

# Bringing the Past into the Present: Toward a New Social Scientific Research Agenda

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*Communism's Shadow: Historical Legacies and Contemporary Political Attitudes.* By Grigore Pop-Eleches and Joshua A. Tucker. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017.

*Memory Laws, Memory Wars: The Politics of the Past in Europe and Russia.* By Nikolay Koposov. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

*Twenty Years after Communism: The Politics of Memory and Commemoration.* Edited by Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

*War, Guilt, and World Politics after World War II.* By Thomas U. Berger. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Assessing the societal significance of the past in terms of the various interpretations accorded to it in the present has long been primarily the domain of disciplines within the humanities. However, in the wake of the tectonic political shifts that have recently shaken democracies worldwide, social scientists have become increasingly aware of the direct and lasting impact that representations of past events have on contemporary politics. Contentious historical understandings, and the way in which these are remembered, have significantly informed the burgeoning of nativist populism, anti-immigrant sentiment, and democratic backsliding. They have also affected how political interactions are structured more broadly, with the moralistic didacticism implicit in “getting the past right” favoring a zero-sum style of politics that renders competitors into enemies and forestalls the ability to compromise. As a result, conflicts over how the

past is publicly remembered have become one of the central political battlegrounds across established democracies, no longer being perceived as merely epiphenomenal or confined to states dealing with issues of transitional justice (e.g., Barahona de Brito, Enríquez, and Fernández 2001; Elster 2004; Nalepa 2010). We therefore contend that the present-day recall of past events demarcates a distinct political realm, one that follows its own logics of contestation. Indeed, the redistributive responses available to appease conflicts over the allocation of material resources are usually not possible, or even relevant, when it comes to issues of historical interpretation that are directly linked to the expression of collective identities.

It is important to note that the implications of this research paradigm are not, and never have been, restricted to Europe alone; the theoretical constructs and evaluative methods discussed below are potentially applicable to, and should eventually be assessed against, a broader spatial scope and across differing regime configurations and political coalitions. Therefore, while the books considered herein all (with the partial exception of Berger's volume) focus on Europe, this is due to our expertise falling in this geographic area. In epistemological terms, these four volumes testify to the growing interest social scientists are exhibiting in the diachronic representation of political processes and their associated outcomes. Consequently, they likewise demarcate an intellectual terrain distinct from that of the social-scientific study of historical processes as practiced within historical institutionalism, where the focus is typically on understanding the deeper structures of past political processes rather than their present-day reverberations.

This emerging avenue of social science research also necessitates a critical examination of how fundamental concepts such as collective memory and historical recall have been conceptualized and researched in other fields, particularly cul-

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tural studies (e.g., Erll 2011; Feindt et al. 2014; Rothberg 2009), in order to discern a distinctive approach in the social sciences and to see what the latter stands to gain in terms of cross-disciplinary insights. The books discussed in this review lend themselves to exploring this potential, allowing us to assess the applicability and empirical tractability of new theoretical conceptualizations, methodologies, and sources of data.

Thomas Berger's *War, Guilt, and World Politics after World War II* (2012) is the oldest of the volumes we survey. Starting from the assumption that we live in an "age of apology," Berger pays a great deal of attention to issues of victimhood, reconciliation, and the assignment (or deflection) of culpability across Germany, Austria, and Japan. In comparing these three cases, he investigates how similar historical conditions in the immediate aftermath of World War II have subsequently been reshaped through active political engagement and contestation over the politics of the past. Berger stresses not only the role of evolving domestic realities, but also the role of the international community and its differential application of pressure concerning the interpretive contours of historical representations, in accounting for the divergence of official mnemonic policies between countries.

Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik's edited volume *Twenty Years after Communism* (2014), meanwhile, proposes a comprehensive theoretical framework through which to understand how disputes over history and its interpretation are politically activated, as well as a typology of the elites that engage in these processes. Critically, it represents an attempt at systematizing categories to render specific empirical inquiries comparable. The contributing authors then apply the editors' theoretical framing of these issues in their case studies, which focus on the postcommunist states of Europe. More concretely, their proposed heuristic delineates between mnemonic "warriors" (who seek the elucidation and political imposition of historical truth as they understand it), "pluralists" (who are willing to accept that interpretive differences exist and are situationally relevant in politics), "abnegators" (who avoid engaging in the politics of the past), and "prospectives" (who believe they have transcended the past with their forward-looking ideologies). An undergirding assumption is that a materialist ontology informs political actors' behavior, which is predominantly, although not exclusively, instrumental. However, as befits a book edited by two scholars respectively trained as a political scientist and an anthropologist, they focus on behavioral incentives arising from both "positional" (i.e., political) as well as "semiotic" (i.e., cultural) factors, the implication being that the social coherence of the range of interpretive options available to political actors is meaningfully constrained by contextual embeddedness. In other words, politicians' repertoires of action (and perhaps even their under-

standings of these) are constrained by the societal milieu in which they find themselves situated. Engaged in this light, Bernhard and Kubik provide a comprehensive means of tracing and categorizing the (dis)similarities in both the mnemonic actors and regimes that have appeared across Central and Eastern Europe since the collapse of the Soviet system.

For its part, Grigore Pop-Eleches and Joshua Tucker's *Communism's Shadow* (2017) initially appears to be the odd volume out, given that its focus and methodology differs substantially from the other books we examine. However, considering it permits a valuable juxtaposition to be made regarding the types of analyses employed. This volume affirms that the specter of the past that still haunts the postcommunist space also manifests itself in everyday political attitudes. Looking at the mass-level effects of communist legacies, as opposed to their political activation by elite actors, reveals noteworthy differences and commonalities in the values and attitudes held by ordinary citizens residing within postcommunist countries. Specifically, Pop-Eleches and Tucker identify the lasting impact of past experiences, notably living through communism, on contemporary political attitudes. In general, their analysis reveals that individuals who experienced a longer duration (and intensity) of exposure to communism tend to display attitudes that are more congruent with those propagated by the past regime. This leads the authors to claim that exposure to communism, age, and social factors such as religiosity and social class explain more of the differential attitudes exhibited toward politics and economics across the postcommunist space than do the specific conditions that characterize postcommunist societies today.

Finally, Nikolay Kaposov's *Memory Laws, Memory Wars* represents the most recent publication considered herein, having been released in late 2017. This book illustrates the extent to which the post-Cold War phenomena of legislating how the past is to be recalled has rapidly spread throughout Europe. Interestingly, while memory laws are particularly prominent and confrontational across the postcommunist states of Europe, it was actually the Western half of the continent that pioneered their establishment during the late Cold War era. By investigating the political conflicts they engender both domestically and across borders, Kaposov's analysis highlights the diffusion of norms and values across Europe (and beyond). In doing so, he painstakingly traces the processes through which proposed memory laws were introduced and ultimately adopted by legislators in contemporary Russia and Ukraine, paying particular attention to the influence of wider geopolitical processes and cross-border discourses.

These four books all address various aspects of how the past bears on the present, and each adopts a different ap-

proach to the question. However, when read in aggregate, they amount to a comprehensive survey of the broader research agenda's state-of-the-art practices, as well as the advantages and limitations of applying various methodological techniques and theoretical concepts to studying the political relevance of historical legacies and how these resonate in the present day. The discussion that follows focuses on four main issue areas: (i) conceptual, (ii) methodological, (iii) explanatory, and (iv) comparative.

First, all four volumes raise important conceptual issues, notably in relation to how they understand, and by implication operationalize, key terms and concepts. One striking divide is between those contributions that approach history and memory as collective legacies, namely, by looking at a set of indicators focused on past societies and evaluating how these relate to present political attitudes, and those that approach them as narratives, namely, by looking at interpretations of past events in present societies. Pop-Eleches and Tucker, following the former line, convincingly assess the impact of what they term "living through communism" versus "living in a post-communist society." Through an extremely well-conceived and stepwise process of statistical analysis, they identify the causal pathways between individuals' experiences of communism and what citizens in contemporary postcommunist societies think about democracy, the organization of the economy, the role of the state, and gender equality. However, the works that follow the latter conceptualization, most clearly Kopolov and the contributors to the Bernhard and Kubik volume, suggest that we must address what different indicators come to mean at different points in time. In other words, how are the conditions of precommunist societies or communism mediated temporally, from "back there" to the present "here," and who are the agents involved in that process? This perspective raises the question of how exactly people understand concepts such as gender equality and democracy. Moreover, this narrative-based perspective emphasizes the transmission and diffusion of these concepts, investigating their shifting meanings across the region and over time. In sum, the legacies approach is convincing if the goal is to extract what effect the past has on the present, but on its own it adds little to understanding the frameworks through which interpretations of the past are mediated and, consequently, why they possess the durable political and social power that they do.

This theoretical dividing line is intriguing and deserves to be explored further, as how we conceive of the activity of the past in the present determines the kind of sources that are relevant for our investigation. It also raises the question of which analytical level is to be explored, for example, individuals' attitudes or collective representations, supply-side

(elite-centric) versus demand-side (mass-based) calls for the political activation of contentious pasts, whether the discursive field on which the past is negotiated is domestic (subnational or national) or international (bilateral, multilateral, regional, global), and the degree to which domestic or transnational nonstate actors affect the construction and deployment of historical narratives. Berger's comparison of different theoretical approaches to assessing the past's role in the present navigates admirably between these poles, and his exploration of the ways in which historical legacies and their interpretations constrain the culturally relevant frames that elites use (but which are also subject to manipulation by them) represents a useful analytical starting point, particularly as the implications following from this can be further tested via different methodological approaches.

A further theoretical question raised by these volumes is whether a distinction ought to be made between "history" and "memory," these terms standing in as proxies for concerns related to studying the past and its effects over temporal distances. The underlying issue revolves around whether an objective truth accessible to scholars is believed to exist—the positivist position—or whether scholarship itself is not exempt from conditioning by the mnemonic frames of its time, which continually renegotiate the meanings associated with the past. Kopolov, for one, largely dismisses the difference between history and memory, arguing that it is a "grossly exaggerated opposition," as both are concepts with "complex and largely intersecting meanings" (48). This constructivist point of departure understands memory as the represented meanings of the past and, consequently, sees it as mediating the possibility of objective historical or social scientific research. Conversely, both the Berger and Pop-Eleches and Tucker volumes implicitly take as their starting points the existence of an objective past that can be either narrated or measured. Berger's position is conveyed by the fact that each chapter begins with a factual account of historical events, an approach that Kopolov and most of the contributors in the Bernhard and Kubik book avoid by centering their accounts more directly on interpretations of the past in the present. Likewise, Pop-Eleches and Tucker assume an objectively quantifiable past by measuring historical conditions through such variables as literacy, urbanization, and economic development.

Regarding these conceptual issues, the heuristic for studying memory regimes proffered by Bernhard and Kubik merits further attention. Their differentiation between memory regimes relies on the presence (or absence) of different types of memory actors, such as the previously noted warriors, pluralists, abnegators, and prospectives. This ordering organizes the book's individual chapters in a productive manner, allowing for cross-case comparison and suggesting its poten-

tially wider applicability, for example, by providing a lens through which to explore the comparative dimensions of the Koposov or Pop-Eleches and Tucker volumes. Nevertheless, it leaves certain issues relating to audience and perspective unresolved, as one person's mnemonic abnegator or pluralist can appear to be a mnemonic warrior relative to a different historical event or at a different level of analysis. To cite but one example, in Poland there is little substantive controversy over how to interpret the extrajudicial mass executions of military reservists, border guards, and other Poles by the Soviet NKVD in the 1940 Katyń massacre. As such, on this matter at least, Polish politicians tend to be mnemonic abnegators domestically but frequently assume the stance of mnemonic warriors when confronting their Russian counterparts, who tend to view these killings not in isolation but as one ripple in a bloody sea of Stalinist crimes, the leading victims of which were Soviet citizens. Consequently, the inherently relational nature of such positions, and the discursive fluidity resulting from it, cannot be appreciated without considering cross-border interactions. As such, a promising direction for future research would be to explore the contradictions and tensions within the analytic categories proposed by Bernhard and Kubik at differing analytical levels.

Second, there are serious methodological questions and related issues of data collection concerning how to study the political relevance of the past in the present from a social scientific perspective. The sources of data that can reasonably be used are manifold, notably encompassing surveys, parliamentary records, political speeches, and media reports. Combining waves of surveys from the World Value Survey, the European Bank of Recovery and Development's *Life in Transition Societies*, and two country-specific panel studies from Hungary and Germany, Pop-Eleches and Tucker assemble a rich multilevel data set that they analyze quantitatively while carefully controlling for a broad range of longitudinal variables. This approach to public opinion data generates an analytically persuasive assessment that brings the study of the political effects of past conditions right into the heart of political science and its methodologies. As a result, the authors can speak to the general literature on political socialization in addition to a more specific set of writings on postcommunist societies.

The other three volumes draw on a different and broader array of sources. Koposov, for instance, considers memory laws (a prime example of what Jürgen Habermas has termed the increasing "juridification" of social life by the state) but understands them within the context of the political debates that surrounded their proposal or adoption. This approach requires the mastery of an impressive set of linguistic skills, with primary sources drawn from a panoply of Slavic, Ger-

manic, and Romance languages. Similarly, Berger uses German and Japanese sources to evaluate collective representations made by political leaders, parties, and parliaments in the context of analyzing the official historical narratives advocated by these states and their malleability. Finally, the Bernhard and Kubik volume develops an intriguing inductive research approach that examines the role of political elites and how they variously interpret and represent the twentieth anniversary of communism's collapse in Europe.

This latter set of sources, however, is intrinsically limited by the fact that the authors cannot ultimately gauge the societal reach of memory politics and the extent to which elite struggles over them shape mass perceptions. Moreover, references to public surveys in the latter three volumes tend to be scant and cannot comprehensively determine the extent to which there is a causal pathway from the backward-looking politics elites engage in to the establishment or evolution of the collective representations of the past citizens hold. But Pop-Eleches and Tucker's choice of sources is not without limitations either. For example, in their analysis it is unclear where exactly the attitudes they measure originate from, as this would have required a more careful consideration of the politics emanating from the elite level and the collective representations they engender. Ultimately, the challenge that these four books pose is how to navigate between varying levels of analysis, including citizens, society, and political elites. To this end, further triangulation is required; however, the trade-off may have to be that the available universe of data is less rigorously sampled from.

With regard to textual sources, the issue is how these ought to be analyzed. One way forward would be to carefully delimit the potential of new methods of text analysis to gain a more systematic understanding of the central ideas encoded in political declarations concerning the past and the differences between the actors making them. In particular, recent advances in natural-language processing and automated content analysis, which go beyond simply quantifying words *in situ* to assessing their contextualized use, hold considerable promise. Employing such approaches would help to measure variation between relevant actors and changes over time on a larger scale, and in a more systematic manner, than has previously been feasible.

Likewise, given that it is nearly impossible to single-handedly undertake a qualitative comparative analysis across the numerous languages prevalent in Central and Eastern Europe, Bernhard and Kubik's volume offers a convincing illustration of how researchers can leverage the comparative insights gained in collaborative projects. All the contributors included therein produce data points subsequently applied toward the Qualitative Comparative Analysis that the editors

undertake in the concluding section of the book. This allows Bernhard and Kubik to identify common causal pathways leading to the memory regimes operative in countries such as Hungary, Poland, and Slovenia—namely, experience with reformed communism, a negotiated extrication from the previous regime, a strong ex-communist social democratic party, and an obvious Left-Right cleavage—as opposed to states such as Romania, Slovakia, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, where conditions around the time of transition were quite different, as reflected in their resultant memory regimes (274–80).

Third, the books showcase the different explanatory ambitions of this still-nascent research agenda. What, if any, causal inferences may be drawn reliably, and how are the dependent variables of interest to be understood? To illustrate, Berger has as his main dependent variable the official state narrative concerning history, rather than “collective memory,” which he sees as being much more complex to study. As a secondary dependent variable, he takes conflicts over history, measuring how these intrude on the political affairs of nations and their relations with other states. Introducing this international relations component is theoretically important, as what instances of the past are introduced into cross-border political discourses likely differ significantly from those that enjoy primary salience at home, and it is reasonable to postulate that their effects will differ as well. To explain these aspects of the research, Berger relies on a set of independent variables derived from the competing theoretical accounts he discusses (31) and can, thanks to his small *n*, explore not only the rich details but also the contradictions and tensions within the historical narratives connected to his three empirical cases.

Bernhard and Kubik, meanwhile, take the political form of the official memory regime as their dependent variable. They conceptualize memory regimes as having one of three values, namely, “fractured” (when at least one actor is a warrior), “pillarized” (when there is no warrior in the mix and at least one actor is a pluralist), and “unified” (when no actor is a warrior or a pluralist). Using their explanatory variables, they study a range of structural constraints that political actors faced after 1989–91 and that limited the set of cultural choices that actors could credibly make. However, an important assumption that guides this volume is that actors are by and large instrumental as well as intentional in their use of the past. This idea should be probed further rather than being simply taken at face value. Regarding when actors behave in an instrumental fashion as opposed to a deontic manner, interrogating processual logics of behavior against their consequentialist counterparts (March and Olsen 1998, 2005) represents one potentially fruitful direction in which to move forward. Similarly, there is no good reason that the stipulation of a materialist ontology as forming the backbone of inten-

tionality cannot be relaxed, especially as doing so in no way requires the abandonment of rationality assumptions (Finne-more and Sikkink 1998; Green and Shapiro 1996).

Pop-Eleches and Tucker, in turn, seek to theorize why citizens living in postcommunist societies are, on average, less supportive of democracy and free markets and more supportive of state-provided social welfare and exhibit barely any variation when it comes to their attitudes toward gender equality. To explain these attitudinal differences, they examine what it means to have lived through communism and to be living in a postcommunist society, examining intensifying and resistance factors on both the country and the individual level (60) alongside the sociographic, geographic, economic, and institutional characteristics of the societies they study (77).

Finally, Kopolov’s book aims at understanding the spread of memory laws across Europe and their changing impetus over time. Combining an overview of memory laws with case studies of Ukraine and Russia allows him to embed these two country cases in larger transnational dynamics and to develop the distinctions between the sorts of memory laws that have taken root among the postcommunist states and are usually meant to give force to national narratives and Western European memory laws, which are predominantly aimed at anchoring those societies’ past narratives in a transnational setting. In particular, Kopolov emphasizes the salience of globalization and the social-liberal consensus around the development of the welfare state, which has led to universalization of the concept of human rights and laid emphasis on victimhood, the latter trend abetted by the “memory boom” of the second half of the twentieth century. Nationalism has also exacted its revenge in an age when sweeping, historically grounded political ideologies no longer hold sway. To this list we could also add technological advancements such as the advent of social media outlets, which not only compress news cycles and universalize content but also remove editorial scrutiny over information flows.

Fourth, the comparative and international perspectives adopted in all these books emphasize the degree of political interconnectedness that exists across borders when it comes to state-led recall of the past. Kopolov is meticulous in tracing the spread of ideas between, for instance, the French 1990 Gaysot Act and the various Russian legislative projects concerning public depictions of the past engaged in during the Yeltsin and Putin years. Construing his cases as fundamentally interconnected, Kopolov identifies dynamics at different geographical and institutional levels that would not be noticed in analyses focusing exclusively on national cases. However, how to adequately adjudicate between international and domestic effects, which are bound up in complex and dynamic feedback loops, remains a problematic methodological and

theoretical issue, particularly at higher levels of analytical abstraction. So while regional effects clearly play a significant role in Central and Eastern Europe given similar national experiences with communism, the extent to which different overlapping subnational and cross-regional factors structure domestic realities related to recalling the past remains difficult to untangle empirically. Yet the intersections between these levels, specifically the complex legacies of communism and the desire of these states to integrate into the political life of Western institutions, on the one hand, and the growing neoimperial tendencies emanating from Russia, on the other, are certainly worthy of more investigation in order to develop approaches that take these dynamics adequately into account.

In conclusion, there exist multiple ways by which social scientists may approach studying the relevance of the past in the present, but each comes with attendant advantages and limitations. Realizing this, however, should not dissuade us from pursuing what promises to be an exciting new research agenda. Studying the political significance of narratives about what came before provides a timely opportunity for social scientists to gain traction relative to the profound societal upheavals that have occurred in recent years across many developed democracies. We should care about these narratives precisely because their insertion into contemporary political life is predicated on privileging one memory or set of memories over another, in the process threatening the ability of societies to maintain mnemonic pluralism, which is part and parcel of a liberal democratic order. Excepting the books considered herein, much of the extant scholarship on the contemporary political impact of historical legacies has been diffuse in its claims, impressionistic in its conclusions, and unstructured in its application of theory. It has also neglected to engage in substantive dialogue with work being done in

other academic fields, which could provide a useful starting point for thinking about how to deploy concepts, frame analyses, and discuss hypotheses and conclusions as precisely as possible. Consequently, this review article has considered not only the promising potential of exploring the present-day impact of the past through the lens of the social sciences but also the impediments to doing so, in an effort to advance a theoretically informed and empirically rigorous stream of research in political science and international relations.

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