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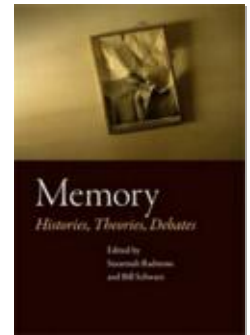
Published by Fordham University Press

Radstone, Susannah and Bill Schwarz.

Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates.

Fordham University Press, 2010.

Project MUSE.muse.jhu.edu/book/66748.



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Introduction

Mapping Memory

Susannah Radstone and Bill Schwarz

The idea of memory runs through contemporary public life at high voltage, generating polemic and passionate debate in the media, in the spheres of politics and in the academy. Yet although the contemporary “presentness” of memory is evident, how this is to be understood remains a matter of dispute. It is not clear what meanings attach themselves to the generic conception of memory itself; and while in the academy there is a common belief that memory is “everywhere,”¹ what this means remains an open matter. *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates* constitutes one collective response to the contemporary salience of memory and to the controversies it has activated. Our purpose is to guide readers through the interdisciplinary fields of memory research. In doing so we aim to bring out into the open what, intellectually and politically, is at stake in contemporary debate.

The Politics of Memory

As we demonstrate in the chapters that follow there have been many divergent currents that have fed into the present preoccupation with memory. We can take here, as one starting point, the various investigations into the phenomenon of postmodernism that began to cohere in the 1980s. From this theoretical moment there emerged the notion that what most characterizes the times in which we live is a social amnesia, in which we, as modern subjects, are cut off from the pasts that have created us. In this account, the current fascination—or even obsession—with memory is ineluctably associated with the idea of its absence, atrophy, collapse, or demise. One version of this approach proposes that historical consciousness has been eroded by the recycling

and commodification of the past characteristic of late capitalism;² another is that organic memory has been destroyed by the transmissions of new media technologies.³ To think in these terms leads one to conclude that “real” memory is not so much “everywhere” as it is “nowhere.” Indeed, many argue that it is precisely because memory is in jeopardy that the present critical hyper-activity has occurred. Whether the fragility of memory defines the epistemic imperative of the age is a question that has come to shadow current preoccupations, in a range of different areas of inquiry. This argument, in its many particulars, is a theme addressed in the chapters here. However, if it is true, or partially true, we need to know concretely how this collapse in memory operates, in what domains of subjective and social life, and with what consequences. To make such a notion work we have to break open the capacious category of memory and disinter its complex, shifting meanings. Only through careful sifting of concrete evidence, working close to the ground, can the larger claims of systemic forgetting be assessed.

If arguments concerning the atrophy of memory provide one route into the field of contemporary memory debate, it could be equally effective, conceptually, to start from a contrary premise: not that memory is no longer possible, but rather that we are witnessing an unprecedented politicization of memory, such that public engagement with memory is taking on new and more complex forms. If we follow this perspective, emphasizing the imbrication of memory with political imperatives (widely understood), we would be obliged to think at a different level of abstraction. We would need to move from the high level of generality on which the premise of the decline of memory is based to lower, more concrete levels of analysis, closer to the historical “real,” taking us to particular arenas, moments, and conjunctures. It moves us from the general—the absence of memory—to the concrete: to historically specific formations of remembering and forgetting, in which each is articulated in the other. To think like this highlights, for instance, how specific acts of forgetting—purposeful or involuntary—inform and reorganize the terrain of politics itself. And it allows us to think as well more carefully about the complexities of temporality, and about the heightened perceptions of the workings of the past-in-the-present.

These conceptualizations of memory—its decimation or disappearance, on the one hand, and its presentness and politicization, on the other—need not necessarily function as contraries, for work at a lower level of abstraction necessarily depends on broader, general categories. But these conceptualizations do point to different theoretical priorities. As editors, our inclinations lean more to the “presence” than to the “absence” of memory, though differing emphases occur across the chapters collected here. It seems to us that what—subjectively—most drives investment in the study of memory, in the academy and in allied domains, is less the notion of the impossibility of memory than the conviction that memory has become the site of, or the sign for, many intersecting issues: the temporal imaginings of past, present, and future; subjectivity and identification; the passage from the inner life to the outer world; even the politics of being in the world and of recognition.

Whether it is wise for memory to be assigned such inflationary properties is a conceptual, strategic question that a number of contributors discuss. We need to ask as well why, at this point in history, such inflation in the category of memory has occurred. Yet whatever the appropriate methodological protocols, the fact that memory has become the theoretical medium for these varied concerns is clearly the case. Notwithstanding these difficulties, there is, we believe, much in the contemporary investigation of memory that is vital intellectually, and that carries too an engagement with pressing political realities. That we believe this to be so accounts for this book.

Invariably the relations between the practices of memory and the practices of politics are compacted and difficult to unravel. The injunction to “remember,” determined in every instance by the social locations of those involved, inevitably raises important questions of ethics. One of our aims is to critically address the memory–politics nexus, demonstrating the diverse ways in which memory works both in the public sphere and in everyday life. As we have implied, what constitutes the formal domain of politics is itself in question, partly as a consequence of the operations of memory. Theorizations founded on an expansive conception of politics—understood as the politics of culture, of everyday life, of sexuality, of ethnicity, of the self, and so on—draw in part on notions of memory in order to signal the means by which transactions between public and private, external and internal, occur. Memory and forgetting are frequently invoked, in public life, to acknowledge and indict diverse acts of violence, present and past, perpetrated by states, groups, and individuals. The politicization of memory is to a degree driven by the sufferings attendant upon the making of the modern, globalized world, encompassing instances where memory, as a site of social practice, has intensified. In the afterlife of collectively experienced catastrophes—slavery, the Holocaust, and many genocides; wars, and ecological disasters; forced migrations and the fact of becoming a refugee or an “illegal”; the damage done to the self by acts of sexual violence and by torture—the medium of memory has seemed to offer the possibility not only that an element of selfhood can be reconstituted, but also that a public, political language can be fashioned in which these experiences, and others like them, can be communicated to others.

Yet this mobilization of memory *as* politics requires critical engagement. Identities, individual and collective, are formed and re-formed through narrative, in history, and through adversity. No simple call to “remember”—charged as that imperative now finds itself, with the power to heal and to restore, or to stoke the fires of deadly conflicts—can leapfrog over the complexities of history, of politics, and of speaking positions. Neither can remembrance turn back the clock by inserting lost times into the present. Memory is active, forging its pasts to serve present interests. Whether embedded within nationalist struggles, for instance, or in the daily rituals of home-making in new lands practiced by the migrant, memory’s activities *in the present* belie the apparently simple, reified, and knowable past evoked by the call to remember.

Yet the politicization of memory continues apace. As a result, the coordinates of memory are themselves in the process of transformation. Memory, from this perspective, is defined less by its loss than by its overdetermined presence, always working in conjunction with its dialectical other—no memory without forgetfulness, no forgetfulness without memory—such that the social relations of memory are activated in new ways in the social landscapes of our times. Memory, in this scheme of things, is not an impossibility, but a pre-constituted, actually-existing site of conflict, in which many contrary forces converge and in which the interactions between memory and forgetting are contingent as much as they are systemic. In whatever guise it is manifest, the politics of memory is always overdetermined and unstable, the consequence of incessant human intervention.

The contemporary public prominence of memory has brought with it diverse attempts to conceptualize memory beyond the realm of the personal. Readers will be familiar with those terms—including “public,” “social,” “cultural,” and “collective”—that have been appended to memory in order to enhance understandings of its wider scope and dynamics. Indeed, recently, a veritable international, cross-disciplinary industry has emerged as scholars vie to produce the most complete, coherent, or convincing taxonomies and definitions of these “types” of memory. Alongside this, there are those who insist that true memory is personal memory and that the expansion of the concept of memory beyond the personal constitutes a weak metaphor at best, and a metaphor strained to its breaking point by the freight it is currently asked to bear.⁴ In our view, however, these efforts at producing abstract definitions may miss the point. For what they fail to register is the mutual implication of the high voltage public life of memory with the many controversies concerning memory in the abstract. For us, there is no way of thinking about memory outside its histories and politics—histories and politics that inform understandings of memory inside the academy as well as outside. *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates* strives to shed light on how understandings of memory are formed—and are being formed—in circumstances that are themselves historically, intellectually, and politically charged and, indeed, that are changing as we write.

Pedagogy

The more immediate inspiration for this book is pedagogic. We are conscious that those who are preoccupied with the public and private aspects of memory seek to make sense of the specialized philosophies that underpin even the most commonsense recourse to memory. Yet as anyone coming to the study of memory for the first time will know, the intellectual field is vast, drawing from many different specialisms. To make headway it is necessary to be conversant with a number of disciplines and to work across different disciplinary boundaries. Many of the field’s formative texts and theories are dispersed or buried in particular philosophical debates whose precepts are far from immediately clear.

This is not an easy terrain to navigate. The purpose of this book is simply to provide a map or a series of linked maps of intellectual debate, such that what might otherwise appear to be a daunting morass of competing positions begins to assume overall shape.

This putatively innocent objective, however, has many ramifications. *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates* is a big book, pulling together a wide range of contemporary research of different kinds. From the beginning we found it impossible to make any formal distinction between memory and its theorizations, for the category of memory itself is notoriously fissile. One of the aims of the collection is to communicate the range of analysis encompassed by the idea of memory, in different disciplines and within differing theoretical traditions. It reviews debates conducted in the humanities, in the social sciences, and in the sciences (in cognitive psychology and in neuroscience), and provides analytical and historical depth across a number of specialized fields of inquiry. The variety of topics addressed, and the consequent scale of the book, are testimony to the plurality of phenomena that memory signifies. Even so, this book is not comprehensive, nor could it be. It reflects our own location, both in the wider sense of the north European provenance of the editors and, in terms of intellectual or disciplinary affiliation, in our training in the humanities. Thus while we have attempted to reach outward, in time and space, and in drawing in work from the sciences that is foreign to us, the core of our concerns derives from these locations, and bears their impress. The issues discussed here are urgent to us; but this first person plural, we hope, has a wide embrace.

The intellectual pluralism that underwrites this volume itself represents part of a larger argument. If the study of memory is to fulfill its promise, it must necessarily remain an open project, whose theoretical boundaries can accommodate competing paradigms. The present volume is a collaborative one in the deepest sense, offering a spectrum of opinion rather than attempting to marshal a single overriding thesis. It is constituted by many voices and in many contrasting registers which work—we hope—to dissolve orthodoxy and programmatic proclamation. The individual contributions, commissioned specifically for this volume, endeavor to draw out complexity and contradiction in the theorizations of memory that they discuss, highlighting those areas where theory falters, or reaches an impasse, such that these moments of fracture might serve as the catalyst for new lines of inquiry. Each chapter aims to reprise a particular debate or issue while in the same moment carrying forward the arguments by indicating where, and how, new thinking might happen.

Histories, Contexts, Faultlines

In planning the volume, and in briefing our contributors, one of our objectives was to emphasize three clusters of problems: first, the histories of memory; second, the theoretical contexts, or provenance, of the dominating categories employed in the interpretation of memory; and third, the faultlines, or points of breakdown, in current theorization.

The emphasis on history reminds us of the multiplicity of operations that, through time, the idea of memory has signified. Memory in one situation may not equate to memory in another. It allows us to link theorizations of memory to larger historical transformations (the coming of the book, or of the moving image, for example). It alerts us to the specificity of memory formations, and of their conjunctural conditions of existence. And it enables us to see the *formation* of the field of inquiry, as a process rather than as a number of discrete, ready-made philosophical positions. After all, history, it can be said, offers the means by which we can grasp the memory of memory, such that we can appreciate the contingency of the theorizations that dominate our own times.

The idea of theoretical contexts refers more specifically to the conceptual representations of memory. Against too easy an eclecticism we are keen to advocate a methodological pluralism which—while still remaining plural—at the same time respects the theoretical integrity of the paradigms from which we draw. We might cite here, particularly, the case of Walter Benjamin, regularly conscripted to the arena of memory research, and indeed to many other strands of critical inquiry, but often without sufficient grasp of the specificity of his concepts and of their valence within his larger epistemology. A similar point could be made about the appropriation of many other figures too. To say this stands as a plea, within the pedagogy of memory research, for a more self-reflective understanding of the provenance of the intellectual paradigms that we employ and, too, for a measure of caution when we endeavor to transport the concepts formed in one theoretical moment to another. The interdisciplinarity of the study of memory, welcome and necessary though it is, creates pitfalls as well as possibilities.

The idea of faultlines designates those ruptures or contradictions that run through memory research, between and within disciplines, and that represent the range of contentions that characterize the *unfinished* epistemological organization of the field of inquiry. One such faultline, for example, we have already alluded to: the tendency of memory research to expand its reach to a point where not only is memory “everywhere” but it comes to designate well-nigh “everything.” While there is common accord that discrimination is called for, in order to demarcate what is, and what is not, memory, there is little consensus on how such demarcations might be conceptualized. It’s not only that this remains unreconciled: there is no consensus about how conceptually the issue could become reconciled. Around this, as in many other of the faultlines which run through the field, contention accumulates.

A second faultline that recurs concerns, as we’ve suggested, the question of collective memory and its various cognates, social memory, cultural memory, and public memory. Though it is now widely—though by no means uncontroversially—accepted that memory’s purchase extends beyond the bounds of the individual, the question of how the social dimensions of memory are to be theorized continues to provoke debate. The extension of concepts borrowed from psychology or psychoanalysis, though potentially very rich, nonetheless remains problematic. Meanwhile, a focus on “mediated” memory—on the

role of media in transmitting memory beyond the individual—risks misconstruing the media, in all their complex forms, histories, genres, and technologies, simply *as* “memory.” This blurs the distinctions, not only between individual memory and public discourses, but also between specific processes of production, distribution, and reception. How, exactly, are we to distinguish between public or social memory, on the one hand, and other modes of public discourse, narrative, and practice on the other? These questions, too, remain unresolved.

These tensions and dislocations are there for all to see, in these and other issues, in the field of memory research. Indeed, we might say that it is these faultlines that *constitute* the evolving, dynamic field of inquiry itself.

Structure of the Volume

Much of our argument is condensed in the conceptual organization of the book, whose structure implies that there is no singular, clear-cut phenomenon that we can designate as “memory.” Memory has signified, and continues to signify, different phenomena in different historical situations, and within different theoretical or disciplinary paradigms. The memory that is the object of the investigations of the cognitive scientist has a conceptual provenance and history distinct from the memory discussed by anthropologists or theorists of digital media. This emphasis on the multiplicity of memory practices represents a founding precept of our collection.

The volume is divided into three overall parts: “Histories,” “How Memory Works,” and “Controversies.” The short opening section of three chapters offers a snapshot of the discontinuous histories of memory and demonstrates the degree to which theorizations of memory work within a dense web of thought and speculation. We can see too, at different historical moments, the modes in which memory itself has been differentially valorized. The period of high modernity, particularly, witnessed a proliferation of writings about memory—writings that still have a powerful gravitational pull on the contemporary world and that, in some respects, we still internalize as “ours.” Researchers today continue to be intrigued by themes such as amnesia, haunting, or re-remembering. At the same time, however, it’s also the case that much that preoccupies us—the relationship between subjectivity and space, say—was central to the theorization of memory in earlier epochs, even if differently nuanced. This historical perspective allows us to grasp more clearly the extent to which our own theorizations, which feel so much to be the product of our own times, represent a beguiling combination of the new and the old.

“Imagining Modern Memory,” the second section of this opening part, foregrounds those thinkers who remain powerfully influential today, reconstructing a network of theoretical genealogies and demonstrating the continuities and discontinuities between modern and contemporary perceptions, preoccupations, and politics. We indicate, for

instance, that contemporary writing on memory-objects is shadowed by the musings of earlier generations on mass commodification and fetishism, to be found in Walter Benjamin's reflections on the waning of the aura and of *Erfahrung* (lived experience) in high modernity, for example, and in the work of Siegfried Kracauer and of the Frankfurt School more generally.

Yet to organize discussion of modern memory genealogically, as we do here, also highlights distinct patterns of theorization that persist to this day. If the Frankfurt traditions represent one tendency, another can be identified in the psychoanalytical traditions of Freud and his followers, and perhaps a third in the lineage which moves from Bergson to Deleuze. There are of course important transactions between these distinct conceptual formations. But the incommensurabilities are as evident as the commonalities, suggesting that the field of study represents more a congeries of competing paradigms, in which dialogue across each paradigm is difficult to sustain.

In the second and third parts the focus of the volume shifts rather more from the past to the present, setting out to reveal the ways in which memory—and theories about memory—have come to permeate all levels of our understandings of contemporary experience. Part 2, “How Memory Works,” comprises a series of sections that take the reader from discussion of the inner self, via subjectivity and the social, to the issue of public memory. Each of these sections engages with the politicization of memory, both in the formal domain of state policy and public life and in the inner regions of domesticity, private life, sexuality, and the psyche.

In the third part of the volume, “Controversies,” we review some of the defining areas of memory research where political issues are closest to the surface. Here the authors engage with a—necessarily partial—range of historical and contemporary questions that have been central, formative even, in the development of memory research. The chapters focus on concrete instances, comprising different historical moments and mnemonic practices and drawing from different conceptual paradigms. Expectations of what memory means and what it might offer are confounded at every step.

We are aware that the concept of trauma could well have provided one general or framing theory by which to approach these issues, and readers may be surprised that it isn't more conspicuous in the pages that follow. The instances analyzed here—slavery, the Holocaust, sexual abuse—have all been theorized as traumatic: indeed they have done much to develop and bring to prominence trauma theory as a key framework within memory studies. Yet without denying the significance of the connections between memory and trauma, we are less sure about the viability of elevating trauma into a general theory, applicable across time and space to very different formations of memory activity, an uncertainty that Catherine Merridale, in particular, explores in her chapter on memories of the Soviet epoch. At this theoretical moment it may be wiser for the concept of trauma to be adopted critically, self-reflectively, and with an element of caution. There are a number of reasons for this. The emphasis of trauma studies has

undoubtedly expanded our understanding of the unspeakable and unrepresentable registers of individual and collective suffering. Yet as Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer argue in their chapter, the focus of trauma theory on unspeakability and silence as the manifestation of a “true” or “complete” witnessing is not without risks. For, in their words, those silences can be “so open to interpretation and projection that . . . they preclude therapeutic listening in favor of ascription and appropriation” by *any* external political force. That which trauma theory posits as truth, in exceeding the bounds of narrative sense-making, certainly carries a politics. But the scope for political discrimination from such a perspective, discrimination that could determine where such a politics might lead, remains profoundly circumscribed.

Too often the effect of starting out from an insistence on trauma has been to pit traumatic memory *against* history. The emphasis of this book, on the contrary, is to propose that memory research constitutes not a rejoinder to historical (and other) inquiry, but its—awkward—ally. If traumatic memory and history are polarized, this in turn can obscure the politics of remembering. That the politics of memory, in the instances we address here, extend beyond trauma theory is demonstrated here in Stephan Palmié’s chapter on slavery, where he argues that histories of slavery, and accounts of slave memory, “aim to fashion, authorize, and motivate specific definitions of moral community in the present.” Our purpose is to encourage multiperspectival, interdisciplinary research in these most fraught of areas and to demonstrate that in the politics of memory—in academic research and in the wider public sphere, in these instances as well as more generally—meanings remain perpetually in tension and open to question. They acquire their power, though, when articulated to an ethics of the present.

Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates is, we believe, greater than the sum of its parts. Its purpose is to bring together, in a single volume, as many different facets of contemporary memory analysis as is practicable, in order to allow the reader to range across the varied dimensions of current scholarship. It will be open, we imagine, to a wide range of readings. In this way, we hope it will play a part in furthering research in the areas discussed here as well as in new fields that await investigation.

