

## INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE: NATION-BUILDING AND THE DYNAMICS OF SILENCES, MEMORY AND FORGETTINGS IN CENTRAL EUROPE

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This special issue on nation-building and the dynamics of silences, memory and forgettings stemmed from an (online) international workshop that I organized, under the auspices of the Visegrád Anthropologists' Network (V4 Net)<sup>1</sup> at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology and with the support of Charles University in Prague on October 15-16, 2020.

This workshop brought together leading academics from different branches of anthropology and adjacent fields from the V4 region (the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland), and also from the UK, Germany and Norway. The focus was on long-term silence (or deep silence) in correlation with other processes of memory and forgetting. This provided the theoretical framework for a comparative anthropological exploration and an intense debate on the extent to which silence can serve as a useful analytical category in the study of nation-building in the Vysegrád region (but not only here). The result, as demonstrated in this issue, was an attribution of a central role to silences, of a range of types, within nation-building that can only be analyzed and understood within wider contexts of Europeanization and globalization.

Today, thanks to the “Ethnologia Polona” editorial team who, in response to our proposal, expressed their interest in turning extended versions of some of the papers presented in the workshop into a collection of peer-reviewed articles, I have the honour, but also the significant responsibility as the guest editor of this collective publication, to write its introduction. The current volume is a thematic issue which, due to the valuable work put into it by many parties, has reached far beyond its initial expectations. This is why, we believe that the current publication can be of interest not just to

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.eth.mpg.de/4638135/Visegrad\\_Network](https://www.eth.mpg.de/4638135/Visegrad_Network) (accessed: 01.11.2021).

anthropologists and specialists in nationalist and memory studies, but also to a wider public beyond academia.

The introduction is structured in three parts. The first part contextualizes the period covered, while trying to define what we mean by the main concept of the issue: silences. The aim here is to provide a preliminary exposition of the ideas, questions and themes I expected to be covered in the subsequent articles. In the second part, the seven articles that comprise this volume, offering a rich variety of ethnographic material, innovative concepts and theoretical questions, will be briefly introduced. Thereafter, I propose some concluding and reflective remarks.

#### AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL LOOK AT SILENCES AND NATION-BUILDING

Silence has long been a significant theme in anthropological studies. In his book, *Du silence* (1997), David Le Breton demonstrated (as have other authors, such as Keith Basso (1970; 1990)) that the meanings and uses attributed to silence (both individual or collective) are neither self-evident nor stable across, or even within, different cultural and historical locations and contexts. Although it may seem to be its opposite, silence – as is the case for other corporal gestures – can be considered in the same terms as verbal language: as another mode of human communication.

It can be conscious and unconscious; forced, as a result of social, political, economic and even religious contexts or circumstances, or voluntary. It is one thing to discuss silences under a totalitarian regime, like those experienced in Europe in the twentieth century, when millions of people were forced into silence. Or, as historian Orlando Figes (2007) put it, when describing private lives in Stalin's Russia, what people said had to be self-controlled and not too loud. Silences under these regimes were a consequence of structural political oppression: the state, and the whole apparatus of various actors that it deployed, created a social atmosphere of fear, distrust, risk and uncertainty, which made people vulnerable and forced them into silence.

It is quite a different thing to study silences in post-war situations and/or following periods of ethnic cleansing, when terrible memories can leave people mute, without words. This muteness does not, however, mean that people forget, as John Borneman has argued in his book *Political Crime and the Memory of Loss* (2011, 63): “During an ethnic cleansing, some central aspects of the loss remain unregistered and escape recognition at the actual time of the happening: language and the ordering mechanism of the symbolic order fail to register what is often called ‘the unspeakable’.” In other words, narratives of death and loss are shrouded in silence.

A further distinct context, as will be argued in this volume, is that of the study of silences in contemporary democratic post-1989 Central and Eastern European nation-states, also members of the EU.

For this is a region which was deeply marked by World War I (and the subsequent consequences of the Treaty of Versailles) and World War II (with all its memories, silences and forgettings mainly related to the Holocaust, or *Porajmos* for the Roma), as well as by the subsequent post-war atrocities, ethnic cleansing and displacement of people all around Europe (Judt 2005). These traumas of war were followed by more than four decades of communist totalitarian systems until their fall in 1989, and the subsequent unexpected, fast and sometimes harsh transitions to democracy and a global market economy that came thereafter.

Within this context, the call for contributions included the following list of suggested themes.

- Silences and the imagined community (Anderson 1983). Here, my suggestion was that long-term shared silences, as a strategic tool of communication, might bring a community together, especially when silences are perceived as a continuation of the past. Such silences can therefore be considered an essential aspect of the functioning of society. However, what happens when these shared silences, or communities of silences, at familial, local, regional and even national levels, are broken and contested: can such ruptures tear a community apart?
- What is the relationship between nation-making (in its attempt to give an image of a unified community), minorities and silencing? The discussion in this instance focuses on teasing out the identities (ethnic, religious, etc.) of the carriers of both old silences and new ones, as well as the respective substantive foundations of these silences. Can we talk about keeping the nation protected from any sense of internal contradiction through silencing “others”?
- To what extent are memory and silence frameworks (Halbwachs 1992) related to such issues as: inclusion and exclusion; truth and lies; purity and impurity; continuity and change; stability and threat; acknowledgement and indifference, etc.?
- What role do emotions play in silence and memory practices? What do people experience: fear, happiness, sadness, shame, sorrow, relief, nostalgia, etc.?
- How are silences politically instrumentalized in connection with official heritage, commemorations, memorials, national myths and ritual? What particularly striking examples of this phenomenon can be observed in this region?
- The materiality of silences. How do such “silencedscapes” (Soler 2019) as ruins, or mass graves as “landscapes of terror” (Ferrándiz 2015), speak for themselves, relate to or even define the contexts around them?
- Finally, following the work of Kendall R. Phillips and G. Mitchell Reyes (2011) talking about “global memoryscapes”: what happens when shared silences, or public silences, are no longer grounded within the confines of traditional nation-states, but reach different European or globalized frameworks and temporalities?

Underlying each of these suggested themes is the question: what can we learn from these silences, and how can they help us to understand some of the challenges that Europe and the world are facing today?

## STRUCTURE AND CONTENT OF THE ISSUE

In response to these initial questions, themes and ideas emerged the seven articles that comprise this issue. These texts both offer a rich set of vivid ethnographic examples and propose novel theoretical frameworks and questions.

The opening two papers move us into the arena of the materiality of silences. The first article, “The Fall of Marshal Konev: Silencing Beyond Post-Socialist Monument Removal(s)” by Petr Gibas and Karolina Pauknerová explores the ways in which the controversial Marshal Ivan Stepanovich Konev statue in Prague has been de- and re-contextualised by means of various material interventions and performances that finally led to its definitive removal on April 3, 2020. Drawing upon this act of political and social iconoclasm of a Soviet figure (that played an essential military role in the liberation of the Czechs from Nazi occupation), the authors, inspired by an archaeological sensitivity, suggest a need to critically rethink the concept of post-socialism. Their novel theoretical proposal aims to reinvigorate this concept in CEE in relation to the dynamic processes of the geopolitics of memory, remembering, forgetting and silencing.

The second article, “Silent Traces and Deserted Places: Materiality and Silence on Poland’s Eastern Border” by Aimee Joyce, touches upon the issue of the materiality of silences from a different angle. Through two specific barely noticeable and yet powerful sites related to historical conflict – in this case to the Holocaust – in a town on Poland’s Eastern border, Joyce ethnographically demonstrates the relationship between silences and traces. The author analyses how silenced acts of historical violence are not locally forgotten, but rather suspended in the landscape. The author emphasizes how silencing creates gaps in the official historical narrative of the nation, as Rolph-Trouillot (1995) noted in the book *Silencing the Past*, and can also be generative in its capacity to construct cohesive local communities. Therefore, alongside the importance of neighbourliness in community building, local practices of silences can also be strategically used in order to guarantee conviviality (at all levels, not just the local).

In the third article, “Self-silencing Strategies in Casual Conversations about Politics in Rural Poland”, Anna Malewska-Szałygin considers a constructive dimension to self-silencing. Through different examples based on interviews conducted among villagers in the mountainous Nowy Targ county in Southern Poland at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the author excellently demonstrates how, in a hostile socio-political environment, self-silencing or muting one’s voice when talking about politics and the use of rhetorical techniques (such as indirect speech, irony, allusions, etc.) can be strategically used to make an adversary’s voice more audible, to avoid definitive judgement and to create a safer space for exchanging opinions. The author tackles this issue of a constructive and positive aspect of self-silencing in order to safeguard dialogue

and avoid the polarization of society, not just in casual conversation, but also in wider public debate. This text, therefore, pursues the concept of the issue by examining how silences and self-silencing can be an essential element in the successful functioning of a community (at both micro and macro levels).

The fourth article, “Undercommunicated Stories in Boundary Building Processes: Successful Romanies in the Czech Republic” by Zdeněk Uherek, deals with the issue of de-ideologization and de-ethnicization in everyday interactions and conversations. The text documents narratives of social and cultural experiences that do not have a strong potential for creating national or ethnic borders, because their stories are regionally universal. The narratives are told by Romani, but this is not apparent in the stories themselves. In the text, the author demonstrates that the stress on group boundaries in both literature and society with regard to the Roma issue is exaggerated. There are numerous topics where the boundaries between many Romanies and other inhabitants of the Czech Republic are not visible. The author suggests that the non-communication of these shared experiences and the over-ethnicization of a divide between the discourses of the Romani and the rest of the population does not realistically mirror the everyday lives in the common state.

The fifth article, “Strictly Confidential Anthropology: Post-truth, Secrecy and Silence in Society and Academia in Hungary” by László Kurti, tackles the issue of how academic life is not immune to secrecy, silence and covert practices. Drawing upon a long-term personal and professional anthropological experience that dates back to the times of state socialist ideology in both Romania and Hungary, the author comparatively demonstrates how Hungarian academic life strategically continues to rely on covert programs, hidden or silenced information and institutionalized hegemony in order to promote, reproduce and maintain its structures and interests. The article thus demonstrates how in different contexts silence, secrecy and power have been, and continue to be, intrinsically interrelated.

The sixth article, “Silences and Secrets of Family, Community and the State” by Haldis Haukanes and Frances Pine, suggests that silence is more about remembering than forgetting. Drawing on ethnographic work and particular examples that date back to the late 1970s in Poland (in the case of Frances Pine) and the beginning of the 1990s in the Czech Republic (in the case of Haldis Haukanes) up to the present, the authors introduce the term *the walls of silence* in order to explore the roles silences play in the relational and dynamic processes of drawing boundaries between people and the state, between generations (grandparents, parents and children) and within communities (between insiders and outsiders). By looking at different registers and domains of silence, and the ways in which they are strategically used at different levels (micro and macro levels), the authors suggest that silence can be complicated when crossing social spaces and relations of both intimacy and power, but that despite of this is essential in anthropological studies.

In the seventh and the final article, “Long-Term Ethnicized Silences, Family Secrets and Nation-building”, through a particular ethnographic case study I address the dynamic relationship between long-term ethnicized silences, family secrets and nation-building in Central and Eastern Europe. How have modern nation-states been imagined and formed on the basis of these long-term silences? In order to illustrate what I believe could be the contribution to anthropology (principally to nationalism studies) enabled by introducing the analytical category of *ethnicized silences*, the paper focuses on an analysis of the life story and identity journey of a self-identified “Slovak woman with Hungarian-Roma roots” who settled in the Czech Republic in 2009. The term *ethnicized silences* proposed in this article draws attention to the relationship between silence, ethnicity, power and agency. For nation-states that are based on the principle of ethno-cultural homogeneity it is suggested that this term can be used to identify ethnic power dynamics within a hierarchical social structure. In this sense, it is suggested that silences of this kind can be considered an integral element in the complex processes of nation-building (from the bottom up).

#### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we can say that even though we could agree that some silences are necessary, especially those that are related to meditation, intimacy and reflection – these being highly needed in today’s society – and that there are some moments when silence is demanded during social interaction, there are also other kind of silences, disturbing silences, in Central and Eastern Europe that are far removed from such connotations.

Perhaps, there might be another way of putting this – not as a distinction between positive and negative silences – but as different implications of the way in which people use silences to deal with disturbing memories of the past. Several of the articles in this volume suggest that silences enable the community to live together in the face of divisive and horrifying memories, but also suggest that, in the very process of avoiding these tensions, the resulting strategic silence implicitly preserves the memories themselves and their dangerously destructive potential.

The result is the existence of multiple long-term silences found at both micro and macro levels, and in some cases persisting over generations. Therefore, we believe that if recognized, collected and analyzed (which is the main goal of this thematic issue), apart from stimulating debate and generating new theoretical frameworks, these silences can enable not only a better understanding of how nations have been (and are still being) built in the V4 region, but also illuminate some of the most significant challenges today facing Europe and the world.

In this regard, and in order to conclude the introduction to this thematic issue, it could be suggested, at least as a warning, that the extent and types of silences might be

used as a marker of the state (or quality) of our contemporary EU democracies. This could be done not just by the analysis of the short term inflections of existing measures of long-term silences (with their different dynamics, temporalities, domains, meanings, uses and abuses, whether contested or broken), but also through a multisited research programme which could gauge the social increase and decrease of them.

But this is just a hypothesis, so I leave this open question here to reflect while reading the following texts.

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**SHORT BIO ABOUT THE GUEST EDITOR**

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