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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Wiemann, A. (2019). Making Memory by Dissociating the Past from the Present: Narratives of Movement Intellectuals of the Post-Fukushima Protest Cycle in Japan. *International Quarterly for Asian Studies (IQAS)*, 50(1-2), 157-170.
<https://doi.org/10.11588/iqas.2019.1-2.10344>

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Making Memory by Dissociating the Past from the Present: Narratives of Movement Intellectuals of the Post-Fukushima Protest Cycle in Japan

Research Note

Anna Wiemann

Abstract

The impact of collective memory on mobilisation processes is an emerging research field in social movement studies. Adopting the perspective of “memory in activism”, which tackles the question of how memories of previous struggles shape present social movements (as proposed by Ann Rigney), this research note provides a first idea of the effect of the collective memory of the violent 1960s “New Left” protest cycle in Japan on the most recent protest cycle triggered by the Fukushima nuclear disaster in 2011. At their peak, these protests drew up to 200,000 participants during the summer of 2012 – a fact often downplayed in Western media coverage. As an access point to the study of the memory work pursued by and within the movement, this research note analyses written narratives of two activist intellectuals of the post-Fukushima protest cycle. The analysis shows a clear dissociation from the violent legacy of the 1960s that emphasises the distinctively peaceful character of the present protests and claims for them an equally important status in history.

Keywords: Japan, Fukushima, collective memory, social movements, protest cycle, 1960s

At first sight memory and activism may seem poles apart, with the former oriented towards the past and the latter towards the future. At second sight, however, they are deeply entangled. (Rigney 2018: 371)

Demonstrations are no spontaneous phenomena. They are constituents of a social movement’s action profile embedded within larger protest cycles. The concept of protest cycles visualises the intensity of public protest over time and space – rising and falling in waves of mobilisation and demobilisation phases. A protest cycle is usually triggered by a political opportunity per-

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ceived by movement actors, which they use to push for social and/or political change by entering “sequences of intensified information flow and interactions” with the authorities (Tarrow 2011: 199). The connectedness of different protest cycles over time has been stressed in the structural (e.g. organisations, networks, abeyance) as well as in the cultural research approach to social movements (e.g. framing). An emerging research field in the cultural perspective in the past few years is the role of collective memory¹ in and for social movements, as collective memory can be either a constraint or a driver of mobilisation (Della Porta et al. 2018, Doerr 2014, Kubal / Becerra 2014, Rigney 2018, Zamponi 2013).

Following the earthquake, tsunami and the subsequent nuclear meltdowns in three of four reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant on 11 March 2011, Japan experienced a wave of public expression of political discontent – a fact largely neglected in the international media coverage on the social and political impact of the triple disaster. Anger about the government’s mismanagement of the crisis, especially the lack of information concerning radiation levels and the related risks,² sparked street demonstrations in the summer of 2012 with up to 200,000 participants in front of the Japanese parliament in Tokyo, which spread from the capital all over the country (see Brown 2018, Chiavacci / Obinger 2018, Redwolf 2013, Wiemann 2018). This anti-nuclear protest wave which peaked in summer 2012 and which was followed by several spin-off movements³ in the following years (e.g. anti-racism (2013/14), anti-security legislation (2013/14), pro-democracy (2015)), marked the end of a 40-year absence of major public protest in Japan.

Many scholars explain the long time span without significant public protest action in Japan with the public memory of the protest cycle of the 1960s and 70s, which was characterised by violent clashes between protesters and authorities. The perceived “senseless violence” of this period produced a negative protest image, which effectively constrained people from participating in social movements for many years.⁴ A major actor in shaping the negative pro-

1 Collective memory can be broadly defined as “the set of symbols and practices referring to the past which are shared by a community of people” (Zamponi 2013: 225). However, memory is intrinsically plural, as individuals can belong to different communities sharing different collective memories. Therefore, scholars differentiate between “*collective memory* [...] as the memory shared by a community or group, *social memory* as the memory spread across the entire society, and *public memory* as that part of the latter which refers to the public sphere” (ibid.: 225).

2 A concrete trigger for the demonstrations in summer 2012 was the planned recommissioning of the Ōi nuclear power plant units No. 3 and 4 in the Kansai region (western Japan), which had been temporarily taken offline after March 2011 for safety checks. The – in the eyes of many – careless procedure contributed to turning anger into action. Summer 2012 was the peak of the anti-nuclear demonstrations; however, the movement is active until today (with fewer participants, of course).

3 Spin-off movements draw their impetus from initiator movements which stand at the beginning of a new protest cycle; see McAdam 2013.

4 Major issues triggering the protests of the 1960s protest cycle were the revision of the Japan-US security treaty or Anzen Hoshō Jōyaku in Japanese (Ampo in short) (1960), the Vietnam War (around 1965), the studies and living conditions of university students (late 1960s) and the reaffirmation of the Ampo treaty in 1970. While the student-dominated protests in the early and late 1960s to early 1970s were characterised

test image was the Japanese mainstream media, which produced and reproduced “iconic images” of the United Red Army (Rengō Sekigun) incident (also Asama Sansō incident or siege). In winter 1972, a splinter group of the United Red Army fled to a mountain resort, took a civilian hostage, and was arrested by the police. The final assault, which cost the lives of two police officers, was broadcast live on TV. After the siege ended, it became known that the group “had carried out a terrible internal purge in which a dozen members of their own group had been tortured and killed”. This retrospective interpretation of the “New Left” protest cycle in terms of “a sequence of senseless violence [...] discredited all protest activity” that was to follow (Steinhoff 2018: 38–39).

With this research note, I intend to draw attention to the field of collective memory and its impact on contemporary social movements in Japan. While the collective memory of the violent 1960s protest cycle often serves as an explanation for the long period without major protest action in Japan, thus far no systematic empirical research has been done on the question of how movement actors today deal with the 1960s legacy or why despite this legacy movement actors were able to mobilise high numbers of participants during the protest cycle triggered by the events in 2011. In the following, I briefly summarise the field of collective memory and social movements and outline, based on the works of Ann Rigney, possible research questions in this realm for the case of Japan after 2011. I then single out the case of the Kantei-mae protests in Tokyo, which reached a peak in summer 2012, and discuss challenges concerning the methodological approach to studying collective memory in contemporary movements. As a result, and as an access point to the field of interest, I suggest analysing narratives of social movement intellectuals, who can be considered producers or makers of narratives forming a collective memory of a series of movement events. To provide a first idea of collective memory narratives of the 2012 protests, I look at the works of two memory makers – Noma Yasumichi and Oguma Eiji – and I draw a careful conclusion pointing to further fields of investigation.

Collective memory and social movements

Ann Rigney, a professor at Utrecht University, and since January 2019 the leader of an ERC Advanced Grant research project with the title “Remembering Activism: The Cultural Memory of Protest in Europe (REACT)”, characterises

by violent clashes with authorities, the Anti-Vietnam-War movement in 1965 remained peaceful in its tactics. As the focus of this research note is the question of how today’s activists deal with the collective memory of the violent 1960s protest cycle, in the following, I concentrate on references to the Apmo protests. For more background information on the 1960s protest cycle as a whole see, for example, Derichs (1998) or Avenell (2010).

the “memory-activism nexus” as “a complex one, a vortex of recycling, recollection and political action that can be summed up as ‘civic memory’”. Within the memory-activism nexus she distinguishes three interplaying research fields: the first concerns the question of “how actors struggle to produce cultural memory or to steer future remembrance” of their actions (memory activism). The second one deals with the question of “how earlier struggles for a better world are culturally recollected” (memory of activism) and the third one covers the question of “how the cultural memory of earlier struggles informs new movements in the present” (memory in activism) (Rigney 2018: 372).

Rigney points out correctly that these research fields interplay. However, they differ from each other in their point of view. The two fields of “memory in activism” and “memory activism” intertwine more closely in the sense that they share a focus on the role of a collective memory of one (or more) social movement(s). In contrast, the field of “memory of activism”, as Rigney characterises it, rather refers to the more general social memory of a broad public sphere.

Against this background, and in the context of post-3.11 Japan, two interesting research fields open up. The first one touches upon the question of the role of “memory in activism” and may be framed as such: How did movement actors of the 2011 protest cycle deal with the memory of the previous protest cycle of the 1960s, which – supposedly because of its image of “senseless violence” – functions as a major constraint for participation in social movements in Japan? What did actors do in order to lower perceived risks and costs for potential “new” participants in demonstrations?

The second research field concerns the “memory activism” of the 2011 movement actors, drawing attention to the question: How do actors want their protests to be remembered in the future and what is their strategy to be remembered in a certain way? The research field of “memory of activism” in this context plays a role when thinking about the public memory of the 1960s as “violent”, which according to Steinhoff and others constrained protest in the past (see above). A second interesting aspect arising from this research field is the question of whether the movements after 2011 were successful in reframing the image of protest in the broader public and/or how the 2011 protests are remembered in the broader society today, eight years later.

According to the outlined objective of this research note, the following exploration adopts the perspective of “memory in activism”. This approach serves as an access point for developing a comprehensive research agenda on collective memory and the 2011 protest cycle in Japan.

The Kantei-mae protests in Japan after 2011

In the aftermath of March 2011, many anti-nuclear demonstrations took place all over Japan, most of them in the capital Tokyo. These demonstrations (as one form of protest from a whole range of possible protest actions, see e.g. Della Porta 2013), were organised by different, albeit in parts overlapping networks of social movement organisations (Wiemann 2018). Among others,⁵ a network of civil groups, the Metropolitan Coalition Against Nukes (MCAN or Shutōen Hangenpatsu Rengō),⁶ emerged and organised the so-called Kantei-mae (in front of the Prime Minister's Office) or Friday demonstrations, as they take place in the form of standing demonstrations every Friday evening from 6 to 8 pm in front of the Prime Minister's office.⁷ These protests started at the end of March 2012 with 300 participants and experienced a peak in June and July 2012 when about 200,000 people participated in the weekly rallies (Redwolf 2013: 19). MCAN's Friday demonstrations are in addition to those of the trade union-led Sayōnara Genpatsu (Goodbye Nuclear Power) demonstrations, which are widely known and have gained considerable attention from the scholarly world (e.g. Brown 2018, Cassegard 2018, Machimura / Satoh 2016, Manabe 2015, Tamura 2015). Furthermore, MCAN was successful in the sense that on 22 August 2012 they were allowed to meet with then-Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko – an occasion at which they could take their claims directly into the political arena (Oguma 2013c: 243). Just as any social movement, the actors of the Kantei-mae action aim at building a unitary interpretation or a consistent narrative of the period of events in which they are involved, in order to build a strong collective identity and to form a competitive collective memory narrative in the public sphere, which may serve as a basis for future mobilisations.

Methodological approach

A consistent narrative connecting a series of events forms a collective memory within a group, which is deeply connected to a group's collective identity. Collective memory has, in this sense, as Zamponi (2018: 15) points out, “a regulatory function: it defines, through its mechanisms of selection and removal,

5 For example, the Genpatsu Yamero! (Stop Nuclear!), the Genpatsu Yamero Hiroba (No Nukes Plaza) or the Sayōnara Genpatsu (Goodbye Nuclear Power) demonstrations, to name just a few. For a more comprehensive account please see Wiemann 2018 and Brown 2018.

6 In 2015, MCAN merged from a network of organisations to a single organisation. One reason for this is that members were unable to maintain the activities of the network and their former individual organisations at the same time (Shutōen Hangenpatsu Rengō 2015).

7 In cooperation with other groups and networks, MCAN also participated in marching demonstrations.

the boundaries of a group's membership and the plausibility and relevance criteria for the group identity". While a consistent collective memory on the one hand fosters a group's identity, it also has an impact in the public sphere. There, various collective memory narratives of different groups collide and compete against each other, aiming at dominating one another. While this impact of collective identity seems logical, it is a challenge to approach the study of the "slippery phenomenon" of collective memory methodologically.

As a solution to this, Kansteiner (2002: 179) calls for applying methods of media and communication studies, specifically those of media reception, ranging from "traditional historiography to poststructural approaches". He conceptualises collective memory as "the result of the interaction among three types of historical factors: the intellectual and cultural traditions that frame all our representations of the past, the memory makers who selectively adopt and manipulate these traditions, and the memory consumers who use, ignore, or transform such artifacts to their own interests" (Kansteiner 2002: 180). Collective memory, although it is a distinctly collective phenomenon, thus "only manifests itself in the actions and statements of individuals [...and it] is as much a result of conscious manipulation as unconscious absorption and it is always mediated" (Kansteiner 2002: 180).

To get an impression of the production side of collective memory of the Kantei-mae protests and their framings, especially those dealing with the meaning of previous protest cycles for the present, I look at the writings of memory makers of this series of events. Memory makers can be broadly defined as those who make meaning, interpret series of events and tie them together to form a story. Such memory makers use media to reach their audience – be it monuments, pictures, videos, books, weblogs and other digital and social media (Neiger et al. 2011). In this sense, movement intellectuals in particular qualify as memory makers as they often provide an overall framing and a first consistent interpretive story connecting events scattered over time and space using media to disseminate their ideas. Social movement actors usually make use of the entire range of media platforms to form their stories; however, the media that provide a most consistent story are books, articles or video documentaries, as these media types require the author to provide an overall framing and common theme throughout the text/storyboard. In my attempt to map and demarcate a first impression of such narratives, I concentrate on two books written by movement intellectuals, thus on narratives making and shaping memory from within the movement. However, further research in this field naturally requires including other media types produced by a variety of actors as well.

Movement memory makers

Several left-leaning intellectuals supported the Kantei-mae protests in Tokyo. Two of them attracted my attention during fieldwork for my dissertation from 2013 to 2014 (Wiemann 2018): the historical sociologist Oguma Eiji and the freelance publisher Noma Yasumichi, both of whom wrote and published books already in late 2012 and 2013 about the protests during summer 2012 (Noma 2012, Oguma 2013a). Noma, born in 1966, was on the staff of the so-called “twitter demonstrations” organised by a network group called TwitNo-Nukes, which started in April 2011 and took place once a month in Shibuya (a very popular district of Tokyo, especially among young people). Noma later became a member of the Metropolitan Coalition Against Nukes (MCAN), the main organiser of the protests of 2012. When the most intensive anti-nuclear demonstrations subsided and, as a spin-off movement, the issue of hate crimes – especially against Koreans residing in Japan – gained momentum, he became involved in the anti-racism movement, a topic about which he also wrote and published several books. Noma is thus an experienced intellectual movement activist engaged in several issue fields.

Oguma, born in 1962, is a professor at Keiō University in Tokyo and was active with the Kantei-mae protesters to the extent that he was part of the delegation of protesters who in August 2012 met then-Prime Minister Noda. Oguma is known not only in Japan but also internationally for his research on the construction of “Japaneseness” (see Askew 2001) as well as for his research on the 1960s protests in Japan (cited for example extensively by Knaudt 2016). Both are thus no newcomers to social movements nor to writing, editing and publishing.

Naturally, for further research, a comprehensive exploration of the discursive field is necessary. The two books I concentrate on here provide but a first insight into the issue. My analysis serves to awaken interest in engaging in further research in this field and to provide some first ideas as to where this research may lead.

Two related narratives

The two books *The Friday Protest in Front of the Prime Minister’s Office: The Voice of a Demonstration Changes Politics* (Noma 2012) and *The People Who Stop Nuclear Power: From 3.11 to the Prime Minister’s Office* (Oguma 2013a) are related to one another: Noma’s book from 2012 comes with a book wrapper (which is quite common in Japan) with a blurb by Oguma saying:

A valuable record from a witness. It will remain in modern history as a book written from the inside of a movement, which accounts for the first civil movement in Japan

since the 1960s Ampo protests, which appeared internationally at the same time as the “Arab spring” and “Occupy Wallstreet” movements.⁸

With this statement – as promotional as it is – Oguma ties Noma’s book to the narrative he constructs in his own book, which was published about nine months later. The master frame Oguma refers to in his book is built around the importance of documenting events from the point of view of a movement, the meaning of such “live” records for the making and writing of history and for emphasising the historical importance of the 2012 events by relating them to the 1960s movements in Japan and more recent movements taking place in different parts of the world. In the introduction to his book, Oguma writes (2013b: 4):

After the Great East Japan Earthquake and nuclear accident on 11 March 2011, many things happened. In this book, I intend to recount these. I research modern Japanese history from a sociological point of view, and what I often feel are the limits of missing records from the time of the happening of events. Especially when it comes to civic experiences or social movements, oftentimes we only find police records or mass media articles. That is why history is written based only on such sources. Of course, there are also publications of accounts of participants. However, if these are written down many years later, because of the passage of time, memories deviate remarkably. Beyond this, activists tend to write down their opinions and points of view. Of course, this is not bad, but it cannot be used as a record or database. Within my field of research for example, the accounts of participants in the 1960s Ampo struggle did not remain in an unfiltered way. We do not find much besides police records, newspaper articles, publications of political parties and trade unions, or the memoirs of intellectuals or leaders of student groups.

It is thus the concept of Oguma’s book to document the voices of movement actors as unfiltered and as close in time to the actual events as possible. Oguma is the editor of the book and provides the introduction (cited above) as well as a history and analysis of the movement after 3.11 in part four. The first part is a group interview with some prominent movement actors (spokespersons). Part three is an interview with Kan Naoto, who was Prime Minister at the time of the Fukushima disaster. Part one and three sort of frame part two, which gives “various testimonies”, for which Oguma asked 50 people engaged in various activities related to the Fukushima disaster to report about how they experienced what happened and about the activities they have been involved in since then. The book closes with a part written by the political scientist Kinoshita Chigaya about the development of the anti-nuclear demonstrations and an appendix providing a list of anti-nuclear demonstrations. Considering Oguma’s blurb for Noma’s book, Oguma thus establishes a connection between Noma’s story and the “various testimonies” from Kantei-mae and other related accounts he compiles in his own book.

8 All citations translated by the author.

Noma's book portrays in six chapters his experience of the civil activities from the first stirrings to the "big" demonstrations and internal problems of the protest organisers during summer 2012. This is followed by an account of the direct exchange with the political arena. The book closes with Noma's thoughts on what the movement has achieved so far. The appendix provides several short statements from different participants in the demonstrations as well a list of demonstrations in front of the Kantei. Thus, for Noma too, it seems important to document the many voices of individuals at the demonstrations as well.

Two shared themes

In the following, I systematically interpret the two books' text passages referring to the Ampo protests in the 1960s, which were the largest at the time and which are mostly associated with a violent image even today. Looking at such text sections, it appears that the two books share two common themes. The first common theme is, as pointed out above, the reason for writing the books, which is to provide eyewitness accounts from the inside of the movement. While Noma intends to document what happened from his personal perspective, Oguma develops this thought further to the necessity of timely eyewitness records to assign the movement its proper place in history. Oguma thus more explicitly connects the recent movement to previous ones and does not shy away from drawing comparisons to other protests in Japan (the Ampo protest period included) and the world.

However, the second common theme of the two works may be framed in terms of a clear dissociation of the Kantei-mae from the 1960s Ampo movement. Noma refers to the Ampo movement almost exclusively when he reports about media content that discusses and/or compares Kantei-mae to the period of the 1960s or other movements in the world. He states for example (p. 17):

I, who was a middle-aged late-comer activist, carry a vague romanticism [based on images of protests in the Philippines in 1986, Tiananmen Square in 1989 in China, the occupation of Tahrir square in Egypt in 2011, and the 2003 sound demos in Japan against the war in Iraq] about civil movements in my heart, but this completely rolls past the MCAN activists. Nobody ever spoke of such romantic feelings, neither in the meetings after the weekly demonstrations nor in other everyday conversations. I think that even listening to TV newscasters getting excited about "this [kind of mobilisation] [has not been seen] since the 60s Ampo [protests]", nobody really felt affected by it. The staffers are rather unconscious about the difference between the 60s and 70s Ampo [protests], or between Zenkyōto and Zengakuren,⁹ or the relationship of radical sects to the movement, and they also took no interest in it.

Interestingly, the passage following this citation, in which Noma states that even after the largest demonstrations, the only subject of conversations among

9 The two major student organisations involved in the 1960s and late 60s to 70s movements.

the activists concerned the safety of the demonstrators or communication strategies with the police, is also cited by Oguma (p. 239). In addition to this, regarding the peaceful character of the protests, Noma also dissociates the Kantei-mae protests from Okinawa's peace movement, Gandhi's radical non-violent movement and others. He strongly stresses the specific character and peaceful strategy of the Kantei-mae protests solely adapted to the present social and political conditions in Japan (p. 136):

The style of the Kantei-mae protests was [exclusively] decided based on the actual [social] and political situation in Japan. In a situation of social movement phobia, political apathy, and the extreme attitude of avoidance of violence in the 21st century, the most effective way [to address] people who vaguely think "demos are scary" or "people going to demos are strange" is to show them that this is not the case.

When reflecting on the image of the Kantei-mae protests' claim that it is a style allowing "normal" people to participate in – an image Noma is opposed to (because of its discriminating undertone) – he cites the political commentator Magosaki Ukeru, who characterises the difference between Ampo and Kantei-mae based on their organisational structure. For the Ampo mobilisation, strong leaders and group membership played a significant role. For the Kantei-mae mobilisation, on the other hand, individuals mobilised based on their own and individual reflections. Therefore, people from all ages and social classes participate (p. 250).¹⁰

Oguma, who in the analytical part four of his book undertakes a thorough examination of the societal background of the 1960s and the 2012 protests, joins in on this argument. He characterises the Kantei-mae protests by the absence of hierarchical structures and charismatic leaders while the Ampo protests were strongly typified by these. The reason for this, according to Oguma, is the different social structures of the time. The modularised and networked (civil) society today stands here in contrast to the civil society of the 1960s, which was mainly structured by groups such as trade unions, neighbourhood associations or business circles. Without the (legitimizing) presence of these groups, social movement demonstrations would never have been taken seriously. By representing such social groups, movements are perceived to express the opinion of more people than might be seen on the street; if people come as individuals, this is not the case (pp. 252–253). Oguma also points out that the Ampo protests were interpreted as an expression of a "people's will to

10 In this research note, I concentrate on references to the Ampo protests. However, for the more knowledgeable reader of Japanese social movements, here is a short comment on references to the Anti-Vietnam-War movement (Beheiren in short in Japanese, see footnote 4): Noma refers to this peaceful movement when pointing out that tactics for restricting a movement to a single issue (as the Kantei-mae does) is not a new phenomenon, as the Beheiren movement, the World Peace Now campaign against the Iraq war in 2003 and the Free Tibet movement in 2008 did so as well (pp. 164–165). In Oguma's book, references to Beheiren can be found in some of the "various testimonies". Here, one author points out that the Kantei-mae atmosphere resembles the past Beheiren protests while others point to this period as the background to their childhoods (pp. 41, 76, 157). The memory of the Beheiren movement is a point for a follow-up with more comprehensive research in the future.

build a new society by themselves”; consequently, the Kantei-mae protests would have to be understood as an expression of “social responsibility of individual citizens” (p. 234). One more important characterisation of the Kantei-mae protests noted by Oguma is their sustainability and durability compared to other protests for example in Paris in 1968 (2 months), in Korea 1987 (1 month) or in Egypt 2011 (20 days) (p. 245); MCAN has continued organising Kantei-mae protests up until today.

Conclusion and outlook

In a nutshell, it can be said that these two movement intellectuals do not directly consider the legacy of the 1960s to be a constraint to the mobilisations after 2011, nor do they refer to the 1960s in any negative way. One reason for this could be that a considerable number of movement participants in summer 2012 had an activist background in the 1960s (see for example testimonies in Oguma 2013a: 41, 79 and Noma 2012: Appendix). But the authors apparently feel a strong need to distinguish themselves from the past protest cycle and to emphasise the exceptional nature of the recent protests and their organisational features and peacefulness, which have been exclusively adjusted to the social and political context of today’s Japan. The authors thus use the examination of the past to point out the distinct characteristics of today, which they want to be remembered in the future (giving the movement its correct place in history). The analysis of the books of these two memory makers thus confirms the deep entanglement of “memory in activism” and “memory activism” within a social movement (see Rigney 2018).

However, this first analysis of memory makers’ accounts only provides a small glimpse of a much larger research field concerning the memory of past protest cycles and their meaning for the memory of present protest cycles. In the “memory in activism” and “memory activism” fields, first, there is a need to prove whether the interpretation of the past and the present as framed by Noma and Oguma resonates within the broader movement; that is, the reception of this narrative needs to be studied. Further, competing narratives within the movement need to be investigated and the most influential narratives need to be singled out. In a second step, in the “memory of activism” field, perceptions and interpretations of the broader public of summer 2012 and the resonance of the narratives provided by movement actors should find their way into the research. Looking at the issue of activism and memory from a transnational perspective may also further the general understanding concerning the engagement of present movement actors with the legacies of past movement cycles, examined in different social and cultural contexts.

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