The Memory of Peace

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Remembering political violence

Political violence leaves behind painful scars, if not open wounds, in the personal memories of victims and their relatives, as well as in the collective memories of societies. The question of how societies publicly remember and commemorate this violence is a distinctly political issue. State sponsored public acts of remembrance such as official commemoration ceremonies, memorials and educational programmes show this quite clearly: not only are they selective — certain memories of the violent conflict are highlighted, whereas others are consigned to the private sphere, ignored, or even suppressed —, their political nature can also be observed in that their effects vary. In some instances public forms of remembrance reinforce the status quo and existing power structures, whereas in others they have emancipatory effects, for example when non-elite groups are offered the opportunity to publicly express their memories. As Jenny Edkins notes, the political character of remembrance manifests itself not least when specific groups resist official commemoration practices. ¹ The politics of how violent conflict is remembered has great significance in transitional post-violence societies. In the aftermath of a period of violent civil war or ethnic struggle in which various groups killed each other or parts of the civilian population, the question arises not only as to how perpetrators should be punished, but also how the painful memories of traumatic political violence should be addressed in the public sphere. In other words: How does the peace declared after the cessation of direct physical violence manage these memories? And, importantly, what does that say about this peace?

In his book ‘History, Memory, and State-Sponsored Violence’, Berber Bevernage outlines two strategies elites in transitional societies have implemented to tackle the problem of the harrowing memory of the violent past. A first is to call on society to forget the violence and the injustices of the recent past. The ‘new’ future, so it is argued, should not be burdened by the deadly weight of the past. The claim is that not forgetting, certainly if it is combined with efforts to punish all perpetrators, is perilous for the recently established peace, as it could inflame new tensions and lead to renewed violence. Thus this strategy frames forgetting as the only guarantee of maintaining the fragile ‘peace’, so labouriously established after a period of divisive violence. Clearly, the peace advocated by this strategy comes at a price. It does not only imply the impunity of perpetrators, but also the suppression of victims’ memories, at least in the public sphere. In other words, amnesty and amnesia are welded together seamlessly. Not surprisingly, this strategy is most often used by members of elites who played a crucial role in the violent conflict, who were in a position of power during the hostilities and have managed to retain their positions, and who count a number of perpetrators in their ranks. Following the end of the military junta in Chile, Augusto Pinochet for example strongly advised all parties to leave behind and forget the painful past in order to ensure that the Chilean population could look
forward to its new future unencumbered by recent history. In South Africa, following the collapse of the ‘Apartheid’ regime, Frederik Willem De Klerk proposed that “the best way to reconcile would be to say: Let’s close the book of the past, let’s really forgive and let’s now start looking at the future.” This strategy of oblivion and historic amnesia quickly runs into opposition. Not only because it results in a sort of peace that is perceived by many as too minimalistic, but also because there is resistance to the assumption that painful memories of violence and war can be easily put aside, as if they were like drawings in the sand erased by the simple movement of ebb and flow. In recent decades, elites in post-violence societies have therefore looked for other ways to deal with painful memories of a violent past. This resulted in a second strategy, that of establishing ‘truth and reconciliation commissions’. These commissions, which rapidly and impressively gained popularity since the early 1990s, were framed not only as an alternative to the criminal prosecution of perpetrators, but also as an answer to the question of how transitional societies should address and manage their difficult past.

Truth and reconciliation commissions oppose the call to forget the past – on the contrary, they give agonizing and excruciating memories centre stage position in the public sphere. Amnesty in this strategy is uncoupled from forgetting: amnesty is only possible if amnesia is foreclosed, that is, if the ‘truth’ about violent acts in the past are brought out into the open. Notwithstanding the laudable efforts of truth and reconciliation commissions to allow the memories of a violent past to be aired at a public forum and to strive for reconciliation, this strategy has also been met with the necessary criticisms. In his subtle critique Bevernage focuses on the temporal premises underpinning the work of many truth and reconciliation commissions. These commissions often not only assumed that the mere act of telling the truth about the past leads to reconciliation, but also – and importantly – that this results in ‘closure’, in leaving the past behind and putting it ‘to rest’ so that a future of peaceful coexistence can finally commence. In other words, they presumed that the confrontation with a harrowing past in and through the truth commission allowed society to close the past, to literally ‘make it history’, to ‘banish’ it from the present and safely store it in a past that is truly past, with the ultimate objective of making a new, shared and peaceful future possible, a future that is not burdened or ‘haunted’ by spectres from a violent past. As Bevernage remarks, Desmond Tutu himself used a spectral discourse to describe and promote the work of the South African truth commission. Tutu referred to the past’s ‘uncanny habit of returning to haunt one’ and the fact that it ‘refuses to lay down quietly’ as important arguments in favour of the truth commission. Indeed, according to Tutu, the commission would be ‘charged to unearth the truth about our dark past; to lay the ghosts of that past [to rest] so that they may no return to haunt us.’ Thus truth commissions did not call for forgetting, but rather attempted to performatively effectuate a break with a past in order to make possible not only reconciliation and peace, but also a new beginning and a future unburdened by the past. In practice, however, riveting together redemption-through-truth-telling, closure of the past, and reconciliation and peace is not that simple nor straightforward. In countries such as South Africa and Argentina memories of traumatic political violence have shown themselves to be particularly stubborn and recalcitrant phenomena. It has proven to be not that easy to put to rest the ghosts from a violent past, or to banish them from the present. Following the conclusion of the work of the South African truth and reconciliation commission, some groups of victims and relatives did not accept that their violent memories no longer held any current political relevance, nor that their memories now definitely were a thing of the past. Victim groups such as the Khulumani Support Group not only claimed that the truth commission did not unearth the whole truth (for example about the many people who disappeared during the Apartheid era), but also that expecting closure from the victims came too soon and was
asking too much. As far as the victims are concerned, the past is still very much present; it has not yet become history from which they can distance themselves. In other words, their suffering is still raw, the passing of time alone has not healed their pain. In their own words, the Khulumani Support Group claimed that “We the victims and survivors declare the past to be in the present”.4

Thus it becomes clear that for post-violence societies it is not easy to achieve a clean and surgical break in time that separates the present from the traumatic past in order to facilitate a new, peaceful future. It certainly seems impossible that this break can be realized simply by parliamentary decree or the promulgation of a truth commission that the ghosts of the violent past now have finally been laid to rest. Despite extensive attempts to effectively make the past ‘history’ and ‘over and done with’, in many post-violence societies the traumatic memories of victims and survivors continue to haunt the present. As uninvited and unwelcome guests they keep surfacing. At this point a crucial question emerges: can victims and survivors whose memories are deemed to be unwelcome in their painful ‘present-ness’, whose memories are considered to be detrimental for a new future and therefore maybe even subjected to suppression, can these victims and survivors identify themselves with or feel recognised in the peace that was declared after the cessation of violent hostilities? If the answer to this question is negative, if this peace is believed to be too minimalistic and exclusionary, then a next question arises. How can transitional post-violence societies facilitate a ‘memorial culture’ in which there is space for a plurality of (traumatic) memories of violence and war, however uncomfortable, inconvenient or painfully ‘present’ these memories may be? In other words: what are the critical preconditions of a post-violence memorial cultures in which as many people as possible, including victims and survivors, feel themselves recognized in their memories of the violent past and consequently are able to identify with the peace brokered and established after the ending of violence? In this paper I attempt to outline some of the key features of such an ideal-typical memorial culture. I argue that in order to do so, it is necessary first to gain insight in the plural and conflictual nature of collective memory, and second to flesh out an agonistic theory of peace.

The plurality (and dissonance) of collective memory

In societies the memory of past events is transmitted by a large number of agents (not only state actors but also civil society organisations and family and kinship networks), in a wide variety of arenas (both public and private), and through a great diversity of media (such as public commemorations, memorials, educational curricula, museums, television shows, websites, literature and theatre plays, et cetera).5 As a result, a society’s collective memory is not monolithic (as a superficial reading of the term might imply) but inevitably characterised by diversity. If plurality is one of the basic hallmark of the political, this extends unconditionally into the sphere of the politics of memory. Another way of looking at the diversity and multiplicity of memory starts from the double-sided observation that remembering the past at the same time is intimately linked to the individual – each person remembers the past in his or her own distinct personal way –, as well as inherently social, as it is mediated through socially constructed frames of interpretation. The theory of the social dimensions of memory (most texts in memory studies at this point refer to the inescapable Maurice Halbwachs) is well-known and need not be repeated here.6 Important for the purposes of this paper is that the social nature of memories helps explain why collective memory inherently carries a large degree of dissonance and, therefore, are always potentially contentious: if people remember the past in a wide variety of ways and forms, it follows naturally that these memories can constitute the
grounds for conflict. Moreover, the sphere of conflict over memory is structured by underlying power relationships. Some forms of memory are promoted by power elites, while others are marginal or subversive.\footnote{7}

For transitional societies which recently emerged out of divisive violent conflict, the dissonant plurality of collective memory holds a special relevance. The fault lines of the violent conflict are easily transferred into post-violence memorial culture. This can seriously impact the peace established after the ending of the hostilities. Furthermore, memories of violence are often of a painful traumatic nature. In the remainder of this section, I will briefly dwell on the characteristics of traumatic memories, because they place the dissonant plurality of memory in post-violence societies in a different light and thus are of relevance in outlining some of the critical preconditions of an ideal-typical peaceful memorial culture. Broadly defined, the concept of trauma describes overwhelming experiences of sudden and catastrophic events which constitute a radical break and a fundamental discontinuity in how the world is experienced. Everything that was previously perceived of as ordinary and common, such as the expectation of the safety and permanence of family life or the narrative of the protective state, comes under severe pressure. The experience of physical violence such as heavy bombardments of a city, genocidal violence or the brutal loss of loved ones through a terrorist attack can threaten or even destroy the existential protection emanating from these expectations and narratives: as the traumatic events show that the security and safety they promised are not redeemed, they lose their immunological value. Importantly, people react to traumatic experiences in a variety of ways. Some victims and survivors cling desperately to narratives that frames violent death or suffering as a heroic or patriotic sacrifice, sometimes demanding retribution or revenge. For others, these martial discourses sound false and bitter. They turn to more intimate and personal memories, which focus on the pain of the loss of loved ones. Some survivors may even resist official and state-sponsored memory practices, for instance when these invoke the violent events in the past to legitimate further violence. Thus, as is the case with collective memory in general, traumatic memories of political violence are characterised by plurality and diversity. Important, however, is that speech is not necessarily the most prominent form of action in the sphere of traumatic memories. Silences also play a crucial role. For some victims and survivors the experience of trauma leads them so far beyond what can be normally expected that they cannot find the words to describe their experience, let alone understand or explain it. Some survivors are left perplex as a consequence of their trauma, they feel that common language cannot do justice to their horrific experiences.

The literature on traumatic memory, especially in the humanities, often uses a psychoanalytically inspired conceptual apparatus, in which terms as repression and dissociation are responsible for much of the theoretical work. Traumatic memories appear here as memories that do not exist, or not completely: the traumatic event has become the object of amnesia, and is banished to the unconscious. Of course, the experience of trauma does not remain without effects; it is deemed to be constantly acted out, but not in full consciousness. The traumatic memory first has to be ‘claimed’ before it can be understood and worked through.\footnote{8} This reading of how traumas are remembered, which admittedly offers many interpretative and theoretical possibilities and also permeates popular discourses on traumatic memory is, however, not uncontested. Non-psychoanalytical strands in psychology claim there is scant evidence, clinically or experimentally, for amnesive mechanisms when it comes to remembering trauma. The argument here is that most traumatised people remember horrific experiences all too well. More: they are haunted by them, in the form of flashbacks, nightmares and intrusive thoughts, that make them relive and re-experience events from the past painfully...
realistically in the present. Traumatic memories, in other words, are repetitive: they keep coming back to ‘haunt’ the present. These observations point to the specific way traumatic memories relate to time. Although all memories – traumatic and non-traumatic – are mental events happening in the present, they can play in various time-regimes. Memories that are acted out in a linear time-regime, make a clear distinction between past and present: they refer to events in a past that is clearly past and ‘closed’. These memories can be understood through historical narratives that have a beginning and an ending (the past has become history). Traumatic memories, however, play in a different time-regime, which Jenny Edkins refers to as ‘trauma time’. Trauma time does not make a clear break between past and present: traumatic memories are repetitive and cyclical, they keep bringing events from the past to life in the present, they are continually acted out – or ‘re-enacted’ – in the present. Traumatic memories, in other words, are not ‘over’, safely ‘placed’ and ‘stored away’ in the past: they keep haunting the present.

In sum, and to conclude these observations on collective memory, plurality is one of the main hallmarks of how a society remembers political violence. In all societies, but most definitely in transitional post-violence societies, this diversity in memorial culture manifests itself in a dissonant, contentious and often even divisive manner. Remembering the past is not a matter of consensus, but the source of divergent interpretations, conflicts and tensions. In the context of societies where the past to be managed is of a traumatic nature, it is furthermore important to note that traumatic memories are acted out in non-linear time-regimes. Attempts to ‘close’ the violent past at a time that victims and survivors consider to be premature, may result either in opposition, resistance, or disappointed silence and alienation from the peace established after the ending of violence. The question therefore is how we can think a ‘peaceful’ memorial culture that is congruous with and takes into account the dissonant plurality of collective memory. Finding answers to this question necessitates a closer look at the meaning of peace.

**An agonistic theory of peace**

Peace, not unlike collective memory, is an essentially contested concept. The term has been the subject of a wide variety of definitions and conceptualisations. Also historically, there have been a multitude of manifestations and practices of peace, from the armed Pax Romana, the religiously inspired medieval Truce of God and the victors’ peace of Versailles to today’s Democratic Peace. To gain an understanding in this plurality of meanings and manifestations of peace it is useful to distinguish between different ways to study peace.

Firstly peace can be studied empirically, by investigating how it has manifested itself historically and sociologically, as a practice, at different times and in different places throughout the world and world history. A comparative outlook will quickly raise the question what these ‘peaces’ have in common. This, in turn, paves the way for a second, conceptual way of studying peace. The central question here is how ‘peace’ can be defined – a query which has preoccupied peace studies for decades. Most commonly, conceptualisations of peace start from a ‘negative’ definition, in the sense that peace is understood as the absence of war, violence, disruption, conflict, hostility, et cetera. Most scholars would easily reach consensus over this ‘negative’ definition of peace as absence of violence, were it not for the fact that in itself this definition does not make clear how ‘violence’ can be understood – a question that obviously raises equally complex discussions, which are outside the scope of this paper. A merely negative definition of peace has not satisfied most peace researchers. The problem is that peace conceived as the
mere absence of violence could imply a peace that in practice would be nothing more than a situation of tense quiet and rest, an order in which manifest outbursts of physical and direct violence are kept under control, but where structural causes of violence are not addressed. Therefore, following the example of Johan Galtung, many scholars have attempted to broaden the negative conception of peace and enlarge it with a ‘positive’ counterpart. Peace here is not only understood as the absence of violence, the focus is also on the preconditions and causes of enduring peace. Many ‘positive’ definitions of peace have been put forward. Michael Banks, for example, lists four conceptualisations: peace as harmony, peace as justice, peace as order, and peace as conflict management. These positive conceptualisations of peace have, of course, also come under critical scrutiny. One of the main points of critique is that these positive definitions often fail to clearly delineate the concept of peace, which starts to converge with others phenomena such as justice. Removing all limits to the concept of peace however, critics argue, devalues its relevance in scientific description and analysis. As Harald Müller notes, unless concepts can describe distinctions, they are useless in scientific debates. If a concept cannot distinguish anything, it describes everything. Müller therefore advocates a strict distinction between the concept of peace and theories of peace. The concept (or the definition) of peace is confined to its negative interpretation: “Peace is a state between specific social and political collectives characterized by the absence of direct violence and in which the possible use of violence by one against another in the discourse between the collectives has no place.” However, in order not to isolate this conception of peace from its social, political, economic and cultural context, Müller subsequently emphasizes the need to look at the conditions and causes of peace, in other words, to develop theories of peace.

Looking at peace from a theoretical perspective is a third way of doing peace research. Here it is useful to distinguish between explanatory theories, which try to understand the various manifestations under which peace has historically and sociologically appeared, and normative theories. The latter are aimed at conceiving ideal-typical forms of peace by investigating the critical preconditions for a non-violent society and the social, economic, political and cultural context in which peace (as the absence of violence) thrives best. Peace researchers have not only identified various critical preconditions of peace such as democracy, a just socio-economic order and the prevention of arms races, but also emphasized the importance of a culture of peace where the absence of violence is promoted through the active pursuit of respect, mutual understanding, recognition of differences and the diversity of opinions and attitudes, and a continual readiness to enter into open dialogue. Normative theories of peace and conflict management, moreover, have stressed the idea that peaceful coexistence is a process that needs to start from the idea that difference and plurality necessarily imply the possibility of conflict. This agonistic reading of the politics of peace accepts and recognizes that different interests and needs in a society can come into conflict and contradict each other. It acknowledges, furthermore, that there is not necessarily a shared frame of reference available for negotiating these differences. An agonistic theory of peace admits that the space – or the arena – where these negotiations can take place sometimes needs to be consciously constructed, an exercise that can be both laborious and difficult. (As a note: that this paper speaks of ‘post-violence’ rather than of ‘post-conflict’ societies needs to be understood in light of this agonistic theory of peace).
The agonistics of a peaceful memorial culture

An agonistic reading of peace, combined with an insight in the plural and conflictual nature of societies’ collective memories, makes it possible in this last paragraph to flesh out a number of critical preconditions for an ideal-typical memorial policy in post-violence societies. The underpinning question of this endeavour is how post-violence societies should address and manage the dissonant variety of memories of the political violence that deeply divided these societies, given the fact that these memories often can be very uncomfortable and painful, and with the ultimate objective of ensuring that as many people as possible feel recognized and are able to identify with the peace declared after the end of hostilities.

The starting point is the plurality of collective memory in general, and of memories of political violence in particular. The recognition that people remember violent pasts in many different ways should be the cornerstone of any memorial policy, especially in post-violence societies. In this respect, Bleiker and Hoang emphasise the importance of an “ethics of difference” and the idea that “a more tolerant and peaceful future can only be constructed once the notion of a single historical narrative gives way to multiple visions of the past and the future.”

The question then of course is how to manage this difference. Although Siobhan Kattago reminds us of the need to address divisive issues involving representations of the past (in the form of monuments, museums and history books) in public, the main emphasis in her critical framework is on finding points of common interest and understanding between individuals while still respecting cultural differences. Thus she distances herself from an overly agonistic approach to memorial policy. The importance of finding common interests and positions notwithstanding, I would however rather concur with Duncan Bell who argues that “a focus on the necessarily conflictual nature of historical interpretation provides the first step in creating a political environment in which different group identities can co-exist peacefully.”

In this view, the focal point and starting point of post-violence memorial policy should be the agonistics of remembrance and the potential conflictual nature of memories of violence. The challenge then becomes to devise strategies to mediate conflicts in narratives about the violent past. Two points of attention are important in this respect.

A first is that an agonistic approach to memorial policy does not imply relativism. The acceptance of dissonant plurality in how violence is remembered entails neither a moral relativism that would not be able to distinguish between moral and immoral forms of remembrance, nor a historical relativism which would imply that all narratives about the past are equally ‘correct’ or ‘accurate’. In outlining their ‘ethics of difference’, Bleiker and Hoang note that recognizing difference does not equate with relativism. In an atmosphere of open dialogue, it is possible, even necessary, to enter into critical discussions on the moral implications of different forms of remembrance and commemoration, for example, whether they risk contributing to the re-emergence of physical violence or to the perpetuation of structural or symbolic violence. A similar critical discussion is possible about the historical value of various memorializations. Narratives about the past can always be subjected to critical historical scrutiny. This, it is important to stress, is of course anything but simple, not least because historians, as Berber Bevernage notes, usually employ the premise that the past, before it can be studied historically, needs to be ‘closed’ and distanced from the present. Thus it can easily become difficult for historians to disengage themselves from the projects of those groups in post-violence societies who want to perform the closure of the past. On the other
hand, historians attach great importance to engaging as many narratives about the past as possible, as this diversity is deemed a necessary condition to reach informed and adequate judgments.\(^{21}\)

The observations about closure bring me to a second point of attention. Memories of violence are often traumatic in nature. Traumatic memories, as I have tried to demonstrate above, tend to undermine the assumption of a linear concept of time that a clear distinction can be made between the present and the past. For victims and survivors, the past does not pass that easily: it continues to haunt the present and retains its full force in the present. It can take a very long time for the haunting, spectral past to slowly recede into a historical past. This explains why some victims and survivors will resist a memorial policy that wants to prematurely close the past in order to ‘move on’, or why some of them become silently disappointed and alienated from the political order established after the violent conflict. From the viewpoint of an inclusive peace this would be problematic. A pluralist memorial policy should therefore take up the challenge of keeping the past open, and tread very lightly when it comes to discourses about closure and moving on. The traumatic nature of many violent memories points to a further challenge for post-violence memorial. Some victims and survivors find it extremely difficult to express their traumatic memories in speech. Not being able to find words that in their eyes do justice to their experience, they remain silent. How painstakingly difficult that may prove to be in practice, memorial policies should try to find ways to address the fact that some people remain silent, and to recognize that these traumatic silences form an integral part of a post-violence memorial culture. A possible element of this effort could be to establish public memorials that provide space for silence and do not transmit explicit narratives about the past, such as the Vietnam Memorial in Washington.

In the image of Hannah Arendt, a peaceful memorial culture is like a table, which simultaneously links people with and separates them from each other.\(^{22}\) The conversations at this table can be acrimonious, as well as interspersed with silences. Nevertheless, in light of an agonistic approach to peace and memorial policy, it is important to invite as many people to the table as possible and to keep the conversation going, not despite but because of the differences and conflicts. A memorial culture that merely establishes a passive peace in which the sensitive, painful and traumatic past is concealed by thick layers of imposed silence, will not suffice to banish all the phantoms from the past. They will keep coming back and determine the order of things.
1 J. Edkins (2003), *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press.
3 Ibid., p. 56.
4 Ibid., p. 60-64.