

Project 1. After the Violence: The Work of Memory in Culture and Society

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Project Rationale

Since the 1980s cultural practices as well as scholarly discourses have shifted attention toward the politics of remembering and the imaginary strategies that form it. Work on memory has produced diverse artifacts and interdisciplinary approaches to grapple with the ways in which remembering and forgetting redefine how the past relates to our present and how we imagine the future. Contemporary art and literature, the design of monuments and museum exhibition, commemorative event culture and the visual media contribute to what some have called a memory obsession that saturates the public sphere.

Scholars and critics from the humanities and social sciences have been investigating the relationship between memory and culture, contributing to the increasing complexity of our understanding of memory. Their vocabulary and conceptual tools – e.g., collective memory, the archive, traces and palimpsests, trauma, testimony and authenticity, amnesia and amnesty – suggest ways of connecting history, public memory, and recent efforts to deal with the consequences of community violence.

The CGES project “After the Violence: The Work of Memory in Culture and Society” establishes a network within and outside the University that will enable graduate students and faculty to share their expertise and maximize the possibilities of overlapping interests across disciplines. By providing a platform from which we can draw on research beyond the campus through workshops, video-links, conferences, and publications, this project will help students as well as faculty to initiate concrete research projects, share innovative research strategies, and spread awareness of significant findings. We see this project as moving in three specific directions in the next five years.

a. Germany’s Memory Boom

(Coordinators: Rudy Koshar, Marc Silberman)

Reflecting the CGES anchor in “things German,” a fundamental hypothesis underlying the project is that Germany provides a paradigmatic locus of memory work and collective identity crisis in the twentieth century. Two world wars, the Holocaust, occupation by competing power blocs, and the ideological confrontation symbolized by the Berlin Wall pose continuing challenges to Germans’ own self-understandings. Moreover, the effects of these historical developments touched people far beyond the country’s (changing) borders and established Germany’s international image as the ultimate “other” in its deviance from civilized norms. But during the past 60 years Germany’s efforts – in both the East and the West – at “coming to terms with the past” also constitute a protracted and rich case study of memory work with instructive generational shifts, blind spots, repetitions, illusions, and self-delusions. It is no surprise that

other groups who experience social disintegration, political division, and catastrophic war look to Germany for both positive and negative models of healing, reconciliation, and restoring human rights.

One key theme of this project is to follow the changing dynamics of the memory work in and about Germany, interrogating how writing this history and creating its symbolic representations contribute to the civic culture that attempts to stabilize an increasingly multicultural Europe with its diversity of traditions and historical imagery.

b. Globalizing Memory

(Coordinators: Simone Schweber, Marc Silberman)

The proliferation of memory discourses beginning in the 1980s was triggered in Germany by the widening and energetic debates about the Holocaust in conjunction with a series of politically over-determined forty and fifty-year anniversaries related to the history of the Third Reich: Hitler's rise to power in 1933, the book burnings of 1934, the Nuremberg race laws of 1935, the Kristallnacht pogrom of 1938, the Blitzkrieg of 1939, the Wannsee Conference marking the onset of the Final Solution in 1942, the Normandy invasion of 1944, the camp liberations and capitulation in 1945.

Since then, the implications of these commemorative events and their wide media coverage have spilled over into other countries and generated debates about complicity and exclusions in new contexts: France's collaborationist Vichy regime and colonialist war in Algeria, Austria's self-image as Hitler's first victim, the ambiguity of Italy's modernization under Mussolini, Japan's attempts at rewriting its history books, Switzerland's "Holocaust gold," and calls for restitution for victims of Spain's Francoist regime. Not without controversy, the Holocaust has become a metaphor and a measure for genocidal politics in the contemporary world, extended to Cambodia's "killing fields," Chile and Argentina, Bosnia and Kosovo, Rwanda and Darfur but also extended backward in time to Armenia, Stalinist repressions, and Japanese war crimes in Asia.

This portion of the project is also concerned with the status of grief and pain, shame and guilt in the globalization of the Holocaust discourse beyond its original referent. Moreover, the prominent role of the electronic media within the dynamic of remembering and forgetting raises questions about the instrumentalization of emotions in collective memory as social cohesion appears to become ever more unstable.

c. Victims and Perpetrators

(Coordinators: Heinz Klug, Marc Silberman)

The work of memory concerns not only victims but also perpetrators, not only survivors but also those motivated by the "heroics" of ideology, religion, or morality. Societies faced with reconstruction after episodes of community violence, civil conflict, and state repression need to find ways of understanding those who inflict or even passively tolerate violence: the militias, assassins, terrorists, collaborators, and bystanders.

War crime tribunals, judicial proceedings, official inquiries, and truth commissions have emerged as important legal and social structures for exposing atrocities and torture and for overcoming the silence and repression that can poison communities and block political transitions. Representations in peacetime in the media, the arts, and literature provide avenues for understanding the after-effects of violence and betrayal. They often articulate a sense of loss and a felt need for compensation, not in the material sense but rather to restore social and personal stability. Studies in law and in social organization can be drawn on creatively to enhance the work of the humanities disciplines in interpreting the meanings of these events as captured in often deeply felt personal accounts rendered in a variety of media.

This portion of our project interrogates the way public spaces are created and used when ethnic groups or other collectivities try to come to terms with violence suffered or violence perpetrated. Public memory spaces focus our attention on the complex workings of the visible and the invisible, the need to speak and the unspeakable, the traces and the residues of moral amnesia.