

MEMORY IN A WORLD
TO BECOME
Memory Work in the
Medium-Term Future

Workshop by
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In light of increasing conservative and right-wing pressure on national remembrance narratives, this workshop, held in German, addressed the question of how memory work on issues of migration, colonialism, and racism should position itself in the medium term. The goal was to preserve the transnational perspectives and international networks that civil society built up over many years. Following a short introduction, freelance cultural scientist and curator Anujah Fernando opened the room for an initial exchange in small groups, where participants could introduce themselves. Participants were invited to present a central resource they could contribute to decolonial and anti-racist memory work and struggles for remembrance. Participants from Berlin, Hamburg, Hannover, and Munich identified both highly individual capabilities—such as empathy, personal networks, or work with children and young people—and their strong engagement within cultural, culture-supporting, and political institutions, as well as civil-society groups.

In the following plenary session, participants discussed the discursive and political threats and challenges currently confronting remembrance work. Most contributions focused on existing or anticipated underfunding and cuts to cultural budgets. The production of critical knowledge had been especially affected by these cuts. Statutory posts for equal rights and against discrimination remained unfilled, and laws that have already been passed cannot be implemented due to a lack of financial resources. Participants suspected that a conservative, reactionary political agenda underpinned these budget consolidations. The situation has given rise to concerns that the cuts may intensify the struggle for resources within existing networks. The hard-won advances of recent years thus appear fragile, while personal threats, both verbal and physical, have increased in the context of growing racism and anti-Semitism. In addition to these existential challenges, participants also debated whether the creation of sites of remembrance and the renaming of streets was contributing to a de-politicization of decolonial memory work. There was a danger that such sites could become so central to remembrance culture that other forms would receive less attention.

The subsequent discussion addressed questions of whom memory culture is actually directed towards, who the counterparts in memory work are, and what might strengthen their activities. The discussion of the results

was brief but full of insights. Without attempting to define in detail whether a clear distinction between addressee and sender can be drawn within remembrance culture, participants emphasized that it is directed at everyone—both current and future generations, and perhaps even past generations. Through understanding and engaging with the past, valuable lessons can be drawn for our future and the voices of earlier generations can be heard.

In discussing the question of who the counterparts in decolonial memory work are, participants initially emphasized that they were not the same ‘allies’. Allied activists and civil-society organizations can function as amplifiers by underlining the importance of specific concerns or by calling for more intensive engagement. Making use of the power of institutions of memory culture, even when this is associated with challenges, remains crucial. Awareness of where decisions are made and how influence can be exerted supports the realization of one’s own projects. Similarly, contact with the media and effective lobbying work can be of great importance. In some cases, legal action may also be necessary to advance decolonial remembrance culture.

To strengthen decolonial memory work, it is important to emphasize that there should be no competition between different aspects of remembrance culture. Instead, the task is to create common spaces in which an empathetic approach to one another can be cultivated. This involves promoting trans-cultural, intersectional, and multiperspectival approaches within decolonial and anti-racist memory work as well as in education as a whole in order to foster an inclusive society. In light of limited resources and politically motivated funding cuts, many participants pointed to the importance of reducing dependence on state funding. The creation and strengthening of autonomous financing models and (infra)structures were seen as key for the long-term realization of concrete visions. Achieving this requires alliances and the institutionalization of different voices within the remembrance discourse through associations and civil-society organizations.

The workshop highlighted the enormous challenges confronting the development of memory work in the medium term. At the same time, the open exchange raised awareness of the need to strengthen national and transnational networks and to develop common strategies in order to maintain the vigour of existing decolonial remembrance culture.

Report by Simon Goeke

Translated from German by Colin Shepherd