

Barbara Christophe
Teaching the 'Cold War' – Memory practices in the classroom
Presentation during the first project workshop in August 2013

What are we planning to do?

Here I would like to introduce a distinction between what we aim at on the level of the four separate *case studies* and on the level of *comparison*

- Aim of the case studies: Analyse memory practices in the classroom
- Aim of the project is twofold:
 - We want to use comparison as a heuristic instrument to grasp peculiarities of the case studies
 - And we want to compare memory practices in four memory cultures and account for differences

How do we analyse memory practices?

The proposal actually suggests a three step programme

- Firstly, we study representation of the cold war in two types of memory texts: in (i) history textbooks and in (ii) life story interviews with teachers
- Secondly, we observe teachers' practices of appropriating textbook narratives in three types of settings: (i) while telling their life story, (ii) while speaking loud about text book quotes, and (iii) while teaching
- Last but not least, we observe student's practices of appropriating narratives as conveyed by textbooks and by teachers in two types of settings: (i) in the classroom and (ii) in focus group discussions

What is our Focus?

Just to make that simple and clear, on all these different research phases and on all these different research levels we focus on the memory practices that will unfold in the triangle between textbooks, teachers and students.

Having said this, let me for a moment draw myself into question by raising a couple of why question wherever it is possible and thus reflecting on the relevance of what we are up to do. Let me start with the most fundamental one asking, why we should be interested in memory practices. In my answer I would like to touch upon different arguments:

First of all, looking at memory practices ties in quite neatly with *recent theoretical development in the field of memory studies*. Actually, what we can observe here, is a significant shift from analysing **institutionalized objects** of memory cultures like monuments, exhibitions in museums or textbooks to studying the **practices** people come up with while using or appropriating these objects. Obviously, this shift in focus does not come out of the blue. It is rather based on a general trend in a couple of theoretical fields in the social sciences.

To point to the most **visible** one, I would like to refer to *theories of practice*. What is useful here for us, I think is the general emphasis on the unpredictability of all social practice. Practice is thought of as something that is **never** ultimately determined by social rules or norms.

Looked upon from a certain angle, we can observe something rather similar in another field. What I am thinking of here is *discourse theory*. Actually, quite a lot of authors nowadays take issue with what they perceive to be the rather orthodox point of view as expressed by Foucault. He would be blamed for propagating a too monolithic view on the relation between discourse and power. Instead of speaking again and again about the power of discourse, critics would rather remind us that there are gaps and fissures to be found in every discursive formation. They would thus emphasize the inescapable instability of all meaning. And they would claim that this instability would lead to an ongoing struggle between those attempting to fix meaning and those who are keen on destabilizing those fixations. If you buy that argument and I actually tend to do, you will end up at a similar point as recent memory studies. You will not only study the structure and the rules on what can be said and what not. You will be also interested in social practices of dealing with discourse. Just to mention that in brackets: Quite frequently those struggles I have just mentioned are difficult to observe as they are not always taking place under the eyes of the public. However, what we can get hold of quite easily, are the leftovers of those struggles. We can render them visible in texts and statements. What seems to be especially interesting, promising and telling in this regard is ambivalences and vagueness. To my mind, both regularly emerge in discourses whenever the balance of power is precarious. Under these circumstances they usually serve two needs.

- Vagueness may help a speaker to simulate a consensus that does not really exist.
- Ambivalence helps to create statements that are open to different understandings and thus works into the same direction.

As you will see from Kathrin's presentation we would very much like to include the search for ambivalences into our textbook analysis.

To cut a long story short and in order to sum up the argument I have developed so far: I guess with a focus on memory practices our project is not only highly innovative in the field of textbook research. It is moreover located at the intersection of theoretical developments in the three fields of memory research, practice theory and discourse theory.

To add some more cautious tones to what I have just said if translated into another theoretical language what we are up to do may appear to be a little bit less new or innovative. Actually, some of the questions raised in the field of memory research have already been dealt with in history didactics. Unfortunately, both research traditions seem to have used rather different terms for more or less the same things.

- Memory research promises to look into the interplay between collective memory and individual memory.
- The didactic of history talks about the relationship between historical culture and historical consciousness.

Having paid attention to the similarities between the two research fields so far, I would like to spend some thoughts on differences as well. I will do so mainly in order to point to some of the advantages that are in my opinion to be gained from reference to memory theory in general and from the notion of memory practices in particular. Actually I see these advantages on two different levels.

To start with, I guess the concept of memory is much broader than the concept of historical consciousness. Whereas memory can encompass (i) the *conscious* as well as the *unconscious*, (ii) the *declarative* as well as the *non-declarative, knowledge* of the past as well as *feelings* about the past, *historical consciousness* seems to be much more limited to the realm of the explicit, that

is to **conscious** mental processes at the expense of everything that is not under my cognitive control.

Secondly, since Jörn Rüsen and his distinction between four different types of historical consciousness, the concept seems to carry a heavy load of normative assumptions. Authors making use of it seem to be convinced that there are forms of reflective historical consciousness that are better than others. As far as I can see, they are therefore mainly interested in the factors that might contribute to this higher form of consciousness. Different from this, I would like **us** to focus less on what SHOULD take place in the classroom, but more on what IS going on there.

What is our Research question?

Having dealt with conceptual issues, I would like to return to simple WHAT-questions. Let me briefly ask myself what we are looking at, when we study memory practices. I guess we actually pursue a twofold agenda.

On the one hand we ask a descriptive question. We simply want to know, what happens inside the triangle. Do teachers and students reproduce narratives, do they reject them or do they modify them? And do we observe differences in teachers and students dealing with textbook narratives.

On the other hand we ask analytical questions as well. We want to find out, which factors do exercise an influence on memory practices inside the triangle? To frame it differently, we actually try to define different types of textbooks, different types of teachers and different types of students that do interact and thus bring about different types of memory practices.

Why memory practices inside the didactic triangle?

I would now like to justify some of the decisions we made. First of all, why did we chose to study memory practices inside the didactic triangle, and not, to mention just one possible alternative, among visitors of newly planned museums dedicated to the cold war. Again, I would like to suggest a couple of answers.

My first answer directly refers to **memory research**. The school simply is an

easily accessible research field, where one can observe how two types of actors with different kinds of social rules, i.e. teachers and students, engage with institutionalized objects of memory like textbooks.

My second answer is based on the assumption that the school belongs to those institutions which have emerged in the modern age and then travelled around the world. Despite local differences in forms of organization and pedagogical principles, we can probably say that schools across the globe do display a striking homogeneity at least when we are talking about function. That means, one can easily pursue a comparative agenda if one does research in schools.

My third argument in favour of the school as an almost perfect site for research into memory practices refers to social relevance. Actually, if we look at each of the three angles in our triangle, if we look carefully at textbook, teachers and students, we cannot but realize that all of them are embedded in different spaces of relevance.

All that adds up, I would tend to say, to a pretty much encompassing picture of a given society

- Textbooks: can be described as a kind of border object located at the intersection of political, scientific, didactic and economic discourses
- teachers: are members of a certain generation with specific historical experiences AND members of a professional group with certain standards and principles
- students: members of a different generation, embedded in social media networks; expected to share in specific modes of using media

And last but not least, studying memory practices in schools appears to be an advantage from the perspective of practice theory as well. This argument is mainly based on the observation, that all the actors, that we want to look at, that is textbooks, teachers and students are subject to contradictive expectations and role assignments. None of them can thus be expected to simply implement or enact predefined role models. All of them have to navigate between rules or norms that prescribe different things.

- Textbooks: convey dominant discourses and mirror social controversies
- Teachers: are supposed to act as neutral translators of state approved

knowledge AND as emotionally engaged pedagogues

- Students: are assumed to assimilate a defined body of knowledge AND to demonstrate the ability to engage critically with knowledge

To sum up my rather complicated argument: if you want to analyse rather unpredictable practices from a perspective informed by theories of practice, you are well advised to do research in the setting of schools. On the one hand, the school is an institutionalized setting where the transfer of predefined knowledge is to take place. On the other hand, it is a space where actors with incoherent agendas meet and interact and thus cannot but produce unpredictability