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The Cultural Memory of Protest

Review of Andrea Hajek, *Negotiating Memories of Protest in Western Europe. The Case of Italy*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 232 p., ISBN: 9781137263773, € 64,00.

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Against the background of ongoing discussions about a shared framework of European memory, which more often than not revolve around traumatic memories of war, colonialism, and totalitarianism, Andrea Hajek's study of the commemoration of European protest movements presents a refreshing avenue of investigation. Conceptualizing the 1960s and 70s as a transnational and transcultural site of memory, whilst embedding her analysis in the local framework of a particular incident in Bologna in 1977, Hajek is able not only to elucidate the micro-history of a relatively little-known event during the 'Movement of '77' whose memory remains controversial to this day, but also to present this case study as a prism through which to analyze the relationship between official and counter-memory and the connection between memory and activism more generally. The focus on protest movements opens up, beyond the synchronic comparative analysis, a diachronic study of the way in which past incidents of political dissent have influenced and continue to be evoked within different protest cultures today. At the same time it complicates the idea of 'shared' memory, which tends to give authority to one specific version of the past at the expense of counter-memories, and suggests that, above all, it is the lack of public consensus and the co-existence of different versions that keeps memory alive. By emphasizing specifically the contentious memories of the 1970s, this study contributes to recent scholarship in memory studies that has shifted the focus from objects and sites to questions of how memory is transmitted, situated, and mediated.

Furthermore, Hajek contributes to scholarship on the memory of social movements in the 1970s that investigates the clash between how these movements and the violent events connected to them have been represented in public discourse and how the activists themselves think about and commemorate them. Italy is a particularly apt case study in this context because the 1970s were not only characterized by left-wing terrorism but also by neo-Fascist terrorism, a fact which is almost entirely obscured in public discourse. At the same time, the case of Bologna shows how the student movement of the 1970s was by no means a unified force, but rather a highly heterogeneous assortment of different sub-groups, each with a different memory. The author paints a compelling picture of this issue, drawing on a great variety of sources (newspaper articles, letters, official documents, television broadcasts, grassroots memorials, as well as interviews). This approach is one of the book's great strengths, but it also poses significant methodological and theoretical

challenges, not all of which have been fully overcome. I will return to this at the end of my review.

The book is divided into three sections, the first comprising three chapters, beginning with the historical and political background from 1968 onwards, and setting up the comparative European framework with an emphasis on the parallels between left-wing terrorism in Italy and West-Germany in the 1970s. The second chapter presents the competing narratives about the 1970s on the transnational as well as the national level: the memory of the decade as the traumatic 'years of lead' characterized by left-wing violence stands in contrast to the nostalgic memories among former activists. Both narratives exclude the terrorist acts perpetrated by neo-Fascist groups in Italy, thus presenting an incomplete picture of the decade. In the third chapter, Hajek zooms in on Bologna and the events of March 1977, where the student and left-wing activist Francesco Lorusso was shot dead by police during a demonstration. This sparked an escalating cycle of reprisals by the protesters and increasingly harsh countermeasures by the police and even the army, turning the city center into a war zone. These events, which Hajek presents as a collective trauma for the city of Bologna, resulted in a wide spectrum of irreconcilable memories, some of which the author singles out for deeper analysis in the subsequent chapters.

The second section of the book likewise comprises three chapters, each of which illuminates one particular perspective on the spring of 1977 in Bologna and its commemoration, while elaborating on the tensions between private and public memory. The first of these focuses on Lorusso's controversial victim status and his family's largely futile struggle for public acknowledgement. The failure to establish Lorusso's innocence in court, combined with the negative portrayal of the student protesters in the media, has excluded Lorusso from the public discourse of victimhood which centers on other acts of terrorism in the 1970s, most importantly the neo-Fascist bomb massacres. The next chapter considers precisely the mechanisms of strategic remembering and forgetting within the official and political sphere that have prevented acknowledgement for Lorusso. Focusing on the local government's attempts to achieve some sort of reconciliation, Hajek shows how Lorusso's memory was conflated with the memory of other victims of terrorism, and thus a homogeneous and depoliticized narrative was produced that has enabled the left-wing government to avoid taking any responsibility to this day. The last chapter in this rich section turns to the student movement. Rather than seeking legal or political recognition for Lorusso's victim status, subsequent generations of left-wing activists have mobilized his memory as a catalyst for their critique of dominant structures and injustices. This is one of the strongest chapters in the book, especially because Hajek draws parallels to more recent acts of police violence and addresses the inter-relation between memory and political activism.

In the final section, comprising a single chapter, Hajek discusses various memorials in Lorusso's honor created in Bologna by the different groups. It might have been more productive to integrate this material into the preceding section; indeed Hajek already discusses some of these memorials there and the result is that this final chapter feels isolated and in some cases redundant. Above all, one might have expected this final section to adopt a broader perspective, returning to the transnational scope of the beginning, heralded also by the book's title. It would also have been necessary to reflect more critically, in the conclusion, on the implications of this interesting and provocative study for work on transnational and European memory and for the field of memory studies more generally. One of the great contributions of this book is its focus on the contested memory of protest as a counter-point to the homogenizing official narrative of universal victimhood. The specific combination of cultural memory and political activism, which the Lorusso

case exemplifies, is important for memory studies precisely because it is not limited to mourning, commemoration, and reconciliation, but rather is linked to civil disobedience and dissent, yet this crucial aspect remains somewhat under-theorized in the book.

The need to counteract facile official narratives of victimhood is particularly strong in Italy, where such auto-exculpatory discourse goes hand in hand with the ongoing rehabilitation of Fascism. The ghost of Fascism haunts the memory complexes Hajek discusses, but this important aspect never receives sufficient attention. There are several moments in the book where the author gestures towards this issue, but then stops short of engaging with the implications of the material. Thus, for example, when discussing a right wing politician's recent bid to lump together Lorusso and a Milanese activist from the neo-Fascist Youth Front, who was killed in 1975 by left-wing extremists, as undifferentiated victims of political violence, one would have expected Hajek to place this incident in the larger context of the current political climate in Italy, but instead she inexplicably draws an analogy to the commemoration of Bloody Sunday in Northern Ireland (116). Similarly, Hajek reports that the local press explicitly linked the presence of tanks in the streets of Bologna to the Second World War, and uses the press coverage as an example of how memory is mediated. In this context, she repeatedly refers to the events of 1977 as traumatic, observing that a salient characteristic of trauma is that it is experienced belatedly (66-67). This seems a missed opportunity to identify a deeper trauma at work here, namely that of Fascism and the war. The presence of tanks in the streets is quite literally a return of the repressed, just as the Communist and neo-Fascist terror attacks of 1970s can be seen as a re-enactment, almost a repetition compulsion, of the conflict between the partisans and the Fascists thirty years previously. Indeed, it seems impossible to understand the full significance of the political unrest in Italy in the 1970s and the dynamics of commemoration and forgetting since then without viewing them in the context of the open wound of Fascism.

These shortcomings aside, this book remains a valuable contribution to cultural memory studies, particularly because of its attention to the processes by which acts of dissent are commemorated and reclaimed. As such, it is relevant not only to scholars working on Italian memory, but also provides a useful case study for cultural historians interested in political and social movements more generally. Certainly, there is more work to be done on the way memories of protest are negotiated in Western Europe and this book certainly provides an important starting point for further study.

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