

MEMORY POLITICS AND  
TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

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**MEMORY POLITICS,  
IDENTITY AND  
CONFLICT**

Historical Memory  
as a Variable

**Zheng Wang**



# Memory Politics and Transitional Justice

Series editors

Jasna Dragovic Soso  
London, United Kingdom

Jelena Subotic

Dept of Pol Sci, 1018 Langdale Hall  
Georgia State University  
Atlanta, GA, USA

Tsveta Petrova

Columbia University  
New York, NY, USA

The interdisciplinary fields of Memory Studies and Transitional Justice have largely developed in parallel to one another despite both focusing on efforts of societies to confront and (re-)appropriate their past. While scholars working on memory have come mostly from historical, literary, sociological, or anthropological traditions, transitional justice has attracted primarily scholarship from political science and the law. This series bridges this divide: it promotes work that combines a deep understanding of the contexts that have allowed for injustice to occur with an analysis of how legacies of such injustice in political and historical memory influence contemporary projects of redress, acknowledgment, or new cycles of denial. The titles in the series are of interest not only to academics and students but also practitioners in the related fields. The Memory Politics and Transitional Justice series promotes critical dialogue among different theoretical and methodological approaches and among scholarship on different regions. The editors welcome submissions from a variety of disciplines – including political science, history, sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies – that confront critical questions at the intersection of memory politics and transitional justice in national, comparative, and global perspective.

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Zheng Wang

# Memory Politics, Identity and Conflict

Historical Memory as a Variable

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Zheng Wang  
School of Diplomacy and International Relations  
Seton Hall University  
South Orange, NJ, USA

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*For Xiaojuan, Anya and Ailynn*

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## Historical Memory as an Omitted Variable?

**Abstract** This chapter introduces the main content and organization of the book. It outlines the difficulties of using historical memory as a variable for social science research. This chapter also discusses why the functions of historical memory are overlooked as an omitted variable and the reasons behind the lack of integrated research on historical memory.

**Keywords** Historical memory · Research methods · Variable

### MISSION IMPOSSIBLE?

In Andrei Markovits and Simon Reich’s research on how Germany’s past influences present policies, they found an interesting phenomenon: Even though collective memory is “the biggest factor mitigating the exercise of German power,” it is “an element many political scientists usually avoid but any journalist working in Germany regularly sees in action.”<sup>1</sup>

The politics of collective memory—impossible to quantify, hard to measure with the methods of survey research, yet still very real—is a major ingredient of the political arena, the public discourse, and the policy setting in every country. It circumscribes the acceptable. It defines such key ingredients as pride, shame, fear, revenge, and comfort for a large number of a country’s citizens. It is central to an understanding of the forces of nationalism.<sup>2</sup>

Research methodology is indeed a major reason why political scientists usually avoid using historical memory as a variable in their research. There are concerns that historical memory cannot be researched scientifically because, in social life, the past does not exist as a hard, objective, or factual reality to be grasped and appropriated.<sup>3</sup> Historical memory is a fluid set of ideas often reshaped by time, emotion, and the politically savvy, not something solid, immutable, or truly measurable.

Not only a problem for political scientists, how ideational factors affect human behavior and social relationships have been one of the most bewildering puzzles for scholars in different disciplines. Progress in incorporating cognitive variables into empirical research on decision-making has been relatively slow and uneven.<sup>4</sup> Scholars who have struggled with this question list three factors that may pose difficulties to research that uses identity as a variable.

First, the existence of identity as a universal but largely implicit concept makes it difficult to isolate and understand.<sup>5</sup> This is because identities and perceptions are only one variable cluster within a rich and complex causal framework for decision-making; identities and perceptions influence, but do not unilaterally determine decision-making behavior.<sup>6</sup> Second, it is extremely difficult to find a one-to-one correlation between perceptions and behavior.<sup>7</sup> Third, when identities are measured, the techniques used (large-N surveys, interviews with policy makers, ethnographic field work) are typically not available to social scientists who study elites in closed or semi-closed states.

One of the important reasons why few scholars have used historical memory as a variable in their research is because it does not fit neatly in one specific academic discipline; the subject and its implications are scattered throughout many academic fields. Insights into its theories are strewn across diverse bodies of literature on anthropology, culture, history, literature, politics, psychology, and sociology. Each discipline cites its own reason for not attending to historical memory. In the field of history, Roudemetof argues that the discipline's tradition of seeking "scientific objectivity," has not until recently allowed the examination of historical writing in relationship to the articulation of collective memory.<sup>8</sup> In sociology and anthropology, the legacy of pioneers such as Emile Durkheim and Maurice Halbwachs were "eclipsed in mid-twentieth century by the more empirically oriented and positivist tradition of U.S. mainstream sociology."<sup>9</sup>