



SARAH GENSBURGER, SANDRINE LEFRANC:  
*Beyond Memory: Can We Really Learn from the Past?*  
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In *Beyond Memory: Can We Really Learn from the Past?* (2020), Sarah Gensburger and Sandrine Lefranc challenge the widely held belief that memory policies are effective tools for building peaceful societies, in stable democracies or post-conflict settings. They argue for reconsidering memory politics from an individual standpoint, rather than adhering strictly to a governmental approach. This shift aims to catalyse a paradigm change within memory studies, targeting a broad audience that includes history, sociology, political science, law, and social justice professionals.

The authors present several key insights about memory. The book highlights the inherently individualistic nature of memory, shaped by personal experiences and social contexts. Gensburger and Lefranc critique memory institutions, such as museums and educational programmes, for often reinforcing existing social inequalities by catering to affluent, predominantly white demographics. Drawing on Wagoner and Brescó (2016), they present a two-fold perspective on memory: while it can support reconciliation, it can also reignite historical grievances and, under certain conditions, intensify animosity.

## Reflection

### The Necessity of Forgetting

The book's view of memory aligns with Philip Rieff's (2016) arguments on the value of forgetting. Rieff suggests that forgetting can sometimes be beneficial, especially given the turmoil and suffering that remembrance can invoke. He suggests that the collective memory, unlike individual memory, lacks tangible roots and is instead tied to narratives shaped by imagination and societal context. Without the option of forgetting, people 'would be wounded monsters, unforgiving and unforgiven', being trapped in cycles of unforgiveness and despair (p. 120).

### (Ab)use of History

The recent paradigm in Memory Studies follows George Santayana's words: 'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it' (1905: 284). However, recently the

(ab)use of narratives in creating history has been analysed. Margaret MacMillan (2008) highlights how political leaders can manipulate narratives of past glories or wrongs to serve their interests. She warns that the misuse of history can result in one-sided or distorted versions of events that go unchallenged due to a lack of historical knowledge among the populace. MacMillan (2008) stresses the importance of contesting these narratives to prevent leaders from leveraging false histories to justify harmful policies. In *Beyond Memory*, Gensburger and Lefranc critique such distortions, arguing that they undermine the authentic, diverse narratives that memory policies should ideally uphold.

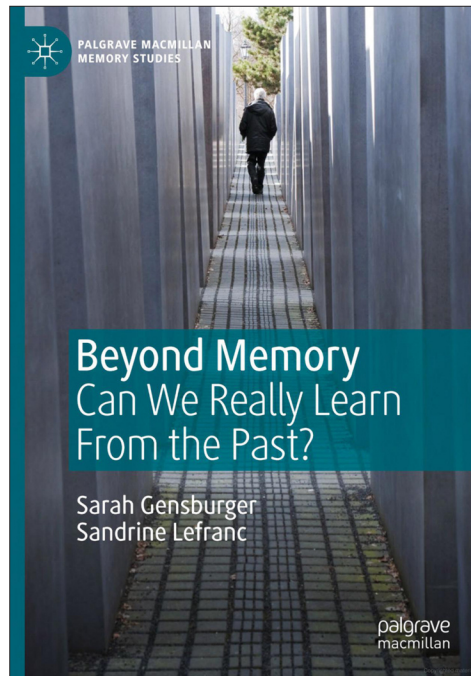
### Memory as Governmentality

Karin Antweiler (2024) expands on these ideas by analysing memory through the lens of governmentality, suggesting that memory acts as an active practice that shapes individual desires and societal engagement. She highlights the risks of using memory to reinforce compliance rather than genuine change, particularly in the context of Holocaust remembrance. People are expected to follow the mainstream narrative and will therefore pretend to comply. Following Cruickshank (1999), examples are attending a remembrance meeting and applauding the speakers mainly coerced by societal standards. Antweiler (2024) calls for alternative perspectives to challenge the 'mainstream', governmental narrative.

### Positioning *Beyond Memory* in Contemporary Memory Studies

In the broader landscape of memory studies, *Beyond Memory* offers a timely counterpoint by questioning the effectiveness of memory policies as tools for fostering social cohesion. Echoing Santayana's warning about the perils of forgetting the past, they challenge the notion that memory alone can lead to reconciliation or social cohesion. They argue that memory, as a deeply personal construct shaped by individual and familial experiences, cannot be adequately preserved through uniform institutional narratives.

Gensburger and Lefranc share Rieff's concerns about the dangers of uncritical remembrance, advocating for a more nuanced approach that acknowledges when forgetting can be a necessary response to complex histories. They assert that memory politics must pivot from governmental frameworks to a focus on individual narratives, thereby allowing for a richer and more nuanced understanding of the past. This focus on individual memory also resonates with MacMillan's (2008) call to contest misused



narratives. Gensburger and Lefranc highlight how institutional memory often caters to specific demographics, reinforcing existing social inequalities.

Furthermore, their critique of memory as a form of governmentality parallels Antweiler's insights. Gensburger and Lefranc argue that memory policies frequently reinforce state narratives rather than promote meaningful change. They advocate for critically examining memory practices that can liberate individual voices from the constraints of dominant narratives, fostering a more inclusive dialogue around remembrance. The personal choice of 'forgetting', as elaborated by Rieff (2016), also remains important to decrease adherence to the governmental narrative.

Gensburger and Lefranc's work is a compelling addition to memory studies, prompting scholars and practitioners to reconsider the roles of memory and forgetting in shaping social justice. Their emphasis on individualised remembrance challenges us to engage critically with the narratives we uphold, making *Beyond Memory* a vital catalyst for a paradigm shift in understanding how we remember and learn from the past.

To summarise, in *Beyond Memory: Can We Really Learn from the Past?* (2020), Gensburger and Lefranc argue that the Foucauldian concept of 'conduct of conduct' has overtaken memory's transformative potential in shaping global assumptions. They assert that governments are flexible in altering and changing memory narratives, primarily reinforcing the state's position rather than initiating meaningful change. At the policy level, the role of the individual is not to transform the world or memory politics but to conform to a constructed narrative, positioning citizens as 'voluntarily compliant' (Cruikshank, 1999). Focusing on the constructed narrative and disregarding the 'real memories' of impactful historical events diminishes the effectiveness of memory policies. Whereas the policies should foster critical remembrance and, therefore, individualism, Gensburger and Lefranc conclude that memory has been transformed into a means of governmentality.

### Areas for Improvement

Despite its strengths, such as various examples based on multiple countries, the book sometimes feels like it cherry-picks its case studies, lacking engagement with counterarguments or alternative perspectives. While it primarily focuses on a French case study, the inclusion of other contexts broadens its appeal but can lead to occasional incoherence. The structure logically develops the argument that memory policies follow state narratives, which lead to governmentality within individual behaviour. The argument would benefit from more explicit connections between chapters, consistent headings and a consolidated reference list that includes recent academic literature. To gain a foothold in this developing area of memory studies, adding recent literature is necessary to support the claims.

An issue that could be addressed more is the rise of right-wing actors, which has further complicated memory politics. Adaire (2024) argues that many East Germans remember the transition to democracy after reunification as a period of economic hardship, a memory that groups like the AfD and PEGIDA exploit by using chaos, disinformation, and mockery to confuse political distinctions. The influence of right-wing politics may challenge the familial interpretation of memory, making it a significant contribution to the book.

The authors also briefly address the role of colonial legacies in memory politics, but a more comprehensive examination of this critical issue would enhance the book's relevance. While the book primarily centres on Holocaust memory policies, colonialism has increasingly become a focal point in memory studies, especially with recent movements for state apologies and reparative policies. A deeper analysis of colonial memory policies could provide insights into whether these initiatives differ significantly from Holocaust-focused policies in their capacity to foster reconciliation.

Finally, the book might benefit from engaging more with international memory policies beyond the national framework. While Gensburger and Lefranc focus on state-led memory initiatives, exploring the roles of supranational institutions, like the European Union and United Nations, could broaden the analysis and offer valuable insights into multilevel memory politics.

DANNY VAN WANROOIJ, LISA SCHIPPERIJN,  
Maastricht University

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OKSANA SARKISOVA, OLGA SHEVCHENKO:  
In Visible Presence: Soviet Afterlives in Family Photos  
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What is the content of memories that photographs invoke? Is it as complex as solicited by madeleine's bite from Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* – 'involuntary memory' bordering physical sensation (Batchen, 2005)? Even if it can sometimes instigate bias, photos are perceived by an individual as the 'reality in a past state' which can also authenticate the feeling of identity (Kirby, 2021, citing Barthes). This multifaceted nature of photography as an evocative object and mnemonic tool is examined by Sarkisova and Shevchenko's extended study, spanning years from 2006 to 2019.