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Contested Memories and the Role of Emotions in Central, Eastern, and South-Eastern Europe

Sahra Rausch

International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Giessen)

Contact: Sahra.Rausch@gcsc.uni-giessen.de

Abstract:

The multi- and interdisciplinary volume *Disputed Memory. Emotions and Memory Politics in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe* provides a variety of case studies to display the complexity and specificity of disputed pasts in this region. By trying to overcome a methodological nationalism and a “representation bias” in the study of memory, the volume aims at understanding the mediation and transmission of memories in their social contexts. Furthermore, the authors integrate the role of emotions in processes of memory making and politics – at first sight a new and interesting approach. While the volume successfully displays transnational memory movements in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, the analysis of emotions in the assembled texts could have benefitted from integrating methods and theories from the already rich sociological and historical literature on the study of emotions.

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International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Giessen)

Sindbæk Andersen, Tea and Barbara Törnquist-Plewa (eds.): *Disputed memory. Emotions and memory politics in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2016. 383 pages, 140 USD. ISBN: 978-3-11-045353-9.

Abstract:

The multi- and interdisciplinary volume *Disputed Memory. Emotions and Memory Politics in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe* provides a variety of case studies to display the complexity and specificity of disputed pasts in this region. By trying to overcome a methodological nationalism and a “representation bias” in the study of memory, the volume aims at understanding the mediation and transmission of memories in their social contexts. Furthermore, the authors integrate the role of emotions in processes of memory making and politics – at first sight a new and interesting approach. While the volume successfully displays transnational memory movements in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, the analysis of emotions in the assembled texts could have benefitted from integrating methods and theories from the already rich sociological and historical literature on the study of emotions.

Memory studies is a steadily growing field, integrating more and more disciplines and thus a variety of methodological and theoretical approaches. Eastern and South-Eastern Europe provide a great research environment because of their “double experience” (p. 1-2) of having lived both under communism and National Socialism. The 2016 edited volume *Disputed Memory. Emotions and Memory Politics in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe* thus aims to display a “broader panorama of the region’s memory disputes” (p. 3). These “painful pasts” (p. 11) cannot be described in a simple perpetrator-victim-dichotomy but must be envisioned through diverse analytical strands. In the introduction to the volume, the editors Tea Sindbæk Andersen and Barbara Törnquist-Plewa not only emphasize the importance of a transnational analysis of memory, but also the key role mediation plays in its broadest sense to transmit, negotiate, and change memories (p. 9). Furthermore, the volume promises a truly new approach through a systematized integration of emotions into memory studies.

The authors state that the study of emotions in memory has been neglected for a long time despite their importance in the mediation of memory. Emotions can turn memory into personal experiences and thus into “deeply felt memory” (p. 10). The examination of emotions is consequently the crosssectional category in the case studies provided in this volume.

The book assembles 14 articles and is divided into four parts. The first part focusses on the impacts of disputed memories in international politics and their regional effects, which introduces analytical tools from international relations to the study of memory. The second part targets various sites of memory transmission, focusing particularly on museums and memorials. The third section treats local and marginal memory, primarily concentrating on memories of WW II. The last section centers on the transmission of memory via new media and social media, depicted as memorial media spaces.

Political scientists Tuomas Forsberg and Davide Denti add interesting insights from the field of transitional justice to the study of memory. In “Sorry for Srebrenica?”, Denti develops a rationalchoice approach to analyze the expression of apologies within a cost-benefit model. He considers apologies as a means of restorative justice. The goal to become a member of the EU has increased the benefits of official apologies for the genocide in Srebrenica. To keep the costs low, only partial and incomplete apologies are offered, “because it allows the countries to reap the benefits of reconciliation while permitting politicians to keep at bay the risk of domestic backlash” (in form of an identity-based memory mobilization among the different populations) (p. 77). Still, his analysis could have profited from an in-depth analysis of the notion of “authenticity” in apologies (p. 68). How is authenticity expressed and how is it related to emotions of regret and atonement, with the aim of gaining acceptance of the apology?

In her text on “The Spatial Choreography of Emotion in Berlin’s Memorials”, Sophie Oliver provides a analysis of the role emotions play in visitor’s experiences of the Jewish Museum and the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe. Oliver refers to the popularized field of new museology, through which museums engage their visitors in the process of meaning-making. Emotions are intentionally evoked by creating a choreography of aesthetic and spatial experiences and are thus considered to be “catalysts[s] for moral transformation” (p. 101). They do so by creating empathy for the suffering of the victims that eventually shall prevent visitors from historical amnesia. By interrogating visitors at these two sites, Oliver concludes that many of them experience “emotional unsettlement” (p. 112). In further addressing the question whether this experience supports the development of empathy, Oliver states that a subsequent social interaction (also in a form of “bearing witness”) is a necessary means of making sense of the “unsettlement”, of turning it into a political engagement or challenging the provided (emotional) narrative of the site.

What the assembled texts of *Disputed Memory* have in common is the identification of the EU as an important player in shaping memory politics in East and South-Eastern Europe (see for examples the contributions of Inge Melchior, Andrej Kotlcharchuk, and Davide Denti). This edited volume certainly gives a fascinating overview of the plethora of directions memory studies can take. The book provides enriching perspectives on the “troubled pasts” in the East and South-East of Europe while also displaying the contention faced when subjected to Western European narratives in the process of European integration. To turn towards the analysis of emotion is a truly innovative undertaking; still, it needs some further systematization. The texts could have derived benefit from reviewing the already rich body of literature produced in the field of the history of emotions, such as Benno Gammerl’s work on “emotional styles” (“Emotional Styles – Concepts and Challenges”. In *Rethinking History* 16 (2), 2012, pp. 161-175) or William Reddy’s on “emotional regimes” (*The navigation of feeling. Framework for a history of emotions*. Cambridge 2001) to explain how emotional practices might structure memory politics and thus serve to legitimize memory claims. Furthermore, the sociologists Deborah Gould (*Moving politics. Emotion and act up’s fight against AIDS*. Chicago 2009) and Helena Flam (Helena Flam and Debra King (eds.): *Emotions and social movements*. London, New York 2005) convincingly conceptualized the analysis of emotions in social movements to emphasize their mobilizing political potential. The term ‘emotion’ was so prominently displayed in the title of the volume that I would have hoped for more insightful methodological approaches to understanding the power of emotions in memory transmission. Nevertheless, this volume takes an important first step in the field of memory studies towards the analysis of emotions.

German Abstract:

Umkämpfte Erinnerungen und die Bedeutung von Emotionen in Zentral-, Ost- und Südosteuropa

Der Sammelband *Disputed Memory. Emotions and Memory Politics in Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe* bietet eine Vielzahl von Fallstudien, die die Komplexität und Besonderheit der weithin umstrittenen Vergangenheiten in den Regionen aufzeigen. Der Band versucht sowohl den ‚methodischen Nationalismus‘ als auch die Konzentration auf eine ausschließliche Repräsentation von Erinnerungen zu überwinden und dabei stärker die sozialen Kontexte in der Vermittlung und Übertragungen von Erinnerungen in den Blick zu nehmen. Ein zunächst neuer und interessanter Zugang ist der Fokus auf die Bedeutung von Emotionen in der Hervorbringung und Vermittlung von Erinnerungen sowie damit zusammenhängender Politiken. Während der Sammelband die ausgewählten transnationalen Erinnerungsbewegungen in Ost- und Südosteuropa überzeugend darstellt, verdeutlicht er bei der Erforschung von Emotionen zwar deren Bedeutung, zeigt aber kaum neue methodologische und theoretische Zugänge auf. Es wäre für den Band sicher bereichernd gewesen, soziologische wie auch geschichtswissenschaftliche Entwicklungen in der Emotionsforschung einzubeziehen und entsprechend deren Konzepte in der Erinnerungsforschung nutzbar zu machen.

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International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Giessen)

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