

# The State's Imprint on Memory

*by Marie Ines Harte*

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**Sarah Gensburger dismisses the idea of the French state being overwhelmed by the fragmentation and proliferation of memory-related demands. Rather, the state is the primary creator of society's memorial frameworks, even using them as a powerful means of reasserting its own legitimacy.**

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Reviewed: Sarah Gensburger, *Qui pose les questions mémorielles ?*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2023, 328 pp., €25.

The debate on memory never seems to run out of steam in France, whether it concerns the Holocaust, the Algerian War or France's colonial past. Media coverage of these topics may give the impression of a confrontation between communities with different memories, such as the harkis, the "Blacks of France" or the descendants of colonized peoples. However, none of this is new. In his work *Rethinking France*,<sup>1</sup> Pierre Nora drew attention to a proliferation of groups seeking greater recognition of their own particular histories in the public arena, thus undermining the cohesion of the national narrative. Social scientists have since focused increasingly on how societies remember and interpret their past and how individuals draw on it in the present. Benjamin Stora even talks about a "tribalization of politics" in which people recognize themselves within communities that assert their identity through memory-based claims.<sup>2</sup> It is in this context that Sarah Gensburger has undertaken to reflect on the

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Nora et al. (1986) *Rethinking France: Les lieux de mémoire. Volume 3: Legacies*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Stora and Thierry Leclère (2011) *La guerre des mémoires : la France face à son passé colonial*, La Tour d'Aigues, Éd. de l'aube.

mechanisms at play behind what seems to be both an accumulation of memories and an increase in conflicts over them. However, she does so with an original perspective. Building on her research, which takes a critical approach to the “war of memories,” her book seeks to answer a question that is essential but seldom mentioned: Who asks the questions about memory? She sheds new light on this subject by placing the state at the center of her analysis and conducting an in-depth exploration of the inner workings of the issue. Running counter to the theories that situate the origin of memory policies in the demands of social actors—as in the work of Pascal Blanchard<sup>3</sup>—her approach highlights how public administration actors shape memory policies and invites us to examine the state using the tools of political sociology, to better understand how they are crafted and what effects they have on society, particularly on associations.

## **Seeking the emerging field of public action on memory within the functioning of the state**

The sociologist turned to the public administration to explore the origins of memory as a category of public action: specifically, France's Department of Remembrance, Heritage and Archives (DMPA), affiliated with the Secretariat for War Veterans under the Ministry of Defense. By tracing the history and evolution of this service, she sheds new light on the gradual establishment of memory as a field of public action.

In the 1970s, faced with the steady and inevitable reduction in the number of war veterans, questions arose concerning the fate of the State Secretariat that dealt with these matters. With the threat of restructuring or the dispersal of these functions to other ministries, officials of this administration turned to memory as a resource to fight against the oblivion that was jeopardizing the memory of the twentieth-century wars, but also to justify the continuity of their actions and the survival of the service. Gradually, their efforts to spark interest in remembrance helped to make it a permanent part of public policy. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, several departments and directorates dedicated to the memory of wars and conflicts were created, reflecting the gradual institutionalization of remembrance at the heart of the state. Finally, in

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<sup>3</sup> Pascal Blanchard et al. (2008) *Les guerres de mémoires. La France et son histoire. Enjeux politiques, controverses historiques, stratégies médiatiques*, Paris, La Découverte.

1998, as part of an overhaul of the Ministry of Defense's administrative departments, the Department of Remembrance, Heritage and Archives (DMPA) was created, thus establishing a service that is “involved in shaping and implementing government policy on the memory of contemporary wars and conflicts and devising an appropriate commemorative program” (p. 98).

The emergence of a public policy of remembrance can therefore be explained by a bureaucratic logic driven by actors keen to defend their administration and resist the forces of time. But this development is also the result of a second dynamic, involving tensions and rivalries between the ministries of Defense, Culture and National Education. By using memory as a way of perpetuating its work, the veterans' administration has had a ripple effect in other sectors of the state. As a result, each has seized on this new area to implement projects specific to its portfolio, such as organizing commemorative events. Ministries may sometimes be pitted against each other—as in the case of the presidential request to organize a tribute to Guy Moquet in 2007, which was sent simultaneously to the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Culture—but such competition between ministries plays a key role in strengthening remembrance as a category of public action, and spurs civil servants to step up their efforts to demonstrate the quality and professionalism of their work. Strikingly, this kind of competition is also seen at municipal level, as shown by the study of the cities of Paris and Villeurbanne, where remembrance projects are structured and divided between the delegations in charge of either culture or veterans' affairs. In Paris, the researcher's interviews with Philippe Lamy, a former advisor specializing in security and remembrance issues under Bertrand Delanoë, clearly illustrate the way in which remembrance is fragmented within the cabinet: the culture department is responsible for museums and archives; the secularity department is in charge of Jewish remembrance; commemorations and ceremonies are handled by the delegation for remembrance, veterans and archives, while the subject of slavery is entrusted to the DOM TOM advisor.

The author goes on to describe this as a “memorial market” (p. 115) within central and local public administration, in which social groups become involved and in turn help to shape the politics of remembrance.

## **A diverse social mobilization of memory in response to government action**

There may well be a social demand for remembrance, described as community-based, if we look solely in terms of the organizations that act as the entrepreneurs of remembrance. However, by turning her attention to the state, Sarah Gensburger unveils a completely different panorama. By rigorously expanding her scales of analysis, bodies of research and methods, she highlights the impact of public action, which makes memory a resource that can be mobilized by local actors, both public and social, and frames its relationship with society. This analytical framework provides a better understanding of how memory circulates between public institutions, both central and local, and the social sphere.

Based on a geographical and chronological analysis of how associations mobilize around remembrance—taking into account the number of associations created and correlating them with the dedicated municipal departments in municipalities with more than 30,000 inhabitants between 1967 and 2014—the study reveals that associations are created in line with local authorities' remembrance policy initiatives. Community involvement thus stems from state incentives. The case of Villeurbanne illustrates this dynamic. In the early 2000s, this municipality wanted to promote the city's history, which was undermined by the dominance of Lyon, notably through an “Inter-neighborhood memories and heritage” project. This was quickly followed by greater participation from social actors involved in memory issues, resulting in 14 new organizations, compared to the three that existed between 1967 and 2000 (p. 136).

In addition, the number of projects using the language of memory is increasing, with the state losing some control. The researcher makes a strong argument thanks to word processing software analyzing the activities of associations created in France between 1997 and 2014. Although the veterans' sector remains the most dense and structured, a diversification of themes can also be observed. New spheres of engagement revolve around three other dominant axes: culture, secularism and the fight against discrimination. Thus, contrary to popular belief, social mobilizations around memory are not centered on historical subjects often considered divisive, such as the Algerian War, slavery or colonialism, but rather on notions that follow policies deployed at the local level. By entering the framework created by the state at the national and local levels, these associations adopt its terminology and unite around

focal points in line with republican values promoted by the state framework, such as integration and equality (p. 153 and p. 174).

## **Remembrance policies as a lever for legitimizing the state and a tool for redefining state-society relations**

Finally, the book emphasizes how memory policies shape the relationship between the state, the nation and society, where an opposition between general interest and special interests is at play. The establishment of memory as a category of public action has helped to reinforce the state's legitimacy in a context of a "denationalization of its authority"; one of the characteristics of the transformation of contemporary states is the decoupling of the nation and state authority, while other levels of governance are developing at both the local and supranational levels. In their daily work, the agents in charge of implementing these policies must manage the inherent tension between the universalism embodied by memory and special interests. The participant observation conducted within the DMPA highlights how memory becomes an instrument through which the state can manage its relations with society and its particularities. One example of this is when the officials tasked with designing an interpretation center on Mont Valérien were reluctant to mention the role of Abbé Stock, so as to avoid any risk of religious interpretation (p. 65), and were also wary of allowing representatives of associations to get involved, preferring to rely on the historians' expert opinion.

These are also the issues addressed in the recommendations of the 2008 Kaspi Commission report, which concluded that too many commemorations promote particularism at the expense of national unity. For the state and its stakeholders, memory must be preserved as a vehicle for cohesion. It is interesting to observe throughout the book that the deployment of memory is not the result of the vertical imposition of a univocal national narrative on the past. Memory policies are not a matter of "knowledge" but of "governance" (p. 70). Sarah Gensburger illustrates this point when she describes how the organizers of the tribute to Guy Moquet were more concerned with the choice of artist invited and the performative nature of the ceremony than with the story that was to be told (p. 58). Likewise, her analysis of the public's reception of the 2012 Paris exhibition on the Vél d'Hiv roundup, entitled "C'étaient des enfants" ["They were children"], draws the same conclusion.

Though they formed an expert and knowledgeable audience, visitors did not so much retain the content of what they had read or seen, but rather the values that the exhibition sought to convey: indignation in the face of injustice, the fight against anti-Semitism, the defense of democracy, etc. (p. 198). Remembrance as a category of public action enables the State to provide a framework. Once created, this field of memory spreads to local, public and social players, who invest in it, mobilize it and appropriate it to create new causes of their own, using the same language, which then becomes both shared and plurivocal, in which the universal and the particular are linked (p. 179), and where the state seeks a horizontal re-legitimization of its authority.

## Conclusion

*Qui pose les questions mémorielles?* is a dense, rich and captivating book that immerses us in public action on remembrance and challenges the idea of a passive state overburdened and overcome by fragmented and increasing demands for remembrance. On the contrary, states play a major role in the production of our memorial frameworks, which are an instrument used to reaffirm their authority in the broader context of the transformation of contemporary states.

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