

# Memory and democracy: *a complex relationship*

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In the past few years, the question of what societies should remember and how it matters has shifted squarely into the spotlight. In 2020 and 2021, almost no day went by without front-page reports about statues being torn down or street names being changed.

Whether these transformations were driven by protestors or governments, they were always part of larger debates about what kinds of values are represented through cultural symbols connected to legacies of colonialism, racism, white power, dictatorial rule, patriarchy and more. Underpinning these discussions is the idea that what we decide to set in stone, what we commemorate in our public spaces, matters for how we are governed and how our societies are constituted at a deeper level. Civil society activists and policy-makers – whether they are friends or foes of democracy – tend to assume that public memory “does something”: it either helps us to build more democratic, peaceful and reconciled societies or it can erect a barrier to doing so. However, scholars have recently argued that this assumption is not well-founded empirically (Gensburger and Lefranc, 2020; Pisanty, 2021; David, 2020). After all, if remembering past instances of racist and antisemitic violence is so impactful, why do we still see so many racist and antisemitic attacks? Similarly, why do conflicts keep flaring up after transitional justice processes? While I will not wade into this discussion here, it is clear that the causal connection between public remembrance and various policy outcomes is not well evidenced. A first step in that direction needs to be a more systematic understanding of what a “good” – or democratic – memory actually means. This short article attempts to explain the different elements that I believe we need to consider in a conceptualisation of democratic memory.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Please note that my reference point here is always public memory – made up of the existing and emerging memorial landscape, non-physical memorials such as anniversaries, but also significant public debates. In other words, public memory is always at least to some extent sanctioned by the state, although it may still be contested. While private and clandestine forms of remembering are highly significant, they complicate the operation of remembering and this discussion falls outside the scope of this article.



## Memory and democracy in theory

The most sustained thinking about the relationship between memory and democracy has happened in the literature on transitional justice and democratization. Of course, this is a highly complex matter, but we can roughly say that there are two relevant positions here – one emphasising the importance of building strong democratic institutions after the end of an authoritarian regime – a goal that often necessitates forgetting the past, not prosecuting perpetrators, or giving amnesties in order to get buy-in to the new state from elites and “the masses”. The other position is that the establishment of democracy fundamentally needs the development of particular types of norms. This means facing up to the past, hearing the voices of victims and memorialising their experiences. Anne Sa’adah calls these two pathways the “community of behaviour” in which citizens respect the rules and institutions of the state (but it doesn’t much matter what they believe) and the “community of conviction” in which democratic values are internalised. The former is established through an “institutional” strategy, which is concerned primarily with the absence of violations and the reliability of the citizenry. The latter is the result of a “cultural” strategy that seeks to create a trustworthy citizenry with a self-sustaining democratic spirit (Sa’adah, 1998). This issue is one that West Germany faced during the postwar period, with so many former Nazis and fellow travellers at all levels of society after the high levels of general support for the Nazi regime. As Jeffrey Herf pointed out, the “inherent tension between memory and justice on the one hand and democracy on the other would appear to have been one of the central themes of postwar West German history”. (Herf, 1997:7). Not only is remembering the past not always good for democracy, then, but not all forms of remembering are democratic – just think of the continued reverence for militaristic and fascist symbols after 1945. So the question is: what kind of

memory is good for democracy? What is democratic memory and could undemocratic memory be good for democracy under certain circumstances? To consider these questions, we can conceptualise democratic memory in four different ways, none of which by themselves are sufficient to guarantee that public remembrance will have a positive impact on democratic governance. What is important is how they interact in particular historical settings as various actors contend over how the past will be represented in the public space.

## Representative memory

First, democratic memory can be understood in terms of the minimalist or electoral definition of democracy: it represents the view of the majority (or the will of the people). Memory can thus be democratic in that public memory culture corresponds to what the majority in society believes to be an acceptable depiction of the past. Importantly, this does not necessarily mean an historically accurate representation, but one that feels like it is “telling the right story” – and has majority support. However, what does it mean when a majority supports a narrative of the past that analysts believe is fundamentally opposed to democracy? This was the case in the wake of the Holocaust in Germany. Contrary to the commonly held assumption, Germans in the period immediately after WWII did not remain silent about the past so much as they remembered it in a highly selective manner. As soon as the Allies allowed it, there was indeed a significant amount of civic activity to commemorate the war experience – but the overwhelming majority did not address or take responsibility for the perpetration of the Holocaust. Thousands of memorials were built to remember “German victims” – people who died or lost their homes fleeing west from formerly German territories, victims of Stalinism and the uprising in the GDR in 1953, as well as POWs.



2. Memorial to Victims of Stalinism, Steinplatz Berlin, 1951. Picture: Jenny Wüstenberg.

This public memory very much had majority public support in West Germany, as well as support from the democratically elected government. Certainly, there were also efforts, especially by survivors, to commemorate the Holocaust and Germans' responsibility for this genocide – but these groups were not well-supported by the state or by majority public opinion. Thus, at this point in time, the dominant forms of public memory were indeed democratic in the representative sense, supported by a high level of civic social capital and legitimized by an at least formally democratic state – though of course the presence of former Nazis at all levels of government in the Federal Republic of Germany should give us pause. However, no observer would define the memory culture in the 1940s and 50s in West Germany as democratic: the societal norms being fostered by dominant public memory in the immediate post-war era were not conducive to democratic values. The same could be said for the state of public memory in the Russian Federation today. Though independent research is currently challenging, it does appear that most Russian citizens wholeheartedly support the state-driven and -endorsed celebration of Soviet (and by extension Russian) victory in the Great Patriotic War, whereas a reckoning with Stalinist and Post-Stalinist oppression is side-lined and even persecuted (Gabowitsch, 2023).

## Legitimate memory

The second element in an assessment of democratic memory would be that a democratically elected government or state supports it through resources and official recognition, so it has electoral and institutional legitimacy. Here, the notion of resilient institutions that uphold the letter of the law and can keep citizens “on board” with memory culture is important, but there is also an element here of keeping citizens “in line” – meaning that the state to some extent has the role of protecting the memory narratives that voters have given the government a mandate for – even when it means practicing some level of surveillance and policing of counter-memorial activity that has democratic objectives. Thus, we might argue that the memory policies of the Polish government up to 2023, which was democratically elected, hold a certain level of democratic legitimacy.

However, they have been strongly criticised by Polish civil society leaders, as well as by international institutions and observers, for undermining critical historical research and an honest working through of complex legacies of resistance, collaboration and complicity during the Holocaust. On the flip side, the German Democratic Republic is an example of a dictatorial state that (at least nominally) promoted public commemoration of the experience of persecution by the Nazis, probably mostly against the resistance of the general public. Thus, democratic state legitimacy is no guarantee of democratic public memory, while non-democratic states can promote norms that may be seen as a component of democratic remembrance.



3. Macron undertaking an act of commemoration at Memorial de la Shoah. January 2020. Picture: US Ambassador to France. Public domain per 17 U.S.C. § 101 and § 105 and the Department of Copyright Information

## Normative memory

Third, memory could be democratic because the kinds of narratives that it evokes help to develop values that are important for democracy, such as tolerance for difference, inclusion and taking care of the weak in society. This notion is supported by the “community of conviction” idea, as well as by recent work on democratic backsliding. Thus, Levitsky and Ziblatt have argued that certain norms are crucial, serving as “guardrails of democracy” that underpin the spirit of democracy in a way that just following the letter of the law would not be able to do (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). All democratic systems rely on unwritten codes of conduct – and the same is true for democratic memory. Of course, the flip side is also true: some norms are detrimental to democracy, whipping up nationalist sentiment, silencing complex and traumatic experiences and so forth. And these are usually underpinned by particular mnemonic narratives. In West Germany during the 1980s, myriad local initiatives emerged that sought to remember the Nazi past and the

Holocaust from the ground up, carefully working through continuities, exposing perpetrators and commemorating victims in a way that helped to address discrimination in the present. Eventually, this resulted in a decentralised landscape of memory, as well as influencing historical education and the institutionalisation of memory, but the cultivation of these mnemonic norms initially happened mostly against the resistance of the state and majority public opinion. Similarly, Indigenous activists and intellectuals in Australia (like in other settler colonial states such as Canada or the United States) have worked to publicise and commemorate the history of colonial violence, dispossession and (cultural) genocide for decades, while arguing that this memory is crucial to addressing continued racism and disenfranchisement. It has been a long a struggle against the Australian state and the public – a division that was again reinforced by the failed campaign for the “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament” in 2023.



4. Protest for Voice. Brisbane Community rally in support of voting Yes for The Voice at the Referendum in Australia. September 17, 2023. Picture: Panthus, CCO, via Wikimedia Commons

## Civic memory

Fourth, memory can be democratic in the sense of it being driven by grassroots or civic memory work. This connects to Robert Putnam’s notion that social capital (fostered through civic associations) is what fundamentally “makes democracy work”. (Putnam, 1993). Putnam and others in this tradition argue that civil society helps people to articulate their interests and demands to government and therefore shapes what the state does. Moreover, civil society fosters “habits of the heart” – skills and public spiritedness in the citizenry that are indispensable for the public good (Tocqueville, 1954). This argument was initially put forward simplistically to mean that civic engagement is automatically good for democracy. As I have argued with respect to Germany, civil society groups have fundamentally influenced the memorial landscape and the institutions governing memory, though it was not always for the benefit of democracy, as right-wing and populist grassroots work has been just as influential (Wüstenberg, 2017). Yet what is

interesting is that the idea that civic memory equals democratic memory is a strongly-held belief among many memory activists themselves – and crucial to their identity. This was central to the efforts of the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina (Image 5) (Iturriaga, 2019; Jelin, 2021) long before they were globally recognised as pioneers in the struggle for democracy and against forgetting. Today in the United States, we see a vibrant cast of civil society activists working to de-commemorate Confederate and colonial symbols (and often replace them with statues that recall traditions of resistance, anti-racism and democratisation) (Gensburger and Wüstenberg, 2023), even as the majority opinion in many (Southern) states and legislatures uphold such anti-democratic legacies. At the same time, civil society actors that seek to protect these legacies, such as the United Daughters of the Confederacy, are also numerous and strong (Levi and Probulus, 2023). In other words, a lively mnemonic civil society is not by itself a driver of democracy.



5. Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo at the ESMA transfer ceremony on October 3, 2007. Picture: Mónica Hasenberg, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons

## Concluding thoughts

Bringing together these different (and sometimes clashing) elements of democratic memory suggests some important points that warrant further consideration and research. For one thing, it is clear that if our objective is to create deeply democratic societies with a vibrant and critical approach to the past, the process of remembering how societal majorities and various interests are symbolically represented or changed over time matters just as much as the content of public memory. Second, memory is never set in stone as “democratic” because it can never operate in isolation and must always be understood in relation to the transformation of society and its historical discourses. This is because the narratives about the past that support democratic norms changes over time. Even when a dominant public memory was the outcome of a democratising process (as was the case in West Germany), this does not mean that we can stop thinking about how to engage the public in that memory. For example, today there is an urgent need to address how German memory culture can reckon with histories of colonialism and racism and speak to an increasingly multi-cultural and multi-past population. Finally, and maybe most importantly, democratic memory per se does not prevent violence against minorities or discrimination. As statistics in Germany show, the very strong position and support for remembering the Holocaust does not mean that racist, anti-Semitic, transphobic etc. attacks do not happen at an alarming rate. These ideas of course do not provide prescriptions for how to design memory policies that support democratic consolidation, but they do offer the beginnings of a framework for thinking through the complex relationship between memory and democracy in different local, national and transnational settings.

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