



HAL
open science

A Time for Memory in Lebanon?

Candice Raymond

► **To cite this version:**

Candice Raymond. A Time for Memory in Lebanon?: About Sune HAUGBOLLE, War and Memory in Lebanon, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2010, 260 p., and Franck MERMIER and Christophe VARIN (dir.) Mémoires de guerres au Liban (1975-1990), Paris, Sindbad/Actes Sud, 2010, 618 p.. Ethnologie française, 2021, Anthropologies libanaises Entre dispersion et lignes de force, 51 (2), pp.393-399. 10.3917/ethn.212.0393 . hal-04113069

HAL Id: hal-04113069

<https://hal.science/hal-04113069>

Submitted on 2 Jun 2023

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

A Time for Memory in Lebanon? (Book Review)

by Candice Raymond

French Institute of the Near East c.raymond@ifporient.org

About Sune HAUGBOLLE, *War and Memory in Lebanon*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2010, 260 p., and Franck MERMIER and Christophe VARIN (dir.) *Mémoires de guerres au Liban (1975-1990)*, Paris, Sindbad/Actes Sud, 2010, 618 p.

During the general uprising that arose in Lebanon on the 17th of October 2019 observers were struck by its cross-sectarian character and capacity to mobilise throughout most of the country's regions and across socio-professional categories. The initial unanimity in the protesting, with the prevalence of national symbols (flag, anthem), made plain in the uncompromising condemnation of the entire political class, without exception. It was soon interpreted as a sign of a national union almost unheard of in contemporary Lebanese history. Some were even tempted to see it as the real end of Lebanon's long civil war that engulfed the country between 1975 and 1990¹ the fractures of which seemed unresolvable ever since.

One of the hypotheses put forward to explain the scale of such an event, when all previous protests had failed to mobilise the population so widely, is worth examining: the idea that, with the generational renewal, the grip of fear of a return to war had finally been loosened. Nevertheless, it only took a hastily assembled wall to block the Nahr al-Kalb motorway tunnel, north of Beirut, or clashes between the Beirut neighbourhoods of Ayn al-Remmaneh and Chiyah, to rekindle a spate of anxieties. By taking up positions in these different sites of memory of the war, the protesters rekindled the fear of a violent "regression" and of a resurrection of the sectarian demons – all fuelled with the help of the traditional media and social networks. Initiatives were quickly taken to dismantle the wall and women's marches took place across the old demarcation lines to defuse this perceived danger and ward off the curse. But they were nonetheless insufficient in curtailing the mobilisation from partially ebbing.

These recent episodes show to what extent the memory of the civil war still lingers thirty years after the official end of the fighting. It continues to be an effective factor in how social and political life in Lebanon functions. The persistence of vivid, often traumatic memories of this long war, transmitted within the family circle and creating just as many "post-memories" [Hirsch, 1992], infuses the imagination, feeds fears, gives shape to anticipations, and influences behaviour. But these episodes also demonstrate the effectiveness of the motto "*tendhakar ma ten'ad*" ("Let it [the war] be remembered and not repeated"), produced by three decades of memory work carried out by a civil society that is now at the heart of the protest movement;

¹ Marwan Chahine, *Is this finally the end of the civil war?* (« *La fin de la guerre civile, enfin ?* »), *L'Orient- Le Jour*, 1 Nov. 2019.

here, the reminiscence of the dark hours of the war is as much an anxiety-provoking re-emergence of repressed or hidden memory as it is a “obligated memory” [Ricoeur, 2000: 105] with its correlated injunction to responsibility.

The official policy of the Lebanese state in the aftermath of the war, which consisted in promoting the non-remembrance (if not the forgetting) of the violence and pronouncing the amnesty of its protagonists² as the main path towards national reconciliation, places Lebanon in what the literature on post-conflict policies has grouped under the paradigm of the “politics of amnesia” [Makdisi and Silver-Stein, 2006]. However, this policy was more prescriptive than performative, since this oblivious amnesty has not been enough to extinguish the living memories of past violence and the resentment that they feed on, nor to fully restore the *pólis* as its ancient Greek precedent aimed to do [Loroux, 1997], nor permanently silence the supporters of a “duty to remember” sacrificed on the altar of security appeasement and post-war political and economic interests. Banning memory certainly deprived Lebanon up to the early 2000s of any large-scale public discussion on the subject of the civil war, but without being able to generate the “collective amnesia” [Khalaf, 2001] that was prematurely diagnosed by some social scientists. Since then, socially differentiated analyses have highlighted the multiplicity of memories constituted and transmitted in different social spaces despite the official injunction to forget, while other studies allow for the historicization of one of the main intellectual debates of the Lebanese post-war period, namely the very necessity of memory work and, more broadly, the modalities of managing the legacy of the war.

On this double level of memories and politics of memory, Lebanon has indeed proved to be a particularly fertile ground for researchers from different social science disciplines over the last two decades. The two books selected for this book review, both published in 2010 at the end of several years of research, actually ushered in a series of publications in memory studies in Lebanon that illustrate how dynamic this field of research is; no less than six books on this theme were published in the space of only two years³, with others to follow, not to mention the numerous scientific articles that have been written on these issues. This temporality of research echoes the political chronology of the country. Insofar as the crisis sequence that began in 2005 with the dramatic assassination of former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, and the subsequent lifting of Syrian control over Lebanon enabled a series of new contentions, the return of war (the Israeli offensive in the summer of 2006, and the increase in political violence culminating in the inter-party fighting of May 2008) acted as a powerful emotional trigger and led to the first nationwide debates about war memory [Haugbolle, 2010; Kanafani-Zahar, 2011]. This topicality of the

² The Amnesty Law of the 26th of August 1991 exempts from prosecution the perpetrators of political crimes committed before March 1991, with the exception of crimes committed against political leaders, religious leaders, or diplomats.

³ HAUGBOLLE, 2010; MERMIER and VARIN, 2010; VOLK, 2010; KANAFANI-ZAHAR, 2011; SAWALHA, 2011; LARKIN, 2012. Let us also mention the more recent publications of S. Hermez [2017], who places the study of living memories of the civil war in a broader anthropological reflection on violence in post-2005 Lebanon, and of C. Calargé [2017], who examines studies on anamnesis of war carried out in post-war Francophone cultural production.

memory issue within Lebanese society has since found its counterpart in the production of social sciences, leading to this genuine memory moment in Lebanese studies.

Memory cultures and the politics of remembering

This contextualisation helps to place the contributions of the two books at the heart of this book review. Sune Haugbolle's book, based on his doctoral thesis at Oxford [Haugbolle, 2006], is centred on field research conducted between 1997 and 2005, a period during which public interest in the memory of the civil war grew. The author starts from the observation that in the absence of any effort on the part of the state to establish what happened during the war and who was responsible for the tragedies that accompanied it, it is mainly through cultural production (understood in a broader sense than only the production of the cultural sector) that "politics of remembering" have been deployed by various non-state actors seeking to define the historical, political and ethical significance of the war [Haugbolle, 2010:4]. By placing observation at the intersection between personal memories and cultural forms that frame their public expression, the book aims to be both "an ethnography of social memory and a history of a central debate in the cultural and intellectual life of postwar Lebanon" [*ibid.*: 3]. However, the ethnography of living memories and post-memories, of the way in which they are inscribed in various social practices, transmitted or recomposed, only occupies a marginal place⁴. The book's central question is much more about publicizing certain individual or group memories, or in other words, the conditions (in particular the changing norms of the sayable and the unsayable), the strategies and modalities according to which they gain visibility in the public sphere and participate in the progressive elaboration of historical memories. S. Haugbolle mobilises a wide range of sources, from the most common ones such as the press and books (whether testimonies or novels) to other less common ones such as television programmes, films, graffiti, and other forms of urban iconography, while reporting on the public debates, artistic exhibitions, and intellectual encounters that he had the opportunity to observe. This rich and eclectic material is certainly one of the strengths of the book, although the restitution of its social contexts of production and reception proves patchy throughout the chapters. At any rate, it allows us to document the interplay of multiple "memory cultures", a notion that the author prefers to the all-encompassing notion of collective memory so as to underline the fragmentary, processual, and negotiated character of the production of Lebanese historical memories. It also makes it possible to historicise and, to a certain degree, sociologise the emergence of a memory issue and the mobilisations that have taken hold of it, drawing as many sequences in the political trajectory

⁴ For this type of work, readers can turn to Aïda Kanafani-Zahar [2011], whose third part analyses the memory narratives solicited from Christian and Druze victims of the Mountain War (1982-1984), and Craig Larkin [2012], who deals with the post-memories of Lebanese high school and university students. See also, from a more historical perspective, the various articles published by Dima de Clerck on the Christian and Druze memories of southern Mount Lebanon, notably DE CLERCK, 2014, and her chapter in MERMIER and VARIN, 2010.

of the memory question: during the war itself, after the Taif peace agreement (1989) and the consecration of Syrian tutelage over Lebanon, and during the "Independence Intifada" in 2005.

The seven chapters of the book follow a thematic and chronological progression. The introductory chapter shapes the book's research problem by mobilising a multidisciplinary theoretical framework that draws on both memory studies and the literature on nationalism. It usefully returns to the master narratives of the war and the debates about the nature of the Lebanese sectarian system, recalling how the discourse that assimilates the Lebanese War to a "war for others" (according to the famous expression of the journalist and diplomat Ghassan Tuéni), i.e. a proxy war between regional powers on the Lebanese terrain, has made it possible to erase the most troublesome internal aspects of the conflict and has thus imposed itself as the dominant representation of the conflict. The fascinating second chapter proposes a genealogy of contemporary memory culture by reviewing the transformations that modern institutions of public representation, in its double meaning of political representation and cultural expression, have undergone since the 1950s and 1960s. Seeking to historicize how Lebanese society pictures itself to be and negotiates the meaning of its own history, the author revisits the upsurge in mass culture media and its consequences on the expansion of an increasingly inclusive and decentralized public sphere, where cultural production constituted a space for debate on the political and social developments of pre-war Lebanon. It highlights the rise of the educated middle class, among whom the first dissident voices would be recruited and the first attempts at civil resistance to the war would be made during the 1980s.

The next four chapters take us into the post-war years and explore the different manifestations of these competing memory cultures. In a context that was not very conducive to the opening of a public debate on the meaning of the war (in addition to the adoption of the amnesty law in 1991, the law on audiovisuals voted in 1994 reinforced the tendency of many actors to self-censorship), the discussions that accompanied the start of the huge reconstruction project in downtown Beirut, addressed in Chapter 3, gradually grew to form a much more encompassing debate on the memory of the civil war. The "intellectual party" (as Samir Kassir [2000] dubbed it - iterating Péguy) played a central role in objecting to a building project that oscillated between two geographic visualizations: Beirut as a forward-looking 'Hong Kong' of the Middle East, or as a middle-eastern Paris trading in nostalgia for a fantasized pre-war era. This theme of nostalgia dealt with in Chapter 3 and especially Chapter 4, gives rise to a wide-ranging discussion of its versatility, stoked up by an examination of its various expressions and uses within different generational groups and social classes. In contrast to these nostalgic graspings of the past, Chapter 5 addresses the much more marginal cultural productions that confront the darker aspects of the civil war and focus on the instigators of violence rather than its victims. Apart from a few literary and cinematographic works that share the transgressive ambition of unabashedly denouncing the militia experience, it is mainly the autobiographies and testimonies published by former political cadres or ordinary combatants that fall into this category. These public speaking

engagements often take on the appearance of a cathartic exercise, but they also contain their share of euphemised violence and externalised guilt. According to Haugbolle, they are above all a way for their authors to renegotiate their membership in the moral community of post-war Lebanon, by aligning themselves with the dominant watchwords of reconciliation and condemnation of sectarianism. These productions, however, reveal representations in which the enemy of yesterday, now today's partner in a supposedly reconciled nation, is still the 'Other', outside a sectarian "we" that has been perpetuated as the main category of identification. Not surprisingly, the memory cultures of political parties discussed in Chapter 6 take this logic of sectarian identity to the extreme and inscribe their own "sectarian hagiography" in urban space, centred on the cult of dead leaders and war "martyrs", through a series of visual markers designed to circumscribe as many exclusive territories. Observing the graffiti, banners, flags, political posters, and other memorials, sometimes of a makeshift nature, is probably a clever way to circumvent the difficulty for an 'outsider' to enter certain partisan circles. It allows us to address new issues related to the spatialization of memory cultures and the particular way of making war memories visible that transform the spaces of everyday life in Beirut into out-and-out propagandist palimpsests.

The concluding chapter traces the turning point of the years 2000-2005, providing us with a fascinating reading of the political movement of spring 2005 through the prism of memory discourses. It shows in particular how the memory culture developed in intellectual circles, which had gained momentum in the early 2000s, was co-opted by the anti-Syrian opposition front in the form of a demand for truth (initially relating to the assassination of Rafiq Hariri but extended to all crimes of the past), that was heard in different ways among the actors of the movement, and was ultimately more divisive than expected: *«Telling the truth about the war for many people meant displaying their disagreements over national history and identity in antagonistic terms. This was not the truth memory makers had in mind.»* [Haugbolle, 2010: 224]. According to Haugbolle, the "independence intifada" and the various memorial events that accompanied it thus appeared to be the moment of consecration of a liberal memory culture (in the Anglo-Saxon sense of the term), while at the same time rapidly showing its limits; its moorings in the particular social imagination of cultural elites largely from the left would lead it to be overly optimistic about the reconciling virtues of the work of remembrance and to underestimate the strength of competing "politics of remembering". If 2005 did indeed mark the ending of the injunction to silence, the subsequent crisis sequence bore witness to the strong politicisation of war memory, to which the actors in the political field had uninhibited recourse to publicly discredit their opponents of the moment.

A mosaic of memory

The richness of the empirical material and of the analyses scattered throughout the book, despite the occasionally convoluted writing style, makes it an essential reference in this field of

research, although it is evident that the subject has not yet been depleted. Many of the avenues opened up by S. Haugbolle are refined, developed, or completed by the collective work directed by F. Mermier and C. Varin [2010]. Inspired by a rich francophone literature in sociology, anthropology, and history of memory, ranging from Maurice Halbwachs to Michèle Baussant and Marie-Claire Lavabre, via Paul Ricoeur, Pierre Nora, and Henri Rousso, the work presented in this imposing volume goes beyond this theoretical framework and adopts a wide variety of approaches and investigative devices to deal with a wide variety of issues. Memories (personal and collective, living and transmitted, social and historical) are sometimes the subject of the investigation itself, or the documentary material that allows us to address other subjects. Thus, although this was not the primary objective of the book, as the editors point out, we also learn a great deal about the war itself; some of its episodes (in particular the clashes between the two Shiite organisations Amal and Hezbollah at the end of the 1980s, dealt with by O. Lamoum) or some of the social spaces that were subjected to its effects (the school environment, for example, studied by S. Slim). The eclecticism of the collection extends to the modes of writing adopted by the contributors, with some very beautiful chapters of creative non-fiction such as the "Diary of G.S., displaced by war" reconstructed by W. Charara from interviews conducted with one of his students.

The thirty contributions are grouped into three parts. It is perhaps regrettable that they were not preceded by introductions that would have allowed us to relate their immense diversity to a few theoretical or transversal thematic issues. The first part, entitled "Writings of Memory", brings together a set of texts that examine the complex relationship between memory(ies) and historiography (whether in academic history, history textbooks, or competing testimonies published by former actors in the conflict), and that look at how different memory entrepreneurs have taken over certain sites of memory, commemorative dates, or media (in particular the web). This part, which focuses on the strategies and practices of the actors, is very complementary to the monograph mentioned above, and extends its effort to historicise the Lebanese memory issue by dealing with another historical dispute that is embedded in contemporary social memory, namely the sectarian conflicts of the nineteenth century. The second part deals with the political dimension of war memories, firstly by looking at the memory construction and competition among the former armed protagonists, and then at the issues relating to the fate of the victims (questions of the disappeared, reconciliations organised by the state in the mixed villages of Mount Lebanon, or the psychological shields developed by individuals following traumatic experiences). Finally, three types of "spaces of memory" are explored in the last part: the city, the cultural field, and the religious field. The city, first of all, reduced here to Beirut alone (as in the previous book, one would have appreciated some excursions outside the capital, as the cities and regions of the provinces remain the poor cousins of the historiography of the war), but intensely explored through six chapters forming perhaps the most ethnographic part of the book. The examination of the social and spatial reconfigurations following the demographic reconfigurations resulting from the war gives a central place to the question of the displaced,

whose memory stakes are grasped by scrutinizing the cemeteries of the southern suburbs, by collecting the accounts of former Christian inhabitants of a district that has become Shiite, by settling narratively in a squatted building on the famous Hamra Street, or by surveying the streets of a district close to the city centre awaiting renovation. Artistic creation is another space of memory that is approached both from the angle of the post-war avant-gardes that have made the archive their idiom (a subject that has been abundantly dealt with elsewhere, but which is the subject of a particularly enlightening sociological approach here) and from the angle of the partisan commemorative posters produced during the war itself. Finally, the last two chapters examine the politico-religious dimension of the social frameworks of memory, through Shiite rituals and Christian pilgrimages. The book ends with a short but didactic conclusion by Fawaz Traboulsi defending the necessity of remembrance and the need to forget.

It is easy to see from this overview of the themes and objects dealt with that this is a richly informative work that explores the multiple ways in which these fragmented war memories are inscribed and mediated. Incidentally, the memory entrepreneurs from organised civil society find their rightful place: not quite marginal but nonetheless minor, compared to the dynamics at work in sectarian and partisan spaces. The book also shows what work of memory is indeed being done in Lebanese society; it is a type that does not fit into the weave of an untraceable national narrative, but one that diffracts among several "imagined communities", which are themselves worked on by several politics of remembering that are more or less elaborate and adaptable to a shifting political environment. Over the last decade, various studies have continued to explore the manufacture, circulation, and reception of sectarian or partisan memory cultures in the mixed Druze-Christian region of Mount Lebanon [De Clerck, 2015] or within the Shiite community [Chaib, 2014; Fournier, 2019; Saade, 2016]. And in the same manner as *Lebanon. Mémoires de guerre* they show that a view from below allows for a detailed reading of the cleavages and tensions within communities and even individuals. The dynamics of memory can therefore prove to be a valuable analyser of the power relationships in certain territories or social groups, and all the more so as they call for a reflection on variations in scale. If the political hegemonies sharing the control of Lebanese society retain an undeniable capacity to frame memories and imaginations, it is in any case not certain that they always manage to keep the public space closed to the claims made by the actors of organised civil society. The adoption of Law 105 in November 2018 by the newly-elected Parliament on enforced disappearances, and the appointment in June 2020 of the national commission responsible for shedding light on the fate of the missings, thus appear to be a further victory won by the tenacious mobilisation of the families of the disappeared [Abou Jaoudé, 2020].

More than a decade of intensive production on the issue, now begs the question of whether memory studies have become a saturated field of research in Lebanon. If the fragmentation of war memories implies that multiple fields remain to be explored, it is nonetheless up to each discipline to consider which thematic and theoretical renewals are possible. For the history

discipline, it is a given that memories are now among the common objects of research. However, the larger project to be pursued is that of a history of the war itself and its effects on society. Academic research, also subject to the effects of generational renewal, has taken on this essential "history work" by shifting the investigation to less studied phases of the war, geographical areas, or research objects⁵. Working with and against the memories that permeate the historiographic operation from one side to the other, this research lays the foundations for a revisiting of the political, social, and cultural history of this crucial period for the understanding of contemporary Lebanon.

Without necessarily pretending to "set the tone" for memory dynamics, the conviction remains that this historical research is playing its part in the effort of the Lebanese society to critically distance itself from a painful past.

References

ABOUJAOUDÉ Carmen, 2020, « Opportunités et défis de la justice transitionnelle au Liban : la centralité de la question des disparus ou *Chronique d'une guerre inachevée* », *Confluences Méditerranée*, 112 : 207-223.

CALARGÉ Carla, 2017, *Liban, mémoires fragmentées d'une guerre obsédante : l'anamnèse dans la production culturelle francophone (2000-2015)*, Leiden, Brill.

CHAIB Kinda, 2014, *Culture du martyr au Liban Sud : entre fabrication de catégories et enjeux mémoriels*, thèse d'histoire, Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne.

DECLERCK Dima, 2014, « Histoire officielle et mémoires en conflit dans le Sud du Mont-Liban : les affrontements druzo-chrétiens du XIXe siècle », *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, 135 : 171-190.

DECLERCK Dima, 2015, *Les Relations druzo-chrétiennes dans le Mont-Liban Sud à l'épreuve des guerres et des réconciliations, des représentations et des mémoires*, thèse d'histoire, Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne.

FOURNIER Zara, 2019, *Géographie des lieux de mémoire du Sud du Liban (1978-2018). Du fantomatique au fantasmatique*, thèse de géographie, Université de Tours.

⁵ Several dissertations and theses recently defended or in progress show this renewed interest in the history of the Lebanese war, which was also reflected in the holding of two conferences in Beirut in 2015 and 2018 (the works presented on the occasion of the latter forming the subject of the recent issue of *Confluences Méditerranée*, 112, 2020/1: "Liban : la guerre de 1975-1990 dans le rétroviseur")

HAUGBOLLE Sune, 2006, *The Politics of Remembering in Post-War Lebanon: civil war, memory and public culture*, Ph.D.dissertation, University of Oxford.

HAUGBOLLE Sune, 2010, *War and Memory in Lebanon*, New York, Cambridge University Press.

HERMEZ Sami, 2017, *War is Coming. Between Past and Future Violence in Lebanon*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press.

HIRSCH Marianne, 1992, « Family Pictures: Maus, Mourning, and Post-Memory », *Discourse*, 15 (2): 3-29.

KANAFANI-ZAHAR Aïda, 2011, *Liban. La Guerre et la Mémoire*, Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes.

KASSIR Samir, 2000, « Dix ans après, comment ne pas réconcilier une société divisée ? », *Maghreb Machrek*, 169 : 6-22.

KHALAF Samir, [1997] 2001, « From a Geography of Fear to a Culture of Tolerance. Reflections on Protracted Strife and the Restoration of Civility in Lebanon », in S. Khalaf, *Cultural Resistance. Global and Local Encounters in the Middle East*, Londres, Saqi Books : 249-267.

LARKIN Craig, 2012, *Memory and Conflict in Lebanon: remembering and forgetting the past*, New York, Routledge.

LORAUX Nicole, 1997, *La Cité divisée. L'oubli dans la mémoire d'Athènes*, Paris, Payot.

MAKDISI Ussama et Paul A. SILVERSTEIN(dir.), 2006, *Memory and Violence in the Middle East and North Africa*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.

MERMIER Franck et Christophe VARIN (dir.), 2010, *Mémoires de guerres au Liban (1975-1990)*, Paris, Sindbad/Actes Sud. RICOEUR Paul, 2000, *La Mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, Paris, Seuil.

SAADE Bashir, 2016, *Hizbullah and the Politics of Remembrance. Writing the Lebanese Nation*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

SAWALHA Aseel, 2011, *Reconstructing Beirut: memory and space in a postwar Arab city*, Austin, University of Texas Press.

VOLK Lucia, 2010, *Memorials and Martyrs in Modern Lebanon*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.