

Cyprus and the Politics of Memory: History, Community and Conflict

Edited by REBECCA BRYANT AND YIANNIS PAPADAKIS
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A Russian proverb says: 'The past is less predictable than the future.' Today, the task of re-visiting and re-working the past is, more than ever, a major theme of the present. In his book *Present Pasts* Huyssen (2003, p. 3) argues that we currently suffer from a 'hypertrophy of memory', not history. Commenting on the explosion of memory discourses he points out that whereas nineteenth-century nation-states were concerned with recording history and tradition in order to legitimise a utopian future of progress, contemporary debates centre not only on the relationship between history (official, public) and memory (unofficial, personal) but also on the nature and premises of history writing itself. In this new memory market, Cyprus is well positioned to offer the perfect case study, given the conflict, the trauma and the almost experimental design of collective memory with the arbitrary and abrupt closing and partial opening of the Green Line. *Cyprus and the Politics of Memory: History, Community and Conflict* (edited by Rebecca Bryant and Yiannis Papadakis, I.B. Tauris, 2012) is an example of this trend that aims at exploring how 'history becomes a site for struggle, as well as a weapon used in the struggle' (p. 3). Even though not all the chapters engage theoretically the dynamic between memory and history, it is obvious that the main concern of the book revolves around what and how people remember the past – whether it is the past they personally experienced or the past handed down to them through history books.

Thus, the first theme one detects is related to how history in Cyprus is constantly re-visited and revised. Hatay and Papadakis start off in chapter I by arguing that a comparative look on the evolution of history writing in Cyprus on both sites can be illuminating, not because it will settle the issue of what really happened but because the question of historiography (vs. history) seems to be a much more interesting site for examining the struggle over the past. In the same vein, Bryant (chapter 7) explains how the battle of Erenköy evolved from a historical footnote that simply added on the idea of helpless Turkish Cypriots awaiting salvation from Turkey, into a myth of Turkish Cypriot heroism. Current commemorations of the battle are a sign of shifting loyalties and an indication that Turkish Cypriots are ready to move on to a history that does not present them as pure victims.

Both chapters allude to the idea of history as a palimpsest: a palimpsest is a manuscript (papyrus or parchment) that contains text underneath which another text from an earlier era is still visible. Reasons for the creation of palimpsests were both economic as well as political (for

example, the case of Christian sermons written over pagan texts in order to destroy them) but they are considered important documents because they are material manifestations of the memory/amnesia dynamic relationship. Two other chapters take on similar perspectives by peeling away layers of memory in people's narratives. In chapter 5, Göker examines how memory is subject to revision once we cross a spatial or temporal threshold: a nationalist visits her home on the other side and cannot deny that she has memories of peaceful coexistence; a migrant Cypriot rewrites the chapter of 'home' when he is unable to find his childhood home after crossing the Green Line. Even though the conceptual focus of the chapter is on home, belonging and alienation, it represents an excellent case of the workings of memory, especially as they relate to issues of space. In another interesting chapter, Loizos (chapter 8) begins to strip off not only the layers of his informants' memory but, more importantly, the layers of his own ability as an anthropologist to collect, collate and present legitimate information. The main focus of the chapter is the question of oral evidence related to the burning of the Argaki Turkish Cypriot coffee shop and the originality of it stems from the fact that it is posed in relation to memory, not history. Loizos argues, however, that neither the historian nor the social anthropologist can avoid the fact that all types of evidence must be interpreted as admissible and valid.

Two other chapters engage the pedagogical side of history by examining its multiple public performances that infuse everyday life. In chapter 6, Pattie provides a critical overview of the Armenian genocide commemoration through poetry and song, supporting the idea that history revolves around narratives of pain and suffering. In one of the most poignant questions of the book she asks: 'What might it mean for children to recite a poem about war and death that involves young people, even children?' (p. 151). While the question is left unanswered, it is a reminder that the issue of how trauma is transferred remains understudied in the case of Cyprus, with only a few exceptions (see Zembylas, 2008). In chapter 2, Philippou analyses Greek Cypriot geography and civics textbooks in order to point out that dominant identity claims and moral teachings of history are not confined to history textbooks. Indeed, this argument is important for anyone interested in the politics of collective memory in Cyprus which continue to fuel furious public debates any time educational reforms are proposed.

In most of the book's chapters a close affinity between memory (or collective memory) and history is implicitly assumed – after all, in ancient Greek mythology, Mnemosyne was the mother of the muse of History. More recent interpretations of their relationship, however, point to a memory/history split. Nora (1989), for example, argues that modern, national history has abducted people's memory and turned it into a monolithic interpretation of the past. The starting point for Panayiotou in chapter 3 is exactly this issue: the silencing of the Left's role in forging class consciousness, contrary to what people experienced or remembered. The chapter argues that (official) history systematically suppressed the voices of people from the Left in order to provide a nationalist version of the EOKA struggle that did not differ much from the modernising British vision. Similarly, Chatzipanagiotidou (chapter 4) engages the 'unofficial' and marginalised history

of the Left (through the eyes of Cypriot migrants in London) even though her work offers a more nuanced analysis: first, in pointing out the dangers of assuming that any alternative or silenced history is automatically authentic and second, in presenting splits between official and unofficial accounts even within the unofficial version.

In both chapters, (official) history is presented as an overpowering, controlling force that provides a singular lens for understanding the world. This is what Ratip aims to deconstruct in chapter 9 by arguing that it would be more useful if we could see the history of Cyprus from the perspective of those who are excluded by it; those who belong to a non-Cypriot history. We would, therefore, recognise how this limited perspective has robbed us of the ability to focus on other narratives beyond the Greek Cypriot/Turkish Cypriot conflict – such as the cases of violence and ‘purification’ within each community. The main argument of the chapter is a call to incorporate Cypriot history in the larger, international context of capitalism, militarism and globalised violence and, in that sense, to free it from the shackles of exceptionalism.

Ratip’s chapter along with chapter 10 by Galatariotou is where the volume ventures into unanticipated areas in order to resolve the history/memory split of the Cyprus conflict. I was initially highly suspicious – should I say, resistant? – of Galatariotou’s attempt to bring psychoanalytic methods to the study of history and collective memory but by the end of the chapter I was a Greek Cypriot patient on the couch, enlightened by the seamless connections between private, psychic reactions and public, ideological positions. The chapter initiates us into the basics of psychoanalytic thought (that the objectivity of external reality is compromised by the subjectivity of the conscious or unconscious mind; that there are collective psychic positions; and how we are fixated at the trauma and cannot move past it) before presenting Cypriots’ six major difficulties in revisiting the past. From resistance to change to collective obsession with ‘the truth’ yet fierce rejection of irrefutable facts, and from deceptive memories to de-signified memories (knowing without feeling), the analysis of how the Cypriot society suffers from ‘paranoid-schizoid and depressive states of mind in its inter-communal relating’ (p. 246) points to a collective denial that maintains false beliefs. These are the beliefs that can and have justified violence.

The problem is that people firmly believe in what they remember as real – as Galatariotou explains: ‘Memory is an unreliable witness of external reality but an unfailing recorder of psychic reality’ (p. 252). Such diagnosis, of course, is based on the idea that there is an external reality that is separate and, to some extent, independent of our psychic reality. And this is really the bottom line: can this external reality (about what happened in Cyprus) ever be established by those whose psyches have been traumatised by it? Or, more importantly, how do we know that we are in danger of privileging psychic realities at the expense of recognising an external reality? These questions that pitch positivism against relativism may sound simplistic and outdated but they are at the crux of the matter when we are investigating violence, pain and human rights, and I wish that more of the chapters in this book engaged them directly. The Russian proverb implies that memory is productive, not reproductive. If we are experiencing an era of memory saturation that favours the

trauma, the survivor and the witness, then we need to recognise when we are in danger of moving from the fetishisation of history to the fetishisation of the victim. Overall, this book is itself productive in the multiple ways in which it interrogates the tension between reality, truth and memory and, thus, raises more questions than it answers.

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