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# **Introduction: Objects of Memory and Rituals of Memorialisation as Fields of Struggle**

Federica Rossi and Kanika Sharma

Monuments, memorial stones, flags, museums, street names, and official commemorations all act as objects and sites of memory. They seek to perform multiple roles and actions at once: they attempt to embody individual and collective memories of events and people; and act as a bond between the memory, the person(s) that they seek to incarnate, and the public to whom they are addressed. While doing so, their most important role is to invoke an emotion in the viewer – these emotions can vary from anger, to shame, to victimhood, to pride and nationalism, amongst others. Not only do objects and sites of memory invoke such emotions, they also help to celebrate the ability of the human spirit to overcome particular events. Memorials to genocide and war including the Holocaust memorials, or geo-spatial commemorations of national events such as Nelson’s column in Trafalgar Square or the Monument in central London, each stand as a marker to the perseverance of the human spirit. In addition, these sites provide the viewer with a space to communicate – this communication may be with one’s self in order to come to terms with a personal loss; or to communicate with the deceased, for instance at sites of accidents and murders marked by a proliferation of cards and flowers, such as in Paris, where the terrorist attacks took place in 2015, or in London, at the Grenfell Tower. The site, or object, allows for communication with other members of the public who may visit the space in the future, or can act as a call for political action. Often the type of communication will be determined by the type of memorial and who creates it – here it is important to distinguish between planned and spontaneous memorials. National or cultural memorials are often planned and created by the state and exist on grand scales; they epitomise the official or dominant interpretation of historical events. These sites are conceived of and built to signify the unity of a society, its reconciliation after a conflict, and go a long way

in materially representing the national identity. Through their mostly unquestioned presence in public spaces they underscore the legitimacy of the imagined community<sup>1</sup> towards whom they are aimed. In opposition to this, people, communities, or groups, also spontaneously build their own collective memorials to commemorate specific events. This kind of community memorial may call for the state to mark the site and commemorate the event in an official way, or it may act as a counter-narrative challenging the official one and giving visibility to marginalised memories and groups.

Despite the claim of unity and cohesion that official memorials seem to express, these objects and chosen sites are the product of political decisions, competitions, and negotiations within and outside the political field. Their selection is imposed from a position of socio-political and legal power, and they reflect the construction of a dominant narrative of the past. For each memory that they include, such sites hide memories and concurrent divergent interpretations of the past that the state wants to exclude from national historiography. In this perspective, they tell more about the power relations that characterise a society at a given moment than about the past event they refer to. What happens when an official memorial triggers conflicts and resistances instead of the unity and cohesion that the state seeks to generate? The official character of these objects or sites never completely hides the cracks that surround them: interstitial memories, memories that are sought to be silenced by those very political strategies of memorialisation, the neglected memories of the subalterns or defeated struggles can, under certain circumstances, re-surface and claim their share. And these symbols of the past become fields of struggle between the sovereign (not only the nation-state, but also international and multi-national organisations and companies, local or global bourgeoisie, armed forces and the like) and counter-hegemonic movements and forces (including peoples' mobilisations, local uprisings, anti-colonialist struggles, class struggles, workers' movements and others).

Numerous social scientists have highlighted the role of monuments, museums, memorial stones, and commemorations as fixing and shaping the collective memory/knowledge of past events,

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<sup>1</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities* (London: Verso, 1983).

as well as the processes through which these spaces and symbols are decided and organised. Ceremonies of commemoration have been analysed as forms of ritual action and social practice: Paul Connerton, for example, defines commemorations as specific types of ritual action through which the past is represented (or performed) and re-enacted.<sup>2</sup> The functionalist tradition, following Emile Durkheim's<sup>3</sup> approach, sees the goal of all ritual representations as the social reproduction of cohesion and the moral unity of society or of a given community. Memory studies, however, have generally paid less attention to the conflicts, contestation, questioning of those objects and rituals, to the visible and less visible interactions that are shaping the life of, and reinvesting, those sites of memory.<sup>4</sup> This collection situates itself in a more critical tradition, and instead prefers to analyse, as suggested by Stéphane Latté<sup>5</sup>, commemorative celebrations – both official and unofficial – as forms of political mobilisation. This means that commemorations and memorials are observed as sites where political divides and dissent from official narratives of past events appear and become (at least temporarily) manifest. The aim of the present collection is to unveil the unofficial and conflictual processes that constantly unmake and remake the memorial sites.

The discussions generated by the stream 'Objects of memory and rituals of memorialisation as fields of struggle' emphasised the conflicts surrounding social representation of the past and the need to analyse memorial sites as fields of struggle and power relations that reflect wider power relations in a given society at a specific time. The collection consequently aims to reintroduce political agency and conflict at the heart of the analysis, grounding it in empirical case studies, and thus questioning aspects that are often overlooked by studies of social and cultural memories. The three studies presented in the collection challenge the univocal, supposedly consensual, representation that official memorial stones, monuments, and commemorative days attempt to impose. Instead they attempt to

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York: The Free Press [1915] 1965).

<sup>4</sup> Pierre Nora, *Lieux de mémoire* and Nora (Paris : Gallimard, 1992) and Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire", *Representations* 26 (1989).

<sup>5</sup> Stéphane Latté, "Le choix des larmes. La commémoration comme mode de protestation" *Politix* 110 (2015).

show how present (political) struggles shape the representation and understanding of the past, and how the legacy of past events is continuously reconstructed retrospectively, questioned and contested. They place those conflicts in their historical, political and social contexts, and critically analyse the dynamics of memorialisation: following the approach that Peter Novick developed in his study of the Holocaust in American life<sup>6</sup> and using the works of the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, the papers presented here question how “present concerns determine what of the past we remember and how we remember it”.<sup>7</sup> This collection aims to question the complex relation between the past and the present as it is expressed through monuments, symbols, and rituals of memorialisation; that is the way in which past events are given visibility through physical contours in order to ‘re-shape’ history to serve the aims of the present. It explores the spatio-temporal politics of objects of memory, the way they contribute to the politicisation of public space, and the social and political meaning they carry and/or contest.

This means that each contribution, as well as the collection as a whole, presents a study of a specific case in its socio-political and historical context, articulates different levels of analysis, from local to national, and associates the examination of particular events or policies with the understanding of long term conflicts and divides. These articles show the social and political dynamics of what may at first glance be perceived as static objects, such as a memorial stone or a monument: not only do they underline how political interests and historical contingencies shape memory policies, but they also draw attention to the lasting existence of marginal, interstitial memories that continue to oppose and challenge, with their very existence, the dominant representations of the past and official attempts at reconstructing a policed, consensual national memory. These are the memories carried by groups that the power holders try to exclude or silence, memories that are expressing *other* identities and taking the forms of everyday and micro-resistances, social interactions, and hidden transcripts.<sup>8</sup> These memories and resistances are rooted in

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<sup>6</sup> Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American life*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> James C. Scott, *Domination and the arts of resistance. Hidden transcripts* (London: Yale University Press, 1990).

local areas and crystallised into objects or rituals of memorialisation, and all three studies of this collection highlight the significance of space as a support for collective memory. Following Halbwachs's approach they look at the spatial and social frameworks of memory<sup>9</sup> and collective memories to simultaneously combine multiple levels of memories and identities:

We can understand each memory as it occurs in individual thought only if we locate each within the thought of the corresponding group. We cannot properly understand their relative strength and the ways in which they combine within individual thought unless we connect the individual to the various groups of which he is simultaneously a member.<sup>10</sup>

Struggles, however, are the central focus of this collection, as they make it possible to seize the complexity of memory policies and politics in a way that the official historiography cannot.

We start in Italy where Federica Rossi's paper examines the polemics and mobilisations surrounding two memorial stones in two different Italian cities: the plaque in memory of the anarchist militant Giuseppe Pinelli in Milan, and the one in remembrance of the victims of the far right bombing at Bologna's railway station. The analysis of the political and social contexts in which these two stones are laid and contested casts light on the recurrent controversies over the political violence and events that characterised the 1970s in Italy. In the second paper, Conny Klocker analyses the recent attempts made by the Russian state to put an end to the people's commemoration of the deportation of Chechen and Ingush populations to Siberia by Stalin in 1944 in the form of an annual 'Day of Memory and Grief'. Instead Vladimir Putin sought to recodify the day as the 'Defender of the Fatherland Day' in an attempt to rewrite history and remove any commemorations that were critical of the state and replace them with a tribute to Russian patriotism. In the last article Ceylan Begüm Yıldız (with some input from Laurent Dissard, who was her co-presenter at the conference) takes us to Turkey to analyse the attempts by the state on one hand, and by people's groups on the other, to assign opposing

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<sup>9</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago, 1992).

<sup>10</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 53.

meanings to the bullet-holed, millennium-old, four-footed minaret in Diyarbakır. While people's groups sought to portray the monument as a space of mourning for the death of a particular human rights activist, Tahir Elçi, and for the death of human rights in the area more generally, the state sought to pursue a neo-liberal agenda by sanitising the monument of all references to the recent conflict and instead portraying it as a site of tourism.

Even though the articles in this collection are separated in space and time, the central concern of each paper is the way in which states use their hegemony to label one particular reading of history as the only authentic narration possible. The individual papers focus on the contested meanings attached to particular objects of memory, especially when one of those meanings is attributed by the state and the other by the public or non-governmental groups. Through this juxtaposition, the papers are not attempting to portray the public perception or counter memory of the historical event as the only legitimate version in opposition to the state's view of the event, but rather they are questioning the process through which historical 'authenticity' is sought to be established. While doing so, they examine the process of selection of a particular memory object and the competing discourses that spring up around it. This process also gives us a glimpse of the forms that state-based historiography takes in different countries, and the power of the people to contest and reimagine, or reaffirm and accept, the space/event.

By bringing these papers together, this collection shows how different national contexts shape rituals of memorialisation and conflicts around the social and political memory of past events. It allows us to examine the ways in which state sponsored attempts at memorialisation are questioned, and possibly repudiated, and gives us an opportunity to highlight the similarities and variances in the way social conditions in different countries, in different periods of time, allow a counter-memory to challenge the hegemonic nature of the dominant discourse.