

**Jeffrey K. Olick, ed.**

**States of Memory: Continuities, Conflicts, and Transformations in National Retrospection.**

Duke University Press, 2003, 368 pp.

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The collection of essays edited by Jeffrey Olick reconsiders some of the assumptions that structure research and theorizing on collective memory. In the introduction Olick outlines several critical gestures that drive the book and which constitute important issues for the sociological study of memory. Here are a few. First, Olick argues for an approach to research on memory that can make links between the particularities and the generalities of each context, that is, to discover ways of theorizing their communalities without reducing their complexities. Second, Olick asks us to reconsider the assumption that the individual is the refuge of “authentic” (9) memory against an oppressive state-memory apparatus, a diagnosis which one finds often in research undertaken in post-communist and authoritarian contexts. Third, there is a critique of the tendency in memory studies to overemphasize the pliability of memory that stems from a critical impulse but can lead to what Olick calls an overly voluntaristic notion of memory. That is, while the constructionist argument shows how memory can be manipulated to serve particular interests, it can underestimate the role of social context, which can render memory less malleable and even unruly at times. In questioning these three tendencies in memory studies, Olick asks us to consider the tensions that traverse the processes of memory in order to develop a more nuanced sociological approach. These are themes that run throughout Olick’s work on memory and while the introduction builds on ideas that he has developed elsewhere, it provides an engaging theoretical context for the series of essays that follow.

This book offers a series of studies on memory from a variety of contexts. The case studies include: an examination of how the October Revolution is being rethought in Russia after glasnost, fluctuations in the interpretation of Confucius’s legacy in Communist China, the role of recent historiographical debates in the construction of Israeli national identity and a comparative analysis of how calendars map out temporal systems which structure national memory. Common questions throughout the collections of essays include: Does commemoration facilitate forgetting? That is, can the ritualization of memory through official commemorative practices depoliticize the past and render its lessons forgotten? How does revolution manage the need to construct radical ruptures in the face of persisting cultural memories? How are contemporary historiographical crises reflected in new methods of writing historical and national memory and what kind of conceptual apparatus can we develop to begin to appreciate the nature and magnitude of these shifts?

As I cannot do justice to all of the individual essays, I will highlight only a few. Zamponi’s discussion of Italian fascism as a response to the disruptive and transformative nature of modernity does an excellent job of situating the question within a larger theoretical context through an investigation of Halbwachs and in particular, Benjamin. Polletta’s article, a content analysis of the American Congressional Record, elucidates the legacy of Martin Luther King and examines the challenge of commemorating social movements. Polletta reconsiders the notion of a monolithic state behind the

construction of official memory and instead situates the process of memory building in the tensions between competing social actors, social groups and within elites themselves. An important insight that emerges from this research is the impact of “genre boundaries” (218) on political discourse. That is to say, the rhetorical style of commemoration — dignified, solemn, literary — is considered inappropriate for discussions of policy within congress, so that the memory of King is invoked in reference to commemorative decisions but not other policy debates such as crime, education, environment and health care, issues that strike at the very heart of his legacy. This alerts us to the risk of “normalizing” difficult pasts and blunting their critical potentials that commemorative ritualization can pose. Finally, the article by Zhang and Schwartz on the interpretation of Confucius during various phases of Communist China theorizes the tensions between the continuity and discontinuity of his legacy. Zhang and Schwartz probe the stability of Confucius's memory despite certain fluctuations and argue that there is a narrower margin of interpretation of this tradition because of a “syndrome of authoritarianism” in China (103). Their argument is based on a general claim that this renders the past less malleable for interpretation, a claim that can be contested by pointing to examples of authoritarianism where radical projects of reconstruction have taken place. Instead of “reconstructing” the memory of Confucius, they argue that China engages a process of “critical inheritance” — it is evaluated critically, various parts are rejected and accepted, although ultimately “its contents remain stable” (120). This is an interesting proposition, but how critical inheritance differs from the dialectic of remembering and forgetting that is always implicated in reconstruction requires more elaboration.

With these comments aside, this book offers a series of thought-provoking case studies that prompt the reader to make links between different contexts of memory, something that, as Olick points out, is often lacking in this field of study. Despite the risk that the range of contexts and methodological orientations can dilute possible sociological and theoretical insights, overall, it is one of the book's assets. It makes a contribution to research interested in refining the sociological study of memory and developing a conceptual apparatus sufficiently nuanced for the complexity of the topic and its current conditions.

Christine Lavrence  
Université Laval  
christine.lavrence.1@ulaval.ca

Christine Lavrence is a Post-Doctoral Fellow at Université Laval, at the Canada Research Chair in Comparative History of Memory/CELAT/AUF.

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