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Trauma and the Memory of Politics

In this original study, Jenny Edkins explores how we remember traumatic events such as wars, famines, genocides and terrorism, and questions the assumed role of commemorations as simply reinforcing state and nationhood. Taking examples from the World Wars, Vietnam, the Holocaust, Kosovo and September 11 Edkins offers a thorough discussion of practices of memory such as memorials, museums, remembrance ceremonies, the diagnosis of post-traumatic stress and the act of bearing witness. She examines the implications of these commemorations in terms of language, political power, sovereignty and nationalism. She argues that some forms of remembering do not ignore the horror of what happened but rather use memory to promote change and to challenge the political systems that produced the violence of wars and genocides in the first place. This wide-ranging study embraces literature, history, politics and international relations, and makes a significant contribution to the study of memory.

Jenny Edkins is Senior Lecturer in International Politics at the University of Wales Aberystwyth. Her publications include *Whose Hunger? Concepts of Famine, Practices of Aid* (2000), *Poststructuralism and International Relations: Bringing the Political Back In* (1999) and, with Nalini Persram and Véronique Pin-Fat, *Sovereignty and Subjectivity* (1999).

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For John

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Know what has happened, do not forget, and at the same time never
will you know.

– Maurice Blanchot

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Preface

This book was prompted by a curiosity about how what we call ‘politics’ draws on a particular linear notion of time. Thinking about time and politics led me to explore what have become two growth areas of recent scholarship in a range of academic fields – history, anthropology, cultural studies and psychoanalysis – questions of trauma and memory. At the beginning of the new century it appears that a large number of people are interested in how, to what purposes and with what effects, we memorialise the traumatic events of the twentieth century. Places such as Flanders, Auschwitz, Hiroshima and Vietnam all hold our attention now not only as events, but in relation to the question of memory. And following the events of September 11, 2001 in New York and Washington this interest in trauma and memory has intensified and become more personal for many. Two things are recognised. First, from work on trauma it is acknowledged that memories such as these are distinct – traumatic memory is not the same as everyday memory. Second, from work on collective or cultural memory it is argued that many contemporary forms of memorialisation function to reinforce the idea of the nation. What I do in this study is put these two understandings together and explore what they imply in political terms. It has already been argued that memorialisation often constitutes a form of forgetting. I explore how this works, but I am more particularly interested in asking how it can be and is challenged, by whom and in what contexts. I argue that such challenges constitute a questioning of the power of the sovereign state itself, as a form of political community, and its legitimation through ‘politics’.

Increasingly a distinction is being drawn between what we call ‘politics’ – the routine, regular processes that take place in parliaments, elections, political parties and the institutions of government – and something more lively, less dogmatic, less predictable, which some writers have begun to call ‘the political’. This latter is the arena of innovation and revolution, a field of sudden, unexpected and abrupt change, a point at which the status quo is challenged. It is where what we might call ‘real politics’ resurfaces, challenging the claims of the impostor that has taken

its place. Quite often, such challenges and the changes they produce are so startling that we don't quite know how to describe them until some time after they have taken place. Occasionally, they appear traumatic. They upset, or escape, the straightforward linear temporality associated with the regularity of so-called 'politics' and appear to occupy another form of time: a time that I call in this book 'trauma time'.

In the linear time of the standard political processes, which is the time associated with the continuance of the nation-state, events that happen are part of a well-known and widely accepted story. What happens fits into a pattern. We know almost in advance that such events have a place in the narrative. We know what they are. In trauma time, in contrast, we have a disruption of this linearity. Something happens that doesn't fit, that is unexpected – or that happens in an unexpected way. It doesn't fit the story we already have, but demands that we invent a new account, one that will produce a place for what has happened and make it meaningful. Until this new story is produced we quite literally do not know what has happened: we cannot say what it was, it doesn't fit the script – we only know that 'something happened'.

The events of September 11 are an example of this traumatic disruption to the linearity of time and expectations. Television viewers around the world heard reporters in New York and Washington struggling to find words to describe what had happened. People on the streets of New York stood frozen, horror-struck, staring up at the twin towers, unable to believe that what they saw in front of their eyes was actually taking place. Although the newsrooms responded in the main by replaying over and over again the point of impact and, later, the images of the collapse of the towers, eventually they needed to make a 'story'. They needed to put titles across the screen. And later, New Yorkers needed to talk: hundreds gathered in Union Square that night to debate and discuss – and to mourn. However, even one year on the term 'events' survived as perhaps the best that could be managed by way of description and the date 'September 11', or '9/11', stood in as the most evocative designation for what had happened.

Of course, the distinction I have made between trauma time and the linear time of the state is not quite as straightforward as I have described it. For the nation-state and its so-called 'politics' to work, the linear time associated with it has to be produced and reproduced all the time. This time is not a natural phenomenon, but one that is socially constituted – it is a notion that exists because we all work, in and through our everyday practices, to bring it into being. In the main, the production and reproduction of linear time take place by people assuming that such a form of time does exist, and specifically that it exists as an empty, homogeneous

medium in which events take place. This is a very Newtonian conception of time, one long since called into question by Einstein's re-thinking of natural science. Our everyday thinking about social events has yet to catch up with what are now our accepted scientific notions of time. Even though we are happy to explore the new Einsteinian cosmology in science fiction, we have not yet begun to think about how it would affect our ideas about politics if we were to take it seriously.

However, it is no accident that we haven't done this. Nor can it be put down to intellectual laziness or a reluctance to change our ways of thinking. I will argue in this book that the old Newtonian way of thinking about time persists not because we just haven't got round to re-thinking these ideas in the light of new scientific analysis, but because linear, homogeneous time suits a particular form of power – sovereign power, the power of the modern nation-state. Sovereign power produces and is itself produced by trauma: it provokes wars, genocides and famines. But it works by concealing its involvement and claiming to be a provider not a destroyer of security. It does this, of course, directly, through discourses of international security that centre around the state as well as through claiming to provide security internally for its citizens. In addition, however, the state does this in no small part through the way in which it commemorates wars, genocides and famines. By rewriting these traumas into a linear narrative of national heroism, this book will argue, the state conceals the trauma that it has, necessarily, produced. Resistance to this re-scripting – resistance to state narratives of commemoration – constitutes resistance to sovereign power. As Milan Kundera reminds us in his *Book of Laughter and Forgetting*: 'the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting'.¹

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My interest in time and the political was initially provoked by an invitation to contribute to a panel on 'time' at a conference of the International Studies Association in Vienna in 1998. My thanks go to Mike Shapiro and David Campbell for the invitation, and to participants at the session for their comments. Since then, work in progress has been presented in a number of seminars and conference panels. I would like to thank participants in the International Studies Association conferences at Washington in 1999, and at Chicago and Hong Kong in 2001. Thanks to Cindy Weber and François Debrix, the convenors of the series 'Mediating Internationals' and participants in the seminar at the University of Leeds in February 2000. Tarak Barkawi's colloquium

¹ Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, trans. Aaron Asher (London: Faber and Faber, 1996).

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in Aberystwyth was a valuable occasion to air some of the debates engaged in here, and many thanks go to participants Susie Carruthers, Huw Evans, Sue Ferguson, Steve Hobden, Jasmina Husanovic, Adam Morton and Priscilla Netto. A number of people have read and commented on drafts of parts of the book at various stages, including Mick Dillon, Nicky Gregory, Len Scott, Steve Smith, Annick Wibben and Maja Zehfuss, and many more have contributed to the book's development in different ways: Diana Bankston, Aida Hozic, Véronique Pin-Fat, Patricia Owens, Daniel Warner and Marysia Zalewski, among others. Thanks to Edith and Horst Zehfuss for hospitality, and to staff of the Dachau concentration camp memorial archive in Munich, and the Imperial War Museum archive and the Public Record Office in London for their assistance. Thanks to Katherine Tomlinson and to Olivia Bennett of the Oral Testimony Programme at the Panos Institute in London. And, finally, thanks to the two anonymous reviewers at Cambridge University Press for their encouraging comments.

Parts of this book draw on material published elsewhere, and I am grateful for permission to include this here. Part of Chapter 4 is revised from 'Sovereign Power, Zones of Indistinction and the Camp', *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 25, no. 1 (January–March 2000), copyright © Lynne Rienner Publishers, used with permission of the publisher. Part of Chapter 3 appeared as 'Authenticity and Memory at Dachau', *Cultural Values*, 5, no. 4 (2001): 405–20.

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As always I am grateful to my family for contributing to the development of my ideas and thoughts in all sorts of different ways. Two family members warrant special mention in the context of this particular book. The first is my grandmother, the late Elizabeth Smith. Her husband died on 3 July 1925 from tuberculosis brought on by injuries sustained in the 1914–18 war. Their daughter (my mother) was two-and-a-half at the time. Richard Smith had served as a private in the Lancashire Fusiliers and was with the BEF from 13 March to 20 October 1917. The second, John Roy Pierpoint Edkins, who died in 1960, was a psychiatrist at Woodside Hospital during the Second World War. He worked with trauma victims and published papers on treatment by abreaction. My immediate family are the ones who I must thank the most, however:

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John, David and Tim. I apologise to Tim and David if my preoccupation with my computer for long hours at a stretch has put them off writing and the academic life for good, and wish them much joy in their chosen alternatives. John has always supported me, and my work, way beyond the call of duty and I dedicate this book to him.

The epigraph at the start of the book is taken from Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster: L'écriture du désastre*, trans. Ann Smock, new edn (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 82.