

H-Net Reviews

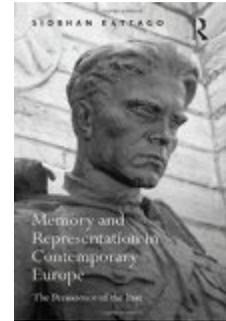
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Siobhan Kattago. *Memory and Representation in Contemporary Europe: The Persistence of the Past*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2012. 141 S. \$99.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4094-3637-9.

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Published on H-Memory (June, 2013)

Commissioned by Catherine Baker



Siobhan Kattago's most recent book discusses the issue of the presence of the past in contemporary Europe and the role it plays in different societies. Having published numerous works on the subjects of memory, history, and historical responsibility, focusing primarily on Estonia and Germany, she takes these two countries as representations of the two versions of the European historical narrative.[1] Kattago's previous work (*Ambiguous Memory: The Nazi Past and German National Identity*, 2003) has been praised for being an "informed and useful overview," but criticized for terminological chaos and not providing enough original analysis.[2] This book is not only a theoretical study of the persistence of the past but also an engaged text on the role and responsibility of public history and the tensions between history and politics.

In the introduction, Kattago discusses the argument that modernity has changed the way in which people are engaged with the past and has changed how the past is remembered by individuals. Basing her opinion on the theoretical works of Pierre Nora, Reinhart Koselleck, and Andreas Huyssen (among others), Kattago warns against clinging to the past or enshrining it as a talisman against the ever-changing present: "Because the pace of everyday life is so fast, we try to grasp whatever remains and fragments we can. The past validates our fragile foothold on the present" (p. 10). Chapter 1 goes beyond theory and deals with the dilemma of facing the past by either remembering or forgetting. The writings of Timothy Garton Ash, Hermann Lübbe, and Susan Sontag give Kattago a platform to discuss two approaches employed in modern democracy and their possible pitfalls. This leads the author to the difficult problem that contemporary European peoples have different memories/narratives and,

therefore, different identities.

These memories and narratives are based on the memory of World War II, but they are remembered in a very dissimilar way. While in the West, World War II is remembered through the Holocaust, Eastern Europeans want also to honor the suffering experienced at the hands of the Soviets. For Russians, however, there is yet another set of memories and narratives: this war, for them, started only in 1941 and was called the Great Patriotic War. Not only does this narrative emphasize the victory and heroism of the Red Army, but it also downplays the USSR's previous alliance with Hitler and the occupation of the Baltic States.

Chapters 3-5 zoom in to three case studies based in Germany. Memory, remembering, and forgetting are examined in detail through examples of how photography shapes beliefs about the past; how novels and academic books can influence people's understanding of bygone times; and, finally, how the life of an individual (such as the literature professor and former SS officer Hans Ernst Schneider, whose life is examined in one chapter) can illustrate the history of a whole society.

Just as these three chapters deal with coming to terms with the past in Germany, the following chapters focus on Estonia and its own struggle with the ghosts of history. Examination of the debates around Tallinn's Soviet war memorial gives Kattago an opportunity to discuss the functions of monuments in contemporary Europe and how they are used (together with other material objects) by different groups to project their identity. Chapter 6 goes back to the plurality of memories and the need to accept the diversity of historical narratives. Finally, the revolutions of 1989 are confronted with

the paradigm of revolution and how it reflects the modern way of thinking on time and history. Kattago compares the French Revolution with the fall of communist regimes in Eastern Europe to see if the events of 1989 can also be understood as “magical moments” of “radical newness and rupture” (p. 109).

Memory and Representation in Contemporary Europe comprises essays already published elsewhere, but gathering them together gives the reader a more coherent perspective on the topic. This collection of essays is an important contribution to the study of collective memory and to the theoretical analysis of the role of the past and history for today’s European societies. Kattago strongly stresses the damage caused by putting aside the true problems of history and enshrining them in museums, monuments, and commemoration only. Suppressed pasts can undermine social identity and lead to repetition, but the other extreme is equally dangerous. Reliving events that have passed can prevent us from living for the future and in fact enslave us. Indeed, history cannot be distanced from contemporary political and social issues. Kattago’s remarks linking these historical issues with the philosophical thinking of Friedrich Nietzsche, Zygmunt Bauman, Hannah Arendt, and Isaiah Berlin are especially valuable and fascinating, and the book displays a high quality of analysis, discussing an impressive variety of thinkers.

One would thus have expected Kattago to discuss the key idea of collective memory. Although the author rightly points out all the weaknesses of such a framework, she stops short of confronting the issue and thereby proposing any solution. Instead Kattago supports herself with Pierre Nora’s concept of “realms of memory.” Using it as a base for further inquiries is problematic, because it is quite impossible to define the key terms, and moreover it does not explain how “collective memory” works. Since memory is a product of personal experiences and is therefore unique for each individual, it is hard to explain how a wide range of people (spread over time and space) could have the same memory, and it is not clear who would actually be a “bearer” of such memory. The reader is left wondering why the author goes on using the term “collective memory” despite the criticisms of it made earlier in the book. This observation has previously been made about Kattago’s earlier work by Jeremy Brooke Straughn, who has pointed out that the research would benefit greatly from engaging more with the current debates on collective memory and identity rather than just relying on Nora’s concept.[3] Similarly to most books on the topic, Kattago’s book does not at-

tempt to explain how individual memory, as understood in psychology, is related to collective memory. Duncan Bell’s proposal to replace the term “collective memory” with that of “mythscape” did not gain massive support, but it at least tried to cope with the issue in a way that the work under review does not.[4] It would be unfair to expect Kattago to solve such a difficult problem, though it would have been good for the question to at least be faced, especially since this is a compilation of previously published essays.

Another concept that could be developed further is that of the “democratization of history,” to which *Memory and Representation in Contemporary Europe* pays a lot of attention (p. 30). However, the author neither explains nor proves the existence of the actual link between democratization, the establishment of an international justice system, and memory, nor does she explain the influence that democratization and international justice have on memory. It is a very interesting point and seems to be the case, yet the included essays present little, if any, support for it. Moreover, taking Estonia as the only representative of Eastern Europe seems, at times, problematic, if not one-sided. When writing about the memories of the peaceful revolution that ended the communist regimes, Kattago claims that those reminiscences came to be put aside “beneath the more pressing problems of social fragmentation, minority issues and political apathy” (p. 120). Yet, both in Hungary and in Poland, right-wing politicians (Viktor Orban and Jarosław Kaczyński, respectively) made a rejection of the transition model the crucial point in their political thoughts. This is not to say that Estonia cannot serve as a good case study; on the contrary, it is more than welcome for a different country to be taken from the usual set when writing about Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, generalization should be made with more caution.

These remarks and criticism do not contradict my conviction that Kattago’s book is a good study on the importance of history and the past in contemporary Europe. The condensed format allows a good overview of the subject and thanks to that Kattago’s book can be a useful starting point to explore the topic. Clear language coupled with a smooth style of writing add to the philosophy of history that Siobhan Kattago offers to both historians as well as others interested in the topic. The eclectic nature of the collection of papers already published in recent years means that some parts stand out from the rest. If chapter 3 has a bit too much review and too little analysis, the others make up for that. Kattago’s book is a solid and interesting piece of academic writing,

but is more about putting together existing pieces than adding a new one.

Notes

[1]. Siobhan Kattago, *Ambiguous Memory: The Nazi Past and German National Identity* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001); Siobhan Kattago, "Commemorating Liberation and Occupation: War Memorials Along the Road to Narva," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 39, no. 4 (2008): 431-449; Siobhan Kattago, "Agreeing to Disagree on the Legacies of Recent History: Memory, Pluralism and Europe after 1989," *European Journal of Social Theory* 12, no. 3 (2009): 375-395.

[2]. Rainer Schulze, "Review Article: Memory in German History: Fragmented Noises or Meaningful Voices of the Past?," in "Collective Memory," special issue, *Journal of Contemporary History* 39, no. 4 (2004): 637-648; 639; Björn Krondorfer, "Review," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 17, no. 1 (2003): 170-177; 176.

[3]. Jeremy Brooke Straughn, "Book Reviews—*Ambiguous Memory: The Nazi Past and German National Identity*," *American Journal of Sociology* 107, no. 3 (2002): 1631-1632; 1631.

[4]. Duncan Bell, "Mythscape: Memory, Mythology, and National Identity," *British Journal of Sociology* 54 (2003): 63-81; 76.

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Citation: Piotr Kisiel. Review of Kattago, Siobhan, *Memory and Representation in Contemporary Europe: The Persistence of the Past*. H-Memory, H-Net Reviews. June, 2013.

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