Changing Memoryscapes in post-Yugoslav Countries: Social (Re)construction of Places of Memory

Introduction

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Changing Memoryscapes in post-Yugoslav Countries: Social (Re)construction of Places of Memory

Ana Ljubojević*

What exactly do we mean when we think of research of and in the post-Yugoslav space, Southeast Europe, the Western Balkans, "the region (region)", the "former country (biuša država)", or "the neighbourhood (sus(j)edstvo)"? Since the break-up of Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), the territory this country once occupied has been intensively labelled with multiple geographical, political and cultural significations. While a spatial turn has impacted the social sciences and humanities globally since the 1980s, there has been comparatively little attention paid to the role of space and geography in the research on identity and nation-building in former Yugoslavia.

Therefore, although most of the post-'89 research dealing with Southeast European studies has concentrated on Yugoslav war/post-war studies and identity studies,1 said research has predominantly focused on political elites and institutions, leaving the agency of individuals and/or groups and their representation unproblematised. Therefore, a bottom-up approach is essential to grasp the other part of the spectrum of the ‘political’ – discursive acts that "involve power, or its inverse, resistance."2

Combining wide-ranging theoretical and methodological approaches within memory studies, this special section brings new perspectives of grassroots memories in the city, thus striving both to bridge the gap in analysis of bottom-up initiatives in the region, and to use notions of space and place as analytical tools in the research. In particular, we wanted to scale-down the focus of our research interests: not only did we opt to step away from an analysis of politics of memory on the institutional level, but we sought instead to engage in initiatives from below that address, defy or dissent from the official politics of memory. Furthermore, we did the same scaling in terms of the spatial dimension and shed light on local, fine-grained territory in which grassroots memories are produced.

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Memory studies in post-Yugoslav countries

Although research in the field of cultural memory has increasingly been applied to the post-Yugoslav region in investigating collective identity, political mobilisation, and its impact on transitional justice processes, much remains to be done. Particularly, the question of how the war of the 1990s is officially remembered has been reduced to a narrative around the nature of war, concentrated on local narratives and processes of dealing with the past, or examined gender-affected memories of the war. The scholarship about remembrance of previous historical periods or exceptional events is even scarcer or ideologically coloured. Again, the vast majority of scholarly work is dedicated to official politics of remembrance and memorialisation practices. For example, commemorating the Great War and interwar period gained momentum on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the end of the First World War and continues to represent an important nation-building element, most notably in contemporary Serbia. Second World War memory and its legacies, entering the domain of cultural memory, are predominantly researched through educational and political frameworks. Therefore, this essay addresses research on the topic of memory which primarily focuses on the Second World War while neglecting the importance of the Great War and interwar period.


policies and toolkits, museum exhibitions or commemorative practices and other mnemonic rituals. Consequently, there is considerable need for more research regarding bottom-up memory processes, everyday memories and alternative lenses and perspectives of cultural memory,\(^9\) such as texts, performances and other forms of non-institutionalised initiatives.

Social anthropology has already underlined that memorialisation practices, and commemorations of war events in particular, are used first of all to legitimise the ruling ideology and build a state/national/ethnic identity. From the perspective of the state, the goals of public commemorations and memorials more often relate to nation-building and defining an “imagined community”\(^10\). Particularly Michael Billig’s theoretical framework of “banal nationalism”\(^11\) seems significant, arguing that national identity is predominantly produced and reproduced in a variety of social fields and cultural forms. This performative character of contemporary identity formation\(^12\) draws attention to its dynamic character and the way in which it frequently draws on symbolic repertoire from popular symbolic images, rituals, and sites. The research presented in this special section, however, aspires to overcome nationally-oriented memory studies focusing on politics of identities. We follow Brubaker's approach in opposing "taken for granted ‘groupist’ constructivist paradigm"\(^13\) and incorporating everyday contexts in which people "create their meanings of social context, and adjust their actions accordingly"\(^14\).

In addition, the rationale for a bottom-up approach to collective memory comes from an aspiration to bridge the existing normative gap: even though the memory studies theory underlines attempts to construct a common cultural identity, i.e. “presuppose a [...] desire for cultural homogeneity, consistency, and predictability,”\(^15\) the practice reveals a different state of affairs: contested memories, embracing different interpretations of the past that confront one another,\(^16\) produce divergent vectors of memory even within the same social group. In the case of nations, there is no single collective memory either; rather, there are many voices that over time achieve some cohesive clarity. Recent

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theoretical insights directed towards a new "transcultural turn" in memory studies\(^\text{17}\) emphasise the importance of memory migration, mediation and new media, where carriers, media, contents, forms, and practices of memory "travel and transform through time and space, across social, linguistic and political borders".\(^\text{18}\) Our aim is to engage precisely with the dynamic model of the social production of memory and demonstrate under which circumstances different actors use meanings of place while challenging or negotiating with official politics of memory.

**Memory and space**

By introducing the notions of space and place into our theoretical and methodological toolkit, the scholarly work presented in this special section analyses collective memory as a connector between the physical and the social. Articles grouped in this collection analyse how grassroots mnemonic practices are related, impacted or trigger on their own changes and the (re)construction of what is broadly understood as *lieux de mémoire*. We thus engage not only with material objects as carriers of memory, but also symbolic spaces that, under given circumstances, also occupy material, physical places.

Our research on memoryscapes in Southeast Europe underlines several common aspects analysed thoroughly in the papers by Nikolina Židek, Gruia Bădescu, Naum Trajanovski and Ana Ljubojević. First, while keeping in mind the context of official historical narratives and politics of memory, we track the heterogeneous and conflictive nature of grassroots memory in the city as well as discursive struggle present in the public domain. In this sense, we focus on memories in conflict, i.e. "opposition of 'memory against memory' [...] each one with its own forgetfulness".\(^\text{19}\) Second, the spatial aspect of the mnemonic practices is especially underlined, as we are dealing with vernacular memory and changes in everyday practices in proximity of the sites of memory. In addition, although we opted for a specific geographical area, we did not want to engage solely with one specific "memory event" like the 1990s wars or the Second World War. Instead, such an approach gave us the chance to explore better generational aspects of memoryscapes, such as whether and in which ways transgenerational transmission of trauma and memory occurs. Finally, the variety of case studies should set a basis for expanding our theoretical and empirical findings not only inside the specific (and relatively narrow) area of Southeast Europe, but also in comparable settings where defying mnemonic initiatives from below exist.

**The content of the special section**

We have focused on memory as the converging point where material and imaginary spaces intertwine. Although each paper comes from a different


starting position, dealing either with material or imaginary spaces, eventually they all arrive at this point of interception. Our main task was to define how memory is communicated with reference to space and place, and what the dynamic strategies of creation and interaction with the already present collective memories are.

Gruia Bădescu’s paper offers an analysis of the urban reconstruction of the areas of the Serbian capital of Belgrade affected by the 1999 NATO intervention. The author not only focuses on the city level acts of memory, but enters into discussion about memory entrepreneurs "from below", i.e. goes beyond the political elites as the main memory entrepreneurs. In other words, he examines the role of urban planners and architects in the process of memory production and the creation of official politics of memory. At the same time, Bădescu introduces categories of materiality, space and memory, notions that will be repeatedly used, thought of and questioned in all five contributions.

Theatre as a space of freedom of expression, but also as a space of memory production, is the main topic of Nikolina Židek’s paper. While analysing the historical development of alternative or contesting memory production in post-1991 Croatia, this contribution questions ways of dealing and working through the 1991-1995 war trauma. The author considers the theatre not only as a limited space with strict material borders, but tries to grasp its potential to "come out", both physically and symbolically, into the outer world.

The potential of rituals in creating mnemohistory is the focus of Naum Trajanovski’s paper on commemorations of Maria Buneva in North Macedonia. The author explains how the subject of a counter-mnemonic practice became part of institutionalised memory. Unlike other bottom-up mobilisations described in this special section, in the case of Skopje commemoration this marginal event was used and adopted for a specific political project.

Ruptures and continuities of mnemonic rituals are the research interest of the last paper in this collection. Ana Ljubojević analyses the collective memory of Vukovar in Croatia through a prism of cultural trauma. Moreover, emotional investment and spatial mobility engagement are shown in the case of the Zagreb to Vukovar cycling marathon, organised on the eve of the official commemoration.

**Bibliography**


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