Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy
VOL. 31, NO. 1 · FEBRUARY 2026
https://doi.org/10.26556/jesp.v31i1.4431

POLITICAL FORGETTING

Alexander Bryan

> Clarendon counselled England's political leaders to "teach your neighbours and your friends … how to learn this excellent art of forgetfulness" and avoid finding new labels of division to ensure that "the old reproaches of Cavalier, and Roundhead, and Malignant, be committed to the grave."
>
> —Clare Jackson, *Devil-Land*

POLITICAL IDENTITIES and relationships are, among other things, matters of what and how we remember. The imagined communities of nation-states extend into the past, picking out events—battles and treaties, revolutions and reforms, atrocities and heroics—that inform what we take ourselves to be. So too for other identities—religious, racial, regional. Such practices of collective memory are taken by most (Nietzsche is a notable exception) to be both politically and ethically valuable—in some cases, even morally required.[1] Remembering injustices is essential for their remedy, and failing to remember may make us complicit in those injustices. More prosaically, having an understanding of those past events that have most shaped and continue to shape the political present might seem to be necessary for us to carry out our epistemic and political duties as citizens.

Sometimes, though, we are faced with appeals to *forget* certain aspects of our civic affairs. The quotation at the beginning of this article concerns one example, issued shortly after the monarchy was reestablished and Charles II crowned king of England—in other terms, in the aftermath of a long period of unprecedented political tumult preceded by a remarkably bloody conflict. The Earl of Clarendon was a veteran and a partisan of these conflicts, having served as a member of the Long Parliament and then as Charles II's political advisor. His call in 1660 to "learn this excellent art of forgetfulness"—and the accompanying Act of Free and Generall Pardon, Indemnity, and Oblivion, a broad ranging pardon "to bury all seeds of future discords and remembrance of the former, as well in [Charles II's] own breast as in the breasts of his subjects

1 Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory*, 9.

one towards another"—was, we can assume, issued with the aim of securing the new political settlement.[2] But we might also imagine it—and here we may depart from historical reality—as a sincere attempt to construct a postconflict political community on terms acceptable to all. Attempts to recast the categories of politics after conflict are common, and while they generally aim to achieve this by exposing rather than shrouding past injustices, some do incorporate notable injunctions to forget. To the case of the English Restoration we can add those of the Athenian Amnesty of 403 BC (in which the democrats issued a "decree [that] contained an explicit interdiction: it was forbidden to remember all the crimes and wrongdoing perpetrated during the immediately preceding period of civil strife," with all citizens required to take an oath not to do so) and the resolution to forget injustices and evils committed under the revolutionary regime in France issued by Louis XVIII upon his ascension to power in 1814.[3] Such cases of forgetting may also be rooted in action rather than exhortation, such as the toppling of statues upon the fall of a political regime, and may be implicit rather than directly commanded by political institutions or offices.[4]

In 1660, the categories of Cavalier, Roundhead, and Malignant would still have been highly relevant to public life, necessary for understanding ongoing political divisions and issues as well as the recent history of the polity. The injustices committed in this period would still have been fresh in the minds of those subject to them. Having these categories—as well the events and issues they mapped on to—in mind might appear not only to be required as a matter of civic engagement but as morally necessary. Political forgetting of the kind urged by Clarendon then seems to conflict with both our political and moral duties. This raises the question: Can such forgetting ever by justified?

I have two tasks in this article. The first is to provide a conceptualization of the kind of forgetting being urged by Clarendon—or, as I call it, *political forgetting*. I argue that we should conceive of political forgetting as a coordinated reduction in the salience of particular issues or categories in our civic affairs undertaken by the public in its capacity as the constituting people. I suggest that this is a more effective way of characterizing political forgetting than alternative models—namely, what I call the *belief-centered model* and the *prohibition model*. On my approach, political forgetting is undertaken by the constituting people for the purpose of reconciliation. This conception both accords with

2 Indemnity and Oblivion Act 1660, 12 Car. 2, c. 11, https://www.legislation.gov.uk/aep/Cha2/12/11/contents/enacted.

3 Connerton, "Seven Types of Forgetting," 61–62; and Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 453–54.

4 Tanesini, "Collective Amnesia and Epistemic Injustice."

cognate discussions concerning public monuments and commemoration and shows that one source of the apparent conflict between political forgetting and our epistemic obligations as citizens is in fact illusory.[5]

The second task is altogether more ambitious. This is to outline the conditions under which political forgetting is justified. In brief, I suggest that these conditions are: (1) the transformation of the terms of political reality does not obscure terms or events that continue to structure society to the unjust disadvantage of any particular group; (2) that transformation is endorsed by all relevant social groups; and (3) the "forgotten" terms or events can be resurrected by agents in certain conditions. While demands made on others to forget are often opportunistic or cynical, I suggest there are at least in principle some circumstances in which political forgetting can be justified. As I show, these circumstances are rare. When it may be justified, political forgetting will usually not be undertaken in isolation but as one feature of a broader attempt to recast the terms of civic engagement. As even these cases will be quite rare, I suggest that the main practical benefit of clarifying the justificatory conditions of political forgetting is that it can help us diagnose cases in which unjustified calls to forget are made.

A final note before proceeding: throughout the argument, I refer back to the particular case of political forgetting urged by the Earl of Clarendon to illustrate different aspects of the view. I do so not to propose this as a paradigmatic case of political forgetting as I conceive it but purely for expositional purposes.

1. UNDERSTANDING POLITICAL FORGETTING

A starting point for developing a conception of political forgetting is to think about forgetting in our interpersonal lives. As Rima Basu has argued, forgetting is "an integral part of our moral duties to others."[6] We need to be able to forget some aspects of a person's history in order to have beliefs about them that reflect their current identity. Our personal identities are constituted through social practices of "holding" and "letting go," Basu claims (following Hilde Lindemann).[7] Treating others rightly involves letting go of, or forgetting, beliefs about them that conflict with their current identities.[8] We can think of

5 It does not, of course, cover all forms of forgetting. For instance, it does not incorporate cases in which documents are destroyed in order to prevent certain truths being made matters of historical record or public knowledge. My aim is to capture a particular kind of collective project of forgetting.

6 Basu, "The Importance of Forgetting," 472.

7 Lindemann, *Holding and Letting Go*.

8 Basu, "The Importance of Forgetting," 474.

occasions on which we do not do this as "holding failures": by "holding on" to certain information about a person's past we commit a doxastic wrong against that person. For instance, we plausibly wrong a trans person by referring to them by a name they no longer go by (i.e., deadnaming them); we might also wrong someone if we fail to forget information we learn about them by overhearing a private conversation.[9] We have reason to think both forgetting and failing to forget are morally evaluable, then; just as we wrong a close friend when we forget their birthday, we can also wrong them by *failing* to forget "those stories that no longer fit."[10]

An important feature of Basu's account of interpersonal forgetting is that it does not view forgetting as entirely involuntary. It is sometimes argued that our beliefs are not subject to our voluntary control. If this is so, the idea that we could ever have a duty to forget some event or concept would run up against the barrier of ought implying can. But as Basu argues, we do have at least some voluntary control over our beliefs, and the control we have is sufficient to ground moral evaluation of our beliefs.[11] If I really want to remember my friend's birthday, I can set reminders for myself or actively try to commit it to memory or check my recollection every so often. Similarly, I can and should take steps to avoid unjustly retaining information I should forget.

But we can also see that the kind of forgetting Basu argues is morally required is quite different to forgetting where you put your car keys or the postcode of the house you lived in as a child. We can in many cases fulfill our doxastic duties to others without *literally* forgetting—a feature of what I call the *belief-centered model of forgetting*. On such a view, forgetting can be achieved only when an agent no longer holds or has the capacity to access the relevant piece of information. The kind of forgetting we are morally required to practice in our interpersonal interactions need not involve this. Within some forms of forgetting, we can still have the capacity to recall that piece of information: what Basu calls *archival forgetting*, for instance, involves internally classifying some piece of information as unimportant or irrelevant to our purposes.[12] Doing this can make that information difficult to retrieve and prevent it from bearing on our normal practical reasoning. It thus seems to be an adequate way of classifying information like the deadname of a trans person. We may still be

9 Basu, "A Tale of Two Doctrines," 109–11, and "The Morality of Belief 1," 7. I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting the example of deadnaming. For discussion of a case similar to that of blamelessly overhearing, see Munch, "How Privacy Rights Engender Direct Doxastic Duties."

10 Basu, "The Importance of Forgetting," 474; and Lindemann, *Holding and Letting Go*, 45.

11 Basu, "The Importance of Forgetting," 487.

12 Basu, "The Importance of Forgetting," 475–76.

able to access the information again at some point in the future, and it would be inaccurate to say that we no longer hold that belief, but neither of these facts indicates that we are committing a doxastic wrong given the way in which we treat the relevant information.[13]

Like interpersonal forgetting, I suggest that a plausible account of political forgetting does not require the complete loss of access to the relevant categories or pieces of information. This would be deeply implausible given the continued salience and resonance of that information to individuals and society as a whole. It is difficult to imagine that any of Clarendon's audience could *really* be expected to actually forget the bloody civil war, the political chaos that preceded it, the unprecedented juncture of the interregnum, and the remarkable process of the reestablishment of the monarchy. Almost everyone in society would have known someone who died in the war, would have had their lives radically shaped by the political turmoil. Therefore, a plausible account of political forgetting must eschew the belief-centered model and mirror Basu's conception of interpersonal forgetting by incorporating forms such as archival forgetting—or, more plausibly in the case of the civil war, what Basu calls *siloing*, where we isolate and keep apart some memories from our practical reasoning because they are too painful.[14]

Relatedly, forgetting involves more than simply not raising an issue. One might imagine a group in which all members agree not to talk about some topic. We might call this the *prohibition model of forgetting*. Clearly, prohibition is a feature of some of the examples cited at the beginning of this article, with various levels of repression offered by different historical cases. In reality, Clarendon may well have been satisfied with this kind of forgetting. But we should reject this way of conceiving of political forgetting for two reasons. First, this appears less a model of forgetting and more a model of repression. While the absence of discussion of the relevant topic might on the face of it suggest forgetting, the topic might in fact remain just as prominent in the thinking of members of that society as it had been prior to prohibition. Second and relatedly, simply repressing talk of a topic is likely to be unstable, with that repression likely to falter when agents drop their guard or wish to provoke. But there is no reason to assume that collective forgetting is so unstable.

While drawing on interpersonal cases of forgetting can be useful, it is important to note a disanalogy in the goods promised by interpersonal and political forgetting. Interpersonal forgetting aims to bring about goods like

13 Bernecker, "On the Blameworthiness of Forgetting," 244.

14 Basu, "The Importance of Forgetting," 477.

privacy and forgiveness.[15] Neither of these is obviously the kind of thing that political forgetting could (or should) bring about. We cannot claim that our previous political commitments or actions are protected by our right to privacy—a right that covers our personal lives rather than our civic engagement. While forgiveness is sometimes raised in discussions of political transition from conditions of severe injustice or oppression, it would be highly implausible to think that *all* cases of political forgetting must aim this high.[16] Forgiveness is supererogatory in response to injustice, and appeals to forgive often trade on comprehensive ethical doctrines to which the state and citizens are not entitled to appeal when determining the terms of their cooperation.

This, though, does point us towards a better way of theorizing the good that political forgetting aims to bring about. This is not forgiveness but *reconciliation*.[17] Political forgetting should be understood as a collective endeavor aimed at changing the terms of cooperation in political life in the aftermath of serious injustice. Reconciliation is more usually sought through commemoration, truth commissions, and other processes focused on confronting or more fully revealing these injustices. These processes aim to unsettle established historical narratives constructed around severely unjust regimes, democratizing memory by exposing those aspects of that shared history that the powerful would have us forget. The notion that reconciliation could involve forgetting might seem to fly in the face of both our ethical judgments and the empirical evidence on the success of different ways in which societies have sought to reconcile after conflict or grave injustice. This is especially apparent in cases of atrocity, where forgetting might appear to be an act of complicity; a proper response to such cases involves sustained attention to the moral testimony of the victims and to the ways in which such crimes were permitted with the aim of ensuring no such atrocity can happen again. But as I outline in the next section, processes of forgetting may feature within these modes of reconciliation too. And just as in our interpersonal lives, forgetting might facilitate certain kinds of relationships, political forgetting may in some cases help create "living space for present projects."[18]

In the next section, I outline an account of political forgetting as a collective commitment to reduce the salience of some topics or concepts in our civic life. This is one aim of more standard features of reconciliation processes, which aim

15 Basu, "The Importance of Forgetting."

16 On the relationship between forgiveness and forgetting, see Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory*, ch. 6.

17 Brendese, *The Power of Memory in Democratic Politics*, 4.

18 Connerton, "Seven Types of Forgetting," 63.

to create the conditions for such reduced salience through mutual understanding, expressions of pain and dignity, and the confrontation of those perpetrators of injustice with the consequences of their actions. As I show below, the salience model of political forgetting does not mandate particular processes of reconciliation or suggest that forgetting can be justified if unaccompanied by other processes of confrontation and change.

2. A SALIENCE MODEL OF POLITICAL FORGETTING

In any society, political discussions and deliberations are informed by an understanding of what concepts, categories, and events are *salient*. That which is salient is worthy of or perhaps demands our attention.[19] As Susanna Siegel notes, the way information is presented in broadcast and print media follows a salience principle: to "make salient information that is important for the public to know about."[20] Our political discourse and everyday political reality are to a significant degree concerned just with those things that have been made or advanced as salient in this way. As I write this article, the most salient topic in European politics is the Trump administration's attempts to reshape the arrangements of the collective security of Europe. As the most prominent story in most newspapers and on most websites and television channels in recent days, this is presented as a matter to which the public should attend and that is *more* worthy of that attention than those matters that are given less prominence.[21] This organization of information by media outlets makes sense because it aims to enable citizens to direct their attention to those stories that most demand it and thus to direct the focus of public deliberation to those matters of greatest civic importance.[22]

There is an important sense in which we can think of salience in descriptive terms, as simply determined by the distribution of public attention. But it also has indispensable normative content. As the burgeoning philosophical literature on attention and salience makes clear, we can wrong people by

19 Siegel, "Salience Principles for Democracy."

20 Siegel, "Salience Principles for Democracy," 237.

21 If only temporarily. Of course, the salience attributed to a particular story need not reflect the overall significance of that event or issue relative to others.

22 There are of course other views on how media outlets should decide which matters they report on and which of those matters they grant prominence over others. Perhaps it is not importance but public interest that makes a matter newsworthy, or perhaps (as Siegel argues) the importance principle requires supplementation. I proceed with the importance version of the salience principle in mind, but the claims I make below should be accessible from a broad range of alternative positions.

misattributing the salience of particular characteristics.[23] Just as an individual makes a mistake when prioritizing (and thus as representing as more salient) their doctor's race or gender over their professional qualifications, so can a political community mistakenly or wrongfully attribute greater or less salience to some matter than is justified. The differences in the core political commitments of a polity, its institutional framework, and its historical development mean that what is properly viewed as salient across societies may vary. But within those constraints, there are some matters that we should as citizens prioritize and grant more attention to than others. Indeed, we must view salience in normative terms to understand why we should attend to some things rather than others *in our role as citizens*—things, that is, that bear on our ability to effectively satisfy the duties attendant to that role but that we would do not wrong in ignoring otherwise—and why we can reasonably be criticized for failing to recognize that something that is salient in another context is not relevant in political life generally or some specific area within it. The fact that some issue deserves more attention than some other does not mean that we are morally or politically required to grant it greater consideration in all circumstances, as there may be other reasons that give us cause not to.

Of course, politics is to a significant degree constituted by conflicts about which matters are most salient and how we should best conceive of them to reflect that salience. What is taken to be salient can not only change with events but be altered because we make an effort to pay attention to a different topic or feature of a situation, or because our values change.[24] We can disagree about what is worthy of attention as individuals and about what is deserving of our collective *civic* attention, but just as we individually can alter our attentional habits, so we can come to alter the focus of our joint attention. In most political communities, much disagreement begins from a position of agreement on the salience of other concepts or values and occurs against a background of the broader "social imaginary" of that society, to use Charles Taylor's term.[25] A social imaginary "incorporates a sense of the normal expectations we have of each other, the kind of common understanding that enables us to carry out the collective practices that make up our social life" and "some sense of how we all fit together in carrying out the common practice."[26] Social imaginaries can be altered as new narratives are asserted (often through social movements)

23 Munton, "Prejudice as the Misattribution of Salience"; and Whiteley, "Harmful Salience Perspectives" and "'A Woman First and a Philosopher Second.'"

24 Whiteley, "Harmful Salience Perspectives."

25 Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*.

26 Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 25.

and incorporated into that broader imaginary, coming "to be accessible to the participants in a way [they were not] before" and "eventually . . . to count as the taken-for-granted shape of things, too obvious to mention."[27] Despite the fact of political disagreement, then, political communities can alter what they pay attention to, as individuals do.

I think we can best understand political forgetting as an agreement to voluntarily reduce the salience of particular concepts or categories that are a part of our political life. This requires us to make an exception to the standard salience principle—that more important or significant information should be granted most salience—in pursuit of civic accord. The salience principle aims to guide our attention to those issues or properties that should be prioritized. Political forgetting involves an intentional collective departure from this principle with respect to some matter(s). This departure involves accepting a norm that alters the salience of the relevant topic in descriptive terms; it aims to move the matter down the order of priorities such that people do in fact view it as less salient and thus pay less attention to it. How strongly the matter is deprioritized is decided on a case-by-case basis by the relevant community (within some constraints, as I note below). In successful cases of political forgetting, this reduction in salience is constituted by a reduction in the attention paid to the matter by the citizenry. Reducing the salience attributed to that matter in social practices or institutions is instrumentally valuable in achieving this, as media organizations, public institutions, and political parties, among others, have the authority to assert to citizens the salience of some item and to constrain the extent to which they are able to reduce the attention they pay to it.

This way of thinking about forgetting nicely dovetails with some recent work on the role of monuments in our civic consciousness. This work largely begins from the premise that the historical processes by which public spaces come to be populated by monuments serve to "demarcate particular events, individuals and locations as especially significant to the nation's memory; and to materialise this in durable form."[28] The collective memory being constituted by these monuments might paradigmatically be national, but in many cases, it may instead (or also) be regional (as in the case of the erection of statues of Confederate generals throughout much of the antebellum American South in the twentieth century) or relate to some other mode of collective identity. The physical manifestation and visibility of monuments are an assertion of the *salience* of these individuals or events in that history, and as Michelle Moody-Adams among others argues, their presence "renders the past in ways

27 Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 29; and Moody-Adams, *Making Space for Justice*, ch. 6.

28 MacDonald, *Memorylands*, 200.

that constructively shape the present."[29] While newspapers generally seek to advance the *immediate* salience of various items, public monuments and buildings make claims of *enduring* salience. Of course, a primary concern of both scholarly and public discussion of problematic monuments in recent years has been with promoting the salience of different kinds of considerations and perspectives with our collective histories and altering the public realm to better reflect this, as well as with challenging the honoring of morally objectionable individuals or individuals who are commemorated for morally objectionable reasons.[30] *Contra* some critics, these arguments and the public campaigns they discuss do not aim to erase or forget aspects of the past.[31] But note that some thinkers discuss forgetting as a motivation in the destruction or removal of monuments in the aftermath of revolution or regime change. As Alessandra Tanesini notes, using the example of the toppling of statues of Saddam Hussein in Iraq following the US-led invasion, removing such monuments can be seen as "an effective way of consigning [the regime] to oblivion."[32] This is plausibly an attempt not merely to alter the content of the collective history articulated by the built environment but also to reduce the salience of those figures and that regime within that history and spare citizens from seeing "objects that would cue memories of a past they wish to forget."[33] Sometimes, such action may be impermissible; the quick removal of symbols of the Nazi era after 1945 should, Anja Berninger argues, be thought of as a case of impermissible "defensive forgetting," as the removal of those objects was motivated at least in part by a desire not to fully reckon with or own up to that past.[34] Nevertheless, just as the physical environment can be altered by a community to promote or relegate the salience of particular concepts or information, so can our political concepts and reference points.

Any genuine recalibration of the salience of some topic—rather than, say, a straightforwardly political attempt to subdue the discussion of some historical events or salient categories—must be a collective affair. Without widespread buy-in, we are faced simply with a standard political conflict. Only widespread acceptance of the relegation of the salience of the relevant concept can support

29 Moody-Adams, *Making Space for Justice*, 138; and Schulz, "Must Rhodes Fall?"

30 Frowe, "The Duty to Remove Statues of Wrongdoers"; Lai, "Political Vandalism as Counter-Speech"; Lim and Lai, "Objectionable Commemorations," 3; and Schulz, "Must Rhodes Fall?"

31 Frowe, "The Duty to Remove Statues of Wrongdoers," 8–9; and Moody-Adams, *Making Space for Justice*, 144.

32 Tanesini, "Collective Amnesia and Epistemic Injustice," 214.

33 Tanesini, "Collective Amnesia and Epistemic Injustice," 195.

34 Berninger, "Erasing History as a Form of Defensive Forgetting," 548.

the coordination of such a shift. The agreement need not be universal to be effective. Clarendon's appeal to reduce the salience of the categories and divisions of the English Civil War and interregnum was aimed at the aristocratic ruling class, who held a monopoly on political power, rather than at the wider population. In modern democracies, we cannot expect all citizens to accept any democratic norms, or indeed that any particular topic is salient; it may instead come about through individuals each seeking to promote their own values or claims rather than coming to some prior mutual agreement.[35] Exactly the threshold required depends on the conditions of the society, but we can broadly say that the more widely distributed political influence is, the broader the agreement must be.

Finally, it is a crucial feature of genuine political forgetting that it is not a merely institutional affair but an act of *the constituting people*. Following the social contract tradition, we can distinguish between two senses of "the people": the constituting and the constituted people. One purpose of this distinction is to explain how the same referent of 'the people' can persist after radical constitutional change, such as the regime changes that took place at the start and end of the interregnum. The *constituted people*—that is, the people acting as a group agent within an institutional regime—is set aside and replaced in these cases. But, as Philip Pettit puts it, "the replacement of the constituted people need not return people to the state of nature … since the constituting people can retain enough coordination as a set of individuals to manage a smooth transition to a new constitution."[36] This coordination is the product of a "network of norms" that enables the constituting people to engage in one-off joint action without having a common will or an enduring organizational structure, and so may be quite minimal.[37] It can accordingly take a variety of different forms, with the possibilities for the joint action of the constituting people spanning the range of options for joint action in general; it may take a similar form to that of some individuals cooperating to carry a piano up some stairs or to the alternative form of those same people playing tennis, or it may emerge unplanned (as with a norm to greet others with a handshake rather than a hug).[38]

I think this distinction can illuminate two aspects of political forgetting: (1) how it can be undertaken; and (2) how it is consistent with the epistemic duties of citizens. To begin with 1, the distinction between the constituting and constituted people can explain the capacity in which citizens act when reducing

35 Pettit, *On the People's Terms*, 277–78.

36 Pettit, *On the People's Terms*, 291.

37 Pettit, *The State*, 206–11.

38 Pettit, *The State*, 209.

the salience of some matter. This might initially be puzzling, as individuals are acting neither in their institutional roles nor as entirely private actors. Because political forgetting is not a matter of formal institutional politics, it cannot (only) be undertaken by the constituted people.[39] But I suggest we can instead understand it as within the power of the citizenry acting as the constituting people. In this role, citizens may reorient the terms of democratic politics by altering the salience of particular items or concepts. On Pettit's characterization, the constituting people do not simply sit in the background ready to step in to respond to serious injustice but rather "jointly sustain the polity" by acting to populate civic and political offices and participating in the day-to-day life of democratic politics.[40] But there is also a long-term dimension of their role, which involves "subjecting government to the discipline of the considerations they valorize as relevant in public decision-making" (or, as Pettit puts it in *On the People's Terms*, "shaping government policies to the requirements of commonly endorsed norms").[41] Political forgetting is possible in these terms, as the constituting people might through a variety of methods relegate some considerations from the position of salience they once held. When the constituting people decides to alter the political salience of certain categories and concepts, they are deciding to subject the government to the discipline of some considerations over others, shifting the overall ordering of priorities. This extra-institutionally alters the terms of civic life, which, if successful, is then reflected in the institutional action of the constituted people.

The absence of a unified corporate will does not preclude this possibility. The acts of the constituting people are usually plural rather than the single act of an individual agent. These decisions are the subject of widespread acceptance—whether on the matter of which norms or considerations to which government policies should be subject or the matter of which proposed constitution should be adopted.[42] As the matter of which considerations should most strongly discipline public institutions is generally determined by competitive processes in

39 Of course, political institutions and office holders (like Clarendon) may encourage or attempt to shape a process of political forgetting. But while they can incentivize certain attitudes and aim to reproduce them, they cannot generate the kind of agreement that is required for a genuine process of political forgetting.

40 Pettit, "On the People's Terms," 694, and *The State*, 212.

41 Pettit, "On the People's Terms," 694, and *On the People's Terms*, 286.

42 Sieyès suggests that the constituting people might also act through the creation of "extraordinary representatives" not subject to ordinary constitutional rules or procedures. This body of representatives, operating as a "surrogate for an assembly of that nation" could indeed act as a corporate body while also acting in the guise of the constituting people. In the more ordinary course of things, however, the constituting people will indeed be understood as engaged in joint, plural action. See Sieyès, *Political Writings*, 139.

which citizens advance differing proposals, we can expect political forgetting to emerge either via the aggregated desires of many individuals to engage in such a process or (perhaps as part of such a process) through more explicit deliberation among citizens about some proposed course of forgetting.

Moving on to 2, I suggest the distinction between the constituting and constituted people can also provide a way out of an apparent conflict between processes of political forgetting and the epistemic duties we hold as citizens. Many scholars believe that citizens have epistemic duties of various kinds, which apply to our practices of voting, belief formation, protest, and deliberation. For instance, we owe it to our fellow citizens to take precautions to reduce the risk that we come to hold irrational or unjustified political views.[43] Duties of this kind appear to conflict with the practice of political forgetting, which may require us to ignore (or give less attention to) relevant information when forming our political views or advancing policies in public. While the epistemic duties held by most people in Restoration England would have been minimal, we can see this conflict more clearly by reimagining it as a democratic society in which all citizens hold some formal political power and basic political liberties. In this scenario, the kind of precautions citizens owe to each other to take would surely involve attending to the historical and political processes that explain current political issues, including those of the Civil War and interregnum. Political forgetting might, then, seem to be a violation of our responsibilities as citizens.

Understanding political forgetting as a task undertaken by the constituting people can help us to avoid this conclusion. Doing so might not initially seem to help much; after all, on Pettit's view, the constituting people are active "in the short haul of day-to-day, policy-by-policy decision-making," as well as in elections, political office, and social movements.[44] These "day-to-day" activities—like voting and standing in elections, or challenging the government in the courts, the media, or even through acts of civil disobedience—come with epistemic duties attached.[45] This demonstrates that the epistemic duties of citizens do not apply to citizens only in their role as the constituted people. But in their role as the constituting people, individuals may have quite different sets of epistemic duties or responsibilities, which apply to different aspects of that role. This is because, firstly, the constituting people have the prerogative to decide if and when there are reasons that justify departing from the usual salience principle and raising or reducing the attention we grant some consideration

43 Beerbohm, *In Our Name*, 151.

44 Pettit, *On the People's Terms*, 286.

45 Pettit, *The State*, 212–13.

based on the political values or aims of the community. Secondly, while citizens hold a duty only to provide public justifications for policies that appeal to considerations that can reasonably be expected to count as relevant grounds for all members of the community, this constraint does not preclude citizens from *refraining* from appealing to some consideration or from assigning it less significance than another.[46] As such, we can say that the epistemic requirements of citizenship do not rule out political forgetting, which remains an active option for the citizenry acting in its capacity as the constituting people.

Having outlined a model for conceiving of political forgetting, I now turn to the question of whether it can be justified and in what conditions.

3. Justified Political Forgetting

As noted in the introduction, there are strong *prima facie* reasons to be skeptical that political forgetting might ever be justified. There are two main grounds for this skepticism. The first of these concerns the distribution of burdens and benefits that emerges from a process of forgetting. While other modes of reconciliation appear to obviously promote the interests of those subject to injustice (by, for instance, enabling them to publicly express their experience of this injustice and have state institutions recognize the wrongs inflicted on them), reducing the salience of still-relevant political categories seems likely to disadvantage those who have suffered injustice. Suppressing categories of political significance can be a way of delegitimizing difference or criticism, or a means of generating a new common sense based on a partial historical narrative. For instance, in urging the English public to forget the categories of Roundhead and Cavalier, the Earl of Clarendon was, along with others, attempting to assert the reestablished monarchy's legitimacy by presenting it as continuous with the pre-interregnum constitutional regime. The methods used here of delegitimizing certain political actors and causes were clear, with the infliction of violence on the corpses of Oliver Cromwell and Henry Ireton just one "gruesome deterrent to future anti-monarchical agitators."[47] If processes of forgetting are always motivated by the desire of some social group to supress discussion of a topic or political opposition or to avoid confronting their role in some injustice, political forgetting will not be justifiable.

The second *prima facie* reason to be skeptical about the justifiability of political forgetting is that reducing the salience of important social categories might seem to license or even to mandate irrationality. Having a broadly accurate

46 Pettit, *On the People's Terms*, 253–54.

47 Jackson, *Devil-Land*, 378–79.

sense of the relative importance of different matters helps us to make better decisions individually and collectively. By jointly acting as if some matter were not as salient as it is, we deny ourselves relevant and important information.[48] We find this worry in the work of Paul Ricoeur, who, when considering cases of "commanded forgetting" such as that of the Athenian amnesty, asks, "Is it not a defect in this imaginary unity that it erases from the official memory the examples of crimes likely to protect the future from the errors of the past and, by depriving public opinion of the benefits of dissensus, of condemning competing memories to an unhealthy underground existence?"[49] Taking the Restoration again as a concrete example, Clarendon's call to forget would seem to have been asking people not to recognize the significance of the Civil War and interregnum and to ignore those aspects of monarchical rule that animated the "Good Old Cause" in the first place. Doing so would seem to inhibit the capacity of the polity to identify and perhaps resolve substantive and enduring political issues. Unless the topics in question actually come to be less relevant, then acting *as if* they are less relevant commits the political community to irrationality, falsity, and the reductions in welfare that may consequently accrue.

These are both important concerns, but while they certainly constrain the conditions under which political forgetting might justifiably be undertaken, they do not preclude its justification. I argue that political forgetting can in principle be justified when it meets certain conditions, which I suggest should assuage both of these concerns. These conditions are as follows:

1. The transformation of the terms of political reality must not obscure terms or events that will continue to structure society to the unjust and significant disadvantage of any particular group.
2. The transformation must be endorsed by all relevant social groups.
3. It must be recognized that it is legitimate for agents to raise the "forgotten" terms or events in public discussion in certain conditions.

The reasoning behind 1 is straightforward. The primary risk associated with political forgetting is that it will be used by the powerful—and in contexts where it is most likely to arise as an option, more precisely by the victors of a recent conflict—in order to recast political reality to their own partisan advantage by silencing discussion of a rightly salient topic. This would be unjust both as an epistemic and a political matter. As an epistemic matter, reducing the salience of a topic that continues to structure society economically and politically to a very significant degree would be to obstruct the capacity of those

48 Brendese, *The Power of Memory in Democratic Politics*, 13.

49 Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 455.

disadvantaged by this structuring to understand their circumstances. This (and this is the political aspect of the worry) would also make it more difficult for this disadvantage to be challenged, as these matters may then become difficult to raise in public deliberation. Many practices of forgetting are unjustified for these reasons. Consider cases of what Alfred Archer calls *consigning to history*, which involves "the involuntary exclusion of certain people's identities from a community by narratives placing them in the community's past but not its present or future."[50] Examples of consigning to history include the development of narratives concerning portrayals of Indigenous people in North American popular culture and portrayals of industrial laborers in French narratives of deindustrialization. In both cases, these narratives present some identities—and those who continue to hold those identities—as inhabiting the past tense, rendering their place in the present invisible. These cases are unjustified, Archer suggests, because this invisibility "places them outside the temporal boundaries of this community."[51] Cases of consigning to history are wrong at least in part because the concepts, identities, and events they classify as belonging to the past and not the present remain relevant to the distribution of burdens and benefits. They make it harder for those affected to make their claims heard, thus violating 1. In very many cases, they are not endorsed by the group that is consigned to history and therefore also violate 2.

A question arises here: Do not all candidate case of political forgetting concern topics that have this kind of structuring effect? Topics or events that no longer effect political life require no special mechanisms to lose their salience. Political forgetting arises as an option only for issues that remain of high salience; it makes little sense for Clarendon to have urged his audience to forget events or political divisions that had already been forgotten or that were no longer relevant to public life. But 1 does not therefore rule out all political forgetting as unjustified. This is because not all topics of high salience continue to structure political reality in a way that is unjustly and significantly advantageous to some over others. They may not have an effect that significantly advantages some over others, or that advantage may be justified. Such concepts can continue to have high salience. In these situations, political forgetting remains potentially justifiable. But it is certainly true that this criterion rules as unjustified a very wide range of cases—including, plausibly, the forgetting urged by Clarendon, which seems very likely to have been to the undue disadvantage of antimonarchists. This should be regarded not as a defect of the account but as properly reflective

50 Archer, "Consigning to History," 7.

51 Archer, "Consigning to History," 7.

of the moral risks involved in political forgetting. It also points us to two specific modes of forgetting that more plausibly count as justifiable.

The first of these is forgetting that is undertaken as part of a broader program of change aimed at reducing the actual importance of the categories or concepts whose salience is to be reduced. A wide-ranging program of reconciliation that includes practices of truth telling, institutional reform, and the prosecution of perpetrators of severe injustice can include practices of forgetting that are premised on the operation of these other mechanisms. What distinguishes this from the ordinary application of the salience principle is that it is undertaken deliberately with an eye to altering the terms of civic engagement. The *prima facie* concerns noted at the beginning of this section are significantly abetted by marrying practices of forgetting with mechanisms aimed at reducing the importance of relevant categories. Indeed, if these mechanisms are successful, the kind of forgetting under discussion becomes rational.

One example of this is South Africa's postapartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). As P. J. Brendese has argued, "the TRC's proceedings reflect certain Nietzschean theoretical assumptions about how one remembers in order to forget."[52] The Nietzschean model of *willful forgetting* involves, in Brendese's terms, "the supplanting of an exclusive way of relating to the past."[53] The TRC undertook this first by democratizing memory, granting authority and validation to victims to publicly share their experiences. This disrupted the historical narrative that accompanied apartheid (in contrast to Clarendon's attempt to reinstate an "exclusive way of relating to the past"). But the amnesty to which these practices of truth telling was tied itself required a form of forgetting, or, as Brendese puts it, "a suspension of the remembrance of identities created by victimization."[54] Indeed, some of the criticism levelled at the TRC has been that it developed a narrative of reconciliation that failed to account for "memories resisting closure" and forgiveness.[55] What this example shows is that even processes of reconciliation that involve extensive processes of truth telling and public revelation of past crimes—that is, an actual reorientation of the salience of different concepts and topics in the shared life of the community—may have as one of their aims the kind of forgetting outlined above.

The second mode of forgetting is *prefigurative*, or undertaken as an experiment. In the absence of a broader program of change, a political community may embark on a project of political forgetting as an attempt to try something

52 Brendese, *The Power of Memory in Democratic Politics*, 43.

53 Brendese, *The Power of Memory in Democratic Politics*, 47.

54 Brendese, *The Power of Memory in Democratic Politics*, 50.

55 Brendese, *The Power of Memory in Democratic Politics*, 52.

new. Rather than definitively changing the terms of civic engagement, such a project could only justifiably be a trial run in which a citizenry explores the effects of reducing the salience of some concept or category. This kind of political forgetting is an act of collective faith, an invitation to other citizens to explore an alternative vision of the political community. This kind of forgetting *does* involve irrationality on the part of citizens, asking them to act as if some alternative state of affairs pertained. But it may still be justifiable given the mutual benefit that recasting the terms of civic life might generate.

Of course, both these forms of forgetting, especially the latter, are precarious and still run a risk of obscuring injustices impermissibly. Conditions 2 and 3 further specify the conditions under which political forgetting may be justified, and these further specifications constrain these risks.

Condition 2 requires that the reduction of the salience of the chosen topics or events is endorsed by the relevant social groups. This includes groups directly picked out by those concepts under discussion (e.g., Cavaliers and Roundheads in Clarendon's case), those whose identity and social position are a product of oppression strongly linked to those concepts (e.g., Black Americans in relation to the history of racial subjugation in the United States), and those who share a relevant feature with those groups (e.g., religious minorities in the aftermath of some schism between other religious groups).[56] There is a clearly a practical need for all relevant social groups to accept the reduced salience of some set of concepts for that reduction in salience to take place; if one group were to continue to operate as it did before, the salience of the topics would remain a matter of active political contestation, which is precisely the opposite of what political forgetting aims at. But the normative requirement involves a higher standard than this practical one. After all, groups can be brought to accept deeply unjust political settlements under threat of violence. The endorsement of groups must be given freely, and, though it need not be a matter of unanimous agreement among members, it should have wide-ranging support from members. The reduction in salience of some topic or concept must be understood by relevant social groups to be to their benefit (or at least not to their unjust disadvantage).

Finally, condition 3 requires that in certain conditions, the salience of the relevant concepts can be legitimately reasserted. A group that feels that the reduced salience of some concept is unjustly disadvantaging them is entitled to contest the agreement to relegate the salience of that concept. This is likely to itself be a matter of intense political contestation, but the right of communities

56 I leave open what precisely it means for an identity or social position to be a product of oppression or what might count as a relevant feature. The examples I provide indicate some of the cases I think are covered by any plausible answer to either of these questions, but the case I provide here does not rely on accepting any particular such answer.

to make such claims is a necessary component of any justified political forgetting. This does not mean that all such claims are warranted or acceptable to others, just that members of a society engaged in political forgetting—and especially those members of social groups referenced by categories being granted reduced salience—have the right to contest the justice of the new state of affairs. This is a necessary escape hatch to be used in case of unjustified or coerced cases of political forgetting. Threatening or inflicting outright violence on those who may contest the new state of affairs—as, for example, the reestablished monarchy did with the degradation of the corpses of Cromwell and Ireton—would certainly contravene this condition.

It is important to note here that condition 3 concerns the right to contest the reduced salience of a concept/topic and does not imply that political forgetting standardly involves such a steep reduction in salience that individuals are penalized for even mentioning that concept/topic. Any attempt to completely remove some concept/topic from political discourse will always violate condition *i* by virtue of severity; when a topic remains relevant to the understanding of an injustice, but citizens are not able to freely raise it without censure, those subject to that injustice are unduly disadvantaged. The possibility for contestation remains important even when the salience of a topic is only somewhat reduced, as that reduced salience can still have a serious effect on the terms of political discourse. If this effect is negative or unjust, it may be challenged.

Having outlined the conditions that apply to the justification of political forgetting, it is clear that there will be few real-life cases in which political forgetting is justified. These will most likely be cases in which forgetting appears as part of a broader package of changes to the terms of civic engagement and where the reduction of salience is moderate. But having a conceptual model of political forgetting and an account of the justificatory conditions that apply to such forgetting remains important. This is firstly because in these cases, justified forgetting may come with significant benefits. Reducing the salience of some concept or topic may, in tightly circumscribed situations, productively reconfigure the terms of political engagement within a society. But the account of political forgetting offered here also has a second useful function that is more broadly applicable. It can be used to evaluate real-world charges to forget—in particular, to demonstrate why they should be rejected. When faced with calls to forget, we can use the account to spot when and why those calls might be unjustified. Perhaps the proposed forgetting would be to the disadvantage of some particular group or is not endorsed by that group or makes it overly onerous for that group to raise concerns about some topic or using some concept in the future. Whatever the fault may be, the account sketched above helps us to identify what exactly is wrong with such proposals.

4. CONCLUSION

I have argued that we should conceive of political forgetting as a coordinated reduction in the salience of some topic or concept undertaken by the public in their role as the constituting people and for a set of justificatory conditions according to which we can evaluate proposals to forget. The model I have outlined is highly demanding; many calls to forget aspects of our political life neither fit the conceptual framework nor meet the justificatory conditions. This should not be regarded as a defect of either aspect of the model or as a reason to dismiss the concept of political forgetting entirely. Rather, it should be seen as a reflection of the high stakes involved in such cases and of the frequent unjustified calls to forget that are a feature of political life. My account vindicates the judgment that these calls are unjustified. But it leaves open the possibility that some forms of political forgetting may be justified. It also suggests that those cases will likely involve more than just a reduction in salience, encompassing instead a broad array of measures designed to alter in fact as well as thought the terms of civic engagement within a political society.

More generally, the account of political forgetting I have offered presents questions of what and how societies should relate to their pasts as not just thoroughly political but as requiring a particular kind of democratic politics.[57] Civic memory is always a matter of political struggle and conflict, but civic forgetting of the kind I have been concerned with here operates at one step of removal from these everyday practices of political contestation—informed but not determined by them. Acts of political forgetting are one extraordinary means that political communities can take to reorient the terms of their shared life, to create the possibility that their institutions will step beyond the reenactment of past conflicts and create a shared democratic future.[58]

University of Cambridge
ajb387@cam.ac.uk

57 Brendese, *The Power of Memory in Democratic Politics*.

58 I am grateful to two anonymous reviewers and an associate editor from this journal for their helpful comments. I am also grateful to the Isaac Newton Trust, which provided funding (grant number NTACDF5) for the fellowship I have held while developing this research.

REFERENCES

Archer, Alfred. "Consigning to History." *Philosophers' Imprint* 24, no. 19 (2024): 1–14.

Basu, Rima. "The Importance of Forgetting." *Episteme* 19, no. 4 (2022): 471–90.

———. "The Morality of Belief 1: How Beliefs Wrong." *Philosophy Compass* 18, no. 7 (2023): e12934.

———. "A Tale of Two Doctrines: Moral Encroachment and Doxastic Wronging." In *Applied Epistemology*, edited by Jennifer Lackey. Oxford University Press, 2021.

Beerbohm, Eric. *In Our Name: The Ethics of Democracy*. Princeton University Press, 2012.

Bernecker, Sven. "On the Blameworthiness of Forgetting." In *New Directions in the Philosophy of Memory*, edited by Kourken Michaelian, Dorothea Debus, and Denis Perrin. Routledge, 2018.

Berninger, Anja. "Erasing History as a Form of Defensive Forgetting." *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 42, no. 2 (2025): 547–63.

Brendese, P. J. *The Power of Memory in Democratic Politics*. Boydell and Brewer, 2014.

Connerton, Paul. "Seven Types of Forgetting." *Memory Studies* 1, no. 1 (2008): 59–71.

Frowe, Helen. "The Duty to Remove Statues of Wrongdoers." *Journal of Practical Ethics* 7, no. 3 (2019): 1–31.

Jackson, Clare. *Devil-Land: England Under Siege, 1588–1688*. Penguin, 2022.

Lai, Ten-Herng. "Political Vandalism as Counter-Speech: A Defense of Defacing and Destroying Tainted Monuments." *European Journal of Philosophy* 28, no. 3 (2020): 602–16.

Lim, Chong-Ming, and Ten-Herng Lai. "Objectionable Commemorations: Ethical and Political Issues." *Philosophy Compass* 19, no. 2 (2024): e12963.

Lindemann, Hilde. *Holding and Letting Go: The Social Practice of Personal Identities*. Oxford University Press, 2016.

MacDonald, Sharon. *Memorylands: Heritage and Identity in Europe Today*. Routledge, 2013.

Margalit, Avishai. *The Ethics of Memory*. Harvard University Press, 2002.

Moody-Adams, Michelle. *Making Space for Justice: Social Movements, Collective Imagination, and Political Hope*. Columbia University Press, 2022.

Munch, Lauritz Aastrup. "How Privacy Rights Engender Direct Doxastic Duties." *Journal of Value Inquiry* 56, no. 4 (2022): 547–62.

Munton, Jessie. "Prejudice as the Misattribution of Salience." *Analytic Philosophy* 64, no. 1 (2023): 1–19.

Pettit, Philip. "On the People's Terms: A Reply to Five Critiques." *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 18, no. 6 (2015): 687–96.

———. *On the People's Terms: A Republican Theory and Model of Democracy*. Cambridge University Press, 2012.

———. *The State*. Princeton University Press, 2023.

Ricoeur, Paul. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. University of Chicago Press, 2004.

Schulz, Johannes. "Must Rhodes Fall? The Significance of Commemoration in the Struggle for Relations of Respect." *Journal of Political Philosophy* 27, no. 2 (2019): 166–86.

Siegel, Susanna. "Salience Principles for Democracy." In *Salience: A Philosophical Enquiry*, edited by Sophie Archer. Routledge, 2022.

Sieyès, Emmanuel Joseph. *Political Writings: Including the Debate Between Sieyès and Tom Paine in 1791*, edited by Michael Sonenscher. Hackett, 2003.

Tanesini, Alessandra. "Collective Amnesia and Epistemic Injustice." In *Socially Extended Epistemology*, edited by J. Adam Carter, Andy Clark, Jesper Kallestrup, S. Orestis Palermos, and Duncan Pritchard. Oxford University Press, 2018.

Taylor, Charles. *Modern Social Imaginaries*. Duke University Press, 2003.

Whiteley, Ella Kate. "Harmful Salience Perspectives." In *Salience: A Philosophical Enquiry*, edited by Sophie Archer. Routledge, 2022.

———. "'A Woman First and a Philosopher Second': Relative Attentional Surplus on the Wrong Property." *Ethics* 133, no. 4 (2023): 497–528.