

Transnational Sites of Memory: Reconstructing Memory in the City

Aleida and Jan Assmann

2017 Balzan Prize for Collective Memory

Balzan GPC Adviser: Thomas Maissen

Project Directors: Aleida and Jan Assmann

Affiliated Institution: Kulturwissenschaftliches Kolleg Konstanz

Period: 2018-

Aleida Assmann held the Chair of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Konstanz from 1993 until her retirement in 2014. **Jan Assmann** held the Chair of Egyptology at the University of Heidelberg from 1972 until his retirement in 2003.

Over the last decades, the Assmanns have seen that dynamics of collective memory are more likely to be shaped by initiatives and movements from below rather than from the national and supra-national level. For this reason, their research project emphasizes European cities and local actors as the crucial context for the emergence of new memory practices that reshape collective memory and identity in the age of globalization at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Europe is chosen as a frame and context for the project due to the rich international network of experts, teams, and young researchers available. The project will begin with two Balzan Fellowship holders at Konstanz. Eventually there are hopes to finance a research group, travel stipends, workshops, a Balzan Lecture, and publications.

The project will focus on local memory initiatives and activities that are currently evolving in cities but never make it into the news, nor are they noticed and known in neighboring cities. The guiding premise of the project is that citizens today are confronted with a number of memory issues that are reflecting not only radical political changes and a traumatic history, but also cultural, social and technological changes. The city is not defined here in the usual sense as modern, progressive and urban in contrast to the country; both cities and towns in industrial and rural contexts are included in the project. Cities as well as towns can be defined as a condensation of

historical events, as a thickening and materialization of history, as tangible carriers of signs and traces that are eventually destroyed or preserved, discarded or deciphered, marked or unmarked, forgotten or remembered. The emphasis is placed on larger and smaller communities and on the various challenges that these communities face with respect to their collective memories.

Some of the case studies and relevant questions to be addressed by the project include:

- How is the collective memory of the community shaped by its architecture and built environment? How does history materialize in the city? How is it inscribed, anchored, erased, contested, transformed and renewed or reconstructed? Who are participating in these debates, who ignore them, who pay for historical transformations in the city? Which historical layers are privileged and foregrounded, and which are forgotten or repressed?
- Towns and cities are spaces where historical memory is performed, commemorated and contested. What is the role and use-life of monuments in the city? Do they reflect national standards or express local orientations? What is the impact of shifts in the frames of national memory on the local level? What happens if national memory and local memory diverge significantly?
- We have often been told that due to digital technology, the local has become globalized and the global localized. But how does this interrelation really work? To which extent is the global embraced or distanced in the community? Who has access to distant communication and uses these modalities and who does not? How are digital means used to create new collective memories on the local level?
- In a time of mass migration it is not the country as such but the city and the town to be impacted by these dramatic changes. How is the collective memory of the community affected by the arrival and presence of new citizens? Which memories do the immigrants bring with them and do they find ways and means to share them with the other inhabitants?

These and other questions may provide more insight into the complex relations between memory, space, time, and identity in times of rapid transformation. The city is an important focus of the project because it is the exemplary contact zone where people from different nations and distant cultures interact face to face. It is by no means a 'melting pot' but a paradigmatic contact zone where heterogeneous social and cultural imaginaries are defended, contested, communicated and negotiated in confined space.

Additional initiatives such as workshops, Balzan Lectures and publications on the Balzan research project are foreseen.