

Atencio, Rebecca J. (2014). *Memory's Turn. Reckoning with Dictatorship in Brazil*. Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press. 170 pp.

In her book, *Memory's Turn. Reckoning with Dictatorship in Brazil*, cultural studies scholar Rebecca Atencio attempts to identify patterns in the formation of social memory, defined as “cycles of cultural memory”. In this context, she is looking at the interplay between institutional practices addressing a problematic past and cultural productions that revisit the military dictatorship in Brazil. Employing an innovative approach that takes into consideration discursive switches in both politics and cultural works (literature, television, and performance), Atencio aims to bridge two different fields that tend to ignore each other, namely cultural studies and transitional justice studies. The author claims that in order to understand why some mnemonic projects are successful while others fail, one needs to look at both cultural productions and official strategies situated in their particular historical and cultural context. Atencio identifies different stages in the process of memory formation by inquiring into the ongoing struggle with the past in post-dictatorial Brazil: (1) the occurrence of different types of events at the same time (“simultaneous emergence”), (2) their perceived interconnectedness (“imaginary linkage”), (3) the strategic use of the perceived linkage by mnemonic actors to promote a particular agenda (“leveraging”), and (4) the further development of similar projects (“propagation”). This theoretical argument is discussed in four empirical chapters organized in a chronological order.

The main argument of the book is that Brazil has not yet managed to come to terms with its dictatorial past and that precisely this “mnemonic hesitancy” (Zelizer 2011) or, in Atencio’s words, “ambiguity”, fosters ongoing public debates regarding the past which take the form of mnemonic cycles reviving former remembrances: “these individual cycles are not closed loops but rather form part of a larger system by feeding into one another in myriad ways” (p. 125). One of the strengths of this book is the author’s attention to socio-political context, which allows her to outline national moods in the Brazilian society over time. Another important aspect is the discussion about the role of the main part of the Brazilian society – the bystanders – in the persistence of the dictatorial regime and in further shaping what the society should remember or forget. Most of the scholars dealing with the politics of memory in post-dictatorial society focus on the dichotomy of victims – perpetrators, while ignoring the importance of the onlookers in the

formation of social memory. In the case of Brazil, as Atencio states, the greater part of the population was not comfortable with the confrontationist approaches to the crimes committed during the military dictatorship because this meant confronting their own responsibility and guilt regarding the past atrocities. Therefore, from participants through silence in state-sponsored violence, they became participants in state-directed amnesia: “the willed ignorance, the ‘hav[ing] no idea’ persisted well into the political opening, at which point its most sinister consequence ceased to be tacit acceptance (of what was going on) and evolved into tacit denial (of what had happened)”¹ (p. 49).

In spite of the impressive data collected and analyzed in the book, consisting of both cultural and political texts, as well as media debates and public interviews with important mnemonic agents such as authors of cultural productions, one weakness of the book is related to the methodological approach. The claims about the general public seem to be based on public knowledge as the author did not survey ordinary citizens (the bystanders). Therefore, the theoretical discussion about the imagined linkage between official and cultural projects addressing the past refers to the agenda of powerful actors in society (politicians, media, civil society) rather than the general public as the author claims.

The first empirical chapter focuses on the 1979 Amnesty Law and the testimonial literature about guerilla fighters. The former represents a political attempt to close a chapter in the Brazilian history by granting forgiveness to both guerilla members and to secret security agents. In this respect, the Amnesty Law was a form of “reconciliation through institutionalized forgetting” (p. 13). At the same time, former guerillas started to publish testimonial books, which complemented the law by promoting “reconciliation by memory” (p. 29). According to Atencio, the conciliatory approach of both the legislative initiative and the testimonial literature, which was in line with the national mood, explains the imaginary linkage between the cultural productions and the Amnesty Law. The author also discusses the case of a book written by a former guerilla and published two years before the Amnesty Law. She notes that this book, which condemns state violence, went to oblivion. Besides timing and format (the book is a novel, not a testimonial), a critical approach that called for reparative justice rather than reconciliation

¹ The term “political opening” (or “abertura” in Portuguese) refers to Brazil’s return to civilian government in the early 1980s. This process was initiated by President Ernesto Geisel through a series of reforms aimed at liberalization and then furthered by his successor, Joao Batista Figueiredo, who enacted the Amnesty Law in 1979.

led to the book's exclusion from the imaginary linkage regarding the Amnesty Law and the testimonial boom.

The second chapter introduces the case of *Anos rebedlos* — an early 1990s miniseries based on a book of a former guerilla member — and the impeachment of Fernando Collor de Mello, the first president directly elected by the people after the end of the military dictatorship. Atencio notes that the telenovela fueled mnemonic ambiguity in spite of its powerful message of “never again”. On the one hand, it humanizes the guerilla fighters and, on the other hand, it frames the dictatorship as a mild rather than radical regime (p. 66). Nevertheless, this tension stirred public debates regarding the past. It also allowed students protesting against the President, involved at that time in a corruption scandal, to identify with the series' characters and to appropriate slogans and songs from *Anos rebedlos* to promote social change, thus “demanding their place in the circle of memory” (p. 76).

The third chapter focuses on the 1995 Law of the Disappeared and the book of Fernando Bonassi, *Prova contraria*. The latter stresses the ambiguity surrounding the disappearances of people during the military dictatorship, while the legislative initiative was under public scrutiny because it only focused on the state's accountability for the past and the reparations paid for the victims, but ignored the perpetrators. Therefore, the Law of the Disappeared was another political attempt to bring closure through reconciliation. The official report that followed the law also reinforced the hegemonic discourse (unity and reconciliation, as characteristics of the Brazilian identity) given that it focuses on truth and memory, but avoids the question of justice through individual accountability for the past crimes.

The fourth and last empirical chapter follows the changing meaning assigned to a site of detention in Sao Paolo. The former prison became a memorial site (Prison Memorial) in 1998, turned into a cultural center (Freedom Memorial) in 2002, and it was redesigned again as a memorial site (Resistance Memorial) in 2009. In the late 1990s a theatrical performance, *Lembrar e resistir*, was staged there for more than one year and influenced the role assigned to the former torture center, by symbolically turning the audience into prisoners (by recording their personal data), witnesses of the past atrocities, and participants in reclaiming and reoccupying the site. In this way, the spectators were reminded of their responsibility to remember and to tell the truth about the past to the next generations. The play was interrupted once the authorities decided to renovate the site and to transform it in a different type of cultural center, in which past

meanings were erased: “the human rights message of *Lembrar* had been replaced by the logic of neoliberalism with the celebration of an urban renewal project designed to attract middle-class cultural consumers to a blighted part of the city” (p.117). Following the pressure exerted by the associations of former prisoners, seven years later the site became again a memorial place.

In the concluding chapter, Rebecca Atencio emphasizes the idea that coming to terms with the past has been a strenuous and still unfinished process in Brazil. She suggests that the next cycle of memory might be related to the film *Hoje*, based on the book of Fernando Bonassi, and the creation of the Truth Commission.

Memory's Turn. Reckoning with Dictatorship in Brazil should be a significant work for historians and scholars in the fields of memory studies, cultural studies and transitional justice, with a particular interest in Latin American transformations. The book can serve as a blueprint also for those who try to understand how memory works in other post-authoritarian societies such as, for instance, post-communist Eastern Europe. The biggest merit of *Memory's Turn. Reckoning with Dictatorship in Brazil* remains the complex analysis of two different types of events – institutional strategies to reckon with the past and cultural productions that revisit the past – and their interplay.

Alina Thiemann,
Institute of Sociology, Romanian Academy

References

Zelizer, B. (2011). Cannibalizing memory in the global flow of news. In Meyers, O., Neiger, M., Zandberg, E., Hoskins, A. and J. Sutton (Eds.) *On Media Memory*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 27 – 36.