Memorials in Times of Transition

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BOOK REVIEWS


In the aftermath of conflict, and in times of transition or post-conflict transformation, the effort to grasp the internal dynamics of societies emerging out of war requires an indepth analysis of those multilayered processes. A careful look at such processes reveals a most fascinating and complex post-war phenomenon: the civil wars of memories,¹ that is, conflicts over the narratives and representations of the past.² Such conflicts may occur on the intercommunal or intracommunal level and reveal a complex nexus of actors and dynamics among various mnemonic communities. How do societies after conflict negotiate their past, present and future? What do they choose to collectively remember, forget, obliterate or deny? What is the role memorials play in shaping these processes? What is the role memorials have in processes of transitional justice, peacebuilding or post-conflict transformation? Even more importantly, what effect do commemorative events and memory work emerging around memorials and sites of memory have on the communities concerned and on processes of collectively remembering and forgetting?

Some of those acute questions and others are addressed and further discussed in Memorials in times of transition. The growing field of social memory studies and its importance and relevance to peace and conflict studies scholars, as well as to scholars in the field of transitional justice, is clearly articulated in the chapters presented in this volume as ‘they consider memory not simply being susceptible to change but as being an agent of change in and of itself’ (p 6). This edited volume provides an indepth analysis of various case studies tackling this challenging meeting point between memory politics and post-conflict transitions, and dealing with the past processes, particularly as related to the role of memorials as a policy instrument in transitional justice. Edited by Susanne Bucky-Zistel and Stefanie Schäfer, the book presents nine chapters based on substantial field research using a variety of methodologies, including ethnography, participatory observation and the spatial analysis of sites (p 3). The contribution of this volume is first and foremost in the depth of analysis it offers to some transitional justice processes as related to politics of memory and dealing with the past, which are otherwise often over simplified when framed exclusively in policy terminology. As the editors explain, ‘the goal of

¹Kuljić (2009).
²Jelin (2003).
this volume is to situate the analysis of transitional justice within memory studies’
broader critical understanding of the socio-political, aesthetic and ethical concerns
which informs these memorial projects’ (p 2).

Among the protagonists of the chapters and the heterogenic conflicts analysed
throughout this volume are transitional justice entrepreneurs (p 9) as well as memory
entrepreneurs,3 victims associations as well as perpetrators, bystander witnesses,
visitors and spectators (both insiders and outsiders). The structure of the volume offers
three main parts – ‘Connecting transitional justice and memorials’, ‘Memorial spaces
and representation’ and ‘Contestation and politicisation of memorials’ – with each
consisting of three chapters by the various authors. As the editors state, they hold this
structure crucial for understanding the usages and effects of memorials within post-
conflict societies; namely, the question of potentially positive outcomes of memorials
in transitional justice, the political (ab)use of and struggle over memorial sites, and the
issue of representational concepts and spatiality in memorials (p 21). In that sense, a
thorough read of these chapters offers a cohesive analysis that enhances our
comparative thinking about transitional justice and politics of memory in different
societies after conflict. From post-authoritarian societies to post-conflict societies, the
relationship between collective memory (as socially constructed) and conflict, and
between memorials and transitional justice, is analysed presenting rich and up-to-date
data collected in the most recent research based on extensive fieldwork.

Memorialisation, as discussed by Barsalou in chapter 2 titled ‘Reflecting the
fractured past: Memorialisation, transitional justice and the role of outsiders’, which
sets the theoretical ground for the chapters to follow, ‘represents a powerful arena
of contested memory and the complex nexus between politics, trauma, collective
memory and public art’ (pp 49–49). According to her, the urge to publicly document
who died, by what means and why, appears to be nearly universal. Consequently,
enhancing our comparative thinking, two cases in this volume can be compared, as
related to the dimension of time in memory politics in post-conflict transitions. How
the time that has passed since a conflict or war shape the memories, rituals and
dynamics created around memorials? As Braun’s chapter analysing the Srebrenica-
Potocari memorial titled ‘The Srebrenica-Potocari memorial: Promoting (in)justice?’
shows, memorials can deepen divisions existing already (in this case, between Serbs
and Bošniaks in Eastern Bosnia-Herzegovina). The proximity of the events and
the relatively short time passed since 1995 imply that commemorative practices
culminating every year in July, among mnemonic communities from Bosnia and
Herzegovina as well as in Serbia4 will continue to evolve and even change over time.
Therefore, the commemorative rituals surrounding memorials should be carefully
integrated into the data and analysis of the memorial centre. The time dimension as
a drive for change in mnemonic practices is indeed explored in Klep’s chapter on
Chile titled ‘Memorials, memorialisation and social action in Santiago de Chile’,
which offers a critical insight into the importance of time in transitional processes.
As Klep argues, there has already been a shift in Chile ‘from the early focus on
mourning and commemorating the detained-disappeared and executed as victims of

3Jelin (2003), p 34.
4See the Women in Black memory work on remembering Srebrenica as genocide in Serbia in
the dictatorship to including memories of social and political agency which has inspired both commemoration and social action’ (p 201).

In that sense, this may correspond with recent literature in memory studies and novel thinking about memorials offering a move away from the question of witnessing (with survivors) – into the realm of civic engagement as in the case of Irit Dekel’s ethnographic study of the holocaust memorial in Berlin titled Mediation at the holocaust memorial in Berlin. In this case, participation in memory work is thus cast as an act of citizenship. Memory work as related to memorials is hence at the heart of the dynamics within societies after conflict in their effort to ‘deal with the past’. Commemoration and commemorative rituals allow members of societies emerging from conflict not only to revive and affirm older memories of the past but also to modify them over time.

The analysis of commemorative practices as related to memory work around memorials, points at the ambiguity of memorials that is at times missing from some related discussions in the field of transitional justice. As Connerton argues in How modernity forgets, ‘the desire to memorialise is precipitated by a fear, a threat, of cultural amnesia’. The relationship between memorials and forgetting, according to him, is reciprocal: the threat of forgetting begets memorials and the construction of memorials begets forgetting. Hence, those reciprocal relations (as may surface in some of the texts in this volume, though not in all) call for a more nuanced discussion of transitional justice that can be deepened and enriched when seen through the lenses of social memory studies, as in this volume.

References

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\[\text{Dekel (2013).} \]
\[\text{Dekel (2013), p 2.} \]
\[\text{Zerubavel (1995), pp 5–6.} \]
\[\text{Connerton (2009), p 27.} \]
\[\text{Connerton (2009), p 29.} \]