlighted under the rubric of memory studies represent the outlines of an increasingly important paradigm that unifies diverse interests across numerous disciplines, and consolidates long-standing perspectives within them, in perspicuous ways’ (Olick et al. 2011, p. 5).

This development is illustrated by the impressive growth of features that are characteristic for a discipline rather than a field. Among them are the existence of established publication outlets with reputable publishers, departments handing out Masters and PhD degrees, academic positions (lectureships, professorships), funders giving grants supporting research in the field, specialized conferences as distinctive forums for exchange, and organizations giving the field institutional backing.

3.1 Publication Outlets

For the first element, dedicated publication outlets, an exponential growth in the last years can be observed. The number of publications that carry terms such as ‘collective memory’ in their title or subtitle is increasing constantly. Together with the amount of research conducted, also the number of outlets are growing. If initially articles dealing with memory were published in journals that had a different disciplinary focus (i.e. *History & Memory*, *History & Theory*), since 2008 a dedicated journal called *Memory Studies* and published by SAGE has become the preferred article publication outlet for many memory scholars after its rapid listing by Thompson Reuters Journal Citation Reports® (JCR). As a result, the journal has become the flagship journal of the field and is dealing with an impressive backlog and a not minder impressive rise of its impact factor. Similar can be said about books and book series. For many years the Palgrave MacMillan *Memory Studies* series edited by John Sutton was the only player on the pitch. Today, there are five more book series dedicated to publishing exclusively research on memory: The Routledge *Studies in Memory and Narrative*, the Routledge *Memory Studies: Global Constellations* series edited by Henri Lustiger-Thaler, the De Gruyter *Media and Cultural Memory* series edited by Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning, the Springer series *Soziales Gedächtnis, Erinnern und Vergessen – Memory Studies* edited by Oliver Dimbath, Michael Heinlein, Jörg Michael Kastl, Nina Leonhard, Marco Schmitt, Gerd Sebald, Peter Wehling, the Stanford University press series *Cultural Memory in the Present* edited by Hent de Vries, and the recently established Berghahn *Worlds of Memories* series edited by Aline Sierp, Jenny Wüstenberg and Jeffrey Olick.

3.2 Academic Positions and Degree Programmes

Together with the increase of publication outlets came the establishment of academic positions and degree programmes. The first chair in Memory Studies was established

in 2013 in Aarhus. Initially running under the title 'Public Use of History and Historical Theory', since 2015 it is called 'Chair in Memory Studies and Historical Theory'. Others followed, for example the chair 'Memory Studies and Narrative' at the International Centre for the Humanities Studies 'Umberto Eco' (ex Scuola Superiore di Studi Umanistici), and the TraMe Center for the Interdisciplinary Study of Cultural Memory and Traumas, at the University of Bologna. Or the Canada Research Chair in Culture and Public Memory. At the same time, the amount of MA and PhD programmes having memory as their central focus has expanded rapidly. Initially most programmes which had some courses on memory in their curriculum were running under a different label, i.e. 'heritage' or 'transitional justice'. In the past years an increasing number of programmes has 'memory' in their title though (i.e. the MA in Cultural History, Memory and Identity of the University of Brighton or the MA in Heritage and Memory Studies of the University of Amsterdam or the Graduate Certificate in Holocaust, Genocide, and Memory Studies of the University of Illinois). A few PhD programmes are also explicitly about memory (i.e. at the University of Amsterdam, the University of Edinburgh or the Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main). In addition, institutionalized research clusters dedicated to Memory Studies within universities can be found. Among them are the 'Frankfurt Memory Studies Platform' at Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main, the 'Memory at War' project at the University of Cambridge, the 'School for Heritage and Memory Studies' in Amsterdam, the 'Centre for Research in Memory, Narrative and Histories' at the University of Brighton, the 'Centre for the Study of Cultural Memory' at the University of London, the 'Arbeitskreis Soziales Gedächtnis, Erinnern und Vergessen' of the Deutschen Gesellschaft für Soziologie and the John Nicholas Brown Center for Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage at Brown University.

3.3 Specialized Conferences

Similar to degree programmes that dealt with memory issues but did not have memory in their title, also the development of specialized conferences dedicated exclusively to the showcasing of memory research took a while. Most scholars organised smaller memory panels at bigger conferences (i.e. at the ECPR, the CES or the ISA conferences). The arguably very first conference explicitly inviting memory scholars and having memory in its title took place in 2010 in London. It featured many scholars that belong to the most-cited memory scholars and were to play an important role in the future building of the discipline: Astrid Erll, Susannah Radstone, Dirk Moses, Michael Rothberg, Andrew Hoskins to name just a few. From 2010 onwards the amount of memory conferences increased year by year. However, most of them remained regional and relatively small. Compared to the ever-growing memory scholar community with more and more graduates having memory degrees, conference activity remained rather limited. What was missing was a pivotal annual conference giving an overview of recent activities within the field. Discussions about this missing element went hand in hand with the increasingly felt

lack of a central professional organisation able to bundle all the smaller networks, their members and dispersed information.

3.4 Central Organisations

During a small 200 people conference in December 2016 in Amsterdam hosted under the umbrella of the ‘CES Research Network on Transnational Memory and Identity’ chaired by Aline Sierp and Jenny Wüstenberg, the idea of the Memory Studies Association (MSA) was born. The association was formally registered six months later, in June 2017, in Maastricht, the Netherlands. Aline Sierp, Jenny Wüstenberg and Jeffrey Olick became its first Co-Presidents supported by an Advisory Board and an Executive Committee. Since then the MSA has organised three annual conferences in Copenhagen 2017 (attracting 600 attendees), Madrid 2019 (attracting 1500 attendees) and Charlottesville 2020 (cancelled due to COVID-19). The fourth conference is going to take place in July 2021 in Warsaw. Paid membership has increased from initially 200 in 2016 to over 1500 in 2020. The MSA is not only organising an annual conference with the ambition to draw in scholars from underrepresented regions (Asia, Africa and South America) but also has its own website and newsletter, organises several awards (a best paper award and an outstanding first book award), has its own internship programme, runs a mentorship programme for young scholars and supports over a dozen Working and Regional groups.

3.5 Funding

One of the aims of organisations like the MSA is to connect like-minded scholars. This is one of the preconditions for successful funding applications. The number of donors (either state authorities in charge of grants or private funders) that consider memory a topic worth funding has increased constantly. To name here in particular are the big funding calls by the European Commission (especially H2020 or the ‘Europe for Citizens’ programme) who included ‘memory’, ‘dealing with the past’ etc in their wording. The triple helix model of research funding (industry, the state, and the university) requires now next to the traditional criterion of scientific excellence also the demonstration of commercial potential and societal relevance. While the second element is less relevant for Memory Studies, the societal relevance criterion is a box most projects easily tick. This has to do with the fact that memory issues often touch upon topics that are of sensitive nature to the state: i.e. national and ethnic identity, foreign policy, post-conflict reconstruction, human rights etc. As a result, in the case of Memory Studies, universities and the state are the principal funders of projects, with scientific excellence and societal relevance as the main grant criteria.

All of these elements point to a slow development away from an established field of study towards a discipline that has become institutionalized in a formal sense,

with an infrastructure of student education and hiring, as well as funding mechanisms, scholarships, and organizations to back it up. In that sense the Memory Studies field has come a long way from the first assessment made in 2013/2014. Duceac-Segesten and Wüstenberg (published only in 2017) had concluded at the time that: ‘the memory studies field has many scholarly agents engaged in making it a stand-alone field, as per step number one. However, there is weak institutionalization at the university level, coupled with deep methodological and even theoretical fragmentation, making step two in the model the next milestone to reach. The third step of the model, recognition by public and private funding entities [. . .] was deemed farthest away from completion’ (p. 487). Even if the Memory Studies field is still far away from being established to the same extent as its neighbourly disciplines, it seems to have moved markedly into the direction of institutionalisation.

Not everybody sees this development as something positive though. Already in 1995 Barbie Zelizer writes that contemporary Memory Studies have ‘the feel of a blended family grown too large too fast. We may have adopted tenets of study that are ill-fitted to the dimensions of remembering that we find’ (p. 215). Steven Brown (2008) and Susannah Radstone similarly worried 13 years later that the creation of a formal discipline will translate into intellectual rigidity and restrict academic freedom. Notwithstanding this criticism, the memory field continues to grow with an ever-expanding number of different actors and topics to investigate.

4 The Main Actors

Stretching not only across disciplines but also across different domains Memory Studies are carried out by a wealth of different actors. Few other disciplines allow to bridge the academic and the practitioner’s world so easily. As varied as the disciplines that memory scholars come from are, as diverse are also the job profiles of practitioners dealing with memory issues. From museum curators to artists, memorial staff to archivists, policy advisors to members of NGOs and cultural managers. This does not always render communication across the field easy. Conferences and networking events tend to address either an academic or a practitioner audience. The first organisation that tried to integrate both communities was arguably the European Network Remembrance and Solidarity (ENRS), founded in 2005. The yearly symposium brings together the main voices of both worlds. A similar goal is pursued by the European Observatory of Memories (EUROM), founded in 2012. However, both organisations continue to be dominated by practitioners. The Memory Studies Association has the opposite problem: despite its explicit attempts to attract both, most members come from the academic world. As the discipline further consolidates, this might change.

In the survey carried out by Jenny Wüstenberg and Anamaria Dutceac Segesten in 2013/2014 PhD students and junior academics made up the largest categories. The authors concluded that this may have been due to a selection bias, but could also point in the direction of Memory Studies as a subject of interest mainly for younger

academics, with fewer established professors tempted to switch affiliation to a new discipline. Looking at the members of the Memory Studies Association and the participants of its annual conference, we can still observe a similar distribution of ages and rank. This is in line with observations in other fields that are prone to interdisciplinary research. As long as the academic world is dominated by disciplines that jealously guard their own land, this trend will most likely continue.

The other striking element defining Memory Studies is the origin of its main actors. While Memory Studies has been defined as inherently ‘international’ (Erl et al. 2008; Keightley und Pickering 2013; Olick 2008), exchange between the different lively Memory (Studies) communities working in French, German, Spanish, Hebrew, etc. is sometimes hampered by the existing language barrier. This notwithstanding, a kind of canon of main debates has developed over the years.

5 The Main Debates

The question of which debates can be considered leading in Memory Studies depends markedly on the national context within which they unfold. In France, the discourse on memory has been dominated by historians and Pierre Nora’s concept of *lieux de mémoire*. The difference between history and memory takes a central place in discussions between different scholars. In the US, Memory Studies are closely connected to Holocaust studies, trauma studies and poststructuralist critiques of representation. In the UK research is characterised by its marked interest in ideology. It is often informed by radical Marxism and draws from oral history and politically informed psychoanalysis. German Memory Studies cannot be separated from public discussions about the Holocaust and national guilt. Social and cultural anthropology are its central axes. For a long time, the concept of cultural memory going back to the work by Jan and Aleida Assmann was dominating most research (Erl 2011a, pp. 10-11).

Research production in Memory Studies can be roughly divided into three phases (often also called the three waves). The first wave focused on examining social groups and is commonly linked with the work of Maurice Halbwachs, Aby Warburg, Walter Benjamin, Frederic Bartlett, Karl Mannheim and others. While it was pioneering work in its own standing stretching far beyond existing disciplinary boundaries, it was equally criticized for simply transferring concepts from individual psychology to the level of the collective. It was in particular the anti-individualist outlook of the so-called Durkheimian approach, seeing society as a disembodied entity that exists over and above the individuals who comprise it, that led scholars to investigate new terrain.

The second wave revolved around nations as sites of remembrance and began around the publication of Pierre Nora’s (1984-1992) and Jan Assmann’s (1992) works in the 1980s and early 1990s. It was more thematically focused on nations and traumatic events than the first wave yet was criticised for assuming that memory communities were homogeneous and unitarian and that remembrance was driven mainly by elites (e.g. Frei 2006; Gillis 1994; Romero and Varsori 2005). It was

feared that it was running the danger of treating social groups as essential and static entities (Englund 1992). The second phase furthermore concentrated on tangible manifestations of memory with the result that it was often accompanied by the narrow idea that ‘collective memory [...] represents or mirrors a prerepresentational past’ (Olick 2007, p. 89).

The third phase of Memory Studies pays greater attention to understanding the complex, multiple and mobile character of remembrance. New research is taking into account global dynamics without discounting the continued salience of local and national categories. Moreover, scholars of the third phase show new interest in studying the outcomes and tangible manifestations of memory work beyond national borders and in a global context. Religion, ideology, ethnicity, the media and gender are the new coordinates around which research revolves (see for example Reading 2016; Hoskins 2018). In this context, Europe as a potential ‘region of memory’ and the investigation of transnational memory linkages on the European level has attracted sustained attention (see Jens Kroh’s 2008 study on the International Task Force on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research as transnational forum for memory negotiations, Elisabeth Kübler’s 2012 account of memory politics within the Council of Europe, and Aline Sierp’s 2014 book *History, Memory and Trans-European Identity: Unifying Divisions*). This work conceives memory as a process and movement and thus challenges both the methodological nationalism and the strict categorisation of the first and the second phase. Outstanding publications of the third phase that have formed a sort of canon for memory scholars are for example Levy and Sznajder’s (2005) publication on *Holocaust and Memory in a Global Age* introducing the concept of ‘cosmopolitan memory’ or Michael Rothberg’s (2009) *Multidirectional Memory*. Credit should also be paid to Astrid Erll, who was the first to talk about a ‘Third Wave’ in her article ‘Travelling memory’ in 2011.

Interestingly, attention to questions of methodology has been limited in Memory Studies because much research has been more concerned with theoretical or empirical issues. However, also here we can distinguish a list of must-reads that has developed over the years. To mention here are Radstone’s (2000) *Memory and Methodology*, Keightley und Pickering’s (2013) *Research Methods for Memory Studies* and Drozdowski und Birdsall’s (2018) *Doing Memory Research*. Given the dominance of the humanities, the focus lies on qualitative methods. Most scholars employ discourse or narrative analysis, archival research, interviews and media analysis. The most common quantitative approaches are content analysis and network analysis.

6 Conclusion

To conclude, we can say that Memory Studies has displayed an impressive growth spurt on all levels. Having been initially a topic of investigation for a rather small group of scholars, it became of major interest for intellectuals in many different disciplines. This explains its current methodological richness but also its disjointedness. Being initially considered a field of research, Memory Studies has developed in

the last two decades into an area of investigation that displays all the defining characteristics of an established discipline. It is being sustained by a system of hiring and funding, supported by a network of institutions and a central organization, has its own dedicated publication outlets and specialized conferences. Its main actors do not only come from different research backgrounds but also bridge the gap between academia and the practitioner's world. Given the current dynamic of the field and its rapid development in the last years, it is safe to assume that it will continue to grow and prosper also in the future.

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