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Introducing “Disrupted Histories, Recovered Pasts”

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Introduction

History, is after all, a storying. (SPIVAK, 1996, 25)

- 1 This introductory paper outlines the conceptual framework and case studies comprising the research project *Disrupted Histories, Recovered Pasts*. “Disrupted Histories, Recovered Pasts” is a joint UK-France (Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Care for the Future - LABEX Pasp) research project documenting historical experiences of disruption and recovery in post-conflict and post-colonial contexts¹. Through combining research methodologies from history and social anthropology, the project has explored a series of historical cases of displacement. Our focus has been on the potentially ‘disruptive’ effects of oral histories and non-academic histories on conventional historical and historiographical understandings of past events, contributing a cross-disciplinary analysis and cross-case synthesis of experience and memory in post-conflict and postcolonial contexts.
- 2 Our starting point has been the methodological issues infusing whose and what types of experience and knowledge are considered to be of value in formulating historical analysis and narrative (THOMPSON, 1978), and thus in shaping the presences of pasts in unfolding futures. These concerns flow from a Foucauldian appreciation that whose pasts are able to contribute to the future and how is always saturated with power relations (FOUCAULT, 1982). In particular, and as argued by Michel de Certeau and Paul Ricoeur, “memory” and “history” can find themselves dissociated because of doubt

surrounding the validity of oral testimonies (CERTEAU, 1993 [1975]; RICOEUR, 2004 [2000])

- 3 The past that becomes written as “History”, as well as the memories which become fashioned into more-or-less formalised national strategies of “remembrance”, thus are always caught within contingent discursive webs and institutional(ised) structures. Further complexity is conferred through differences in how “memory” is understood and utilised by historians and anthropologists. For example, memory in the sense of narratives and evocations of the past, should not necessarily be confused with memories of experiences lived or transmitted by individuals in the present (BLOCH 1995; BAUSSANT, 2019). From this perspective, oral history may differ from memory insofar as the historian works *with* oral sources and testimonies, whereas the sociologist or anthropologist works *on* memory, analysing the different ways in which the past is mobilised in the present by actors in specific contexts.
- 4 Simultaneously, however, this contingency of voice, as well as of the objects and subjects of knowledge conferred by particular “regimes of truth”, forms the ground of possibility for disruptive interventions that recover and recognise other(ed) voices, views, wills and presences (FOUCAULT, 1977; SPIVAK, 1996 [1985]). The past revealed, concealed and constructed through historiography is thereby encountered as explicitly *heterogeneous*, opening the way conceptually and methodologically for the telling of different and multiple stories – for “the decomposition and recomposition of national [and public] myths” (LAVABRE 1994, 2012) – through varied methods, registers and media.
- 5 This possibility of historical heterogeneity is perhaps particularly present in post-conflict and postcolonial contexts. In such settings, experience of objectively traumatic events, combined with strongly hierarchical structures that reinforce difference and politicise what it is possible to remember, make the retrieval and recognition of occluded experiences particularly potent. In a range of prior studies we have thus emphasised the patterning that can arise in such settings, as well as the methodological sensitivity required in both drawing to the fore experiences that may have been silenced, and in hearing silences themselves as perhaps articulations of the unspeakable (for example, BAUSSANT, 2002; SULLIVAN, 2002; DOS SANTOS, 2005; DODD, 2013; OTELE, 2015). Such emphases are increasingly the focus of cross-disciplinary analyses in post-conflict and postcolonial contexts, including in geography (for example, MUZAINI, 2015), anthropology (for example, CRAPANZANO, 2012; FAHY, 2012) and sociology (for example, JEDŁOWSKI, 2001), as well as history.
- 6 In the postconflict, colonial and postcolonial contexts of our cases, we see “disruption” as present in three senses:
 - 7 1) as the productive ways that multiple voices and experiences, retrieved through recording and analysis of oral and amateur histories, may refract and revise historical narratives based on written archives that become historical convention in the present;
 - 8 2) as the happening histories of objectively disruptive events in conflict and colonial settings, which interrupt the flow of individual and collective experience to produce “strong breaks or intense political and social mutations” (LAVABRE, 2012: 263);
 - 9 3) as a strategy for cross-disciplinary research to disrupt conventional understanding by drawing attention to occluded and “subjugated knowledges” (FOUCAULT, 2004) as a nontrivial gesture towards the democratisation of knowledge production.

- 10 Children’s histories and childhood memories (as explored in several of our case-studies), in particular, are latently disruptive because of the unique ways in which children experience events, their passivity in the face of political decision-making, and their lack of responsibility for past crimes. Nonetheless, their voices have been overlooked, or relegated to the status of anecdote or nostalgia (WOOD, 1999). We instead follow work in childhood studies that recognises children’s knowledge as different, not inferior, to adults’ (MACNAUGHTON *et al.* 2007), and affirms that recalled experiences, expressed retrospectively, can be mobilised so as to understand traumatic pasts only parts of which are publicly recognised.
- 11 “Recovery”, in the sense of *Recovered Pasts*, thus is for us also polysemic. It refers to the retrieval of past experiences that may be masked by public discourse and historiography based on written archives alone, attending to mismatches with public discourses about displaced groups and individual experience, and the possibility for enhanced well-being through voicing memories that may previously have been unheard. Following Gayatri Spivak, then, we consider oral and amateur history research to facilitate “subject-restoration” and the recognition of heterogeneity in contexts of “subject-deprivation”, i.e. where disruptive experiences have acted to “drain” individuals, groups and experiences “of proper identity” (SPIVAK, 1996 [1985]: 206-207, 221, 229).
- 12 Our case research has been guided by the following questions:
- 13 - how might oral histories, testimonies and narratives speak to, with and as “History” in selected contexts of objectively disruptive historical events including war, migration, colonisation, and eviction?
- 14 - how do oral histories, as well as amateur histories recorded through blogs and websites, refract and revise more formal history and historiography in these contexts?
- 15 - are there themes, patterns and theoretical modifications that might arise through sustained conversation, engagement and synthesis of experiences inscribed through multiple cases across similarly disrupted historical experiences?
- 16 - how might these possible themes and patterns permit the roles and values of oral and amateur histories to speak with more methodological strength to processes of knowledge production in historical research based on written archives?
- 17 In this Special Issue, we share our research through a series of five papers interrogating relations between memories, oral histories, narratives produced by diverse social actors, written institutional archives and historiographical writing. Following the pioneering work of Maurice Halbwachs (HALBWACHS, 1925; 1941; 1950), our approach aims on the one hand to bring to light the different disruptions produced by these encounters – whether they take the form of dialogue, recovery or appropriation, or that of avoidance, denial or confrontation. On the other hand, by bringing our diverse case studies systematically in sight of each other, we put forward methods and tools to “disrupt” the manner in which the mediation of the past has traditionally been conceived and practiced within the social sciences. Finally, we seek to reflect on new ways of reconstituting the complexity of the past and the present in a globalised world where representations, imaginaries and models proliferate, and our access to different sources and historical interpretations appears to multiply endlessly.
- 18 The Special Issue thus brings together memories, oral history and archival research in multiple contexts, conducted from disciplinary bases in social anthropology and

history. We have interrogated relationships between oral histories and amateur histories, sound recordings and historical records with more formal written archives and historiography in a series of disrupted settings and recoverings: on-site oral histories and childhood memories in contexts of evictions in colonial and apartheid west Namibia (Sullivan); “ordinary” representations of the Jewish Egyptian past conveyed by social actors, and on the symbolic and material geographies of these representations in diasporic and Israeli contexts (Baussant); recovery of childhood memories in contexts of war-time trauma in France (Dodd); narratives of African refugees from the recent maritime exodus in 21st century Europe (Otele); and rupture from a hegemonic imperial-nostalgic narrative in Portugal, encouraging the expression of very diverse experiences of colonization and decolonization (Dos Santos). Our case research is complemented by systematic cross-case engagement, synthesis and theorisation focusing on a series of “points of articulation” explored as we proceeded with our research. This cross-case synthesis forms the focus for our concluding paper in the special issue.

Case research

- 19 In the first article, Sian Sullivan consolidates analysis of oral histories of displacement from former dwelling sites, recorded through return to sites that were previously home for these individuals and connecting these memories with written archival documents and new historiography (MIESCHER, 2012; RIZZO, 2012) that map and document land use and indigenous presence in west Namibia. This material is worked through in a contemporary context wherein the mapping of new administrative domains for integrating conservation and development, and the defining of rights in terms of both new policy and the citizenry governed thereby, are central to postcolonial neoliberal environmental governance programmes known as Community Based Natural Resources Management (CBNRM). Examples now abound of the complex, ambiguous and sometimes contested outcomes of CBNRM initiatives and processes. Sullivan draws on historical, oral history and ethnographic material in relation to indigenous Khoekhoegowab-speaking Dama / ǀNūkhoe and ǁUbu peoples in north-west Namibia, to explore two issues. First, she highlights the disciplining significance of historical colonial and apartheid contexts that generated mapped reorganisations of land and human populations, in relation to memories of access and use that exceed these reorganisations. Second, she foregrounds a nexus of conceptual, constitutive and affective relationships with lands now bounded as CBNRM administrative units or “conservancies” that have tended to be displaced as an economising “postcolonial” “culture complex” of neoliberalism has unfolded in this context. She argues that acknowledgement of disjunctions in conceptions and experiences of people-land relationships may assist understanding of who and what is amplified or diminished in contemporary globalising trajectories in neoliberal environmental governance. In particular, oral histories recording individual experiences in-depth, especially those of elderly people prompted by return to remembered places of past dwelling, can historicise and deepen recognition of complex cultural landscapes that today carry high environmental conservation value.
- 20 Michèle Baussant’s article follows this “red thread” of the alternative narratives emerging from silenced experiences of the past and the diffracted constellations of

disappeared worlds. It deals with the memories and ordinary representations of the Jews of Egypt, who had to leave Egypt in the 1950s and 1960s and settled in various countries, including Israel, France, Italy, and the United States. While this history has long been absent from official narratives and social spaces of emigration and immigration, and its memory has often not been transmitted within the family, Baussant retraces the trajectories of these Jews from Egypt. She focuses on the evolution of their narratives over time, according to places and countries, between silences, fragments, and traces. She illustrates how, in the context of relations between Israel and the Palestinians, we moved from an unseen and invisible history to a past mobilized for political purposes in half a century. Baussant also proposes a methodological and theoretical reflection on her fieldwork by distinguishing it from the various memory collection projects, often justified by the so-called “needs” of history, memory, or roots. On the contrary, the aim of this article is, in an anthropological approach, to analyse the evolution of the memories of this exile and their uses.

- 21 Through the cross-referencing between narratives collected on the different places of exile and settlement, archival sources, and observations, the article emphasizes the multiple processes of “de-diasporization” and “re-diasporization.” A triple comparison reveals the reshaping of memories over time: historical, by retracing the migrations of Jews to Egypt and their life in that country, the silences that followed the exile, and finally the recent recognition of refugee status for Jews from Islamic countries, in Israel and the United States; geographical, by considering the different countries where various traces, both connected and distinct, of this history are produced, in particular through return journeys and associative activities; and socio-spatial, by focusing on diversified social spaces where these narratives of the past are created, legitimized, invested, rejected or simply ignored, to understand their origins, effects, and resonances.
- 22 Focusing on the oral history narratives of three people who were children in France during the Second World War, Lindsey Dodd’s article sheds new light on the emergence and production of these alternative narratives and divergent memories that demonstrate their dissatisfactions with dominant versions of this past put forward in authoritative public discourse. Rachel was a Jewish child, persecuted, abused, but saved; Anne-Marie was the daughter of a railway resistance fighter who was deported and killed; Grégoire was a child evacuee who survived a violent bombardment. At various moments of their adult lives, each experienced a disruptive form of dissociation with their (personal) history as lived and experienced in comparison with (national) History as researched and recounted. All three invested in healing this wound, in private and public ways. Norquay writes that forgetting is “an active process which can involve denial, refusal, discrediting, silencing, omitting” (NORQUAY, 1999); this article shows the generative power of *feeling* forgotten, denied, refused, discredited, silenced or omitted, to inspire action which challenges hegemonic discourse. While much influential scholarship is dedicated to top-down analyses of French post-war memorial culture (*mémoire*), less attention is given to personal *souvenirs* of “ordinary” or “unimportant” people, particularly those who were children; such voices and the claims they make have at times been characterised as competitive and damaging to the “coherence of the national narrative” (WIEVIORKA, 2010). Yet by failing to listen,

dominant historical discourse may provoke damaging sentiments of resentment, exclusion and shame.

- 23 In our fourth article, Olivette Otele explores other ways to challenge dominant discourses and to disrupt established media visual memories by analysing stories of loss, crossings, recovery and the formation of new cultural memories. Echoing Paul Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic* (1995) and Alessandra Di Maio’s term “Black Mediterranean” (2012) that refers to the troubled relationship between Italy and people of African descent who have been crossing the Mediterranean in search of better lives, Otele highlights how the Black Mediterranean and the twenty-first century so-called migrant crisis are intertwined. The Black Mediterranean today conjures up images of people of African descent packed in vessels and in many instances drowning or being rescued in Southern Europe. Mass media and ordinary people have accepted that visual definition. This article challenges the assumption that the Black Mediterranean is the starting point for a visual memory that relates to the history of sub-Saharan Africans, by examining stories of migrants and refugees in South Wales, UK. The aim is to look at what we define as the “Mediterranean in action” meaning, a dynamic process of memory creation that uses the practice of telling and sharing one’s story in order to build cohesive communities in a part of Britain that has a strong regional identity. It is also about understanding what it means for the children of those who migrated to be Afro-Welsh and British.
- 24 In our fifth and final case study, Irène Dos Santos follows our journey around the late emergence of a critical questioning of colonialism in Portugal, analysing social and epistemological disruption regarding the recent violent past. The very homogeneous representations of Portugal’s imperial and colonial history and the silences and disinterest in the recent violent past – dictatorship, colonization, colonial war and decolonization – that characterize Portuguese society, contrast today with the emergence in the public space of critical narratives about these pasts, that circulate through various “vehicles of memory”: literature, theatre, performing arts, public history, documentary films, etc. At the same time, the number of research projects has multiplied, particularly in the transdisciplinary stream of postcolonial studies, which has been interested in these public memoirs apprehended as historical counter-narratives, highlighting their disruptive potential in the construction of a more democratic society. The reflection deals with the articulation, or overlay, between biographical, historical and historiographical ruptures in this post-colonial and post-imperial European society, extending the reflection to the analysis of trajectories and life stories of two individuals (a 70-year-old man, political exile in France since 1961, son of Portuguese settlers who fought for the independence of Angola; a 33-year-old woman, historian and descendant of returnees from Angola in 1975) whose pasts connect transnational spaces of mobility and writing of the past.

Points of articulation

- 25 Our concluding article constitutes a cross-case reflection, synthesis and theorisation of the case research shared in these five papers. In this final article, we describe our processes of reflection both across the thematic axes of our research and the methods we share, focusing on our attempts to “practice” in the full sense of the term a real “interdisciplinarity” and a “doing together” around our distinct case studies. Finding

the points at which our case studies share “hinges” – flexing in different directions but articulating across the same joint – has been at the heart of our collaborative work. While our cases remain heterogeneous, they nonetheless all focus explicitly on situations of “disruption”. Such disruption occurs at multiple levels: in the experiences of the historical/social actors; within the structures and stakes of their social, political and institutional treatment; in the unfolding of knowledge and the constitution of “blind spots”; inside the logics of forgetting and recovery; in our own practical encounters with each other, as anthropologists and historians; and within our project itself.

- 26 The case studies are also concerned with situations wherein the material traces of the past are no longer – or are only partially – accessible. In such situations, personal memories may circulate inside what Maurice Halbwachs, and after him others such as Jan Assman, have termed “milieux de mémoire” (HALBWACHS, 1925 ; ASSMAN, 2002). These may themselves be invisible or be in the process of becoming so; their original social networks of transmission may likewise have disappeared or have been reconstituted, thus circulation attaches itself to other social spaces. Whether by omission, denial, silencing, erasure or ignorance, the forgetting of certain pasts is the product of active social forces, which we seek to elaborate. It is this very forgetting which generates and feeds the continuous “need” for the past among particular social groups, but not systematically. This hypothesis is at the heart of our work as anthropologists and historians, as well as our collaborative project.

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NOTES

1. UK ref. AH/N504579/1, see <https://dsrupdhist.hypotheses.org/>

ABSTRACTS

This introductory paper outlines the conceptual framework and case studies comprising the research project *Disrupted Histories, Recovered Pasts*. Our project proposes a cross-disciplinary analysis and cross-case synthesis of experience and memory in post-conflict and postcolonial contexts. In the post-conflict and colonial contexts of our cases, we see “disruption” as present in three senses: as the productive ways in which multiple experiences retrieved through oral histories may refract and revise historical analysis; as the happening histories of objectively disruptive events break the flow of individual and collective experience; and as a strategy for cross-disciplinary research to disrupt and democratise conventional understanding by drawing attention to occluded experiences. We also articulate “recovery” as polysemic: invoking retrieval of past experiences and the possibility for enhanced well-being through voicing memories that may have been suppressed, as well as attending to mismatches with public discourses about displaced groups and individual experience. Following an introduction to our conceptual approach, we summarise our case-research. We have conducted oral history and archival research in multiple contexts, from disciplinary bases in anthropology and history. Our aim has been to interrogate relationships between oral histories and amateur histories with more formal written archives and historiography in a series of disrupted settings: evictions in colonial and apartheid west Namibia (SULLIVAN); memories and historical interpretations of the Egyptian Jewish diaspora (BAUSSANT); the evacuation of children in Second World War France (DODD); recent maritime exodus of migrants from Africa (OTELE); and rupture from a hegemonic imperial-nostalgic narrative in Portugal (DOS SANTOS). Our case research is complemented in the concluding paper of this Special Issue by systematic cross-case engagement, synthesis and theorisation of our case-study research.

Ce texte introductif présente le cadre conceptuel des études de cas traités dans ce numéro consacré aux *Histoires Perturbées, Passés Retrouvés*. Nous proposons ici une analyse

interdisciplinaire et une synthèse croisée de l’expérience et de la mémoire dans des contextes post-conflits et postcoloniaux. Articulant une perspective anthropologique et historique, nous examinons les relations (ou leur absence éventuelle) entre histoires orales, histoires écrites par des amateurs, archives écrites et historiographie. Dans les contextes post-conflits et postcoloniaux ici abordés, nous définissons la notion de « disruption » de trois façons : comme un moyen permettant aux expériences multiples, recouvrées par le biais l’histoire orale et des évocations du passé collectées au cours de nos enquêtes, de complexifier et de modifier l’analyse historique ; comme la survenance d’histoires liées à des événements perturbateurs interrompant le flux « ordinaire » des expériences individuelles et collectives ; comme une stratégie de recherche interdisciplinaire visant à la fois à perturber et à démocratiser les modes de compréhension conventionnelle en attirant l’attention sur des expériences occultées. Le terme « retrouvé » est lui aussi polysémique. Il évoque tant le recouvrement d’expériences passées que la possibilité d’accéder à et de reconstruire un autre rapport au passé, plus « apaisé », grâce à l’expression des souvenirs. Il permet également d’interroger l’écart et la non-coïncidence entre les discours publics portant sur certains groupes, les expériences individuelles de leurs membres et les souvenirs qu’ils construisent autour de ces dernières. Notre approche privilégie une articulation explicite entre les outils conceptuels mobilisés pour nos recherches et les données empiriques collectées, associant histoire orale, diverses formes « ordinaires » d’évocation du passé et archives dans des contextes multiples. Ce travail multidisciplinaire adopte avant tout une perspective anthropologique et historique. Les études sont menées dans plusieurs contextes : l’expulsion coloniale et l’apartheid dans l’ouest de la Namibie (SULLIVAN) ; les souvenirs et les interprétations historiques de la diaspora Juive Égyptienne (BAUSSANT) ; l’évacuation des enfants en France pendant la Seconde Guerre Mondiale (DODD) ; les exodes maritimes des migrants en provenance d’Afrique sub-Saharienne (OTELE) ; et la rupture avec le récit hégémonique de la nostalgie impériale au Portugal (DOS SANTOS).

INDEX

Mots-clés: mémoire, histoire orale, histoire, perturbation, recouvrement, traumatisme, conflit, post-colonial, subalterne, études de cas

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Sian Sullivan is an environmental anthropologist concerned to better understand diversity in cultural ontologies and representations of the natural world, amidst contemporary concern over climate change and species decline. She has explored these issues in the volumes *Political Ecology: Science, Myth and Power* (2000), *Contributions to Law, Philosophy and Ecology: Exploring Re-Embodiments* (2016), *Valuing Development, Environment and Conservation: Creating Values that Matter* (2018) and *Negotiating Climate Change in Crisis* (2021). She is Professor of Environment and Culture, Bath Spa University, UK, and a Research Associate of Gobabeb Namib Research Institute, Namibia. She has sustained a long-term research engagement in north-west

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MICHÈLE BAUSSANT

Michèle Baussant is director of research in anthropology at the CNRS. She is currently working at the French Social Science Research Center in Prague (Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs and National Center for Scientific Research) on a project devoted to the intra- and extra-European memories of the defeated in the 20th century (<https://cefres.cz/en/15251>). She has also worked in Quebec (Canada) at Laval University and the *French Research Center* in Jerusalem (Israel). In addition, she coordinates and has overseen several national and international research programs. Her interdisciplinary experience includes working with other social scientists (historians, sociologists, political scientists, geographers, economists, psychologists).

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LINDSEY DODD

Lindsey Dodd is Reader in Modern European History at the University of Huddersfield (United Kingdom). She writes on children's lives in France during the Second World War, and works as an oral historian. She is part of the editorial team of the journal *Oral History*. Her first monograph *French Children Under the Allied Bombs, 1940-1945: An Oral History* was published by Manchester University Press in 2016. She is co-editor (with David Lees) of *Vichy France and Everyday Life: Confronting the Challenges of Wartime* (Bloomsbury, 2018). At the moment she is interested in finding ways to apply affect theory to the study of the past, and is doing some historical research on children deprived of their liberty.

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OLIVETTE OTELE

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IRÈNE DOS SANTOS

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