

Memory Genealogies in Central and Eastern Europe Theories and Methods

International Conference. Warsaw, 23–25 November 2011¹

Within the last few years the diversity and complexity of studies of memory and its social, historical and spatial determinants have produced the need to take stock of the intellectual achievements in this area of study and to discuss the most recognized and influential theoretical and methodological approaches. It has also laid the foundations for the search for new approaches within the different humanistic disciplines and social sciences. Finally, it has encouraged the development of interdisciplinary research projects.

In my opinion, the international conference Memory Genealogies in Central and Eastern Europe. Theories and Methods (which took place at the Warsaw University Library on 23–25 November 2011²) was an interesting attempt to respond to these needs.

The Conference attracted participants from Central and Eastern Europe, Western Europe and the United States of America, including historians, sociologists, anthropologists, ethnographers, and specialists in culture studies.³ Central and Eastern European countries were well represented.

There were more than 70 presenters. Two of them, Aleida Assmann and Jeffrey Olick, researchers who have greatly contributed to memory studies, evoked the largest interest. Their presentations stimulated heated discussions and polemics and set the tone for the entire conference.

Other renowned memory scholars from Germany were also present, including Lutz Niethammer (University of Jena), Gertrud Pickham (Free University Berlin) and Alexander von Plato (Fern Universität in Hagen) and the United States of America,

¹ The conference organizers plan to publish the conference proceedings very soon. These will include a selection of the conference papers. Selected articles will also be published in scientific journals, including the *Polish Sociological Review*. Current information on this project can be found on <http://genealogies.enrs.eu/>. The second Memory Genealogies conference will be held in autumn 2012 and will be entitled *Regions of Memory. A Comparative Perspective on Eastern Europe*. This conference will largely be devoted to remembering and forgetting about acts of mass violence in the 20th century.

² The conference was organized in cooperation with the European Memory and Solidarity Network, the Institute of Sociology, University of Warsaw, the Institute of Sociology at the Warsaw School of Social Studies and Humanities, the Federal Institute for German Culture and History in Central and Eastern Europe, the Institute of Eastern European Studies of the Free University Berlin, and the National Culture Centre.

³ The conference program and presentation recordings can be downloaded from the conference website at <http://genealogies.enrs.eu>

including Wulf Kansteiner (Binghamton University). Unfortunately there were no presenters or participants from France, such an important country in the field of social memory, except Nicoletta Diasio (University of Strasbourg).

The Polish organizers set several ambitious conference goals. Above all, they wanted speakers not only to present specific research findings and historical-theoretic studies but also to make an effort to find a common theoretical language for various historical and spatial cases of collective memory.

The Conference was divided into four large thematic blocks. In block one, alluding to Pierre Nora's conception and entitled *Lieux de memoire*, participants discussed various symbols and events which have shaped memory in Central-Eastern Europe.

Block two, *Theories and Conceptions*, was devoted to purely theoretical and methodological aspects of memory studies.

Block three, *The Dynamics of Memory*, was devoted to problems of memory transformations in society in various periods of time and their various cultural and social determinants.

The objective of the last block, *Memory Media*, was to demonstrate the effects of the media, variously understood, on collective memory.

The session entitled *On the Specific Nature of History and Memory in Central-Eastern Europe* and the presentations by Aleida Assmann and Jeffrey Olick were very impressive. In my opinion, this session, (not situated in any of the four thematic blocks) was one of the most exciting conference events. Let me add that the problems discussed at this session were reflected in the panels accompanying the four thematic blocks. Participants conducted animated discussions of the chances and limitations of application of theoretical and methodological approaches to memory studies developed in the West to Central-Eastern European research.

Harald Wydra (University of Cambridge) opened the session. He drew attention to the different memory patterns in Eastern and Western Europe and postulated introduction of comparative research into the cultural meaning of national memories and the role of the elite in the development of these types of social memory.

Slawomir Kapralski, anthropologist and sociologist (The Warsaw School of Social Sciences and Humanities), presented a different approach to this issue. He drew attention to the popularity of the alleged uniqueness of social memory and memory frames in Central Europe only to refute it. On the basis of selected examples from studies of the Romani community, he underscored the similarity of the mechanisms of remembering and forgetting in the east and west of the European continent.

Andrzej Nowak, a historian from the Jagiellonian University, Kraków, tackled the problem of memory construction from the perspective of political correctness.

The alleged difference between memory in Eastern and Western Europe was also discussed by Joanna B. Michlic (Hadassah-Brandeis Institute) in the context of research into memory of the Holocaust in post-communist Europe. She postulated that Holocaust studies in Central-Eastern Europe, in which the Western analytic model predominates, ought to consider dimensions ignored by this model. In her opinion, this would help researchers to achieve a better description and interpretation

of strategies of Holocaust recall in different countries and to determine the limits of their applicability in different types of society.

Dariusz Stola, a historian from the Polish Academy of Sciences and Collegium Civitas, focused on the peculiarities of collective memory in post-Second World War Polish society. Taking memory of violence as his point of departure, he discussed the problem of reliability of historical sources and pointed out the importance of memory coherence when sharing traumatic experiences. He also drew attention to selected memory strategies, their social pathologies and patterns of memory.

The last speaker, Matthias Weber (Federal Institute for Culture and History of the Germans in Eastern Europe) talked about the asymmetry of memory in Poland and Germany. He pointed out the risks of instrumentalization of the past and its politicization and concluded his presentation with the following thesis: although democratic historiography does not need a unified vision of the past, it is worth highlighting the didactic aspect of history and the need to overcome stereotypes.

The topics discussed during the first session, especially the effect of research traditions developed in Eastern and Western Europe, on the current state of research were continued in the debates which took place during later panels.

One of the most important and most widely discussed conference events was surely Aleida Assmann's (University of Konstanz) lecture *The Transformative Power of Memory*. When discussing the transformative powers of memory she pointed out that memory changes not only people, societies or states, it also changes itself over time. She discussed these two types of change giving various examples and referring to various contexts. She first drew attention to changes in memory frames. In her opinion, these changes led to major changes in memory culture. Aleida Assmann then quoted Christian Meier and Hermann Lübe's publications to give examples of social memory and forgetting, pointing out that both can have both positive and negative consequences. This reflection led her to an important theoretical-historical construction, i.e. to the thesis that a transition is currently taking place from forgetting to remembering, and this means a change in perspective, from modernist to moralist.

According to Aleida Assmann, this fundamental change had a powerful effect on the emergence of a new memory policy, one which is having significant social and political consequences. Quoting several theorists, including Edward Said and Pierre Nora, Aleida Assmann pointed out that a more complex and pluralist discourse has now emerged in public space. She supported this thesis with several examples: the changes in Germans' attitude toward the past—their own and their neighbours', changes in memories of the past in the former Soviet republics, or the development of transnational frames for European memory. These very interesting examples allowed Assmann to conclude that we are currently observing a transition from monologic to dialogic memory. Transitions such as this—she thinks—should help to cross the boundaries of e.g. national memories.

The German scholar also pointed out the advantages of new—dialogic—memory. In her opinion, dialogic memory is empathic and facilitates contacts among various communities. It is a memory which transcends the boundaries demarcated by the single-community perspective. It is a memory which takes other perspectives on the

past into consideration and strives to gain a deeper understanding of the other side's beliefs.

Aleida Assmann's presentation stimulated a very heated and fundamental discussion. Participants concentrated largely on the concept of dialogic memory. They wanted to know how to realize the postulates of this type of memory—who stimulates it, who dominates the development of visions of the past, and who is most interested in doing so.

Time and again, discussants drew attention to the specific nature of Central-Eastern European experiences. They wondered whether assumptions concerning the presented transformations of memory types were not too optimistic. They also feared that new generations of immigrants to European countries would not be interested in their past. They argued that memory dialogue at a global level, between religions, societies or cultures, may be very difficult or even completely impossible.

When answering these questions Aleida Assmann made it clear that she saw no danger to memory supported by the family, school or culture. As far as memory asymmetry is concerned (particularly the asymmetry between victims and perpetrators), she said that the most important thing is to be aware of this asymmetry and try to understand "the other side." She highlighted the role of religion, tradition and culture in overcoming existing memory schemas, and also the role and importance of different social actors for the creation of collective memory.

In addition to Aleida Assmann's inspiring theoretical contribution, another very important contribution was the one by Jeffrey Olick, a scholar more interested than his German colleague in the practicalities of research on collective memory.

Olick pleaded that when we analyze the complexities of memory changes we must not forget to apply the simple models used in collective memory studies. He also commented on the current "memory boom." He argued that we should look into not only its repercussions for scientific research but also its consequences. In his opinion, in both cases we must take a closer look not only at the vicissitudes of popularity of the collective memory topic but also the determinants of this waxing and waning interest. He also mentioned the crossing of various contexts, realities and identities in the situation when various aspects of memory are synchronized in time.

Jeffrey Olick also paid a lot of attention to the regional aspects of memory: shared and non-shared, to the need to distinguish local and regional memories from transnational and transhistoric memories. He drew attention to the significance of fears of instrumentalization of the past. He pointed out the importance of religion and its effect on memory discourse, especially the one accompanying debates on guilt, distress and compensation.

To summarize, the first conference in the Memory Genealogies cycle was an interesting scientific event in Central-Eastern Europe, not only thanks to Assmann and Olick. Not only did participants present the results of unique empirical studies of memory in different countries and periods of time, they also asked fundamentally important theoretical and methodological questions. Equally importantly, they discussed the opportunities and limitations of transfer of Western theories, methods and empirical styles to Central-Eastern Europe.

Last but not least, the conference drew attention to Central-Eastern European traditions in memory research. In particular, it uncovered the intellectual strength of Polish tradition, especially the tradition of Stefan Czarnowski, Ludwik Krzywicki, Nina Assorodobraj-Kula and their students. One of the organizers' major successes was their decision to introduce this particular tradition to the conference debates and to render it a significant element of European reflection on social memory. The discussions initiated at the conference will hopefully stimulate a dialogue between Eastern and Western European memory, a dialogue based on the empathy for which Assmann appealed. I also think that they will contribute in the not too distant future to a dialogue between Western, Central and Eastern Europe concerning theory and methodology of collective memory studies.

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