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History, Memory and Migration

Perceptions of the Past and the Politics of Incorporation

Edited by

Irial Glynn

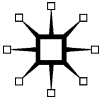
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Foreword

We live in a period when the volume and variety of migration flows are as great as any in the past. One reason we must adopt a different optic in the field of memory studies is that the social context in which we think about the subject is changing. From the time of Ernest Renan at the end of the nineteenth century to Benedict Anderson's seminal study of imagined communities, the nation state and the mobilising power of nationalism have provided the force and focus of several generations of scholarship on memory and remembrance.

Since the 1960s, however, a different international environment has emerged. In some respects, what we term 'globalisation' is merely the reiteration of trends already in motion before the First World War, but the huge movements of capital, goods and labour in the late twentieth century and after present us with a changing demographic landscape. To be sure, the nation state has not died, but its power has been eroded, in part by a surge in emigration from what we now term globally 'the South' – Africa, South Asia and Latin America – to 'the North' – Europe and the United States. An unspecified but very large part of this population movement from developing to developed nations is illegal. That is, people are moving from developing to developed nations through normal visa channels if they can, but through illicit channels when they must.

This dramatic trend in population movement is a challenge to the integrity of the nation state. In many parts of the world, the state is less that institution that has the authority to declare war than that institution which has the power to determine who enters its territory. That power is now in question. The result is the presence among us of very large silent populations – silent because they are not supposed to be here. Such people occupy menial jobs in developed economies and constitute a huge reservoir of poorly paid labour. Speaking up would call attention to their illicit presence. They are silent, too, in that they have no political voice in the country to which they have come. On occasion, that can mean they have no rights at all and face hostility, harassment, arrest and deportation. Stephen Frears' 2002 film *Dirty Pretty Things* opened a window onto this subterranean world, one that is hard to look at.

Our silence about the presence of these migrants among us is something on which we should reflect. If you travel to any major city, anywhere in the developed world, take an evening off, dine in a local

café, and you are likely to be in the company of these newcomers, just off stage, washing dishes or cleaning up. Most of the time, we too are silent about them, preferring to avoid a direct confrontation with the problem of undocumented immigrants, who consequently lead a shadow life, filled with dangers and uncertainties.

This changing demographic reality is bound to affect the way we look at the nation state and the historical questions we ask about our common cultural heritage. If memory and forgetting bracketed our understanding of nationhood and nationalism at the high water mark of what Charles Maier termed the age of territoriality, then it may be possible to see that now, in a transnational age, it makes sense not to dispense with memory and forgetting, but to develop a wider vocabulary to explore the sphere of signifying practices surrounding identity, community, migration and ethnicity in the contemporary world.

The search for that vocabulary is the subject of this book. Some of it is state-driven. Policymakers and politicians tend to treat the subject of migration as if it were radioactive. Votes are lost every time someone opines on the need to restrict, control or enforce migration quotas. Consequently, the lead in this area has devolved to smaller units of aggregation – to cities, towns, villages, neighbourhoods, streets, families. Local associations are more important than national groups in negotiating the space of lived experience between newcomers and long-term indigenous residents. Salient among these organisations are the churches, whose transnational character make them natural supporters of the right of migrants to seek work where they find it and their right to reunite with their families, composed of earlier migrants who send remittances for the benefit of their family members at home, across the border, but who may very well decide never to go ‘home’ again.

For millions, exile is their homeland. That is, there is a substantial population who may have migrated with one set of intentions – to return some day with savings enabling them to build a house or live in one built with their earlier remittances – but who have changed their mind over time. Their status is neither here nor there, but in between; they live in a kind of cultural and political no-man’s land. Those who cross borders illegally don’t have the right to vote in their new place of residence, though they may retain their right to vote in their countries of origin. They are also still tied to their birthplace in a host of ways – through religion, language, dress, festivals, and in countless other ways. Their interest is not in assimilating, but rather in constructing a hybrid, liminal identity, where, for instance, they earn American wages, but in their heads and in their churches, they live in ‘Mexico’.

The challenge for the future is to go beyond the notion of control and assimilation as the poles of migration studies, and to explore these populations, some of whom have legal status in their country of residence, but many do not. Between isolation and assimilation there is a third option, now chosen by millions of people, to have plural identities, to live lives in two countries at the same time, not in a physical sense, but in a cultural sense. They work 'here', but in all the most important matters of their daily life, they are stilling living 'there'. It is in this complex set of loyalties and iron necessities that we must locate the hybridisation of the twenty-first century. Families by the millions are hybrids of those with the right to be where they live, and of those who have no such right, but who live 'here' anyway. The central divide in these families and communities is not only geographical, but even more so, legal, between those who cross borders legally, and those who do not. Legal migrants can take the path to assimilation, if they choose to do so. Undocumented migrants cannot.

This legal split is of fundamental importance for our understanding of memory formation. Halbwachs taught us that collective memory is the memory of different collectives, rather than that of the state. As collectives change, he wrote, so does memory, as a linguistically shared and performed expression of group identity. But nothing in Halbwachs has prepared us for the legal divide between millions of migrants who cross borders illegally, and who live a shadow existence alongside legally constituted temporary migrants or guest workers and those with rights or residence who choose to assimilate and possibly to obtain citizenship in their new abode.

In this reconfiguration of memory and migration studies, we need to follow Halbwachs in another way. We are never the first to know who we are, Halbwachs told us. Our families do so. But what happens to notions of memory when grandparents are in Mexico and their children and grandchildren are in Connecticut. One-quarter of the population of the town in which I live, New Haven, is in this position. Who tells the children who they are? Whose memories are collective? Those of legal immigrants or undocumented ones? Those of absent grandparents or of those told to migrants' children by priests, teachers, neighbours? It would be foolish to assume this is an exceptional case. It is happening all over the world.

We are, it is apparent, at a crossroads today. Collections of perceptive and rigorously documented essays such as those in this book are essential steps towards a reconfiguration of the way we understand the overlap between migration and memory. We should be grateful to these

scholars for throwing considerable light on the discursive and experiential field surrounding migrants. Now is the time to go one step further, and explore the dark world, the silent world, inhabited by those who legally are not here (wherever here is), but whom we simply cannot ignore. They are legion.

Jay Winter
January 2012

Contributors

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