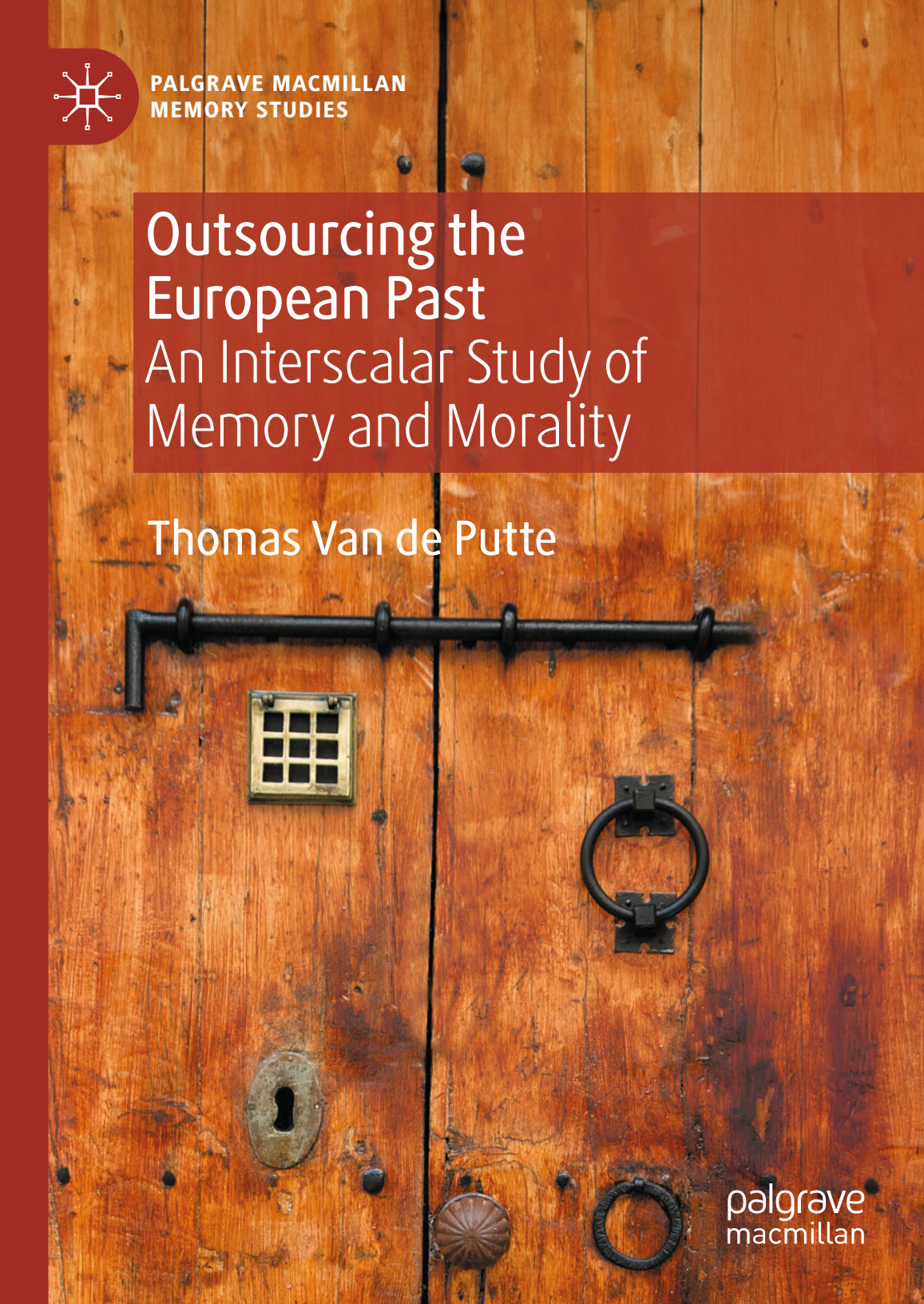
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN
MEMORY STUDIES
Outsourcing the
European Past
An Interscalar Study of
Memory and Morality
Thomas Van de Putte
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Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies

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 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?

Thomas Van de Putte

Outsourcing the European Past

An Interscalar Study of Memory and Morality

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Abstract This introduction comprises the main theoretical arguments of this book. It looks at the double entanglement of memory and morality: as an entanglement of description and prescription, and of culture and action. Furthermore, it outlines what an interscalar study of memory and morality might look like.

Keywords Memory · Morality · Humanist ethics

In the last few years, we have seen confederate statues toppled in the US and colonial ones elsewhere, a war is fought over memory in Ukraine, and we are explaining Trump through the prism of fascism and memory of autocracy, and Brexit through the prism of nostalgia for Empire.[1] Cultural memory (A. Assmann 1999; J. Assmann 1995, 2008, 2011)—culturally shared representations of past events that we haven't witnessed ourselves—seems to play a key role in today's political debates. Why is that the case?

In this book, I argue that the key to answering this question is to investigate the entanglement of memory and morality. Narratives about

[1] For popularized scholarly approaches to these arguments, see: Gessen (2020), Butler in Salmon (2016), Snyder (2017), and Dorling (2019).

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the past (either mythically glorious or dystopic) inevitably support and provide arguments for moral choices and political decisions in the present. Cultural memories, at once, seem to be both informing moral and political action and justifying those same actions post-factum. I investigate this entanglement of memory and morality in an extended case study of the memory policy of the European Commission between 2014 and 2020. In interscalar and multi-methodological fashion (Keightley et al. 2019), I explain how cultural memory narratives and moral discourses are entangled on, and are moved between, the macro-cultural level, the political-institutional meso-level and situated interactions between citizens. This book's main empirical aim is to provide an understanding of how the European Commission, various non-governmental intermediary institutions and, in the end, citizens in policy projects attribute meaning to the past and connect that past with specific norms and values.

Memory Politics Interscalarly

Since the 1980s, both academia and politics have heavily invested in cultural memory narratives and discourses. The memory 'boom' in academia went hand-in-hand with the growth and institutionalization of memory politics on national and international levels of government and governance (see, e.g., Kucia 2016; David 2020). In these cases, especially in Western Europe, the US and Israel, commemoration has increasingly been seen as a key policy tool to heal cultural traumas, but also to combat xenophobic rhetoric and promote human rights. As a policy operationalization, Holocaust memory education has been at the forefront of policies combatting xenophobia and intolerance.

However, both memory studies and memory politics in its liberal form have recently been interrogated. Memory's mobilizing potential and healing power in the context of the Human Rights regime has long been taken for granted by both memory scholars and policymakers. Recent studies show that the effects of those liberal memory policies and their educational outcomes are far from clear (Gensburger and Le Franc 2020; David 2019). Even more, the countries that have invested most in cosmopolitan and liberal Holocaust education and commemoration have not shown to be immune to the rising attraction of populist, right-wing parties and the growing normalization of xenophobic discourses. These right-wing parties themselves have been very successful in their usage of collective memory and cultural heritage (Wüstenberg 2019; Levi and

Rothberg 2018). That is not only the case in Europe, but is a global phenomenon.

I believe that this current socio-political reality should push scholars of memory politics to focus on studying the effects of those politics on the everyday beliefs held, and moral discourses produced by the people that are exposed to those politics. In that respect, this book engages with three central questions that are answered in one theoretical and four empirical chapters:

1. How does the European Commission turn more general cultural memories into concrete moral discourses in its memory policy?
2. How are these policies institutionally operationalized? Which intermediary organizations are involved? And what draws these institutions to the European Commission's memory policy?
3. And finally: what happens when individual citizens are exposed to the outcomes of those policy projects?

These three questions function on three different scales. The first one is inherently cultural. It represents the search for which cultural memories and moral discourses are dominant on the supranational level of the European Union. The policy documents analyzed in this book represent a broad cultural and political compromise about the meaning of the European past at the federal level of the EU.

The second question links politico-institutional dynamics with those cultural meanings and looks at how institutions put those cultural meanings 'to work' in concrete policy projects. The cultural and politico-institutional scales of analysis are deeply connected. First of all, intermediary organizations are not free to operationalize whatever cultural memory and moral discourse they would like to, but they do that in dialogue with the broad cultural compromise on the level of the Commission. On the other hand, the only cultural meanings (mnemonic or moral) that get operationalized are those that serve the interests of these intermediary organizations. So, a lot of what is dominant on the cultural level gets lost on the institutional level because of a mismatch between the two dynamics. The third question seeks to investigate how individual citizens interact with the dominant mnemonic and moral meanings of the EU's memory policy.

The memories I am interpreting in this book are quintessentially cultural (A. Assmann 1999; J. Assmann 2008). They are relatively stable, durable, well-known meanings attributed to past events that none of my participants have witnessed. The fact they are cultural, however, does not mean they can't be reactualized or rejected by citizens in interactions. Those citizens come to those interactions with their own socializations and interests which informs their expectations from the EU's memory policy. But the structure of the interactions as such also informs which meanings citizens internalize and then reproduce elsewhere. When an analysis takes into account the function of a memory policy on the cultural, politico-institutional and interactional scale and their respective connections, I consider that analysis an interscalar one.

I am answering these questions in an interscalar and multi-methodological fashion in one extended case study. I investigate the 'European Remembrance Strand' of the Europe for Citizens Programme 2014–2020 and see which cultural memory narratives and moral discourses have become dominant in that policy program. Then, I take three non-governmental organizations that have benefited from that program and function as those forces to which the European Commission is outsourcing the administration and implementation of its memory policies. The Memory Studies Association (MSA), Euroclio (the association for history educators in Europe) and the Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) are my key focuses here. Finally, I have looked at what happens when individual citizens are exposed to dominant cultural memory narratives and moral discourses in concrete situations in policy projects.

Before delving into the methodological aspects of an interscalar analysis and an empirical analysis of the European Commission's memory policy, I need to outline this book's three main theoretical takeaways. They concern a triple entanglement of memory and morality.

Memory and Morality: The Entanglement of Prescription and Description

In the policy documents, policy projects and interactions between participants that I have analyzed, cultural memory narratives have a descriptive function, while the connected moral discourses prescribe action. This prescription-description entanglement is key to the argumentative power of the memory-morality nexus in political discourse.

Cultural memory narratives describe and string together a set of—often well-known—events from which (supposedly) lessons need to be learned. Those lessons are then entextualized in prescriptive moral discourse about the present. Cultural memory does the description of the past that underlays moral prescription for the present and future. As I will demonstrate in this book, cultural memory offers an argumentative basis for morality. But on the other hand, without the need for moral prescription, I believe cultural memories would lose their politically argumentative functions and disappear, be forgotten. Let's make this a bit more concrete by describing the four key cultural memory narratives I found the European Commission telling about its own past, and connect it to three associated moral discourses.

In the data I analyze in Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6, I have identified four dominant cultural memory narratives, three of which are connected with a specific (liberal) moral discourse. First, the European Commission narrates the history of the EU as project for everlasting peace after the dystopia of the Second World War. Such a cultural memory narrative is linked to pacifist moral values. Secondly, the European Commission narrates the history of the EU as a reaction of the continent to the unique genocide that was the Holocaust. This cultural memory narrative inevitably connects to values of tolerance and challenges xenophobic, homophobic, antisemitic, and anti-gypsy attitudes and beliefs. The third cultural memory narrative sees the EU as the result of a post-totalitarian Europe, and treats Nazism and Stalinism as equally bad. This cultural memory narrative links up with a moral discourse that prescribes individual freedom and the legal and institutional structures that should be provided for such freedom: freedom of speech, freedom of the press, democratic checks and balances, a strong civil society. Finally, the European Commission also tells the story of its own institutional integration, from the Treaty of Rome (1957) until today. There is no obvious moral discourse connected to this memory narrative—apart from the fact that, potentially, European integration is good in itself—which makes it less appealing to European policymakers, NGOs and citizens (see also Littoz-Monet 2012, 1189). In all these four cases, a rather descriptive cultural memory narrative rhetorically supports a prescriptive moral discourse.

By analyzing how *others* (in this case my various participants) connect descriptive memory narratives with prescriptive moral discourses, I take a slightly different route than the recent research that asks questions about the ethics of memory. That branch of research asks if memory and