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**Collective Memory, Politics and the Influence of the Past:  
The Politics of Memory as a Research Paradigm<sup>1</sup>**

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ABSTRACT Politicians frequently make use of mythologized understandings of the past to mobilize memory as an instrument of politics in the present. Despite the postwar “memory boom” collective remembrance remains a slippery concept. In politics collective memory exerts its influence both from the bottom up, as interpretations of the past affect the identities and understandings of political elites, as well as from the top down, as statements by public figures place certain events into the national consciousness while silencing or forgetting others. In addition to summarizing the existing literature, this integrative review proposes a discursive conception of the politics of memory. I argue that research into political memory should focus on (1) the substantive content of collective memory as expressed by actors within state institutions, and (2) on the interactive channels through which ideas about the past are conveyed, disputed, silenced and negotiated outside these formal settings. I substantiate this argument – and demonstrate the relevance of collective remembrance to politics – by drawing examples of the role that memories of World War II continue to play Italian and Slovenian internal politics, as well as in their relations with each other.

KEYWORDS Collective Memory, Conceptual Analysis, Narrative, Politics of Memory, Memory Boom, Research Program

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*Introduction*

Politicians often draw on collective understandings of the past to mobilize remembrance as an instrument of politics. In certain cases they draw on historical analogies to frame and think through important issues (Khong 1992); at other times they deploy the past strategically, manipulating memory to legitimize their actions with reference to formative events in the collective consciousness of their community (Hayden 1992). Although these debates are usually based on domestic cleavages, they often spill into international relations. Such disputes over the meaning of the past demonstrate that “narratives are formidable instruments of politics” (Kotkin 1998, 403).

Interest in collective memory has exploded since the late 1960s, as clashes over historical narratives made the past relevant to scholars both as concerned citizens and as researchers (Klein 2000). There are many reasons for the development of the “memory boom” (Blight 2009). At the broadest level, this interest in remembrance is associated with three broader social movements: the student revolts of the 1960s, when the youth became interested in the wartime actions of their forebears; the rise of anti-colonial struggles, which challenged accepted narratives; and “the resurfacing of suppressed national concerns among subjugated European peoples on both sides of the Iron Curtain” after 1989 (Resina 2000, 1).

The factors driving the memory boom put the focus on events that occurred within a generation of the present. More specifically, they point to the fact that World War II – and the events associated with it – “retains its grip on memory and myth” (Reynolds 2001, 469). During the postwar era these effects were masked in Europe, as the Cold War directed attention away from differing understandings of the past. After the fall of the Iron Curtain and the unification of the continent under the banner of representative

democracy and capitalism, however, unresolved issues concerning the meaning of the past became politically salient once more (Judt 1992).

Examples of the political import of collective memory abound. In Europe, the Estonian government's decision to move a statue of a Red Army soldier honoring the sacrifices of the Soviet Union in "liberating" the country from the Nazis caused a diplomatic confrontation with Russia, which included a cyber attack by Russian hackers on the government in Tallinn (Peach 2007). In the Greek sovereign debt crisis – which ostensibly revolves around the economic issues raised by the creation of the European Monetary Union and Germany's unwillingness to forgive loans to the Greek government – "[h]ardly a day goes by without Chancellor Angela Merkel being depicted in a Nazi uniform" (Fleischhauer 2012).

Although this integrative review of the literature on political memory focuses primarily on Europe, disputes over the meaning of World War II are not confined to the "savage continent" (Lowe 2012). On the contrary, they are global, as was the war itself (Berger 1998). For instance, memories of this conflict have fueled antagonism between Japan and China, as Chinese leaders have refused to meet with Japanese ministers who visit to the Yasukuni Shrine, which honors Japan's wartime dead, including a number of Class A war criminals (Wolf 2004, 8). These disputes are difficult to resolve as narratives of the past are intimately tied up with self-perception and collective identity in the present.

The current obsession with the past seems to confirm Friedrich Nietzsche's (1985, 4) appraisal that "we are all suffering from a malignant historical fever." In a similar vein, Jacques Derrida (2001, 28) notes the "*universal urgency* of memory." The political

import of these disputes transcends the past, posing important questions about both the present and future. Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone (2003) argue, “Our understanding of the past has strategic, political, and ethical consequences. Contests over the meaning of the past are also contests over the meaning of the present and over ways of taking the past forward.” While the politics of memory is rooted in the past, its illocutionary content, i.e. the desired communicative effect of these discourses, is motivated by contemporary political considerations. In many cases memory has real perlocutionary consequences, changing the way that important actors and whole think about and react to situations in the present. This makes the politics of memory into an important new area of research for political science.

Although collective memory has generated a vast literature across the humanities and social sciences, there is little agreement about what it is and how it should be studied. For example, Andreas Huyssen (2003, 3) notes that “memory is one of those elusive topics we all think we have a handle on. But as soon as we try to define it, it starts slipping and sliding, eluding attempts to grasp it either culturally, sociologically, or scientifically.”

This review seeks to lay the foundations for collective memory as a political research program. In addition to critiquing the relevant literature, identifying research gaps and highlighting new questions, I also propose a discursive conception of political memory that focuses on how disputes about the past in the informal sphere of civic society work their way into and affect the operations of the formal institutions of the state. Drawing on the discourse theory of Jürgen Habermas, I argue that research into the politics of memory should focus on the communicative pathways that mediate

interactions between the informal public sphere of opinion-formation (such as public opinion and broader social movements) and the formal institutions of will-formation. Although this approach highlights the importance of the state as the primary nexus for memory disputes, it takes developments within civil society and international factors into account as well.

My basic thesis is that research on the politics of memory should focus on both (1) the substantive content of collective memory expressed by actors within state institutions, and (2) on the interactive channels through which ideas about the past are conveyed, disputed, silenced and negotiated outside these formal settings. The argument proceeds in three steps. First, I review existing work in collective memory studies to show how scholars have used this concept and to situate research into the politics of memory within the broader literature. In the second section, I narrow my focus and look at how collective memory has been studied in the context of politics. With this foundation in place, I elaborate my discursive definition of political memory. In the final section, I reflect on areas for future research.

Although this review is primarily conceptual, I substantiate my arguments – and demonstrate the political relevance of collective remembrance – by examining the role memory continues to play on the Italo-Slovenian border. These disputes date back to the interwar period, when fascist Italy controlled parts of contemporary Slovenia and Croatia, and the wartime atrocities that defined the battle for this territory. Whereas the Italian story focuses on the territory lost by Italy after the war, which allows them to “forget” the Fascist persecution of Slavs in the interwar period and their occupation of Yugoslavia during the war, Slovenian collective memories are contained within a narrative of

oppression and liberation from foreign rule, which silences debates over the brutal killings and retributions against the Italian inhabitants of the areas the partisan movement came to control. Examples drawn from this case will help clarify the motivation and the potential benefits of a narrower focus of political memory on interaction between the formal and the informal public spheres.

*The Concept of Collective Memory*

The paradigm of collective memory (*mémoire collective*) builds on the pioneering work of interwar French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs. As a student of Émile Durkheim (1982, 8), Halbwachs inherited his mentor's understanding of sociology as the study of how individuals living together "expresses a certain state of the group mind (*l'âme collective*).” He applied this insight remembrance, arguing that it is impossible to separate individual memories from the effects of society at large.

In *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (1925), Halbwachs opposed the individualist paradigm of memory presented by earlier thinkers, including Henri Bergson and Sigmund Freud. He argued that collective memory is socially constructed: “the idea of an individual memory absolutely separate from social memory, is an abstraction almost devoid of meaning” (quoted in Connerton 1989, 37). According to Halbwachs, collective memory is always mediated through complex mechanisms of conscious manipulation by elites and unconscious absorption by members of society. These social frameworks not only give meaning to individual memories; they also provide the broad historical imaginary that shapes the selection and interpretation of formative events.

There was little interest in Halbwachs's work before his untimely death at Auschwitz in 1944. It was only after the postwar memory boom of the 1960s that

remembrance became a topic of interest among academics and within society at large (Ginzburg 1997). In addition to the geopolitical factors I highlighted in the introduction, at a more individual level this change was driven by a ground swell of interest in family trees, autobiographies and museums. This trend was reinforced by the publication of Yosef Yerushalmi's *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (1982) and Pierre Nora's *Lieux de mémoire* (1984), which identified collective memory as a more primitive – or even sacred – way of preserving of the past that is different from modern historical consciousness (Klein 2000, 127-8).

These developments turned collective memory into an important explanatory factor for understanding human interaction. However, “though memory has obviously become a central concept in the humanities and the social sciences, it remains unclear to what extent this convergence reflects actual common intellectual and methodological interests” (Kansteiner 2006, 11). While psychologists and neuroscientists have made progress in understanding how memories are encoded in the brain (Schacter 1996; 2001), the difficulties surrounding the study of memory as a social variable abound.

A major issue is that collective memory subsumes and overlaps with many other concepts. Since it is a foundation both of our personal identities and our public allegiances and affiliations, collective memory is related to social phenomena such as ethnicity, nationalism and cultural identity, which build on shared understandings of the self (Ego) over and against the other (Alter). Memory studies can thus be seen as a new way of dealing with “that most elusive of phenomena, ‘popular consciousness’” (Dower 1999, 25).

This conceptual overlap gives rise to another problem: the lack of a clear, consistent distinction of collective memory from history. On one reading, history is about facts, while collective memory focuses on how past events are understood (Gibson 2004, 70-1). In other words, history is academic and objective, whereas collective memory is popular and subjective. Unlike history, on this understanding memory “makes the past ‘reappear’ and live again in the present,” refusing “to keep the past in the past, to draw the line, as it were, that is constitutive of the modern enterprise of historiography” (Spiegel 2002, 162). Summing up this approach in his short story, “Big Mama’s Funeral,” Gabriel García Márquez (2008, 198) declares that he must tell his narrative “before the historians have a chance to get at it.”

Although memory can be conceptually separated from historical research in this way, this distinction is highly contested and difficult to maintain in practice. Problems arise from the fact that although “[memory] is not history...it is sometimes made from similar material” (Fogu and Kansteiner 2006, 285). Peter Burke argues that “neither memories nor histories seem objective any longer. In both cases we are learning to take account of conscious or unconscious selection, interpretation and distortion. In both cases this selection, interpretation and distortion is socially conditioned” (quoted in Butler 1989, 98).

The concepts of history and memory overlap in important ways. Just as the study of history can change an individual’s internal memory, the personal experiences of historians can also affect their academic work. Collective understandings of the past, communicated through a variety of social interactions, can even cause individuals to develop “false memories” of events they never actually witnessed (Davis 2005). Hannah

Arendt (1998, 181) describes the interaction the individual and the group as occurring within a “web of relationships and the enacted stories” that bind the community together while allowing human beings to differentiate themselves from each other (for more on Arendt’s understanding of collective memory, see Verovšek 2014).

These difficulties have led some scholars to abandon the paradigm of collective memory altogether. For instance, Martin Duberman (1969, xii) argues that “the past will always remain ‘uncompleted’: we will never grasp its meaning whole, never understand its influence over our lives to the extent we might like, nor be able to free ourselves from that influence to the degree many might wish.” As a result, Noa Gedi (1996) contends that scholars should return to the traditional idea of “myth” as the appropriate designation for communally shared stories and interpretations of the past.

As if the term were not vague enough, the study of memory has also been subjected to a great degree of fragmentation. These divisions are reflected in the many adjectives that have been attached to memory in various contexts. A perusal of recent work (see Hodgkin and Radstone 2003; Huyssen 2003) reveals a plethora of approaches, based on a variety of different factors, including levels of analysis (individual or personal, collective, local, regional, institutional, national, global), origin (official, oral, commercial), status (contested, consensual, shared, selective) and substance (historical, cultural, social, political). This pluralism of prefixes result in part from the appropriation of memory by different disciplines, including history, literature, area studies, sociology, political science, anthropology, psychology and neuroscience. Each of these fields treats and approaches memory in different ways, based on its analytic tools and traditions.

The difficulties in conceptualizing the politics of memory cannot be overcome through ignorance or apathy. Simply disregarding remembrance will not change the fact that “the control of memory is a form of power. Persons in a position to manipulate memory, and with it the valued symbols of a society or group, hold...political power” (Hirsch 1995, 23). Nor will it stop the past from intruding into both domestic and international affairs (Brendese 2014). In a striking example demonstrating the relevance of collective memory for politics in the present, the American Ambassador to Slovenia, Thomas B. Robertson (personal communication, 4 July 2007), was shocked when diplomatic protests forced NATO to suspend routine over-flights of the country because the Italian squadron assigned to the task had carried out bombing operations over Ljubljana during Italy’s occupation of Slovenia during World War II.

Despite its problems, collective memory studies remains “an ingenious intellectual hybrid” (Fogu and Kansteiner 2006, 293) that should not be discarded. The new literature on transitional justice, which examines the effectiveness of institutions such as truth commissions, trials, amnesties and apologies as a way of dealing with authoritarian legacies of repression and violence spawned by the recent waves of democratization, highlights the value of memory for understanding the social and political world (Amadiume and Naim 2000; de Brito, González Enríquez, and Aguilar Fernández 2001; Lind 2008). In this sense, collective memory studies fulfills Imre Lakatos’s (1970, 116-120) *desiderata* for a research program, since it has led to the discovery of “new facts” and has corroborated “excess empirical content.”

In order to live up to its potential, the paradigm of collective remembrance will have to overcome the difficulties that have plagued it thus far. In particular, scholars will

have to “focus more aggressively on identifying sources and developing methods that allow us to describe with more precision how [memories] emerge” (Kansteiner 2006, 11-2). Agency will have to play a larger role in research that identifies how memory is mediated through intellectual and cultural background or frames. The use of clear and replicable selection criteria for which phenomena and processes are included under the rubric of memory and which are to be left out is also crucial.

I argue that the interactions between elites, who assume, forget and manipulate the past, and “memory consumers,” who adopt, reject or ignore the traditions that appear in discourse, are particularly important. In the following sections, I develop the tools necessary to overcome some of the most important problems of the study of memory in politics. I begin by examining the way the politics of memory has been used in scholarship to date. I then develop my own discursive understanding of political memory against this background by drawing on Habermas’s work on the relationship between civil society and state institutions within the public sphere.

#### *Existing Research into the Politics of Memory*

The memory boom has resulted in a proliferation of interest in the effects of remembrance on politics. However, instead of working together, scholars from different disciplines and methodological traditions “have long worked in isolation from each other” (Levy 2008, 1). Although they all adopt the paradigm of collective memory introduced and elaborated by Halbwachs, researchers vary considerably in how they define their terms and the interaction between memory and politics.

One problem is that “the politics of memory” has become a catch phrase, frequently appearing in the titles of scholarly works. However, in many of these cases this concept

then fails to play a central role in the argument of the text (for example, see Marcuse 1993). Sometimes the word memory does not even appear in the index of a work, despite its presence in the title (see Des Jardins 2003).

This bandwagoning effect not only testifies to the growing interest in political memory, but also its lack of definition and unity. Many texts that appear to be about political memory actually focus on related concepts, such as public discourse, cultural trauma, historical consciousness, narratives, and contested pasts, to name just a few (Brown 2003; Hodgkin and Radstone 2003; Lazzara 2006; Rappaport 1990; Resina 2000; Wolf 2004). Although these studies deal with some common themes and motifs, they explore different phenomena with different tools under different rubrics. This makes direct comparison difficult, as it is impossible to put them into dialogue with each other (Lakatos and Musgrave 1970).

One major problem – perhaps *the* major problem – with the scholarship on the politics of memory is delimiting the boundaries of this concept. On the one hand, political memory is often defined in such a broad sense that it can encompass almost any event or phenomenon within society. Clearly, politics pervades many areas of society. However, on the other hand, if every possible influence on politics, politicians and the general public is included, then the concept of political memory becomes meaningless (Resina 2000, 9). A narrower conception, which gives more guidance about what kinds of evidence can be used to support arguments about the influence of collective memory in necessary for this paradigm to live up to its potential.

Although overly-broad definitions of political memory extend the sphere of the political to the point of tautology, overly-narrow conceptions of this phenomenon cut out

important aspects of public life. The latter problem plagues conceptions of the politics of memory that focus on political institutions. For example, Richard Ned Lebow seeks to provide the foundation for comparative research program into the effect of collective memory on postwar Europe by focusing on what he calls “institutional memory.” This concept “describes efforts by political elites, their supporters, and their opponents to construct meaning of the past and propagate them more widely or impose them on other members of society” (2006, 13). Lebow seeks to capture the Gramscian assumption that discourses shape the way people think and the role that leaders play in these debates. As a result, he focuses on the role that elites play in framing crucial events – particularly focused on the Second World War – in ways “that were self-justifying and supportive of their domestic- and foreign-policy goals” (Lebow 2006, 6).

This narrow, institutional approach to the politics of memory has a number of advantages. To start with, it allows researchers who adopt this framework to reach joint conclusions by comparing the different studies to each other. For instance, the scholars who contributed to *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe* (Lebow, Kansteiner, and Fogu 2006) all identified the period from 1960-80 as crucial in shaping memory debates across. They also agreed on the importance of generational dynamics in this process. Lastly, these studies confirmed “the *dominant* relevance of the national – as opposed to the international or role-dependent – framing of politics of memory” (Fogu and Kansteiner 2006, 294).

Despite these positive features, a narrow focus on institutional memory is too limiting. A full understanding of political memory should not be restricted to the institutional plane, but should encompass work at all levels of analysis. This top-down

focus on institutions is understandable – after all, holders of public office do occupy a nodal position in the communicative networks of their community and are able to mobilize state resources, such as schools, memorials and legislation, to support their point of view – but it is also somewhat myopic. Although the ability of leaders to draw on political memory is asymmetrical compared to their constituents, the broader public must also accept the narratives put forward by public officials (Smith 2003, 32). As Seyla Benhabib points out, “A story that is not well told will not be remembered” (2002, 102).

The key problem of political memory studies is mediating between institutional understandings of the politics of memory that are too narrow, ignoring the important role that broader debates in civil society and the cultural sphere play in influencing political expressions of collective remembrance, and conceptions that are too broad, thus lacking analytical rigor and making comparison across different studies impossible. In the next section, I begin to develop a framework for this paradigm that focuses on how disputes about the past in society at large work their way into and affect the operations of the formal institutions of the state. This understanding of the politics of memory has the advantage of keeping the focus of research on the center of political life, while not overlooking the important role that outside factors play in influences these discourses.

#### *Towards a Discursive Conception of the Politics of Memory*

The definition of basic concepts is crucial to any research program (Lakatos and Musgrave 1970). The task of a central concept is to identify analytical limits so that research can be carried out in a consistent way. Although this conceptual narrowing inevitably involves leaving out potentially important factors, it sets the boundary conditions of the paradigm and defines the limits of what will be forms of substantiation

will be accepted. This process can be thought of using the metaphor of a judicial court, where the criteria for valid evidence must always precede substantive arguments about the case itself (Kratochwil 2007, 42-3).

These reflections apply to the politics of memory, whose organizational concept has not been clearly defined. Given the close connection of collective memory and narrative, I argue that the politics of memory should be understood as a communicative paradigm. Following Vivien Schmidt's understanding of discursive institutionalism, I argue that this will involve studying "not only the substantive content of ideas but also the interactive processes by which ideas are conveyed" (2008, 305). Applied to the politics of memory, this dialogical approach places the focus on both the contested interpretations of the past by official actors within the state, and on how these ideas are produced, influence, draw on and conflict with other narratives that are present within society at large.

Although studying the substantive content of ideas and discourses within political institutions is relatively simple, understanding the processes through which discourses work their way into politics is more complicated. In his pioneering work on discourse theory, Habermas differentiates between what he refers to as the *formal* and the *informal* public spheres. The former includes "parliaments, courts, ministries, and administrations," highlighting the activity of "politicians and officials within political institutions" (2008, 130, 122). By contrast, the latter focuses on "the informal conflict of opinions within the political public arena, [where] citizens and civic organizations operate below the threshold at which the institutional sanctioning power of the state can be invoked" (2008, 5).

In thinking about how to conceive of the interaction between these two spheres, Habermas borrows terminology of “sluices” from German sociologist Bernhard Peters (1993, ch. 9, sec. 2). This image of channels controlled by a series of gates and other obstacles meant to control the flow of water into a closed system (such as a water mill) highlights the relations between the political center of formal decision-making (will-formation) and the periphery of broader discussion (opinion-formation). Peters (quoted in Habermas 1996, 356) conceives of the interaction between the two as “a system of sluices through which many processes in the sphere of the political-legal system must pass, but the center controls the direction and dynamics of these processes only to a limited degree. Changes can start as much at the periphery as at the center.”

Although Habermas (Habermas 1989; 1996) builds a broader theory of democratic legitimacy on the idea that the formal institutions of will-formation must remain connected and responsive to the process of opinion-formation within the informal public sphere, the image of sluices is also useful for conceptualizing a discursive conception of the politics of memory. Although cultural, literary, historical and other debates about the meaning and import of the past are not political in and of themselves, they become part of the politics of memory once they have begun to work their way toward the formal public sphere through the sluices that link the formal and informal public spheres. In this sense, the politics of memory is not only about the ideas present in the formal institutions of the state, but also the “interactive processes by which ideas are conveyed” (Schmidt 2008, 305).

A good example of this process drawn from the ongoing conflict over the meaning and significance of the past on the Italo-Slovenian border is the movie *Cuore nel pozzo*

(“Heart in the Well,” Negrin 2005), which appeared on the national Italian television network RAI in February 2005. The film portrays the end of World War II in the Julian March, when the Yugoslavian partisans pushed the Italian army out of the lands Italy had received as a result of the Treaty of London (1915). In the process, the partisans retaliated against the Italians for oppressing the Slavic population, its language and its culture since 1920. They killed a number of ethnic Italians who had lived in Istria for generations, by throwing them into fissures or grottos, known locally as *foibe* (*fojbe* in Croatian and Slovenian, see Fogu 2006, 166). The film highlights the dramatic murders in the *foibe* to portray the Slavs as merciless killers (Anonymous 2004; Doktorič 2005, 3).

Although the narrative presented in the film started within civil society among the Italian *esuli* (“exiles”) who fled from their homes in Yugoslavia after the war, it eventually worked its way from the periphery through the sluices of the public sphere to Rome. Long ignored by Italian politics, the *esuli* gained a voice with the appointment of Gianfranco Fini of the neo-fascist *Allianza nazionale* as the Italian Foreign Minister in the government of Silvio Berlusconi in 2004. As a result, the film telling their story of suffering and expulsion from their ancestral homes was produced by and broadcast on the Italian state television network.

The film caused huge upheavals on both sides of the border. In Slovenia, the right government sought to downplay the issues raised by *Cuore nel pozzo*, calling the issue “an Italian internal matter,” “that does not affect relations between Slovenia and Italy” (Kante 2005, 3; Vidmajer 2005, 1). On the Italian side, the movie mobilized Italian nationalists and the *esuli* to push the government to support their claims for reparations and the return of their *beni abbandonati*, i.e. the property they left behind in Yugoslavia

(Petacco 2005). In the end, the film increased tensions between the two governments by “exacerbating nationalist, ethnic-based tensions between Italians and Slavs” (Hametz 2005, 204).

The political effects of *Cuore nel pozzo* made it hard to ignore the film and the issues of memory it raised. Unlike the many fictional books and memoirs that have appeared within the communities on the Italo-Slovenian border since World War II, this dispute was clearly part of a *political* fight over memory (Ballinger 2004). Given the timing of the film, it may also have been a response to the report of Slovene-Italian Historical and Cultural Commission (Anonymous 2004), which appeared in 2004, a year before *Cuore nel pozzo*. This report, commissioned in 1993 at a time when the claims of the *esuli* had not yet penetrated from the informal into the formal Italian public sphere, divided blame for the atrocities that occurred during the war between the Italian fascists for their brutal occupation and suppression of Slovenian culture, and the partisans for their mass killings, leading to the cleansing of the Italian minority in Yugoslavia.

This example shows how the activism of a minority within civil society can lead to a cultural artifact being mobilized for a political purpose by the institutions of the state. It also illustrates how this process of movement through the sluices of center and periphery can not only affect the internal affairs of the state, but can spill over into international relations. Under a discursive conception of political memory, both the contents of this narrative and the process by which it came into the formal public sphere are distinct parts of this single research paradigm.

This example also highlights what the politics of memory is not: the correction of popular understandings of history by providing facts. In many cases, the study of political

memory may show how certain agents have manipulated the past by distorting history. The screening of *Cuore nel pozzo* was followed with two weeks worth of commentaries, roundtable discussions and documentaries that claimed to portray the “historical facts” (Hočevár 2005, 3; Pupo 2005, 5; Šuligoj 2005, 3). Although these interactions may come to have political import, they too must work their way from the periphery towards the political center. In and of itself, the study of the politics of memory is not fundamentally about correcting misunderstandings in order to reach the historical truth (Ballinger 2003, 5). It is about understanding where these popular misconceptions come from, how they spread, whose interests they serve and how they are deployed.

This discursive approach to the politics of memory does not limit the sources and inspirations for the development of theory and the exploration of mechanisms for the transmission or activation of political memory. On the contrary, social and cultural approaches are valuable sources of insight in theory building, as scholarship within these areas has been engaged with memory studies much longer than political science and at a deeper level (Olick and Robbins 1998). Although a clear conception of the politics of memory allows this research program to develop as a branch of memory studies, it does not cut that branch from the “tree” of collective remembrance.

#### *Areas for Future Research in Politics and Memory*

Despite its problems, the politics of memory remains an important area of future research within the study of politics. I have argued that the paradigm of political memory can fulfill its potential by focusing on the substantive content of collective memory expressed within the state and on the interactive channels through which ideas about the past are conveyed, disputed, silenced and negotiated in society as a whole. This narrower

understanding of the politics of memory puts the focus on the channels and interactions through which collective memories pass on their way to the political center, and on how the narratives voiced within political institutions refract back out to the periphery.

To date, little process tracing has been done to understand how certain events retain political salience or the process through which they become important in domestic affairs. The nature of the relation between the state-based and the international effects of memory is also murky, as domestic politics can bring past events onto the international stage, while the international environment can provide the conditions for past events to become salient at others. In particular, existing work frequently fails to deal with the problem of reception and why certain memories or interpretations of the past are accepted over others (Kansteiner 2006, 12).

In considering the issue of salience, the way that collective memories intersect with myth is particularly interesting (Bottici and Challand 2013). For example, during the interwar period, the Italian state actively connected “the Roman imperial past...with the cult of fascism” (Fogu 2003, 193). The image of Rome not only helped the Fascists consolidate their power domestically, it also legitimated their irredentist claims to the Julian March and the Adriatic as a whole. They drew on *romanità* to frame their occupation of the eastern Adriatic coast as part of a civilizing mission (Gaeta 1943), arguing that the territory of the Italian state should conform to the boundaries of the Roman Empire (Vinci 1992). The Italian fascists bolstered their claims with archeological excavations of Roman ruins, which established the primacy of Italian civilization in the area (Bandelli 1991, 253, 258, 260). This shows how state narratives can draw on existing historical connections to become salient in the present.

There is also a lot of interesting research to be done at the individual level of analysis. In many ways this is the most logical place to start, since the individual is the building block of society (Jervis 1976, 14-9). Studies focusing on political actors and their changing views of the past over time using memoirs, internal documents and bibliographic accounts are invaluable in showing exactly how memory is transmitted to and used by politicians, as well as how it can change over time. Although some preliminary work has been done through the study of political memoirs (Egerton 1994), few mechanisms have been identified to date.

The dynamics of political memory at the sub-national level are also crucial, since civil society is the basis for broader political movements. Although some work has been done on how individual memories are aggregated into collective accounts of the past, these processes are not well understood (Connerton 1989; Misztal 2003). How and why political parties take up certain accounts of the past over others and the role these narratives play in political decision-making requires further inquiry (Olick and Levy 1997).

A cursory examination of the deployment of memory in politics shows that these debates tend to cluster around elections and certain important dates (Müller 2002). In addition to investigating the origins of these narratives of the past and how they came to be accepted, it would also be interesting to see how effective the use of group-specific accounts of events are at mobilizing voters. The similarities in the accounts accepted by various groups on a comparative level are also important areas for future research, especially in light of recent debates in the European parliament over the banning of totalitarian symbols (Lungescu 2005; Žižek 2005, 8-9). To return to my previous

example, documentation of how the claims of the *esuli* worked their way into foreign policy, and to what extent their primary mouthpiece, Fini and his *Allianza nazionale*, profited from aggravating tensions with Slovenia over the past would further our understanding of how collective memories of a minority works its way into state policy and how this can remobilize activity within civil society.

The international dynamics of political memory are also under investigated (Berger 2012; Lind 2009). To a certain extent, the effect of memory in interstate relations and in foreign policy is the cumulative effect of political memory at all of the other levels of analysis, from the individual up to the dynamics of domestic politics and internal debates. As if the complexity of these bottom-up processes were not difficult enough, the international atmosphere also exerts their own, independent, top-down effects. In this sense, international relations is more than the sum of its parts (Lebow 2006, 24-6).

Claudio Fogu and Wulf Kansteiner point out that major turning points in national political memory tend to cluster temporally around key international events and the general patterns in international politics (2006, 296). In line with this pattern, the dispute between Italy and Slovenia regarding the historical events of the interwar period and World War II flared up at the end of the Cold War. Italy saw Slovenia's desire to enter into the European Union as a key pressure point, which it used "as a nationalist distraction to whip up support for conservatives in Rome" and "as a launching pad for involvement in greater European issues" (Hametz 2005, 173). The conflict was finally resolved May 1995 when a new left wing government took power and Romano Prodi, under significant pressure from President Clinton, removed the Italian veto on the beginning of Slovenian accession negotiations (Bebler et al. 2006, 17).

Another important area of research, which has attracted attention in recent years, focuses on the conditions that make broader changes in the dominant frameworks of collective memory possible. Generational dynamics play an important role in this process, as the cohorts that experienced and can remember certain formative events begin to pass away. This temporal dynamic leads to what Thomas Berger (2012, 16) calls the “process of mnemonic drift,” i.e. the fact that collective memory tends to diverge from the original experiences over time. He notes that this drift is compounded by important generational dynamics, “as each new generation interprets received historical narratives against a background of experiences that are increasingly likely to differ starkly from that of earlier generations.”

In order to combat drift, collective memories must be institutionalized, so that they can be passed on to cohorts with temporal distance from the events in question. This highlights the importance of education and schools as “crucibles of identity formation” (Benhabib 2003, 151), which allow “a community which would preserve its ancient spirit” (McWilliams 1973, 218) by passing on narratives that frame past events in ways that further communal identity. This insight demonstrates the importance of textbooks and school curricula as primary sources for research into the politics of memory (Schissler and Soysal 2005, 258) and into how conflictual narratives, such as those that dominate discourses between Slovenia and Italy (Repe 2005), are passed on to the next generation.

Research into the possibility of change in the dominant narratives of the past has focused on the fourth generation born following an important event (Strauss and Howe 1997). Other scholars have taken a more institutional focus, examining the “critical

junctions” or “ruptures” that weaken institutional path dependency, making change possible through the “[c]ontingent outcomes of arguments or conflicts amongst competing leaders and parties” (Simon 2014, 811; see also Verovšek 2014). This has led to a focus on “constitutional” (Ackerman 1991) or “Machiavellian moments” (Pocock 1975) when social movements were able to break through and reshape the dominant institutional narratives of the past. Given the explosive role memory disputes continue to play in politics today, research into this area will become ever more important.

### *Conclusion*

The key difficulty with the existing literature on the politics of memory is its lack of conceptual clarity about what phenomena fall under the rubric of collective remembrance. I have argued that the politics of memory should center on the sluice-like interactions between the formal and the informal public sphere. In other words, research should focus on both the substantive content of collective remembrance expressed within state institutions and on the interactive channels through which these memories are conveyed, disputed, silenced and negotiated outside these formal settings. Although this excludes many cultural factors that are important aspects of collective memory as a whole, I contend that studies of both cultural and political memory will benefit from a narrower, conceptually distinct focus.

Although disaggregating memory and placing a clear focus on its political effects and implications will help ease some of the difficulties, scholars in the field also need to find better ways to isolate the effects of past events on politics in the present. One way to do this is to move to a lower, more local level of analysis, since this will allow researchers to better isolate treatments and track the effects of their variables.

Additionally, scholars will have to identify cases where crucial events in memory act as an exogenous shock and do not merely build on previous narratives or fall into pre-established collective identities. Greater conceptual clarity and research designs that approach political memory in new and ingenious ways to isolate its effects on politics will help the politics of memory to live up to its potential as one of the most exciting new areas of scholarship within the study of politics.

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