

Richard Ned Lebow, Wulf Kansteiner and Claudio Fogu, eds.

The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe.

Duke University Press, 2006, 384 pp.

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This thoughtful and stimulating series of essays from a variety of disciplines explores how the memory of World War Two continues to be revised within several European national contexts, including France, Austria, Germany, Italy, Poland, Switzerland and Russia. The contributing authors examine the different economies of complicity with and resistance to the Nazi project that animate and burden each national context. There are two foci to the anthology: inter-generational conflict as a key force in the politics of memory, and how the contestation of World War Two memory and the Holocaust figures in the process of European integration and identity-building. The authors examine these questions at the level of what is termed “institutional memory” — how the past is continuously transformed and revised in elite contexts, rather than popular or individual ones.

Lacking the space to discuss the full range of issues prompted by these texts, only a few will be examined in detail. Uhl’s chapter on Austrian memories of Nazism, like the others in the anthology, takes a wide historical approach, tracing the shifts in how the memory of war has been institutionalized and contested. The essay raises pertinent questions about incongruencies between how nations treat their past domestically and internationally, and how the memory of Nazism has become the battleground for political parties. Kansteiner’s chapter on German memory politics provides interesting critical insights on inter-generational conflict as the dynamic driving the ongoing rethinking of the past, and opens up the question of how Germany has shifted its discourse on World War Two to signal inclusion in a larger European identity. In his chapter, Wolfe presents the Soviet Union as an anomaly, because of Communist continuity with the pre-war era, unwillingness to acknowledge Jewish suffering in official discourse, the heterogeneity of war experience, and communist anti-fascism that glossed over the Soviet Union’s own relationship to Nazism. The originality of Wolfe’s text is in situating the politics of memory within the problem of time, which he argues is at the core of Communist revolutionary ideology.

One of the strengths of the anthology is the concluding chapter by Fogu and Kansteiner because of its comparative nature — something that is often lacking in the literature on memory, especially in anthologies like this that feature a series of national case studies. The collection of texts in the anthology raises some pertinent questions, particularly about how the memory of World War Two figures in the process of European integration, prompting new directions for research. The authors argue that two distinct modes of negotiating the past emerge from the nations examined: one that is driven by inter-generational conflict and another that is framed by the “poetics of history” — deeply entrenched tropes and historical motifs that supersede generational change. Whether these categories are persuasive or only reflect methodological biases merits further examination.

Other than the comparative dimension of the anthology, other strengths include the desire to avoid the often imprecise categories that frame memory research and a skepticism about psycho-analytic models of “coming to terms with the past” that apply individual models of trauma, the unconscious and repression to collectives. The analysis of memory in these texts places the emphasis on the institutional level. While arguably the analysis of institutional representations allows for better analytic precision, the question of how individual agents engage official discourses remains unexamined, a methodological limitation that is acknowledged by the authors. Moreover, while placing the emphasis on “political interests” rather than “the persistence of trauma [...] in the

collective unconscious” (290) in order to make sense of collective memory is useful, the challenge is to acknowledge its complexity while avoiding a notion of memory that is entirely voluntaristic and malleable to interest. This anthology engages these questions in a thought-provoking and engaging manner, and is worthwhile for researchers on the politics of memory, European integration and identity.

Christine Lavrence

King’s University College, University of Western Ontario
clavrenc@uwo.ca

Christine Lavrence is Assistant Professor in Sociology, at King’s University College, University of Western Ontario. She has published on questions of memory and history, memory and public space, and post-communist nostalgia in the former Yugoslavia. Recent publications includes articles in *Ethnologie Française*, *Arte de Mémoire*, *Matériaux, médias, mythologies* and *The Global Memoryscape*.

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