



Literature Review:

The role of civil society in managing memories of disputed territories

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**Part 2 of 7: Civil society, the past and remembrance -
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CIVIL SOCIETY, THE PAST AND REMEMBRANCE - Harutyun Marutyan

Harutyun Marutyan is Head Researcher at the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography (National Academy of Sciences, Yerevan) & Director of the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute Foundation. In this piece, Harutyun sets out a historical over-view of the academic debates on memory and the past.

On the Concept of the 'Past'

For a human being, the past is the period before certain events that have been recorded directly in the memory of the individual. To be a member of any human community is to situate oneself with regard to one's past, if only by rejecting it. The past is therefore a permanent dimension of human consciousness, an inevitable component of the institutions, values, and other patterns of human society. Although the past and present tenses differ grammatically, the past and the present are not separate independent units. For the greater part of history, we deal with societies and communities for which the past is essentially the pattern of the present. Of course, total domination by the past would exclude all legitimate changes and innovations, and it is improbable that there is any human society that would recognize no innovation (Hobsbawm 1972).

When social change accelerates or transforms society beyond a certain point, the past must cease to be the *pattern* of the present and can, at best, become the *model* for it. The very appeal to the past, even when the call is made that 'we ought to return to the ways of our forefathers,' is a mask for innovation, for it no longer expresses the repetition of what has gone before. Attempts for the restoration of the lost past are often simply symbolic (Hobsbawm 1972) rather than successful, and hence become manifestations of the continuity of the past through replications only (cf.: Zerubavel 2003).

The introduction of a civil society's past to its new members functions as a component of their inclusion in the society and is a significant part of the efforts of that society. Thus the teaching of a national history, whether in Israel or Armenia, Poland or Mexico, is the most significant part of the overall endeavors of the given state in the shaping of national identity (cf.: Smith 1999). As was vividly formulated by Raffi, a nineteenth-century founder of Armenian nationalism, 'History is a creed that shapes the future generation, teaching them to beware of the errors of their forefathers and to follow the example of their worthy deeds' (Raffi 1959). Meanwhile, parting from a certain group or a society often leads to obliviousness of its past (cf.: Halbwachs 1980). For example, children who are neglected by one of their parents seldom have recollections of that parent's family. Similarly, the children of assimilated immigrants do not receive substantial knowledge of the history of the societies to which his/her parents once belonged.

Civil society members perceptions of the past are reflections of personal social experience. Just as the present, the past is also part of social reality and, far from being thoroughly objective, nevertheless is greater than our subjectivity, and is usually shared by others as well (cf.: Fentress and Wickham 1992).

Recollection of the past is an active, constructive process and not a simple matter of retrieving information. The act of remembrance is to place a part of the past in the service of the conceptions and needs of the present (Schwartz 1982).

Almost all political rhetoric depends on the past as a legitimating device. The French revolutionaries of the 1790s referred to the past, to the Roman republic in order to find legitimation for political action not dependent on royal decrees (it was Roman law that recognized the primacy of private property) (Fentress and Wickham 1992). As a rule, revolutionary movements also seek their mottos and ambitions in the past (Le Goff 1992). It is probable that national historical consciousness and its infrastructures have gradually begun to develop in French and European societies

since the French Revolution. It is since the nineteenth century that scholars and politicians have started to accept the importance of the fundamental link between the nation and its past. This link has been one of the most important factors for the growth of nationalist and nation-building ideologies, and in the process of the establishment of the capitalist nations in general (Fentress and Wickham 1992; Anderson 1983; Hobsbawm 1990; Hobsbawm 2000). As Eric Hobsbawm has observed, 'Nations without a past are a contradiction in terms. What makes a nation is the past, what justifies one nation against others is the past, and historians are the people who produce it' (Hobsbawm 1992).

Memory, and historical memory in particular, is one of the fundamental features defining the edges of 'ethnic community (ethnie),' 'nation,' and 'national identity' (Smith 1991). Among the rituals, customs, and common myths, shared historical memories and traditions are a means of tying together the members of a nation and determining their relations and actions. According to Anthony Smith, memories and the understanding of their communal past or pasts form the 'ethno-history' of a nation or ethnic community. It is multi-layered and contested, which implies a continuous process of reinterpretation of national identities. Every generation contributes its own interpretation of national identity, and for that reason, national identity is never fixed or static: it is always being reconstructed in response to new needs, interests and perceptions, although within certain limits. Smith notes that the central question of nationalism, which in general is one of the most powerful social and political forces in the modern world and has the most important role in nation building and national development processes, is the role of the past in the creation of the present and that the essential element in any kind of human identity is memory, reflective consciousness of personal connection with the past (Smith 1999).

Both historical and collective memory are based upon people's knowledge and attitudes to their nation's historical past in its entirety or certain episodes, real or perceived, thereof. At the same time, as has already been mentioned, these

memories are not static; rather they are subject to transformations caused by internal developments and external influences. Such as those in the twentieth century when events of nation-wide significance took place in Armenian society, and the combination of the above mentioned factors led to the formation of significant elements of new identity.

Generally, thoughts about society are almost always expressed through images of individuals. History is perceived in the same way: remembrance of the past begins with the remembrance of people. Individuals composing a society almost always feel the need to have ancestors, heroes (cf.: Irwin-Zarecka 1994), and one of the roles of great men is to fill that need. Thus, special importance is attached to the questions: What kind of historical individuals should be, or are worthy of being, remembered? And what parts of their activities should be presented to future generations? In formulating and searching for answers to these questions, we face the political uses of the past (Schwartz 1991b).

This task is part of a more general problem of the very concept of historical memory taking places in academic circles and which is currently largely considered, discussed and challenged, and has led to clashes of opinion and has resulted in the emergence of individual avenues. In brief, the essence of the question is as follows: some authors maintain that the past is mutable, made and remade for present-day use, depending on the demands of the present. Another group of theorists believes that collective memory survives the changes in society; moreover, it is the past that forms our notions of the present and not vice versa. The third, comparatively smaller group, of memory scholars argues that the same present may carry different memories and different realia may carry the same memory, and thus in political culture collective memory is a dynamic and ongoing process of debate, which flows through time.

None of these theoretical approaches is of narrow or dogmatic character; they differ primarily in emphasis.

Collective Memory in the Context of Interrelations of the Past and Present

One of Halbwachs' fundamental and oft-quoted conclusions is that, 'A remembrance is in very large measure a reconstruction of the past achieved with data borrowed from the present, a reconstruction prepared, furthermore, by reconstructions of earlier periods wherein past images had already been altered' (Halbwachs 1980).

'Present' based approach in social remembrance studies

A group of well-known researchers of national memory and identity, including George Herbert Mead, Michel Foucault, Eric Hobsbawm, Terence Ranger and Charles Horton Cooley, who continued the theoretical development of Halbwachs' observation, also believes that the past is created in the present, and is thus adaptable. A powerful strand of the so-called 'presentist' approach is observed in the scientific studies referring to memory issues. These studies record the ways through which the reflections of the past are changed over the course of time. They also note that different groups use the past for solving present-day problems by engaging in various manipulations while commenting on the past with the purpose of achieving definite goals. Based on various examples, the numerous studies carried out by the above authors and their adherents reveal the transformation of the significance of historical events passing from one generation to another in accordance with changes in the infrastructures of social problems and needs. In other words, according to the authors of this school of thought, an historical event is evaluated differently at different period of times, depending on the requirements of the moment (cf.: Davies 1989). Thus, according to Mead and Halbwachs, collective memory is subject to fundamental revision when new values and social structures replace old ones. They believe that 'the past is a foreign country,' as the title of another author's book states (cf.: Lowenthal 1985).

George Herbert Mead was not familiar with Halbwachs' works. The essence of his theory, based on works published in the 1920s and 1930s, relies upon the idea that 'reality is always that of a present,' despite the fact that the present includes the past and the future, whereas the past arises through memory and exists in images which form 'the backward limit of the present' (Mead, 1929). In its time, his theory was a radical departure from traditional views (cf.: Maines, Sugrue, Katovich 1983). Mead announced that any concept of the past is constructed 'from the standpoint of the new problem of today' and that all aspects of the past lose their relevance when the conditions of the present are changed. Mead's second distinctive point is that new pasts are most likely to emerge during periods of rapid change. Let us recall that during the period of *glasnost*, Soviet citizens revealed a new past nearly every day. For example, in the Armenian reality during the years of the Karabagh Movement new pages in the history of Russian-Turkish cooperation in the first quarter of the twentieth century were revealed. New facts about the role of revolutionary leaders and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union surfaced during the events crucial for the Armenian nation. The emergence of situations determined by such circumstances has a destabilizing effect, yet they may grow into a regular situation, if the past is reconstructed so that it assimilates and mixes in the meaningful flow of the developments.

Charles Horton Cooley, a representative of 'presentism,' observes that the function of the present, not the past, determines how famous people and events are preserved in the collective mind (Schwartz 1991b). Hobsbawm uses the term 'invention of tradition,' that is, the past has been invented, but the cause of this process may be explained by the conditions and requirements of the present. He shows how a tradition may be reshaped and adapted to the objectives of the present (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). These concepts, which seek not only to liberate the present from the grip of the past (Edward Shils), but to establish 'the importance of the present relative to the past' (Fitzgerald 1979), consider perceptions of the past to

be strategic tools created in compliance with the requirements of the present, making the past unstable, precarious, unreliable, ungrounded, and 'its contents hostage to the conditions of the present' (Schwartz 1991a).

One may come across direct manifestation of 'presentism' in the *social limitations of the memory*. Thus, it is well known that our memory is greatly affected by our social environment. Our environment, in some cases, may prevent us from remembering certain events in our lives. That is, the influence of our social environment upon the ways of remembrance of our past becomes more distinct when we understand that the majority of the things 'memorized' by us are, in fact, filtered in the process of interpretation, which usually occurs in the social environment.

Remembering is more than just spontaneous individual performance. It is also regulated by the social rules telling us as a society *what to remember* and *what we may or should forget*. It is these rules that define, for example, the acuteness of our recollection.

At this juncture, I would like to get ahead of the narrative and note that in the course of the Karabagh Movement when, as will be shown subsequently, memory was the driving force of the Movement, people as a rule 'went back' in that memory for about no more than a century. To be more specific, due to the strong family/kinship ties to hundreds of thousands of people, the Genocide memory continued to stay in the domain of collective and personal memories, and had not yet become history in a broader sense. For many that memory was still on the autobiographical level among various age-groups around them and the stories heard from grandparents or retold by parents about the Genocide and deportations were still too vivid and too emotionally felt (cf.: Garagashyan 2006). In the case of the younger generations who had, due to various circumstances, lost these ties, the historical, imagined memory acquired as knowledge was brought to the forefront.

An effective means of altering the past and sending it to oblivion is the policy of *renaming* large and small territories, settlements, streets, and other places. Quite frequently renaming (giving a new name or restoring the older, forgotten, lost one) is the ultimate act of a conquest (liberation) or revolution (overthrow of power). Thus, being not only an indicator of an increase in nationalistic tendencies, but also an act of breaking with the past and founding a new reality (cf.: Burke 1989; Milo 1997; Slyomovics 1998; Abrahamian 2006). This is conditioned by the fact that toponyms are a way of asserting the actuality of a certain starting point of the past.

The use of toponyms, especially in case of disputed territories, immediately awakens definite memories (Lehmann 2006). Imagined landscapes and their names create in individuals or various groups specific 'identity maps' and are extremely important for the construction of identity. For example, notions of a lost homeland conveyed through toponyms can pass from generation to generation, provoking nostalgia arousing loyalty, and devotion to images of the past. I have often witnessed changes of mood and emotional states in second- and third-generation emigrants from Historical Armenian province Vaspurakan at the mention of toponyms such as Van, Aygestan, Aghtamar and Artamet. Talk of the native places of their parents or ancestors, especially when repeated regularly, can even incite certain actions, such as travel to the homeland of their forefathers; (cf.: Hirsch and Spitzer 2003; Gallagher 1993) formation of nostalgic literature and musical compositions; and activities aimed at the recovery of the lost places. Similarly, as will be shown further in this narrative, the simple mentioning or listing of certain toponyms (for example, Deir-Zor, Baku, Shushi, Altay, Gandzak, Sumgait, Nakhijevan, Khojalu) in the years of the Karabagh Movement was not only sufficient for the conveyance of extensive information on one or several historical periods but for the awakening of certain, guided memories (Marutyan 2007).

Visions of 'Armenia,' 'Armenia Major,' 'Liberated, Independent and United Armenia,' and of the lost homeland in general, have always moved the hearts of Armenians for

many centuries bereft of statehood, and have been in their minds and in their dreams. This is the reason why Armenians, especially in the Soviet years, held dear all those maps, whether old or new, or modern or in Armenian or in a foreign language, which depicted Historical Armenia, or wrote 'Armenia' or 'Armenian highlands,' over the disputed territory of the Ottoman Empire and later of Turkey. That is to say, the *iconographical solution* of seeing Armenia united and whole, as maps being condensed representations of landscapes have done, has always been appreciated. It is noteworthy, too, that when referring to south-eastern Turkey as Armenia and, in modern western maps more often as Kurdistan, the fact evokes (among Armenians, as well as among Kurds) an altogether different history, and insists on a different knowledge of place (Hodgkin and Radstone 2003).

Identity is often localized not only in toponyms, but also in certain physical places or sites so that changes to these places can become tantamount to alteration of a memory of a time-period and can even lead to the domination of memories of a traumatic nature.

'Past' based approach in social remembrance

In response to the great importance attached to 'presentism' in the studies of social remembrance, a number of researchers single out approaches conventionally referred to as 'pastism' (as I have conditionally formulated) or based on the past, that is limited adaptability of the past. For example, Michael Schudson believes that, 'The past is in some respects, and under some conditions, highly resistant to efforts to make it over.' According to him, the full freedom to reconstruct the past in accordance with one's own present interests is limited by three factors (Schudson 1989). Schudson is confident, that 'The past becomes part of us; it shapes us, and influences our consciousness, whether we like it or not. In the pathological, but familiar, form, people become entrapped by their old wounds' (Schudson 1989).

On the other hand, people react not only to extreme conditions in their own lives but to extreme conditions in the lives of others, too. They do so not because of some traumatic experience they themselves have undergone but because they are aware of traumatic stories of others in similar situations. As an expression of this certain emotional actions take place (Schudson 1989).

There are some facets of the past that we cannot ignore or forget without feeling the loss of some part of ourselves. Not only the past, according to Freud, lives in people's mental life: people's mental life lives in the past (Schudson 1989).

The structure of social conflict with respect to the past means that it is not always up to one particular group to decide what past should be preserved and what should fall into oblivion. People's ability to reconstruct the past just as they wish is limited by the crucial social fact that other people are trying to do the same thing. This means that control over the past is disputed and the past becomes contested terrain, and that there is a policy of memory that requires study (Schudson 1989).

Michael Schudson noted that there is plenty of evidence that people and groups and nations rewrite the past to legitimate the present, but it should not lead to loose talk suggesting that it is the whole story. The present shapes our understanding of the past, yes, but this is half the truth, at best, and a particularly cynical half-truth at that. The other half of the truth is that 'the past shapes the present, even when the most powerful people and classes and institutions least want it to' (Schudson 1989).

One of the arguments of the representatives of 'pastism' is the following: every society, whatever its ideological climate, requires a sense of continuity with the past, and its enduring memories maintain this continuity. If beliefs about the past failed to outlive changes in a society, then the society's unity and continuity would be undermined. Émile Durkheim was among the early writers who made this unity and continuity problematic. Conceptions of the past, Durkheim believed, are cultivated

by periodic commemoration rites, whose function is not to transform the past by bending it to serve the present, but to reproduce the past, to make it live as it once did (Schwartz 1991a).

According to another outstanding representative of this school of the theory of collective memory, Edward Shils, on the concept of tradition (1981), the past makes the present. In his opinion commemoration is a way of claiming that the past has something to offer the present, whether it is a warning or a model, in times of rampant change because the past provides a necessary point of reference for identity and action. According to Shils, the image of an epoch or a historical figure is not conceived and elaborated anew by each generation but is transmitted according to a 'guiding pattern' that endows subsequent generations with a common heritage. Stable memories strengthen society's 'temporal integration' by creating links between the living and the dead and promoting consensus over time. This consensus is resilient because memories create the grounds for their own perpetuation. According to Schudson, memories are not credible unless they conform to an existing structure of assumptions about the past. Thus, a true community is a 'community of memory,' whose past is retained by retelling the same 'constitutive narrative' and by recalling the people who have always embodied and exemplified its moral values (Shils 1981).

The experience of the Karabagh Movement allows, in our opinion, certain nuances in the 'pastist' approach to be illuminated and, when considered in detail, can claim to being an independent line of approach in its own right. Thus, after the Sumgait events the Movement adopted a line of action in which the factor of the past, specifically the Genocide of Armenians at the beginning of the twentieth century, would assist in the solution of a present problem, that is the Karabagh issue. However, the present in its turn was used for the solution to the problems of the past. This was true in 1988-1990 and is true now when the issue of Genocide recognition, also from the perspective of national security, has become one of the

dominant lines of the foreign policy of the Republic of Armenia. As it was in the Movement years, today as well, the past is with us as we interpret present phenomena through reference to the past, while at the same time we try in the present to find solution to unresolved issues of the past. It should be noted that in that attempt the perception by the international community of the history of twentieth-century Turkey alters, too. That is to say, we try in the present to solve the issues related to Turkey with the tools of the past, while trying at the same time to solve the issue of the recognition of that same past.

Collective Memory as a Process of Continuous Discussion

As was mentioned above, two theoretical approaches to collective memory are distinguishable. The first relates the discontinuities of the past to an ongoing constructive process motivated by the changing concerns of the present. The second draws attention to continuities in our perceptions of the past and to the way these perceptions are maintained in the face of social change.

In contrast to the above mentioned widely spread opinions, where the past is either durable or malleable, the third group of authors (Barry Schwartz, Yael Zerubavel, Jeffrey Olick and others) argues for a more complex view of the relation between past and present in shaping collective memory. They are of the opinion that, 'collective memory should be seen as an active process of sense-making through time' (Olick and Levy 1997). Or, according to a more expressive formulation of another author (Zelizer), 'memory is not an unchanging vessel for carrying the past to the present: memory is a process [of continuous discussions], not a thing, and it works differently at different points in time' (Zelizer 1998). The authors, who adhere to these principles in their works, try to answer the questions of whether the difference between these approaches can be resolved by rejecting one in favor of the other or whether conditions for the applicability of each approach can be specified. They also examine whether a new theory that reconciles their conflicting

claims can be formulated or whether a single, unifying property exists beneath their manifest differences.

These, as well as the other aforementioned authors, come to their opinions as a result of detailed observation of definite and concrete phenomena. The search for the answers to these questions is going on in the sphere of commemoration.

Accordingly, Halbwachs and Mead and their followers are right to anchor collective memory in the present. Their error is to underestimate the present's carrying power. They fail to see that the same present can sustain different memories and that different presents can sustain the same memory. Barry Schwartz believes that once this error is corrected, the Mead/Halbwachs and the Durkheim/Shils approaches to collective memory can be seen as special cases of a broader generalization that relates both change and continuity in the perception of the past to immediate human experience. The example, used in the article by Schwartz, shows that the original, aristocratic image of George Washington was preserved by the same society, which created the new democratic image. These contrasting images coexisted. That is, according to Barry Schwartz, the past is neither totally precarious nor immutable, but is a stable image upon which new elements are intermittently superimposed. The past, then, is a familiar rather than a foreign country, its people different, but not strangers to the present (Schwartz 1991a).

Some remarks on Civil Society

The evaluation and re-evaluation, as well as the ongoing discussion of the past and present events play an important role in the formation of civil societies. This was the case from the very beginning (February 1988 rallies) of the Karabakh Movement or the First Armenian Revolution (Abrahamian 2001; Marutyan 2009). Due to the policy of 'Perestroika and Glasnost,' the Armenian citizens awakened from the long sleep of

the Soviet decades, started to gradually build a civil society in mass rallies at the Opera square. In two and a half years that civil society initiated radical transformations and then formed a parliament through free elections, which led the country to independence in September 1991. In the works analyzing the Movement (Marutyan 2009) is shown how the events of the time (Armenian massacres in Sumgait city of Azerbaijan) (Ulubabyan, Zolian, Arshakyan 1989; Malkasian 1996) awakened and brought to the foreground the memory of the Armenian Genocide, which was in the sphere of collective memory, how that memory helped people to get rid of paradigms of the Soviet present, abolish the bonds of soviet propaganda and become the basis for revolutionary transformations, supporting the construction of a democratic state. Self-organized civic groups play an important role in the construction of civil society. Such groups gradually take over the solution of issues of great public importance. This is how the 'Karabakh' Committee (the lead of the Movement), ecological movement, the group protecting the Armenian language, constitutional and other groups were born.

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