

# C

## Contested Memory



Tomasz Rawski   
Faculty of Sociology, University of Warsaw,  
Warsaw, Poland

### Abstract

This chapter provides a core and developed definition of contested memory, and presents the outline biography of this concept. The definition shows that contested memory points to the political dimension and the relational nature of the link between the past and the present which are interpreted in different ways in each of the three major sociological traditions of thought, used in memory studies. The outline biography shows that contested memory has been an integral part of modern political practice since its very beginnings and has been met with growing interest in memory studies from the 1980s to the present.

## Synonyms

[Contested history](#); [Contested past](#); [Disputed memory](#)

## Definition

Contested memory refers to any dispute over the legitimacy of specific sets of meanings and

symbols related to significant events of the past, which play an important role in identity-formation for more than one social group in the present.

## Developed Definition

The concept of contested memory points to the political dimension and the relational nature of the link between the past and the present. The core of the concept refers to any dispute over the legitimacy of specific sets of meanings and symbols related to significant events of the past, which play an important role in identity-formation for more than one social group in the present. In other words, contested memory denotes a state of disagreement about who has the right to speak on behalf of a past that is at the same time claimed by different actors and presented by them in different ways which are often mutually exclusive. According to Hodgkin and Radstone (2003: 1), the very idea of contestation is about power over the representation and interpretation of the past, i.e., what symbols can be shown and in what ways, what sense-making narratives can be constructed based on them, and how they can be communicated to the broader public.

The above general definition of contested memory is thus rooted in the fundamental division of social reality into “us” and “them,” which underpins the three major classical sociological traditions of thought, used in memory studies. This is the Durkheimian tradition, from which

memory studies have been drawing most extensively from the very beginning (e.g., Halbwachs 1925/1992; see also Assman 2010; Zerubavel 2003); the Weberian one, which is most evident in political science-influenced research on memory (e.g., Müller 2004; Bernhard and Kubik 2014); and the Marxian one, used the least frequently by memory scholars, mainly in the context of social class and labor (e.g., Traverso 2017). Specifying the definition of contested memory within each of these traditions brings slightly different results, as these traditions understand the deep nature of inter-group relations and the power of political action in different ways.

Firstly, defining contested memory in Durkheimian spirit needs to take into account that this structural-functional tradition views groups and communities as interrelated elements of a wider social system striving for internal stability and harmony, and perceives politics as secondary to culture. Therefore, a Durkheimian definition would describe contested memory as the dispute over the contents of memory produced and determined by enduring cultural structures, which is subject to negotiation naturally gravitating toward developing mutual agreement on a legitimate vision of the past by all disputed sides. Secondly, a Weberian definition of contested memory needs to follow the belief in social groups as distinct actors who compete with each other and are driven by the desire to gain/maintain power over another. In these optics, contested memory is a political struggle for a monopoly on the production of legitimate content about the past and the imposition of this content on social and cultural spaces by powerful political institutions. Finally, a Marxian definition needs to pay attention to the central role of conflict between social classes as entities embedded in an economic order which determines all other spheres of social life. Thus, Marxian contested memory relegates disputes over the past to the role of just one of the many dimensions of class struggle and the symbolic space for the manifestation of material class interests.

## The Outline Biography of Contested Memory

The biography of contested memory understood as part of the modern history of memory, can be divided into three main periods: the rise and dominance of nationalist memories (up to 1945); the emergence and globalization of cosmopolitan memory (1945–1991); the global fragmentation and diversification/competition of memories (after 1991).

The first period includes late nineteenth and early twentieth century, where we find historical origins of contested memory as a component of modern political practice. In this period, modern nationalism in Europe emerged and became the dominant interpretive horizon filling the void created after the collapse of the great feudal empires which drew legitimacy from the belief in the divine origin of the monarch (Malešević 2013: 78). As pointed out by classics such as Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983/2014), Anderson (1986/2006), and others, it was during this period that the politicization of the past became the main way of securing the legitimacy of power for modern European states. Newly emerging, top-down nationalist policies integrated territorialized populations around politically re(constructed) national cultures, whose central component were narratives about a nation's past. Thus, contested memories emerged as by-products of the efforts of political elites to prove the uniqueness and deep historical rootedness of one's own nation against neighboring nations. The dynamic development of the top-down massification of national memory, which was to peak in Europe between 1870 and 1914 (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983/2014: 263–308), took place through new institutions of education, public commemorative ceremonies, and the mass production of monuments, archives, and museums.

In a post-imperial world founded on the principle of the permanent yet dynamic coexistence of multiple nation-states, contested memory can be found in the competition both between states and within them. The first case was most interestingly discussed by historians of early nationalism and

nation-building in Central, Eastern, and South-Eastern Europe (e.g., Perica 2002; Roudometof 2002), who, following mostly Weberian tradition, showed how mutually intertwined processes of the glorification of one's own heroic memory and the discrediting of competing heroic memories pursued by neighboring states supported political and/or military conflicts. In the second case, social historians and historical sociologists—especially those related to the Marxist tradition (e.g., Griffin and McDonagh 2018; Zandy 1995)—showed how these top-down memory policies were either contested or reinforced bottom-up by class mobilizations, social movements, and civil society organizations. Importantly, in the first wave of memory studies, symbolically launched in 1925 by Durkheim-inspired scholar Maurice Halbwachs, the contested memory was not recognized as a concept worthy of in-depth reflection.

The second period came after the year 1945, when contested memory as a component of political practice went global on the wave of a broader process of the globalization of memory, whose main forerunner was the global universalization of Holocaust memory. The Holocaust memory first emerged *in a double process of particularization and universalization, as a result of the interaction between the local and the global* (Erl 2011: 106–107; see also Levy and Sznajder 2001). Next, it underwent a transformation from a heroic memory, focused on the history of Zionist victories in the struggle to establish the State of Israel, to a victimhood memory, focused on innocent Jewish victims of Holocaust murdered by the criminal Nazi regime (Olick et al. 2011). Both steps led to establishing a new global model of cosmopolitan memory that—according to Bull and Hansen (2016)—became oriented toward overcoming particularistic and antagonistic national memories in favor of looking for consensual agreements on the legitimate shape of contested memories at other levels—international, regional, and local. The consensus was to be based on commemorating all victims of violence of past conflicts while discrediting and marginalizing all perpetrators.

The dynamic development of global cosmopolitan memory from the 1970s to 1980s until

the end of the 2000s quietened the intensity of contested memories in the Western Europe for some time, while in other parts of the world, contested memories not only re-emerged, but also gained new, particularly complex dynamics.

Firstly, quietening contested memories in the West coincided with the emergence of the second wave of memory studies, symbolically initiated in the mid-1980s by Pierre Nora (1984/1999), who coined and popularized the notion of *lieu de mémoire* (site of memory). The second-wave-researchers turned to individual national memories with the major aim of exploring their diversity, symbolic richness, and social impact, while conflicts and disputes over memory interested them insofar as they allowed them to better understand the internal structures of national memories. At the same time, in exploring relationships between different national memories, they mostly followed the framework of cosmopolitan memory. Politically, the latter efforts resulted in the late 1980s in the project of common European memory, which was led under the auspices of the European Union and peaked in the 2000s but proved to be a failure a decade later. Examples of how a common European memory was supposed to permanently solve the problem of contested memories can be found in works discussing either the development of new transnational history textbooks (e.g., Korostelina and Lässig 2013) or the European Parliament's commemorative resolutions on European days of remembrance (e.g., Sierp 2023).

Secondly, the rapid global re-emergence of contested (national) memories accompanied the escalation of territorial conflicts in the late 1980s and early the 1990s, which took place on the wave of disintegration of multinational states of the Eastern Bloc, including the USSR and Yugoslavia. Newly emerging nationalist political elites intensified and polarized contested memories not only to legitimize their power as legitimate representatives of the people *vis-à-vis* communists, but above all to mobilize societies to participate in military activities. This was the case not only in the post-communist Eastern Europe (the Balkans, Caucasus) and Central Asia (Tajikistan, Afghanistan) but also in South-East Asia (India/Pakistan)

or the Middle East (Israel/Palestine). In memory studies, this phenomenon was best captured by late second-wave-researchers, such as Olick and Robbins (1998), who argued that memory was a dynamic process characterized by continuous negotiations and clashes between competing visions of the past, for which the national frame remained the main reference point. This shifted the attention of researchers from examining individual national memories understood as static symbolic structures to examining dynamic relationships between national memories as produced by various social actors. This led to the popularization of contested memory as a theoretical and analytical concept which entered the canon of memory studies at the turn of the 1990s and the 2000s (e.g., Hodgkin and Radstone 2003; McMahon 2002; Zimmermann 2003). The importance of this moment not only for memory studies but also for the social sciences in general is demonstrated by the emergence of other accompanying concepts, most notably contested past and contested history.

Thirdly, a new global dynamic of contested memories emerged in response to the export of the cosmopolitan memory discourse outside Western countries in the 1980s, alongside a universalist discourse of human rights. On the one hand, cosmopolitan memory encouraged diverse communities at the local and global level—such as anti-colonial movements, migrant communities, national and religious minorities, LGBT+ associations, and others—to contest overly narrow and homogenous dominant national, patriarchal, or post-colonial narratives about the past. Their emancipatory practices were based on histories of the experience of being oppressed and were aimed at constructing alternative narratives about their own past. An important example from recent years is the global wave of contesting the colonial past by the bottom-up social movement of toppling state monuments and statues depicting slave traders, slave owners, and colonizers (e.g., Gregory 2021). An earlier example is the rise of the intellectual trend of people's history (e.g., Zinn 1980/2003), aimed at contesting and reconfiguring elitist national historical narratives by including the historical experience of

subordinated groups: social classes (workers and peasants), indigenous peoples, and others. On the other hand, cosmopolitan memory is also contested by politicians and societies in non-Western countries, who happen to resist and sometimes even openly reject the new global memory framework as an external threat to their historical traditions (e.g., Subotić 2020).

The complexity of these new dynamics was best grasped by representatives of the third wave of memory studies, who in the early 2010s formulated the flagship postulate of turning attention away from studying national historical narratives “*toward mnemonic processes unfolding across and beyond cultures*” (Erl 2011: 9). Identifying contested memories in previously non-obvious spaces was made possible by extensive application of a process-relational understanding of memory practices and identifying the central importance of power relations in the negotiation of symbols and meanings related to the past. Thus, such key third-wave concepts as “travelling” (Erl 2011), “entangled” (Feindt et al. 2014), or “multi-directional” (Rothberg 2009) memory made it possible to map hitherto unseen tensions at different levels, from micro-initiatives undertaken by local communities or even individuals, to trans- and supranational bodies (Lewis et al. 2022) dictating memory policies developed by highly institutionalized social and political networks. As a result, the study of contested memories has proliferated so much over the past decade that some researchers now go so far as to say that *memory is always contested* (Gutman and Wüstenberg 2023: 4).

## Conclusion

Contested memory understood as a political/politicized dispute over the legitimacy of an interpretation of the past—which plays an important role in identity-formation for more than one social group—has been an integral part of modern political practice since its nineteenth-century beginnings and remains one of its central features. At the same time, contested memory remained on the margins of interest for memory scholars until the advent of second-wave memory studies in the

1980s. While early second-wave researchers, led by Pierre Nora, recognized and acknowledged contested memory as an important research problem, it was not until late second-wave researchers—such as Olick and Robbins—formulated a process-relational understanding of memory that the concept of contested memory was enabled to be accurately formulated and introduced into the canon of memory studies. Next, with the advent of third-wave memory studies, contested memories became a widely perceived and broadly researched phenomenon at different levels of memory work: from local and national to regional and global; from top-down and institutionalized to bottom-up and non-institutionalized.

## References

- Anderson B (1983/2006) *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso, London
- Assman J (2010) Communicative and cultural memory. In: Erll A, Nünning A (eds) *Cultural memory studies. An international and interdisciplinary handbook*. De Gruyter, pp 109–119
- Bernhard M, Kubik J (eds) (2014) *Twenty years after communism. The politics of memory and commemoration*. Oxford University Press
- Cento Bull A, Hansen HL (2016) On agonistic memory. *Mem Stud* 9(4):390–404. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698015615935>
- Erl A (2011) Travelling memory. *Parallax* 17(4):4–18
- Feindt G, Krawatzek F, Mehler D, Pestel F, Trimcev R (2014) Entangled memory. Toward a third wave in memory studies. *Hist Theory* 53(1):24–44
- Gregory J (2021) Statue wars: collective memory reshaping the past. *Hist Aust* 18(3):564–587
- Griffin CJ, McDonagh B (2018) Remembering protest in Britain since 1500: memory, materiality and the landscape. Palgrave Macmillan, London
- Gutman Y, Wüstenberg J (2023) Introduction: the activist turn in memory studies. In: Gutman Y, Wüstenberg J (eds) *The Routledge handbook of memory activism*. Routledge, London, pp 5–16
- Halbwachs M (1925/1992) *On collective memory*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago
- Hobsbawm E, Ranger T (1983/2014) *The invention of tradition*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
- Hodgkin K, Radstone S (eds) (2003) *Memory, history, nation. Contested pasts*. Routledge
- Korostelina K, Lässig S (2013) *History education and post-conflict reconciliation. Reconsidering joint textbook projects*. Routledge
- Levy D, Sznajder N (2001) *Holocaust and memory in the global age*. Temple University Press
- Lewis S, Olick J, Wawrzyniak J, Pakier M (eds) (2022) *Regions of memory: transnational formations*. Palgrave Macmillan
- Malešević S (2013) *Nation-states and nationalisms: organization, ideology and solidarity*. Polity Press, Cambridge
- McMahon R (2002) Contested memory: the Vietnam War and American Society, 1975–2001. *Dipl Hist* 26(2): 159–184
- Müller J-W (ed) (2004) *Memory and power in post-war Europe. Studies in the presence of the past*. Cambridge University Press
- Nora P (1984/1999) *Rethinking France: Les Lieux de mémoire, volume 1: The State*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago
- Olick JK, Robbins J (1998) Social memory studies: from ‘collective memory’ to the historical sociology of mnemonic practices. *Annu Rev Sociol* 24:105–140
- Olick JK, Vinitzky-Seroussi V, Levy D (2011) Introduction. In: Olick JK, Vinitzky-Seroussi V, Levy D (eds) *The collective memory reader*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp 3–62
- Perica V (2002) *Balkan idols. Religion and nationalism in Yugoslav states*. Oxford University Press, Oxford
- Rothberg M (2009) *Multidirectional memory. Remembering the holocaust in the age of decolonization*. Stanford University Press, Stanford
- Roudometof V (2002) *Collective memory, national identity and ethnic conflict. Greece, Bulgaria and the Macedonian question*. Greenwood Publishing
- Sierp A (2023) Europeanising memory: the European Union’s politics of memory. In: Mälksoo M (ed) *Handbook of the politics of memory*. Edward Elgar Publishing, pp 81–94
- Subotić J (2020) The appropriation of holocaust memory in post-communist eastern europe. *Mod Lang Open* 1(22):1–8. <https://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.315>
- Traverso E (2017) *Left-wing melancholia: marxism, history, memory*. Columbia University Press
- Zandy J (1995) *Liberating memory: our work and our working-class consciousness*. Rutgers University Press
- Zerubavel E (2003) *Time maps. Collective memory and the social shape of the past*. The University of Chicago Press
- Zimmermann JD (2003) *Contested memories: poles and Jews during the holocaust and its aftermath*. Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick
- Zinn H (1980/2003) *A people’s history of the United States, 1492—present*. Harper & Row/HarperCollins, New York