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Towards a Disentanglement of the Links between the Memory Boom and the Neoliberal Turn

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Abstract

The memory boom and the related emergence of cosmopolitan victimhood-centred memories, increasingly criticized for depoliticizing the past and thus contributing to the depoliticization of the present, have been simultaneous with the curtailment of the welfare state, the abandonment of the politics of redistribution, the erosion of social and economic rights, and the growth in social and economic inequalities. Yet if the latter are often being considered to be among the reasons leading to the current right-wing populist wave in Europe and elsewhere or at least are seen as entangled therewith, the relevance of the memory boom for these developments has not been properly interrogated.

Against this background, this contribution makes a plea for a critical appreciation of the linkages between the memory boom and the global ascension of neoliberalism. It acknowledges the contemporaneity of the two phenomena, which have been fundamentally informing our present age, roughly since the end of the 1970s, and calls for a critical engagement with their interwoven character. In doing this, it argues that scholarship should pay particular attention to the relationship between past, present, and future that the neoliberal turn in its various shapes and guises implies, as well as to the regimes of temporality that underlie various instantiations of the memory boom. It ends by taking heed of recent theorizations in memory studies and by asking to what extent can they be used in order to have a better grasp of the critical juncture we are currently lying at and to contribute to a radical change of the political status quo. Thus, the article makes some preliminary steps towards disentangling the interconnections between the memory boom and the neoliberal turn, and aims to provide a blueprint for a substantial future research project that should look in depth at these entanglements.¹

Keywords: *memory, neoliberalism.*

¹ Author's note: I am making a similar argument in an article entitled 'Whither Politics, Whither Memory?', forthcoming in *Modern Languages Open*, doi: <https://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.334>. The two texts borrow from each other.

1. Memory and neoliberalism: Concurrent unfoldings

What links the memory boom and the neoliberal turn? I suggest that in order to make sense of the entanglements between the two one has to look closely at the relationship between past, present, and future. The argument I am offering for consideration is that both the memory boom and the neoliberal turn – particularly in their (Eastern) European instantiations – are to a large extent underpinned by a contraction of temporal political horizons, characterized by the absence of future-oriented politics.

The connections between the two are visible on several levels, including both connections between neoliberalism and the memory boom as a historical phenomenon as well as between neoliberalism and scholarship on memory and memory politics. The analytical vocabulary frequently employed when researching and discussing issues related to historical memory is imbued with expressions which largely appertain to the corporatist-marketizing-neoliberal jargon. Literature speaks for example about the ‘management of the past’ (Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996; Abou Assi, 2010) or about ‘memory governance’ (Hourcade, 2015: 95), the actors involved in this process of management are seen as ‘mnemonic/memory entrepreneurs’ (e.g. Levy and Sznajder, 2010: 136; Kubik and Bernhard, 2014: 9, 25; Jelin, 2003; Abou Assi, 2010; Sierp and Wüstenberg, 2015; Neumeyer, 2017) or ‘memory stakeholders’ (Hourcade, 2015: 93). Furthermore, steered by such entrepreneurs or stakeholders, memories and memory discourses are often understood as being in a state of competition with each other and hence vying for pre-eminence, even if important critical pleas against such interpretative frameworks have also been brought to the fore (Rothberg, 2009). Last but not least, the past framed as memory is marketized and consumed (Brunk, Giesler and Hartmann, 2018). The ‘desire for the past’ unfolds within ‘memory markets’ (Huysen, 2003: 21).

Furthermore, any attempts whatsoever to look at the historical development of the memory boom in relationship with the advent of what is critically called ‘neoliberalism’ would have to acknowledge the concurrent character of the two phenomena. The global spread of the preoccupation with the past formulated by means of a mnemonic vocabulary and the institutionalization of a neoliberal approach in political and economic policies and practices became salient roughly in the same time span, that is towards the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s (Harvey, 2007: 2; Olick and Robbins, 1998: 107). They subsequently gained in intensity throughout the following decades. Thus, the mnemonic turn and the neoliberal turn were both potentiated by the contemporaneous dissolution of authoritarian regimes all across the globe, i.e. in Latin America, in Eastern Europe (including the bloody dismemberment of Yugoslavia), or in South Africa. Against this background, the apparently uncontested triumph of liberal democracy has been accompanied by an increase in the interest in memory issues and in processes of dealing and coming to terms with the past on the one hand and by the intensified dissemination and

institutionalization of neoliberal ideas and practices in the political and economic realms on the other hand.

In the 1990s, the scope of political transformations appeared to definitively sanction the success of liberal capitalism, which could (at least for a while) free itself from the discourse of crisis and malaise that had been largely underpinning it in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s. For liberal observers in need of some reasons to be enthused, history had abruptly and perhaps unexpectedly reached its end. Francis Fukuyama's famous and, with hindsight, much too optimistic dictum, had become common currency in the 1990s (Fukuyama, 1992). However, if history had allegedly come to its end, it seemed that all that remained – on both the public and the private level – was 'to give oneself to the multiple subjectivities of memory' (Niven and Berger, 2014: 5). Thus, over the past three decades, memory and neoliberalism became key elements of hegemonic discourses, practices, and politics.²

Public and political claims became increasingly concerned with the past rather than with the present or the future. In Eastern Europe, '[t]he range of memory practices adopted after 1989, especially by elites, was a continental novelty' (Mark, 2010: xiii). In Southern European countries such as Portugal, Spain, or Greece, the breakup with the authoritarian right-wing past furnishes at first glance a slightly distinct image, with the tension between memory, the surfeit of (official) forgetting, and neoliberalism appearing to be configured rather differently. Nonetheless, despite differences, largely all across Europe and even beyond, memory projects, public condemnations of the past, and various transitional justice processes and mechanisms revolved around the articulation of a 'new rights culture', indebted to the human rights paradigm as a 'last utopia' (Huysen, 2015: 29; Levy and Sznajder, 2006: 5; Moyn, 2012; Grosescu, Baby and Niemeyer, 2019).

The memory boom is intrinsically linked with the growing interest for the memory of the Holocaust. In the footsteps of developments and evolutions occurring already in the 1970s and 1980s, the memory of the Holocaust acquired a global dimension, and with it came a growing focalization on the figures of the victim and of the witness (Novick, 2000; Eder, 2016; Levy and Sznajder, 2006; Chaumont, 2010; Wieworka, 2006). Yet the mnemonic institutionalization as well as the extraterritorialization of the Holocaust therewith related largely imply its depoliticization and decontextualization, its abstractization, its transformation into a moralizing story of perpetrators (and bystanders) against victims, of Good against Evil (Levy and Sznajder, 2006: 4). Along these lines, the Holocaust also turned into something resembling a template – rather imperfect, to say the least – for many other processes of and pleas for dealing with the past, informing human rights thinking and reparation processes (Torpey, 2006: 159). The

² In this context, the Latin American case is perhaps particularly interesting, since Chile has been the laboratory of neoliberal governance under the right-wing dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. The end of the dictatorship and the transition to liberal democracy have been on the one hand associated with a salience of memory issues, while on the other hand they did not imply getting rid of neoliberalism as a political and economic project (Poblete, 2015).

institutionalization of the memory of the Holocaust has been and continues to be a multifaceted process, also having straightforward political dimensions at the European level, as well as beyond. The official embrace of the memory of the Shoah was perceived in Eastern European countries as a necessary condition in order to enter the European Union (Judt, 2005: 803; Kucia, 2016). Yet such an embrace was bound to lead to discussions related to these societies' own participation in the Holocaust and to tensions between the memory of the Holocaust and the memory of the Gulag. Furthermore, often distinctly drawing on the memory of the Holocaust, a humanitarian paradigm of human rights – generally centred on political and cultural rights rather than on social and economic rights and largely emphasizing the need for international interventions in humanitarian catastrophic emergencies – as well as a culture of trauma and victimhood emerged, expressed by means of a depoliticized humanitarian vocabulary (Moyn, 2012; 2017: 103–113; Fassin, 2012). The Holocaust provided 'the foundations for a new cosmopolitan memory' (Levy and Sznajder, 2006: 4).

The increasing juridification and legal treatment of the recent and less recent past, taking for example the form of memory laws, is another process characterizing the memory boom (Koposov, 2018; Teitel, 2000). The apparently belated quest to bring WWII perpetrators to justice in the name of human rights and of the imprescriptibility of crimes against humanity, is an important aspect of this process as well (Hartog, 2015: 201). The debates about whether or how to symbolically (by means of gestures, apologies etc.) and legally come to terms with the past and to repair past injustices have clearly gained centre stage over the past three to four decades (Barkan, 2000; Olick, 2007).

Throughout the same period of time with this increasing interest in and relevance of memory, the broad range of processes that are usually bundled together under the umbrella-term 'neoliberalism' have also become part and parcel of economic, social, and political life. Following the electoral successes of Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom and Ronald Reagan in the United States, the term 'neoliberalism' as such 'increased sharply in usage in the 1980s, and even more so in the 1990s'. At a global level, the term got to be associated with the so-called 'Washington Consensus' (Reinhoudt and Audier, 2018: 4). Concretely, the neoliberal turn has been characterized by the a concerted attack against Keynesianism, translated into the dismantlement of the welfare state and hence of the social consensus (or perhaps compromise) whose backbone was the welfare state, the glorification of privatizations and liberalization of markets as the solution to economic woes, especially against the background of the apparent failure of state socialism in Eastern Europe, and the move towards a financial capitalism.

The increase in social and economic inequalities at both the national and the global levels is associated with the hegemonization of the Thatcherite TINA (There Is No Alternative) dictum. Eastern European countries morphed into the playground of neoliberal shock therapies presented as a necessary and inescapable element of the transition to democracy (Ther, 2016). In this context, an unprecedented transfer of property from public to private ownership took place,

most often legitimized by the idea that the injustices committed by state socialist regimes have to be undone. At the same time, the range of political options at hand greatly narrowed, as no political actors seemed willing to see beyond the political horizon informed by the ‘triad of liberalization, deregulation and privatization’ (Ther, 2016: 17).

In Western Europe, the social-democratic parties continued to move closer to and eventually to almost appropriate the neoliberal mindset of the centre-right. Such parties played an important role in the dismantlement of the welfare state and in the adoption of entrepreneurship-friendly policies. Thus, the differences between Left and Right got increasingly blurred and irrelevant. Tony Blair’s New Labour in the United Kingdom and Gerhard Schröder’s Social-Democrats in (unified) Germany are perhaps the best exemplifications of this turn, but in effect no traditional mass Western European left-wing party has escaped the phenomenon. Keynesianism at the level of the nation state and ideas of redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor largely stopped being part of the repertoire of political and economic options at hand. Furthermore, what came instead has not been an illusory transnational Keynesianism, but on the contrary, an accentuated shift towards neoliberal transnational governance. Thus, in Europe, ‘[s]overeignty shifted decisively to EU’s unwieldy and undemocratic institutional frame’ (Eley, 2002: 408). Fundamentally, the apparent global success of liberal democracy that Fukuyama’s hastily announced ‘end of history’ assumed meant the consolidation and geographic extension of the neoliberal paradigm shift that had been gaining leverage since the 1980s.

Yet it has to be underlined that neoliberalism as such stands in effect for something qualitatively different and broader than just a set of social and economic policies. It stands for a new type of reason and a new type of production of subjects. Thus, in neoliberalism, subjectivities and social relations are essentially remade according to entrepreneurial patterns. Contemporary neoliberal rationality ‘configures human beings exhaustively as market actors, always, only, and everywhere as homo oeconomicus’ (Brown, 2015: 31; Foucault, 2008; Bowsher, 2018).

Thus, the linguistic contamination exemplified at the beginning of this introduction reveals itself to be the symptom of a complex interwoven relationship of concurrence between the so-called memory boom and the triumphant march of neoliberalism. This relationship has not been subjected to an in-depth analytical treatment. At this stage, it is also worth emphasizing that the intellectual origins of neoliberalism and of what we would call today memory studies are also traceable to the same period: the interwar, when French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs engaged with the concept of ‘collective memory’ (Niven and Berger, 2014: 3), while economists such as Walter Eucken or Friedrich Hayek started developing the economic and political theories that are at the basis of contemporary neoliberalism (Biebricher, 2018; Slobodian, 2018). The particular political and social context of the post-World War I era heading towards another catastrophic conflagration was key for both sets of elaborations. Furthermore, at least at the European level, the West German postwar Ordoliberalism has been identified as setting the stage in

the aftermath of the Second World War for the subsequent embrace of neoliberalism in the final decades of the twentieth century (Foucault, 2008). Similarly, the West German preoccupation for dealing or coming to terms with the past, first emerging in intellectual circles in the late 1950s and early 1960s has paved the way for the subsequent institutionalization of coming to terms with the past as a moral and political desideratum. These considerations are to a certain extent speculative, yet it might not be far-fetched to investigate whether some sources of the entangled and concurrent character of the memory boom and the neoliberal turn can perhaps be found in effect in the intellectual history of the two paradigms.

2. Entanglements: Lines of research

The existing literature foraying into the relationship between memory and neoliberalism has proposed different ways of looking at their synchronicity, thus indicating several research avenues that it would be worth pursuing in a more concerted manner in order to disentangle the apparent knots. One line of research emphasized for example that the assimilation of the economy to a mathematical model, typical of the neoliberal logic, presupposes that social groups do not call for redistribution, as such calls would constitute an unwanted and unwarranted intervention in the operations of neoliberalism. In this context, the function of the focalization on memory is that of muffling potential redistributive calls (Koposov, 2018: 57; see also Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006). In a similar vein, another line of research, which looks in depth at the relationship between transitional justice and neoliberalism argued that the memory work that transitional justice implies looks for a technically understood consensus that is supposed to bring societies together, without in any way attempting to interrogate socio-economic power relations, structures of inequality, systemic and structural violence. Thus, ‘it sketches out the conditions for a present where the antagonisms wrought by the economic relations of production’ are not seen in any way as relevant and hence are not critically addressed (Bowsher, 2018: 104). Furthermore, processes of juridification – underlying the functioning of both transitional justice and neoliberalism – are also an indication of the interwoven character of transitional justice (or memory as transitional justice) and neoliberalism (Bowsher, 2018; see also Bugarič, 2016).

The contemporaneity of the memory boom and of the neoliberal turn has also been accounted for by situating it in the broader context of the dissolution of the post-war consensus, whose cornerstones were economic Keynesianism and an official antifascism at the level of the politics of the past.³ Seeing the two as tightly

³ In this context, it is worth quoting from an extensive review of Pierre Nora’s famous *Lieux de mémoire* project. The multivolume work was published between 1984 and 1992 in France: ‘Surely every aspect of today’s “crise identitaire” has been accompanied—indeed, all but occasioned—by foreign developments, from the ending of the “trente glorieuses” (three decades of prosperity and comparative social peace) to the diminution of French sovereignty attendant on integration into the new Europe to, above all, the painful social dislocation brought on by increased Islamic immigration

related, historian Dan Stone (2014) has pointed out how memory politics and socio-economic change are inextricably linked.⁴ A great merit of his narrative also lies in the emphasis he places on the far-right's re-emergence in Western Europe in the 1980s, connecting this phenomenon with the challenges undermining the official memories of war and fascism and thus with the re-articulation of memory beyond ossified antifascism. The fall of state socialism in Eastern Europe gave another boost to this reconfiguration (Stone, 2014). However, the more profound answers related to the deep causes and reasons of the synchronic dissolution, empirically documented, of economic Keynesianism and mnemonic antifascism – are not easily extractable from Stone's otherwise highly readable and engaging account. The study does nonetheless indicate that the past and its memory have increasingly turned into a key arena of politics over roughly the past thirty years. It looks almost as if the potential conflicts related to the neoliberalization of the present are predominantly couched in or also in mnemonic terms, as they take the form of conflicts over the past.

Arguments about the orientation towards the past play an important role in other analytic accounts as well, such as the one by John Torpey (2006), where this orientation is placed in connection to the disappearance of future-oriented politics. The global proliferation of reparations politics whose fundamental aim is that of 'making whole what has been smashed', in Torpey's apt formulation, is presented in his work as inextricably linked with or even as a symptom of the 'unmistakable decline of a more explicitly future-oriented politics' (Torpey, 2006: 5). To a large extent, Torpey suggests, contemporary politics looks more often towards the past rather than towards the future and functions almost as if it had a redemptory goal. Transformative future-oriented projects, normally associated with the political left, have stopped being on the political agenda: 'For many people, even those who would unblinkingly regard themselves as progressives, the past has extensively replaced the future as the temporal horizon in which to think about politics' (Torpey, 2006: 18). In a similar vein, even if they do not focus exclusively on memory-related issues, other critical accounts also point out the disappearance of a future redolent of promises, hopes, possibilities, and potentialities, as the temporal horizon of politics, against the background of the bankruptcy of ideologies and of hope-laden utopias, of the decline of the idea of progress (replaced by the cult of the new as a value in itself, no matter how useless or futile), and of the acceleration of politics and society (Taguieff, 2000; Leccardi, 2011; Hassan, 2009; Hartog, 2017).

Yet this cancellation of the future did not bring with itself only an apparent political, social, and cultural focalization on the past and the mobilization for

and the related, profoundly embarrassing, political backlash that is the National Front.' (Englund, 1992: 301)

⁴ Historian Enzo Traverso (2016: 10) poignantly summed up one of the main characteristics of the phenomenon, namely the mnemonic turn towards victimhood: 'The memory of the Gulag erased that of revolution, the memory of the Holocaust replaced that of antifascism, and the memory of slavery eclipsed that of anticolonialism: the remembrance of the victims seems unable to coexist with the recollection of their hopes, of their struggles, of their conquests and their defeats.'

acknowledgment of past wrongdoings and for redress of past injustices. It also came together with a reconsideration of the articulation of the relationship between past, present, and future, a reconsideration best captured by what French historian François Hartog called ‘presentism’. If the (short) twentieth century stood largely under the aegis of futurism and of future-oriented politics, starting with its last third, the ‘present began replacing the future and encroaching further and further until, in recent years, it has seemed to take over entirely. The viewpoint of the present—the perspective of presentism—has established its dominion’ (Hartog, 2017: 108). Hartog has argued that ‘presentism’ and the memory boom are closely linked. The present ‘in the very moment of its occurrence, seeks to view itself as already history, already past’, self-historicizes itself almost instantly (Hartog, 2017: 114, 193). At the same time, memory is fundamentally about the construction and interpretation of the past ‘in and for the present’ (Szpunar and Szpunar, 2016: 381).

The never-ending present underlies both the preoccupation for memory and the neoliberal ethos. The two practically reinforce each other (Traverso, 2016; see also Kuposov, 2018: 53–57).⁵ Hence, one should not fall into the easy trap of regarding presentism and the aforementioned orientation towards the past as contradictory. Presentism is connected with both past and future, is a ‘suspended time between an unmasterable past and a denied future, between a “past that won’t go away” and a future that cannot be invented or predicted (except in terms of catastrophe)’ (Traverso, 2016: 8). The never-ending present is the past being reified, being turned into a commodity or into debt, it is an indebted present without an outward-looking perspective, which makes the future either impossible or simply irrelevant (Traverso, 2016, 8; Hartog, 2015: 193–204; Taguieff, 2000).

3. Past, present and future

The aforementioned explanations and tentative research directions definitely have their merits. Nonetheless, they seem to be speculatively circling around over the crux of the issue. They thus rather loosen and not completely disentangle the knots that appear to inextricably tie the memory boom and the neoliberal turn, as well as other related processes and phenomena. This piece does not aim to undertake such a complete disentanglement, but rather to recognize its necessity and to lay another stone onto a road that in effect still waits to be paved.

It pays off bringing to the foreground questions related to time, temporality, and historicity as they can provide a relevant vantage point from which to address the linkage between the memory boom and the neoliberal turn. The implicit or explicit construction of the relationship between past, present, and future is quintessential for memory discourses and practices. Yet the experience and the social construction of time and hence of the triadic relationship between past, present, and future, is also at the core of the transformations that neoliberalism has

⁵ In exchange, in a recent interview, Andreas Huyssen (2018) suggested that memory and neoliberalism stand in mutual opposition: ‘If anything, the memory boom of the 1980s and of the 1990s stood in clear opposition to the idealization of an eternal present of global financialization and neoliberalism.’

been producing. The neoliberal turn involves a transformation in thinking of and in constructing time. In this context, it would be both counter-intuitive and fundamentally fallacious to ignore the intense preoccupation with memory – fundamentally a preoccupation with time, on a scale that surpasses previous similar preoccupations – that has been accompanying this turn.

Time in neoliberal capitalism is the fluid time of constant change, indebted to the cult of the new for the sake of newness, it is the time where the future already seems to be swallowed by the never-ending present. It is the time of (hyper)acceleration and (hyper)speed. Industrialism and modernity were themselves marked by acceleration, but this was still an acceleration politically held in check. The temporality they nurtured was forward-looking and indebted to the idea of progress, to the representation of a future in the process of being built. In exchange, the move towards neoliberal capitalism implies an almost unlimited expansion of the speed (and space) of capital, in the name of an abstract market ideal, presented as consensual, yet far from being so (Hassan, 2009). The future got subsumed to the desiderata of the present. Against this background, politics constructs the past instead of the future.

By normatively establishing the primacy of the economic over the political (even if the way this primacy is configured might differ from case to case) and by situating us in a never-ending present, neoliberalism rejects the future as project and hence any potential future-oriented political or social struggle whose underlying aim is that of questioning this pre-eminence (see also Taguieff, 2000). Critical literature on neoliberalism argues that the future inscribed in the neoliberal project is a dystopic future of business markets that have fully transcended politics, of individuals shaped according to and by the markets, and of technocratic governance in which allegedly apolitical expertise is more important than democracy (see also Robinson, 2004). The other potential future that lurks on the horizon is the future as catastrophe – environmental, social, economic, political, civilizational.

The short-termism and the unpredictability of contemporary financial capitalism make neoliberal presentism and the apparent emphasis on the past as memory easier to fathom. In the best case, memory, especially in its institutionalized forms, seems to function as an endeavour to introduce something of a moral character to the former. Liberal cosmopolitan memory discourses as well as the right-wing staunch conservative (antagonistic) memory discourses both share a moralizing dimension, which is meant to bestow legitimacy upon two only apparently contradictory present political and economic projects: globalized neoliberalism and authoritarian right-wing nationalism. However, despite what it might seem at a first superficial glance two projects do not stand so much in opposition. Presentist neoliberalism has shown itself more than apt to develop an anti-democratic symbiosis with past-oriented neoconservatism and various forms of nationalism, tightly linked with de-democratization processes (Harvey, 2007; Brown, 2006). As if mirroring this process, liberal cosmopolitan discourses, with their de-politicizing presuppositions, impulses, and implications, have shown themselves particularly apt to be appropriated, at least in their emphasis on

victimhood, by right-wing antagonistic memory discourses (see also Cento Bull and Hansen, 2016).

The memory of atrocities and particularly the memory of the Holocaust as Europe's negative myth act as legitimizing props for an essentially neoliberal project as the European Union (EU) is (Leggewie, 2008; Traverso, 2016: 15). Hence, (institutionalized) memory appears more often than not to provide a legitimation rather than a contestation of contemporary neoliberalism. Furthermore, the opposition towards the EU as well as towards other instantiations of contemporary neoliberalism might resort to mnemonic tropes, yet generally these tropes are illustrative of strongly conservative political projects, that do not in effect question neoliberalism as such, and its cult of the market, but only, in some cases, its globalized dimension. The temporality implied by such memory discourses imagines the future as a reiteration of an idealized past. This makes the future either impossible or dystopic. The putative future-looking orientation of liberal memory discourses aiming to contribute to the global imposition of a consensual human rights regime in the name of 'Never again' fails to tackle precisely the conditions which appear to lead rather to 'Yet again' (Levy and Sznajder, 2006; 2010). The compassion-oriented moralistic humanitarianism that underlies it is also a substitution of politics (Fassin, 2012). Not only that the search for mnemonic foundations and the attempt to economically and symbolically atone for past wrongdoings are far from being interest-free and are prone to be turned upside down, but they lead to a never-ending loop from the present to the past and the back, in which the future fails to emerge because it has been made impossible. Interpreting past atrocities as human rights/humanitarian crises within the contemporary politics of memory legitimizes contemporary practices of 'humanitarian government', that largely rely on a politics of inequality and of precarious lives (Fassin, 2012). The moral horizon of humanitarian politics, undergirded by cosmopolitan memory discourses and practices, precludes the construction of political solidarities and radical change.

4. Memory, whereto? From politics of memory to memory of politics

Recent scholarship engaging with memory has taken heed of the fact that the current political predicament seems to be linked with an impasse of the mnemonic models in circulation.⁶ For example, Anna Cento Bull and Hans Lauge Hansen (2016) have argued in favor of an agonistic mode of remembering. The two scholars drew on Chantal Mouffe's theoretical elaborations regarding the need for an agonistic type of politics, whereas Mouffe (2005) in her turn had reinterpreted Carl Schmitt's conceptualization of the political (2007). Along similar lines, Berthold Molden (2016) developed a mnemonic hegemony theory, conceptually related with the theory of agonistic memory.

⁶ The discussion on Mouffe and agonistic memory largely draws on Cercel, 2018: 5-7.

Mouffe, whose work both aforementioned elaborations rely on, even if to different extents, severely criticizes both the 'post-political vision' which informs neoliberal rationalism as well as the belief in a cosmopolitan, partisan-free, consensual order. She pleads for a recognition of the relevance of collective identifications and of the related antagonisms in the configuration of the 'political', understood as 'the very way society is instituted', together with the passions and emotions such identifications entail (Mouffe, 2005: 9). For her, the construction of agonistic spaces is meant to provide legitimate political channels for dissenting and counter-hegemonic voices and for the enunciation of opposing passions and affect. Without such acknowledgments and provisions, Mouffe argues, various nationalist, religious or ethnic forms of identification will eventually hijack and dominate the political. Against this background, Mouffe also emphasizes the need to recognize the hegemonic nature of social orders, and the fact that 'every hegemonic order is susceptible of being challenged by counter-hegemonic practices' (Mouffe, 2005: 18). Hence, her agonistic democracy is constructed as a response to 'the emergence of a new hegemonic project, that of liberal-conservative discourse, which seeks to articulate the neo-liberal defence of the free market economy with the profoundly anti-egalitarian cultural and social traditions of conservatism', and which would also 'legitimize inequalities and restore the hierarchical relations which the struggles of previous decades had destroyed' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: 175–176).

The mnemonic ethos of neoliberal hegemony implies the eternalization of the present order. The engagement with the past functions either as a prop of the latter or simply lacks the critical present- and future-oriented potential to contribute to change. The acts of remembrance and recollection oriented towards a political action in the present with the goal of producing radical change are largely absent, as are political projects with such goals. The left populist movements that have emerged in recent years, such as Podemos in Spain, Syriza in Greece, or France Unbowed, have in effect oscillated between trying to resuscitate the antifascist mnemonic tradition and reinforcing some of the hegemonic tenets of mnemonic cosmopolitanism, yet largely failing to provide a proper counterweight to the appeal of antagonistic memory discourses promoted by contemporary right-wing populist movements.

One way of putting together the aforementioned theoretical elaborations and the recognition that neoliberalism and the memory boom are linked by multiple threads is to argue for a concerted move from the politics of memory to the memory of politics (Lebow, 2006; Edkins, 2003). The politics of memory is both past-oriented and presentist, failing to promote the construction of a future in common. In exchange, the memory of politics could bring back to the foreground former futures, previous ideas of equality and radical democracy and the collective struggles aiming to put them into practice, could remind us that fighting for the future could give legitimacy to the present much more than fighting solely for the past. Such a conceptualization and an understanding of memory is visible in some contemporary mnemonic projects, which for example try to acknowledge for example the value of past left-wing struggles in Latin America in the 1970s, or

which denounce and criminalize the complicity of multinational corporations in wars, dictatorships, or in industrial disasters. Such projects are fundamentally counter-hegemonic at this stage. A counter-hegemonic memory of politics could play a role in the enabling of the construction of a radically democratic future, as it is meant to show us that the current social and political status quo is not inescapable. Contemporary politics of memory, more often than not, makes it inescapable.

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