

CALL FOR PAPERS

SYMPOSIUM: THE CONSTRUCTION OF FORGETTING
(MISHA, Salle des Conférences, 26th and 27th November 2009)

In 2009 we will commemorate two major events which have shaped the political, economic and social history of the 20th century in profound ways: the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 and the collapse of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989/1990. Whereas the end of the Second World War is commonly considered as marking the beginning of the Cold War, the political revolutions in Eastern Europe 20 years ago put an end to this historical period. During the second half of the 20th century politicians, intellectuals, researchers, artists and especially the victims of the Third Reich have exhorted mankind to remember the crimes committed by the National Socialists (A. Assmann 2006). Since 1989/1990 the Eastern European countries for their part have made an effort to (re-)construct their post 1945 communist past. The individual and collective memory of everyday personal history as well as of official history thus appears to have been at the centre of public life for several decades.

“The Ages of extremes”, which E. Hobsbawm (2003) also called “the short 20th century”, was characterized by totalitarian systems that wanted to systematically control memory, going as far as to violate its most secret sanctuaries (T. Todorov 1995). But memory and oblivion are not antithetical: forgetting and conserving always, and necessarily, interact within memory. Forgetting is a selective and dynamic process: like memory it is the result of a social construction, of a specific relation to the past, it is part of the multiple rewritings of history, it is submitted to policies and to ways of legitimating power, it becomes in certain cases a strategy of survival and a value which is the foundation of the collective identity of a group (for instance the gypsies as I. Fonseca 1996 has demonstrated). If memory has been the object of multiple studies in the social and cultural sciences, which accompanied the memory waves of the last twenty years (see the works of F. Raphaël or A. Wieviorka), less importance has been attached so far to forgetting, which is the memory’s shadowy other, its silent, suppressed obverse.

It seems indispensable to examine the ways in which the great collective events of history have been put under erasure in private and public life, for instance all those fugitive, elusive memories of colonialism, war, dictatorship and resistance stored in different sources of memory: family narratives, photo albums, autobiographies, school books, literature, art and museums. The absence of commemorations, the silence on historical events and figures, the lack of transmission between generations and negative social mythologies shall also be worth examination. As L. Passerini (2003) has shown, forgetting can take the form of an “inflicted amnesia” (for instance the war in Algeria), but also of a reservoir of memories which sets a process of democratization going (for instance the partial forgetting of the Civil War in Spain in the public debate after 1978 [P. Aguilar 1996] or the memory prohibitions in Ancient Greece [N. Loraux 1988]). The phenomena of lies, amnesia, silence, the ephemeral, the non-information, repression and misleading information shall also be considered. Particular importance will be attached to identifying the workings of that grey area between conservation and forgetting, from which memories can be re-appropriated according to contexts and historical situations. Thus institutionalized forms of remembering can in reality

be intentionally used in order to induce forgetting, for instance the designation “anti-fascist victims” used in the official commemorations in the countries of the former soviet sphere of influence in fact serves to erase the diversity inherent in those victims’ experiences.

At the symposium we want to study in a transdisciplinary perspective these different ways of constructing forgetting as part of memory. Sociologists, anthropologists, historians, political scientists, psychologists, literary specialists, art historians and museum experts are thus invited to examine the construction of forgetting in all its forms. The languages of the symposium will be French, English and German.

Please submit your proposals (title and an abstract of about 5000 characters or 800 words) before December 1st 2008.

The organizing committee regrets it is unable to contribute to travel and hotel costs.

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