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Literature Review:

The role of nation states in managing memories of disputed territories

January 2020

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Part 8 of 8: Collective Memory:

The Politics of 'Remembering' and 'Reminding' - M. Usman Farooq

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113053853471251

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 823803.



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In this final section M. Usman Farooq (Forman Christian College, Pakistan) explores the politics of memory through Halbwachs’ conception of ‘collective memory’ and goes on to question how politicians can play a critical role in both reciting, and challenging, dominant state led discourses of identity and nation-hood.

This discussion surveys the literature on the influence of memory on the present: particularly on ‘the politics in present’. It focuses on the politics of remembering (or reminding) and the role of politicians as creators and replicators of the state-led discourse and also considers potential channels of dissent and counter-memory. However, before investigating the role of individual politicians in reciting state-led discourses, it is significant to review one of the fundamental questions of collective memory studies on the link between individual and collective memory. The underlying assumption for reviewing the link between individual and collective memory is strongly connected to the main subject of this review: while politicians act and (re)construct past narratives in their individualistic capacity, the impact and influence of their actions and narratives represent and appeals to a larger audience of the collective and shared memory. There exists a delicate relationship between the individualistic representation of a deliberately chosen past and its (re)construction as collective and shared past of a whole group.

In recent history, the subject of ‘memory’ or ‘remembering’ has been the pinnacle of the debates, especially in cultural studies, mainly because of its important role in shaping societal life and its use and misuse (Assmann 2006). Its growing significance is also due to the reasons deeply connected to the social, cultural and political developments, especially in the post war era, that emerged in the backdrop of the declining ‘modernist narratives of progressive improvement through an ever-expanding welfare state’ (Olick et al 2011, 3). In its complex composition, memory ‘is a collective phenomenon but it only manifests itself in the actions and statements of individuals’ (Kansteiner 2002, 180). These ‘actions and statements’, when committed and expressed by those who have the political power in a particular state or a country, often have broader meanings and greater implications for

wider society or a group. Therefore, politicians often use the memory of the past 'strategically, manipulating memory to legitimize their actions with reference to formative events in the collective consciousness of their community (Hayden 1992, cited in Verovsek 2016, 529).

The next section will briefly review the classical literature on the link between the individual and collective memory. The final section of this review will outline some of the empirical studies, particularly on investigating the role of the individual politicians in creating or replicating the state-led discourses using the 'past' or 'past memories' as a tool for politics in the present.

Collective Memory: From 'Personal' to 'Group and Social Memory'

As an academic concept, 'collective memory' has its roots in modern social science and humanities through the work of 20th century French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (Verovsek, 2016). Initially, Halbwachs was interested in what Henri Bergson referred to as the 'variability of memory'; that despite the growing 'standardization' of time and 'rationalization' of societal life in modernizing societies, 'individual memory was still highly variable, sometimes recording short periods in intense detail and long periods in only the vaguest outline' (Olick et al 2011, 17). Bergson believed that this 'variability in memory', was mainly due to the 'variability of *individual* experience'.

Contrary to Bergson's reasoning, Emile Durkheim, contemporary to both Halbwachs and Bergson, later argued that this 'variability in memory' is not based on the vagaries of subjective experience, but the differences among forms of social organization and therefore focused upon how 'different *societies* produce different conception of time' (ibid, 17). Durkheim went on to develop a sociological framework, which would later be utilized by Halbwachs in his analyses on the collective memory. For Halbwachs, memory was not only mediated by social structures, but is in fact shaped by them; 'It is in society that people

normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories' (1992: 38).

Bergson, Durkheim and Halbwachs agree on the variability of experiences (hence 'variability in memory'), yet whilst Bergson traces the reason of this variability to individuals, Durkheim and Halbwachs acknowledge that individuals do not participate in memory in 'isolation' or separate to social structures. On the 'variability of memory', Halbwachs believed that the form memory takes varies according to social organization. All 'individual remembering' therefore takes place 'with social materials, within social contexts, and in response to social cues. Even when we do it alone, we do so as social beings with reference to our social identities' (Olick 2008, 156). The act of 'remembrance', by the individuals, is done in a mutually inclusive way to their respective groups. While they remember what interests them personally, at the same time, individuals are 'able to act merely as a group member, helping to evoke and maintain impersonal remembrances of interest to the group' (Halbwachs 1980, 50). Therefore, the groups 'to which any individual belongs are primary even in the most apparently individual remembering' (Olick et al 2011, 18).

'Group memory', in this regard, compliments individual memory, to the extent that it becomes 'impossible for individuals to remember in any coherent and persistent fashion outside of their group contexts' (Olick et al 2011, 18). And '(t)he collective memory, for its part, encompasses the individual memories while remaining distinct from them' (Halbwachs 1980, 51). These are often 'intermingled' to the extent that 'the individual memory, in order to corroborate and make precise and even to cover the gaps in its remembrances, relies upon, relocates itself within, momentarily merges with, the collective memory' (Ibid., 50). Taking Halbwachs conceptualisation of 'collective memory', the next section continues to explore how this can be utilised within the political sphere.

The Memory Politics: The Politics in 'Remembering' and 'Re-minding'

The politics of memory or memory politics, as defined by Boyarin, refers to 'rhetoric about the past mobilized for political purposes' (Boyarin 1994, 2). The conceptualization of

collective memory, as a subject of academic inquiry by French philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1925), sparked debates concerning the politics of memory (or memory politics). Some of these debates include the political role of collective memory in creating the legitimacy of a nation state through the remembrance and recollection of the past (Olick et al, 2011), or to ‘mobilize remembrance as an instrument of politics’ (Verovsek 2016, 529), or to create ‘tradition’ (Hobsbawm, 2000), or the reshaping of identities in the present by altering, or omitting, particular events of ‘shame’, in the past (Ergur 2009).

The politics of remembering is fundamentally dependent on political narratives that often originate from collective experiences, achievements, and sufferings that leave deep impression on the collective ‘conscious’ of a group, community and a society. It is in the narratives that the memories of different events are embedded, and without narratives, memories are but some fragments of moments and thoughts. As Chamberlain and Thompson (1998) argue, ‘Memories contain and are contained by a narrative which orders, links and makes sense of the past, the present and the future.’ And it is the ‘ordering’ and ‘making sense’ of the past—in broader sense ‘time’—that makes narratives a ‘formidable instruments of politics’ (Kotkin, cited in Verovsek 2016). In creating or replicating these narratives, politicians often play a role of a conductor, using the baton of the past memory, to direct the political narratives in the orchestra of the history of a nation. Their role can be of ‘reimagining’ the past in answering to the issues of ‘identity’ and ‘unity’ in the present (Colak 2006), or, in case of Germany’s Nazi past, considering it ‘as an ineluctable burden’ (Olick & Levy 1998, 921).

Various studies have focused on the usage of the collective memory of the past by politicians in absorbing to the needs of the present politics. Gavriely-Nuri (2013) highlights the use of the collective memory by two prime ministers of Israel, namely Ariel Sharon (in office 2001-2005) and Ehud Olmert (in office 2006-2009) as an example. While collective memory has been perceived as static reality, Gavriely-Nuri argues, that its political power as a metaphor ‘promotes specific political agendas in a manner resembling those personal memories that act as ‘road signs’ directing people toward various goals while shaping their

positions and behavior’ (2013, 56). With similar approach, Yoder (2017) analyzed 54 speeches of German Chancellor Angel Merkel over the period of 10 years to assess her usage of the past and concluded that ‘Merkel draws upon several pasts—from different points in time and from different configurations of Germany—to present an integrated collective memory for a unified Germany’ (2017, 660).

Eric Langenbacher (2014) in his extensive investigation on the role of memory in influencing and shaping the foreign policy of post-war Germany highlights how various politicians play a diverse role in shaping or shifting the collective memory of a nation and its influence on policy. While it is clear, from the empirical data Langenbacher presented, that Germany’s foreign policy choices are in line with its ‘Determination of national interest based on a cost-benefit calculus and willingness to push through such interests even with recalcitrant targets...’ (Langenbacher 2014, 69). At the same time, Germany’s culture of remembering or ‘culture of memory’, he argues, ‘has deeply conditioned the values, thought patterns, and behaviors of German policymakers’ (Ibid., 70).

It is difficult to specify the role of politicians in creating or replicating the narratives of the nation state as one of the channels of remembering. The several cases reviewed above, demonstrate the use of different memory modes, or what Bull and Hansen (2016) highlight as both ‘cosmopolitan’ and ‘antagonistic’ modes of remembering. However, there are two primary issues that can be addressed in further research on the role of politicians and memory. Firstly, on the empirical side, despite having an apparent ‘cosmopolitan mode’ of remembering the past, as also argued by Langenbacher (2014), the policy choices remain in line with national interest—and that national interest can be of any nature. In this regard, the further empirical research can be carried out in focusing on the influence of the past memory on the policy choices made by the politicians. Secondly, from a theoretical perspective, some further research should be focused on what Bull and Hansen (2016) refer to as ‘agonistic memory’, to analyze whether this third memory mode is in coherence with the Durkheimian framework of the social structures and the ‘variability of experiences’ and ‘variability in memory’. The coherence or in coherence of ‘the agonistic memory’ with

Durkheim's framework of social structures as key to the 'variability' in experience and memory can open a new field within collective memory studies that can relate or analyze the changing or changed social structures. In this regard, the role of politicians can also be analyzed as (re)presenters or responders of the changing or changed social structure and its influence on the 'mode of remembering'.

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