

## **MEMORIALS: MEMORY, MYTH AND THE RIGHT TO REMEMBER**

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The Oxford English Dictionary indicates that a memorial is a “a sign of remembrance; preserving or intended to preserve the memory of a person or thing”. This definition helps to identify the core elements that constitute memorials: that they are a sign, they have to do with an aspiration to remember with the intent of preserving memory of a particular subject or object. It also indicates that underlying this definition of memorials is the idea of loss. This is an important distinction as it separates them from commemorative monuments that can be a result of war but are not necessarily about loss. It also suggests an element of agency in the intent and desire to remember and remind.

In the context of the symposium, co-organized by the Catalan institute Memorial Democratic, this paper asked: Do memorials only exert an authoritarian and coercive injunction ‘thou shalt not forget’ or can they have a different, democratic, function and if so what would this look like? Through this question the paper sought to explore the implications of memorial practice for citizenship, rights, and duties.

Memorials can take the form of ceremonies, commemorative days, preserved ruins, monuments such as cenotaphs, songs, poetry, music, films, theatre, and the naming of streets. All of these forms have both tangible and intangible

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dimensions. Both of these dimensions are fundamental considerations in order to begin to understand how memorials might function within space and time.

In a post-war reconstruction paradigm the past is called on to serve various functions. First, an edited version of history is constructed and attempts are made to mould memories in order to give legitimacy to the post-war administration. The constructed historic narrative is reflected in many formats from school curricula to comic books and films and is reinforced through commemorative practices.

Central to this process is the fact that it **is** selective; choices are made about what to explicitly 'remember' or deliberately silence. As old symbols are reinterpreted, familiar landscapes change and new ideological connotations are added. Thus, memorials can be used to construct a mythology for the emerging power structure, one that supports its claims of legitimacy and power. Together with rendering visible a new repertoire of heroes and 'legendary' events that support a myth of origin of the new State, memorials can also be used as the scaffolding for a moral framework, an attempt at social control. To illustrate this there is no better place to turn to than 1940s Spain.

The message of martyrdom so prevalent and reiterated in the memorial practices of post-war Spain had implications for the structuring of citizenship and rights. Since the state presented itself as being an emanation of that body of people, the martyrs, who had sacrificed so much for Spain any grievance was made to look petty in light of the sacrifices made. Furthermore, imbedded in the memorials, plaques, prayers, anniversaries and ceremonies dedicated to those 'Fallen for God and for Spain' was a lesson about who had the right to mourn, and which dead had the right to be remembered.

Zygmunt Bauman has recently remarked that at some point memorials seem to blend into the landscape of the ordinary and mundane; that we stop *seeing* them, or being moved by them, that they lose their ability to trigger memories or emotions. Yet, in moments of crisis these memorials to past moments of loss become rallying points and regain their evocative power.

Memorials are often activated officially on a yearly basis as the stage settings or centre pieces for the performance of commemorations. Nevertheless, even when the messages that these structures are intended to communicate appear relatively fixed, memorial sites prove to be far more complex, their meanings changing with time and use. The importance of this understanding is that it highlights memorials as processes rather than as objects and makes the point that the apparent 'permanence' of memorials is a delusion they are always transient, at least in their intended form.

In the process popularly referred to as the Recovery of Historic Memory witnessed in over the past decade in Spain, discussions have been framed by an idea of moral, historic, or legal justice. The three leitmotifs running throughout these discussions are: the duty to remember, the right to be remembered and the freedom to mourn. Memorial processes thus do have implications for building active citizenship that stretches beyond an individual needs to mourn.

As we engage in memorial practices it is our responsibility to question their intentions and potential impact. We need to keep studying, and questioning, memorial practices, to better understand the intent behind them and how this compares with their impact on the societies that produce or inherit them.