Centralia, Collective Memory, and the Tragedy of 1919

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Abstract
The Centralia Tragedy of 1919 has been represented in numerous works over the course of the past 100 years. The vast majority of them concern the events of the day of the Tragedy, November 11, 1919, and whether a small group of Wobblies – members of a union group known as the International Workers of the World (I.W.W.) – opened fire on a group of parading American Legionnaires. This particular element, whether or not the Wobblies opened fire on the Legionnaires or the Legionnaires actually charged the hall where the Wobblies were staying, has generated significant concern in academic and popular literature since it occurred.

This study is less concerned with the events of the day itself, accepting that the full truth might not ever be known. It is instead focused on the collective remembering of that event, and how those recollections splintered into several strands of memory in the nearly 96 years since. It categorizes those strands into three specific ones: the official memory framework, the Labor countermemory framework, and the academic framework.

Each strand developed from early in the Tragedy’s history, starting with authors and adherents in the days after a 1920 trial. That trial, which declared the Wobblies guilty of the deaths of four Legionnaires while not holding anyone accountable for the lynching of Wobby Wesley Everest, generated ample discord among Centralians. This lack of closure prompted the various aggrieved parties to produce books, pamphlets, speeches, protests and even a famed statue in Centralia’s main park. Over time, the various perspectives congealed into the distinct strands of memory, which often flared up in conflict between 1930 and the present day.

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Collective memory depends on the existence and upholding of hegemonic discourses that in these contexts create conditions of victimisation. Pictures often simplify events and narratives to the extent that we might misinterpret them. It has been argued that Holocaust pictures have, at least in the West, served as a template for images of other genocides. Susan Sontag argues that ‘What is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that this is important, and this is the story about how it happened, with the pictures that lock the story in our minds.’ (2003: 76). The activity of collective remembering, which is inseparable from power relations (Gillis 1994), is then according to Sontag a demanding of the importance of one narrative over another. Both the individual memory and the collective memory have rather limited, but differing, spatial and temporal boundaries. Those of the collective memory may be either more compressed or more extended. During my life, my national society has been theater for a number of events that I say I “remember,” events that I know about only from newspapers or the testimony of those directly involved. These events occupy a place in the memory of the nation, but I myself did not witness them. Of course, the collective memory would play a very secondary role in the fixation of our remembrances if it had no other content than such sequences of dates or lists of facts. But such a conception is remarkably narrow and does not correspond to reality.