Abstract

Studies of nationalism and nation-states insist that the construction of usable pasts is central to the creation of national solidarities and the very identity of a nation. The memory/nation nexus is taken for granted in scholarship on nation-building. However, this scholarship is limited by the scant attention that is paid to how those pasts are constructed, or what the mechanisms are through which decision-making occurs. The results of this neglect are often abstracted assumptions that presume a voluntarism and coherence that most often does not exist. Repeatedly, studies focus on the products of memorialization which generates a tendency to impose consistency and statist intentionality, after the fact, on what is a contingent, messy and complicated process. In addition, studies often assume a singularity of power, located in an unfragmented state, with authoritarian capacity to produce meaning.

This dissertation remedies these flaws by paying attention to the processes and procedures through which memorialization and nation-building are constructed. It focuses specifically on post-Apartheid South Africa where these processes are currently unfolding. It examines the context of South Africa’s transition, which has produced multiple continuities with and changes from Apartheid institutions. The partial critical juncture that enabled South Africa’s transition ensured that there were no clear victors resulting from the struggle for and against the legislated system. The “new” nation thus had to be imagined within a context of deep antagonisms and a colonialism that was theorized as internal. This meant that the relationship between the settlers and the colonized would have to be transformed into a unified national imaginary; a new nation of equal citizenship needed to be imagined on persistent bedrock of inequality and bitter violence. In other words, the making of the memory-nation is theorized as both path-dependent and contingent.

This perspective emerges through tracing the processes of memory-making; processes that reveal a neglectful, rather than an assertive governing party, contested approaches within the state, and a multiplicity of variables within the party and within local contexts that limit and enable different approaches (including the character of the ANC and the character of opposition). There are numerous factors at play in understanding memory-making including the character of transition, fractions within the governing party, frictions in the state, and the relationship between national, international and local contexts. In tracing the processes of memory-making as
they are attached to nation-building, this dissertation pays careful attention to processual analysis that rejects the reification of “the nation” and its memory. Reification inadvertently or deliberately participates in the production of the very memory/nation under scrutiny. It argues that on-going dynamics of power in bureaucratic states tend to lend formal benefit to the already empowered with the so-called previously disadvantaged reliant on more informal mechanisms of asserting voice; in other words, in the context of the post-Apartheid dispensation, democratization and decolonization are not necessarily simultaneous processes. The dissertation does not present a puzzle for resolution, but instead suggests a method of reading the construction of the memory-nation. This method takes context and contingency not as variables in theory, but as theory itself. Thus, the unexceptional exceptionalism that is the nation-state in this global conjuncture can be analyzed and understood.