

## Surveying the Field of Collective Memory Studies

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**Abstract:**

Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook is a survey of the complex and disparate field of cultural/collective memory studies. The volume, edited by Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning, provides an account of research in this broad field that is at once systematic, historical, genealogical and disciplinary. Bringing together contributions from history, philosophy, literary studies, sociology, political science, media studies and psychology, the volume examines relationships between culture and memory, their individual and social aspects, mnemonic products, and processes of remembrance. The negotiation of interdisciplinary links makes this handbook a first step towards the development of a meta-concept of memory in sociocultural contexts.

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Not many concepts have sparked intense interdisciplinary research the way ‘collective memory’, or – if you will – ‘cultural memory’ has done and continues to do. Beginning with Maurice Halbwachs’s inquiry into *mémoire collective*, numerous approaches have been developed across the social and behavioural sciences and humanities with a similar aim: systematising the contents, functions, qualities, forms and locations of a social group’s supra-individual memory. While some scholars criticize the field of collective memory studies for reaching rampant proportions and the resultant inflationary usage of the term ‘memory’ within sociocultural contexts, Astrid ErlI and Ansgar Nünning’s anthology *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* acknowledges the term’s persistent ambiguity. Their remarkable survey of 36 contributions from 42 international authors offers a systematic overview of research which embraces the rich variety of approaches to, and concepts of, cultural memory.

The handbook comprises six chapters and begins with Astrid ErlI’s introduction, which serves as an umbrella for the entire volume, offering as it does a heuristic framework for the material, social and mental dimensions of the relationships between culture and memory. By classifying individual and collective levels as well as the different modes of cultural memory, ErlI manages to sketch the disparate strands of cultural memory studies as complementary parts of a complex whole.

The first chapter centres on the plurality of sites of memories and their integrative function in constructing collective identities. In brief: Pim den Boer suggests the establishment of European *loci memoriae* for purposes of transnational identity politics, Udo J. Hebel points to the changes accompanying an increasing “democratization, [...] pluralization and commercialization” of American sites of memory (p. 53), and Jay Winter highlights the social function of memorials within the process of public commemoration.

The second chapter deals with memory and cultural history. Drawing on the idea of collective memory, Alon Confino places social mentality in a sociohistorical context, and Dietrich Harth follows the historical development of the Heidelberg school’s concept of collective memory. After Aleida Assmann outlines the functions of and differences between canons and archives in the formation of cultural memory, Jan Assmann describes his own concept of cultural and communicative memory.

Chapter three gives insight into social, political and philosophical memory studies. Jeffrey K. Olick's historical account of social memory studies leads to the identification of collective memory as a dynamic entanglement of "diverse processes, products, and practices through which societies confront and represent aspects of their past" (p. 159). The political implications of memory are addressed by both Andreas Langenohl and Erik Meyer. A systems-theoretical perspective on social forgetting by Elena Esposito finds a society's memory in its mass media – a point she shares with Siegfried J. Schmidt's social-constructivist framework.

Entirely different but extremely fruitful, the fourth chapter on psychological memory studies can be considered an outstanding feature of the handbook. Jürgen Straub, for instance, identifies cultural memory as the sociocultural media and scripts with which individuals order and systematise their recollections of the past. David Manier and William Hirst provide a detailed cognitive taxonomy of collective memory, although one could contest their claim that distant, semantic collective memories lack an emotional impact on society (p. 258). Harald Welzer refines Jan Assmann's communicative memory concept by specifying its "levels of mediation between the social and the autobiographical side" (p. 286).

The role of literature in the construction of cultural memory is discussed in chapter five, notably by Ann Rigney, who calls attention to the dynamic mnemonic processes involving literary products.

The last chapter takes a closer look at media and cultural memory. Barbie Zelitzer unfolds the prominent forms and functions of journalism "as one of contemporary society's main institutions of recording and remembering" (p. 386). Finally, Martin Zierold outlines an integrative media perspective, enabling an empirical analysis of the media's ramifications for social memory and rendering insufficient those approaches which only address single aspects of the media.

The handbook demonstrates that there is no such thing as a single, master concept of collective memory. While certain streams are more prominent and foundational than others, the various disciplinary approaches and foci have led to a widely flourishing field. Its participants now have, thanks to Erll and Nünning, a fitting forum; the true accomplishment of the handbook lies in the editorial disentanglement of the complex field according to academic culture, discipline and historical development. Indeed, this work can attest to a unifying tendency within the field towards dynamism, fragmentation and processes of memory (as opposed to stability, homogeneity and mere products). Regarding the desired meta-concept, one can only hope that more scholars will pick up Erll's framework; it would actually enable an interdisciplinary research program and the integrative coexistence of multiple individual and supra-individual memory concepts.

With the increasing emphasis on 'cultural' rather than 'collective' memory, however, a second issue arises, whose origin is not given a prominent place: different concepts of 'culture' – such as Erll's anthropological-semiotic concept, Schmidt's culture as a program and Esposito's systems-theoretical culture concept – raise questions of compatibility which go beyond the scope of memory.

All said, this handbook is highly recommended, providing as it does an illustrative overview of both the opportunities and difficulties inherent in such a multidisciplinary, internationally populated field. (For those seeking introductory reading to this eclectic survey, Erll's previously published book on collective memory and cultures of remembrance can also be recommended: Astrid Erll: *Kollektives Gedächtnis und Erinnerungskulturen. Eine Einführung*. Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2005.) The handbook itself is a valuable resource for researchers and provides excellent impetus for a robust concept of collective memory: one that addresses the complexities of modern social collectivities which can only be properly examined from an interdisciplinary perspective.