

**Report on the Berlin Program Alumni Roundtable
at the 37th Annual GSA Conference
October 3 - 6, 2013, in Denver, Colorado**

**Studying Memory: Methodologies and Tools for Research
October 5, 2013**

CHAIR: Belinda Davis (Berlin Program Fellow 1989–1990)
Department of History, Rutgers University

SESSION ORGANIZER: Jenny Wüstenberg (Berlin Program 2012–2013)

PARTICIPANTS:

Jeremy Brooke Straughn (Berlin Program 1998–1999)
Transnational Studies, Westminster College

Alexander Mirescu (Berlin Program 2007–2008)
Department of Political Science, Saint Peter's University

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It has become an annual tradition for the Berlin Program to host a Roundtable of its alumni at the German Studies Association (GSA) meeting. In years past, such diverse topics as demography, visual arts, and minority rights have been the focus of discussion. In addition to being a forum to discuss a specific theme, the Roundtable is of course a wonderful chance to (re)meet each other, reminisce about the good old days in Berlin, and to showcase the work being done by this growing community of scholars. The Roundtable is also an important way to strengthen the partnership between the Berlin Program at the Free University and the GSA.

The idea of this year's Roundtable emerged out of my observation that "Memory Studies" as a field (if it can be called that) suffers from a dearth of interdisciplinary venues for exchange. As a result, I believe we are faced with problems such as a lack of agreement on the content and boundaries of memory scholarship as well as underdeveloped methodological standards. The GSA, as home to scholars from many different disciplines, countries, and epistemological persuasions, seemed to be an excellent place to evaluate our commonalities, differences or even potential incompatibilities.

A call for contributions to the Roundtable went out to alumni early in 2013 and we quickly had a good group of Berlin Programmers together. Alexander Mirescu (Political Science, Saint Peter's University), Jeremy Brooke Straughn (Transnational Studies/Sociology, Westminster College), and Jenny Wüstenberg (Berlin Program/Political Science, Free University) – all Berlin Program fellows at one point or another – we were joined by Eric Langenbacher (Government, Georgetown University).

Belinda Davis (History, Rutgers University), in the Berlin Program in 1989/90, agreed to moderate the discussion. The fact that the Roundtable was composed mostly of social scientists gave it a particular bent that might have been somewhat unusual for the GSA, but this was thankfully balanced out by an unusually active and articulate audience whose members came from a variety of disciplines.

To prepare our discussion, I had asked each of the participants to speak briefly about their own research, the methodologies they use, as well as their time in the Berlin Program. In addition, I asked them to consider the following questions:

- What are “memory studies” as a field all about? How can/should they be improved or developed?
- What are the “big methodological trends” as you see them right now in memory studies?
- How can memory studies learn from their component (or other) disciplines?
- Can memory studies be a cumulative science? Do we even want them to be one?
- Do memory studies have sufficient venues for sharing ideas and methodological approaches?

Jeremy Brooke Straughn kicked off the Roundtable by reflecting on his research experiences before, during, and since his Berlin Program fellowship. Over a period of over 15 years, Jeremy has conducted oral history interviews with East Germans in Berlin and Dresden, focusing in particular on their changing recollections and interpretations of the events of 1989/90. By revisiting the same respondents in multi-year intervals, Jeremy was able to examine how autobiographical memories – and with them memories of life in the GDR and its demise – change over time and in the context of peoples’ contemporary lives. Moreover, this type of “longitudinal ethnographical research” allows an analysis of the generational mechanisms of mnemonic change, as well as of the subjective stake individuals have in how the past (here: the GDR and the revolution) is remembered. Jeremy called on us – and maybe particularly those in the room who were at the beginning of their scholarly career – to conduct research without a clear purpose at the outset – in order to enable qualitative studies in a longitudinal framework: to leave ourselves “time capsules” that we can pick up and utilize over the course of our lives as scholars.

Jenny Wüstenberg is currently the postdoctoral fellow in the Berlin Program and has worked on two major projects during her tenure there. The first concerns civil society engagement in German memory politics; the second maps transnational networks of actors driving the formation of a European memory culture. Rather than delve into this research however, I reported the result of a recent survey I conducted together with Professor Anamaria Dutceac-Segesten of Lund University in Sweden. The online survey was sent out to over a dozen listservs and social media platforms and was taken by a large number as well as variety of individuals who identify as “memory scholars” (about 250 total). I shared a few key points that emerged from the survey: first, memory scholars really do come from all kinds of different disciplines (most represented were history (21%) and sociology and political science (11% each), with media, film, and cultural studies, as well as psychology and area studies among the rest). Our respondents also hailed from different parts of the world and from different stages in their career. Second, memory studies have few fora for exchange across disciplinary borders. There are no conferences, professional associations or publishing outlets that are shared across the board. However, it does appear that the H-Memory listserv as well as the journal *Memory Studies* are very widely read. Third, there are some indications that truly interdisciplinary (as opposed to multi-disciplinary) work is being done by memory scholars. For example, a significant number of respondents reported having co-authored with colleagues from other fields

(about 12.5 %), though only few have cooperated with people in truly “distant” disciplines (like an historian with a neuroscientist). Overall, there seems to be no agreement on whether memory studies are inter- or multidisciplinary in nature – an observation that was reflected again during the ensuing discussion with the GSA audience.

I had invited Eric Langenbacher, the only participant who was not a Berlin Program alumn, in order to get his perspective on conducting quantitative research in memory studies. Eric has written extensively about German and European memory politics using survey data on history-political notions and political preferences. He is the managing editor of the journal *German Politics & Society*, giving him somewhat of a birds’ eye perspective on the development of research in this arena over the past years. Eric began by noting several key developments in memory studies, leaving open for debate whether they cumulatively should lead us to regard “the glass as half empty or half full.” Eric noted the vibrancy of activity in memory studies, but also the lack of clear focus and institutional support. For example, he lamented the non-existence of a common conference and of funding sources that could be tapped by memory scholars. This problem of institutional support became a major topic in the ensuing discussion, with several speakers reporting of problems getting published in highly-ranked journals or having memory-friendly journals be recognized in tenure and promotion processes. Eric also argued that while there are a multitude of publications about memory, there are today no “big books” that everyone reads and that might unite different strands of memory scholars. This point was disputed by members of the audience who cited authors such as Astrid Erll, Andreas Huyssen and Aleida Assmann as canonical in the field.

Eric also addressed the question of whether memory studies can be a cumulative science, expressing the hope that it could be. However, he argued that with a field as amorphous and fertile as memory studies, it would be unrealistic to expect true cumulation overall. Instead, he advocated that we strive for cumulation in specific targets of study – for example the study of the impact of memories of Nazism/WWII in a case like Germany; or in the related field of transitional justice or conflict resolution.

Alexander Mirescu, who studied Church-State Relations in East Germany, Poland and Yugoslavia during his Berlin Program period and is currently engaged in research on civil society politics in contemporary Tunisia and in the wake of the Arab Spring more generally, advocated in his contribution for using the tool of “process tracing” in memory research. He contended that process tracing is an approach extraordinarily well-suited to better understand the “small-scale” mechanisms which lead to mnemonic change.

The debate that followed the panelists’ remarks was extraordinarily lively and constructive, so that moderator Belinda Davis did not have to intervene either to reign in speakers or fill silences. The overall theme of the discussion revolved around trying to characterize the nature of memory studies – as either a topic that could be integrated into many different larger disciplines or a field in its own right. There was no agreement on whether memory studies is or should be institutionalized and how. Some in the room argued that it is important to define clear boundaries and “defend” memory studies against competitors in order for them (and us as professional scholars) to acquire reputation, funding and professional clout. There was a general sense that there is currently a great deal of activity and interest in memory (even a “memory turn”?) and that it might be a crucial time to establish a new “field.” New developments such as the idea of multidirectional or multivocal memory, transnational memory, the incorporation of the “spatial turn” as well as scholarship in non-anglophone regions were cited as noteworthy. This sense of transformation notwithstanding, one

audience member argued that interdisciplinary fields are constantly in flux and so this collective feeling might not be particularly unusual. Moreover, several participants noted that memory has been studied for a long time – but has been conceived of through other concepts such as tradition or heritage. Thus, a genealogy of the memory concept was called for.

Audience members and panelists – despite their diversity and various assessments of memory studies – were united in their critique of disciplinary politics and career pressures that often hamper cross-disciplinarity in general and memory scholarship in particular. Nevertheless, there are some key venues that may encourage further exchange: among them the New School’s memory conference that will hopefully be revived and the Memory Studies network of the GSA. The Roundtable has – it is hoped – also contributed to connecting scholars of various backgrounds and providing food for thought.

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