Dimbath Oliver (2022) Oblivionism. Forgetting and Forgetfulness in Modern Science. Leiden: Brill. 302 pages. ISBN: 978-3-8467-6573-3

Bart Penders

b.penders@maastrichtuniversity.nl

"I still dream of Orgonon" is the first line of Kate Bush' hit 'Cloudbusting'. The song is inspired by Peter Reich's *A book of dreams* (1973), a memoir that recalls life at the research lab Orgonon (Maine, USA) devoted to the study of orgone energy. The study of orgone, the face of the field, Wilhelm Reich (Peter's father) and the links between Reich and Einstein are no longer part of the scientific corpus. We have forgotten them and if I would not greatly appreciate Kate Bush's music, I would have been as oblivious as the rest.

Oblivion, the problem of not knowing something anymore, and oblivionism, the critique of systematic or intentional forgetting in modern society, stand at the heart of Dimbath's sociological analysis. Dimbath offers the reader a sociology of a loss of knowledge, which does not restrict itself to forgetting or forgetfulness in modern science, as the subtitle suggests. Modern science, to Dimbath, is a case study hinted at throughout the first chapters of the book, but only moved into the spotlight in the very last chapter.

Dimbath offers a dense text that oscillates between more philosophical and sociological contributions and continuous encounters between oblivion and highly theoretical manifestations of knowledge, time, and memory. Through various excursions into philosophies and sociologies of time and memory,[1] Dimbath presents us with a score of concepts that orbit oblivion in complex interwoven patterns and that co-define and shape various co-existing notions of what could be and are oblivion. He moves through individual, social, institutional, cultural and political conceptualisations of what it means to forget and have forgotten.[2]

The core of the book deals with the development of a sociological theory of memory and remembrance, in continuous exchange with and connection to oblivion. Dimbath casts a very wide net in both sociology and philosophy and continuously moves between classic and contemporary theory. Dimbath distinguishes between three dimensions of social memory, declarative-reflective, incorporated-practical, and objectivist-technical (p. 99). While there is a lot to say about the conceptual rigour through which Dimbath assembles his sociologies of memory and oblivion, the placement and understanding of memory and forgetting in science warrants primary attention here.

To Dimbath, science is the perfect site for testing his conceptual apparatus, given its "particular emphasis on permanently referring to the past" (p. 189). He studies oblivion in science as a conceptual pilot; armchair sociology as it were, never plunging himself into specific practices or representing them though data. Dimbath discusses "the literature", how it stores knowledge and the selection processes involved in retrieving knowledge from it, how completeness ideals and practices of selection and replacement create both social memory and forgetting in the sciences. Where not accumulation but replacement of knowledge, theories or paradigms constitute scientific progress, forgetting is a requirement.

The forgetfulness of science knows many shapes: ranging from innovation as creative destruction to a pathological lack of self-reflective abilities. Oblivion in science, so Dimbath argues, can be metaphorically represented in the form of a leak – a problem that needs to be fixed, or a form of cleansing – a desirable process geared toward some idea of self-improvement. It is not solely a characteristic of internal selection processes in science, but is also shaped by external dynamics, such as economic thinking imposed onto the governance of science that favours selection based on success, or political steering, that favour selection on desirable (fields of) specialisation. These selection processes can manifest themselves in the form of evaluation regimes, which specifically seek out oblivion: work that does not fit an agenda, or a mission, or work that is considered poor. Even publication bias (Dimbath does not use the word) can be explained this way: by a desire to forget unsuccessful experiments. Selection based on success favours remembrance of the successful and forgetting of the rest, producing the Matthew Effect and elite journals in the process. Forgetfulness in science is also intentionally (in part, at least) performed via citation practices, or rather, selection process that result in not citing a study, and on a larger scale, via Kuhnian paradigm shifts. Dimbath extends this into the moral realm, where tabooing of certain research areas via ethics committees or political actors helps to cast them into oblivion.

Dimbath speculates that science's relentless productivity might, on the micro-level of the individual scientist, be sparked by a desire to escape oblivion and be remembered for a contribution. He also finds room for some critique on the scientific system, the meso- and macro levels, where precarious employment and forced mobility produces forgetfulness in scientific organisations. On a similar institutional level, the design of curricula and canon not only creates descriptions of relevant knowledge, but also preselects what may be and should be forgotten. This shapes the state-of the art, the status-quo and simultaneously, cleanses science of unwanted epistemic content. Systematically not citing something renders it invisible and ultimately forgotten. If knowledge becomes canon, its origin can be forgotten (black-boxed). If it does not become canon, it can be forgotten completely.

"Oblivionism" does not offer a single comprehensive analysis, but rather offers a large numbers of small and fragmented "applications" of Dimbath's conceptual apparatus to scientific practices, each of a few paragraphs only. Many, most actually, are quite illustrative and offer a new and refreshing perspective on issues well known. Some overstretch the idea of forgetting somewhat, for instance the description of the reorientation of existing knowledge and personal history in different funding applications (p. 228). Does a switch in rhetoric constitute forgetfulness? Does updating textbooks and personal collections, curation of databases and literature all constitute desires to remove and forget? Dimbath does briefly touch upon self-presentation through publication lists and the attempt to make audiences forget of less prominent publications. He even explicitly mentions "career-damaging behaviour" (p. 234), and (successful) plagiarism as a way to forget about an affected originator (p.235). However, we learn little about how scientists and the scientific community seek to forget fraud (erase it from the corpus and expunge the fraudster from its ranks) and whether, as a consequence, reparation is possible. The same goes for retractions in literature – how do we understand them as a mode of oblivion?

How something is forgotten, what is forgotten, who is forgetting, at what social level something is forgotten, what may be retrieved and how, whether oblivion is object- or subject-related and whether it is series of conditions or a process – Dimbath slowly takes the reader on a strenuous journey to tick off each and every one of these questions with the help of an army of theorists and theories – on taboos, organisational learning, silencing, reframing or restructuring and more, including a small meta-journey into forgetting about oblivion. The result, a classification of oblivion under three headings: forgetfulness, wanting to forget (volitional oblivion) and making one forget. Hiding under these three labels are huge numbers of differentiations of oblivion and immense conceptual detail. However, this complexity and conceptual detail makes the book difficult to process and access. It is somewhat of

a challenge to read and process and many might feel tempted to fast-forward to Chapter 4, where the analysis of science starts. The book even lacks an index that could help facilitate access to its complexity.

After extremely lengthy theoretical discussions, the four-page conclusion confirms that Dimbath's lens of oblivion offers value to sociology and science studies. When science moves forward, we usually wonder what that means. We can also ask what is lost along the way. Dimbath offers us a collection of tools to answer that question, so we do not have to rely on Kate Bush' eclectic reading habits. How these tools work in empirical studies is an open question, for all of us to answer.

References

Reich P (1973) *A book of dreams. A memoir of Wilhelm Reich*. New York: Harper & Row.

Notes

1 Featuring Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Augustine, Bergson, Ricœur, Husserl, Heidegger, Derrida, Durkheim, Mead, Halbwachs, Parsons, Giddens, Luhmann, Elias, Weber, Ebbinghaus, Freud, Barnes, Connerton, Weinrich, Adorno, Lübbe, König, Nietzsche, Gadamer, Eco, Goffman, and more.

2 Some of these thinkers, whose work is briefly touched upon by Dimbath, have very little to offer to the development of his conceptual apparatus. He is mostly transparent about this, which sparks comparisons to the negative results in experimental studies: displays of what ultimately proved to be futile are still of intellectual value, even if only to avoid others to take the same path.