Book Review: Political Memory and the Aesthetics of Care

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Margaret Comer

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Political Theory
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Political Memory and the Aesthetics of Care: The Art of Complicity and Resistance, by Mihaela Mihai. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2022. 312 pp.

Reviewed by: Margaret Comer, *Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, University of Warsaw, Poland*
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In *Political Memory and the Aesthetics of Care*, Mihaela Mihai weaves together theories drawn from studies of memory, perpetration, transitional justice, and feminist and social epistemology, as well as critical race, anticolonial, postcolonial, and decolonial lenses, to identify a critical "double erasure" at the heart of most hegemonic, official political memories of fallen authoritarian regimes. Legal tools designed to facilitate the pursuit of justice in the courts, and the memory discourses drawn from them, overwhelmingly focus on individual guilt or innocence during a specific moment in time and space, leaving the "vast in-between of bystanders, enablers, indirect beneficiaries of violence, and morally dissociated onlookers" unexamined. Also unexplored is the vista of political, structural, emotional, and intersectional identitarian factors that shape individuals' choices (27). Specific people's choices to resist or be complicit or collaborate over a stretch of time can only be understood if we comprehend how these factors shape the "horizon of hope" or "horizon of expectations" within which they make decisions. It is crucial to engage with how people's everyday choices and concerns—about money, housing, food, career advancement, or prestige—interact with political leanings, misgivings about political violence, despair, hope, and other convictions. Also important is considering whether they can envision that an act of resistance might make any difference at all. Thus, creating works of art that deploy alternative depictions of repression can constitute a deep form of "aesthetic care" for a community struggling to heal from past repression.

This holistic, intersectional view of how most people living in authoritarian societies are variably complicit with or resistant to it, depending on changing circumstances over time, does not fit well into simplistic national narratives of perpetrators and heroes, of (usually) men fighting endlessly and selflessly for a critically unexamined "good." Following Pierre Bourdieu, Mihai theorizes the stubborn persistence of such overly simplified "mnemonic master narratives" as a type of habitus, as this enfolds "their embeddedness in the

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