

On memory and the yet to come: Interview with Andreas Huysen

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Andreas Huysen (born Düsseldorf, 1942) is the Villard Professor of German and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, where he served as founding director of the Center for Comparative Literature and Society. He is one of the founding editors of *New German Critique* (1974-), the leading journal of German Studies in the United States, and he serves on the editorial boards of *October*, *Constellations* and *Germanic Review*. In 2005, he won Columbia's coveted Mark van Doren Award for Great Teaching for "humanity, devotion to truth and inspiring leadership". His research and teaching focus on 18th-20th-century German literature and culture, international modernism, Frankfurt School critical theory, postmodernism, cultural memory of historical trauma in transnational contexts, and, most recently, urban culture and globalization. His most recent books include *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (2003), and the edited volume on the culture of non-Western cities entitled *Other Cities, Other Worlds: Urban Imaginaries in a Globalizing World* (2008). His most recent collection of essays, so far only published in Spanish, is *Modernismo después de la posmodernidad* (2010). He is currently developing two projects: a study of modernist miniatures, an experimental form of modernist writing, widespread in French and German modernism from Baudelaire to Rilke, Kafka, Kracauer, Jünger, Musil, Benjamin, and Adorno; and a consideration of the overlaps and tensions between contemporary discourses of memory and human rights.

You recently argued that the present is currently expanding towards the past and a crisis of meaning. It is known that in times of crisis and uncertainty towards the future, communities and societies tend to turn to the past in order to either seek refuge from present anxieties or to find some guidance to deal with them. How would you see this tendency?

If crisis was the signature of the modern era (Koselleck), it may have become an empty signifier today. Or it is the only thing that is left after various anticipated futures have failed to materialize. Crisis used to be a prerequisite for progress. What

of “progress” today? As Fred Jameson has quipped: it may be easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.

The turn toward memory and the past in recent decades was always more than an attempt to seek refuge from anxieties caused by uncertainty about the future. It set in motion a political process of working through instances of traumatic histories across the world: Holocaust, apartheid, state terror, ethnic cleansing, genocide. Truth commissions, legal prosecutions, forms of restitution and redress all testify to that fact, however limited the results may have been. By now, however, memory may have lost some of its earlier drive, as we deal with the fallout of the economic downturn of 2008, the massive rise in unemployment rates, and the continuing redistribution of wealth to corporations, banks, and the top few percent in Western societies. The “indignez vous” movement and Occupy Wall Street were signals that the present has reasserted itself. While work on socially traumatic pasts still goes on in conjunction with human rights movements, I see this turn toward contemporary issues as a positive development as it may push us to think about alternative futures. At the same time, one of the most urgent long-term issues, climate change, is still not getting enough attention.

Do you think that this obsession with the past, as well as this profound anxiety towards the future, is leading us to a state of unremitting in-betweenness and actually preventing us from experiencing and sensing the present?

The present is notorious for not being graspable. Whenever it is present, it is already gone. We do need new tools to negotiate the relationship between past and future after the shipwreck of two of the latest utopias: the neo-liberal utopia of free markets and the concomitant utopia of total internet freedom. Banking crash and NSA scandal should have buried them, but nothing much seems to have changed. To vary an old saying about soccer: after the crash is before the crash. That is kind of a definition of the present.

In *Present Pasts, Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (2003) you argued that from the early twentieth century to the post-World War

II period, Western societies were “energized by what one might call ‘present futures’”, and since the 1980s the growing obsession with memory and the collapse of utopian imagination has shifted the focus to present pasts. Currently we are facing a new turning point, a disruptive condition that is having a deep impact on economic, political, social and cultural spheres, so much so that we may say that crisis seems to have become the dominant discursive paradigm.

Perhaps there is still too much chaos, contradictory tendencies spread across the world to speak of just one paradigm. I would be more tentative. One thing though seems clear: 2008 was not just a crisis of banking, but pointed to a fundamental realignment of the relationship between democracy and capital, most glaringly in the United States, but also visible in different forms in Europe. It may have been too optimistic to predict an end to neo-liberalism after 2008. Six years after the crisis not much has changed in the basics of neo-liberal economics and finance capital. The gap between rich and poor keeps growing. Basic civil rights are increasingly being undermined across the world. The US has lost much of the moral authority it once may have had, as it deals with the NSA scandal, the persecution of whistle blowers by the Obama administration, Guantanamo, the mess of immigration reform. To weld capital to democratic institutions and rights has always been a protracted struggle. But it now seems to be going in reverse. Economically, we can observe a sliding backwards to class societies as we know them from the 19th century. The period between World War II and 1989 increasingly looks like an aberration. Question: to what extent do we see an adaptation of the Chinese model in the West with corporate capital playing the role of the Party in China? Just as the Party in China controls capital? Crude thinking? Maybe, but it makes me long for the Cold War when the existence of the communist bloc helped a great deal to maintain pressure on capital, labor relations, and governments in transatlantic societies.

Nowadays, memory discourses have become intermingled and intersect all over the world (what you call ‘the transnational flow of memory politics’), sometimes competing and sometimes reinforcing each other.

This is the case with Holocaust memory, which has become globalized and transferable. You claim that while the Holocaust might have overshadowed other violent experiences throughout the world, its transnational impact has also raised awareness towards those cases. Isn't there a risk of universalizing a particular memory, of turning it into a template, and shaping future memory politics without considering the specific features of events? On the other hand, one also runs the risk of establishing hierarchies of suffering. How should one go about this increasing transnational articulation of memory discourses?

You raise the important questions. Memory discourses across the world may help create a globalizing spectrum within which people from all parts of the world can communicate without universalizing in a traditional sense.

I see several challenges to memory studies (and I exclude neurological memory research and its potential relationship to the humanities and social sciences about which I cannot speak competently): one pertains to the relationship between Holocaust discourse and colonialism, a discussion which in the past has all too often been blocked off or subjected to simplistic equations, but to which Michael Rothberg has contributed in his recent book *Multidirectional Memory*. Much more can be done here. Another related aspect refers the relationship of memory discourse to human rights and theories of transitional justice. As far as the humanities are concerned, one can of course add interminably to instances of traumatic memories across the world, but the question beckons: what is the cognitive gain of such accumulation in a theoretical and methodological sense? The paradigm of memory studies has been enormously successful. It has won the battle against historiography, having itself become a subfield of historiography. How can it deal with the danger of becoming academic routine?

At any rate, we should not limit memory studies to historical trauma alone. Other questions pertain to contemporary media culture in our lives. What does the instant availability of ever more pasts do to our system of temporal and spatial perception? How does the internet change patterns of perception and human interaction? What are the effects of social media and the internet on reading, seeing, hearing in human relations? No doubt, it is a mixed story in which one has to weigh benefits against risks and abuse.

Holocaust memory always seems to be facing new challenges. Auschwitz has recently inaugurated a new permanent exhibition to respond to critical voices that regard the main exhibition as ‘outdated’. Is the Holocaust going through a renewed crisis of representation? What kind of challenges does the memory of the Holocaust face today?

The challenges are the ones we know about: ideological exploitation, saturation on the one hand, forgetting, evasion, indifference on the other.

You have argued that “the realities of the past must be faced (...) to establish a new sense of nationhood in an increasingly interconnected world of nations” and that “a national identity oriented to the future can simply no longer be based on prohibitions and on the erasure of the past”. Yet, nowadays there are still several examples of societies that officially censor memories of conflict and violence and where any attempt to bring those memories to public discussion is inevitably silenced. How would you define a society in which younger generations are raised within a culture deprived of its memory and which are the greatest fragilities of nations living under a political culture that draws heavily on selective memory and omission to build its discourses on collective memory and national identity?

Yes. And I stick with this argument. Memories of conflicts, violence, and trauma need to be dealt with rather than erased and forgotten. Official censorship must be opposed, especially since the silencing of pasts often goes hand in hand with silencing of conflicts in the present. This is precisely where memory studies about the past can link up with rights struggles in the present. Memory studies have worked transnationally in recent decades. The willingness of nations to face rights violations in the past has greatly increased, even though not everywhere to the same degree. And there are societies, as you say, that still censor public discussion of such pasts,

reveling instead in admiration for past dictators. Russia and Serbia come to mind. China exerts strict censorship of present and past.

Much of your recent work has focused on memory discourses and Human Rights. Although memory and human rights are deeply linked (only the memory of past violations can foster the promise of human rights), they often seem driven apart by disciplinary discourses. The so-called memory boom seems to have stayed inside the Humanities, while Human Rights are still regarded as a legal and political issue. How can we bring them together and why is this so necessary?

Human Rights debates, especially in their unreflective universalizing form, often lack historical knowledge about the development of rights discourse and practices. Memory debates in the humanities, on the other hand, don't pay enough attention to how rights violations in the past continue into the present (racism, immigration detention, racial profiling etc being some recent examples). Whether a deeper link between memory studies oriented toward the past and rights debates concerning current developments can improve the protection of rights in the world is an unanswerable question at this point. On the effect of such cultural debates, Musil once suggested that the world will not be changed by discourse, because the forces that energize events are of a cruder nature. And yet, a bringing together of memory and rights might help both achieve a better balance between concerns for the past and concerns within the present.

The current economic crisis, which displays different and uneven features throughout the world, is certainly a result of an increasing interdependency brought about by globalization and its transnational flows. Nation-states are said to be losing ground in face of globalization, but in times of crisis, the policies of national governments have become central and decisive once again. If, as you said, we cannot avoid being global, how can we demand and negotiate a more “reasonable globalization”?

The problem of national sovereignty in a globalizing world is a key political issue. At one level, national sovereignty has been undermined by military interventions in the name of humanism—some justifiable (Kosovo, Lybia), others not (Iraq). Today national sovereignty is being undermined by the power of the markets (the Mediterranean countries in the EU). I’m not sure what a more “reasonable globalization” would look like, but I remain convinced that it cannot be achieved without strong input by democratically elected national governments. Postnationalism exists only in “global capital”—both corporate and financial.

Do you think that the current transnational crisis might bring utopian thinking back, that is, a perspective that envisions the future instead of looking back to the past? Or do you think the future has to be conceptualized and organized beyond utopian views?

Utopia is a big word. It needs to be thought about in specific historical context. The kinds of utopias oriented toward linear progress that dominated the 19th and 20th centuries (communism, fascism, modernization) have become delegitimized, hopefully for good. But we do need to think the future, and there is no thinking of the future without a sense of the not-yet, of possibilities not yet realized, of alternatives to the kind of economic and social structures that rule our world today. This might be utopian thinking with a small <u>, which may well be a species requirement.