Imperial Sites of Memory

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The notion of memory has long been popular in cultural and historical studies. The roots it has taken are so deep by now that Aleida Assmann can confidently refer to it as the new „paradigm" of cultural studies. It is surprising therefore, as DOMINIK GEPPERT (Bonn) pointed out in his introductory remarks, that so far few attempts have been made to connect memory to another „historiographical boom topic": imperial history. The aim of the conference was thus twofold: finding a new perspective on imperial history by combining it with memory studies and suggesting some methodological progress in the latter. In an altogether successful attempt at structuring the newly established field the organisers chose Pierre Nora's *lieux de mémoire* as a starting point. What Nora considered to be a new way of writing a „second-degree history" of the nation was put to the transnational and imperial test.

Like most of the follow-up projects to Pierre Nora's numerous volumes on French *lieux de mémoire* the conference was based on the assumption that sites of memory are not only topographical places but encompass all those, often immaterial points which structure collective imaginary landscapes. Historical personalities and events and even concepts can figure just as large in collective memory. For the purpose of finding imperial sites of memory the concept of collective memory had to be retraced to its origins. While Nora had narrowed Maurice Halbwachs's concept down to the nation as point of reference it soon became clear that a whole array of different groups on a supranational, national, subnational and transnational level has to be taken into account when considering imperial history.

While most of the papers concentrated on a single site of memory in their explorations of the relations between the commemorative narratives and their material manifestations, both keynote speakers drew wider pictures. WINFRIED SPEITKAMP (Kassel) focused on Kenya after independence describing the intricacies of commemorating the Mau Mau-movement. Speitkamp showed how debates on colonialism are still mostly tied to national contexts while there is no straightforward divide between the former colonial subjects and colonisers. Thus, Kenya's first president, Jomo Kenyatta, introduced a commemorative strategy of „forgive and forget" which did not even mention the Mau Mau-uprising. Only in recent times has there been some political capital attached to the Mau Mau but the remaining difficulties lie in the multi-ethnic character of the Kenyan nation.

ANNA-MARIA MISRA (Oxford) elaborated in rich detail on the memories of the Raj from 1947 to the present day and included a comparison with Chinese and Vietnamese approaches to their respective colonial pasts. Like Speitkamp's arguments about Kenya, Misra stated that in India remembering colonisation was not tantamount to simply condemning the colonisers and raising their opponents to the status of national heroes. Even some of the British monuments remained in place for years after Indian independence in 1947. Especially, the elites represented in the Congress were so deeply infused with the British heritage that a radical new orientation seemed impossible. As Misra put it, the Raj appears to have „passed into the DNA of India". Indian history in itself seemed to stand in the way of a streamlined process of forming a new national narrative. While Nehru and the Congress elites aimed at a new modernity that could not quite cut itself off from European influence, for the Hindu nationalists the British were only one in a long line of non-Hindu intruders.

In an attempt to categorise imperial sites of memory the organisers had come up with four panels: Monuments; Heroes and Villains; Trauma, Defeat and Loss and, finally, Institutions. SHRADDA KUMBHOJKAR (Pune) and JAMES KORANYI (St Andrews) followed the changing fates of monuments in an Indian context and in what could be deemed a case

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of inner-European imperialism. Kumbhojkar chose the obelisk at Koreagon Bheema to analyse a case not so much of contested memories but of a site of memory used very much differently from the intentions of its constructors. While the British had erected the obelisk to remember a battle against a local ruler it later was overwritten to become a site of memory for low caste people and their fight against suppression in the Indian society. Further symbolic capital was accumulated when a social activist, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, visited the monument in 1927. Since then it has become a pilgrimage site for low caste people who left Hinduism to become followers of a neo-Buddhist religion. As Kumbhojkar put it: „The memorial that was built to perhaps reaffirm the colonial power's belief in its own military prowess, is serving as a different site of memory, but serves pretty much the same function."

Koranyi traced the history of a monument erected for thirteen officers executed after the failed Hungarian revolution of 1848-49. The monument for the so-called „Thirteen Martyrs of Arad" was unveiled in 1890 but had been planned since 1867. It was very much a Hungarian site of memory directed against what was seen as Austrian imperialism. After the First World War the town of Arad fell to Romania and what had been erected as a symbol of Hungarian resistance now appeared to be a sign of Hungarian chauvinism. After 1990, the monument – which had since been removed and relocated more than once – was returned to its original site, this time intended to serve as a symbol of reconciliation. In his paper on monuments and memorials in newly established colonial rules in India and Algeria, XAVIER GUÉGAN (Newcastle) added the interesting thesis that not only the monuments in themselves could be treated as sites of memory but also their visual representations in paintings and photographs. Thus, a specific visual mobility was created and a further dissemination could be achieved which linked the colonial periphery with the populations in the imperial centres.

The second panel comprised historical figures who at different times were seen as heroes or villains. RICHARD GOEBELT (Berlin) investigated the changing memories of Lord Clive, officer of the East India Company and victor of the battle of Plassey in 1757. Considered a problematic figure by many contemporaries he was transformed into a prototypical imperial hero in the late 19th and early 20th century. His reputation waned with Britain's imperial fortunes, but he was recently reinvented as a critic of the negative social impact of financial capitalism and corruption. BERNY SÈBE (Birmingham) considered Kitchener and Marchand, the British and French heroes of the Fashoda incident. While their fame was created by a mass press, their memory faded as the imperial power of their home countries declined. A further and highly interesting example throwing light on the different sides of imperial memory is Imam Shamil. STEFAN CREUZBERGER (Potsdam) showed that Shamil was not the typical villain in the eyes of at least some parts of the Russian elite of his times who saw him as an able military leader and organiser. This image changed in the early Soviet era, when he was portrayed as religious fanatic opposing a higher Russian civilisation. During the Thaw, though, a lengthy debate evolved, which formed the basis for a further change in perception after 1990, when Shamil was elevated to the status of national hero in Dagestan and praised as the leader of a liberation movement in most of Russia.

Turning to Institutions as sites of memory, VICTOR ENTHOVEN (Amsterdam) focused on the Dutch East India Company (VOC), retracing the hold that it still has over present Dutch mentality although no clear cut interpretation of the colonial past and the VOC's involvement has yet evolved. Other institutions connected to colonial history also proved ambiguous in their function as receptacles of imperial memory. Discussing the ambivalent role of British missionary societies in imperial contexts, JOHN STUART (Kingston) recognised their potential as imperial sites of memory. However, in spite of some aspects of missionary work which became part of imperial memory culture, the societies themselves do not figure large. Similarly, KATJA KAISER (Berlin) and FRANK UEKÖTTER (Munich) questioned the label of imperial site of memory for the Botanical Garden in Berlin and Kew Gardens respectively. Kaiser stated, though, that –

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added to the intimate link of German Botany with the colonial economy during the *Kaiserreich* – today's growing interest in Germany's colonial history may yet lead to the Botanical Garden in Berlin becoming a point of crystallisation for imperial memories.

In methodological terms the panel on Trauma, Defeat and Loss proved to be no less challenging. While the work done by CLAIRE ELDRIDGE (Southampton) on the Pied-Noirs, the French settler community in Algeria highlighted important dimensions of their lively memory culture it remained a point of debate if this group should be seen as an imperial site of memory or as a memory community contributing their specific gloss to a set of imperial sites of memory. BARAK KUSHNER's (Cambridge) investigation of the remodelling of monuments symbolising Japans imperial might to monuments of peace after 1945 similarly provided further stimuli for the discussion on what constitutes an imperial site of memory.

Overall, the conference has shown that there is as yet no definitive methodological and theoretical framework for the concept of imperial sites of memory. Giving an equal status to the memory cultures on the former peripheries of empires also remains a real challenge. As one of the organisers, FRANK LORENZ MÜLLER (St Andrews), made clear, an application of the concept requires for some questions to be answered: do imperial sites of memory adhere to a chronology of pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial eras? What are the exact functions of imperial sites of memory? Do different kinds of empires produce different kinds of memory cultures? What categories could allow a more precise structuring of the field? Are sites of memory usually constructed top-down or are they the result of grass-root developments? Do they have to be validated by a wide public interest? What is the relation between material and immaterial aspects?

However, the conference revealed the great potential of imperial sites of memory as a tool for research in the field of imperial history and opened up several avenues for further examinations. The most important result were the numerous hints at ways of breaking up what could be seen as the binary opposition of imperial history which was more often than not heightened by postcolonial studies. The dichotomy of the imperial masters vs. the suppressed, of colonisers vs. colonised, of centre vs. periphery does not hold for the winding paths of imperial memory or – as we should rather say: memories. The number of different groups on a supranational, national, subnational and transnational level all creating their own identities and commemorative networks is far more differentiated than a simple dyadic structure could ever start to reveal. The imperial sites of memory can help structuring those sometimes vastly different imaginary landscapes which constitute identities. It is here where the accretion of different layers of conflicting memories can be studied in detail and sometimes it is, as in the Indian examples, the things which are chosen to be forgotten that are most telling.

Conference overview:

Keynote Lecture 1
Winfried Speitkamp, Kassel: „Forgive and forget"? – Colonialism in Collective Memory: European and African Perspectives

Panel 1: Monuments

Shradda Kumbhojkar, Pune: Contesting Power, Contesting Memories. The Memorial Obelisk at Koregaon Bheema

James Koranyi, St Andrews: The Thirteen Martyrs of Arad: A Monumental History

Xavier Guégan, Newcastle: Monuments, Memorials and their Visibility within Newly Established Colonial Rules in Post-Mutiny British India and Post-Conquest French Algeria

Panel 2: Heroes and Villains

Richard Goebelt, Berlin: „Winning and Empire" – Lord Clive and the Inventionb of an Imperial Founding-Myth of the British Empire

Stefan Creuzberger, Potsdam: Freedom Fighter or Anti-Tsarist Rebel? Imam Shamil and Imperial Memory in Russia

Berny Sèbe, Birmingham: The Making of the 'Hero of Fashoda' and the 'Sudan Machine': Metropolitan Celebrations of Marchand and Kitchener

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Panel 3: Trauma, Defeat and Loss

Barak Kushner, Cambridge: Love Statues: De-Construction of Japanese Imperial Monuments to War

Claire Eldridge, Southampton: Being the 'Best' Victim: Placing Pied-Noir Trauma in a Transnational Context

Keynote Lecture 2
Anna-Maria Misra, Oxford: Forgetting Empire? Indian Memory and the Raj

Panel 4: Institutions

Victor Enthoven, Amsterdam: This VOC Mentality! The Dutch East India Company as a Lieu de Mentalité of Empire

John Stuart, Kingston: Africa in British Missionary Memory: No Place for Empire?

Botanical Gardens and Empire

Katja Kaiser, Berlin: Plant Hunt and Colonial Agriculture – The Botanical Garden and Botanical Museum Berlin-Dahlem

Frank Uekötter, Munich: Kew

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