

The Politics of Memory in a Global Context

Thomas Lutz

Less than half a year ago the 9/11 Memorial Museum in New York City opened. In addition to the remembrance for the victims of the terrorist attack, the focus of the museum is the historical exhibition with its detailed description of the four terrorist attacks on September 11th 2001, and the terrorist attack that took place at the World Trade Towers in 1993.

A Conference entitled “The Politics of Memory in a Global Context” took place on November 4th- 5th 2014. The first session “Remembering the Past in Public; A Conversation” took place in the museum’s new auditorium in front of 140 people. The event was sponsored by the Columbia University Committee on Global Thought. IC MEMO chair, Karen Franklin, participated in the planning and suggested Thomas Lutz, deputy chair of IC MEMO, as a speaker. Psychologist William Hirst (author of a 10-year study of individual memories of 9/11), Henry Rousso (French contemporary historian), and Steve Davis (museum’s architect), also took part in the discussion that was moderated by Bruce Shapiro (Executive Director, Columbia Journalism School).

Additional information about the event and a stream of the discussion can be found at:

<http://globalcenters.columbia.edu/content/politics-memory-global-context-%E2%80%93-remembering-past-public-conversation>

The next morning an intense four-hour workshop on the topic “Critics and Analytics: Presentation of the Past in the 9/11 Museum” was organized at Columbia University and attended by 50 faculty members and students. Chaired by historian Carol Gluck (Columbia), Henry Rousso as well as Charles Strozier (psychoanalyst and author of the book “Until the Fires stops Burning”), Jeffrey Alexander (sociologist and author of the book “Trauma: A Social Theory”), Daphne Shohamy (cognitive neurologist who especially deals with the topic of learning and memory in the brain) and Thomas Lutz (head of the Memorial Museums Department of the Topography of Terror Foundation) exchanged their opinions and their knowledge for the IC MEMO.

It is interesting to note that in recent years many memorials related to acts of terrorism, also with a museum and educational component, came into being or are now being established. The 9/11 Memorial Museum in New York City is by far the largest. There are currently a number of debates about the implementation of memorials for the 69 young victims of the Utøya massacre on June 22nd, 2011 in Norway. A memorial for the Israeli Olympic massacre in 1972 in Munich is also under development. These memorials and monuments reflect change of forms in warfare and terror, and new forms of dealing with these topics have developed. Thomas Lutz, who represented IC MEMO, a committee that deals with the every aspect of remembrance for victims of state and public crime, provided an important voice in the Politics of Memory Conference and has an important role to play in the development of such places of remembrance on the basis of their experts’ reports.

In his remarks at the conference, Thomas Lutz spoke from the memorial museum perspective. He noted that the 9/11 Memorial Museum deals with a time-limited crime. A primary goal of the institution is remembrance of the victims. He suggested that in its method of presentation, in its memory culture as well as in the historical exhibition, the message strongly reduced the memorial to its “own victims” in the USA. The fact that the people also came from different countries gets lost. In

addition to the aspect of remembrance this memorial site, the designers wanted to adopt an educational approach. This is a great challenge in two different ways: on the one hand these events occurred relatively recently and still are traumatic memories in USA society. - This is similar to the situation in Norway. - It is difficult to have an open debate on the events that are portrayed so emotionally through the memorials at the crime scene. On the other hand is the question how to contextualize the even if it is well documented, so soon after it occurred. Since there is only a very small reference to Al Qaeda at the end of the exhibition, the airplanes seemed to be "falling from the sky". The interpretation finally was made in a sense, that all terrorists who will do any harm to America will be chased and killed.

That is not enough to understand the "prehistory". The exhibition also does not inform the visitor about the social discussion, and the international political and military reaction. Considering the architecture of these places of remembrance there should be debates about the experiences on the usage and about other opportunities for design. These topics will be addressed in the IC MEMO 2015 conference, but we identified another venue.

Both Karen Franklin and Thomas Lutz took the opportunity to talk to Dr. Carol Gluck, who runs the Columbia University Committee on Global Thought, about possible future cooperation. Dr. Gluck suggested a joint conference organized by Columbia University and IC MEMO in Warsaw in 2015 or 2016, with public debates in the evening and academically orientated workshops the next morning. The widely differing approaches to portraying the past in the Warsaw Uprising Museum, the new Jewish Museum, Polin, and other institutions can be discussed. This historical and social debate in Poland should be of great interest to IC MEMO members, academics, and the wider museum community.