

Pre-workshop comment

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Cultural memory has gained significant relevance over last decades as a concept that simultaneously subsumes and integrates various kinds of memory (personal/individual, social, collective) and points to their mutuality and the ways they communicate and influence one another (cf. Baal 1999, Van Dijck 2007). This concept emphasizes another important aspect of memory: through mediation, memory is always placed in cultural space and made recognizable as a cultural object. As such, it becomes a subject of (re)negotiation, justification, reinterpretation, struggle, as well as of subversion, parody, resistance etc.

My points on cultural memory are based on research conducted in the area of former Yugoslavia, where memories of the traumatic events of WW2 and the 1990s as well as memories of socialism are characterized by contested interpretations and intense negotiations over their nature, form and legitimacy. Memories articulated outside the official sphere, in literature, art and individual accounts made widely accessible through digital media, have significantly contributed to the perception, accession and understanding of WW2 and the 1990s wars as well as the socialist period and became a powerful tool in the politics of memory that challenged officially-established narratives about the past. These processes reveal the importance of the relationship between cultural memory and official memory: individual accounts are continually sharpened against available public versions of the past (Van Dijck 2007). But to what extent may individual narratives influence dominant discourses about past events?

Literature, as a medium providing narratives on the past that mediate between the individual and the collective, proves to be an important mediator of historical understanding for a number of generations and thus figures as a crucial object of research in the field of cultural memory. In the post-Yugoslav contexts, the following aspects of literary practices and questions related to them seem important for understanding how cultural memory works:

- literary writings as voices of silenced/concealed past events/trauma (writings on the Holocaust, on ethnic violence in WW2): these events emerge in literature while they are absent in official collective remembering;
- memory and displacement: what is the nature of memory that emerges in relation to the experience of exile, displacement? which literary canons are challenged and which are newly established in situations where writers, due to their displacement, do not unequivocally belong to national spaces and national literatures?
- the relationship between literature and other cultural practices of remembering: how are narratives of the past changed in different media and through different practices?
- the relationship between literature and historiography: what is the status of narratives on the past as presented in literature (thinking mostly of the so-called 'historiographical metafiction' that combines a narrative about the past with a reflection on the nature of historical representation, Claasen and Kansteiner 2009) when juxtaposed to historiographical discourses? what is the relationship between literarily narrated memory and truth(fulness) and factuality?

The essential aspect of cultural memory is that it speaks about the present as much (or even more) as it speaks about the past. Both material objects of cultural memory (texts, images) and all kinds of memory practices are situated in the present and mobilized for the negotiation of roles, values and beliefs of social groups who use/articulate them. It is therefore necessary to observe actors of these practices as active, political subjects whose memory practices are also politically relevant statements. The study of cultural memory should not overlook this aspect of memory practices; approaching them exclusively as individual, cultural and performative acts (easily marked as irrational, accidental and arbitrary) prevents us from grasping their political and emancipatory potential.

Position paper

My views on cultural memory originate from my research interest in memory practices in post-Yugoslav / post-socialist societies. The socialist revolution coincided with WW2, and the dissolution of the Yugoslav federation and consequent nationalization/ethnicization of the post-Yugoslav societies coincided with the end of socialism. These two facts significantly define both the nature and the meaning of memory practice in the post-Yugoslav space.

Increased interest in memory studies in this space results to a certain extent from the need to give a voice to those who were not allowed to speak during socialism. To even greater extent, however, this increased interest is provoked by multiple and ubiquitous voices of resistance to 'collective amnesia' imposed by national/istic elites in the former Yugoslav societies and to official discourses in which [positive] experiences of Yugoslav socialism are neglected, condemned or at best ignored. In these discourses there is a pressure to 'forget' any positive aspect of the decades of life in the socialist Yugoslavia, and a tendency to label as bad everything related to the Yugoslav socialist past. This tendency is accompanied by practices of historical revisionism related to the Second World War and of silencing radical violence from the last wars.

I would like to emphasize role of new/digital media in the formation and negotiation of cultural memory in the former Yugoslav lands. Digital media blur a firm division between the individual and the collective, public and private, official and unofficial memories and also make it possible for alternative interpretations of the past to be present in the social space. After physical de-territorialisation of the country (including in the form of exile and displacement for many of its citizens), the internet enables its [virtual] re-territorialization.

As a cultural practice positioned between the mentioned opposition, literature both supports and challenges dominant memory regimes. The breakdown of Yugoslavia and the subsequent ethnic violence were characterized by a revival of ethnic and traditional themes in the national literary production of the Yugoslav successor states. At the same time, authors such as Miljenko Jergović, Daša Drndić, Boris Dežulović and others, as well as authors who migrated to other parts of the world (Dubravka Ugrešić, Aleksandar Hemon, Slavenka Drakulić...) had an important role in articulating the voices of opposition to the silencing of the ethnic violence in the 1990s, and to historical revisionism concerning the events of WW2. Literature thus became a medium of cultural memory indispensable for problematising the role of national meta-discourses and for preventing hegemony over versions and interpretation of history.

The last point I would like to address is the issue of the political relevance of cultural memory. Acts and practices of remembering the socialist past are usually interpreted as an individual, cultural, performative acts or plain consumerism. It is necessary to look at them more broadly, meaning that they should also be seen as (political) statements, active and responsible acts on the part of individual and collective subjects of taking a stand toward institutions, practices and values, both from the socialist past and the post-socialist present, which are inevitably related.