

Memory, Politics and Identity: Haunted by History. By Cillian McGrattan. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Pp. 211. £57,50 paper.

In his latest book Cillian McGrattan tries to untangle the difficult relationship between memory, history and politics. Focusing on the Northern Irish context, he examines how short term political compromises, unquestioned narratives of self-justification and self-exculpation compromise the long-term prospect of a lasting peace. By drawing from transitional justice and post-colonial theories he tries to map the reproduction of ideas and narratives about history, providing a new outlook on the residual force that history has on the development of identity and values in post-conflict societies.

The book is divided into eight chapters, each looking at a different aspect of the problem. Chapter one analyses the influence of the normative transitional justice paradigm on Northern Ireland's politics. Chapters two and three explain how this discourse has arisen by making reference to alternative visions of how conflict-ridden histories might be approached. Chapters four and five deal with two concrete examples by interrogating different narratives that have developed around Bloody Sunday and the hunger strikes. Chapters seven and eight look at the implications of truth recovery for Northern nationalism and the role the growth of anti-revisionist scholarship has played in the resurgence of neo-nationalism.

In order to uncover the dynamics of 'dealing with the past' in the making, McGrattan's book examines various forms of discourse on and about the Irish 'transition'. Because the author wants to focus on the roots of physical markers or performative rituals of memory, which he sees in the discursive understandings about history, most of the examples given come from cultural or political representations, interviews and the analysis of archival documents. In analysing those sources he recognizes that the process of coming to terms with the past after experiences of violence is always a partial process. However, what he criticizes in the Northern Irish context is not so much this partiality but the fact that the rising awareness of the past does not lead to a new historical consciousness but rather to a disengagement from serious debate. He shows by drawing particularly from narrative incidents in cultural production, how questions of social responsibility are being evaded by relegating dealing with the past to the private realm. The result, according to him, is a retreat from the ethical dimension of the conflict and the withdrawal of ethical and historical judgement from the public sphere.

McGrattan argues that these dynamics are not necessarily inevitable but that they are particularly intensified in transitional periods when the urge to retell the past in order to make it conform to contemporary needs, becomes particularly strong. One of his main arguments is that it might paradoxically be the truth recovery paradigm itself that leads to the amplification of the very narratives that inspired conflict in the first place. According to him it is precisely the talking *for* and the talking *about* victimhood that veil the actual events, giving rise to a totalising narrative that ignores historical distinction by privileging certain voices and narratives over others. This in turn might effectively lead to a sectarian understanding of the conflict and serves to exonerate the policy-making apparatus from its role in perpetuating it. Grattan heavily accuses structuralist approaches to political science and history to foster this development by giving a prominent place to traditionalistic-nationalist scholarship that reproduces and perpetuates anti-revisionist, neo-nationalist paradigms instead of criticising, deconstructing or assessing them. He argues that a form of analytical saturation is occurring based on the 'recycling of the idea that Northern nationalist political discourse is transformative of the Irish problem' (101). He does not stop at the Irish case study, but uses it to put forward his controversial argument that it is the nationalist ideology itself that conflicts with historical inquiry – an aspect, he believes, that has been under-researched by historians and political scientists alike. He argues that a partial solution to this problem can only be found if ethical awareness is harnessed to historical accuracy in order to avoid the depoliticisation of politics and the privatisation of ethics and history.

McGrattan's book is written in very dense, sophisticated language, making use of long sentences that are only interrupted by a number of direct quotes. The sometimes disconnected paragraphs render the reading slightly difficult. Even if the author tries to provide links and repeats his main claims several times, it is sometimes not entirely clear, how the different elements interplay. This could have been avoided by providing a clearer structure, having introductory and concluding paragraphs for each chapter and by supplying a final conclusion that draws together the main findings.

McGrattan does not distinguish clearly between new and different interpretations of primary sources (archival documents) and the analysis of mediated representations (film and drama but also academic papers). This is probably done on purpose, conflating the two elements as two sides of the same coin. Indeed, McGrattan believes that culture and structure are self-reinforcing and cannot be separated and thus tends to talk about 'politico-cultural representations' (66). For the sake of clarity it nevertheless would have been helpful to

distinguish the two (which does not mean that the possibility of analysing them together is compromised).

McGrattan underlines several times that his book offers nothing new (175). However, the frontal assault on both politicians and academics, who are charged with entrenching ethnic narratives, is something fairly unusual, adding an additional layer to the very rich theoretical debate of the wider question of how to move beyond a contentious past. Jon Tonge (Professor of Politics at the University of Liverpool) might be right when saying that Cillian McGrattan's book *Memory, Politics and Identity: Haunted by History* 'may be one of the most-talked-about books yet produced on Northern Irish politics'.

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