

THE PRESENCE AND ABSENCE OF THE PAST

A symposium to mark the conclusion, and afterlife, of the Max Planck Research Group
“Empires of Memory: The Cultural Politics of Historicity in Former Habsburg and Ottoman Cities”

3-5 March 2022 | Harnack Haus, Berlin

Organizers: Çiçek İlengiz, Annika Kirbis, Jelena Radovanović, Jeremy F. Walton



“The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” –William Faulkner

“Duress, as I shall argue, has temporal, spatial, and affective coordinates. Its impress may be intangible, but it is not a faint scent of the past. It may be an indelible if invisible gash. It may sometimes be a trace but more often an enduring fissure, a durable mark.” –Ann Laura Stoler

“By silence, I mean an active and transitive process: one ‘silences’ a fact of an individual as a silencer silences a gun. One engages in the practice of silencing. Mentions and silences are thus active, dialectical counterparts of which history is the synthesis.” –Michel Rolph Trouillot

The ambivalence of the past in the present has been abiding concern, challenge, and inspiration for the work of Empires of Memory. Throughout the geographic remit of our research, from the Adriatic and Pannonian Basin to the Bosphorus and the Aegean, the past has become ubiquitous in recent decades, as what Francois Hartog refers to as the regime of historicity of “presentism” recruits bygone persons, places and things to contemporary cultural, political, and economic ends. These buffed surfaces of the past threaten to obscure its unruliness and its embeddedness in relations of power, both bygone and contemporary—the “duress” that Ann Laura Stoler interrogates. Moreover, this proliferation of the past in and for the present resounds with silence, erasure, and oblivion—the faces of the past that remain in shadow. These modes of absence of the past are not so much antithetical to the pervasiveness of the past. On the contrary: they are mutual entailments of each other.

“Empires of Memory” will draw to a close in March 2022, but the dilemmas, anxieties, and riddles that have incited us to discourse persist. Our concluding symposium, “The Presence and Absence of the Past,” gathers together a plethora of like-minded scholars from across multiple fields of expertise to discuss the themes that have animated “Empires of Memory,” including: the materials/materiality of the past in the present; histories of memory, memories of history; political afterlives; the city as archival project; and post-imperial heterotopias. Our five thematic sessions are titled “The Art of Recollection and Forgetting,” “Uncanny Time(s) in the City,” “Afterlives of Difference,” “Amnesia, Silencing, Obsolescence,” and “Sensing Time through Objects.” Finally, in our gently experimental plenary session, “Telling Times,” we invite participants to narrate a moment in time—past, present, future—through a chosen object.

Participants

Gruia Badescu, University of Konstanz
Karen Barkey, University of California, Berkeley/Bard College
Dorothee Brantz, Technische Universität Berlin
Shannon Dawdy, University of Chicago
Patrick Eisenlohr, University of Göttingen
Edhem Eldem, Boğaziçi University
Chris Hann, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology
David Henig, University of Utrecht
Andreas Huyssen, Columbia University
Çiçek İlengiz, Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity
Banu Karaca, Forum Transregionale Studien, Berlin
Annika Kirbis, Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity
Nora Lafi, Leibniz Zentrum-Moderner Orient
Alexander (Sasha) Newell, Université Libre de Bruxelles
Vjeran Pavlaković, University of Rijeka
Katarzyna Puzon, CARMAH, Humboldt Universität zu Berlin
Jelena Radovanović, Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity
Rahul Rao, University of St. Andrews
Piro Rexhepi, Independent Scholar
Florian Riedler, University of Leipzig
Ann Rigney, University of Utrecht
Thomas Schmitt, University of Heidelberg
Avi Sharma, Technische Universität Berlin
Nükhet Varlık, Rutgers University
Steve Vertovec, Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity
Alice von Bieberstein, CARMAH, Humboldt Universität zu Berlin
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