


# Resistant pasts versus mnemonic hegemony: On the power relations of collective memory

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## Abstract

The politics of history and memory in any society are determined by the relations of forces between hegemonic master narratives, defiant counter-memories, and silent majorities whose historical experience is rarely articulated in public. Based on Antonio Gramsci, Michel Foucault, Ernesto Laclau, as well as postcolonial critique, this article explains historico-political processes through a specified reading of hegemony theory. Two common, though by no means unambiguous, terms are reloaded with specific definitions: politics of history as the political agency directed at the establishment of specific representations of the past, and memory cultures as the structural frameworks for these politics. This approach sheds light on the relationship between official and group-specific politics of history within defined memory cultures: the possibly conflictual interaction between those who interpret certain events, inscribe them into a historical canon and thus make them points of historical reference, and those who are the carriers, consumers, reproducers, but also challengers of this history.

## Keywords

Counter-memory, Foucault, Gramsci, hegemony, Laclau, memory culture, politics of history

## An introductory example

The intersecting paths of collective memory tend to draw a tricky map. Their triumphant gateways may be deceiving, their seemingly reliable boulevards treacherous. They are, as William S. Burroughs (1987) wrote of the roads to those promising Western Lands stretching beyond the logical terrain of academic history, “devious, unpredictable. Today’s easy passage may be tomorrow’s death trap” (p. 151). While the canons of grand historical narratives, the monuments to bygone heroes, and the memorials for the victims of genocidal campaigns claim to provide firm orientation for strong collective identities, we have often seen such grand histories deconstructed, monuments toppled, and the most sacred victim groups re-clothed as perpetrators and caught in struggles of competitive victimhood. Moreover, between these well-marked pathways there exist wide, uncharted territories of historical experience that are not recorded on these maps of memory at all. Why

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is this so? I argue that the power relations inherent in collective memory can best be captured by an adapted theory of hegemony.

In the thinking of Antonio Gramsci, and later Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, and others, hegemony is the ability of a dominant group or class to impose their interpretations of reality—or the interpretations that support their interests—as the only thinkable way to view the world. The dominated groups come to accept the interests of the dominant ones as the natural state of the world. Hegemony thus establishes one particular narrative as a quasi-natural universality and delegitimizes alternative forms of reasoning. It is the successful creation of this powerful common sense of reality that includes most people in a social group while sapping those who think—or remember—outside the box. For example, after 1989, it has become all but outrageous to argue, in mainstream media and discourse, outside the paradigms of market liberalism, as its alternatives (communism, socialism) have been proclaimed historical errors that failed to survive the evolutionary competition of ideas. The corresponding memory practice is the delegitimization of the “Communist experience” within the master narratives of European history.

In fact, few instances of accelerated historical development and memory production illustrate my case better than the end of the Cold War in Europe and the disappearance of the Iron Curtain. As I have analyzed elsewhere (Molden, 2010, 2014), these events came along with a pervasive politics of history and memory that embedded the political change in narratives depicting it as a historical necessity or at the very least a strong desirability. The various anniversaries of “1989” saw many solemn and euphoric speeches about the reunification of Europe, but they also gave rise to a series of evaluations meant to ground the high-flying expectations of a universal “end of history,” a reconciliation of all antagonisms that the great shifts had provoked. Politicians, academics, and intellectuals celebrated the East’s “re-Europeanization” and “return to Europe.” In this manner, Western Europe externalized the history of state socialism and totalitarian regimes and heralded the victory of its own socio-economic model. Within the formerly communist countries, revamped historical museums rolled out a similar version of the post-communist past that often did away with the nuances of historical experience under communism. And on the other side of the Atlantic, the US Senate congratulated Central Europeans on “the significance and value of [...] freedom and the dignity of citizens” reclaimed in the “history events” of 1989, but it also firmly linked its felicitation to these countries’ “determination to join [...] NATO and the European Union” (Congressional Records—Senate, Senate Concurrent Resolution 69, 3 November 1999, 28116–28117).

Parallel to these triumphant commemorations, however, a cohort of social scientists and historians, on both sides of the former Iron Curtain, gathered the stories of those who had lived through the Cold War. Methodologically grounded in oral history, everyday history, or qualitative textual analysis, this type of research directs our attention toward the peculiarities of historical perception. The memories these studies collected quite often contradict the dominant narratives endorsed by school textbooks and in political and media discourses (Dimou et al., 2014). Contrary to prevalent narratives of the Cold War as a crisis-ridden period during which one half of Europe was held hostage by totalitarian regimes while the other was free but lived in constant fear of nuclear extermination, most Europeans recall this part of their lives as peaceful and stable. Life under socialism was not a prison sentence, but allowed for normality and happiness. In the West, on the other hand, nuclear threat was not thoroughly determining, and there was indeed discontent with the political system. The teleological narrations of post-1945 Europe as the eventual unification of two separate yet internally homogenous blocks have the political function of a salvific history: the history of the victors, as it were (Molden, 2010). This example allows identifying the large communities of experience whose memories remain unarticulated and—despite the above-mentioned academic efforts and eventual political invocations of polyphony—ignored by the grand narrations of European history.

Given the constructed and political nature of collective remembrance, hegemony theory offers an enlightening and, surprisingly, not yet systemized perspective on memory. I propose a concept of mnemonic hegemony that highlights discursive agency in specific political contexts (interests), the public adscription of narrative credibility, and access to media and spheres of social knowledge production and signification; a concept that encompasses not only the competitive relations between hegemonic and proactively counter-hegemonic agencies often described as memory wars, but also the coexisting communities of passive remembrance; and that describes the interactions between these fields. Thus, approaching these conflicts through the concept of mnemonic hegemony allows for a more encompassing analysis of the dialectics between memory and politics.

## **Mnemonic hegemony theory: contingency, insurrection, materiality**

### *Memory as a layering of contingent sediments*

I opened this essay with metaphors about mnemonic maps and pathways of memory. Indeed, spatial metaphors in historiography like “realms of memory” or “sites of memory” often move horizontally along the geographical surface of the present. In order to redefine memory culture in terms of hegemony, we quite literally have to dig deeper into the “layers of time” (Koselleck, 2000) where the deposits of historical experience and discourse can be found. These sedimentations constitute the discursive strata where the contingent origins of memory and historical narration are hidden. It is a central feature of mnemonic hegemony that the bases of the always-specific constitution of the present are depicted as necessities and that they are essentialized as inevitabilities rather than shown in their contingency. In fact, for theorists of hegemony, the necessary is necessarily and subversively contingent and the field of the political, as Ernesto Laclau (1990) writes, is constituted through the rediscovery of these sediments in the “moment of antagonism where the undecidable nature of the alternatives and their resolution through power relations becomes fully visible” (p. 34–35). The past as we know it from history is depicted as the only possible one because this serves to justify the present order, but this arrangement is never entirely stable. Elizabeth Jelin notes that it “is at this point of complex intersection and convergence, in that present where the past is the space of experience and the future is the horizon of expectations, where human action is produced.” Conversely,

it is in human agency that the past [...] is activated. Memory, then, is produced whenever and wherever there are subjects who share a culture, social agents who try to ‘materialize’ the meanings of the past in different cultural products. (Jelin, 2003: 4 and 24–25)

The central component of Gramsci’s theory is the description of power as the ability to impose the particular interests of the ruling group (for Gramsci, class) as universal values, while the ruled accept the social distribution of power and the political system as quasi-natural. Power is established not only by means of coercion, but also by the cultural consensus between ruling and ruled, which—and this is crucial—conceals the historicity of the present and the contingency of its historical development. Ruling groups achieve this only by blocking out the fact that historical events might always have turned out different or by claiming that any different outcome would be a worse-case scenario. They stabilize power by the successful establishment of a supposedly teleological and linear historical narration. This constitutes a characteristic of collective remembrance: “Collective memory can be described as a layered field of sedimentations which’s contingent origin in the dispute of competing definitions of the past has been forgotten, after a certain version of the past had imposed itself and become hegemonic” (Marchart, 2005: 25).

Contingency and undecidability are the two categories of openness that are constitutive of hegemony. As Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001) point out at the very beginning of their seminal work on post-Marxist hegemony theory, the condition for any form of hegemony is that one discourse is elevated above others, not because it is superior but because the most powerful group put it there (p. xii). In terms of memory studies, hegemony is built by prioritizing some memories over others according to the specific power constellations of a given society. There is no *one* history because every historical event can have different meanings, can be ignored, or interpreted from radically different perspectives.

### *The insurrectional function of counter-memory*

Michel Foucault's thoughts on counter-memory take a similar interest in the hidden contingency of historical foundations, calling for "insurrectionary genealogies [that] exploit the openness of our (indefinitely multiple) pasts" (Medina, 2011: 27). Foucault (2003) looks at the "new history" that emerged in early modernity and challenged "Roman history," in which memory had had the function of upholding power:

In this new historical discourse, the function of memory acquires a whole new meaning. [...] Basically, what the new history is trying to show is that power, the mighty, the kings, and the laws have concealed the fact that they were born of the contingency and injustice of battles. (p. 72)

Foucault's (2003) critical genealogies are "insurrection against the centralizing power-effects" (p. 9)—anti-sciences or, in mnemonic terms, anti-histories, but not yet *counter*-histories. Counter-histories, on the other hand, are histories created from this sort of genealogy and directed against the hegemonic memory canon. They combine the erudition of historiography with the insurrectional power of memory. José Medina comments on this combination:

Counter-histories are centered around those experiences and memories that have not been heard and integrated in official histories. [They] are possible because there are people who remember against the grain, people whose memories do not fit the historical narratives available. Counter-histories feed off such counter-memories and at the same time transform them, revitalizing practices of counter-memory and offering them new discursive resources to draw on. (Medina, 2011: 12)

Counter-memory is yet another blend of erudition and memory. "By combining linear history and orally transmitted popular history, counter-memory combines the best of both modes" (Lipsitz, 1990: 228). According to Foucault (1977) himself counter-memory means "a transformation of history into a totally different form of time" (p. 160), and therefore, it is completely open for what will be found in the sediments of historical experience. In a negative sense, it is "the absence of memory in archeological inquiry, not the consideration of alternative memories" (Hutton, 1993: 203, note 20).

When analyzing the links between counter-memory and the power centers of knowledge production Foucault—and in his tradition Medina—speaks of power relations, echoing Gramsci's "rapporti di forza," and, like the poststructuralist approach of Laclau and Mouffe, emphasizes the plurality, polyphony, and heterogeneity among the agencies of both power and resistance. He shows the power struggles between different knowledge frameworks, that is, epistemic fields that elevate some into hegemonic positions while "subjugating" others. "Subjugated knowledges" are formerly accepted yet marginalized "blocks of historical knowledges," or else they are forms of knowledge deemed incorrect or underdeveloped by the dominant knowledge system of a respective time. They may rise in an "insurrection of subjugated knowledges" against hegemonic knowledge/power systems

(Foucault, 2003: 7). Foucault's famous example of the race war discourse in England develops the model of counter-history along a dichotomy of violent repression of one group by another. As I will argue below, however, the subjugation or repression of large memory cultures is not necessarily executed along such clear lines of conflict. Rather, it often happens through the silent consent within hegemonic relations of mnemonic power. Subjugated knowledge may resist its subordinate position within hegemonic systems or, of course, they may not and remain silent. This second dimension addresses the unarticulated memories and passive communities of memory that were mentioned in the introduction and will receive more attention further below.

### *The material dimensions of memory*

Mnemonic power relations determine the (non-)representation of social experience in cultural memory. Social conditions of life as defined by belonging to certain segments of a given society—be they class, milieu, strata, or others—are crucial for the development of an individual's or group's specific representations of the past. Accordingly, collective memory has been explained by Marie-Claire Lavabre as “an interaction between politics of memory—that can be called ‘historical memory’—and souvenirs— ‘common memory’ of what has been lived in a community” (Lavabre, n.d.). The material dimension of memory is crucial. It is through personal experience and/or through materially manifest social relations that such significance comes to exist, in the “dialectic of experience and discourse,” as Marc Steinberg (1996: 18) puts it, or in the words of Jonathan Joseph (2002): “Hegemony cannot be understood simply in terms of the struggles between different agents; the material causes of hegemony must be sought. Agents are involved in relations, both with each other, and with social structures and practices” (p. 39). There is always a connection between historical experience, the structural context of power relations, and the history politics of a time. It corresponds to the relationship between history as the event or process that is experienced, memory cultures as the given structure, and the concrete agency of those who want to maintain or change this cultural framework as well as those who just live in it passively.

This material experience is expressed in language and narratives that embody historical memory. Gramsci (2011) stressed the importance of the politics of history within hegemonic systems at the very beginning of the emergence of the concept in his writing:

In reality, every political movement creates a language of its own, that is, it participates in the general development of a distinct language, introducing new terms, enriching existing terms with a new content, creating metaphors, using historical names to facilitate the comprehension and the assessment of particular contemporary political situations, etc., etc. (first notebook § 43, 126)

Even though this well-known quote seems to suggest a “purely discursive” reading of historical discourse in politics, the impact of such discourse is linked to historical experience. Gramsci (2011) emphasized the inseparability of language and the material world: “Every language is an integral conception of the world and not just an outer garment that functions indifferently as a form for any content” (fifth notebook §123, 366). This once again points to the importance of a social history perspective on the material dimension of memory production. In fact, Laclau and Mouffe (2001) “affirm the material dimension of every discursive structure” (p. 94) and explain that some “discursive forms” of experience are in fact the manifestation of “the final impossibility of any stable difference and, thus, of any ‘objectivity’” (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: 108).

Marc Steinberg, in his study of movements of English weavers in the 19th century, provides a telling example of the political potential of language, especially in terms of appropriation. The political and economic situation and the experience of living in a specific social context drove

marginalized or politically not-yet organized groups to develop a new language. Even as they used the vocabulary available to them from the dominant social groups, they appropriated these elements and came up with an essentially new discourse. Steinberg's argument builds on the notion from British cultural Marxism that a culture of common or analogous experiences—exploitation, repression, and the struggle against it—had laid the ground for a political culture of the working class with its own identity and forms of discourse. And, one could add, with its specific representations and interpretations of history, particular narrations and other discursive forms to make sense of the past, employing them for the formation of political agency. Steinberg's emphasis on the dialogical process of language is strongly indebted to the Russian semiotician Mikhail Bakhtin: "While dominant classes limit and channel conceptions of class identity and collective consciousness, the dialogic nature of discourses always contains the potential for subversion" (Steinberg, 1996: 7, 1997). Steinberg looks at working-class attempts to establish counter-hegemony by appropriation of the opponents' discourse, but his observations equally apply to the construction of historical imaginaries and the ensuing representations of history (mnemonic utterances, one might say with Bakhtin). They endow meaning, both on subjective and on collective levels, by linking individual or group-specific experiences with those of others and specifically with well-elaborated and therefore more-or-less dominant discourse.

But, however important Bakhtin's dialogical concept of language and of polyphony is for the understanding of heterogeneous cultures of remembrance, his semiotic definition of culture is limited when applied to our context. As Jürgen Pieters (2001) observed, this "makes it hard for Bakhtin to stress both the *fact* and the manner *in which* every cultural constellation constitutes a physical battleground where different groups fight for political and cultural hegemony" (p. 158). Mnemonic hegemony theory aims to capture precisely this intersection between material structures, social experience, and discursive practices. It emphasizes that any sign, word, or memory can be multi-vocal and can be put to use differently by different speakers, according to their experience, context, and needs.

## Memory cultures and the politics of history

### *Memory cultures as a field of social agency*

Through its focus on the plurality of struggles and plurivectoral relations of forces, hegemony theory replaces the commonly bipolar perspective with a more open, polyphonic view on mnemonic agency. The counter-mnemonic groups within this polyphony can build coalitions to destabilize the hegemonic discourse. Very often, hegemonic power changes are linked to crisis events. For Alain Badiou, an "event" is a transgression of that which can be said and expressed in the dominant discourse (the hegemonic order)—something about which the prevailing knowledge system cannot decide, not even subsequently (Badiou, 2005). Such an event—like the French Revolution for European modernity or, as Aditya Sarkar pointed out, the Bubonic Plague for labor relations in Bombay (Sarkar, 2014)—is never integrated into the dominant discourse, but radically changes it through the recurrent inscription of disturbing voices into the hegemonic discursive instances. It is interesting to consider the order of causality between political event and discourse. According to José Medina (2011: 21f), counter-memory emerges when political upheavals allow for it. I disagree with this causality between counter-memory and political agency, because at times counter-mnemonic agency actually *creates* the political conditions for change. Vivid examples can be found in the memory activists in Guatemala or the famous Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Argentina who contributed to toppling the military dictatorships in these countries rather than emerged in the wake of the regime change. We must also take into account differences between

dictatorial and democratic societies. What seems to be indispensable for significant changes in mnemonic power relations, however, is a certain instability of the dominant political order that imposes memory.

If no structural crisis accelerates the process of change, then these coalitions have to develop slowly in order to be sufficiently consolidated to replace the dominant discourse. Gramsci would have thought of this as a mnemonic “war of position.” Once the balance of mnemonic power is changed, however, no unified counter-discourse is automatically established. At the end of the counter-hegemonic process, there most likely will not be *one* common discourse of all the formerly subaltern memory groups. Much rather, fractions among them will persist and the eventually formed new hegemonic memory culture will not represent all those involved in the “memory revolution.” The question is, then, whether a balanced, symmetric polyphony—a truly heterogeneous memory culture, a memory *multiculture* so to speak—could ever be maintained for a longer time. Or, if a new dominant memory is formed, which of its children the “memory revolution” will devour and which will prevail.

Because the temporary stability created by mnemo-hegemonic shifts is never complete, and because community is never entirely homogenous—or, as Laclau and Mouffe (2001) somewhat dramatically put it, society is impossible (p. 108)—tensions between different groups (often with opposed collective memories) do persist within the collective. These tensions allow changes in power relations and thereby re-arrange the cultural coordinates of the broader community. The reactivation of historical openness and the heretical challenge to master narratives originate in moments of hegemonic instability when marginalized or unheard counter-voices force the re-negotiation of power relations and of their historical causes. Mnemonic hegemonic theory explains seemingly or temporarily constant social structures and collective identities as inter-social relations of power that can be altered by active individuals and groups. Gramsci calls the social medium in which these subjects act “culture” and understands hegemony as a constellation of consent of dominated groups with the interests of the dominant groups. I suggest to use this Gramscian concept of culture to arrive at a new definition of “memory culture” as the always specific and contingent dimension of all social realms in which the meaning of the past is negotiated (Molden, 2010: 217).

Gramsci’s understanding of culture—employed and adapted by Marxist historians and critics such as Raymond Williams, E.P. Thompson, and the new historicists—escapes the economic determinism of orthodox Marxism-Leninism. While rooted in the sphere of material production (base), culture unfolds in the superstructural realm of state and civil society with certain autonomy. Culture, then, acquires a wide and dynamic definition of an embracing social process that includes all symbolic and material thinking, acting and negotiating practices within a defined major group. Projected to remembrance, culture is the sum of all communication processes with regard to the reflexivity of collective knowledge and memory, as Jan Assmann (2008) put it, “is knowledge with an identity-index, it is knowledge about oneself, one’s own diachronic identity” (p. 114). Marc Angenot (2004), borrowing from Gramsci and Bakhtin, conceptualizes culture as social discourse that

legitimizes and publicizes certain views, tastes, opinions, and themes. It represses others into the chimerical, the extravagant. [...] In the social discourse you find in coexistence all the soft forms of social domination of classes, sexes, privileges, and statutory powers. (p. 105)

These cohabitating elements of societies are in a constant tension and sometimes antagonism with each other, albeit contained within a “hegemony that mark[s] the boundaries of the ‘thinkable’ [through] the normative imposition of the legitimate language” (Angenot, 2004: 102).

In its post-structural turn, hegemony theory takes a more radical stance toward antagonism and replaces Gramsci's aim of a new hegemony (that of the working class), and the resulting desirability of complete emancipation, with the ideal of a permanent division and tension—because, according to Laclau (2000), “full realization of freedom would be equivalent to the death of freedom, for all possibility of dissent would have been eliminated from it. Social division, antagonism and its necessary consequence—power—are the true conditions of a freedom” (p. 208). Angenot (2004) also appreciates the importance of antagonisms: “A culture [...] is thoroughly made out of regulated antagonisms between conflicting images, concepts, cognitive discrepancies, and incompatibilities that are still relatively stabilized without ever reaching a state of equilibrium” (p. 102). Within the relative stability of hegemony, Angenot identifies several constitutive elements, one of which—universal taboos—is particularly interesting in mnemonic terms:

What we perceive as universal taboos and censorships that mark out the limits of the sayable, the thinkable. Discursive hegemony does not only provide canonic forms of expression and compelling themes; it also represses certain “things” into the unthinkable, the absurd, the chimerical. (Angenot, 2004: 108)

The “historical limits of the thinkable and sayable” that Angenot (2010) describes within the social discourse of culture are quite analog to the limits of the socially ‘memorable’ within memory cultures.

Understood as a dynamic and operational structural term, memory cultures do not represent a static condition in the sense of classical structuralism but the flexible framing of a field of political agency. Not unlike Bourdieu's (1984) concept of habitus—“a structured and structuring structure” (p. 171)—memory cultures can be changed by political actors, just as these actors' actions are essentially determined by the memory cultures, in mutual interdependence or in “interaction between structures and agents” (Joseph, 2002: 38). In certain analogy to the workings of common sense in Gramscian hegemony, habitus is created through mimesis, that is, “not an intentional act of imitation but a spontaneous form of identification” (Medina, 2006: 107). According to Bourdieu, memory is already inscribed in

the process of reproduction—a practical reactivation which is opposed to both memory and knowledge [...] The body believes what it plays at [...] It does not represent what it performs, it does not memorize the past, it enacts the past, bringing it back to life. (Bourdieu, 1990: 73)

José Medina (2006) stresses both the fact that “this cultural memory incorporated in the habitus is not a conscious remembering” (p. 108), and the role that the exclusion of certain experience (amnesia, forgetting) plays in the construction of cultural memory. For Bourdieu (1977), the social “unconscious” is always in the process of being produced by “the forgetting of history that history itself produces by incorporating the objective structures it produces in the second natures of habitus” (p. 78–79). It is made of the very sedimentations of the forgotten contingencies of history mentioned above. We can follow Michael Burawoy and Jens Kastner in noting that Bourdieu's concept of habitus is, then, an astute description of the incorporation of hegemony into the subject and yet it is the pessimistic flipside of (neo-)Gramscian optimism concerning the reach of agency and the subjects' ability to change the structures and modes of symbolic domination (Burawoy, 2012: 189; Kastner, 2012). Together, these dimensions address the structural conditions in which specific power relations develop. A memory culture is defined by the frames of historical reference common to certain communities of experience and/or tradition who share a critical mass of content, patterns of interpretation, and rituals of collective memory.



### *The role of media in memory cultures*

This hegemonic notion of culture highlights, in terms of political power, the role played by media as discursive tools. For Gramsci, all of the realms where memory is being forged into history belong to the ideological sphere of superstructures, especially the institutions of civil society that he had partly elevated out of Marx' basement, so to speak. Civil society is the non-state part of the superstructure that reproduces hegemony through culture and comprises schools and academic institutions, media, artistic production, and so on. All these contribute to the consolidation and stabilization of hegemony insofar as they reproduce and actualize conceptions framed in terms of common sense and seemingly unquestionable assumptions dressed up as universal truths. The deconstruction of the interactions between civil society and state in overlapping public spheres and the role of media within this relation is particularly important for the leading media—both national media and those with an international impact such as CNN or Al Jazeera—that are instrumental in the upholding of hegemonic culture.

Understanding media discourse requires a historicized notion of the cultural frames of common sense. Stuart Hall described this, with reference to Gramsci, as a

network of elements, premises and assumptions drawn from the longstanding and historically-elaborated discourses which had accreted over the years, into which the whole history of the social formation had sedimented, and which now constituted a reservoir of themes and premises on which, for example, broadcasters could draw for the work of signifying new and troubling events. (Hall, 1982: 73)

The analysis of media discourse is indispensable for grasping the omission or manipulation of memory in the service of a hegemonic discourse about meaningful events (or rather, events to be endowed with meaning), because social hegemony is being produced through the channels of civil society. Although today's omnipresent use of the term differs from that of Gramsci, it is interesting that after 1989 it has been precisely the structures of civil society (education, media, non-state organizations) that were targeted by Western actors in order to influence the "common sense" in Eastern Europe. Examples include George Soros' multiple initiatives for journalists and civil society institutions, the creation of the Central European University, international writing competitions among school children on memory like that of the German Körber Foundation, the creation of European history schoolbooks, and so on. But some of these initiatives failed or rather backfired. We can think of ultra-nationalism in Hungary and the Baltic states, combative Catholic conservatism in Poland and its anti-Communist witch-hunts, or the philo-Stalinist imperial power play in Russia.

But Hall's statement is also applicable to more group-specific local media as well as the infinitely more polycentric new social media that transcend the monovectorality of source-transmitter-receiver of the Shannon-Weaver model (Erll, 2004). According to some media scholars, the streamlining of popular memory is mostly a feature of authoritarian regimes. Martin Conboy argues that, while Bakhtin's concept of dialogue stresses open-ended discursive interactions, "within authoritarian systems there are attempts to close this down to an overriding perspective, a truth" (Conboy, 2002: 19). In terms of modern memory production, the latter may also apply, if in a more moderate way, to democracies and their "soft" imposition of common frames of thought. In pluralistic democracies like the European Union (EU) or the United States, the right to, and the political desirability of, mnemonic polyphony is portrayed as core a value, but adjacent structures may really guide toward homogeneity. David Simpson made this point regarding the *New York Times* coverage of 9/11, deconstructing the "flag-waving" national remembrance of a crisis event (Simpson, 2006: 39). Roger Simon, in his article on collective memory in the Historical-Critical

Dictionary of Marxism, picks up the same example to illustrate the production of consensus and identification, that is, assent to the dominant system, through common memory: “[Media memory practices] also serve to eliminate those memories from social memory that might get in the way of the prevailing hegemony” (Simon, 2010: 1125). In their introduction to his article, the editors of the dictionary ask to what degree media discourse plays into the hands of what Althusser (1971) called the “ideological state apparatus.” Simon follows up to this question in his analysis of patriotic media events and Debord-esque spectacles, especially the example of 9/11: “The media, which safeguard the hegemonic narratives about 9/11 and its impacts, function as a state apparatus that inscribes the ‘event’ ever more into a serial emotional structure of fear” (Simon, 2010: 1126). Similar dynamics could be observed about the memory of the Cold War in Europe after 1989 (Molden, 2010). Events like these, unlike the game-changing events that Badiou thinks of, serve to reaffirm the ruling discourse through binding and streamlined memory, although they too may “alter the ‘inner life’ of culture” (Simon, 2007). Counter-memory, then, becomes mnemonic agency against the culture of spectacle.

Access to and control over the means of communication and diffusion of historical narratives are of utmost importance for the establishment and maintenance of mnemonic hegemony. The double-condition that “memory operates under the pressure of challenges and alternatives” (Starn and Davis, 1989: 2) makes the role of media so crucial. The material foundations and structural conditions of memory cultures notwithstanding, the representations of the past are produced in a contingent process in which the decisive factors are the access to material and symbolic capital, to the public sphere and its media, as well as the public recognition of one’s competence in the interpretation of history. Like Gramsci and Bourdieu, Elizabeth Jelin speaks of the “power of words” and their institutional cachet:

Memory as a narrative social construction involves studying the narrator and the institutions that grant or deny power to the voice of the narrator and authorize him or her to speak, since as Pierre Bourdieu notes, the effectiveness of performative speech is proportional to the authority of the speaker. (Jelin, 2003: 23)

The distribution of these elements strongly determines who dominates the respective arena of historical discourse by establishing and, however temporarily, maintaining discursive hegemony in the politics of memory and collective identity. The politics of history and official discourses of memory produced by the elite’s ideological apparatus can be—but do not always have to be—cut off from real experience. Counter-memory on the other hand—while possibly also constructed as an idealist myth—is more likely to have to rely on a material basis of experience, given its lack of strong media support and other amplifying and reifying tools. In history politics, as in any process of political conservation or mobilization, the access to media and other means of public articulation is essential in determining who is able to maintain a regnant historical perception or persuade a significant and maybe decisive part of the public into changing it.

### *Politics of history as agency in a hegemonic field*

The specific agency at play within memory cultures can generally be defined as “politics of history.” They are politics of history, and not of memory, because despite their group-specificity and grounding in particular interests and experience, they are meant to become “history,” that is, hegemonic narratives within memory cultures. As agency in the hegemonic field of history production, politics of history can thus be defined as any social action that is essentially based on historical references and/or tries to influence the interpretation and representation of history. Hence,

politics of history is not limited to the field of official state or supranational politics (in most cases, the power centers of historical knowledge production), which would exclude other powerful groups of historico-political agency like critical academia or marginalized ethnic groups that operate in the realms of civil society. Nor does it comprise all forms of memory, as there is no or little mnemo-political agency in those communicative memories that do not challenge prevalent historical narrations, even if these historical narrations are contrary to such experience. To put it in terms of hegemony theory again, “a hegemony or hegemonic project should [...] be seen as an articulated attempt to preserve or transform [cultural] structures and relations” (Joseph, 2002: 39). Because the relations of forces are neither permanent nor completely stable, powerful actors may lose ground and influence in the interpretation of history, while formerly silent communities of experience may “suddenly” challenge the regnant master narratives. Yet, those who are neither trying to strengthen nor to defy a dominant interpretation are also still part of the correlation of forces in the political field of historical representation: as consumers or ignorers of specific history politics, as potential recruits, and, most importantly, as the carriers of alternative, though not yet articulated narrations of history.

But this does not mean that the content of their memories cannot be political, as Tanya Petrović has shown in her analysis of the nostalgic historical discourse of textile factory workers in post-Yugoslav Slovenia. Petrović objects to the widespread dismissal of such nostalgic narratives as “losers’ discourse” and in contrast points out their function as a specific cultural practice of creating meaning. Nevertheless, it is not a historical narrative deliberately composed to challenge a dominant discourse (Petrović, 2010). Such representations, like the positive memories of life under Communism in Eastern Europe, do not necessarily seek empowerment vis-à-vis an official history by which they do not feel represented. These are not mnemonic rebellions, but the communicative memories of different experiences of the same events, different from those woven into the sense-making epos of the respective nation or other collective. They coexist—sometimes peacefully, sometimes uneasily—with the master narratives of their time.

Under certain circumstances, such a non-competitive, that is, not counter-hegemonic, collective memory held by a certain group during a particular period could well be transformed into a counter-discourse defying prevalent historical perceptions. Elizabeth Jelin (2003) notes that in opposition to (national) master narratives “there will be others who—whether in form of private oral stories or as practices of resistance to power—will offer alternative narratives and meanings of the past, threatening the national consensus that is being imposed” (p. 29). But what if the passive “third sector” in the field of mnemonic hegemony does not rise to mnemonic agency? The dominant historical narrative may just tell a story that differs from the communicative memory of the majority, but without hurting their interests. Or contact with the dominant narratives may be uneasy, yet complementary—sometimes converging, sometimes conflicting, but devoid of open clashes. Or the memory of many may literally be outside the hegemonic culture because the order of discourse is *built* on their silence. Theirs is a “knowledge that is local, regional, or differential” (Foucault, 2003: 8), “knowledges that are not articulated or voiced in the *proper* way, knowledges without accepted credentials,” and “the locally scattered memories that were never allowed to amount to more than unqualified and dismissible experiences” (Medina, 2011: 17, 19). The speechlessness or silence of subaltern groups, even if historically they have acted as important political subjects, is related to the inarticulate communities of memory that, in the dominant understanding, do not *exist* unless they are articulated by oral historians or others. Is there a necessity, a “historical interest” in the articulation of their memory? And where does the possibility for their discursive empowerment reside? Is it the duty of memory scholars to recover these memories? Or will this just instrumentalize these silent memory cultures to the benefit of academic careers or political tactics?

### *Resistant pasts? History and the articulation of subaltern memory*

What Foucault was searching for in his genealogies were histories of struggle and thus pasts that are resistant in a twofold way: On the one hand, they are histories of resistance against hegemonic domination; on the other, they contain historical perceptions that resist their incorporation into the grand narratives of the ruling classes. In Foucaultian terms, hegemonic memory can be defined as experiences and memories transformed into a knowledge system, as a filtered and normalized canon. If this is so, then a memory that is not yet part of a refined history/knowledge system is a subaltern memory in the sense of Spivak, an unarticulated system of communicative and cultural references to the past and common experiences. Despite the recovery of “ordinary people’s” everyday experience through oral history projects and testimonial or memorial literature, the functional position of this group of “ordinary people” within the power system of memory has not been convincingly captured: the silent majority that, by (Gramscian) consent, remains subjugated to a hegemonic discourse and does not articulate the heterogeneity produced by Foucault’s counter-history. Foucault declares that the agency of unmasking hegemonic structures lies in the hand of intellectual critique and calls upon scholarship to empower these forms of knowledge, to revive them. This, however, is precisely the point that Gayatri Spivak took issue with in her famous essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”: the grand gesture of the (Western) intellectual, academia, the critic, and so on, to assume the act of articulation on behalf of the subaltern.

Spivak’s (1999) analysis of “the surreptitious subject of power and desire marked by the transparency of the intellectual” (p. 265) is clearly directed against the barely camouflaged complicity of Western progressive intellectuals with postcolonial hegemonic structures, and “resistant pasts” as defined above can clearly be found in the history of anticolonial struggle (Molden, 2011). But her warning is also relevant for memory scholars in general. Subaltern studies have been among the most prominent employers of Gramscian theory. As a matter of fact, they were crucial in Gramsci’s resurrection as a major theoretician of social power relations (Hall, 1986; Modonesi, 2013). We are therefore well advised to keep Spivak’s argument in mind while developing a hegemony theory of memory, and all the more so because history is so central in their analysis of subalternity and hegemony. Before intervening on behalf of dispossessed and unarticulated communities of experience, the explorers of the power relations of memory should heed the advice of postcolonial criticism.

Dipesh Chakrabarty located Marxist historiography of thinkers like Eric Hobsbawm (and earlier, Lenin, Trotsky, Bloch, or Althusser) within the tradition of “historicism”—an Enlightenment-inspired progressive historical thinking in which “Western” societies are more advanced than those of the Global South. These latter, notwithstanding their contributions to global modernity, still had to develop into modern subjects as exemplified by the post-1945 European citizen. “That was,” Chakrabarty (2000) asserts, “what historicist consciousness was: a recommendation to the colonized to wait” (p. 8). Historicism, then, is seen as an inescapably western means of domination.

Ranjit Guha (1989), who also pointed out the complicity of even critical historians with a “dominance without hegemony,” nevertheless argued in favor of counter-memory using the Gramscian terminology of common sense. The authority who selects, according to its own values, certain historic events and deeds over others, is the ideology of the state. Guha (1996) calls this (European) ideology “statism.” “This is why the common sense of history may be said generally to be guided by a sort of statism which thematizes and evaluates the past for it” (p. 1). However, according to him, this colonial practice failed because education was limited to first feudal and then bourgeois elites and lacked the connection with the masses to establish a true hegemony: “Yet the narratives which constitute the discourse of history are dependent precisely on such choice” (Guha, 1996: 3). Guha (1996) draws on examples of “small voices” that are not referenced in the

big histories of dominant ideologies, because either they do not fit into the narrative and are “drowned in the noise of statist commands” (p. 3) or they are reduced to elements in the logic of principal contradictions: that between colonizers and colonized just as much as that between nationalist and Marxist historical discourse, with the difference that in the latter cases hegemonic power does not belong to an existing regime but is “yet to actualize, a dream of power” (Guha, 1996: 7). Nonetheless, “in either case historiography is dominated by the hypothesis of a principal contradiction which once resolved would convert the vision of power into its substance” (Guha, 1996: 7). Guha (1996) claims that a re-writing of hegemonic histories would “challenge the univocity of statist discourse. [...] a re-writing that heeds the small voice of history will put the question of agency and instrumentality back into the narrative” (p. 11). In a Foucaultian sense, it will be “interrupting the telling in the dominant version, breaking up its storyline and making a mess of its plot” (Guha, 1996: 12).

In the tradition of Foucault (2003), the deconstruction of historical narratives strives “to desubjugate historical knowledges, to set them free” [Foucault, 2003: 10] so that insurrectionary struggles against coercive epistemic closures are revived” (Medina, 2011: 12). The historic memory of past struggle is to be converted into a new struggle by the

coupling together of scholarly erudition and local memories [...], the meticulous rediscovery of struggles and the raw memory of fights. [...] This coupling [...] allows us to constitute a historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of that knowledge in contemporary tactics. (Foucault, 2003: 8)

Mnemonic hegemony theory, as presented here, does not call to arms for the articulation of passive memory cultures through activist research projects taking sides in the standoff or confrontation between different historical narrations. It is not about the “right to be heard” of these groups, because why should academia determine this right? It is not about assuming normative positions that involve essentialization and the assumption that a specific group holds such a right in terms of “historical interests,” of which Laclau and Mouffe (2001) say they “hegemonize certain demands” (p. 107). In order to avoid the simplifying pitfalls of Guha’s principal contradictions, it is crucial to entwine hegemony theory with a Bakhtinian sense of polyphony. This will allow us to understand that the power relations of memory are more complex than binary “clashes of memory.” Aspects of gender, class, language, political and religious identities, and common experience—all mentioned by Halbwachs as constitutive categories for collective memory—must come into focus.

## The pitfalls of bipolar reductionism

Hegemony theory shifts our attention away from exclusive logics of open conflict and competition and toward the multilateral and plurivectoral relations of forces that are, however, constructed precisely by the logic of hegemony. Deviating from Gramsci’s insistence on a single struggle between a hegemonic center and its opposition, Laclau, Mouffe, and others try to overcome in historical theory the simplistic dichotomies of late 19th century orthodox Marxist analysts like Karl Kautsky. Much current social science analysis and public discourse seems to envision cultural memory as a competition along more or less clear-cut lines between national or international players on roughly the same level of agency. The concept of simple binary relations between the powerful and the marginal tends to blind out interactions with those communicative memories that are not politically articulate, and therefore ignores the old question whether the dominant historical accounts of a period do reflect the popular experience of the time itself.

One of the most recurrent metaphors in memory studies has been that of conflict and even of “history or memory wars” (to cite but a few examples: Blanchard et al., 2008; East European

Memory Studies, 2010; Leggewie, 2008; Linenthal and Engelhardt, 1996; Macintyre and Clark, 2003; Stora, 2007). Accordingly, memory has also been analyzed as a field of international peace building (Wang, 2009), and of negotiating historical guilt between different groups within one state (Barkan, 2000). And, consequentially, one of the best-received mediating proposals in this debate has been a model of “dialogical memory” that reflects the negotiatory situation in the wake of memory battles. Aleida Assmann (2011) defines dialogical memory as

politics of memory between two or more states that are connected with each other through a common history of violence, recognize their own part in the traumatized history of the other and empathically include the suffering of the other in their own memory. (p. 22; this and all following translations B.M.)

In this conflictual logic—Assmann’s title invokes the ubiquitous notion of a “divided European memory”—her model rightly addresses the conflicting master narratives of nation states, narratives that have already established public dominance within their own society. It is these master narratives that are imagined at war, featuring the occasional insurrection of a particularly articulate marginalized group memory. Alas, such a mnemonic map falls short of the multilayered and multi-directional complexity of history politics.

While some of this martial phrasing may not go beyond more or less skillful branding in a defined market of cultural memory discourse, this rhetoric is indeed characterized by an idea of memory as, to paraphrase Foucault’s (2003) take on Clausewitz, yet another “continuation of war by other means” (p. 15). As a matter of fact, Foucault also speaks of “battles” between knowledge systems and analyzes the power relations between actors of unarticulated and articulated memory, between master narratives of hegemonic history and counter-memory. Not unlike the revolutionary Gramsci, Foucault agitates his readers to undermine and overthrow the prevailing power grid of knowledge and history and, like Gramsci, he identifies the bourgeoisie as the universalizing hegemon of historical master narratives: “History was a discipline by means of which the bourgeoisie showed [...] that its reign was [...] perfectly justified” (Foucault, 1998: 423)—just as Guha (1989) and others do in postcolonial theory: “A bourgeois discourse par excellence, [liberal historiography] helped the bourgeoisie to change [...] the world according to its class interests in the period of its ascendancy, and since then to consolidate and perpetuate its dominance” (p. 215). What sets both Foucault and postcolonial critique apart from Gramsci is their poststructuralist approach to insurrection. While Gramsci wants to replace one hegemony by another, Foucault and postcolonial critique insist on the continuous plurality of insurrections, of knowledges, of struggles “in order to resist new hegemonic unifications and hierarchizations of knowledges” (Medina, 2011: 20).

Hence, the martial metaphors of Foucaultian counter-memory evoke more than the opposition between two versions of history. They aim at the very foundations of power in history:

The central means of destabilization is the return to the origin, that is changing the discursive practice (the power of hegemonic historical narratives) by critically studying its foundational texts and its omissions, silences, and constructions of socio-political unity by means of subjugation of some. (Medina, 2011: 16f)

A Foucaultian reading targets the asymmetry of power created through language, history, and knowledge. However, a hegemony theory of memory requires the analysis of underlying power relations, including the full complexity of the social forces involved, and goes beyond the controversies between nation states or between the incompatible mnemonic legacies of competing ideologies.

Admittedly, Gramsci is interested in culture primarily in terms of political change and he thinks hegemonic relations within a class paradigm. However, Kate Crehan has pointed out that one central misreading of Gramsci’s thoughts is the equalization of hegemony and ideology (Crehan,

2002: 172ff and 199ff). Hegemony is not limited to the field of ideas and conscious worldviews, but comprises the whole of culture—in fact, as I showed above, it emphasizes the level of lived experience that is not reflected on a cognitive, let alone meta-cognitive level. Transposed to Halbwachsian terminology, these non-idealist elements of hegemony constitute central frames of memory and, more importantly, possible points of departure for counter-memory. If we define the groups of agency as “collective historico-political actors,” we can explain the workings of the politics of history and memory. The issue at stake are the relations of discursive power—who exercises it and who doesn’t, and why?—not the bipolarity of class struggle. As James Clifford said about Stuart Hall’s articulation theory, it is a question of

updating [...] Gramsci. It involves a sense of politics, which does not depict good and bad guys neatly lined up on one side or another of a line. Rather, one sees a continuous struggle over a terrain, portions of which are captured by different alliances, hooking up different elements in different ways. There is a lot of middle ground and a lot of political and cultural positions, which are not firmly anchored on one side or the other but, instead, are up for grabs. (Borofsky, 2000: 97)

Concerning cultures of remembrance, the reductive tendency toward a bipolar understanding of hegemonic relations—or even of one that imagines multiple counter-hegemonic forces reveling against a single ruling elite or class—is not unlike that of victims and perpetrators. During the last decades, the focus on this relationship has been dominant in the analysis of history politics. More so, the academic interest in these matters to a large part derived from critical political agencies that challenged dominant narrations (anti-Fascism, anti-Stalinism, anticolonialism, etc.). It is not surprising that the notion of “politics of history” had to be freed from its political connotation before it became an analytic concept. Apart from the fact that the terms of societal reconciliation are often forced by one group upon another, and despite the importance of these relations in post-conflict societies, to focus on the clash of their historical interpretations blocks out other important sub-cultures of remembrance. Michael Schuldson and Barry Schwartz point out the simplistic version of Gramscian theory expressed in those presentist approaches that ignore the fact that the past is often resistant and cannot always be subordinated to political interests of the present (Schuldson, 1993; Schwartz, 2012). One must pay close attention to this critique because it emphasizes the very importance of the materiality of the past that has been highlighted above. Like Lacan’s “real”—the part of the psyche that is not a signifier and therefore does not dissolve into the imaginary and the symbolic—this indissoluble “rest” of the past, which is not constructed, keeps stirring and changing the production of cultural memory; unlike Lacan’s real, however, the past is not entirely beyond our reach. We must look for the concrete traces and sources of past events in order to understand their *nachleben* in contemporaries and later generations. Only if we are able to assess this material impact on different social classes and groups will we be able to interpret the relations of forces between the different agents of history and memory production.

## Conclusion

So what is the specificity of hegemony theory when employed in the context of memory cultures? When any collective, regardless of its hierarchical organization or regime, defines its own cultural, institutional, or geographical boundaries, it uses a set of positive and negative references to the past. To represent the past, then, quite literally means to keep or make it relevant for the present at the service of contemporary interests within the group. We therefore speak of the politics of history, and these politics do not only engage the members of a given collective in communicative processes: the group itself interacts with other groups in order to establish the validity of historical accounts. These interactions may be between equals, such as controversies about historical

responsibilities for past crises between nations or political parties, or their vectors of agency are top-down or bottom-up, be it by disseminating a predominant interpretation of history or by challenging such a master narrative with a defiant version of the past.

In either case, politics of history are defined by relations between political actors who articulate their specific historical accounts more or less effectively within relevant communication arenas, using channels of political influence, media, and other institutions of civil society. They are best conceived of as a specific form of social agency within the dynamic structural framework of memory cultures. The success of any narrative greatly depends on the social audibility and power of the voices that promote it so as to penetrate and determine the hegemonic set of specific memories that form memory cultures and their historical canons. These efforts create the inertia of the mnemonic common sense of what is historically thinkable and acceptable, and what not.

Gramsci was cautious of the hegemonic belief systems and the unquestioned, universalized, and essentializing assumptions of common sense. He was both wary of the embeddedness of common sense in the ruling paradigms of its time and conscious of its importance as a basis of any culture. In any case, its hegemonic saturation makes it unlikely to reflect the entirety of alternatives, the polyphony of actors, and the contingent reservoir of available pasts. This lets us come full circle with our introductory quote of William S. Burroughs (1987) who went on to write about the roads to the metahistoric Western Lands, “The obvious road is almost always the fool’s road. And beware of the Middle Roads, the roads of moderation, common sense and careful planning” (p. 151). Mnemonic hegemony theory keeps us alert of the fact that the most dominant tale is never the only one and may not even represent the most relevant experience. And it can serve as a compass through the maze-like discursive processes of memory, a disorienting terrain where the production of historical sense is a function of political power.

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### Author biography

Berthold Molden is a Historian based at the University of Vienna. He was visiting Professor at the Institute des Hautes Études de l’Amérique latine at Sorbonne III, Paris (Chaire Alfonso Reyes 2014–2015), at the Institut Pluridisciplinaire pour les Études sur les Amériques at Université Jean Jaurès Toulouse (Chaire Amérique latine 2015), at the University of New Orleans (Marshall Plan Chair 2012–2014), the University of Chicago (2011), and at the University of Vienna (2010), where he also earned his doctoral degree. From 2005 to 2010, he was Research Director for Cold War memory studies at the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for European History and Public Spheres (Vienna). Before that, he was research associate at the Asociación para el Avance de las Ciencias Sociales, Guatemala. He is the author of one and co-author of two monographs, Co-Editor of three collective volumes, and author of 20 articles on the politics of history and memory from a global history perspective, the history of the Cold War, and decolonization.