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Elizabeth Jelin.
State Repression and the Labors of Memory.
Translated by Judy Rein and Marcial Godoy-Anativia.
University of Minnesota Press. 2003, 163 pp.
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The book is called *State Repression and the Labors of Memory.* It might be more appropriately entitled *Theories of memory and how memory deals with collective experiences including state repression.*

As a discussion about theories of memory, and the laborious processes by which individuals and collectivities develop, recast, reconstruct, and quarrel over the past as their memories have fashioned it, Jelin's book is provocative and multi-layered. Although the introduction initially promises to address the particular pasts experienced by Latin Americans, especially during the period of the 1970s and 1980s when dictatorships and military juntas imposed state repression, this focus diminishes as the book continues. Indeed, by the end of the introductory chapter, the author notes that the issues transcend in significance the regional experience. Jelin's fascination with the contours and curiosities of memory takes over, and Latin America, along with Nazi Germany and Vichy France, becomes a source of passing examples more than a focus of attention.

For this reason, one is surprised when the short book ends without having illuminated much about repression itself, and then, without explanation, is followed by an appendix with a selective chronology of events (as selected via the memory process otherwise analyzed in the text) in the Southern Cone countries from the 1950s to 2002.

The book, Jelin warns in advance, has a double structure, with each chapter focusing on an issue but dealing with it in a non-linear fashion intended to raise questions and encourage readers' reflections on their own private and public memories. In this, I believe, she admirably succeeds. She describes the complex process of developing memory as a labour, that is, as a process in which the subjective mind incorporates, digests, and "makes sense of" both personal and collective experiences. She acknowledges, as well, the occasional involuntary intrusion of undigested memories which must either be rejected or worked on as raw material to be incorporated into the understanding. She considers psychoanalytic theory in this connection.

Psychoanalytic theories are also considered in reference to the act of (consciously or unconsciously) forgetting, and of forgetting by "human beings embedded in networks of social relations, groups, institutions, and cultures." For this task, Jelin invokes the theories of Halbwachs (1925) and the critical theorists of the 1990s including, particularly Paul Ricoeur.

Two chapters concern the political struggles for memory, that is, the production of "official" collective memories, and, of course, the conflicting versions of the past that inevitably emerge (or re-emerge) over time; and how history itself re-configures the past in light of the present. Here the development of memory for the citizens of France of the Vichy regime is a case in point, as described by Henry Rousso and further discussed by Jelin. Later, we are asked to consider the symbols and locations of events that enable us to construct particular versions of the past. These include, for example, the

Nazi concentration camps maintained now as memorials (and also as tourist sites). Jelin asks whether countries that have experienced no public trials or truth commissions retain a significantly divergent version of the victims and perpetrators after state repression, than those countries (including Argentina) that have had a commission, some trials, and more recently, new trials. Jelin refers only at the end of her book to the subtle and relevant work of Mark Osiel *(Mass Atrocity, Collective Memory and the Law*, 1997), and to its introduction of questions about the plurality of memories in a democratic context.

From my point of view, that is, the perspective of a political economist cum sociologist, the problem of power is significantly missing in Jelin's work. Here the questions are largely psychological or at most, social psychological, and these are generally devoid of edge in dealing with the substantial differences in perception and understanding of power. To be sure, the repressors are often mentioned, but they are simply "there" the same way that walls and buildings exist while the inhabitants (mostly victims, sometimes their children, occasionally listeners in the fashion of psychoanalysts) express (or guard) the memories.

She does, however, concern herself with "engendered memories," and here she does consider hierarchies of social relations between men and women under the specific conditions of repression in the Southern Cone and Nazi concentration camps. I was struck by the reported argument that women had to be eliminated in the Nazi concentration camps because they were the "carriers of life." I have talked with survivors of the Srebrenica massacre where up to 8,000 Moslem men and boys were shot in an afternoon while women and infants were forced onto buses and driven away. "Why men?" I asked, sharing at that moment the notion that women carried life. The response included a look of incredulity from Serbs and Bosnians alike. It was apparently obvious to a patriarchial society that it was men who were carriers of life. Of course, it is also men who carry most of the guns and wage most of the wars, but the explanation – and the memory that went with it – was about paternity.

The lesson, for me at least, was that even as we try to make sense of other people's actions and memories, we are always confronted by their social and cultural context, and its divergence from our own. I imagine Elizabeth Jelin would agree, though our interpretations might otherwise differ.

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