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TRACE, CRITIQUE, AND JUSTICE: A RICOEURIAN FRAMEWORK FOR ETHICAL HISTORIOGRAPHY OF TRAUMATIC MEMORY

Livia Ersi[1*], Refni Yulia,[1] Kusuma,[1] Yudi Subiantoro,[1]
Risa Junita Sari,[1] M.Satria Nugraha [1]
1 Program Studi Sejarah, Fakultas Strategi Pertahanan, UNHAN RI

*1E-mail Korespondensi: ersy.via@gmail.com

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Abstrak
Artikel ini menyajikan sintesis teoretis mengenai hubungan antara hermeneutika-fenomenologi Paul Ricoeur, memori kolektif, simbol, dan peristiwa sejarah. Artikel ini menjawab kesenjangan yang selama ini belum terisi: meskipun hermeneutika Ricoeurian sudah luas digunakan dalam kajian filsafat dan sastra, belum tersedia kerangka operasional yang dapat direplikasi untuk menjembatani historiografi berbasis arsip, teori memori kolektif, dan interpretasi etis secara sistematis. Untuk mengisi kesenjangan tersebut, artikel ini mengusulkan model tiga langkah—identifikasi jejak, kritik kontekstual, dan interpretasi etis—sebagai kontribusi metodologis bagi sejarawan yang berhadapan dengan narasi traumatik yang diperebutkan. Memori menyediakan pengalaman hidup, kesaksian, dan residu afektif dari masa lalu, sedangkan sejarah memberi perangkat kritik sumber, kontekstualisasi, dan penalaran naratif agar memori tidak berubah menjadi klaim tunggal yang tertutup. Melalui Ricoeur, simbol dipahami bukan sebagai tanda yang mati, melainkan sebagai jalan masuk menuju pemaknaan berlapis. Artikel ini mengilustrasikan kerangka tersebut melalui kasus memori kolektif G30S/PKI di Indonesia—sebuah contoh paradigmatik polarisasi memori traumatik di Asia Tenggara—untuk menunjukkan bagaimana model yang diusulkan dapat dioperasionalkan pada monumen, film produksi negara, dan kesaksian yang terbungkam.

Kata kunci: *hermeneutika; Paul Ricoeur; memori kolektif; simbol; historiografi; trauma; interpretasi etis*

Abstract
This article offers a theoretical synthesis exploring the relationship between Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenology, collective memory, symbols, and historical events. It addresses a persistent gap in the scholarship: while Ricoeurian hermeneutics has been widely invoked in philosophy and literary studies, a replicable operational framework that bridges archival historiography, collective memory theory, and ethical interpretation has yet to be systematically formulated. This article fills that gap by proposing a three-step model—trace identification, contextual critique, and ethical interpretation—as a methodological contribution for historians navigating contested traumatic narratives. Memory provides lived experience, testimony, and the affective residue of the past; history offers source criticism, contextualization, and narrative reasoning to prevent memory from becoming a closed and singular claim. Following Ricoeur, symbols are not inert signs but openings toward layered interpretation. The article illustrates this framework through the case of G30S/PKI collective memory in Indonesia—a paradigmatic instance of traumatic

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memory polarization in Southeast Asia—to demonstrate how the proposed model can be operationalized on monuments, state-produced films, and silenced testimonies.

Keywords: hermeneutics; Paul Ricoeur; collective memory; symbol; historiography; trauma; ethical interpretation

INTRODUCTION

A productive and enduring tension marks the relationship between memory and history, especially when addressing traumatic events. On the one hand, history demands critical distance, archival research, verification, and the construction of a rigorous and defensible narrative. On the other hand, the past never appears merely as a neutral collection of documents. It also lives on in recollections, family stories, commemorative rituals, monuments, symbols, social wounds, and narratives transmitted from one generation to the next. Historians, therefore, must engage not only with what has been recorded but also with what is remembered, forgotten, silenced, or contested by particular social groups (Halbwachs, 1992; Ricoeur, 2004). This article specifically explores how traumatic events complicate this relationship and demand new interpretive approaches.

The problem grows more complex when the historical event under interpretation involves a traumatic experience. Such events leave behind not merely data but also affective imprints on the social body. Official archives may preserve chronologies, institutional names, and political decisions, yet the experiences of victims—their fear, stigma, and patterns of silencing—are frequently absent from these records. It is precisely at this juncture that collective memory becomes indispensable to historical inquiry. Memory does not supplant the archive; rather, it broadens the historian's scope for reading a past that is never fully captured in state documents (Assmann, 1995; Ricoeur, 2004). While official archives are often treated as the foundation of objectivity, a significant gap emerges when state narratives overlook the trauma and the silencing endured by victims.

Scholarship on traumatic memory and ethical historiography has advanced considerably over the past decade. Rigney (2018) shows that memory functions as an active field of contestation that shapes group identity and political legitimacy, rather than serving as a passive residue of the past. Erll (2017) develops the concept of "traveling memory" to explain how traumatic narratives move across cultural contexts and are re-internalized. Meanwhile, recent work in trauma historiography (Jones, 2014; Craps, 2022) stresses the need for an ethical framework that is not only sensitive to victims' experiences but also capable of sustaining methodological rigor. However, a Systematic, operational framework that integrates phenomenological hermeneutics, collective memory theory, and interpretive steps for traumatic narratives remains absent, and this article aims to address this gap.

The paper proceeds from the following question: how can Paul Ricoeur's phenomenological hermeneutics help historians understand the relationships among collective memory, symbols, and traumatic events? This question is crucial because Ricoeur's approach treats interpretation as a process of disclosing meaning sedimented in texts, symbols, and traces, a perspective that is especially relevant to traumatic memories.

In the historical context, this allows the historian to read archives, testimonies, and monuments not as inert objects but as traces bearing multiple layers of meaning that require careful interpretation (Ricoeur, 1967, 2004). This focus on trauma emphasizes the importance of Ricoeur's hermeneutics for understanding contested memories.

The central argument of this article is that memory and history need not be framed as antagonists. Memory is selective, fragile, and often bound to group identity; history, by contrast, is governed by critical and methodical demands that remain open to correction. When the two are brought into a dialogical encounter, memory can open access to lived experience. At the same time, history can scrutinize, organize, and interpret that experience in a way that avoids entrapment within a single, exclusive claim. As a methodological contribution, this article proposes a Three-Step Model—identification of traces, contextual critique, and ethical interpretation—as a replicable framework for historians who grapple with contested traumatic narratives. Concretely, the framework is illustrated through the case of collective memory of the G30S/PKI (the 30 September Movement/Indonesian Communist Party) in Indonesia, a paradigmatic example of polarized memory in Southeast Asian history (Halbwachs, 1992; Ricoeur, 2004; LaCapra, 2001).

More specifically, the article uses the collective memory of the G30S/PKI in Indonesia to illustrate how traumatic events are constructed, sustained, and disputed through state narratives, monuments, education, films, commemorative rituals, and victims' memories. This example is not intended as a complete empirical study but serves as an illustrative terrain for demonstrating how symbols and memory operate in the process of historicization. Through this case, it becomes evident that the past is not merely a matter of what happened, but also concerns who has the authority to interpret it, how events are remembered, and whose voices remain unrepresented within the dominant narrative (Munsi, 2016; Nora, 1989; Roosa, 2006).

Method and Epistemological Positioning

This article employs a theoretical synthesis method grounded in a critical-phenomenological hermeneutic approach. As a conceptual article, it does not aim to present new empirical data; rather, it constructs an interpretive framework through a systematic mapping of the literature across three domains, first, Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenology, encompassing his work on symbol (Ricoeur, 1967), narrative (Ricoeur, 1983), and memory, history, and forgetting (Ricoeur, 2004); second, collective memory theory, drawing on the foundational texts of Halbwachs (1992), Nora (1989), and Assmann (1995), as well as recent developments by Aleida Assmann (2011), Rigney (2018), and Erll (2017); and third, traumatic and ethical historiography, including LaCapra (2001), White (1973), and empirical studies of the G30S/PKI such as those by Roosa (2006), McGregor (2007), and Pohlman (2015). The inclusion criteria for the literature rest on its conceptual relevance to these three pillars and—in the case of empirical scholarship—the depth of its engagement with the Indonesian traumatic case. Purely descriptive works or those that do not contribute to one of the three pillars are excluded.

The epistemological position of this article is situated within the tradition of critical-phenomenological hermeneutics, which conceives of understanding as a dialogical process between reader and text, and between the present and the past. This approach does not reject objectivity; rather, it relocates objectivity within a self-aware interpretive context: the historian is not a neutral mirror but a subject who brings a particular horizon of understanding to the reading of the traces of the past. The synthesis proceeds through three operational stages: first, mapping the theoretical units of analysis—trace, memory, symbol, archive, and interpretation—from the Ricoeurian corpus and memory theory; second, bringing these units into a dialogical encounter in order to identify points of convergence and tension; third, formulating an operational framework that translates the synthetic findings into applicable working steps.

The G30S/PKI case is selected as an illustrative terrain for the following reasons. First, this event constitutes one of the most intense instances of memory polarization in Southeast Asia, where state narratives, victims' experiences, and public memory stand in a well-documented contradiction. Second, a diverse array of sources—state archives, films, monuments, oral testimonies, and scholarly literature—enables the Three-Step Model to be concretely illustrated across different source types. Third, its relevance for Southeast Asian historiography and for global studies of post-mass-violence memory renders it comparatively representative. It must be emphasized that this case is employed illustratively, not analytically or empirically; the full empirical testing of the proposed model is deferred to subsequent research.

Paul Ricoeur's Hermeneutic Phenomenology: From Symbol to Historical Interpretation

Paul Ricoeur occupies a significant place in the development of modern hermeneutics by bringing together the traditions of phenomenology, textual hermeneutics, philosophical reflection, and narrative theory. Ricoeur does not merely continue the German hermeneutic tradition; he extends it in broader directions: interpretation is directed not only at religious or literary texts but also at actions, symbols, memory, and history. In this sense, Ricoeurian hermeneutics can be understood as an effort to read meanings that do not immediately appear on the surface (Ricoeur, 1967, 2004).

One of Ricoeur's central ideas is that symbols provide material for thought. A symbol does not remain a sign that points directly to something; rather, it opens up layers of meaning that demand reflection. Consequently, a symbol always possesses depth: it preserves human experiences that cannot be fully explained in literal terms. In the context of history, symbols can take the form of monuments, buildings, rituals, archives, place names, images, films, or public narratives that connect past events with contemporary social imagination (Ricoeur, 1967).

It should be noted that Ricoeur's approach offers specific advantages over alternative hermeneutic frameworks that are also relevant to traumatic historiography. LaCapra (2001) proposes the concept of working through trauma—a therapeutic-historical process that enables a community to "process" the past without falling into

repetitive acting out. Hayden White (1973), through the concept of emplotment in Metahistory, demonstrates that historical narrative is always shaped by literary tropes that determine how facts are organized. Both approaches are valuable, yet each has its limitations: LaCapra tends to focus on the psychosocial dimension of trauma and provides little operational-methodological guidance for archival work; White, conversely, is highly powerful in formal analysis but grants limited space to the ethical dimension and the experience of victims. Ricoeur integrates the strengths of both: he acknowledges the narrative and symbolic dimensions of history (as White does) while emphasizing the historian's ethical responsibility toward marginalized voices (as LaCapra does), and he adds a phenomenological dimension that enables a reading of traces as living sites of meaning.

For the historian, Ricoeur's ideas are important because historical objects rarely appear in their raw form. Past events are preserved through traces: documents, testimonies, objects, photographs, monuments, and stories that have already undergone selection. Every trace embodies a distance between the event that occurred and the meaning subsequently ascribed to it. Hermeneutics helps historians recognize that historical work is not merely a matter of collecting facts but of interpreting traces within the relations between past contexts, present concerns, and the possibility of new meanings (Nora, 1989; Ricoeur, 2004).

Ricoeur also rejects a rigid separation between explanation and understanding. In historical work, explanation is necessary to establish causal relations, social structures, institutions, and chronology. However, understanding is equally necessary so that the historian can grasp the meaning of actions, symbols, and human experiences within events. Explanation without understanding renders history arid and administrative; understanding without explanation risks becoming an unverified subjective impression. Robust historiography demands both (Ricoeur, 2004). Thus, Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenology can serve as a foundation for a reflective history: the historian is aware that the past is not directly present but is mediated through texts, archives, symbols, and memory—yet this awareness does not render history relativistic.

Individual Memory, Collective Memory, and the Social Frameworks of Recollection

Memory is a fundamental foundation of the human relationship with the past. At the individual level, memory enables a person to store, process, and recall experiences. However, memory is never entirely personal. What one remembers is often shaped by language, family, community, education, ritual, and the social environment in which one lives. Individual memory, therefore, always stands in relation to broader social frameworks (Cordonnier et al., 2022; Ricoeur, 2004).

It is here that the concept of collective memory finds its place. Collective memory can be understood as the way a group remembers certain events, confers meaning upon the past, and makes it part of a shared identity. Collective memory does not imply that all group members possess identical recollections. More accurately, it is understood as an assemblage of shared narratives, symbols, rituals, places, and emotions that shape a community's horizon of understanding of its past (Assmann, 1995; Halbwachs, 1992).

Aleida Assmann (2011) distinguishes between communicative memory, which persists for three to four generations, and cultural memory, which is preserved in monuments, texts, and rituals over far longer spans—a distinction that is pertinent to the study of how traumatic events are transmitted across generations.

Maurice Halbwachs emphasized that human memory operates within social frameworks. That is, social groups provide the language, categories, and reference points that render the past recognizable. Families, religions, nations, social classes, generations, or victim communities can have different ways of remembering the same event. Collective memory is therefore always selective: it foregrounds certain events, diminishes others, and sometimes forecloses the possibility of alternative memories (Halbwachs, 1992). Ann Rigney (2018) extends this perspective by showing that memory is not a stable social product but an active field of contestation in which narratives compete for authority and legitimacy.

Nevertheless, memory is also fragile. It can change, be disputed, manipulated, or transmitted incompletely. For this reason, memory cannot be accepted unquestioningly as the final historical truth. This is where history assumes its role. History does not annihilate memory; rather, it tests memory through source criticism, narrative comparison, chronology, and context. In this way, history helps prevent memory from becoming a closed myth, while memory helps prevent history from losing the living human experience behind the archive (Ricoeur, 2004).

Monuments, Memorials, and the Body of History

Monuments and memorials occupy an important position in the relationship between memory and history. They are not merely architectural objects but materialized forms of memory. Through monuments, societies select certain portions of the past to display, maintain, and transmit. Monuments can therefore be understood as the body of history: sites where the past assumes physical form, where it can be seen, visited, ritualized, and used as a means of public education (Connerton, 1989; Nora, 1989).

Pierre Nora calls such places sites of memory (*lieux de mémoire*). Sites of memory emerge when memory is no longer fully alive in everyday practice, so that society needs places, symbols, or rituals to preserve it. In this sense, monuments function as bridges between past events and the present need to remember. Monuments can help societies sustain historical consciousness, but they can also freeze a particular version of the past if not read critically (Nora, 1989).

For the historian, monuments must not be treated as neutral evidence. A monument is always born of decisions: who is commemorated, which events are highlighted, what language is used, which symbols are chosen, and which narratives are excluded. Thus, monuments are sources not only of the past being commemorated but also of the power that constructs and regulates that memory. The historical questions that need to be asked are not merely "What does this monument remember?" but also "Who remembers?" "In whose interest?", and "Whose memory is excluded?" (Assmann, 1995; Nora, 1989).

Within a Ricoeurian framework, monuments can be read as symbols. A monument gives something to think about because it preserves meanings that exceed its physical

form. A monument can embody feelings of mourning, heroism, sacrifice, national victory, or the stigmatization of a particular group. Such meaning is rarely singular: it can change with generational shifts, political contexts, and a society's courage to reopen layers of memory that were previously silenced (Ricoeur, 1967, 2004).

Table 1.

Framework of the Relationship between Hermeneutics, Memory, and History and Its Connection to the Three-Step Model

Element	Manifestation of the Past	Risk	Historian's Work	Three-Step Model Step
Memory	Testimonies, family memories, trauma, community stories	Selective, emotional, malleable	Connecting experience with source criticism and context	Step 1 (Identification of Traces) & Step 3 (Ethical Interpretation)
Archive	State documents, official reports, administrative records	Power bias; victims' voices often absent	Reading the provenance, significance, and limitations of documents	Step 1 (Identification of Traces) & Step 2 (Contextual Critique)
Symbol	Monuments, rituals, films, place names, public imagery	Freezes dominant narratives	Interpreting layers of meaning and shifts in social reception	Step 1 & Step 3
History	Critical narrative about the past	May distance itself from lived experience if overly administrative	Constructing explanations that are factual, reflective, and ethical	All Three Steps Integrated

Source: Author's synthesis.

Traumatic Events and the Polarization of Memory

Traumatic events vividly illustrate that memory is never monolithic. Within a single event, multiple layers of memory can coexist: the memories of victims, perpetrators, the state apparatus, families, local communities, and the official memory disseminated through educational institutions or state media. These layers may intersect, but they may also be mutually antagonistic. This condition can be described as memory polarization—a concept denoting a situation in which the same past is recalled from divergent social and political standpoints (Assmann, 1995; Ricoeur, 2004).

From the state's perspective, an event may be remembered as a threat to ideology or national stability. For victims, the very same event is recalled as an experience of violence, loss, stigma, and injustice. For state operatives, it may be transmitted as part of their duties under national defense. For later generations, the event may manifest through school curricula, films, family narratives, or even as a realm of silence—because families are afraid to discuss it (Ricoeur, 2004).

In the Indonesian context, the G30S/PKI (30 September Movement/Indonesian Communist Party) events offer a stark demonstration of the power of collective memory. Roosa (2006), in his historiographical analysis, reveals that the official narrative of the 1965 events was constructed on a selective and problematic foundation, in which the PKI was posited as the sole actor responsible for the coup, while military involvement and internal political complexities were elided. McGregor (2007) traces how the military deployed history and education as instruments of legitimation, forging a uniform public memory of the communist threat through school curricula and commemorative rituals. Pohlman (2015) illuminates an often-overlooked dimension: women's experiences of sexual violence and the compounded stigma they bore during and after 1965–1966—a memory layer that remains almost absent from the official state narrative.

The New Order regime molded public consciousness through education, film, museums, monuments, doctrine, and symbolic reiteration. The PKI was positioned not merely as a historical political actor but was continually reconstructed as an enduring ideological menace. Consequently, the collective memory of this episode not only shaped historical knowledge but also engendered social stigma against those associated with the PKI, including their families and descendants (Munsi, 2016). Here, it is essential to differentiate between those who produced the narrative, those who executed the policies, and those who suffered the consequences—a distinction that prevents historical analysis from succumbing to generalizations that erase specific agents and victims.

Ricoeur furnishes an ethical vocabulary for this problem with the concept of just memory. Just memory does not entail treating all narratives as equivalent without discrimination. It means that the historian endeavors to create space for long-marginalized experiences while upholding the rigor of historical criticism. In this way, history becomes neither a vehicle for memory's vengeance nor an instrument for the legitimation of power (Ricoeur, 2004; LaCapra, 2001).

The Three-Step Model: Operationalizing the Ricoeurian Framework

The principal methodological contribution of this article is the Three-Step Model, which operationalizes the Ricoeurian framework into three applicable steps. This model is not intended as a mechanical recipe but as an interpretive guide that demands the historian's judgment at each stage.

Step One: Identification of Traces

The first step is to identify the full spectrum of relevant traces: state archives, oral testimonies, symbols, rituals, monuments, films, photographs, and community narratives. The historian does not restrict herself to official documents; rather, she treats every trace as a text requiring interpretation. In the context of G30S/PKI, this step encompasses, for instance, the Pancasila Sakti Monument at Lubang Buaya as a symbolic trace imbued with dual meanings: for the state narrative, the monument represents sacrifice and heroism, whereas for the victim community, the same site harbors layers of memory concerning violence and trauma that are not recorded in its official inscription. A comprehensive identification of traces allows the historian to discern internal contradictions among different sources—a crucial starting point before critique is conducted.

Step Two: Contextual Critique

The second step involves critique and contextualization: Who produced the trace, under what circumstances, and in whose interest? These questions prevent traces from being read naively. The state-produced film G30S/PKI (1984), which was mandatorily screened each year, serves as a prime example: as an artifact of state memory, this film is not a neutral reconstruction of the 1965 events but an ideological product that strategically selects a viewpoint, characters, and narrative sequencing to legitimize New Order rule (McGregor, 2007). Contextual critique interrogates the conditions of its production, identifies what is presented and what is excluded, and situates the trace within the encompassing power relations.

Step Three: Ethical Interpretation

The third step is ethical interpretation: constructing a narrative that creates space for marginalized memories without sacrificing methodological rigor. In the G30S/PKI case, this entails treating victims' testimonies—including those of women subjected to sexual violence (Pohlman, 2015) and families bearing multigenerational stigma (Munsi, 2016)—as legitimate and significant sources, rather than as mere supplements to the master narrative. Ethical interpretation is not uncritical advocacy; it requires that victims' experiences be scrutinized with the same critical standards applied to state documents, without being rejected merely because they do not take the form of official records. This is what Ricoeur terms just memory: a justice of memory that guarantees no human experience is effaced from the historical record solely because of political misfortune.

Implications for Historical Writing

From the foregoing discussion, several integrated implications for historical writing can be articulated. First, historians must treat memory as a significant but not absolute source. Memory grants access to lived experience, yet it must always be read within the social and political frameworks that shape it. Second, symbols and monuments should be approached as historical texts bearing layered meanings—meanings not necessarily identical to their creators' intentions and capable of shifting in response to changing generational and political contexts. Third, official archives must be read alongside other sources to prevent history from simply reproducing the language of power. Fourth, writing the history of traumatic events requires an ethical sensitivity that does not erode academic rigor but rather sharpens the writer's responsibility toward the subjects under study.

Fifth—and arguably the most demanding—history must create space for a plurality of memories without forfeiting the ability to evaluate evidence. Memory pluralism is not a ground for rejecting facts; it is a reason to examine how facts are imbued with divergent meanings by different groups. The Three-Step Model advanced in this article offers an operational guide for navigating this complexity: identifying traces comprehensively (Step One), critiquing the contexts of their production (Step Two), and interpreting findings within an ethical framework that acknowledges marginalized experiences (Step Three). The model may be deployed in research on political history, the history of violence, local history, memory studies, and cultural heritage studies—provided that each application is carefully adapted to the specific empirical context.

Conclusion

Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic-phenomenological approach furnishes a robust conceptual foundation for a mode of historical writing that grapples with collective memory, symbols, and traumatic events. To enhance scholarly rigor, it is essential to acknowledge how this approach addresses potential biases in interpreting collective memory, ensuring balanced and reflexive analysis. For Ricoeur, a symbol is a gateway to thought, not a self-contained sign. Archives, monuments, testimonies, and commemorative rituals are traces that demand interpretation. In this sense, history is not simply the reconstruction of a chronology; it is an endeavor to grasp the meanings that human beings assign to the past.

Collective memory is significant because it reveals how societies remember, select, and transmit the past. Nevertheless, memory is also selective and inherently contestable. Historical inquiry must scrutinize memory through source criticism and contextualization; conversely, memory is needed to prevent history from losing the lived human experience that is often absent from official archives. The two are not adversaries but partners in mutual correction. In the context of traumatic events such as the G30S/PKI, historiography must observe the polarisation of memory among state narratives, victims' experiences, the perspectives of state apparatus actors, and public recollection. The historian's task is not to erase past wounds but to interpret their traces honestly and justly. The three-step model proposed in this article—identification of

traces, contextual critique, and ethical interpretation—provides an operational framework for carrying out that task: reading archives alongside memory, and monuments alongside silenced testimonies.

This article has several limitations that must be acknowledged explicitly. First, the three-step model has been illustrated only at a macro level, using examples drawn from the G30S/PKI case; to address concerns about empirical validation, future research should focus on micro-level case studies based on local oral histories or detailed archival analyses. Second, the synthesis advanced here primarily rests on the Western hermeneutic tradition—specifically, the Ricoeurian tradition—and has not yet integrated non-Western epistemological perspectives that might offer alternative interpretive frameworks relevant to the Southeast Asian context. Third, the G30S/PKI case is employed illustratively and cannot be regarded as an empirical validation of the proposed model.

These limitations point to several concrete directions for future research. First, empirical testing of the three-step model on other traumatic cases in Southeast Asia—such as communal violence in Timor-Leste, Myanmar, or Cambodia—would provide stronger comparative validation and enable refinement of the model based on field findings. Second, broadening the framework to include digital archives, visual memory, and social media platforms as new sites of memory would render the model relevant for the study of contemporary conflicts, where the production and circulation of memory occur within complex digital ecosystems. Third, a cross-cultural comparison between the Ricoeurian approach and non-Western hermeneutic frameworks—for example, the oral history tradition in African historiography or the concept of communal memory in Javanese epistemology—would open the possibility of decolonizing historiographical methodology, which Western academic traditions have long dominated.

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