THE ROLE OF COLLECTIVE MEMORY
IN NATIONAL IDENTITIES SHAPING

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to expose the important relationship between collective memory and national identity. Memory is an active, non stop procedure which takes place in social contexts and is inevitably influenced by them. Collective memory determines and is determined by the societies in which it takes shape. Collective memory is an important function in every society since it preserves and transfers society’s cultural capital, perpetuating its existence. It is also a high-stake between the social and political parties of societies since it shapes and perpetuates the identity of society’s members and reassures the society’s coherence. The formation of national identity is a non stop procedure that is influenced by national memory. The renegotiation of collective memory has as a consequence the change of the content of the national identity. At the same time collective memory is influenced by the content of every dimension of identity, while its national dimension is constructed by the unification of different versions of the past to national memory in each nation. Since collective memory is an instrument of power then scientific professionals of memory should work for its democratization.

Keywords: national identity, collective memory, national other
1 COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND IDENTITIES

Nowadays collective memory is considered to influence the formulation of national, social and cultural identities, raising concerns about the importance of the role it plays, the character it acquires and the way it is formulated through a variety of sciences such as history, social psychology, anthropology and sociology, while at the same time, collective memory plays an important role on the interdisciplinary between these sciences.
2 COLLECTIVE MEMORY AS A FACTOR OF FORMULATION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY AND THE ‘NATIONAL OTHER’

As national identity we can describe the social representations that a national group has not only for itself but for every other national group. National identity as the other identities is continuously developing. The formulation of national identity begins from the historical development of the group to a nation, which then composes its national identity through the construction of national memory (Φραγκουδάκη and Δραγώνα 1997, 14). The construction of national identity is a process that never stops. National anniversaries, ceremonies, important dates, artworks and monuments intend to preserve the national memory and consequently the national identity (Φραγκουδάκη and Δραγώνα 1997, 14).

So national identity is a symbolic construction which organizes the perception the national group has about the world, not only for itself but also for those who may be called 'national other'. The national identity is based on the common origin of the members of the nation, which in this way reassures its existence as an independent political entity (Φραγκουδάκη and Δραγώνα 1997, 14-15). Nevertheless the references to the common origin and the past of the nation are used to legitimize its constitution as a historically new phenomenon with the form of the nation-state and the adjustments that are required for its perpetuation. At the same time, those references are opposed to the new trends since they are opposed to the mythical perception of the nation, whose origins date from the beginning of time and any change has to be defeated in order to maintain its existence (Αβδελά 1997b, 53).

Collective memory plays an important role on the formulation of the references of national identity. The renegotiation of collective memory either by regulatory standards or by historical circumstances causes, as a consequence, the change of the content of the national identity (Αβδελά 1997b, 53). The meaning the facts and the relationships from the past gain in the present circumstances (some of them do not change at all, some are rejected and the importance of some other changes) changes the meaning of the content of national identity and the construction of collective memory (Αβδελά 1997b, 53).

Nevertheless collective memory is also influenced by the content of every dimension of identity, while its national dimension is constructed by the unification of
different versions of the past to national memory in each nation. National identity is a construction of reality and the past which is a stake between political parties (Αβδελά 1997b, 53).

In order for someone to construct his or her identity, he or she first has to set the criteria which separate his or her identity from the others. In the same way the common criteria which define a nation, such as the common origin, the language, the traditions, myths and the historical memories, determine the ‘national other’ (Αβδελά 1997a, 33). This procedure of inter-determination contributes to the perpetuation of the homogenous and unique character of national identity and to its denial to recognize the similarities with anything not related to it and to any differences in its context (Αβδελά 1997a, 33).

2.1 The social dimension of memory

According to Bartlett our memories are not just the plain record of facts because we firstly organize and adjust the information we receive in order to fit it to our expectations and knowledge (Hayes 1998, 202, 210). As Bartlett proved, we tend to adjust information to the schemas we already have and forget the details which do not respond to them (Hayes 1998: 212). The term “schema” declares an active organization of past experiences which preserve the culture and can be used to transform the past memories (Μαντόγλου 2005).

This does not mean human beings are incapable of remembering the information that does not respond to their schemas but that they tend to stick to this procedure because it is easier to remember information meaningful to them (Hayes 1998, 212).

Bartlett also described the relationship between memory and authority. When the spread cultural tendencies and values are socially controlled, then recalling acquires a reconstructive and inventive character by adjusting to the content that pleases the interlocutor and carrier of authority (Μαντόγλου 2005).

Bartlett not only proved that memory is influenced by society but he also analyzed the social character of memory distinguishing it to: memory inside the social group, memory for the social group, memory-material and memory-method (Bartlett, F.C. (1932/1954) “Remembering: A study in experimental and social psychology”, Cambridge University Press, at Μαντόγλου 2005).
Material-memory is the content of memory that the social group shares, which refers to the act of remembering inside the group, which is its social structure, cultural and symbolic context and refers to the social settling of remembering (Μαντόγλου 2005, 35). Method-memory, which concerns the expression of memory and the form of which its content is transferred, corresponds to the group’s constitution or character, interests and style and the values and emotions of its members (Μαντόγλου 2005, 35).

Although recalling is a personal activity, it is influenced by social factors. Recalling as an activity is common to all people, but the way each person handles it differs (Μαντόγλου 2005, 35).

2.2 The social and political role of collective memory

Collective memory determines and is determined by the societies in which it takes its shape, while, often it is used by social classes as they fight for power, their survival and advancement, that’s why it thrusts aside history because its content spreads faster than history’s (Le Goff 1998, 143). Collective memory responds to the need of all human societies to be perpetuated by transferring their cultural capital to the next generations. Collective memory acts as a mechanism that transfers the knowledge of facts that determine the evolution of a society (Μαντόγλου 2005, 22).

According to Gaskell “the main function of collective memory is to conserve the coherence of the social group and to reassure its identity in the present and in the future” (Gaskell 2001).

Collective memory is not an exact remembrance of the facts though. The form of collective memory is defined by the social context, in which, according to Halbwachs, the memories of each person are recorded. Social contexts support memories and give them meaning in the present circumstances. Those cognitive and emotional contexts which influence the procedure of remembering, are at the same time, ‘spiritual places’ where stable and mercurial meanings and images are composed (Μαντόγλου 2005, 21-22). Language, time and space are the contexts which allow people and groups to remember. Those categories, through which past is chosen, classified and become understood, are stabilized through the internalization of the consequences of social interactions and are stored in the memory as the result of the repetition of interactions (Jedlowski 2001, 31). A society’s history shapes the identity of its members both in
collective and personal level. “Halbwachs shows that individual memories always crystallize in a social framework and that public events leave a deep imprint on those who experience them, especially young people who are in the process of constructing adult identities” (Becker 2005, 105).

Every social group has a past, so collective memory intervenes in the group's members present, and thus connecting them with their past, developing their social identity in this way. (Μαντόγλου 2005, 74). Present is not then only shaped by historical narration but also by collective memory, which has its own narrations that are related to the procedure of the formation of identity (Marcus 1998, 96). According to Candau “Memory makes us, we make memory” (Μαντόγλου 2005, 74).
3 THE NEED FOR MEMORY'S DEMOCRATIZATION

According to Jacques Le Goff (1998, 143), collective memory is an important issue for both developed and underdeveloped societies and for dominant and dominated social classes as they fight for power survival and development. So memory is an important factor of the construction of personal and social identities which are not only a conquest but an instrument of power (Le Goff 1998, 143).

In developed societies, while the use of a variety of new forms of data, oral and audio-visual, seems to promise the democratization of memory, the course of new means for its production and dissemination (television, internet, radio…) shows the opposite. So it is up to the scientific professionals of memory (anthropologists, historians, journalists, sociologists, archaeologists) to work for the democratization of collective memory, which should be one of their most important goals, since memory makes and is made from history and should attend to the liberalization and not to the enslavement of people (Le Goff 1998, 145).
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