

Slow Memory. Perspectives from Central and Eastern Europe. Introduction

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This special issue of Slovak Ethnology is the result of the collaboration within the ‘COST Action’ team entitled Slow Memory: Transformative Practices in Times of Uneven and Accelerating Change (later CA Slow Memory)¹ and our contribution to this action. Our aim as guest editors was to present a thematic issue featuring texts by authors who try to apply the concept and approach of slow memory to their different research topics. Thus, we invited scholars from different disciplines and countries to submit papers that discuss and provide empirical examples of the research dealing with the emerging concept of slow memory.

Slow memory belongs, in our view, to a category of the so called *sensitizing concepts* that, according to Herbert Blumer (1954), the originator of the term, use language and expression from the research participant’s perspective and sensitize the researcher to more fruitful lines of inquiry. Sensitizing concepts give the user only

¹ To find out more about this COST Action, and the activities that have taken place as part of it, visit <https://www.slowmemory.eu/>

a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical cases. While *definitive concepts* provide prescriptions of what to see, *sensitizing concepts* only suggest directions to take. Hundreds of concepts – such as culture, institutions, social structure, mores, and personality – are not definitive concepts, but are precisely sensitizing. They lack precise referents and have no markers that allow a pure identification of a specific case and its content; instead, they rely on a general sense of what is relevant.

Jenny Wüstenberg, the initiator and the Chair of the Slow Memory Action, brought slow memory as both a concept and a research program to the scientific debate. It is a response to previous research in memory studies focusing on historical phenomena and events represented by specific instances or place-specific phenomena. As she pointed out, the adjective ‘slow’ suggests that memory scholars should rethink the temporal premises of the memory study by shifting attention from the ‘turbulent’, ‘eventful’, and ‘situated’ pasts to the pasts that move slowly. These are often without a clear location or do not respect established boundary regimes – but they are no less important or transformative for human (and non-human) lives (Wüstenberg, 2023).

However, slow memory is not only a sensitizing concept and a research program but also a new approach to our work in academia, as suggested in the programmatic statement of ‘CA Slow Memory’. At a time when speed and efficiency have become the primary measure of quality and success in academia ruled by the logic of the market, ‘CA SlowMemory’ calls scholars to “slow down” research methods to afford capacity building, knowledge generation and impact activities (see <https://www.slowmemory.eu/about/>). In line with this approach, we should turn our attention to slow, rigorous, and careful thinking about processes and tools in order to capture, analyse, and make sense of the changing world around us. This approach can allow us to change focus from the individual events to the processes, frequently overlooked slow changes, and seemingly eventless developments that affect our everyday reality. Thus, the application of slow memory in memory studies challenges researchers to change their current optics, resist the pressure of ‘projectified’, ‘entrepreneurial’ academia, and use the methodological tools that take time, such as walks and talks, slow observation, careful, close listening and engaging in sustainable relations with research participants and stakeholders (McQuaid, Jensen, Turner, n.d.).

At the same time, slow memory as a research program calls memory scholars to include in their analyses not only the social but also the natural environment, in which they focus on hitherto often overlooked, at first-sight “invisible” processes that are slowly but surely underwriting the changes that fundamentally affect contemporary human societies.

However, applying both the concept and approach of slow memory in research on the Anthropocene (Craps et al., 2018) means more than simply adding ecological terms to social conceptions of memory or thinking in terms of non-human agency. Exploring slow memory means using the insights of ecology for a better understanding of both human remembering of *longue durée* processes and their non-event,

non-sited, and multi-sited development. It means understanding the social and the political differently; it represents a shift from examining lieux de mémoire to milieux de mémoire, to everyday experiences and practices. In this context, the methodological practices of oral history or ethnography aimed at capturing everyday life seem appropriate. If slow memory scholarship wants to go further, it needs to investigate memory processes that are not shaped by the linear development of human generations and by reference to events and places (however constructed) and the 'past' of history (Wüstenberg, 2023). Although memory researchers do not have the expertise to talk about objective and material aspects of climate change and deindustrialization, their expertise can contribute to an understanding of the cultural and political context that makes these kinds of processes of slow change possible. They draw attention to the socially shared cultural meanings that help people to make sense of these processes and ensure a sense of continuity of experience. Moreover, they can reveal cultural dynamics that sustain the continuity of political and social power (Jones, Van de Putte, 2024).

In sum, the Slow Memory multidisciplinary platform provides a space for gradual but focused discussions and collaborative thinking about memory theory (the need to study and remember slow things), methodology (what methods to use to understand and practice slow remembering), and our academic practice (slowing down research practices to promote deep knowledge and sustainable relations instead of rushed, incomplete knowledge and short-term engagements).

The individual texts we have chosen to include in this thematic issue reflect the state of elaboration and thinking about slow memory. The contributors focus on two approaches: *communicative* and *cultural memory* (Assmann, 2008), which refers to different spheres of life and their gradual transformation process.

The issue opens the article titled Persistent Catastrophes: Slow Memory and Slow Violence in Exploring Dark Heritage. Its first part is focused on a theoretical discussion of the concept of slow memory and its affordances concerning studies of slow violence and dark heritage sites (Scarlett, Rothenberg, Riede, Holmberg, 2024). The second part traces how slow violence continues to affect communities and the history that these memorials or monuments aim to commemorate. The author *Bengi Bezirgan-Tanış* explores three critical aspects of the relationship between slow memory, slow violence, and dark heritage sites: the temporal and spatial dimensions of these phenomena, the invisibility of the narratives of affected communities, and the representational challenges associated with these sites.

The following two papers focus on the period of post-communist transformation and its commemoration and interpretation. *Justyna Tabaszewska* analyses the memory of the political transformation in Poland, which, however, she does not consider as a political breakthrough that took place in a few months between 1989 and 1990, but as a slow, ongoing change, the consequences of which are still visible in Polish society today. She traces two different memory perspectives on political transformation: one that sees political transformation as a missed opportunity or,

at best, as a process that is not yet complete, and the other that sees transformation as a task that is still open in a positive sense, not only for the present but also for the future. Tabaszewska's article demonstrates which the slow memory approach can reveal the complex relationship that this kind of memory forms with the past, present, and future. She shows that remembering slow changes and processes involves not only recalling past events but also remembering how the collective future was imagined and the implications of this 'past future' for the present memory work.

Jogilė Ulinskaitė reflects on how the post-communist transformation in Lithuania is remembered and represented by analyzing two collections of discourse: oral history interviews and far-right populist narratives prevalent in the media. The interviews exemplify slow memory insofar as they emphasize everyday experiences and focus on long-term change and reform. On the other hand, the political narratives operate through condensation and acceleration, which prevents them from incorporating elements of slow memory. Based on the comparative analysis of these two data sets, the author demonstrates how the far-right narratives systematically reduce complex, gradual, and multi-layered processes into simplified stories that advance political objectives. As a result, a key characteristic of slow memory is its absence from public discourse and political space in a coherent and comprehensive form.

The other two papers explore memory institutions – museums – and their role in presenting and interpreting a problematic, conflicted past. *Ene Kõresaar* and *Kirsti Jõesalu* focus on the main museums in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania and examine how these institutions depict the Russophone 'other' and what narrative strategies they use to represent the 'slow conflict' between the native population of the three Baltic States and the Russophone 'newcomers' who arrived during the Soviet occupation after the Second World War. They consider how museums represent a transformation of the Russophone population from a colonizer during the Soviet period to an ethnic minority in the post-Soviet period. While some museums have taken an anthropological and individual-centred approach, using a biographical perspective to tell the stories of some Russophones, most museums continue to treat the Russophones as a monolithic bloc. They tell the national story from the state's perspective, with Russophones framed by securitizing and antagonistic modes of memory.

Anežka Brožová traces the museum's activities in the Hlučín region, in Czech Silesia on the border with Poland, whose history is different from the rest of the Czech Republic and its border region. Before 1920, it was part of the German Reich, and unlike most of the German-speaking population of the Czech borderlands, the autochthonous population of Hlučín was not displaced to Germany after the Second World War. The collective, communicative memory of the region was constantly evolving, during the communist regime, it was marginalized to the point of being undesirable, as it conflicted with the official national narrative – for example, that of the Second World War. This case study examines the work of the Hlučín Museum, recording the life stories of the older generations in the region, and in its theoretical and methodological approach, recognizes this activity as a slow memory practice.

The following studies are based primarily on oral history interviews and aim to engage in theoretical discussions about the meaning of memories that are not aimed at commemoration or monumentalization, but appear in slow and subtle human practices, interaction, and communication. *Markéta Hajsá* applies the slow memory approach to the study of the migration of Roma from the former Czechoslovakia to the West-European countries in the time of Communism. She analyses the ways in which Roma witnesses remembered, described, and interpreted the process of this migration. The text highlights how the use of the principle of slow memory enables new perspectives on past events, in particular by taking into account the marginalized and under-represented perspective of the Roma themselves, which emphasizes the role of kinship and social networks and the large role of Roma solidarity in these stories. *Agnes Malmgren* explores the relationship between (slow) memory and solidarity practices through the lens of the Warsaw-based activist group *Polskie Babcie* (Polish Grandmothers) during the rule of the national-conservative Party Law and Justice (PiS). These women, driven by concerns for the future of their grandchildren, rely heavily on their memories, and dramatic recollections of Solidarity in the 1980s coexist in their repertoire with less eventful experiences of mutual care, friendship, and 'survival' under difficult circumstances. The author points to the significance of 'slow memories' which inconspicuously become embodied and shared through human interaction. Malmgren demonstrates that this kind of memories can also become a resource fuelling continuous political agency.

The authors *Ilana Hartikainen*, *Jonáš Syrovátka*, and *Zea Szebeni* in their case study work with the concept of slow memory and extend it to 'slow joy', which they understand as the gradual accumulation of positive pseudo-historical messages in public memory. They show how much positive ahistorical narratives construct a specific view of history and Slovak identity through 'slow joy', which reinforces a specific vision of Slovak nationhood, effectively charged with a sense of pride. They use the example of the controversy surrounding the unveiling of the statue of Svätopluk I, the 'King of the Old Slovaks', to illustrate how cultural institutions and state actors can legitimize pseudo-historical narratives that project modern national identities onto the medieval past, despite scholarly criticism. This analysis contributes to an understanding of how pseudo-historical narratives embedded themselves in collective memory through material culture and institutional practices.

All contributions to this issue highlight the complex relationship between communicative and cultural memory. Most of the authors focus on the cases from the countries in Central and Eastern European region. They examine the politics and strategies of remembering specific historical periods and processes, as well as the roles played by memory and cultural institutions, or by political and opinion-forming elites. At the same time, all the authors apply the concept of 'slow memory' to their research topics, doing so in diverse ways. As a result, the papers illustrate various interpretations of the concept. The authors use it to discuss slow violence, prolonged conflicts, and persistent antagonisms, as well as to reflect on the memory of slow,

everyday life, care, and the significance of social networks. They also interpret slow memory as tenacious narratives and meanings that endure in collective memory across time and generations. This variety of applications demonstrates that the concept of slow memory is productive, yet its meaning remains open and malleable. In our view, it requires further development and discussion. We hope that this thematic issue will contribute to the scholarly debate surrounding the concept and research agenda of slow memory.

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