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Memory, Politics, and International Relations

Review by Kazuya Fukuoka

Eric Langenbacher and Yossi Shain, *Power and the Past: Collective Memory and International Relations*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2010. 244 pp. \$29.95

Nations are haunted by the memories of the past. In 1882, Ernst Renan made the widely recognized remark, “the possession in common of a rich legacy of remembrances,” which noted national remembrance or national collective memory as important ingredients of the national spirit. Ever since then, they have been a critical part of the study of nations and nationalism.¹ People remember the past as members of *mnemonic communities*.² As national symbols, memories help frame and nurture the perceptions and feelings about nations. This is the “existential fusion” in which “our own personal biography with the history of the groups or communities to which we belong” becomes “an indispensable part of our social identity.”³ Furthermore, this is why we collectively feel a sense of honor, shame, or even pain from time to time in terms of our national history.

The so-called *memory boom* has been widespread in the humanities and in the social sciences over the last three decades, yet international relations (IR) as a field has been relatively quiet regarding the notion of memory. Despite the fact that collective memories of contentious pasts so often

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complicate international relations between former perpetrator and victim nations, and that people in the world are so frequently attracted, swayed, and annoyed by national pasts, the question of national diversities (and the constitutive nature of the formation of national consciousness) has long been a non-issue in IR. Although IR has finally started discussing memory dynamics, especially in terms of collective trauma, it is still in a nascent stage.⁴

abuses to justice have not come to the fore.”⁵ This omission is simply unacceptable since historical issues are real and the empirical importance of memory is undeniable. In this vein, the book tries to explore the profound ways which collective memories in various societies help to shape international politics. Empirically, this project pertains to the question of how specific memories are constructed, contested, and re-constructed, which also leads

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Power and the Past: Collective Memory and International Relations addresses the very question of the role of collective memory in international affairs. Editors Eric Langenbacher and Yossi Shain (both affiliated with Georgetown University) compile a variety of case studies that make this volume an important contribution to our understanding of the inter-connected relationship between memory, identity, and international relations. According to the editors, “[t]he international policy impact of collective memory...has not received the systematic attention in either the academic or the policy arena that it deserves” even though “it is difficult to find a country or region where memory and related concerns such as working through a traumatic past and bringing perpetrators of human rights

to the discussion of the constitutive nature of memories in nation-formation. Theoretically, the editors explore how IR constructivism can incorporate memory problematique into its research agenda.

The volume has four main purposes. First, the editors consider the book “a serious effort to study the impact of post-9/11 collective memories on international affairs and foreign politics.” Second, the book claims a “breadth of empirical coverage,” including case studies that cover Austria, China, Israel, Japan, Poland, Switzerland, and the United States. Third, the volume also aims at making “a conceptual and theoretical contribution” to international relations theory. Fourth, the analytical stance of the book is intentionally “interdisciplinary” with con-

tributors from both the humanities and social sciences.⁶ The book is based on “a series of discussions and symposia” held at Georgetown University in 2005, comprising two theoretical chapters (Chapter 1 and the conclusion) and nine cases studies (Chapters 2 – 10).⁷

Co-editor Langenbacher’s theoretical review constitutes a key chapter of the volume (Chapter 1). The extent of his coverage is commendable. He discusses the key figures in memory studies in the fields of history, anthropology and sociology, and explores the possibility of incorporating those insights into the study of international relations. The chapter serves as a good introduction to the concepts of history and memory. The author cogently explains the level of objectivity (or interpretation) embedded in the analytical concepts such as the past, history, historical consciousness, memory, and myth. He also succinctly summarizes different types of memories by referring to communicative, generational, collective, and cultural memories.⁸

The volume fails, however, to generate a theoretical coherence. It does not seem that the contributors consistently share the theoretical agenda the editors try to develop. Admitting that one of the book’s strengths lies in its interdisciplinary approach (as the editors rightly suggest), this is not a book where each essay articulates the book’s theoretical and cultural framework through different dimensions. More theoretically, the volume also suffers from a lack

of reference to the recently burgeoning collective trauma literature in IR. Langenbacher’s theoretical discussion touches on the work of scholars such as Duncan Bell and Jenny Edkins; however, he only hints at the impact of the traumatic experience in identity-formation.⁹ More significantly, the concept of trauma was never clearly defined even though most of the chapters deal with memories of the Holocaust and 9/11. The phrase is rather uncritically used without theoretical consideration. Accordingly, memory and trauma are used synonymously very often. This is not negligible. There is an array of opposition to the usage of the psychoanalytical approach in the study of collective memory because, most simply, collective memory is not the aggregate of individual, autobiographic memories.¹⁰ Again, people remember the past as part of a nation. Trauma does not exist naturally; rather, it is a socially constructed cultural structure (“cultural trauma”).¹¹ The editors seem generally aware of this, but the volume needs a more sophisticated treatment of this key concept.¹²

Langenbacher’s stress on the theoretical affinity between IR constructivism and political culture research, however, is certainly an appropriate move.¹³ I also agree that IR constructivism is now ready for the incorporation of memory into the study of international relations.¹⁴ However, the question should also be raised regarding its underlying ontology. That is, one of the problems of mainstream IR

constructivism is too much concession to rationalist state-centered ontology.¹⁵ Scholars often fail to pay appropriate attention to the issue of nation and nationalism as a dependent variable (or a unit of analysis). This very lack of ontological treatment is one of the reasons for IR's late register for memory problematique. To merely say that an ideational factor such as memory is at work in the international sphere does not advance our theoretical understanding.

The volume does have a variety of cases that surely show its strength. However, this very variety renders the incoherency of the book. The nine case studies are not coherent in either scope or depth. Among them, four Holocaust chapters are composed of in-depth case studies and present the strongest part of the book. Bettina Warburg's chapter (Chapter 2) provides a nice introduction to German collective memory in the post-War years. She explores the way Holocaust memory in Germany shaped Germany's international role. Langenbacher's case study on German-Polish relations (Chapter 3) shows the potential relativization of Holocaust memories with the emerging theme of German suffering. Avi Becker focuses on the increasing importance of non-state actors in the institutionalization of Holocaust memories in Switzerland and Austria (Chapter 4). Focusing on the American Jewish community and its multifarious voices, Ori Soltes looks into the question of "Jewish political interests" (Chapter 5).

Three chapters on 9/11 are the contributions by historians. Omer Bartov discusses the very question of the use of the past memories for the sake of understanding and justifying present events (Chapter 6). He cautions that the West uses its "distorted" memories so as to legitimize the aftermath of 9/11, including the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Michael Kazin's provocative chapter problematizes "12/12," i.e., the date for the U.S. Supreme Court decision which initiated the presidency of George W. Bush on December 12, 2000 (Chapter 7). Although largely forgotten, the 12/12 event was also significant because the aftermath of 9/11 (the wars on Afghanistan and Iraq) was possible at least in part due to the Bush administration—the product of the 12/12 decision. Referring to German Prime Minister Gerhard Schroder's appeasement stance toward Saddam Hussein as well as President Bush's preemptive strikes, Jeffery Herf's elaborated essay criticizes the ways those leaders "selectively" used historical images and analogies to justify their policies (Chapter 8). This is important because "speaking the truth about the past is not only a moral demand but also essential for good foreign policy."¹⁶ Each chapter presents interesting aspects of the issues surrounding 9/11 from the historians' points of view. As a result, however, they do not pursue the memory of 9/11 in a theoretically coherent way as the editors stressed at the outset, showing the double-edged sword of the interdisciplinary project.

Although the cases on Japan and China provide important insights on East Asia's memory politics, their contribution to the overall theme of the book is unclear. Thomas Berger skillfully explores the puzzling resurgence of memory (and memory politics) in Japan in particular and in East Asia in general (Chapter 9). Driven by the universal discourse of historical justice, memory issues often stall the negotiation processes in other issue areas such as territorial and/or trade disputes.

Second, Shain emphasizes that there are "complex interactions between elites and mass publics" over memory construction. Although the process is mainly "top-down," it is also true that "mass public are not merely passive vessels." Third, Shain stresses "unintended consequences" surrounding memory politics. Fourth, it is emphasized that we now see international affairs differently "through the filter of collective memory." Fifth, the author maintains that "the volume...demonstrates how

The reader should take the volume's shortcomings as a part of the growing pains for IR in striving for a new challenge.

Gerrit Gong, referring to China's antiterrorism cooperation with the U.S. after 9/11, stresses that ideational factors (such as international prestige and justice) became more and more important relative to perceived national interests in contemporary foreign policy makings (Chapter 10). The chapter does talk about the 9/11 event as a catalyst for "the fundamental realignment of Chinese-U.S. relations."¹⁷ But, it is not abundantly clear if the chapter engages itself in the discussion of the working of memory in the way which the book promises.

As a conclusion, Yossi Shain summarizes five "common themes" derived from the discussions in the volume. First, it is the empirical reality that "collective memories emerge in a variety of cultural and national contexts."

important sustained academic attention and reflection remains."¹⁸

Relating to the second point of elite-public interaction, Shain also emphasizes the function of memory as an orienting symbol, which seems to warrant further consideration. He states, "the pools of memories never dry up, since the present continuously evolves into the past and instructs the future."¹⁹ This orienting function of memory is important, yet the thesis is underdeveloped. Social psychology would hint this in terms of "schema."²⁰ Capturing collective memory as a cultural system, sociology of culture also emphasizes the role of collective memory as a template.²¹ The chapter would surely benefit from these theoretical insights.

Shain also asserts that "the 9/11 terrorist attacks and their aftermath

opened new debates on questions of morality, justice, legitimacy, and values in international affairs.”²² This could be true in the U.S. context. Presumably, the Iraq war “heightened the ‘mood swing’ and confused long-standing alliances of values and their prioritization.”²³ Shain also argues that “September 11 constituted a signpost, signaling a new era and a formative new memory”²⁴ because post-9/11 international politics are “governed not only by force but also by assigning legitimacy to actors’ decisions and behaviors.”²⁵ All of these claims are interesting and important, but they need empirical verification. There are many mov-

ing parts to consider (political, social, and cultural) and Shain’s rather casual discussion does not pass the empirical test.

That being the case, *Power and the Past* is still a notable achievement. This is a volume to be read by the students of international affairs in general as well as those who take the cultural turn of IR theories seriously in particular. Each case study provides important implications for the contemporary memory problematiques at work. The reader should take the volume’s shortcomings as a part of the growing pains for IR in striving for a new challenge.

NOTES

- 1 Ernest Renan, "What is a nation?" Translated and annotated by Martin Thom. In *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhaba (London and New York: Routledge, 1990[1882]), 9.
- 2 Eviatar Zerubavel, 1996, "Social Memories: Steps to a Sociology of the Past," *Qualitative Sociology* 19(3): 283-299.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 290.
- 4 See, for example, Duncan Bell, ed., *Memory, Trauma and World Politics: Reflections on the Relationship Between Past and Present* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
- 5 Eric Langenbacher and Yossi Shain, eds., *Power and the Past: Collective Memory and International Relations* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2010), 1.
- 6 *Power and the Past*, 2.
- 7 *Power and the Past*, 12 (footnote 2).
- 8 *Power and the Past*, 28-29.
- 9 *Power and the Past*, 22.
- 10 For the caution in applying psychological and/or psychoanalytical frameworks into the study of collectivity (and collective memory), see, for example, Wulf Kansteiner, 2002, "Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies," *History and Theory* 41: 179-97.
- 11 Jeffrey C. Alexander, 2002, "On the Social Construction of Moral Universals: The 'Holocaust' from War Crime to Trauma Drama," *European Journal of Social Theory* 5(1): 5-85. See also Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka, eds., *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).
- 12 See Bell, *Memory, Trauma and World Politics*; Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*. For "all-embracing view of trauma," see also Jenny Edkins, 2004, "Ground Zero: Reflections on Trauma, In/distinction and Response," *Journal for Cultural Research* 8(3): 247-270. See also Maja Zehfuss, 2003, "Forget September 11," *Third World Quarterly* 24(3): 513-28.
- 13 *Power and the Past*, 25-27.
- 14 *Power and the Past*, 21-25.
- 15 See, for example, Lars-Erik Cederman and Christopher Daase, 2003, "Endogenizing Corporate Identities: The next Step in Constructivist IR Theory." *European Journal of International Relations* 9(1): 5-35.
- 16 *Power and the Past*, 187.
- 17 *Power and the Past*, 207.
- 18 *Power and the Past*, 213-214.
- 19 *Power and the Past*, 220.
- 20 See, for example, Paul DiMaggio, 1997, "Culture and Cognition," *Annual Review of Sociology* 23: 263-287.
- 21 See, Barry Schwartz, 1998, "Frame Images: Toward a Semiotics of Collective Memory," *Semiotica* 121(1/2): 1-40. See also Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).
- 22 *Power and the Past*, 214.
- 23 *Power and the Past*, 214-215.
- 24 *Power and the Past*, 219.
- 25 *Power and the Past*, 220.