

## Response to Serafim Seppälä

A response to Serafim Seppälä's article 'The "Temple of Non-Being" at Tsitsernakaberd and remembrance of the Armenian genocide: an interpretation'. Key themes discussed include increasing efforts to convey divergent positions in a conflict when contemporary memorial sites are planned, as well as recent contributions within the academic field of memory studies, placing emphasis on local narrative and agency rather than institutional religious and national frameworks.

IT HAS BEEN MOST REWARDING for me to make a response to Serafim Seppälä's observations from Armenia in relation to my own work in Bosnia and Herzegovina. My work has mostly been focused on Muslim ritual practices, Sufi traditions and women's roles in devotional life. However, the war of the 1990s and its consequences are still something that has a profound impact on most of the political, cultural and religious aspects of Bosnian life.\* In two studies, I have approached the question of memory and atrocities; one looking at the Bosnian-American author Aleksander Hemon and how he portrays place and belonging in his literary work and one which studies attempts to construct memory spaces in Sarajevo across religious divisions (Raudvere, in press, a and b). The following comments on Seppälä's study of the foremost Armenian commemoration monument to

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the 1915 genocide, Tsitsernakaberd, draws on the discussions contained in these two articles.

In his study of German war memorials, Reinhart Koselleck points to a shift, which occurred during the twentieth century, towards a focus on the lost ones rather than on glorification of the nation and its heroes. The collective of the unnamed dead became representatives of more than themselves and the bearers of a narrative about the past that continues to define the present and its possible futures. Koselleck writes about this transformation: 'The history of European war memorials testifies to a common visual signature of modernity' (2002: 324), aesthetics becoming a tool for existential issues to be used across denominational boundaries. This does not mean that death is taken less seriously in the modern era; rather, Koselleck says, 'while the transcendental sense of death fades or is lost, the innerworldly claims of representations of death grow' and 'become more widespread' (187). Another way of following this line of argumentation when analysing the memorial manifestations of more recent conflicts is to emphasize the decreasing dominance of the established religious institutions and hence the appearance of more space for less religiously orientated articulations of ethical themes connected with atrocities and loss. Still, there are strong patterns of behaviour, artistic conventions and ritual genres that are referred to when visualizations and ceremonies are deemed to be respectful in relation to the victims and in line with the local heritage – or the opposite. Efforts to share a framework that can still represent diverging positions in a conflict appear to be a phenomenon developed only after World War II as part of reconciliation ambitions.

In his book *How Modernity Forgets* (2009), Paul Connerton underlines the ways in which speed and

change in the modern era have transformed how we use memory, as well as amnesia, to produce a palatable version of the past to an extent not previously seen (cf. Connerton 1989, in which ritual and embodied memory practices are discussed). Our own time demonstrates an obsession with memory and heritage, and the battles over images of the past produce a number of narratives and counter-narratives both in democratic societies and under repressive regimes. The lines between art, academic history writing and ideological narratives are often intentionally blurred for political or aesthetic purposes – if not both (Raudvere, in press, a). In early memory studies, groups, communities and collective identities were often understood to be comparatively stable categories, whereas nowadays the palimpsest-like and polysemic qualities of historical cultures are investigated alongside an increasing interest in performance and ritual (Winter 1995, Duizings 2007, Bougarel 2007, Silverman 2013). Such a turn sheds light on the simultaneous character of messages that could be embedded in one memorial structure. On closer inspection, intention and interpretation seem to move in different directions in most cases. Serafim Seppälä portrays the Tsitsernakaberd monument as very homogenous. Yet it would have been very interesting to learn more about intra-Armenian discussions on how, and by means of what tools, a complex and dark history can be represented, and along with that a different view of what constituted Armenian culture before the 1915 genocide. From a Bosnian perspective, some researchers even argue that the contemporary uses of the past are just another way of continuing the conflicts in other arenas (Halilovich 2013, Maček 2014).

In the introduction to their edited volume on how heritage sites are both affected and generated by war, Sorensen and Viejo-Rose state: 'Place exists in networks of references, citing other places through repetition or borrowing forms, and in their materiality places carry meaning – linked to other places and over generations' (2014: 7). By emphasizing the effect of temporalities, the authors point to 'how meanings, connotations, and associations accrue around places through time – places are never blanks but carry the imprint of what happens to them even if discourses are constructed so as to negate their history' (12). Sorensen and Viejo-Rose's volume therefore uses the concept of a 'biography of place' in order to identify the processual character of the memory politics of a

particular site, large or small. A biography of a particular space is certainly what Serafim Seppälä has provided us with and encouraged curiosity about Armenian culture in the Ottoman Empire as well as on the contemporary voices that discuss Armenian historiography and their various positions.

Contemporary memorials and the practices around them challenge institutional religion in many ways. Katherine Verdery, whose discussion of the politics of dead bodies has had a large impact on studies of memory cultures in South-Eastern Europe, writes: 'The link of dead bodies to the sacred and the cosmic – to the feelings of awe aroused by contact with death – seems clearly part of their symbolic efficacy' (1997: 32). Such a perspective goes beyond the conventional understanding of religion in a productive manner, comprehending a wider sphere of existential issues without losing sight of the political dimension and the actors that put them to work. The dead, Verdery continues, are an 'excellent means for accumulating something essential to political transformation: symbolic capital'. In addition, she says, '[t]he fall of communist parties devalued much of what had served as political and social capital, opening a wide field for competition in which success depends on finding and accumulating new capital resources. Dead bodies, in short, can be a site of political profit' (1997: 33). Verdery's study from Romania, conducted in the 1990s, provided perspectives on how war casualties and memories were, and still are, integrated into historical cultures in south eastern Europe. References to events, symbols and narratives related to the dead continue to be elements in the communication of identity politics. Verdery's perspectives go far back and include the collapse of three empires in the wake of World War I with its immediate impact on the region, authoritarian inter-war regimes, atrocities during World War II, repression and resistance in the socialist period and the coming down of the Iron Curtain, all of which have left their marks on public memory cultures in the region, discursive as well as visual ones. The long-term references appear to continue to be significant in aesthetic programmes when representing more recent events. As Reinhart Koselleck put it, 'while the transcendental sense of death fades or is lost, the inner-worldly claims of representations of death grow' (2002: 291). It is an open question how the interpretations of the monuments will develop when made by new generations, and whether the sense of

belonging will continue to be stuck in a constitutional system which petrifies conflicts and categories and assumes stable 'identities' in ethno-religiously defined groups, without recognizing social dynamics, individual choices or loyalty to a place and its inhabitants.

The theoretical point of departure from Halbwachs, Assmann and Nora dominated the field of memory studies for a long time. Recurring themes in this body of work have been informed by their and their followers' seminal writings, where atrocities, trauma and genocide are represented in symbols and monuments and in the construction of memory in the public sphere and where national mythologies are interpreted in civil society and the quests for origin, authentic culture and stable identities are at the core. Connerton (1989) demonstrated how narrative and public performance work together and how the very enactment of this combination culminates in embodied memories that can last for generations.

Alongside the earlier approaches to memory, a certain shift from a strict focus on narratives, performances and places towards local reception and interpretation has left its mark in the field. During the last decade, it has been hard to miss a greater emphasis on active agents, performance, the construction of multiple meanings, and the centrality of irony in the seemingly banal and in dichotomous rhetoric. The agency perspective has been further developed by Jay Winter (1995), who has expressed a preference for the concept of remembrance in relation to memory (and its more passive connotations) in order to highlight the active agents, their tools and their choices. This is a perspective that works very well with Serafim Seppälä's focus on Tsitsernakaberd as an actively used place with many agents involved in its performances and manifestations. Serafim Säppälä's analysis of the Armenian genocide memorial Tsitsernakaberd in Yerevan invites the reader to follow him and he puts a special emphasis on the architectural and symbolic qualities of the site. The genocide of the Armenians in 1915 and the wiping-out of their cultural and religious heritage, in combination with the ambiguous status of the Christian churches in the subsequent Soviet period, constitute the dark background to Seppälä's engaged and learned narrative.

Seppälä's article is based on in-depth knowledge of Armenian theological traditions and numerous field trips to the region. He generously provides a detailed description of Tsitsernakaberd and the

heritage it represents; in this way he opens up issues of fundamental importance to the study of religion: the uses of history and its agents, memory cultures and their aesthetic expressions and identity politics at the core of religious traditions. ■



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