

Book Review

– *The Struggle for Memory in Latin America. Recent History and Political Violence*, edited by Eugenia Allier-Montañón and Emilio Crenzel. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

The editors of this much anticipated volume establish five crucial axes to underscore the importance of comparing the memory struggles in Latin America: the consolidation of a culture of Human Rights; the importance of power relations during transitions; the prevalence of truth commissions as preferred mode of public truth production; the continental assimilation of discourses and practices; and the transgenerational effects of violence. The latter includes NGOs and victims' strategies to keep the past alive and the concomitant disputes on how to deal with it in present-day politics, public spaces, education and social relations.

This panoramic view of the various forms of political violence and the resulting mnemonic disputes do not preclude the national particularities and internal variations. Such sensibility to diversity is another way of accomplishing this book's main purpose, namely to historicize the political memories of Latin America. Indeed, to aim for this is to acknowledge that memory interventions are neither static nor monolithic; they are never fully monopolized nor are they ever universal.

A common contextual premise is adverted to advance this exercise in compared national cases. Despite the region's divergences in the expressions of political violence, all cases are framed, deployed and legitimized through the dominant signifier of the second half of the twentieth century: the Cold War. Consequently, another shared element emerges among the instances of violence compiled, that is, the justification of military interventions throughout the continent as indispensable reactions to the imminent communist threat. The Human Rights discourse was thus confronted with official narratives of 'necessary excesses' under the doctrine and pretext of national security. This in turn yielded particular forms of political and mnemonic resistance susceptible of comparative analysis. It is revealed, for example, how in the aftermath of violence, testimony and the victim category gained more and more political currency, gradually losing its stigma and becoming, as the editors suggest, a privileged place of enunciation in the public sphere.

But memory is fluid and so too are its policies, as well as the public interest in such difficult pasts. Nothing – the editors highlight – is predetermined or unchangeable, which is why several authors in this compilation stress the existence of expansive and shrinking moments in memory practices all across Latin America, albeit at differentiated rates. Numerous authors also underline that the violent past is by no means unanimously rejected, but often even appraised by certain sectors. This at times includes segments of the new generations that did not experience violence and to whom a sense of a glorious past is transmitted, there where powerful players of yore still retain some command on meaning production. After all, memories of violence can be – and certainly are – instrumentalized by all social agents, often for the pursuit of justice, sometimes – as the Salvadorian case illustrates – for less virtuous purposes, like electoral gains.

This book is of immense value for several reasons, not the least of which the gathering itself of known and lesser known memory struggles in Latin America; all thoroughly scrutinized through a historical lens. In doing so, a prolific vocabulary and conceptual arsenal emerges constituting fertile instruments for future endeavours. Notions such as *eclipsing*, *explosion and statization* of memory presented by Crenzel; *Allier-Montaña's* memory of praise, memory of *accusation* and *memory detonators*, or Cynthia Milton's development of Stern's *memory knots* and *camps*; but also projects like the *Marks of Memory* in Brazil (Quadrat), the *Arasá whipping top* in Paraguay (Roniger, Senkman & Sánchez) or *the Eye that Cries* in Peru (Milton). All are extraordinary resources to further research and memory policies elsewhere in the world.

There are minor shortcomings. First, despite the rather suggestive lines of comparison announced in the introduction, these were never developed in a binding conclusion. Second, given the analytical richness of the case studies, it is a pity this was not availed to connect and advance theoretical issues pertaining to larger (global) debates on memory and conflict. Third, the scale of comparison, in this case Latin America, should not be taken as a given, for such comparative framework is not automatically constituted: is comparing the mnemonic reactions to the Tlatelolco massacre in Mexico with the politics of memory on half a century of armed confrontations in Colombia more straightforward than to compare the latter with say, the memory struggles in the Philippines? The point is not to invalidate the exercise, but to call for an explicit address of the selected criteria and cases for comparison and so to de-naturalize socio-political units.

These limitations can nevertheless be easily transformed into the heart of a follow-up volume. Incidentally it is a much welcomed project, for the suggested discussion is of unquestionable relevance now that political action is claimed to be more than ever detached from memory, just as pedagogy is said to be rendered ineffective on the eve of this alleged era of post-truth.

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