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## The Political Economy of Memory

In January 2022, the publication of *The Betrayal of Anne Frank: A Cold Case Investigation*, written by the Canadian author Rosemary Sullivan, caused quite a stir (Sullivan 2022). Based on research by a ‘cold case team’ led by a former FBI agent, Vince Pankoke, the book claimed to have identified the person who betrayed the hiding place of the Frank family, causing their arrest, and consequently the demise of the girl who became the most prominent symbol of the Holocaust, Anne Frank. As the accused was Jewish, the research team hesitated to publish his name, but as the initiator of the research project Pieter van Twisk declared, consulting a rabbi, who said the truth should prevail, convinced the team to reveal his identity with “85 percent certainty.” (Wertheim 2022) Both the book and the international marketing campaign supporting its publication heavily focused on the meticulous detective methods deployed to reveal the identity of the supposed traitor. As Pankoke declared in the CBS *60 Minutes* documentary which aired at the time of the publication, he was leaning on “decades of experience and intuition” as a detective when he used the “cold case playbook” of following leads and looking for clues. The book showed pictures of the investigative team, studiously leaning over documents, of a display of names and photos connected by red lines, and of a digitally produced map of all the places in Amsterdam mentioned in the sources studied by the cold case team (Wertheim 2022).

Soon after the publication, the story of the cold case team unraveled. Not only did it become clear that most, if not all, of the information presented in the book was already known, but also that the accusation leveled against the supposed traitor was unfounded. After a group of Dutch historians published a devastating review of the research of Pankoke and his team, the Dutch publisher decided to pull the book, recalling the copies already delivered to the bookstores and apologizing to the family of the accused for the suffering the book might have caused. That policy was not followed by the American publisher HarperCollins, or any of the other twenty publishers worldwide, who profited from the fact that the book was a commercial success (Wallet 2022).

The upheaval around Sullivan’s book on Anne Frank can be seen as a confirmation of the familiar observation that the memory of the Holocaust continues to dominate the public debate on recollections of the past. Moreover, the remembrance of the Holocaust is often reduced to a pious reference to Anne Frank. Innumerable are the versions of her diary – ranging from scholarly editions to graphic novels and musicals – as are the accounts of her life before, during and after her hiding in the Annex, the recollections of the people who knew her (or

claimed to have known her), the stories about who betrayed her (with Sullivan's only the last in a long line of speculations about it), the accounts of those who want to draw attention to their Holocaust story by connecting it to her name ('the other Anne Frank'), and the lessons that can be drawn from her life. An equally respectable number of books has by now been published on the 'Anne Frank phenomenon' itself – generally critical of the commercialized, universalized, aestheticized, and anaesthetized nature of Anne Frank as a topos in Western and global postwar cultural memory (e.g. Barnouw 2018; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Shandler 2012). Both its all-pervasive presence and its deeply problematic nature make it unavoidable to reflect on the meaning of Holocaust memory within the wider context of the dynamics of memory.

In fact, the episode in Holocaust memory narrated above reveals dynamics of cultural memory that hitherto have remained undertheorized and which perhaps can most aptly be conceptualized as the political economy of memory. While the *politics* of memory are by now familiar terrain, the *economic* perspective in memory studies is often reduced to the materialist question *cui bono*, focused on the competition of victims, clashing for recognition of their traumatic experience, reparation of their losses, or support for their present and future material, territorial, or political claims (Chaumont 1997; Marwecki 2020). In the most cynical version of this line of argument, Holocaust memory is framed as the product of a 'Holocaust industry,' geared to justify the policies of the state of Israel and its continuous support by the American government – an argument that all too easily engages familiar antisemitic tropes about Jews, money and secretive political control, perverting at the same time the metaphor of the Holocaust as an instance of industrial killing (Cole 2000; Finkelstein 2000). Even if the publication of *The Betrayal of Anne Frank* clearly involved profits – and losses – the economic dynamics are not fully acknowledged by an account of material interests.

A more productive perspective is to analyze the dynamics of memory itself in terms of a political economy, in which, as Karl Marx famously claimed, "it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness" (Marx 1904 [1859], 11). Translated to the context of cultural memory, one might argue, as Ann Rigney did, that "cultural memory is the outcome of a fundamentally non-egalitarian process" defined by "differential memorability" (Rigney 2016, 79). The crucial notion Rigney introduces here is that cultural memory should not be conceptualized in terms of storage and retrieval, but as a social process, defined by scarcity, in which interested parties – victims, perpetrators, bureaucrats, activists, lawyers, historians, etc. – compete as entrepreneurs for the use of a limited set of sites, objects, and models of memory. It means that "cultural memory evolves, not just through the emergence of new memorial languages, but also through the recycling and adaptation of old forms in

new situations” (Rigney 2005, 22). The recycling of “old forms” is then further conceptualized as ‘premediation’ of experiences which resonate with available templates, creating tensions because “the desire to recall, the availability of information, and the availability of suitable models of remembrance do not always coincide” (Rigney 2005, 22). Yet another mode of recycling is ‘remediation’: the transfer of objects of established mediations to new media, claiming to provide a more direct, less mediated access to past experiences, while at the same time questioning, and thus drawing attention to the mediated nature of all forms of cultural memory (Erl and Rigney 2009a).

These mechanisms are clearly visible in the example above: the iconic memory of Anne Frank and her betrayal reinforce an already powerful template of commemoration, yet its remediation by a shift to criminal forensics provoked a rebuttal from historians who contested the validity of the forensic mediation. As Rigney rightly points out, familiar sites of memory, like the Annex and its inhabitants, “are constantly being reinvested with new meaning . . . [and] can be said to function as a principle of economy in cultural memory, helping to reduce the proliferation of disparate memories and providing common frame-works for appropriating the past” (Rigney 2005, 18). Thus, remediation as an “ongoing symbolic reinvestment” shapes a competition not just between conflicting memories of the past, but also between mediators and their disciplinary toolboxes (Rigney 2005, 21). In the case of *The Betrayal of Anne Frank: A Cold Case Investigation*, the author and the research team clearly delved into the repertoire of forensic science, profiting from the ‘CSI-effect’ and the forensic turn as a result of which the entanglement of criminal investigation methods and moral reckoning have become such a powerful rhetorical mix (Byers and Johnson 2009; Gessat-Anstett and Dreyfus 2017). Yet high stakes became big losses when historians argued, that by their account, the forensic methods produced no valid results. Moreover, the credits the cold case team claimed by adding a list of historians who supposedly had certified the outcome of the cold case research became a deficit when the list turned out to be fraudulent. Also, the lavish subsidies for the project from the Amsterdam city council turned out to be unaccounted for. Yet all of this happened without fundamentally undermining the mediation of Anne Frank as a commercial asset.

The partial collapse of the cold case investigation thus demonstrates that not all investments in cultural memory pay off. Yet at the same time, it challenges a paradox of collective remembrance Rigney proposed. Although sites of memory function as a principle of economy by creating a shared point of reference for disparate memories, at the same time “consensus (‘we all recollect the same way’) is ultimately the road to amnesia . . . it is ironically a lack of unanimity that keeps some memory sites alive” (Rigney 2008a, 346). Also here, political economy helps

to elucidate what is at stake: the items that circulate in cultural memory are positional goods – like the exemplary calm beach, its value diminishes when demand is rising (Hirsch 1977). Their mnemonic value depends on the number of users and the varieties of use: a lot is good, too much inflates its worth. If anyone can claim the topos of Anne Frank, its value becomes subject to diminishing returns. This also applies to the proliferation of mediations. Even if the introduction of a forensic perspective in *The Betrayal of Anne Frank* fueled the contestation, in the end it diminished the iconic worth of the remembrance of Anne Frank by turning it into a cynical ploy to gain attention and to make a lot of money.

By extension, this might also be an issue for memory studies itself. As Gavriel D. Rosenfeld observed, memory studies itself seemed to have become a booming industry, and “as any casual observer of economics knows, all booms are temporary. Following periods of rapid growth, emerging industries inevitably crest” (Rosenfeld 2009, 123). Borrowing the economic vocabulary introduced by Rigney, the boom might be explained by an ongoing symbolic reinvestment in Holocaust memory. As a result, it becomes very difficult for memory scholars not to discuss the Holocaust. Even the study of multidirectional and traveling memory, demonstrating how Holocaust memory offered a template for decolonial and post-slavery memory, tends to converge all forms of memory studies into derivatives of Holocaust memory studies, and to convert Holocaust memory studies into the gold standard of all forms of memory study (Rothberg 2009).

And in the end, when Holocaust memory becomes the measure of all things, one shouldn't be surprised that it is used to account for all kinds of injustice. The recent debates ensuing in response to the 7 October attacks demonstrate how the memory of the Holocaust is used as a template, not only to interpret the killing of Jewish Israelis, but also to reinforce the condemnation of mass violence against Palestinians – as if the slaughter of human life can only be acknowledged when it can be equated with the barbarity of the Holocaust, even when that taints the memory of its actual victims. (Bashir and Goldberg 2019; Mishra 2024).