The poverty of memory: for political economy in memory studies

Memory and economy share unique historical correspondence and conflation in ways that continue to be felt for shaping and affecting our social lives. For a quick illustration we can recall that the apocryphal “discovery” of the method of loci art of memory, as recounted by Cicero, occurred in a moment of economic dispute. Or consider here that the legal genealogy of the modern corporation has its origins in the collegia of Roman law, which included burial societies charged in perpetuity with ensuring the proper observation of memorial rites in the event of a member’s death. More crucially many members of society have already begun to feel how so called austerity measures, imposed on public services throughout the world following the 2008 financial crisis, have affected memory in society; from distressing autobiographical memories with redundancy and unemployment to the withdrawal of much needed services for those members of society living with a difficult relation to the past. Memory and economy are fundamentally interwoven. The confluence of these domains has on occasion dispensed our techniques, legal frameworks and psychic conditions for organising economic and mnemonic relations. Even so memory studies has yet to fully elaborate an agenda, along with the requisite theoretical and methodological tools, to properly explain the origins and implications of these dynamics. It is beyond the scope of this editorial, and my own limitations, to deliver here the kind of survey needed to follow all these contours, but I do want to highlight some inroads with the intention of opening further dialogue and debate that problem-poses memory in some way with reference to economic dynamics.

Interrogating the intersections between memory and economy opens dialogue to radically develop and expand the conceptual resources that define the field and build authority for commenting and intervening upon pressing social issues. This means continuing to engage with topics that are productively becoming mainstream within the field such as public remembrance and memorial management, memory entrepreneurship, dark tourism and nostalgia industries. However, to delineate a range of emergent memory issues there is considerable prospect and even urgency now to repurpose many recent advances in economic history, the sociology of work, economic anthropology, ecology and environmental studies, organisation studies, economic geography and feminist studies of technoscience (citing just a few fields that can elaborate our understanding of how economic dynamics affect lives beyond what Halbwach’s (1992: 161) called the “zone of technical activity”). Presently these fields share what memory studies lacks, a nuanced and variegated critique of capital. Too often the status of memory is deemed to be too personal, or collectively too sacred, to attend to the dirt of capital under the fingernails of its gravediggers and memorial masons.

Against this sentiment, the political economy of memory, if this formation offers little else, must provide a moniker to remind that the sustainability of our project lies in how well the field can borrow and invent concepts to elaborate empirically-informed dialogue that turns a critical lens onto the conditions that cast memory as a matter of concern in the first place. Framing certain memory issues more explicitly with economic dynamics in view can make a valuable contribution to this end. However, it would be disingenuous to elevate the status of any science in our multi/interdisciplinary conversation on memory, that is why any engagement with political economy in memory studies must also be a cautious ‘critique of political economy, that is to say, of the way in which the economy was transformed into a
politics that kills politics, that gives itself the authority of a rationality that demands unanimity' (Pignarre and Stengers, 2011: 15).

An agenda for the political economy of memory commences, I have argued elsewhere (Allen, 2015), with a critical examination of how property relations define anthropic interests in memory. It is not an accident of history that the prevailing view on memory and identity is coeval to the political philosophies that instituted private property. What is more this moment in the formation of modern memory and economy is embedded in our everyday use of language, consider the grammatical framing of memory as private property in every utterance “I have a memory”. Nonetheless there exist concerns about memory that lie outside anthropocentric definition, and there are alternative practices of property relations that eschew the liberal notion of private property such as common-pool resources (Caffentzis, 2010) and community economies (Graham-Gibson et al., 2013). Money, the media of our private property relations, has memory at its foundations

the word “money” itself comes from the Roman mint at the temple of Juno Moneta, the Latin equivalent of Mnemosyne... Thus for the Romans and implicitly for all those European cultures which take their word for coinage from them, money was at first a store of collective memory linked to the reproduction of the arts as living tradition. (Hart, 2000: 18)

A consequence of private property relations mediated by money is that certain memories have been valued above others. This can be demonstrated along the fault lines of a sociological category that memory studies has yet to fully grapple with, namely class. For instance, the industrial working class of 19th century England were associated with devalued forms of private property, for whom

the wrinkles in the elbow to the jacket or a sleeve were called memories, wrinkles that recorded the body that had inhabited the garment. Wrinkles memorised the labour and the interaction, the mutual constitution of person and thing. (Skeggs, 2011: 500)

Memory studies too must be held accountable for failing to critique its own values. The paradigmatic hold of symbolism within the field means that memory has primarily been problematised according to anthropocentric and logocentric values. This has forfeit considerable engagement with the memory issues of non-human others and dynamics that are not symbolically mediated. A departure into political economy now must politicise those economic struggles that condition the possibilities for and against memory; this might mean being methodologically partisan (Brook and Darlington, 2013). The following is not intended to be a systematic manifesto for political economy in memory studies but a sketch of potential lines of inquiry; indeed, considerable empirical work must follow if the field is to properly illuminate the dynamics of memory in diverse economies.

The spectre that haunts what historian Jay Winter (2006) has called two twentieth-century "memory booms" and the present boom in connectivity (Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2010) is an insatiable intensification of immaterial, precarious and forced labour, economic processing zones, intellectual property rights, securitisation, exploitation and further enclosure of common natural resources. The cultural production of memory depends increasingly upon
the organisation of labour and natural resources. Moreover, it is probably safe to speculate that the bulk of what cognitive scientists call procedural memory is formed and put to work in the service of production; memory at work. Memory studies is yet to consider the specifics of this heterogeneous setting for remembering. Sociologists of work, inspired by Harry Braverman (1998), have sought to explain how capital controls the labour process, how workers resist, the automation of production and the degradation of work. In a highly regarded contribution to this area of study, Ackroyd and Thompson studied cultures of misbehaviour in organisations and found, contrary to the managerialist penchant for (sanitised) humour at work, joking cultures such as clowning, initiation rituals and hazing reflect how people construct identity and manage subjectivity at work revealing that ‘the workplace is a source of illustrative examples of the processes whereby individuals are subjected to increased anxiety and seduced by the security offered by powerful corporate authority’ (1999: 159). Cultures of memory and the dynamics of control and resistance at work have received inadequate attention in academic research. The contributions to a recent special issue of the journal Organization (Cutcher et al., 2016) present an exception. Managerialism has long held memory to be an unalloyed good troubled by the “leaky” qualities of organisations. By drawing focus to the materiality of organisational life, research in organisation studies has undertaken to explain why ‘commemorative sites are so often highly gendered or racialised both within the sphere of formal organisations and beyond’ (ibid.: 6).

Engaging with political economy means understanding how economic conditions shape memory beyond our workplaces. For instance, Bernard Stiegler (2010) has argued that the exteriorisation of human memory to machines has resulted in the proletarianisation of the central nervous system. Before him, Fredric Jameson (1991) defined the communications media of capitalist modernity, especially television, as amnesiac devices; and more recently Mark Fisher suspects new media for perpetuating capitalist realism defined by its “anti-mnemonic blip culture” (2009: 25). There are other commentaries that depart from the “lethic” view of capital; for instance, Wolfgang Ernst (2013) has suggested that digital media usher an economy of permanent information recycling that prioritises short-term “updatable” memory over static retrieval. Moreover, Alison Lansberg (2004) was uniquely sensitive to the property relations of memory when she expressed an ambition that the “exchangeability” of "prosthetic memories" can foster new empathies and compassions. Regardless of whether the analysis attends to the dynamics of remembering or forgetting in capitalist societies it is apparent that, recalling Marx’s notion of species-being, our economic relations not only change our objective environment but also transform the kind of mnemonic creatures we are. Consider, in fMRI studies London taxi drivers were found to have larger hippocampuses than the general population (cf. Cromby, 2007: 150); economic relations redistribute the grey matter of the species and “science as labor” (Lefèbvre, 2005) furnishes our categories for interpreting those changes.

To negotiate the daily meshwork of infrastructures the subject of capital must remember. That is, habituate a series of PIN codes, passwords, train times, filing systems and so on. Meanwhile neuromarketers are busy designing unforgettable digital memes to tantalise the desire of consumers (Rose and Abi-Rached, 2013) mostly living in localities utterly removed from sites of cyber-proletarian production (Dyer-Witheford, 2015). The flow and reproduction of capital relies upon mnemonic infrastructures, regimes of digital
connectivities, that are themselves built upon cognitive capacities, distributed sensibilities, captured attentions and affective exchanges.

Let us now ask: what formal and informal memorial cultures exist in spaces and places of economic activity? How do such cultures shape experiences of control and resistance at work? Moreover, what inequalities in memory work exist? Do gendered workplaces, with more women performing administrative responsibilities, mean women do more work as the custodians of organisational memory, and if so are they properly valued as “knowledge managers”? Inspired by the Wages for Housework campaign, what prospect is there for wages for memory work? How do socioeconomic backgrounds shape engagement in different kinds of social remembering; do working class kids get working class mnemonic jobs? Is there a demand to create memories for consumption by others that is qualitatively changing the nature of work? Is there a quantitative intensification of remembering at work? What is the relationship between working memory and burn out?

To close, I shall state my own ambitions for a political economy of memory by calling upon a literary figure. Herman Melville’s character Bartleby, a copywriter for a Wall Street legal company, has captured dissenting imaginaries for his repeated subtle-but-effective retort to his employer’s requests: “I would prefer not to”. But what if the scrivener not only “preferred not to” but also preferred not to remember? On the face of it the suggestion seems absurd, counterintuitive, and perhaps even irresponsible. Against these sentiments an explanation of how political and economic dynamics shape memory has the potential for politicising and operationalising a Nietzschean “active forgetting” (1997), not only to satisfy intellectual curiosities but to empower the taxi driver and all us memory workers of the world in moments when we would prefer not to remember, to reclaim something of the autonomy of memory from capital.

References


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