

Jill A. Edy, **Troubled Pasts: News and the Collective Memory of Social Unrest**, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 231 pp, \$22.95 (paperback).

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Social memory, as well as the study of the formation of social memory, tends to focus, somewhat paradoxically on the narration of heroic failures and grand tragedies. The battles of Masada, the Alamo and Little Big Horn, as well as the war in Vietnam and the AIDS epidemic, to name a few salient examples, required societies to flex their commemorative muscles in order to mold such stories of loss and grief into meaningful narratives that provide a sense of triumph, or at least solace. Correspondingly, this kind of intensive memory work provides ample data for collective memory scholars who probe the conditions and processes that enable such transformations. And so now, after we have learned about the formation of *Tangled Memories* (Strurken, 1997) and *Difficult Reputations* (Fine, 2001) Jill A. Edy adds an important contribution to this essential research tradition as she asks us to consider the journalistic coverage and construction of *Troubled Pasts*.

In her comprehensive study, Edy explores the ways by which several major American news outlets have covered two significant problematic events - the 1965 Watts Riots and the 1968 Chicago Democratic National Convention – from the time the two events occurred and till the mid-late 1990s. But the term "coverage" is misleading in the case of this study. That is because Edy does not limit her probe to news reports that are merely *about* the Watts Riots or the Chicago Convention. Rather, she analyzes the complex ways by which the memories of these two events have been narrated by different memory agents, while chronicling numerous other events in order to achieve various and often conflicting goals. Offering such a perspective enables Edy to point at the overt outcomes of collective recollecting -- namely, the ways in which the two events were publicly remembered at various critical junctures -- as well as the deeper political, economic and journalistic dynamics and circumstances that shaped such recollections.

By offering such an analysis, Edy advances the study of collective memory in several ways. Within the rapidly growing corpus of research on collective memory, relatively modest attention has been given to the operation of journalists as narrators of the memories of the societies for whom they report (Schudson, 1992; Zelizer, 1992; Kitch, 2005). Hence this book, alongside Edy's earlier work (1999) provides us with much-needed analytical tools for understanding the role of journalists as memory agents. The study is based on an innovative conceptual framework that integrates relevant theoretical contributions from the field of collective memory research, narrative theory, and political communication studies. The advantage of such an interdisciplinary approach is evident, for instance when Edy employs the concepts of framing and agenda setting to study the rise and demise of various memory versions of the Watts Riots and Chicago Convention. Moreover, the choice of a comparative structure highlights variations in the journalistic recollection of such troubled pasts; but at the same time it illuminates some important common patterns such as the constant striving toward coherent plots and the gradual decline in the ability of official agents to shape the memory of disputed events.

Memory scholars often debate the limits of the public narration of the past. While some researchers argue that the past could be clearly defined if it were not invented time and again, according to needs of different narrators (Halbwachs [1951] 1992), other researchers view memory work as having a far less "flexible" task, which fundamentally entails the selection and presentation of events from a finite factual reservoir of related past occurrences (Schwartz, 1982). Edy clearly sides with the latter approach and thus she initiates her study via a careful analysis of the real-time coverage of the Watts Riots and the Chicago Convention, gathered mostly from news magazines. This is because these raw news materials provided the building blocks for the majority of future narrations of the two events. Moreover, the coverage of the events as they happened presented most of the interpretive frames that would be adopted and developed in later years.

Edy identifies race relations as the major interpretive media frame used to contextualize the Watts Riots as they happened. This fundamental frame encapsulated four derivative smaller frames that positioned the riots as crimes; as conspiracy-driven activities; as a reaction to police brutality; and as the outcome of the ongoing economic discrimination against the L.A.'s poorest residents. Such media frames were created via the location of different protagonists at the center of news accounts and by pointing at different solutions for the afflictions exposed by the riots. In contrast to the coverage of the Watts Riots that naturally focused on the violent occurrences, the coverage of the Chicago Convention was split from the get-go between reports that focused on the convention itself and those that focused on the street demonstrations. Hence, while the former type of stories framed events within the context of party politics, the latter stories framed the events as a struggle between protestors and the police.

In the following chapters of the book, Edy explores the ongoing construction of the memories of the Watts Riots and the Chicago Convention via several trajectories. A first trajectory discusses the initial overwhelming influence of officials and institutions on the framing of the memory of the two events in the short run in comparison to their weakening status as meaning producers in the long run. Within this context, Edy utilizes Turner's concept of "redressive rituals" (1981) in order to explain how shortly after the events took place official agencies attempted to minimize the damages caused to their images by the disturbing events. She identifies trials, inquiry commissions and policy changes as tools through which officials tried to restore authority and stability. Within this context, Edy provides an illuminating observation regarding the ways in which such institutional rituals and especially policy changes not only shape the present and the future but also the past. Hence for instance the implementation of the Great Society programs was presented as an institutional answer to the Watts Riots, which meant in turn that the riots were positioned -- retrospectively -- as a consequence of poor economic and social conditions rather than police brutality (p. 70-72).

A second trajectory considers the ways in which the public memory of the two events has been shaped by the structural strengths and weaknesses of the news media; the different goals and interests of various news outlets; and changes in the journalistic practice. While the Watts Riots were positioned through the years as a "local" memory covered mostly by the Los Angeles news media, the Chicago Convention was addressed both by local and national news media which had at times different takes on the identity of the heroes and villains of this event. Moreover, Edy points at three ways in which the Watts Riots and the Chicago Convention have been addressed through journalistic work: commemorations,

analogies and contexts. Which is to say that many mentions of the two events occur while reporters cover other, remotely related topics. In general, most of the accounts appearing in later years moved toward a "flatter" description of the two social upheavals. Such accounts blurred disputes over the difficult events and their meaning and portrayed them almost as inevitable natural disasters. One fascinating example of how the news media advance the construction of coherent, rather than fragmented memory narratives could be found in the incorporation of the memory of the Watts Riots into the larger story of the 1960s civil rights movement and MLK's legacy. This is done in spite of the fact that MLK's actual visit to South Central Los Angeles soon after the Riots was not successful and his speech was poorly received by the local residents (p. 196).

A third trajectory considers the journalistic use of the memory of the Watts Riots and the Chicago Convention as interpretive frames that contextualize and bestow meaning upon two later salient events – the 1992 L.A. riots that followed the acquittal of the police officers that brutalized Rodney King and the 1996 convention of the Democratic party held in Chicago. Edy's analysis shows that the Watts Riots were used during the 1992 riots as a yardstick and as a common analogy. But the early riots were also presented as a contributing factor to the new riots: according to this logic, the 1965 riots generated "white flight" from the city to the suburbs, which, in turn, fueled the ongoing deprivation of inner city neighborhoods, and then led to the recent riots. All of this positioned the 1965 and 1992 riots as scenes in a reoccurring plot of political discrimination followed by violent protest. In contrast, the journalistic coverage of the 1996 convention positioned it as a final scene in the plot; as a successful reconciliation with a problematic past.

While analyzing the process of shaping journalistic memory, Edy follows Schudson's essential distinction between commemorative and non-commemorative forms of public memory (1997). According to Edy, intended commemorative coverage -- such as the ongoing marking of the Watts Riots' anniversaries -- plays a crucial role in constraining, or even consolidating the meanings of the past (p. 95). At this point, one could disagree with Edy. At least some evidence shows that under certain circumstances -- such as growing debates over the core values of a national culture -- commemorative journalism might be actually utilized to amplify the existence of conflicting narratives of the collective past (Meyers, 2002).

Finally, when journalists act as memory agents they engage in three complementary dimensions of their work. On a basic level, they do what they always do: tell the public stories about realities that are beyond the public's immediate reach. On a second level, the journalistic coverage of the past always situates it within larger cultural and social contexts. Thirdly, when journalists narrate the past they tell stories about their own work, and the role they have played and still play in shaping social memories. Within this context, Edy's study provides a superb analysis of memory in journalism but it is less efficient in its exploration of the memory of journalism. The study compares and contrasts the ways in which the memories of the Watts Riots and the Chicago Convention were constructed by several news media through the years but it does not look closely at how journalistic communities have narrated their own stories through this process. It would be intriguing to find out whether various forms of retrospective reporting reexamined the original coverage of the two troubling events: Were there any significant self-reflexive discussions dealing with the role played by journalists in shaping the meaning of these pasts

through the years? And how did the understanding of what journalism is and what it ought to be change during the progression from the "local mode" of coverage and into the "durational mode" of journalistic coverage (Zelizer, 1993, p. 226) of the two events? Considering such a line of inquiry might have added yet another relevant interpretive layer to this nuanced study.

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