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## GLOBAL CRISIS IN MEMORY

# Whither Politics, Whither Memory?

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The memory boom, a multifaceted process fundamentally consisting in the increasing presence of the past in the present, occurred in practice simultaneously with the ostensible (transnational) stabilization of a neoliberal consensus, itself a complex process informed by deregulation, privatization, the abandonment of the politics of redistribution and the erosion of social and economic rights. By drawing attention to the concurrent characters of the history of the memory boom and the history of neoliberalism, this contribution aims to push towards an engagement with the ways in which economic transformation and memory are intertwined. This should enable us to better understand the critical political and mnemonic juncture that we find ourselves at. The question arising is whether memory has in any way the necessary critical potentialities to underlie the pursuit and realization of a radically democratic present and future.

### Author's note

I make a similar argument in an article titled "Towards a Disentanglement of the Links between the Memory Boom and the Neoliberal Turn", forthcoming in the online journal "Intersections". The two texts borrow from each other.

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### Introduction

Historicizing the so-called memory boom would perforce imply accounting for the fact that 'since about 1980 [...] both the public and academia have become saturated with references to social or collective memory' (Olick and Robbins 107). Yet the end of the 1970s and the 1980s are also the timeframe associated with an 'emphatic turn towards neoliberalism in political-economic practices and thinking' (Harvey 2). Furthermore, the fall of state socialist regimes in Eastern Europe, the dissolution of the apartheid regime in South Africa and the end of right-wing military dictatorships in Latin America – all phenomena taking place throughout the 1980s and up until the 1990s – were associated both with a growing interest in memory issues and with the continuing spread of neoliberal ideas and practices in the political and economic realms. In Eastern Europe for instance, '[t]he range of memory practices adopted after 1989, especially by elites, was a continental novelty' (Mark xiii). At the same time, the post-1989 period – both European and global – has been marked by the continuing implementation of neoliberalism, a process that is in effect ongoing (Ther; see also Appel & Orenstein).

It is thus surprising that despite what appears to be a 'strict' contemporaneity of 'the formation of neoliberalism and the rise of memory' (Koposov 53), as well as of their subsequent evolutions, and despite the indication that there are some inextricable links between 'memory politics and socio-economic change' (Stone ix), the interweaving of neoliberalism and memory has in effect only recently started to be spelt out and addressed – even if rather fleetingly – by scholars. A critical confrontation with these connections but also with the links and entanglements with other related – albeit at first glance perhaps contradictory – phenomena and processes situated in the same time span, such as the ascent of neoconservatism and the global rise of human rights discourses, is still pending. Nonetheless, some steps have indeed been made in this direction (Koposov 52–7; see also Brown, "American Nightmare"; David; Huyssen, *Present Pasts*; Moyn, *The Last Utopia*; Torpey).

Of course, a first question arising is: What are we talking about when we refer to the pair that is memory and neoliberalism? Critical (as well as less critical) observations regarding the 'surfeit of memory', the 'hypertrophy of memory' and 'the memory boom' are by no means a novelty, as they have been heard with some degree of regularity since the late 1980s (Maier; Huyssen, *Present Pasts*; Berliner; Winter; Rosenfeld). Yet the apparent ubiquity of memory does not imply that the concept has a clear-cut and well-delineated meaning.

A preoccupation with the past is by no means new. Nor is framing it as 'memory'. Scholarly use of the term 'collective memory' is traceable to the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who coined it as early as 1925. Cultural products, institutions such as museums and archives, monuments, commemorations, celebrations and anniversaries definitely did not first appear at the end of the 1970s. Historically, processes of nation-building made use of such institutions and resorted to what we would call mnemonic practices in order to construct legitimacy. Yet even if the processes and phenomena marking the rise of memory over the past three or four decades are not all really new (though some indeed are!), their intensity has been making them stand out. An enumeration would have to include: the ostensive societal and political interest (fixation? fetish?) for the past, the (public) atoning for past misdeeds, (official) processes of reckoning with the past, the increasing relevance of the past and of past-related statements and gestures in national and international politics, the apparent development of a culture of trauma and a politics of regret, the idea of a duty to remember, the surge in anniversaries and commemorations, growing memory activism, conflicts over the meaning of the past and the legal treatment of the past in the form of memory laws. In particular, the memory of the Holocaust, which is also connected with a broader focalization on victimhood, trauma and human rights violations, has been playing a very important role within this new mnemonic constellation, functioning one way or another as a point of reference in various national and transnational processes of dealing with the past (as well as with the present). Thus, memory seems to be all permeating and on everybody's lips. Politicians, intellectuals and NGO activists all refer to memory, tend to plead for more memory and to rail against forgetting. Surely, voices that deplore the absence of memory or notice instances of social amnesia with respect to particular events in the past might also be heard. In effect, though, even discourses about amnesia, which argue that specific – allegedly forgotten – events should be remembered in particular ways, are also indicative of the relevance of memory as contemporary symbolic currency.

Neoliberalism, on the other hand, is a different animal, be it only for the fact that neither politicians, nor intellectuals nor NGO activists, and not even businesspeople or investment bankers, invoke it as such. Neoliberalism might well rule the world, as critical (mainly left-wing) voices claim, but this seems to be a 'neoliberalism without neoliberals', since nobody claims to be a neoliberal (Biebricher, *The Political Theory of Neoliberalism* 2). Conceptually, neoliberalism is also rather elusive, a 'loose and shifting signifier', defying attempts to define it (Brown, *Undoing the Demos* 20; Biebricher, *The Political Theory of Neoliberalism* 1–20). Tracing its intellectual genealogy would mean going back to the end of the interwar period,

and to the Walter Lippmann Colloquium which took place in 1938 – a gathering of thinkers and economists who sought appropriate answers to what was obviously a crisis of liberalism (Reinhoudt & Audier). Yet the term ‘increased sharply in usage’ in the 1980s, and even more so in the 1990s, and is usually meant to refer to a set of policies which were triggered first by the electoral successes of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan at the end of the 1970s and in the early 1980s, and then by the so-called Washington Consensus in the 1990s (Reinhoudt & Audier 4). The discarding of the welfare state, the belief in markets and privatization, as well as the increasing supremacy of financial capitalism to the point of it becoming overarching and all-encompassing are among the most important processes that inform neoliberalism, and are also connected with a rise in social and economic inequalities at both the national and the global levels. Yet perhaps more importantly, neoliberalism also stands for a new type of reason and a new kind of production of subjects, which makes it much more than a mere set of economic policies. Subjectivities and social relations are remade according to entrepreneurial patterns. Contemporary neoliberal rationality ‘configures human beings exhaustively as market actors, always, only, and everywhere as *homo oeconomicus*’ (Brown, *Undoing the Demos* 31).

Both memory and neoliberalism function practically as vessels whose content can differ from one case to another. When it comes to memory, the lowest common denominator is the multifaceted conjuring of the past into the present; when it comes to neoliberalism, the unifying glue is the full-fledged marketization of life.

### Concurrent histories

One almost self-evident way of appreciating the linkage between the phenomena of memory and neoliberalism is by taking seriously their contemporaneity. This is bound to imply an emphasis on their contemporaneous, synchronic, hence ‘concurrent’ character. By acknowledging that they have been taking place roughly in the same timeframe, they can be described as ‘concurrent’, if we consider the definition of the word as ‘operating or occurring at the same time’. However, can and should they be thought of as concurrent, as in ‘running parallel’, or rather as in ‘convergent’ (‘meeting or intersecting in a point’)? If the latter, then the question is where and how do they converge? Or perhaps they can be envisaged as concurrent as in ‘acting in conjunction’. If they act in conjunction, then towards what do they do so?<sup>1</sup> Or, to take this one step further, are they actually concurrent in the sense of ‘in competition’, in line with the meaning of the cognate term in some Romance languages, such as French (*concurrent*), Italian (*concorrente*) or Romanian (*concurrent*)?<sup>2</sup> Understanding their concurrent character as mere parallelism would suggest that there is in effect no proper entanglement between the two. However, as already indicated in the previous section, the links seem to be there, even if they have not been sufficiently addressed in scholarship.

Following the social and political unrest at the end of the 1960s and the global economic downturn in the 1970s, the late 1970s and the early 1980s saw the ‘near-contemporaneous election of three neoconservative governments (Margaret Thatcher’s in 1979, Ronald Reagan’s in 1980, and Helmut Kohl’s in 1982)’, which amounted to a real ‘turning point in postwar politics’ (Koposov 53). This was the period in which both in Europe and at the global level the tone of politics and of the economy started to be set by neoliberalism, mainly under the influence of the reforms undertaken by the governments of Thatcher in the United Kingdom and Reagan in the United States. From being imposed by force at the periphery of global capitalism – Pinochet’s Chile stands as the best-known example in this respect – neoliberalism

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/concurrent> Accessed 3 May 2020.

<sup>2</sup> This would also be closer to the fourth definition of the term according to Merriam-Webster’s dictionary namely ‘exercised over the same matter or area by two different authorities’. See <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/concurrent> Accessed 3 May 2020.

was moving towards the centre, a process that has relentlessly continued ever since (Brown, *Undoing the Demos*; Harvey).

Underlying neoliberal reform was a concerted attack against economic Keynesianism, one of the cornerstones of the post-war order. Neoliberal developments were certainly not uniform and some states seemed to be more resilient to change than others: François Mitterrand's first two years in power in France, before his 1983 U-turn to austerity, come to mind. Yet all across Europe and the world, Keynesianism was in effect being abandoned: 'Planning, public investment, and deficit financing were opposed by [...] neoliberal ideologies of the market', '[r]edistributive systems [...] linked to social justice entered disrepute' as the welfare state was cut back and dismantled, and the services it had been responsible for were handed over to the market (Eley 396).

This neoliberal attack on Keynesianism and the welfare state was accompanied by a reconsideration of the antifascist ('social-liberal') consensus that had informed the postwar social and political settlement (Stone; Kuposov 38–44).<sup>3</sup> This meant, for example, shedding light upon societal division during the Second World War, upon collaboration with Nazism and upon participation in the Holocaust – all issues to a large extent taboo until that point (Stone). Thus, critically questioning antifascism had two different implications. On the one hand, it paved the way for the transformation of the Holocaust into the 'moral and historiographic starting point' undergirding the 'new historiography of the post-war', into a 'foundational past', the memory of the Holocaust becoming a central reference point 'in the global age' (Biess 1–2; Confino; Levy & Sznajder, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age*). From the 1970s onwards, the Holocaust moved towards the centre of preoccupations with memory and the past, largely informing the memory boom. As an oft-cited adage attributed to the French historian Pierre Nora would have it: 'whoever says memory, says Shoah' (Klein 159; Müller 14; Winter 57).<sup>4</sup> The horrors and trauma of the Holocaust supplanted the antifascist struggle within the (Western) European mnemonic imaginary. This development paradoxically took place in the footsteps of a so-called Americanization of the Holocaust (Eder; Novick). Furthermore, often drawing on the memory of the Holocaust, there emerged 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 (Fassin; Moyn, *Human Rights and the Uses of History* 103–13; Moyn, *The Last Utopia*). So, the Holocaust provided 'the foundations for a new cosmopolitan memory' (Levy & Sznajder, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age* 4).

On the other hand, the reconsideration of this antifascist 'post-war consensus' also enabled a growing historiographic revisionism which implicitly or explicitly equates Nazism and communism, and makes anti-fascism more appealing (Stone). In this context, the changes and reconfigurations related to memories of the Second World War eased 'the far right's re-emergence' (Stone 191). Parties such as the National Front in France or the Freedom Party in Austria, increasingly making themselves heard and seen ever since the 1980s, illustrate this trend.

It is also worth underlining that the neoliberal onset was undergirded by what was perceived to be a social and cultural malaise. Thus, both the financial crisis and the capital-friendly free market-oriented remedies to the crisis were not understood solely in economic terms, but also in moral ones – this perception of crisis having a strongly conservative slant (Chamayou 7–8; Kunde; Sutcliffe-Braithwaite). This is mirrored, too, in the conservative orientation of a broad range of memory discourses and practices illustrative of the first phases of the memory

<sup>3</sup> Whether there was an actual post-war *consensus* is more open to debate, as typical accounts of the history of the (European) post-war period tend to suggest. It might be more appropriate to speak of a particular 'social-liberal'/'antifascist' *hegemony*, with culturally conservative inflections, that was by no means left unchallenged.

<sup>4</sup> I cannot find the location of the putative original quotation by Nora. Even if it is not genuine, it is well conceived.

boom. Pierre Nora's *Lieux de mémoire* project comes to mind, born out of an anxiety related to the historical moment of crisis, of a '*nostalgie de coeur* wrought by the Ghost of Nation Past' (Englund 302).<sup>5</sup> In West Germany, Kohl's coming to power stood under the moral aegis of a 'new conservatism' (Olick 322–42). This is the framework within which Kohl's efforts towards a so-called normalization of German identity, politically incarnated in the Federal Republic, are to be understood (Wittlinger 23). Among other things, Kohl's attempt at normalization led, for example, to the foundation of the two national history museums, namely the German Historical Museum in Berlin (1987) and the House of History of the Federal Republic in Bonn (1994) (Heuser; Stölzl; Wicke 159).

Economic rearrangements coupled with a growing – largely conservative – preoccupation with the past also informed the social and political developments taking place in the eastern part of the European continent in the 1980s. For example, in Romania, Ceaușescu's government was looking through a highly nationalistic lens at the recent and less recent past, in order to construct for itself a desperately needed legitimacy meant to make severe austerity measures more palatable (Verdery). Romanian–Hungarian nationalistic disputes over the past were the order of the day. In Yugoslavia, economic crisis and antagonistically ethnicized memories of the Second World War were mutually reinforcing and would eventually underlie the descent into bloody conflict in the 1990s (Hayden; Rieff). Yet the preoccupation for the past could also have a different, more inclusive outlook: in the same period, in Poland the first steps in the direction of discovery of the country's Jewish past were being made (Irwin-Zarecka; Orla-Bukowska 193). This also had an economic dimension, announcing the subsequent rediscovery and reinvention of the Jewish (and German) past(s) in Central European urban centres, most often embedded within largely sanitized cosmopolitan-multi-cultural narratives (Gruber).

To sum all this up, two (entangled) developments to a large extent characterized the memory boom of the 1970s and 1980s: an increasing focalization on the Holocaust and on memories of victimhood and trauma, bearing the seeds of cosmopolitanism and transnationalism, and a nostalgic-conservative turn, largely embedded in memory discourses and practices with a distinct nationalistic flair. These two frameworks and their interaction would characterize the subsequent evolution of memorialization discourses and practices and of the related mnemonic conflicts.

The fall of state socialism in Eastern Europe further sanctioned the disintegration of the legitimating potential of antifascism, as well as the potential appeal of left-wing politics and economics. It thus appeared definitively to signal the success of liberal capitalism, which could (at least for a while) free itself from the aforementioned discourse of crisis and malaise that had been underlying it in the 1980s. The crumbling of the apartheid regime in South Africa as well as of the military dictatorships in Latin America were interpreted similarly. History had reached its end, as Francis Fukuyama famously (or perhaps infamously?) and (clearly too) optimistically suggested (Fukuyama). Yet the global triumph of liberal democracy that Fukuyama's hastily announced 'end of history' assumed meant in effect the consolidation of the neoliberal paradigm shift that had been gaining leverage since the 1980s. In this context, '[i]f history had come to an end, then all that remained, as it were, was to give oneself to the multiple subjectivities of memory' (Niven & Berger 5).

<sup>5</sup> In his 1992 essay discussing Pierre Nora's *Lieux de mémoire*, the historian Steven Englund described the social and political context of the publication of Nora's opus as follows: '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 and the related, profoundly embarrassing, political backlash that is the National Front' (Englund 301).

At the political and economic level, the Thatcherite TINA ('There Is No Alternative') dictum turned into an unchallenged axiom. The 'triad of liberalization, deregulation and privatization' (Ther 17) was raised to the status of a hegemonic paradigm, that no one is supposed to interrogate. Eastern European countries became the playground for neoliberal shock therapies presented as part and parcel of the transition to democracy (Ther). An unprecedented transfer of property from public to private ownership took place, while the range of political options at hand greatly narrowed. In a similar vein, in Western Europe social-democratic parties largely appropriated the reformist mindset of the centre right, pushing for neoliberal reforms in the economy, seasoned nonetheless with an apparently higher degree of openness with respect to migration or minority rights as compared to their traditional opponents. Tony Blair's New Labour in the United Kingdom and Gerhard Schröder's Social-Democrats in (unified) Germany are illustrative of this trend, but in various guises the phenomenon spared practically none of the traditional Western European left-wing parties. National Keynesianism was erased from the repertoire of political and economic options. What came to replace it has not been an illusory transnational Keynesianism, but a shift towards neoliberal transnational governance. In Europe, '[s]overeignty shifted decisively to the EU's unwieldy and undemocratic institutional frame' (Eley 408).

In this context, in Europe and beyond, the memory boom continued relentlessly and even gained in intensity under the auspices of (neoliberal) globalization. Calls for coming to terms with the past, transitional justice and/or reconciliation became an almost *sine qua non* of the repertoire of addressing post-dictatorial and post-conflict situations. Questions about lustration and transnational justice, and the questions about reconciliation accompanying them entered the public debate at both national and transnational levels. Processes of musealization and of public memorialization of the Holocaust and of other past traumas took place all across Europe and elsewhere. The Holocaust increasingly became de-politicized and decontextualized, even to the verge of being an abstract 'moral universal' (Alexander). The boom thus continued to be largely framed by the aforementioned emphasis on victimhood – indebted to the memorialization of the Holocaust – coexisting alongside nationalistic-conservative impulses and manifestations, with the two trends sometimes also merging, as, for instance, in the case of a broad range of Eastern European discourses about the communist past.

The Holocaust – often discursively paired with 'human rights' – was raised to the status of a foundational myth for the European Union (EU), in what seems to be an attempt to bestow moral legitimacy on what is fundamentally a project of economic and monetary integration largely indebted to post-Keynesian neoliberal principles (Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia* 15; see also Allwork; Probst). However, the centrality of state socialism for Eastern European countries, seen as a failed experiment offering nothing to recuperate, entered a tense relationship with the aforementioned centrality of the Holocaust in Western Europe, which was thus also prevalent at the level of the EU. This tension was further reinforced in Eastern European countries by the representation of a symbolic and political so-called return to Europe following the demise of state socialism.

The return to Europe meant integration within the EU, another step towards a fully integrated neoliberal Europe if one considers that 'the European Union and the Economic and Monetary Union together are easily the most advanced laboratory in regard to the development of neoliberal political forms' (Biebricher, *The Political Theory of Neoliberalism* 2). Next to the broad range of legal, technical and economic measures (selling of state assets, the embrace of a competitive market economy, adoption of the *acquis communautaire*) that had to be taken on by Eastern European countries, the embrace of the memory of the Holocaust – including acknowledgment of these societies' own participation in the genocide against



the Jews – was perceived as a quintessential part of the ‘entry ticket’ package to the EU (Judt 803; Kucia). Against this background, the competitive tension between the memory of the Holocaust and the negative memory of state socialism has often been solved by seeing in Nazism and communism two sides of the same coin, and consequently representing them as twin totalitarianisms. In such discourses and interpretations of history, the fundamental differences between the two ideologies and political projects get levelled, their consequences are equated and a de-politicized shared victimhood acts as a unifying glue. Eventually, this historical narrative – or variations of it – has been embraced at the level of transnational European institutions such as the EU and the Council of Europe (Neumeyer 2019). It is, for example, the narrative proposed by the House of European History in Brussels, the EU-funded museum that opened in 2017, which caused Wolfram Kaiser (2017) to speak about the ‘East Europeanization’ of the project and of its historical representations of the Second World War and the Cold War.<sup>6</sup>

Memory discourses about communism interpreted as the embodiment of evil, discourses constantly (re-)emphasizing the need to break with the past, have been deployed in order to delegitimize attempts to critically engage with contemporary neoliberal policies and their attendant body of thought, the latter constituting the main paradigm informing the post-1989 social, economic and political evolutions in the region (Chelcea & Druță; see also Appel & Orenstein; Mark; Ther). A nostalgia for the previous regime, such as the so-called *Ostalgie* or *Yugo-nostalgia*, is definitely present, but it is relegated either to the private sphere or has become appropriated by neoliberal entrepreneurship, and then repackaged accordingly and sold to the public.

Over recent years, in light of renewed financial crisis and austerity policies, enthusiasm about the triumph of liberal capitalism seems to have come close to its end. Right-wing nationalist movements appear to pose a serious challenge to the liberal cosmopolitan establishments that have been supporting and implementing the global neoliberal turn over the past decades. Nonetheless, the inroads made by radical right-wing parties and movements in European countries, as well as elsewhere, are in effect also potentiated by the fact that neoliberal capitalism on the one hand and social and cultural neoconservatism on the other can easily find ways to coexist (Brown, “American Nightmare”; Vázquez-Arroyo 131). There is in effect ‘a striking convergence across the world in the implementation of neoliberal austerity measures, the growing support for right-wing xenophobic sentiments, the deployment of repressive state practices and the normalization of illicit financial transactions’ (Fabry & Sandbeck 109–10; see also Biebricher, *Neoliberalismus* 185–217). The cases of Orbán in Hungary (Fabry), PiS in Poland, Salvini in Italy, Le Pen in France or the AfD in Germany, Trump in the United States, but also Putin in Russia, Modi in India or Bolsonaro in Brazil all illustrate very well how ‘populist’ right-wing politicians and parties represent in effect no substantial challenge to the current political and economic system, but are much more part of it than their discourses claim.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, most of these right-wing populist movements and political platforms also appear to challenge some of the orthodoxies of liberal cosmopolitan memories, for instance the centrality of the Holocaust. Yet the (surmountable) tension between a fixation on the Holocaust, trauma and victimhood, and a nationalistic-conservative orientation has been a key aspect of the European and global mnemonic landscape from the earlier phases of the memory boom.

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<sup>6</sup> The main alternative narrative to this totalitarian paradigm emphasizing the uniqueness and incomparability of the Holocaust easily lends itself to de-politicized abstraction.

<sup>7</sup> In this context, one should probably not lose sight of the fact that Chile under the right-wing authoritarian dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet was the first testing ground of neoliberalism.

### Points of intersection

Literature tentatively addressing the relationship between memory and neoliberalism has brought to the fore different potential interpretations (and has proposed different research avenues) to account for the concurrent character of memory and neoliberalism.<sup>8</sup> As already suggested, the contemporaneity of the two has been explained by referring to the dissolution of the post-war antifascist and Keynesian consensus (Stone; see also Koposov 38–41). Scholarship has also referred to neoliberalism's embrace of a logic assimilating 'economy to a mathematical model', capable of working properly only if social groups 'do not intervene into its operation' through calls for redistribution, with the focalization on memory also playing an important role in silencing such potential redistributive calls (Koposov 57). An analysis of the relationship between transitional justice and neoliberalism has argued that the memory work done in the name of the former aims to bring societies together on terms that do not question socio-economic power relations and structures of inequality, but look for a technically understood consensus, 'opening up space for a neoliberal imaginary where individuals are both enterprises and stakeholders coming together to solve technically defined problems' (Bowsher 104). The construction of a de-politicized consensus underlies in effect both neoliberal rationality and some of the most relevant manifestations of contemporary memory practices. Critiques of the so-called cosmopolitan mode of remembering, and of its focus on victimhood discourses and on the Holocaust, accused precisely the hegemony self-styled as consensus about the past, a putative consensus whose tenets cannot be challenged. This critical position drew on criticism of the neoliberal representation of society and of the political as functioning on the basis of an alleged quasi-unanimous agreement, a representation muffling dissent, opposition, and potential alternative projects. Yet this representation actually shrouds the existence of diverging social and economic interests and thus acts in a de-politicizing manner, with dangerous consequences (Cento Bull & Hansen; see also Mouffe, *Agonistics*; Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*). Furthermore, it has also been noted that processes of juridification play an important role in the entanglements between the two (Bowsher; see also Bugarič).

Another line of argument suggests that the representation of a perpetual present undergirds *both* memory and the neoliberal ethos. The two are thus seen as reinforcing each other (Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia*; see also Hartog; Koposov 53–7). Contemporary neoliberalism has in effect been associated with a regime of historicity called by the French cultural historian François Hartog 'presentism' – that is, 'the sense that only the present exists, a present characterized at once by the tyranny of the instant and by the treadmill of an unending now' (xv). Yet 'presentism' has also been recognized as a key aspect of the study of as well as the configuration of collective memory, since memory is fundamentally about the construction and interpretation of the past 'in and for the present' (Szpunar & Szpunar 381). In a similar vein, the intense preoccupation with memory has also been linked to the disappearance of future-oriented politics (Koposov 45–52; Taguieff; Torpey).

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), neoliberalism rejects in principle any potential future-oriented political or social struggle whose underlying aim is to question this pre-eminence (see also Taguieff). Critical literature on neoliberalism contends that embedded in the neoliberal project is the dystopic future of business markets having fully transcended politics, of individuals shaped according to markets (as opposed to markets shaped according to individuals) and of apolitical and non-democratic technocratic

<sup>8</sup> The colonization of the descriptive and analytical vocabulary related to memory with figures and tropes appertaining to the neoliberal newspeak (e.g. 'memory entrepreneurs', 'memory stakeholders', 'management of the past', 'memory markets') is also worth mentioning at this stage, as it is indicative of the threads linking the two.



governance (Robinson). If one considers the short-termism and unpredictability of contemporary financial capitalism as two of its main features, then both neoliberal presentism and the stress on past-oriented memories are easier to fathom. The latter appears to function as an endeavour to introduce something of a moral character to the former. Fundamentally, both left-liberal cosmopolitan memory discourses as well as the more right-wing staunch conservative (antagonistic) memory discourses have an important moralizing dimension, purporting to bestow legitimacy upon two – only apparently – contradictory present political and economic projects: globalized neoliberalism and authoritarian right-wing nationalism. The two projects are nonetheless not as antonymic as they appear at first glance. Presentist neoliberalism has in effect shown itself more than apt to develop an anti-democratic symbiosis with past-oriented neoconservatism, leading to de-democratization processes (Harvey; Brown, “American Nightmare”).

The Western human rights agenda, drawing largely on the memory of the Holocaust and of other traumatic events, might have been implicitly supposed to function as an ‘alternative to grand political missions’, while at the same time ‘providing a global framework for the achievement of freedom, identity, and prosperity’ (Moyn, *The Last Utopia* 9; see also Levy & Sznajder, *Human Rights and Memory*). Yet the intersection between the global ascent of neoliberalism and this human rights agenda embedded in a humanitarian paradigm led to a focus on a negative politics of suffering abroad rather than on a positive politics of citizenship at home, and to a quest for a transcendence of politics (Moyn, *The Last Utopia* 12; see also Fassin). The ‘Never again’ imperative and the under-researched ‘confluence of human rights and Holocaust memory’ revolve around a *summum malum* (Moyn, *Human Rights* 113), around what ought not to happen, while largely failing to indicate what actually should happen. The future of the political project implied by the tendency to universalize the memory of the Holocaust and by the globalization of the human rights regime is fundamentally a minimal(istic) one, asserting itself in the negative. It is also quintessentially oblivious of power relationships and structural inequalities: addressing them would imply questioning both the tenets as well as the practice of the contemporary neoliberal regime and of neoliberal rationality. Moreover, use of the memory of the Holocaust in the present is always caught between over-contextualization and de-contextualization. As Ross Poole (38) put it: ‘To the extent that the Holocaust stands for something very specific there is little chance of it being repeated. If it stands for something very general, we find instances all around us.’ At the same time, the association between the professed ideology of cosmopolitan human rights and the violent export of neoliberal capitalism also implies that the two ‘are part of the same project’ and that human rights ideology might ‘be useful for a limited protection of individuals, but it can blunt political resistance’ and does nothing, or too little, to contribute to the struggle against exploitation and domination (Douzinas 293).

If the future has stopped being the object of political deliberation and contestation, not because there is only one possible future, as past utopias would have it, but rather because there seems to be no future anymore, and if the internalization of the Thatcherite TINA dictum condemns us to living in a never-ending present without perspectives, one that cannot be changed, but at best solved, then the essential ‘temporal horizon in which to think about politics’ appears to be the past (Torpey 18). If there is no future to imagine and fight for, one ends up retreating to the past. In a recent interview, Andreas Huyssen (“State of the Art”) has 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.’ Yet this position also indicates the connection between the absence of the future and of future-oriented political projects,

an absence potentiated by neoliberal rationality, and the political and social focalization on memory and on the past.

The surge of right-wing populism in recent decades has been underlain by ‘memory wars’ (Stone, 265–88). Studies critical of what they identified as the hegemonization of a victimhood-oriented and Holocaust-centred cosmopolitan mode of remembering – associated with contemporary liberal democracy – have posited that such memory discourses and practices have not managed to halt the appeal of right-wing antagonistic memory discourses and practices, and in effect might have even contributed to their increasing success. The (only apparent!) opposition between contemporary liberal democracy, in its neoliberal garb, and right-wing populism, self-styled as a challenge to liberal democracy, appears to be mirrored and replicated at the level of memory by the opposition between cosmopolitan and antagonistic memories (Cento Bull & Hansen). But a relationship between a focus on victimhood, human rights violations and the Holocaust on the one hand, and nostalgic-conservative discourses on the other, with the two being mutually reinforcing, has in effect informed the mnemonic turn from its very beginning, as the previous sections of this contribution have suggested.

The contemporary critical juncture appears to be fundamentally the result of the failure of liberal democracy – increasingly understood and practised as a mere procedural form – to allow for the construction and assertion of real political challenges to neoliberalism. Furthermore, it is also due to the tacit negation of relations of power in society and of the antagonisms, struggles and conflicts therewith related (Mouffe, *Agonistics*; Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*). In this context, the mnemonic de-politicization of the past contributes to the erasure of the critical potentialities embedded within its struggles and alternative political projects. Consider for instance one concrete example: what Kristin Ross called the afterlives of May '68 in France illustrate very well how an emphasis on humanitarianism abroad (in the name of human rights) accompanied the imposition of a de-politicized and carnivalesque *post-factum* (mnemonic) representation of the events, which eschews their radically democratic character and hence the revolutionary potential lurking within their social and political relevance. Ross's study also made evident how conflicts over interpretive dominance with relationship to the French May '68 have largely mirrored the opposition between de-politicized liberal cosmopolitanism and bourgeois conservatism (Ross). In this context, it is by no means surprising that both a politics of (international) humanitarianism in the name of human rights and an embrace of conservative anti-communism have informed the memory of May '68 in France in a significant way (see also Fassin). In a related vein, the appropriation of human rights discourses by neoliberal politics has led to the exclusion of economic and social rights from the panoply of human rights, a phenomenon also tightly linked with processes of individualization, de-collectivization and de-politicization (Moyn, *The Last Utopia*).

### **Conclusions: Reclaiming the future in order to reclaim the past**

The argument usually made is that memory and specific forms of memory – for instance memory as translated in transitional justice mechanisms – are particularly important in order that the errors of the past are not repeated and in order to help legitimize the present. Nonetheless, these presuppositions, claims and assumptions are not really mirrored by the reality on the ground (see also David, “Against Standardization”). It suffices to look around and observe the political and social moment of juncture we are at, in order to question the surfeit of memory and the intense preoccupation with the past. The hypertrophy of memory does not seem to have actually contributed very much to bolstering the appeal of ideas of equality and social justice. In this context, (past) projects of equality and social justice, and (past) radically democratic imaginations of the future, are in fact rather relegated to the realm

of 'Marrano' memories – in other words, (Benjaminian) memories of the defeated (Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia*).

Antifascism has been forgotten or erased, national welfarist projects – whose genesis was in effect related to the success of the struggle against fascism – have been declared obsolete and implausible. Future-oriented politics and political utopias are deemed dangerous, bound to fail, as causing plenty of victims on the way, and hence morally problematic and repugnant. Political projects based on collective solidarities have lost their capacity to mobilize. Neoliberalism's economization of life and the hegemonization of the TINA dictum have largely transformed politics into an exercise of trying to figure out the lesser evil, short-lived instances of public enthusiasm for one or the other mainstream political figure or programme notwithstanding.

The essence of contemporary memory discourses and practices has been best summed up by the Italian cultural historian Enzo Traverso (*Left-Wing Melancholia* 29): '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.' In a similar vein, the sociologist Éric Fassin (6) emphasized the contours of this shift within the discourses and practices of humanitarianism that have come to accompany the neoliberal turn: 'Inequality is replaced by exclusion, domination is transformed into misfortune, injustice is articulated as suffering, violence is expressed in terms of trauma.' Against this backdrop, it is probably high time to rearticulate the relationship with the past and with the future – rather than obsessively looking at the past in order to account for the infortunes of the now or so as to legitimize a not-to-be-legitimized present. Bringing the future (back) into the foreground can then be the driving force behind assessing, evaluating, constructing and reconstructing the past (Szpunar & Szpunar 378). Such a call is definitely not a new one (Gutman et al.; Huyssen *Present Pasts*; Szpunar & Szpunar), but it has nonetheless not been put into practice. Perhaps only by first devising projects for the future in the name of particular values that go beyond contemporary neoliberalism and beyond the current socio-economic model, only if we first come to terms with the future, will the engagement with memory and the construction thereof be able to contribute to the present creation of this future and thus will we be able to extract the radically democratic potentialities that lie in the past.

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