Beyond Memory
Can We Really Learn From the Past?

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The nascent field of Memory Studies emerges from contemporary trends that include a shift from concern with historical knowledge of events to that of memory, from ‘what we know’ to ‘how we remember it’; changes in generational memory; the rapid advance of technologies of memory; panics over declining powers of memory, which mirror our fascination with the possibilities of memory enhancement; and the development of trauma narratives in reshaping the past. These factors have contributed to an intensification of public discourses on our past over the last thirty years. Technological, political, interpersonal, social and cultural shifts affect what, how and why people and societies remember and forget. This groundbreaking new series tackles questions such as: What is ‘memory’ under these conditions? What are its prospects, and also the prospects for its interdisciplinary and systematic study? What are the conceptual, theoretical and methodological tools for its investigation and illumination?

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Beyond Memory

Can We Really Learn From the Past?

Translated by Katharine Throssell
To Noah, Tristan, Norah, Esther and Jacob, members of the “future generations”
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Abstract “Forgetting the past means being condemned to repeat it”. This motto has been the inspiration for the widespread development of memory policies since the late 1990s in North America, Europe, and throughout the world. These globalized policies aim to articulate both the good and the bad, and speak them to everyone, in order to enable citizens to learn “the lessons of the past” and to build peaceful societies. They express a belief that memory can help us to build the future. Yet, after more than 20 years of these memory policies, the development of terrorism, populism, and discriminations in contemporary societies forces us to conclude that they have well and truly failed. Instead of the quiet social cohesion and tolerance they hoped for, the countries that invested in these programs have seen the rise of populisms of all kinds. Evaluating the impact of these memory policies is no easy task. Those who attempt it generally end up moralistic or towing a party line. This book goes beyond both of these criticisms and the opposition between historians and moralists. It does not seek to evaluate the good and bad uses of history. Instead, it focuses on demonstrating how this debate is framed in the wrong terms and calls for a renewed understanding of what memory can and cannot do. It moves beyond memory conviction asking: can we really learn from the past?

Keywords Social sciences • Memory • Public policy • Globalization • Hate • Peace
“Forgetting the past means being condemned to repeat it”. This motto has been the inspiration for the widespread development of memory policies since the late 1990s in North America, Europe, and throughout the world. These globalized policies aim to articulate both the good and the bad, and speak them to everyone, in order to enable citizens to learn “the lessons of the past” and to build peaceful societies. They express a belief that memory can help us to build the future. Yet, after more than 20 years of these memory policies, the development of terrorism, populism, and discriminations in contemporary societies forces us to conclude that they have well and truly failed. Instead of the quiet social cohesion and tolerance they hoped for, the countries that invested in these programs have seen the rise of populisms of all kinds. Evaluating the impact of these memory policies is no easy task. Those who attempt it generally end up moralistic or towing a party line.

Up until now, two mains criticisms have been leveled at these memory policies. A large proportion of the existing literature, particularly by historians, condemns some of these policies for taking the wrong direction and for using and abusing the past (MacMillan 2009). A more recent approach from a moral perspective denounces the very principle of these policies and emphasizes the importance of forgetting (Rieff 2011, 2016). This book goes beyond both of these criticisms and the opposition between historians and moralists. It does not seek to evaluate the good and bad uses of history. Instead, it focuses on demonstrating how this debate is framed in the wrong terms and calls for a renewed understanding of what memory can and cannot do.

The field of memory studies is attracting so much attention that the number of books in this area has become inordinately large and diverse, spreading from the subfield of transitional justice and human rights to that of museum studies. This book intends to break with a large portion of the existing literature. It takes a critical perspective on the normative belief in the effects of memory, which is at the heart of so many of the studies dedicated to the presence of the past in contemporary societies. This critical approach is all the more innovative in that it does not begin from a normative standpoint but rather from a close knowledge of the numerous empirical studies—which are themselves responding to the effects of memory and these policies—emerging around the world.

This book takes a step back to ask—where do these memory policies come from? What do they actually do? Whom do they serve? Can we make them more effective? And, in light of all this, what lies beyond memory?
Contemporary society is imbued with the presence of memory. This “memory boom” has given rise to myriad scientific studies and numerous public debates, in western democracies as well as in authoritarian regimes and countries emerging from conflict. Yet the various participants in these debates, even when they are involved in violent controversies, do not challenge the fact that remembering the past is liable to have an impact on social behavior, both now and in the future.

There are many different terms to evoke the political aspect of the contemporary presence of the past (Olick et al. 2011): “uses of the past” (whether their authors label them as “social” or “political”), “policies of the past”, or “memory policies”. This book is not the appropriate place for a discussion of these terms because this debate, although fundamental, has already been conducted in other places. However, because we must name these phenomena and condense them into an analytic object that can only partially describe the social world, we will use the term “memory policy”. We define the latter as actions that mobilize references to the past in order to impact on society and its members and transform them. In the remainder of the book we will focus more broadly on all arrangements that mobilize references to the violent past, particularly in order to prevent violence and intolerance. Because nothing allows us to assume that there is a difference in nature between similar arrangements mobilized in established democracies or post-conflict situations (which happen to be our two areas of expertise), we will use comparative analysis to examine the broadest possible palette of memory policies. Although the latter can be defined by their objective to modify or preserve the memory of violent events from the past (whether glorious or shameful) with the goal of influencing contemporary society, there is no justification for limiting our analysis to examples we are familiar with. These places of memory may be specialist museums, classrooms, courtrooms, or even football fields—for example, when an international non governmental organization (NGO) ONG organizes a game between mixed teams in a country where civil war has separated ethnic or religious groups in the past.

The development of memory policy has raised many questions. Are we commemorating the “right” past? Should we limit ourselves to condemning perpetrators? Should we prevent victims from taking advantage of their new recognition? Should we defend “subaltern” memories over “dominant” ones and thus remember those “forgotten by history”, such as the legitimate victims of colonial conflicts? Should we prioritize history or memory? Should we welcome a certain degree of “forgetting” rather than encouraging an excessive presence of the past?
Although these political and moral questions are interesting, they do not provide insight into what we would actually do if we had to make a firm decision one way or the other. This book breaks with the existing literature in that it pursues a genuine understanding of what is actually at work in these contemporary reminders of the violent past. We therefore set out to consider the ways in which memory policy could be more effective in reaching the goals that are ordinarily assigned to it, or how its objectives could be re-conceptualized.

To do so, the following pages bring together studies conducted in a wide variety of disciplines—from social psychology, history, sociology, anthropology, political science, and economics. Although the French context and the canonical case of the memory of the Holocaust will be given particular attention, this discussion relies on an integrative approach to memory policies in different parts of the world, in western democracies, such as the United States and France, as well as in countries emerging from conflict in South America, the Great Lakes region of Africa, and the former Eastern Bloc.

This book therefore provides an unusual perspective on the widely shared belief that memory policies are effective tools in building peaceful societies, whether in stable democracies or in the wake of violent political conflicts. A better understanding of what these politics actually constitute and what they do will enable us—perhaps—to envisage reforming them, and to explore new ways of thinking about what can prevent collective violence, if that is indeed possible.

Let’s start with an observation: our lives are peppered with reminders of the past. This is nothing new—states are very good at shaping memory. All those in positions of political power have forged traditions that combine “official histories”, glorification of great deeds, invention of legends, and ostracism of the vanquished. However, the First World War marked a break from this, leading to the democratization of state references to the past. Policy was progressively negotiated more explicitly, firstly with veterans and their families and local government. Then, from the 1970s onward, minorities and victims’ representatives began to challenge the official narratives and have their versions of events heard. This was the time of “negative” memory (Rousso 2016), which exhumed the wrongdoing of the nation in the name of human rights. But although the perpetrators of these crimes are brought to light, they are rarely punished. Governments today rarely impose sanctions for historic crimes, and when they do, it is seldom with the ferocity of the “victor’s justice”. Criminal
justice seems to be less a concern here than the denunciation of “hate
speech” or the encouragement of “citizens’ vigilance”. The state is no
longer interventionist, yet it paradoxically increases the number of initia-
tives in this area, sometimes inspired by other countries. Although there is
a global “crusade” against “forgetting” that pushes reluctant states to
account for the violence of their pasts, policies tend to focus on the vic-
tims. It is they who must be distinguished from the guilty, named, hon-
ored, compensated, and appeased. The goal is to help citizens identify
with their suffering.

But although the ways of talking about this have changed, one key
conviction remains constant. Memorial programs prescribe representa-
tions and therefore attitudes, be they “patriotic” or “humanist”. This is
true whether the state is a triumphal transmitter of national identity or
whether it is tangled in a throng of contested identity projects, whether
crowds gather around monuments or shun them, whether citizens demand
their removal or their protection. The mention of violent pasts always
takes the form of an enlightened narrative that encourages each individual
to learn the lessons of the past and change their behavior. Such narratives
once advocated the model of the loyal soldier; today they promote toler-
ant citizens, or—when the past is used by political extremes—encourage
exclusion.

Why should memory be promoted and transmitted at school, through
museums, on television, through monuments, commemoratives ceremo-
nies, “memory” trials, or even during truth commissions? So that mem-
bers of the public know the facts, understand the issues of the present, and
adapt their behavior accordingly, now and in the future. Few would doubt
that contemporary memory policies help build social cohesion, as well as
tolerance among individuals. Memory policies today are the corollary of

1 Truth commissions are temporary institutions that charge apolitical people who have
“good reputations” (academics, church figures, doctors, etc.), with writing the history of
civil war or oppression, based in particular on testimonies from witnesses. Since the 1980s,
approximately 40 such commissions have been set up. Truth commissions are now subject to
UN guidelines and have become a model in Europe. See the 2008 resolution of the
Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, https://www.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/
pdf&action=default&DefaultItemOpen=1 (accessed September 12, 2019) and the
Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, “Use of experience of the “truth commis-
sions””, resolution 1613 of May 29 2008, http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-
past policies to incite hatred, which were often used by bellicose authorities that also mobilized (and sometimes continue to mobilize) reminders of the past in a very different way (for hate propaganda, calls for vengeance, or references to a supposedly humiliating defeat). What memory has done in the past, it has the potential to undo.

Who should memory policies be targeted at? At individuals and groups that are considered intolerant? So that they might be persuaded, and overcome their prejudice? Or should it be directed at the victims of past political violence, to “give them back their dignity”? Or at those who are already tolerant and benevolent, to strengthen their dispositions? Or perhaps those who remain indifferent? Should memory policies focus on “what should be done” or “what should not be done”? The answer from policymakers is often vague—they should talk about “good” and “evil” and do so with and for everyone.

As parents of young children, we also profess our belief that it is possible to shape better citizens through memory, first among them the “future generations” whom we teach and raise. Others, who have political beliefs that differ from ours, believe that recalling the past can provoke hatred and intolerance that they are looking for in their conquest of power. The idea that it is possible to use memory and “lessons from the past” to arm today’s citizens against future violence is a welcome band aid for our insecurities; it protects the individual who subscribes to it from doubts they may have about their own moral convictions.

This book is made of five chapters. The second one will describe the way and to what extent this belief in the effects of memory has been institutionalized in the form of public policies and through the increasing number of specialized institutions, both of which have been transformed by dedicated professionals convinced of how useful they are. For some observers, this may provide the only moral norm compatible with a globalized world (Alexander 2002; Levy and Sznaider 2010).

One thing is clear however. The development of memory policy has not been associated with the development of a more tolerant or peaceful society. We may speculate about what touches people’s hearts—from the grand narratives of states to the intimate stories of victims—but this is not easy to demonstrate. Researchers have shown that just because we applaud a president who evokes the glorious past or orders citizens to be tolerant, that does not mean that we listen, that we internalize the discourse, or that we alter our behavior (Mariot 2011). In this case, like at a commemorative event, attendance does not mean support. We may act in a particular way
(applauding, yelling, yawning, quietly commemorating) because the event encourages us to do so. We might actually be silently trying to remember a shopping list, as we listen to the official list of those who died for the homeland. Positive national memory or negative disparate memories may only have the power we give them.

There is a great temptation to try and measure the effectiveness of memory policy. However, evaluating the impact of public policy on hearts and minds is difficult, even impossible. Academics who attempt it often stumble into a political debate. They are caught between deploring the weakening of national identity and defending the recognition of victims’ identities, between the condemnation of exclusive reminders of the past and demands for the promotion of inclusive memory. We can see this in the debates that followed the events in Charlottesville in September 2017 and the related discussions about the social status and effects of monuments.

The third chapter of the book will then put this question of the social effects of memory policies differently. It will focus on the study of these very ordinary social facts: memory policies as they are implemented. Memory policies, both in relatively peaceful democracies and in post-conflict situations, bring ordinary social beings in contact with each other. These individuals live parallel, evolving lives in various worlds (familial, social, professional, gendered, local, etc.). The public is never directly exposed to memorial content, whether at school, in museums, in courtrooms during the hearings of victims or trials, or before monuments. The strength or weakness of calls for tolerance and instructions to “refuse discrimination” and to “never kill or consent to murder” all depends on exchanges between individuals, as well as their attitudes toward groups and institutions. If we assume that we learn from the past, it is because we imagine the transmission of past violence (at school, through museums or institutions dedicated to rewriting history) as the encounter between an attentive, receptive student and a teacher who has decided to provide in-depth civic education. In so doing, we put the social world on hold. We overlook the complexity of the implementation of any policy, the misunderstandings that unavoidably arise from their re-appropriation, the decisive importance of the social status of their defendants, the multitude of reasons actors may decide to act, their moods at the time, and so forth.

In Chap. 4, we will then observe the limits of these policies and their possible negative side effects. Injunctions to remember draw their strength, and their weakness, from interactions and depend on the social situation of individuals. More simply put, our individual personalities, and how