

Nina Elsemann

Umkämpfte Erinnerungen. Die Bedeutung lateinamerikanischer Erfahrungen für die spanische Geschichtspolitik nach Franco

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Nina Elsemann's detailed analysis of Latin American and Spanish history policy in the context of their respective dictatorships picks up and adapts a central line of research within recent historical and cultural studies: the assumption that local and national memory cultures are not isolated from each other. Global networking in the field of remembering political violence has become institutionalized and leads to new and more complex approaches in historiography, state politics and civilian grassroots movements. Recent works by Aleida Assmann, Sebastian Conrad, Jürgen Osterhammel, Michael Rothberg, Nathan Sznajder and Daniel Levy highlight the necessity to include global and trans-national dynamics in historical scientific research in general and on remembrance in particular; as well as developing concepts such as entangled history, transfer history, multidirectional memory and cosmopolitanism of remembrance. Within this context, Elsemann approaches a particular trans-national constellation. Her study focuses on the links between the politics of history in Argentina and Chile on the one hand and the protracted and contested process of transición in Spain on

the other. Her general assumption is that the unexpected boom of memory culture in the Spanish public cannot be explained solely by internal political shifts on the national level, but requires a closer look at transfers and translations between the debates in Spain and in other societies related to Spanish culture and language.

From the very beginning, the study convincingly develops its notions and arguments, consistently following them throughout the book. After the introduction, the second chapter focuses on the transnational construction of the term *desaparecidos*, the third chapter on the relation between global norms and local effects, the fourth chapter discusses the Pinochet case and its influence on Spain, while the fifth and sixth chapters highlight how the Argentine model of coming to terms with the past influenced recent tendencies in Spanish history politics.

In the first chapter the concepts of "memory culture", "politics of memory" and "politics of history" are clearly defined. The latter is described as an open, discursive process influenced by political, social and cultural

determinants on both the local and the transnational level. Taking this as a starting point, in the following chapter Elsemann deduces how and why the concept of the so-called *desaparecidos* (a concept coined to denominate the disappeared victims of the latest military dictatorships in Argentina and Chile), has been adapted in the context of the Spanish debate on how to come to terms with the consequences of the Franco dictatorship and how it led to a change in public opinion. In this context, Elsemann also explains the term “Contested Memories” (which appears in the book’s title, and was coined in the Southern Cone nations of Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay) in order to analytically comprehend the NGOs’ strategy of subverting the official historical narrative. This term quite rightly entails an element of memory culture and politics of history that the above-mentioned concepts of multidirectional memory or cosmopolitanism of remembrance fail to include analytically. Images of historical events, especially where they are marked by particularly strong power imbalances and painful collective experiences, are not adequately understood – neither in their local nor in their transnational manifestations – when seen as the result of a horizontal debate based on the more plausible argument. Concerning both their causes and their outcome they are a product of intense disputes, during which state institutions, official narratives and the arguments of established historians first tend to prevail; persistently trying to defend themselves against claims from below. These conflicts are only open and tolerant insofar as they support a democratic media intending to represent the diversity

of opinions. Therefore, the present study focuses on mass media (and more specifically on Spanish and Argentine newspapers) and their way of representing the public debate and the changes in the Spanish process of remembrance.

Chapter two also documents how the enforced disappearances of so-called enemies of the state, dissidents or insurgents in South America can be understood as the evaluation and continuation of experiences from Algeria, Indochina, Guatemala and Vietnam. Elsemann states, “Concerning the analysis of the systematic disappearances in Latin America the increasing internationalization of state violence and the exchange of experiences in the field of counter-insurgency [...] have to be taken into account.” (51).¹ Additionally, she highlights that these learning and integration processes in the development of mechanisms of oppression did not only happen on a north to south axis, but also on a south to south level.

The study shows clearly that concerning the victims’ struggle for recognition, a similar process of networking is visible. Elsemann provides a comprehensive overview of how locally developed (but nevertheless globally employable) concepts and tools are generated: transitional justice, truth commissions with their final reports, claims for reparation and the creation of archives. She thus shows that claims for justice do not have to be conceived and consolidated “from

¹ „Bei der Analyse des systematischen Verschwindenlassens in Lateinamerika muss somit die zunehmende Internationalisierung staatlicher Gewalt und der Erfahrungsaustausch im Bereich der Aufstandsbekämpfung [...] mit berücksichtigt werden.“

the ground up” any longer, they can refer to resources and models which only need to be adapted to the local conditions. Local adaptations have, in turn, an effect on the global level when it comes to consolidating universally applicable strategies and laws against human rights violations. In order to show what kind of results this process can produce, the study has a convincing case at hand, namely the criminal prosecution and arrest of the former army general, dictator and President of Chile, Augusto Pinochet. His arrest kicked off an intense debate in Spain about how to deal with the past of Franco’s dictatorship. Elsemann shows very clearly how the discussion of the Pinochet case in Spanish public made the negligence of its own past painfully noticeable.

One could criticize that the empirical data of the study is limited to the national daily press, ignoring, for example, the debate among Spanish historians. The author anticipates this objection and thus clarifies that the commitment to deal with Franco’s dictatorship could indeed be found in both scientific and cultural debates, but that historians in Spain have, by no means, played the same public role as in Germany’s discussion on how to deal with the consequences of National Socialism; a debate that became internationally known as the Historians Quarrel (181f.).

In chapter four, the study clearly demonstrates that initiatives of civil society organizations claiming recognition often start off with the commitment of individuals. The Spanish case features journalist Emilio Silva (grandson of a Spanish desaparecido) and Baltasar Garzón

(a Spanish judge in the Pinochet case and former Member of Parliament) as the key figures to initiate public discussion and legal procedures. Silva’s search for the fate of his grandfather led to a pioneering newspaper article titled “Mi abuelo también fue un desaparecido” and to the establishment of the civil movement Asociación para la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica; Garzón’s initiative eventually led to an international arrest warrant for Pinochet.

On the other hand, the study also demonstrates that these initiatives are not a sufficient condition for an international recognition in the field of memory. Thus, it is only through the transfer of other countries’ experiences and narratives that a network of cross-references and institutional entanglement can be created, which then allows for a similar commitment at the local and national levels, respectively. As an example, chapter five on Argentina suggests that not until the cooperation between a group of US anthropologists and Argentine scientists did the production of evidence on human rights violations by means of standardized scientific methods become viable – a method that, in turn, had a retroactive effect on the Spanish exhumations later on. Elsemann shows that the international media produced a complementary effect through extensive coverage of the exhumations in Spain, which made the Spanish case an international issue. Consequently, the study completes the list of forces involved by reference to the forms of representation and visualization in the media, which indicate the adaptation of a globalized language of memory through web presence, blogs, and online social

networks. The convergences thus produced go so far that recent Spanish remembrance initiatives also refer to the Holocaust and to the case of Srebrenica in order to further fuel the national reconciliation with the past – as demonstrated in chapter six (261, 295, 329).

The easy-to-read, informative and comprehensive study concludes with weighing the advantages and disadvantages of the decentralization of cultural memory and political history. To be sure, this development has not only led to an internationalization of attention for memory processes (and thus to a kind of global democratization of these debates), but also bears the danger of overlooking historically different experiences, subsuming all kinds of political oppression and mass murder under well-established global standards of recognition, reclaiming and remembrance. The study makes it quite clear that the future labor of coming to terms with the past will include the tough task of breaking down these standards to the level of each concrete local experience of collective suffering.

All in all, the study offers a detailed and profound analysis of networking in the field of memory cultures, helpful to both interested laypeople and contemporary historians working in the field of remembrance.