

## Memories for the Future? Narrating Horizons of Hope in “Politics out of History”

Announcement published by Zerina Catovic on Monday, November 25, 2019

Type:

Conference

Date:

December 30, 2019

Location:

Germany

Subject Fields:

Colonial and Post-Colonial History / Studies, Cultural History / Studies, Oral History, Political Science, Social Sciences

Memories for the Future? Narrating Horizons of Hope in “Politics out of History”<sup>[1]</sup>

- Conference to be held at the International Graduate Center for the Study of Culture, Justus-Liebig-University Giessen, Germany on 25./26. March 2020 -

*“There is always an interplay between the history of a people i.e. the past, and their faith in themselves and hopes for their future.”*

Steve Biko

The analysis of memory, be it individual or cultural, enjoys a longstanding and ever growing attention, as the number of publications, research groups and conferences on the topic show. Already long before it became such a popular field of interest in the academic sphere, memory was identified by the mainstream politics as a useful tool of government. Due to the close intertwinement of memory and identity narratives about the past have played an important role in imagining the newly evolving nation-states (Anderson 1988; Rigney 2018). The immense traumas of genocide but even more so a desolate post-war Europe in search of a new world order after 1945 subsequently ushered in the rise of a public memory regime (Moyn 2014). It gave way to a paradigm change best represented in Winston Churchill’s claim that *“Those that fail to learn from history, are doomed to repeat it.”* The gist of this quote guides memory politics of nation states and the global community to this day.

Embodied in international politics, the famous line has become a stepping stone for

Citation: Zerina Catovic. *Memories for the Future? Narrating Horizons of Hope in “Politics out of History”*. H-Announce. 05-27-2022. <https://networks.h-net.org/node/73374/announcements/5418971/memories-future-narrating-horizons-hope-%E2%80%9Cpolitics-out-history%E2%80%9D>

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practices of memory and memory research around the globe: from the rise of categories such as “historical justice” and “human rights” to “politics of regret” and “reparation politics” (Levy/Sznaider 2010; Teitel 2014). In other words, public memory today is less woven around a nation’s alleged greatness but is more about past failures and committed wrongs. Memorialization mustered around Never Again(s) has thus become a common trope while the numerous initiatives engaged in keeping even the most painful memories alive seem to pave the way for future politics via long detours of historical disasters (Bevernage 2015). Despite the fact that by relegating injustices of the now to the past we run the risk of maintaining structural oppression (re)produced in a newly colonized time (Madlingozi 2017), most studies still conceptualize *memory* as primarily being concerned with the past. The leap to the future, on the other hand, is often far less considered even though it appears to be inseparable from any revived memory. What is more, portrays of desirable futures, narrated through memory, are far too often treated as a 'natural' byproduct of any interpretations of history and therefore a less prominent subject of investigation.

However, this conference seeks to challenge the choice of emphasis and analysis. Drawing on the described observations the following hypothesis serves as point of departure into the discussion we would like to advance:

Any memory of the past is strongly concerned with the future. It is dedicated to the future in the sense that it envisions certain ways of living, of treating other people, or more generally, of being in the world. Thus, what makes up the core interest of the envisioned symposium is to critically assess how practices of public and cultural memories, by turning to the past, simultaneously gesture towards the future.

What is more, “if time is an ocean,” as FB Wilderson reminds us in *A Memoir of Exile and Apartheid*, “rather than linear (as white cultural imperialism defines it), then 500 years is simultaneously this minute. The past is the past only for the sake of white’s comfort and safety.” Therefore, the concept of Memory seems to be underpinned by a implicit conception of time which has its epistemic location in the philosophy and historiography of the global North. This shows that the dominant idea of time is everything but neutral and neither are the future-bound approaches to memorialization. They seem to instead all rely on fundamental assumptions that can be traced back to Eurocentric tradition of thought and research. We would like to see these entanglements assessed and problematized from diverse perspectives in a critical turn to 'memory's futures'. Aspirations for the future presented through

memory urge us to ask the question: *Who sets the horizons of hope and for whom? How was future envisioned in the past? And furthermore, to what extent is setting the horizons for the future a political project and how should it be addressed within academia and (memory) activism?*

In sum: in our age of globalized liberal democratic order, the “urgency of memory” that Jacques Derrida (2001) attested, provides legitimacy not only to a particular form of government in the present but also to prescribes certain visions for the future. Ferit Güven (2015) more recently referred to this practice as a colonization of the future. It is therefore necessary to re-politicize the study of memory in order to grasp the extent of its political characteristics, their forms, functions and consequences. We invite scholars from various disciplines to contemplate on this further and possibly offer new critical perspectives for and on public memory.

Innovative papers on theoretical considerations as well as case study-based research are welcome. We also encourage less conventional approaches to the topic, such as performances, art work or more poetic techniques of expression.

Topics this conference would like to address in their regards to narratives of the future include (but are not limited to):

- Memory and the “Postcolony”
- Memory practices and their Futures
- Memory in times of “transition” (TRCs etc.)
- Theoretical approaches to decolonize memory (e.g. epistemic disobedience)
- Memory and government
- Memory of Enlightenment/Enlightenment and memory
- Forgetting and Remembering for the Future
- Alternative Memories, Memory Activism
- Artistic approaches to memory
- Objects of memory (e.g. in collections/museums)

We invite contributions from early-career researchers as well as established scholars. Our goal is to host a small conference that is as accessible as possible for all scholars interested and not perpetuate the many mechanisms of exclusion

embedded within the university system. Therefore we hope to be able to provide funding opportunities for those participants unable to get funding from other institutions and to also find a location that is unhampered by barriers. Being mindful of ecological factors and the negative impact the frequently flying academic has on the environment we are open to forms of participation via video and encourage any suggestions of that sort.

The main aim of this conference is to spark new, as well as to re-articulate ongoing debates, critiques and thus also foster processes of self-reflection as critical scholars. We intend to create a space for engagement and discussion and attempt to shake up the common panel-based conference setting by employing formats such as workshops, round-tables, thematic walks and artistic representations of future-oriented memories.

The success of this attempt is dependent on the contributions offered, though. Therefore a finalized concept can only be provided after we received applications. The publication of an edited volume or a special issue that contains some of the presented works is envisioned as well. We hope to thereby harness the collaborative work emerging out of the conference debates to share it with a larger public.

Please send an abstract of **no more than 300 words** to the two organisers Katrin Antweiler [katrin.antweiler@gcsc.uni-giessen.de](mailto:katrin.antweiler@gcsc.uni-giessen.de) and Zoran Vuckovac [zoran.vuckovac@gcsc.uni-giessen.de](mailto:zoran.vuckovac@gcsc.uni-giessen.de). The deadline for abstracts is **30. December**. Notifications will be send out by 15 Jan. 2020.

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— This wording is borrowed from a book by Wendy Brown (2001) titled *Politics out of History*.

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