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“Unlocked Memory Activism: Has Social Distancing Changed Commemoration?”,

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It was in Spring 2020, that several countries worldwide went into lockdown in order to prevent the death of their inhabitants. Many people will remember the COVID-19 lockdown period for its endless digital activities and interactions. The world has gone online, from elementary and high school classrooms, academic courses and conferences, professional meetings and doctors' appointments, mindfulness support groups to family events. Commemorative events too have gone online, both those sponsored by state institutions as well as alternative ones. In light of the 'connective turn' that predated the pandemic, the sudden abundance, pervasiveness, and immediacy of digital media (Hoskins, 2018), our aim is to document and make sense of this growing presence of online memorialization in times of the COVID-19 crisis. We present data and analysis collected in spring and summer of 2020 capturing both the creation of the memorialization of the lockdown period, as well as official and alternative commemorations and memory activism during the early months of the pandemic lockdown.

As it was impossible for people to gather for annual commemorations, activists as well as state officials began to engage with online mnemonic practices. The quarantine situation and the limits it created for public gathering, turned out to be an unexpected opportunity for the further development of alternative commemorations, while the “historical situation” itself led to a new memory boom, making of immediate memorialization a social imperative. As it appears, the COVID pandemic transformed the actors of commemoration blurring more than ever the frontier between civic society and the State. If the sanitary situation limited social interactions, it unlocked memory, generating new forms of memory activism and empowering already existing memory activists. What does this tension mean for the study of the relationship between memory, democratization and power relations? To tackle these issues, and without limiting to these two national situations, the following pages will pay particular attention to scenarios from the French and Israeli cases, yet they aim at building a broader analytical framework.

Memorializing lockdown: a bottom-up process

From the very beginning, this unprecedented lockdown has been described as “historical” by many commentators, from state representatives to ordinary citizens, as well as historians, journalists, curators and other professionals. In so doing, historical analogies have immediately been one of the main interpretation frameworks through which makes sense of the on-going situation. The reference to the 1918 Spanish Flu and how it changed the world (Spinney, 2018) became recurrent leading many commentators to wonder: “why the Spanish Flu is not a commemorated past” (Segal, 2020), assuming that had it been, the current crisis would have been avoided. But in most cases, it

was over-commemorated pasts that have served as references to understand the lockdown in the present.

In the United States, the main references were to 9/11 and the Second World War. On March 3 2020, significantly enough, the *New York Times* titled “‘War Zone’: Ambulances in NYC are Now as Busy as on Sept 11”. In France, where the President Emmanuel Macron started his first public speech by declaring: “We are at War”, the two World Wars were a prominent framework. The emergency rooms of one Paris hospital were renamed, for example, each given the name of the D-Day beaches in Normandy. Again, for residents of Sarajevo who lived through the 1992-95 siege on their city, war time memories have surfaced, though as a source of strength arguing “We survived the war and we’ll survive coronavirus, too.” (Sadovic, 2020).

This reading of the present through the lens of the past came hand in hand with the concern for keeping track of the present for the future. The hashtag #Covidmemory emerged immediately. It illustrates once more the acceleration of time and memorialization enabled by the digitalization of society. Preserving the “COVID memory” and its traces quickly became a motto of a large number of social actors. Differing from trauma events, such as terrorist attacks, on which this collecting process of spontaneous memory had so far been mainly focused (Gensburger, 2019), the pandemic situation, from lockdown to the actual contamination, potentially concerned everyone and everywhere worldwide, and thus led to an unprecedented generalization of the dynamics. As early as March 19, the *New York Times* podcast club invited its members “If you were recording your own podcast episode about life in coronavirus, what would it sound like?”. Sometimes the promoters of such collect projects were far more adamant and built strict frameworks for these solicited narrations. For example, Katrien Van Poeck from Uppsala University in Sweden created a network of people ready to keep a diary, guiding them in the way they were supposed to express themselves. Collecting “testimonies”, “diaries”, “pictures” and other vernacular “objects”, but also “dreams” or “sounds”, became a social imperative, increasing, more every day, the number of social actors who became engaged in “curating” COVID and “preserving” its memory. It is very difficult to produce a definitive census of these initiatives. However, during the first week of August 2020, we searched the web in English, French, German, Italian and Spanish (depending on our linguistic skills), with the keyword COVID, alternatively joint to the other keywords memory, museum, archive, heritage, diaries, testimonies, collecting and photographs. If this enlisting is in no way exhaustive, it indicates that, in August 2020 already, more than 300 COVID memorialization projects all over the world had been launched since the beginning of the pandemic international crisis.

In promoting those, most of the museum professionals, researchers, local community leaders and archivists turned into memory activists. They claimed to keep traces of the way people lived through the crisis as a way to counter-balance, contrast with and, sometimes fight, what they anticipated to be the on-sided and elites-centered future official and State memorialization of the event. When describing their decisions to collect “stories” and preserve “memory”, most of them claimed their will to document “people’s experiences”, hear “grassroots stories” and collect “ordinary views” of the crisis, reflecting the diffusion of a participatory paradigm in the field of heritage. This claim and the extent to which it legitimized so many initiatives also illustrates the citizens’ mistrust and dissatisfaction toward political elites and state institutions. In France, for example, it was precisely this memory activism that finally lead the central state to react, months

after the beginning of this curating fever. At the end of the lockdown period, the central state sponsored institution to be created by the French State in the aftermath of the first pandemic wave, was significantly christened *Ad Memoriam* (meaning “In memory of” in Latin). Its main goal was to « contribute to the collective invention of commemorative practices since there is neither hope or human progress without the knowledge of history and the preservation of memory ». Its first designated task was to collect the collections made on their own and independently by those professionals turned into memory activists.

Towards a more participatory state-sponsored commemoration

This readjustment of balance between state-sponsored and grassroots dimensions of social memory dynamics, is one of the main patterns of the memory dynamics we have identified during the COVID related lockdown. It took place far beyond the formation of a COVID memory per se. This participatory impulse also renewed some of the classical forms of commemoration and state-sponsored remembrance activities. The inability for people to come together for public commemorations, some of which recurred for decades and others that were far more recent, did not mean that those ceased to exist. However, from March on, events, trips, anniversaries and large gatherings have indeed all been cancelled or reduced in their scope. This need for reinventing commemoration blurred some of the delimitation between state and institutional remembrance, and grassroots experiences and claims about the past. This lead first to an evolution from a passive commemoration, centered around official spokespeople, to a more active form of remembrance that is polyphonic and diversified.

In Israel, the lockdown period coincided with the ‘high season’ of national commemorations as annually marked on the state calendar, which places Israel’s Remembrance Day for Fallen Soldiers and Victims of Terror Attacks (*Yom Hazikaron* in Hebrew), between Holocaust and Heroism Remembrance Day (*Yom Hashoa* in Hebrew and Independence Day, in close proximity to the Passover feast. Changes in the mnemonic landscape and practices that started long before the corona crisis, have culminated during the lockdown period. On the one hand, we observed the continuing growth of mediated practices of commemorations during the lockdown period in March-April 2020, which allowed for state sponsored events to continue almost undisrupted, as they made use of platforms available for wider and diverse public participation, from home. Accordingly, the annually televised central events from Yad Vashem (on Yom Hashoa), as well as the one from Mount Herzl (on Yom Hazikaron), which were broadcasted without audience were also streamed on Facebook and Youtube, the former pre-recorded and the latter in a live format. Other commemorative practices went online too such as the Yad Vashem virtual name reading campaign and the use of the hashtags #RememberingFromHome #ShoahNames. Interestingly, modeled after that practice was the name readings commemorating the 25th anniversary of the genocide in Srebrenica *Reading for Srebrenica Čitanje za Srebrenicu*. At the same time, alternative ceremonies challenging the canonical top-down character of state-sponsored commemorations have gained more publicity and visibility as they became widely accessible via various online platforms. It was the case both with the Holocaust Memorial Day ceremonies (that began appearing as early as the late 1990s) and the questioning of the national hegemonic framing of the Remembrance Day of the fallen soldiers (established in the mid 2000s).

One such prominent example is Zikaron Basalon (remembrance in the living room in Hebrew) -- the Holocaust commemorative platform that was first established in 2011 and has gained great popularity ever since. Initially, the intention was to offer younger generations of Israelis, with fading interest in official state sponsored ceremonies, a bottom-up participatory and dialogical model of commemoration, as they spotlighted individual voices and stories (Steir-Livny 2020). These intimate gatherings offered a form of remembrance that transcends the national by focusing on the constitution of local communities of memory (Kook 2020). Nevertheless, located at the very heart of the national Zionist consensus commemorative framework, the Zikaron Basalon events went online, mainly on the zoom platform featuring recorded or live testimonies of survivors, facilitated by second-generation survivors. The need to record more testimonies began prior to corona, because there are increasingly fewer survivors left to testify. The coronavirus crisis only “accelerated the process and moved their goals forward,” as one of the co-founders explained. Finally, and in addition to the real-time Zoom sessions, Zikaron BaSalon has also provided a downloadable “family kit” for creating individual commemorations in family living rooms.

In France too, March to June is a period of many state sponsored commemorations and national memory days. The limits placed on physical gatherings forced parts of the government and administration to open the commemoration to new actors in order for them to happen at all. Each year on June 6, important ceremonies take place on Normandy beaches in reference to the events of 1944. In 2020, the ceremony included only the French Minister of Defense and a handful of veterans’ representatives. To provide it with a wider audience, the US Embassy in France launched an Instagram activity #DDAY76 to encourage people to share pictures, experiences and archives. Since the 1980s, the French state has celebrated the abolition of slavery in the Antilles on an annual basis. In Martinique, one of the French overseas districts, this anniversary takes place annually on May 22. In 2020, the official ceremony, limited to a handful of state representatives, included a Facebook live event and a digital platform to collect testimonies, art performances and forums involving citizens, activists and artists. In a way, and very paradoxically, while the French state has complained for years about the limited social impact of and lack of public participation in official commemorative ceremonies, the pandemic situation forced them to reinvent part of the traditional ritual. In doing so, new actors, ordinary citizens or existing memory activists, were given a voice in a commemoration, from which they had previously been excluded. In the Martinique example, the emptiness of the commemorative public space opened new opportunities for memory activists to act in a radical form. On the same day, May 22, two statues of Victor Schoelcher, a White French politician who had been among those to fight for the end of slavery in the national parliament and who has been honored by the state as the hero of abolition for years, were destroyed. The toppling down of the statues were claimed as a way to re-affirm the active role played by slaves in their own emancipation. Following this example, and beyond the French Caribbean, it can be hypothesized, for further researches, the toppling down of statues which multiplied in the aftermath of lockdown in different parts of the world may be read as a form of reappropriation of mnemonic power relations in the public space (Gensburger and Wüstenberg (ed.), 2021).

When the COVID pandemics boosts counter-memory and non-state alternative commemorations

The restrictions on movement created a real social resource for memory activists to strengthen and develop their work, insisting on generating and disseminating a counter memory. While official and state-sponsored commemorative events went online, so did alternative commemorations, taking advantage of digital platforms to expand the outreach of their mnemonic actions as well as public visibility and presence. As new forms of digital remembrance appeared, their visibility grew significantly, and so did the public accessibility to their dissemination of alternative knowledge and narratives.

“The Corona did us a big favor” was the first comment Rami Elhanan, a member of the Forum of the Bereaved Families and one of the organizers of the Joint Israeli-Palestinian Memorial Day Ceremony shared, when we asked for his experience with the 2020 ceremony during the first lockdown in Israel. That year, they saw an unprecedented number of people attending their event, estimating the digital crowd at 200,000 participants (Peleg, 2020). As this case shows, the Corona crisis only accelerated some of the processes that have already been taking place regarding the introduction of new online commemorative practices (see Fridman this volume; Fridman and Ristić 2020).

Created in 2005, first under the name of *The Alternative Memorial Day*, the Joint Israeli-Palestinian Memorial Day has been organized by Combatants for Peace and the Forum of the Bereaved Families, both joint Israeli-Palestinian NGOs. From the beginning, the organizers have insisted on holding the event at the same day and time as the state-sponsored one, emphasizing the alternatives they offer, to war, occupation and to ongoing violence. It came from a small fringe-like alternative commemorative event that first took place in Tel Aviv in 2005, and was attended by 200 people, to its growth in 2019 to an event in the Yarkon Park attended by approximately 10,000 people, the 2020 success of the event was ultimately thanks to COVID-19. It was already since 2017 that the ceremony was broadcasted live and online between Tel Aviv and Bet Jala in the West Bank. This was a solution found in order to overcome physical barriers, as Palestinians were banned then from entering the country and were not granted permits under the guise of ‘security’ (Gawerc 2018: 357). Both before and after Corona, through the ceremony they kept insisting on creating a joint platform for mourning, mutual acknowledgment and grievability (Butler 2010), otherwise firmly rejected by the state-sponsored commemorative framework, and as such, subject to growing verbal and even physical attacks in recent years. Moreover, while the DNA of the event, as the organizers acknowledge, is very Israeli as they grapple with question of power relations in joint Israeli-Palestinian action accused often of ‘normalization’, they insist on the transformative element of the event, as a non-violent action. In recent years and even more so during the COVID lockdown, they began also commemorating the Palestinian Nakba, in an alternative ceremony that gained more attendees in 2020, when occurred online.

Promoted by the hashtag #jointmemorial2020 on social media platforms and broadcast live on Facebook and YouTube simultaneously from Tel Aviv and Ramalla, in Hebrew and Arabic with English titles too, breaking the linguistic barriers and enabling people from all over the world to participate. By doing so, activists challenged the state-sponsored memorial ceremony taking place annually within a highly nationalistic and militaristic commemorative scene in Israel (Ben Amos 2003), as they disputed the main framework of the conflict, and that the wars have been righteous and without alternative (Gawerc 2018: 359).

The change in the 2020 event, was in its exclusive presence on the online platforms, in the absence of physical gatherings. Consequently, and somewhat unexpectedly, the organizers saw the rising movement and unprecedented participation of Palestinians from the West Bank and even from Gaza, on the Combatants for Peace Facebook page in Arabic, as well as inside Israel and worldwide. They emphasize the uniqueness of this commemorative event, as occurring within an on-going active conflict. As such, taking advantage of the lockdown, they managed to overcome Apartheid like physical restrictions by turning to the digital sphere, attracting also support and participation from attendees around the world. Also, as our data shows, many people, both Israelis and Palestinians who would otherwise fear the stigma attached to attending the event, felt more comfortable, attending it online, anonymously. And so they did.

Memory, power and inequalities: COVID-19 and neoliberalism

In so many ways, the COVID-19 pandemic was a time of memory and it led to changes in the way commemoration was put into action. In China, on the very popular Day of the Dead (Qingming) on April 5, families are supposed to visit the tombs of their loved ones. Because of the lockdown, funerals were postponed. Organizing them became then a social emergency for many Chinese people as soon as circulation was authorized again. This mourning, this traditional commemoration, made it clear that the official number of dead from the pandemic in China were far from the truth. Here ordinary memory turned, almost unintentionally, into a subversive tool toward an authoritarian regime.

But did the corona crises really cause commemoration to change from an ontological and political point of view? In conclusion to this short and by nature still exploratory text, one of the first articles to be written on the Corona crisis from a memory studies perspective (Hirst, 2020; Erll, 2020), we would like to put inequality back into the discussion.

Even if the lockdown created unprecedented opportunities for counter-memory activists and gave birth to a call for ordinary and everyday memories of the pandemic, in doing so, it also participated in the reproduction of social inequalities. For example, and as Cynthia Enloe's feminist critique pointed out, the war-driven analogy produced a non-neutral political narrative: "Today, one can imagine that waging "a World War II-type war" against a fast-spreading disease is a desirable strategy *only* if one willfully ignores the findings of feminist historians and refuses to absorb the crucial political lessons they have taught us about the actual costs of turning any collective civic effort into a "war."¹ Similarly, social sciences have highlighted that the very act of telling one's own story, through diaries, photographs or objects, is more difficult, and most often not even an option, for people on a low income and little education who, working in essential economic sectors, have precisely been, with the dead and the ill people, the main witnesses to everyday life during the pandemic. Actually, the COVID memory boom and curating impulse was decentralized and center one the individual scale, collecting traces of private and intimate experiences. In doing so, it, paradoxically, participated in the marginalization of more systemic and political dimensions of the event. Significantly, very few collects dealt with the public space. Finally, the COVID memory boom can be seen as one more manifestation of the memory studies' centering of the Western world. From the United-States to Europe, most of the commentators labeled the event as "historic" forgetting that, in the very recent past, Asian and African countries respectively confronted SRAS and Ebola pandemics, almost on their own. In the United-States, some Native American

¹ <https://www.wilpf.org/COVID-19-waging-war-against-a-virus-is-not-what-we-need-to-be-doing/>

spokespeople pointed at the way, at the birth of the nation, the virus settlers brought with them played an active role in the colonization of the continent, which was mainly forgotten. This social and geographical inequalities shape up to the very census of memory projects we referred to at the beginning of this text. While the existing list includes almost 180 projects in North America and 90 in the European Union, it only refers to 40 of them in the rest of the world. Thus, memory dynamics during lockdown were framed by the very same neoliberal factors that led to the pandemic in the first place: western centrality, capitalism, individualism, decentralization and privatization. This preliminary reflection calls for memory studies to critically study the possible and unanticipated relationships between memory activism and neoliberalism.

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