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Comparison and evaluation in Memory Studies

For much of the past month I have been reviewing the submissions to the inaugural Memory Studies Association (MSA) First Book Award. This year marks the start of a closer collaboration between this journal *Memory Studies* and MSA, including a dedicated special issue edited by members of the association. We hope that this will be a major step forward in enhancing reflection and critical debate on the nature of the field and the scholarly work that it comprises, building on the lively exchanges that have been a feature of the journal since its launch in 2008.

Reading a selection of some of the most exciting emerging work in the area has left me with a few reflections of my own. Without going into the details of individual submissions – the winner of the award will be announced at the MSA conference in Madrid in June 2019 – it is clear that as a field Memory Studies is fortunate to have an impressive range of early career scholars, who display a combination of analytic acuity and creative enquiry that shows great promise for the future development of the field. Moreover, the diversity of the topics and sites of study are truly impressive in their international reach. Whilst the journal and MSA have been predominantly European and North American in membership and contributors, these submissions show that a shift towards a different relationship between the global and the regional is underway.

That said, reading across the submissions, one is struck with the specificity of the majority of the work, which is typically focused on a particular national or regional site. This is to be welcomed, of course, particularly in cases where it adds missing elements to the mosaic of knowledge of memory practices across sociocultural settings and gives voice to under-represented groups. However it raises the question of how to judge the contribution made to the field as a whole by each individual work in the absence of a commonly agreed comparator.

One solution is to draw upon the standards of each contributing discipline – history, media studies, sociology, psychology and so on. Whilst this would help to clarify the particular merits of each work on its own terms, it displaces the problem of comparison further, since demonstration of expertise operates in different ways across disciplines. Crudely put, the tendencies diverge between seeking command of knowledge of particular socio-historical period or practice, or of a particular body of theoretical debate, or of a specific methodological paradigm. Each discipline has its own combination of these tendencies, but tends to place particular value upon one above the others. This makes ready comparisons across disciplines near impossible.

For a truly interdisciplinary field such as Memory Studies, overcoming the weight of past in the form of contributing disciplines is a major task. If we are still debating the appropriateness of using a near hundred year old concept such as Halbwachs' 'collective memory', then any sudden advance in thinking seems unlikely. In part, this is tied to a felt need to establish common definitions of the nature of memory in order to clarify the specific ways in different perspectives contribute to the field as a whole. But this idea that agreement on common terms is a necessary precursor to the development of an area is at odds with contemporary understandings of interdisciplinarity (e.g. Nowotny et al, 2001),

which emphasise external societal factors as drivers of research. The stakeholders and funders to whom we are ultimately accountable care more about what we can do with a concept like 'collective memory' rather than the place it might ultimately occupy in the theoretical firmament of Memory Studies. Moreover, as Barry & Born (2013) argue, the current rhetoric around interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity can sometimes mask the extent to which landmark work claimed by individual disciplines was itself the product of interdisciplinary engagement. Bartlett's (1932) *Remembering* is an excellent example here – a foundational text in the history of Psychology that is, in actuality, a multi-layered dialogue with social anthropology. Forgetting the interdisciplinary aspects of a discipline's history results in an over-reification of its modes of enquiry and traditions.

I am not suggesting that we imagine a post-disciplinary future, where 'memory' and the ways in which it might be studied are entirely up for grabs. Rather, that interdisciplinarity here raises two closely linked issues. The first is with the status of theoretical discussions in the absence of clearly worked out conceptual distinctions and the relative excess of potential empirical material to draw upon. The second is with the role of comparison as an intellectual tool in relation to both diverse kinds of 'data' and, ultimately, different scholarly practices.

The example of Social Anthropology is useful here. Academic reputation in this discipline comes in part from a close attachment to a specific field site, which can be either close or distant from the researcher's institutional location. Maintaining a fidelity to the field, and, notably, to trusted informants, is a sign of quality, such that eminent researchers are as well known for who they have researched as for what they have actually said about them. Doing theory in Social Anthropology then involves not so much the application of a pre-existing set of categories to the research, but rather a sustained effort at exploring how the conceptual world of the field that the researcher comes to inhabit can be juxtaposed with the traditions of their discipline. For example, Marilyn Strathern's decades long work in Melanesia directly informs her reconceptualization of what the categories of 'person' and 'relation' might mean for Social Anthropology (see Strathern, 1991). Similarly, the 'multinature' paradigm associated with Eduardo Viveiros de Castro – which argues that 'nature' can be treated as constructed, whilst 'culture' seen as relatively stable, thus destabilising clear nature-culture distinctions – arises from a prolonged engagement with Amerindian perspectives (see Viveiros de Castro 2016).

Comparison also has a unique place in Social Anthropology. Any act of comparing is based on a prior set of categories and relations that propose potential similarities and differences that constitute 'like with like'. Training in any given discipline involves learning these categories and relations such that they become a sensibility, a matter of what tastes right and what does not. The interdisciplinary challenge of being asked to consider a different concept of memory or form of evidence can then feel rather like being served seemingly inedible food. Because the very nature of conducting research in Social Anthropology involves some degree of comparative work across cultural settings, comparison is regarded as a practice worthy in itself of investigation. The comparative practices that are present within a field are of clear concern to researchers, both in terms of what they show of the conceptual universe of persons being studied, and subsequently as provocations to thinking that can be 'taken back' to theoretical work. Bill Maurer (2005) has promoted the view that

making unexpected or experimental forms of comparison underpin a 'lateral reasoning' that can produce novel insights. In all cases, the act of making comparisons, or studying how others make comparisons is generative of thinking rather than simply being an exercise of applying what is already known (see Deville et al, 2016).

In Memory Studies we have a multitude of different theories and different approaches to what theory is and how it is formalised. This lack of a general vocabulary clearly makes for some difficult conversations. But we also have very specific groups and settings that we work with. They should be a part of the conversation. When concepts are properly grounded in the relations and conceptual universe of a particular way of living, they cease to be matters of abstract speculation and become instead instantiations of a lived perspective. To debate a concept on this basis means comparing one or more lived perspectives with another and asking how the concept in question might impact on that world, what differences it might make, what kinds of disruptions it poses. The stakes become very different. Rather than seek a common, integrated theoretical framework, we can instead work towards ways in which diverse worlds might be juxtaposed together, without ever entirely merging. For example, in this issue we enter the worlds of the 'grandparent's generation' in post-Franco Spain (Aguilar & Ramirez-Barat), the 'umbrella movement' in Hong Kong (Lee et al), and the Romanian 'latchkey generation' (Pohrib). The authors all successfully make these worlds available to the community of memory scholars by demonstrating the actuality of memory as it worked out in each. A theoretical dialogue could then begin by asking what difference it would make to each world for a concept from another to enter into it, whether or not the concept could 'live' in that world.

The papers by Quílez & Rueda on changing Spanish political documentary making and Nagy on Hungarian obituaries are remarkable in demonstrating how a close attention to an apparent 'like for like' can uncover differences and transformations. Here the comparative practices of the particular setting, the ways in which similarities and distinctions are organised, become important. But the empirical richness of the papers also allows us to ask other kinds of questions – what would a 'bad' documentary or an 'inappropriate' obituary look like, and what would this tell us about the particular comparative practices themselves and the differences between them? We might then go to ask what within these practices seems to be disruptive of existing notions of collective memory, and how to reformulate the concept on the basis of these specific cases. We can also consider a novel or experimental comparison between Gustafsson's analysis of the debate around the Great Chinese Famine on Weibo and Sodaro's account of the National September 11th Memorial Museum. These are entirely different worlds in terms of media, historical period being recollected, national context, and doubtless numerous other features. The basis for the comparison would have to be invented speculatively. Yet in forcing ourselves to do so, we would begin to develop a form of abstraction that remained grounded in the worlds themselves, a kind of intermediate level sat somewhere between strict empirical analysis and theorisation which would be distinct from a particular disciplinary location.

So where does that leave the problem of establishing the value of a work to Memory Studies? It provides some criterion over and above a specific disciplinary contribution. Work that makes a world available to the scholarly community, that enables it to become an object of debate on its own terms rather than serving as an example of an existing

conceptual approach, becomes enormously important. At the same time, an account of the comparative practices through which memory is enacted within that world allows for a conversation of what various concepts actually do when seen from the perspective of that world, providing for a different, and I would argue, equally productive route into theorisation. Finally, work which makes itself amenable to comparison by drawing out the idiosyncrasies, the particularities of the world it describes, would have a crucial role in allowing for experimental comparisons. Sometimes in a game it is the odd-shaped piece or the very specific card that proves to be critical, at a certain moment, because it affords a move that would be otherwise impossible. It is the search for the novel and unusual rather than the universal and synthetic that makes things move forward.

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