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DISPOSITIF DYNAMICS: STATE NARRATIVES AND COUNTER-MEMORIES IN THE FABRIC OF COLLECTIVE MEMORY

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Abstract

Collective memory is not a neutral archive of the past, but a contested field shaped by power, institutional practice, and struggles over legitimacy. This article argues that state historiography functions as a disciplinary dispositif in Michel Foucault's sense: a coordinated network of institutions, discourses, and practices that regulates what becomes historically intelligible, publicly commemorated, and socially "true". By bringing the concept of dispositif into memory studies, the article clarifies how official narratives are stabilized through education, museums, media, and commemorative rituals, while alternative accounts are rendered marginal, unintelligible, or politically suspect. At the same time, the article shows that counter-memory is not an external alternative to official history. It is produced within the same power relations that organize dominant memory, and it intervenes by disrupting their effects.

This paper further develops this framework by examining how digital infrastructures reconfigure the politics of memory. Digital platforms expand the circulation of counter-memories through decentralized archives and networked testimony, yet they also introduce algorithmic and commercial mechanisms that modulate visibility and recognition. The central contribution of the article is to conceptualize contemporary memory politics as a struggle occurring across both institutional and platform-mediated regimes of truth, where the production of remembrance and the possibility of historical recognition are continuously negotiated.

Keywords: Dispositif, state narratives, historiography, counter-memory, Michel Foucault, collective memory, algorithmic visibility, disciplinary power.

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Introduction

Why do certain versions of history become widely accepted, while others are pushed aside or ignored? What roles do institutions and systems of knowledge play in determining which memories are acknowledged as reliable and which are dismissed as unreliable? These questions are central to contemporary debates on collective memory, historiography, and power. This article examines the tension between official state narratives and the often-overlooked memories of marginalized groups by drawing on Michel Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power, power/knowledge relations, and the concept of dispositif. Memory is not a passive record of what happened, but a dynamic process through which societies continuously shape and reshape what is remembered and forgotten. What is perceived as "common sense," "self-evident," or historically "clear" is not determined solely by empirical evidence or logical coherence, but by the repetition, circulation, and institutional endorsement of particular narratives. When political authorities, educational systems, and dominant media repeatedly advance a specific interpretation of the past, that version acquires the status of familiarity and legitimacy. By contrast, alternative accounts articulated by marginalized groups often appear unfamiliar, implausible, or unintelligible, not because they lack substance, but because they lack institutional amplification. As a result, historical intelligibility itself becomes a function of power.

In historiography, the idea of dispositif helps to explain how collective memory is formed both by official state stories and by alternative narratives from different social groups. State narratives often promote an official version of history that supports national identity or political legitimacy, and social cohesion. These narratives help to justify existing institutions and are usually spread through schools, media, and other official channels. Such processes do not merely transmit historical knowledge; they actively regulate which interpretations are rendered visible, credible, and authoritative.

On the other hand, counter-memory comes from voices that push back against the dominant narratives, often sharing the experiences and struggles of marginalized communities. These counter-memories contribute to a more plural and contested understanding of the past by exposing silences, omissions, and acts of historical homogenization. Rather than simply opposing official history, counter-memories challenge the conditions under which historical knowledge is produced, received, and legitimized.

From this perspective, history cannot be understood as a neutral record of past events. It functions as a complex system composed of institutions, symbolic practices, discursive norms, and practices, that work together to determine what is remembered and how it is understood. Schools, museums, traditions, and the media, operate together to privilege certain narratives while

marginalizing others. The sense of “real” or “true” history is created not only by facts, but also through repetition, emotional resonance, and symbolic associations. Therefore, memories that do not align with the mainstream history are not simply ignored, but also actively sidelined, silenced, or perceived as unreliable.

Conversely, counter-memories often come from people on the margins, including survivors of violence, diaspora communities, activists, and digitally networked publics. These voices do not simply present different or alternative facts; they challenge the very way history is created, received, and disseminated. Rather than simply flipping official narratives, counter-memories often take unexpected, diverse forms that challenge the conventional ways in which we are accustomed to remembering the past. This article provides a comparative look at how memory is constructed, challenged, and transformed in different social and political settings, including post-Soviet war histories, genocide memory regimes, digital projects that preserve forgotten or silenced voices.

The article is not merely a replication of Foucault’s theories; it uses his idea of the dispositif as a starting point for further analytical development. It asks why some stories from the past become what we all know and accept, while others are left out or forgotten? When and how alternative memories emerge and are heard, and when they fade into the background? And how are digital spaces changing the way we remember, question, and tell our stories today?

Methodologically, the study adopts a theoretical-analytical approach grounded in Foucauldian genealogy and discourse analysis. It develops a conceptual framework that treats collective memory as a dispositif constituted by institutional practices, discursive formations, and material and digital infrastructures. The analysis is supported through comparative illustrative cases that clarify how power operates in production, regulation, and contestation of historical narratives.

In this framework, memory is understood not as a passive archive of past, but as an active, contested field through which political subjectivities and collective identities are continually negotiated. The politics of memory concerns who has the right to remember, what is remembered, and and the infrastructures through which memory is produced. It operates as an extension of power that is simultaneously disciplinary, productive, and increasingly data-driven. Counter-memories, in turn, are not simply oppositional, but represent interventions that disrupt dominant configurations of meaning and open up possibilities for alternative historical understandings.

Conceptual Framework: Foucault’s Disciplinary Power, Memory, and the Dispositif

M. Foucault reconceptualizes power by rejecting the traditional view that it is settled only in centralized institutions or is exercised exclusively through top-

down authority. Instead, he positions power as diffuse and omnipresent, embedded in the micro-relations of our everyday social interaction. It operates in subtle and diffuse ways, passing through the norms and rules we foster, the language we use to communicate, and the practices of institutions that shape our behavior and perceptions (Foucault, 1977, p. 27). Power does not flow from a single, superior source, but is exercised through “capillary” mechanisms-minor, diffuse forms of governance that penetrate all levels of society. These mechanisms regulate behavior, influence how individuals perceive themselves and the world, and structure the way knowledge is produced and disseminated (Foucault, 1977, p. 26). These mechanisms do more than simply maintain order; they shape ways of thinking and acting that seem natural and inevitable, spreading power deep into public life.

Foucault extends this analysis beyond sites traditionally associated with discipline- such as prisons, schools, or military service, but also encompass more subtle cultural domains, such as collective memory. In this sphere, institutions are stabilizing social identities and maintaining ideological equivalence by controlling what is remembered, how memories are formed, and which stories are prioritized or excluded (Foucault, 1980). Memory, therefore, functions as a political technology: its regulation ensures the reproduction of social order and the legitimization of power (Rose, 1999, p. 95). Public education, national ceremonies, museum exhibitions, and media narratives participate in this process, not only transmitting historical information, but also building consensus around dominant interpretations while marginalizing alternative perspectives (Foucault, 1977, pp. 27-43; Ricoeur, 2004, pp. 67-85). This dynamic demonstrates how collective memory is continuously shaped and reshaped to serve current power relations and social cohesion.

However, alongside these dominant memories exist counter-memories, in Foucault's sense, refer to stories that resist or criticize official historiography (Foucault, 2003, pp. 39-47). These counter-memories challenge not only the factual content of dominant accounts, but also the institutional and discursive frameworks that determine which stories will arise as recognized and which will remain ignored. They emerge from oral traditions, activist initiatives, artistic interventions, and testimonies from marginalized communities, undermining the integrity of state-sanctioned historiography and exposing the silences and omissions on which it is based.

To understand the interaction between official memory and its counter-effects, this article has referred to Foucault's idea of the dispositif as a multilayered combination of rhetorics, institutions, legal norms, administrative measures, and spatial forms that are organized in response to particular historical conditions (Foucault, 1980, pp. 195). In the politics of memory, the dispositif acts as a regulatory matrix, subtly delimiting what can be thought and said. Its

influence is rarely expressed in overt censorship; instead, it shapes the cognitive and sensory field in which meaning is constructed, determining when and how certain memories can become visible or remain hidden. As Agamben (2009, pp. 16-19) notes, the dispositif is not simply a mechanism for controlling information; it is a structural force that governs the conditions under which truths can emerge. Counter-memory arises both from within and against the system. It's not a simple alternative version of history, but a "shake" that disrupts the order of the things and authority that is built into official narratives. This dynamic underscore the complex and contested nature of memory formation. This demonstrates that the interplay between dominant memories (which are shaped by official institutions and power structures) and counter-memories (which resist or challenge these dominant domains) shows that collective memory is not something simple or fixed. Instead, it is a complex and continuously debated phenomenon, with different groups and forces struggling over the way history is remembered, interpreted, and transmitted. So, memory formation is a complex process, influenced by power, politics, social context, and resistance. It is always subject to conflict, contradiction and negotiation.

From this perspective, counter-memory isn't something entirely independent of the dispositive – it is born from within it, while simultaneously resisting it. It's not simply a parallel version of official history, but a disruptive force that questions the power woven into dominant narratives. States shape what people collectively remember by designing school curricula, organizing public commemorations, and repeating media-approved versions of the past. All of this serves to discipline collective memory so that it remains consistent with political authority and a particular conception of national identity (Foucault, 1977, p. 194). Counter-memories expose the cracks in this disciplinary structure, proposing alternative forms of historical imagination that challenge the homo-genization of the past.

Thus, within Foucault's theoretical framework of disciplinary power and dispositif, memory is discussed not as a static archive of the past, but as a contested field where power is exercised, resisted, and transformed. It simultaneously becomes both a tool of governance and a platform for struggle, where the past is constantly reinterpreted in light of current power relations.

State Historiography as a Mechanism of Memory Discipline

State historiography functions as a regulatory framework that constructs and circulates selective interpretations of the past. Through mechanisms of normalization, it defines whose histories are visible, whose are minimized. These elements combine a memory dispositif that sustains ideological co-

herence and national identity (Foucault, 1977, pp. 196-197; Garland, 2001, pp. 20-35). This process is accompanying how societies maintain a shared sense of belonging and continuity over time.

Education systems, national museums, media institutions, and state commemorations serve as channels through which these narratives are embedded in public consciousness (Foucault, 1980, pp. 85-86; Markwick, 2012, pp. 45-47). School textbooks reinforce consistent timelines, justify national achievements, and often marginalize episodes viewed as controversial. Museums curate cultural memory, legitimizing specific readings of the past, while state rituals encode political values into symbolic practices (Ricoeur, 2004, pp. 120-123). In reality, by actively influencing how society remembers the past, these institutions help to preserve and replicate existing systems of social and political authority, shaping what people collectively remember and believe about their history and identity.

In the Soviet Union, for instance, the Great Patriotic War was portrayed as a narrative of heroic sacrifice, while episodes of internal repression such as the Gulag or Holodomor were downplayed (Markwick, 2012, pp. 38-40). Similarly, the denial of the Armenian Genocide in Turkish historiography reflects an effort to preserve national cohesion and sovereignty by reframing historical violence as civil conflict, thereby denying its systemic nature and discrediting alternative accounts (Akçam, 2012, pp. 52-55). School curricula in the United States have traditionally emphasized stories of the Confederacy and the American Revolution, while stories of Native peoples and African-American slavery have often been marginalized or given limited representation (Ladson-Billings, 1998, pp. 15-23). Comparatively, official narratives about the 1994 genocide in Rwanda were shaped through state media and education to promote national unity and reconciliation, but critics note that these narratives in some cases foster the marginalization of certain victim groups and political views (Straus, 2006, 129-141). In South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission challenged the official historiography of apartheid[1] to amplify minority voices and expose state abuses (Tutu, 1999, pp. 53-67). In Armenia, official commemorations emphasize the national sacrifice and resilience of the Armenian Genocide, establishing a collective identity, while other regional or minority perspectives are often marginalized (Balakyan, 2003, pp. 17-37).

National museums also serve as “guardian” of “official memory”: the National Museum of China emphasizes stories of state unity and continuity, minimizing periods of political instability such as the Cultural Revolution (Harrell, 2001), and the Royal War Museum in the United Kingdom emphasizes British perseverance in the First and Second World Wars, while suppressing themes of colonial violence (Noakes & Pattinson, 2011).

Linguistic operations constitute a functional component of the dispositif of memory, too. Terms such as “liberation,” “sovereignty,” “martyrdom,” and “civil conflict,” serve as semantic mechanisms that encode historically conditional meanings and classifications. These lexical constructs are embedded within institutionalized discourses, where they participate in the regulation of historical intelligibility. Rather than transferring neutral information, such terminology operates within discursive formations that organize what may be said about the past and under what conditions it acquires institutional legitimacy. For example, in the context of the Armenian Genocide, Turkish state historiography uses the terms “civil conflict” (“iç savaş”) and “relocation” (“tehcir”) instead of using the terms “genocide” or “mass extermination.” Meanwhile, in Armenian collective memory, the terms “martyrdom” (նահա-տակություն) and “genocide” (ցեղասպանություն) emphasize national identity, highlighting suffering and endurance. These linguistic choices serve as powerful semantic tools that frame historical events in a way that obscures state responsibility and mitigates accusations of systematic violence (Akçam, 2012, pp. 45-48). Foucault’s (1977, pp. 78-80) formulation of “technologies of governance” situates these practices within broader apparatuses that structure the distribution of meaning across temporal and political domains.

Thus, working together, these institutional mechanisms normalize and reproduce dominant historical narratives, shaping collective memory in accordance with political power. These examples illustrate that show how institutions like education, museums, media, and memorials not only reflect history, but actively shape and distort collective memory to maintain political power and national identity.

In parallel, Foucault’s (1972) concept of the archive outlines the historical a priori that conditions the emergence, circulation, and stabilization of discourse. The archive does not merely store statements; it defines the parameters within which statements become describable, repeatable, and institutionally recognized. As such, the dispositif encompasses not only institutional and material arrangements but also the linguistic protocols that regulate memory production. Through these interlinked mechanisms, memory is not preserved but operationalized: it is compelled to processes of selection, exclusion, and formatting within historically situated regimes of truth.

The rise of digital technologies reconfigures the operational field of the memory dispositif and introduces new complexities. While traditional platforms controlled by state institutions continue to curate authorized historical Narratives, digital infrastructures introduce additional vectors of memory production and regulation. Social media networks, online repositories, and decentralized archives enable the circulation of alternative narratives that may bypass conventional institutional filters. These spaces, however, are not outside

systems of control. They are embedded within algorithmic architectures that modulate visibility according to engagement metrics, platform governance policies, and commercial imperatives.

The disciplinary function of state historiography thus persists, though it is increasingly mediated through digital modalities. While not totalizing, its efficacy is sustained through the combined operation of institutional authority, symbolic representation, discursive normalization, and digital modulation.

Marginal Memories and the Operation of Counter-Memory

Counter-memories arise where dominant frames of memory fail to encompass the lived experiences, identities, and pains of particular communities. They do not simply represent a denial or opposition to official narratives but rather operate as an independent epistemic field where alternative historical perceptions are formed based on local knowledge, emotional connections, and embodied forms (Foucault, 2003, pp. 7-9). Compared to state archives and institutional commemorations, which seek to stabilize and homogenize public memory, counter-memories often rely on oral traditions, material culture, performative ceremonies, and decentralized network histories, making them difficult to suppress or erase. For example, in Haiti, where Vodou ceremonial songs and rituals carry memories of slavery, the Haitian Revolution, and the US occupation. These expressions are no longer simply cultural elements, but elements of memory that preserve historical knowledge, resisting colonial and neocolonial historiographies (Joseph & Cleophat, 2016). Vodou, as a counter-memory, expresses stories that are excluded from dominant historiographies: stories of resistance, survival, and cultural continuity that stand up to reduction to simplistic colonial categorizations of Haiti as a failed state or a site of chaos.

Similarly, in Palestinian communities, widespread throughout the Middle East and the diaspora, tatreez patterns serve as material mnemonic devices that map the villages that existed before 1948. These detailed textile designs are passed down from generation to generation, transforming clothing into wearable archives of displacement, identity, and memory (Weir, 1989, pp. 54-58). This material counter-memory serves as a tool of memory that resists the state's desecration of history and territorial erasure.

After the division of India in 1947, counter-memories emerged as a rich collection of eyewitness accounts and oral histories within Sikh and Muslim communities of violence and experiences of displacement. These personal and communal accounts were often transmitted within families and communities and were not included in state curricula (Butalia, 1998, pp. 120-127).

Counter-memories emphasize individual losses and displacements, disrupting the pure, politically neutral understanding of state history.

These examples highlight an important characteristic of counter-memories: their material vulnerability and semantic power. They often lack the permanence of institutional archives or state monuments, yet their adaptive and portable forms, such as songs, textiles, and oral testimonies, make them difficult to control or destroy. This fluidity allows counter-memory to challenge the temporal closure of dominant historiographies, keeping the past open to redefinition, contestation, and reinterpretation.

Moreover, the fact that counter-memories are not accepted in official history has profound political implications. State historiography often claims a monopoly on "truth," establishing certain narratives as the only authentic ones and dismissing alternatives as invalid or baseless. Counter-memories destabilize this monopoly by basing historical authority on the moral claims of vulnerable and marginalized groups. Counter-memories act as symbolic and epistemic sovereignty. For example, indigenous peoples around the world are reviving traditional knowledge systems, resisting colonial narratives that portrayed them as primitive or disappearing (Miller, 1996, pp. 88-93). Such initiatives aim to both redress historical wounds and establish new visions of justice.

Thus, counter-memories simultaneously emerge from and resist the dispositif of memory, negotiating the boundaries of visibility and invisibility. As a result, counter-memories are challenge to dominant narratives, serving the machinery of justice, identity, and historical pluralism. They remind us that history is not uniform, but multi-layered, shifting, and deeply connected to power. Counter-memories make collective memory an open and dynamic process, rather than a closed history controlled by the state or dominant groups.

Digital Memory and the Biopolitics of Recognition

The digital environment brings new dynamics and opportunities to the processes of collective memory production and regulation, expanding the possibilities of counter-memories alongside traditional, state-controlled narratives. State institutions continue to maintain permissive narratives on traditional platforms, while digital technologies, such as social media, digital archives, and user-generated content, facilitate the dissemination of alternative narratives. These platforms decentralize and democratize memory practices but operate within algorithmic and commercial systems that limit visibility and recognizability (Loney-Howes, 2019; Papacharissi, 2015). As a result, restricted or marginalized voices gain greater access to public memory, enabling local movements and previously excluded stories to achieve widespread recognition.

Technological mechanisms such as algorithmic classification, content moderation, and metadata classification have become components of the dispositif that determine which historical narratives emerge or are suppressed. As Zuboff (2019) notes, these systems do not simply provide access to information, but rather act as selective filters, amplifying or suppressing content based on programmed logic. This leads to a redistribution of memory visibility, with some stories appearing on a large scale while others are suppressed, not through direct censorship but through infrastructural silence.

However, the commercial logic of digital platforms transforms human expression into commercial units of data, subjecting them to processes of classification, monetization, and control (Zuboff, 2019). This is a form of contemporary biopolitics, where power operates not only through traditional state institutions, but also through digital infrastructures that regulate and govern societies, determining what is visible, what is recognized, and what is forgotten in public memory. Algorithmic governance and content moderation are disciplinary mechanisms of this biopolitical system that actively shapes collective consciousness, amplifying some narratives and suppressing others. The result is systemic barriers that prioritize certain memories and marginalize alternative or dissenting memories, revealing the inherently contradictory and adversarial nature of digital public domains.

The persistence of memory repression is made clear by the removal or censorship of some digital archives, reflecting the persistence of traditional forms of control over memory, regardless of technological developments (O'Malley, 2020). Digital environments do not replace old regulatory mechanisms, but rather reinterpret and amplify them, creating a contested space where access to alternative histories is combined with new vulnerabilities and exclusions. Digital memory activism thus functions as a battleground where empowerment and constraints, visibility and silence, are balanced.

Conclusion: Navigating the Dynamics of Memory and Power

The regulation of collective memory is an axis of political power, through which institutional narratives seek to establish reciprocity and social order by means of selective inclusion and exclusion. Drawing on Michel Foucault's analyses of discipline, archive, and power/knowledge, this article has approached memory not as a neutral cultural repository but as a strategic field in which historical intelligibility and legitimacy are produced. In Foucauldian terms, memory is implicated in broader regimes of truth that organize what may be said, remembered, and recognized within a given social order.

Building on this foundation, the article advances a conceptual extension by treating collective memory itself as a dispositif. Rather than remaining an

implicit effect of disciplinary institutions, memory is analyzed here as an organized configuration of institutions, discourses, symbolic practices, and infrastructures that actively regulate historical visibility. This shift foregrounds memory as a mechanism of governance in its own right, one that stabilizes dominant narratives while simultaneously generating the conditions for their contestation.

Within this framework, the article further elaborates the concept of counter-memory. Consistent with Foucault's insights, counter-memory is not understood as an external alternative to official history, nor as a position outside power. Instead, the analysis shows that counter-memories emerge from within the same dispositifs that produce dominant memory, functioning as internal disruptions that expose exclusions, silences, and contingencies embedded in institutionalized historiography. Counter-memory thus operates as a critical intervention that unsettles the apparent coherence and inevitability of official narratives.

The article also reframes these dynamics in relation to contemporary digital infrastructures. The digital age increases the opportunities and challenges of memory politics. Digital platforms democratize the production of memory and allow marginalized voices to emerge on a global scale, but at the same time reproduce and reconfigure mechanisms of control through algorithmic and commercial logics. This ambiguity makes memory a battleground where reinforcements and limitations coexist, requiring nuanced and critical analysis. This reframing shows how algorithmic visibility, platform governance, and data-driven modulation have become integral components of the contemporary memory dispositif.

Taken together, the analysis underscores that collective memory is neither static nor fully controllable. Essentially, memory functions as a dynamic battleground where identities are formed, power is exercised and resisted, and notions of justice and collective belonging are continually revised. Engaging in these processes requires paying attention to the interplay of institutional power, technological mediation, and underground movements, which creates a platform for more just and diverse perceptions of the past.

Notes

[1] Apartheid was a system of institutionalized racial segregation and discrimination that existed in South Africa from 1948 to the early 1990s. Under apartheid, the government enforced laws that separated people based on race, severely restricting the rights and freedoms of the non-white population, particularly Black South Africans.

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