## Memory before Modernity. Memory Cultures in Early Modern Europe

**Veranstalter:** Leiden University
**Datum, Ort:** 20.06.2012-22.06.2012, Leiden
**Bericht von:** David de Boer, Intern research group „Tales of the Revolt": Memory, oblivion and identity in the Low Countries, 1566-1700, Utrecht University

In the last two decades memory studies has become a well-established branch of the humanities and social sciences. Memory studies usually focuses on the modern world; and where that is not so, the early modern period often serves as a mirror more than as the focus of study in its own right. Thus, the notion that early modern people had a fundamentally different relation to the past is often used to explain what actually makes modern memory practices modern. Yet such claims about early modern memory cultures usually have little basis in empirical research. In June 2012 the Dutch research team „Tales of the Revolt", which studies the memory cultures of the Dutch Revolt, organized an international conference entitled „Memory before Modernity" at Leiden University. The conference's objective was to explore a wide variety of early modern memory cultures and critically engage with the question if and how early modern memory culture indeed differs fundamentally from its modern counterpart.

Opening the panel „Memory wars before the nation state", PHILIP BENEDICT (Geneva) analyzed the appropriation of memories of the French wars of religion by the various parties concerned. He highlighted the limited effectiveness of the royal policy of *oubliance*. Benedict pointed out that this national policy of forgetting the past could not prevent various local practices of commemoration, because in many cases reference to the past was essential to the self-definition or political legitimation of a community, like the Huguenots.

JASPER VAN DER STEEN (Leiden) analyzed how the Arminian and Gomarist parties in the Dutch Reformed church attempted to back up their position by appropriating canonic memories of the early phases of the Dutch Revolt. In doing so, he strikingly revealed how confessional quarrels were not only fought out through theological arguments, but could become heavily intertwined with political memory.

In the following discussion, there was agreement that early modern memory practices were astonishingly flexible and fluid, partly because so many agents were involved. It was suggested that this diversity was owing to the lack of a national framework for memory and is therefore not found in the modern era. However, JUDITH POLLMANN (Leiden) pointed out that this did not mean that the memorialization of the past diverged into every possible direction. The very act of quarreling about a certain event not only consolidated this event as something worth arguing about, but also set an agenda that was difficult to ignore, thus providing a shared framework of memory. It can therefore be said that early modern memory practices are not necessarily framed by any governmental enforcement or 'national' history, but nevertheless generate a sort of common consensus and discourse about those aspects on the past that are worth arguing about.

In the second panel „Coping with distressing memories", SUSAN BROOMHALL (Perth) explored how recollections functioned on a more personal level. She pointed to the importance of 'secondary gain' in mediating distressing memories. Although certain experiences could have profound emotional impact on individuals, whether they would be mediated and remembered depended on whether they could provide practical or social benefits. Rapes, for instance, were only recorded in exceptional circumstances because the victim risked becoming a social outcast.

In the paper of ANDREAS BÄHR (Berlin) we can see that the gains obtained through memory were not necessarily substantiated as material compensation for, or social legitimation through, the experience; the gain could also be found in the distressing memory itself. Bähr subtly showed how the memory of a distressing event could be seen by the individual as a catalyst of spiritual or moral development. It the discussion it was pointed out that narrative patterns in which people framed distressing memories in early mod-

© H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved.

ern times are saliently different from the ones used in the West today. The fact that these narratives often have a positive ending and are framed in the language of spiritual growth, was thought to be typically premodern. At the basis of this structural difference between early modern and (post)modern framing of past experiences lays the heavy reliance on divine providence. Linking distressing memories to providence made it possible to interpret them as necessary and in fact valuable. It is not merely a topos that leaves the personal, emotional memorization untouched.

In the third panel „Memory landscapes as multimedial experiences", BENJAMIN SCHMIDT (Seattle) approached the relationship between topoi and personal memories from the opposite end. He analyzed the way in which an overseas experience moved from a simple drawing in a diary to a standardized picture in maps, painted vases and other decorative objects. He thus revealed how personal memories could stand at the base of topoi that were literally and figuratively shaped by objects.

MARIANNE EEKHOUT (Leiden) emphasized the importance of memorabilia, objects that are more directly related to certain events and more explicitly serve as a reminder to them than the commercial products Schmidt described. By analyzing the artifacts that emerged around the peat barge that served as a Trojan horse in the conquest of Breda in 1590, she showed how artifacts propped up and gave shape to personal, local and national memories. Having shown that objects had different meanings in a variety of social settings, discussion arose on whether objects have agency. SUSAN LEGÊNE (Amsterdam) argued that objects demand a certain reaction from the individual who is confronted with it. Since the way it is reacted upon is partly conditioned by qualities that lay in the object itself it has a form of agency. Nevertheless, other panelists argued that agency still resided in the subjects who engaged with the objects. However, since it was not properly defined whether it was the changing meaning of an object over space or time that yielded it agency, or the very fact that it had essential associative qualities that transgressed space and time and therefore demanded a specific reaction, this discussion failed to properly conceptualize agency.

Ironically, DAGMAR FREIST (Oldenburg) historicized precisely this issue when she opened the fourth panel „Memory transmission and identity formation". She stressed the importance of objects in early modern diaspora settings in which people's memories were uprooted as they felt lost in time and space. She argued that through migration and dislocation identity crises were common. Objects were in these cases immensely important mnemonic devices to remember or (re)construct one's background. Furthermore, she pointed to the „glocal" as a term that can be usefully applied to diaspora communities. Being widely dispersed while retaining a closely related identification and sharing exclusive values and belief systems, these „glocal communities" both preceded and transcended national boundaries. In this sense, the importance that Benedict Anderson gave to scale when discussing „imagined communities" is not necessarily restricted to the nation states of modernity.

JOHANNES MÜLLER (Leiden) further analyzed the identity formation of these diaspora communities. He stressed that instead of emphasizing the differences between themselves and the locals, second and third generation exiles actually mobilized their diaspora heritage to build ties with the networks of host societies. For instance, they could claim to be particularly pious because their fathers fled their homes for the godly cause. Similarly, in KATE HODGKIN's (London) paper on the role of women as agents of memory in England, the importance of lineage emerged.

In the discussion it was argued that this emphasis on family history as an important building block for identity might be distinctly early modern. It was stressed that even during the Reformation people only spoke of their parents with praise, despite the fact that they had stuck to the old religion. It is salient that in the premodern period, even in times of rupture, the personal or family-based past was still regarded in terms of continuity. This sits well with the assumption that only from modernity onwards people began to experience the past as being fundamentally different from the present.

© H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved.

However, in the fifth panel, „Sensations of change“, JUDITH POLLMANN (Leiden) subtly showed that this idea of an early modern sense of continuity as opposed to a modern sense of rupture is predicated on a linear approach that derives from the history of historiography but that may not apply to other forms of engagement with the past. Different ways of engaging with the past can and do in fact coexist. As for the early modern age, she scrutinized sensations of change with regard to both the material world and to the customs and mindsets of people. Whether change would be acknowledged or appreciated depended on context. For instance, early modern anachronisms did not result from ignorance but were the result of conscious decisions. The same is still true today; Michael Rothberg has pointed to the use of strategic anachronism in modern engagement with the past.

Moving from a strategic emphasis on continuity to an emotive sense of continuity, ERIKA KUIJPERS (Leiden) analyzed contemporary responses to events that nowadays would be considered to constitute a form of rupture, yet on which many contemporaries nevertheless reflected by stressing endurance. Again, it was argued that the role of providentialism was crucial in providing an explanatory framework that could be applied both to the times before, during and after iconoclasm. Because a single driving force shaped history it made little sense to regard the world as having fundamentally changed.

Although many of the conference papers had pointed to similarities between early modern and modern memory, commentator LOTTE JENSEN (Nijmegen) bravely provided a platform for discussion by re-advocating the importance of 1800 as a watershed between early modern and modern memory. She argued that from this time on, memory and history really became a matter of public interest. Moreover, she highlighted that memory now found a primary organizational concept in nationality. JUDITH POLLMANN (Leiden) responded by pointing out that this was a good example how the grand narratives about modernity work. They couple things like the emergence of the nation, the self, mass media and a new sense of the past, and explain the rise of each one of these markers of modernity by referring back to another. This creates an epistemological muddle. It is precisely here that early modernists prove their worth, by forcing a rethink of such assumptions, and point to other forms of continuity and change. KATE HODGKIN (London) argued that instead of a linear development, one might thus better speak of various regimes of memory that can coexist through time and at different levels of society. What pieces does this leave for modernity to pick up? Jensen already pointed out that it was the scale in which memory could now be mediated that made the difference. With regard to Reinhard Kosseleck's *Sattelzeit*, the number of people who became subjected or had access to certain memories was unprecedented. However, ERIKA KUIJPERS (Leiden) remarked that this improved infrastructure does not mean that the reason of *why* people commemorate is in any way altered. She argued that it is still used for regulating social relations and producing identity. Though the medium might have changed, the individual, social and cultural mechanisms of memory virtually remain the same.

Whether this is true remains a fruitful question for further debate. Although not many will deny that the modern technologies of memory provided some new truth regimes, the coexistence of many such truth regimes, which was also emphasized by the participants, seems to deprive them of any revolutionary properties. However, this conference has provided an excellent springboard to explore whether an increase in scale does not eventually lead to an essentially different engagement with memory. Therefore, a diachronic comparative approach to the subject might prove its worth. Many early modern historians have traced genealogies of supposed modern phenomena, like national memory, back to the premodern era. It may be illuminating to critically study if and how they nonetheless structurally differ over time. This may also help determine whether the lack of hegemonic memory discourses in early modern Europe, that was so evident in the contributions to this conference, should be considered characteristic for this period – or that the existence of nationalist hegemonic

© H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved.

memory is, after all, just a blip in the longue durée history of memory.

**Conference overview:**

Judith Pollmann (Leiden): Introduction

*Panel 1. Memory wars before the nation state*

Keynote: Philip Benedict (Geneva): Shaping the Memory of the Wars of Religion in France: The First Centuries

Sean Dunwoody (Chicago): Civic and confessional memory in conflict: Augsburg in the sixteenth century

Jasper van der Steen (Leiden): A contested past: memory wars during the Twelve Years' Truce (1609-1621)

Ulrich Niggemann (Marburg): 'You will see who they are that revile, and lessen your … Glorious Deliverance' – The Memory War about the 'Glorious Revolution'

Comment: Gert Oostindie (Leiden)

*Panel 2. Coping with distressing memories*

Keynote: Susan Broomhall (Perth): Narratives of trauma, emotion and identity in sixteenth-century Francophone sources

Sarah Covington (New York): The Black-Billed Birds and the Battling Sea: Oliver Cromwell, Memory, and the Dislocations of Ireland

Andreas Bähr (Berlin): Remembering the Fear of Violence: The Affect of Fear and the Fear of God in 17th Century War Memories

Gabriella Erdely (Budapest): Tales of a Peasant Revolt: Taboos and Memory of 1514 in Hungary

Comment: Mario Braakman (Nijmegen)

*Panel 3. Memory landscapes as multimedial experiences*

Keynote: Benjamin Schmidt (Seattle): Memory, Materiality, and Transmediation: On the Lives of Images and their Tactile Evocations

Jasmine Kilburn-Toppin (London): Material memories of the guildsman: crafting communal identities in early modern London

Helena Szépe (Tampa): The Authentication of Memory: Venetian Civic Documents

Marianne Eekhout (Leiden): Celebrating a Trojan Horse. Memories of the Dutch Revolt in Breda, 1590-1650

Comment: Susan Legêne (Amsterdam)

*Panel 4. Memory transmission and identity formation*

Keynote: Dagmar Freist (Oldenburg): Lost in time and space? Material culture and memory transmission

Kate Hodgkin (London): Women, memory and family history in seventeenth-century England

Johannes Müller (Leiden): Exile memories and the reinvention of family history

Christian Kuhn (Bamberg): Historicizing the Reformation in late 16th century. Urban 'Lutheran' identities in the light of calendars

Comment: Bart van der Boom (Leiden)

*Panel 5. Past and present. Sensations of change*

Keynote: Judith Pollmann (Leiden): Sensing change in early modern Europe

Alexandr Osipian (Kramatorsk): Nobility's Historical Culture and Burghers' Memory War in post-Reformation Poland: Construction of the Usable Past in the Trials between Armenian Community and the City Magistrate in Lemberg in 1578-1654

Erika Kuijpers (Leiden): Times of trouble and a sense of change

Brecht Deseure (Antwerpen): Chronicling change. Sensations of crisis in early modern

Comment: Lotte Jensen (Nijmegen)

*Final discussion*

Tagungsbericht *Memory before Modernity. Memory Cultures in Early Modern Europe*. 20.06.2012-22.06.2012, Leiden, in: H-Soz-u-Kult 20.08.2012.

© H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved.