H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Alon Confino, Peter Fritzsche. *Work of Memory: New Directions in the Study of German Society and Culture.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002. 320 S. $32.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-02717-8.

Reviewed by Karen Lang (Department of Art History, University of Southern California)

Published on H-German (June, 2003)

A Polyphony of German Memory

A Polyphony of German Memory

As Alon Confino and Peter Fritzsche suggest in their introductory essay, "Noises of the Past," "the power of memory as an historical concept lies in its openness to questioning and renewal" (p. 3). *The Work of Memory: New Directions in the Study of German Society and Culture* is a collection of essays that emerged from an interdisciplinary conference at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in December 1998. In it, memory is the subject once again. However, in Confino and Fritzsche's collection, memory is examined in a wider historical and conceptual compass. Indeed, one aim of *The Work of Memory* is to move beyond the study of memory in relation to World War II, the Holocaust, and National Socialism more generally. If "Germany has been an exceptional site to explore the workings of modern memory," then until presently "the problem of explaining and historicizing the historical extremes of world war and mass death has more or less defined the topic of memory in Germany" (p. 2). While surely no one would argue that World War II, the Holocaust, and National Socialism remain worthy areas of historical investigation, Confino and Fritzsche rightly recognize the ways in which the almost exclusive focus on the 1930s and 1940s has annexed the study of memory to one historical period in German history.[1] As the editors relate it in their Introduction, "the focus on *VergangenheitsbewÃ¤ltigung* [or coming to terms with the Nazi past] has kept a wide range of other troubling questions about the presence of the past in German life from being asked, while at the same time providing sophisticated methods for doing so" (p. 2). The editors not only seek to expand the historical compass. In presenting this volume of essays they are likewise keen to address the relation of various conceptions of memory to the writing of history. This volume demonstrates what may happen when the study of memory and its relation to German history is extended from the Reformation to the present, while the concept of memory is extended to include political, economic, social, and cultural registers along with various methodological points of view. The results, fruitful and compelling as they are, will lead the field of German history in "new directions."

The introductory essay provides a historiography of memory studies, including detailed footnotes to what

seem to be every conceivable source on the topic. We learn, for instance, that Patrick Hutton has defined a "first generation of studies in the history of memory."[2] Concentrating primarily on the memory of National Socialism, these "self-conscious projects of commemoration" have taken museums, monuments, films, and novels as their primary focus. Although this "scholarship has successfully illuminated how the past has been perceived and used in German society and culture," according to the editors, "by now it runs the danger of being predictable, as yet another (mostly Holocaust memory) is subjected to an analysis of its construction, representation, and contestation" (p. 3). While the first generation of memory studies focused on cultural artifacts at the expense of social relations and an economy of memory, a second generation of memory studies has recently emerged that attempts to "analyze memory as embedded in social networks, and as a commingling of immaterial and material interests and motivations" (p. 5). Centering on "post-1945 East and West Germany," this research has explored such topics "as the interplay between memory and urban space, public and social policy, and official, popular, and counter-gender memories" (p. 5). Confino and Fritzsche consider the memory studies of both generations important yet insufficient: for the first generation, memory remains stranded in cultural representations; for the second generation, memory is considered for the way it represents social relations. In studies of memory involving both generations, memory is therefore conceived as more static than dynamic, as resting in a representational artifact or configured in a social network rather than as produced–and productive–in an economy subject to internal relations and external pressures.

This collection of essays aim to "view memory as a symbolic representation of the past embedded in social action" (p. 5). In doing so, they "ask explicitly the essential question: how memory *forms* social relations–as opposed to the traditional way of asking how memory represents social relations" (p. 5). Through concrete examples and case studies, the essays inquire into how memory operates across the time and spaces–private and public; affective, economic, and administrative–of German modernity. "To take memory out of the museum and away from the monuments means," the editors attest, "to view it not as a location, or a group of people, or a thing, but as a set of practices and interventions" (p. 5). While I find the turn toward "how memory *forms* social relations" quite productive, here I would add that several studies (coming mainly from the field of art history) have attempted to consider the museum and the monument in this way. In examining museum displays and exhibitions, particularly those which put the memory of the nation on display, or the rituals enacted around monuments, these studies have addressed how memory is produced and enacted at the intersection of national representation and the social sphere. As Confino and Fritzsche suggest, "there are no traditional topics, only traditional historians" (p. 4). Rather than moving entirely away from the monument or the museum as a topic of study, I believe these commemorative sites should be productively opened to the kind of analysis, which the editors here advocate.

Conceiving of memory not simply as a location or site but as a set of practices and interventions entails a real understanding of "the practical uses of the category 'memory,' the way it comes to structure perception, to inform thought, to construct identities, to determine policies, and to explain situations" (p. 5). In order to articulate the dynamic texture of memory, the book is divided into three sections: historicity, everyday life, and materiality. "From Presence to Remembrance: The Transformation of Memory in the German Reformation," an essay by Craig Koslofsky, describes how "it is not the passage of time that creates the past, but specific attitudes toward death and the dead that establish the past in the modern order of memory" (p. 34). Medieval devotional images and burying the dead in "a consecrated churchyard at the center of a village or town were practices which kept the living in close proximity to the "separation" (p. 27). This proximity between the living and the dead, recounted in the medieval use of the term *memoria*, was severed during the Reformation. Not only was urban burial now "considered a threat to public health" (p. 29), but "the Lutheran funeral apprehended the dead individual as part of the absent past, a completed story ready to be retold in the funeral sermon" (p. 32).

As the past became absent in the Reformation so history replaced *memoria* , thus ushering in the creation of a modern memory order. Jonathan M. Hess' contribution, "Memory, History, and the Jewish Question: Universal Citizenship and the Colonization of Jewish Memory," focuses on "the widespread debates on Jewish emancipation that began in Germany with Christian Wilhelm Dohm's 1781 book, *Ãber die bÃ¼rgerliche Verbesserung der Juden*" (p. 41). German Enlightenment authors such as Dohm, Michaelis, and Herder viewed "Jewish memory as a problem for the modern state, as the primary impediment to emancipation" (p. 54). Consequently, these *AufklÃ¤rer* enact a suppression and displacement of Jewish memory in the service of Enlightenment ideals of uni-

versal citizenship and civic improvement. Historicizing memory in his essay, Hess thus reveals Pierre Nora's nostalgic vision of Jewish memory as a "modern fiction" (p. 58). While Nora considers "the Jews as the quintessential people of memory forced by their 'exposure to the modern world' to forsake memory" (p. 41), Hess demonstrates "the dynamic role that Jewish memory plays in the very blueprints for political modernization."

Continuing the section on "Historicity," Peter Fritzsche's essay charts "How Nostalgia Narrates Modernity." Turning from a view of nostalgia as merely an affective reaction to rapid change and displacement, Fritzsche argues "that nostalgia is predicated on a 'deep shift in optic identity,' one that is singular and particular to the modern era" (p. 64). The author explains how the French Revolution and the Napoleonic occupation created a fundamental break with the past which "maneuvered ordinary men and women into the flow of history" (p. 68). The written responses to these historical events demonstrate how a "shared experience of time and expectation [...] had fragmented into a 'coexisting plurality of times' that carefully distinguished generations" (p. 72). In short, the events of 1789 to 1815 ushered in a "new regime of seeing" in Germany, one that facilitated nostalgia. While Fritzsche is concerned here with a "shift in optic identity," it would be worthwhile to consider if nostalgia presumes a shift in subjectivity as well. Nostalgia, as the author here defines it, presupposes a break with the past that is somewhat analogous to the separation between subject and object presumed, for instance, by Immanuel Kant's "judging spectator." For Kant, the French Revolution was a "historical sign"–a sign of the human will reshaping the world in accordance with a moral ideal.[3] Kant, however, draws a distinction between theory and practice, offering his support to the idea rather than to the practical events of the French Revolution: rather than engage as an active participant, Kant urges his reading public to demonstrate their enthusiasm solely through disinterest. While the detached bearing of Kant's "judging spectator" is clearly distinct from the affective responses Fritzsche finds in nostalgia's narration of modernity, the sense of a separation from contemporary events unites these accounts. In "Masters of Memory: The Strategic Use of Autobiographical Memory by the German Nobility," Marcus Funck and Stephan Malinowski note how "the nobility used the written conveyance of its canon of values to establish the estate's interior and exterior boundaries over a period of generations, as well as to reflect on the noble cultural model, justify it anew, and sometimes even reinvent it" (p. 93). Here we learn that noble biographies, unlike their lower-class counterparts, are not marked by the distance from self necessary for self-reflection so much as a distance from society borne out through an aristocratic bearing. Keeping up with the vagaries of history, noble biographies move from an "aggressive 'memory-offensive' after 1918 [...] to a nostalgic memory as farewell" (p. 97), as lost childhood worlds and landed estates become a thing of the past. The authors, furthermore, indicate how noble "memory traditionally relied on a metaphorical language of images, especially when it was trying to have a public effect" (p. 90). If the "memory of this greatness uses a variety of physical aids to convey that central message" (p. 89), then it would be useful to consider how the visual culture of noble memory is taken up in advertisements, for instance. Studying how noble memory is deployed in mainstream advertisement would reveal something of the materiality of memory in "everyday life," thereby bringing us to the other side of the equation: not only how the nobility advertised themselves through their autobiographies, but also how advertisements figured the memory of the nobility to a public of consumers.[4]

The second section of essays, "Everyday Life," takes this other side of the equation as its point of departure. Andrew Stuart Bergerson's contribution, "Hildesheim in an Age of Pestilence: On the Birth, Death, and Resurrection of Normalcy," "historicizes normalcy as a category of experience produced in and through specific customs of everyday life" (p. 108). Centering his account on memories of daily habits in Hildesheim under National Socialism, Bergerson demonstrates "the way that self-styled ordinary Germans altered their behavior among friends and neighbors" (p. 108). "In the early 1930s, National-Socialist enthusiasts altered the customs associated with conviviality (*Geselligkeit*) so that they corresponded to the policies and principles of the Third Reich [...]. Yet they simultaneously disguised this transformation of local custom behind a cultural facade of normalcy that insulated ordinary men and women from world history and politics" (pp. 108-09). Bergerson reads his accounts of Hildesheim against those of the village of Oran, depicted in Albert Camus' *The Plague*. Since "Camus's novel suggests that the disease of fascism lies dormant in all modern societies," Bergerson's comparative reading points up "the conceptual error of reducing the problem of National Socialism to a presumed German national character" (p. 109). Normalcy is here newly understood "as a by product of struggles for identity and power played out in the cultural arena." Culture, for its part, is productively defined by the "daily habits that shape experience, inter-

pret meaning and communicate identities in the public sphere" (p. 108). Culture is therefore understood as at once productive, reflective, and disruptive of memory and social relations.

Elizabeth Snyder Hook's essay, "Awakening from War: History, Trauma, and Testimony in Heinrich Boll," focuses on *Und sagte kein einziges Wort*, Boll's "literary response to the ongoing trauma of the war" (p. 139). As in Bergerson's history of Hildesheim, Boll trains his account on daily habits, this time those of Kaete and Fred, "a couple who in the postwar years are unable to resume their prewar existence" (p. 139). If the operative term in Bergerson's essay is "normalcy," here "trauma" is the pivot of the processes and disruptions of memory and culture. Boll's use of key words like *Langeweile* (boredom) and *GleichgÃ¼ltigkeit* (indifference), and of corporeal metaphors, "underscores the intensity of his protagonists' traumas and illustrates the longevity of the war's psychological consequences" (p. 141). Choosing his words carefully to create a parallel between interior and exterior destruction, Boll works within "the postwar dilemma of producing authentic literature with an adulterated native tongue," ably demonstrating how language, like trauma, "has the capacity to express emotion and to hide it" (p. 143). The "elaborately staged religious festivals interspersed throughout Boll's novel," Kaete's "repetitive, compulsive struggle to remove all traces of dust and dirt," or the *Konsumgesellschaft* in which Kaete and Fred find themselves urged "to spend not to think" (pp. 146-47), indicate the efforts of Boll's protagonists, as well as those of the German nation, to remain in a suspended present so as to deny the trauma of the past.

In spite of these attempts, memory, history, and trauma remain open-ended in Boll's account. Indeed, memory is complicated in Boll's postwar essays in order to "draw attention to Germany as perpetrator and articulate the dilemma that results from being at once oppressor and victim, traumatizer and traumatized" (p. 149). In "Memory and Existence: Implications of the *Wende*," Elizabeth A. Ten Dyke takes as her point of departure the "absolutely fundamental significance of memory to the successful performance of ordinary routines" (p. 154). Based on oral history interviews conducted in Dresden during 1991 and 1992, Ten Dyke finds that "the memories East Germans held, particularly those that enabled them to accomplish daily routines successfully, became irrelevant to new life circumstances in the East after 1989" (p. 155). Shopping in shiny new department stores is one case in point, and the author shows how shopping became an uncanny experience in which habitual routine met with strange and new consumer products. Ten Dyke inquires into what these kinds of experiences can tell us about memory. In so doing she "points to a possible connection between East Germans' subjective experience of disorientation after the *Wende* and recent research on implicit memory" (p. 164). As the implicit memories, or what Paul Connerton might term habit memories, of the ordinary rituals of daily life disappeared in the East after 1989, "East Germans were cast adrift in an utterly foreign present; they were strangers in their own land" (p. 166). Whereas Fritzsche describes a rupture between past and present in terms of the narrative of nostalgia, Ten Dyke suggests the "disturbing psychological or physical symptoms" that may result when individuals lose their memories in relation to a social and culture landscape that has transformed itself before their very eyes.

The very "materiality" of memory, its traces and textures, is the focal point of the third section of essays. Paul Lerner's contribution, "An Economy of Memory: Psychiatrists, Veterans, and Traumatic Narratives in Weimar Germany," imaginatively addresses the double sense of the term "economy." At once a monetary term and the description of a social and medical circuit of exchanges, the economy of trauma includes and is the point of intersection of the medical landscape of veterans' psychic wounds and their desire for military pensions. Memory is the central feature in the economy of trauma mapped by Lerner with the aid of postwar pension proceedings. In these proceedings a contest of memory is enacted between "psychiatrist and patients over the reality and significance of traumatic war memories" (p. 175). In these proceedings traumatic memory is made manifest through veterans' inabilities (at work, at home, in personal relationships), or as the absent presence of the memory of trauma as "symptom"? Not only the Great War but industrial modernity itself brought about a new range of affective disorders, including shell shock, railway spine, neurasthenia, and traumatic hysteria. As Lerner makes clear, "memory–and in particular memories of trauma–help forge individual, communal, and national identities; thus, debates over traumatic memory carry great cultural and political significance" (p. 174).

Considering "Public Relations as a Site of Memory," S. Jonathan Wiesen also focuses on economy, in this case "West German Industry and National Socialism." "While to most postwar observers National Socialism constituted a horrifying moral collapse, for the business world it also represented a public relations disaster the like of which had never been witnessed" (p. 197). Using the strategies of public relations to finesse "the legacy of

business complicity during the war" (p. 197), industry sought to construct a "serviceable past" for the present. *The Behavior of the House of Siemens during the Hitler Regime*, a piece distributed "to the local press, to friends at home and abroad, and to the Allied occupation authorities [...] typifies West German industrial publicity in its depiction of industrialists alternatively as victims and opponents of the Nazis, and as the embodiment of corporate integrity" (p. 200). Not surprisingly, Wiesen finds that the "strategies Siemens employed in the summer of 1945 were replicated by a number of firms and individual industrialists throughout the 1940s and 1950s" (p. 201). As postwar industry actively sought to merge industrial memory and collective memory into a usable past, companies "took refuge in the 'made in Germany' myth as it attempted to convince the public that it was not without soul" (p. 202). After the founding of the West German state in 1949, however, companies employed "the persuasive tools of American-style PR" in order to apply a "new philosophy of corporate goodwill and anti-Communism" (p. 202). As Wiesen effectively demonstrates, PR, whether before or after 1949, is not a reflection of "managers' and shareholders' concern for the 'bottom line' " so much as a "largely public and social form" of memory production (pp. 205-07). In "Gender, Public Policy, and Memory: Waiting Wives and War Widows in the Postwar Germanys," Elizabeth Heineman moves away from a consideration of memory as a representation of the past. Instead, she seeks to understand how memory and social policies addressing war widows and wives of POWs and missing men were interwoven into political symbolism and a set of policy-making practices. Beyond the more obvious differences in memory and policy in West and East Germany, the author finds that the "story of war widows and waiting wives [...] was also one of the varying routes via which gendered reminders of the recent past found their way into postwar life" (p. 217). If Lerner's essay tells a complicated and checkered history of veterans' compensation, Heinemann states that "compensating widows for the loss of their husbands was, in some ways, more complicated." This was so because "pensions commemorating *men's* service encountered difficulties when memories of *women's* actions intervened" (p. 220), particularly if these included opportunistic marriages or illegitimate children. Finally, the author addresses how, during the Cold War, veterans', women's, and social workers' magazines "developed several tropes regarding the family and loyalty" (p. 227). In addition to magazine articles, accompanying visual materials could be brought into the analysis here, especially for what this might tell us about how social-policy shaped memory for the public. In this sense, the consideration of memory as a set of narrative or policy-making practices could be extended to include visual strategies as another set of practices. Since citizens "responded to the representation of those programs in the media," consideration of public policy, the author writes, "offers at least a partial solution to the problems of reception that plague cultural historians" (p. 233). This being the case, the inclusion of visual strategies would round out the analysis.

Ten Dyke's brief description of the East, where streets and plazas were renamed but the outlines of the letters of the old street signs remained, is a metaphor for the "work of memory." It is also an example of what Confino and Fritzsche term "a polyphony of memory." From this wide-ranging volume we learn that as the past is recounted in narrative form, individual memories are shaped by culture; as cultures, institutions, and nations tell their stories, so is the past produced in a useable form for the present. Memory, as the interchange of past and present, is indeed a social practice that operates within and through multiple registers. A polyphony of German memory is the commingling of the "noises of the past" in which "different readings of the past, violently different in some cases," coexist "within a certain cultural coherence, one that" is "contested and changing, but one that" is "also delimited by certain themes, rhetorics, symbols, and practices" (p. 15).

Confino and Fritzsche are well-aware that this approach to the study of memory "does not fit neatly with current views on mastering the past in Germany" (p. 11). "In thinking about mastering the past," they write, "we should not assume a production of an absolute coherent, univocal voice, but rather the presence of multiple voices, often contradictory and opposed to each other but in dialogue. These voices exercise self-criticism about the past that ultimately brings self-consciousness" (p. 12). Surely the editors are right, if for no other reason than because memory is forever paradoxical.[5] Memory "leads and misleads and yet only remembering and forgetting provide the ability to act and to judge" (p. 11). This point is drawn out in the epilogue by Steven T. Ostovich. Exploring how "dangerous memories," whether individual or collective, "resist the mastering of historical narrative" (p. 240), Ostovich describes how dangerous memories challenge notions of historical time as well as neat conceptions of the subject, the object, and their interrelations. Offering a "disruptive practice of and from memory," dangerous memories remind the historian of the hubris of univocal narrative. Rather, as Walter Ben-

jamin has most vividly shown, history "in the context of dangerous memories is catastrophe." History thus understood is "not only a science, but equally a form of remembrance" (pp. 241-43).

If the imperative to remember, especially judicious in the case of Holocaust memory, renders the past worthy of historical investigation and narrative, then the human capacity to forget forever lurks as a shadow behind any illumination of the past. Still, it is precisely this condition–a *sine qua non* of history, if you will–that motivates the writing of history in the first place. In this sense, the desire to "master the past" fully and the recognition of an ultimate inability to do so appear as an economy of false alternatives. Because those who seek to master the past are part of the past themselves, or because, in the case of the Holocaust most especially, the past remains part of a present that is seeking to master it, a complete severing of past and present remains impossible. Rather than find fault with the way in which the past refuses to be mastered in a final, univocal narrative, Confino and Fritzsche rightly suggest that "the noises of the past" are the sign of a healthy working through of the past in the present. On this account, the work of memory is conceived as open-ended. In this sense, it might be useful to consider "mastering the past" as a Kantian "regulative idea," an imaginary focus that guides the responsible citizen or historian seeking to come to terms with what came before at the same time as he or she realizes that the only result of this endeavor is a polyphony of memory. Polyphony is not cacophony, however. Confino and Fritzsche appear to reserve the right of historical "truths" and "facts" at the same time as they allow what Rudolf Vierhaus has felicitiously described as a "sense for complexity and contingency" to rest within the writing of history.[6].

This book, then, "is an invitation to problematize memory as a concept that is worth thinking *about*, but also especially worth thinking *with*." In what ways, the editors inquire, "is the term 'memory' useful to develop new insights about German history, to articulate new relationships, to shed new light on old topics" (p. 3)? The essays in this volume indicate the many ways memory can be a productive concept and a useful analytical tool. For Guenter Grass, the time has come to acknowledge that some Germans were also victims of World War II. Whether one agrees with the novelist or not, *Crabwalk*, his latest work of fiction, explores the impact that distant and dangerous memories have on contemporary individuals and society.[7] As Nietzsche had done before him, so Grass characterizes the historian's art as a crabwalk, where progress is measured by a lurching sideways and backward in the present. If attempts to master the past result in a polyphony of memory, then the historian of memory is one who has his or her ear trained on the noises of the past.

Notes:

[1]. According to Confino and Fritzsche, "Writing a history of memory in Germany should therefore begin, in our view, with the recognition that on the spectrum of modern reactions to the past the Holocaust represents the most extreme case, but not, on a fundamental level, a qualitatively different case that stands alone. The ambiguities, traumas, repressions, and negotiations that made the relations of Germans to the past before and after 1945 so troubled need to be put in relation to the overall problem of the past in the modern world" (pp. 10-11).

[2]. Patrick Hutton, "Mnemonic Schemes in the New History of Memory," *History and Theory* 36 (October 1997): p. 380. Cited in Confino and Fritzsche, p. 16.

[3]. See Immanuel Kant, "The Contest of the Faculties," in *Kant: Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 176-90.

[4]. On the latter see John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC and Penguin Books, 1972).

[5]. "Als Deutsche finden wir uns eingegliedert in dies groessere Erinnerungsgeschichte. Unsere Situation laesst sich deshalb nur als Paradox beschreiben: wir haben nicht die Wahl, diese Erinnerung auszuschlagen, und muessen uns doch frei fuer sie entscheiden." Aleida Assmann, "Erinnerung als Erregung. Wendepunkte der deutschen Erinnerungsgeschichte," in Wolf Lepenies, ed., *Wissenschaftskolleg Jahrbuch* 1998/99 (Berlin, 2000): p. 219.

[6]. Rudolf Vierhaus, "Coming to Terms with the Past? Die Historiker und das 20. Jahrhundert," in *Plurales Deutschland-Allemagne Plurielle. Festschrift fuer Etienne FranÃ§ois-MÃ©langes Etienne FranÃ§ois* ed. Peter Schoettler, Patrice Veit, and Michael Werner (Goettingen, 1999), p. 368.

[7]. GÃ¼nther Grass, *Crabwalk*, translated by Krishna Winston (Orlando: Harcourt, Inc., 2002). See also J. M. Coetzee's account in *New York Review of Books*, vol. L, no. 10 (June 12, 2003), pp. 24-26.

Copyright (c) 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of pub-

lication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the Reviews editorial staff: hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.

—– End forwarded message —–

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-german

Citation: Karen Lang. Review of Confino, Alon; Fritzsche, Peter, *Work of Memory: New Directions in the Study of German Society and Culture*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. June, 2003.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7689

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.