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Memory Studies

A brief concept paper

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Memory Studies, A brief concept paper

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Executive Summary

The paper outlines the evolution of the multidisciplinary field of memory studies, from the first use of the term collective memory in the early 1900s. It provides some context to the use of the terms collective memory, cultural memory, historical memory, cultural memory etc. The paper argues that the MeCoDEM project can draw upon conceptual notions from the field of memory studies, in order to interrogate the media's role in constructing and disseminating collective memories of conflict in the transitional countries we are studying.

The paper presents:

- A discussion of the methods used in memory studies, explaining how attention to questions of methodology has been limited in memory studies because much research has been more concerned with theoretical issues. The paper reflects on the methods from oral history, as well as other methods such as discourse analysis, which has been used in processes of remembering, showing how people co-construct the past in their joint production of the social worlds they inhabit through speech and language.
- Some thoughts about how memory studies and media studies intersect, particularly given that the mass media plays a key role in the constitution of memory – and the politics of remembering is intrinsically connected to power.
- A brief discussion of the critiques of memory studies, mainly that the field has not paid attention to the problem of reception (in terms of methods and sources) and thus cannot illuminate the sociological basis of historical representations.

1. Introduction

Memory studies is a multidisciplinary field which combines intellectual strands from anthropology, education, literature, history, philosophy, psychology and sociology, among others (Roediger & Wertsch, 2008). Historians who study collective memory use the work of French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1925, 1941) (inspired by his tutor Émile Durkheim) as a primary theoretical reference point. He published his landmark *Social Frameworks of Memory* in 1925 (Olick and Robbins, 1998) and showed that memories are social and passed from generation to generation. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's *The Invention of Tradition* (1983), has also inspired much research in the area of memory studies (Hoelscher & Alderman 2004, p.349). Other early key texts in the field of memory studies include: French philosopher Henri Bergson's *Matter and Memory* (1896), Paul Ricœur's *Memory, History and Forgetting* (2004), French historian Pierre Nora's *Realms of Memory* (1996-8) and Jacques Le Goff's *History and Memory* (1992). For these writers, the concept of memory destabilises grand narratives of history and power, as "memory, remembering and recording are the very key to existence, becoming and belonging" (Garde-Hansen, 2011). Halbwachs argued that memory is not simply an individual phenomenon, but is relational in terms of family and friends, and also societal and collective in terms of the social frameworks of social groups.

Most studies of mediated memory tend to focus on elite-news media coverage of extreme events such as wars, political revolutions, assassinations etc., and the field has a close relationship to Holocaust studies (Kitch, 2008). "Although no consensus exists either within or across disciplines on the very definition of collective memory and its ownership, there is agreement that such memory is shareable among members of a social group or community, be it a nation, an institution, a religious group, or a family" (Wang, 2008, p.305).

Memory was always a preoccupation for social thinkers, though it was only in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that a distinctively social perspective on memory became prominent with the use of the term 'collective memory' by Hofmannsthal in 1902 (Olick and Robbins, 1998). Memory research is closely linked to many issues at the forefront of contemporary political debate, particularly the political effects of the continuing presence of past hurts in the present (Radstone, 2008). Scholarly interest in memory has resurfaced since the 1980s. While psychologists were more interested in memory from an individual perspective, sociological theorists emphasise the social and cultural bases of shared memories (Pennebaker, 2013).

Memory studies is thus a multidisciplinary field which began with individual memory growing outward to focus on broader dimensions of social memory and the politics of public remembering, especially those channelled through communications media. The focus has generally been on "how these forms of remembering operate as collective representations of the past, how they constitute a range of cultural resources for social and historical identities, and how they privilege particular readings of the past and subordinate others" (Keightley and Pickering, 2013).

2. Terminology

The term collective memory was first coined by Hugo Van Hofmannsthal in 1902 (Olick and Robbins, 1998), but the French sociologist Halbwachs is generally recognised as the founder of collective memory research. Halbwachs developed the concept of collective memory, arguing that it is impossible for individuals to remember outside of their group contexts, rejecting an individual-psychological approach to memory. He identified individual and collective memories as tools through which social groups establish centrality in individuals' lives. Halbwachs saw history as "a dead memory, a way of preserving pasts to which we no longer have an 'organic' experiential relation" and argued that "this understanding of the distinction negates the self-image of historiography as the more important or appropriate attitude towards the past: History's epistemological claim is devalued in favour of memory's meaningfulness" (Olick and Robbins 2004, p. 110). However, as historiography has broadened its focus from the official to the social and cultural, memory has become more central, as it frequently depends on history. Halbwachs distinguished between autobiographical memory – memory of those events we ourselves experience; historical memory – memory that reaches us only through historical records; history – as the remembered past which is no longer important to our lives; and collective memory – the active past that forms our identities. Moreover, Halbwachs characterised shared memories as effective markers of social differentiation – but some critics were uncomfortable with this notion of collective consciousness disconnected from the individual, and prefer to use other terms (Olick and Robbins, 2008).

"Collective memory is not history, though it is sometimes made from similar material. It is a collective phenomenon but only manifests itself in the actions and statements of individuals... it often privileges the interests of the contemporary" (Kansteiner 2002, p.180). Memories are part of a larger process of cultural negotiation, which defines memories as narratives and as fluid and mediated cultural and personal traces of the past (Sturken, 2008). The concept of collective memory rests upon the assumption that every social group develops a memory of its past which allows it to preserve and pass along its self-image. Collective memory is a socio-political construct, a version of the past, defined and negotiated through changing socio-political power circumstances and agendas (Neiger et al., 2011). However, "Remembering is an active reconciliation of past and present. The meaning of the past in relation to the present is what is at stake here; memories are important as they bring our changing sense of who we are and who we were, coherently into view of one another" (Keightley, 2010, p.58). Remembering is thus not just an articulation of individual psychologies, but a performance rooted in lived contexts (Keightley 2010, p.58).

Sturken (1997, 2008) uses the term cultural memory as memory shared outside formal historical discourse but imbued with cultural meaning. "Cultural memory as a term implies not only that memories are often produced and reproduced through

cultural forms, but also the kind of circulation that exists between personal memories and cultural memories” (Sturken 2008, p.76). Fentress and Wickham (1992) use the term social memory. “Critics who charge that ‘collective memory’ over-totalizes prefer a proliferation of more specific terms to capture the ongoing contest over images of the past: official memory, vernacular memory, public memory, popular memory, local memory, family memory, historical memory, cultural memory etc.” (Olick and Robbins 2008, p.112).

Sturken (2008) differentiates between collective and cultural memories – with the latter implying not only that memories are produced and reproduced through cultural forms, but also highlighting the kind of circulation that exists between personal memories and cultural memories. Collective memories are often ‘cohort memories’, where members of a given cohort affected by a large-scale event will write the event’s history and influence the collective memories for future generations (Pennebaker, 2013). “Collective memory sustains a community’s very identity and makes possible the continuity of its social life and cultural cohesion” (Wang 2008, p.37).

Olick and Robbins (2008, p.112) refer to social memory studies as a general rubric for inquiry into the various ways we are shaped by the past, referring to “distinct sets of mnemonic practices in various social sites, rather than to collective memory as a thing”. Pennebaker (2013, p.6) also shows that “significant historical events form stronger collective memories, and present circumstances affect what events are remembered as significant”.

There is a differentiation between collected memory – “the aggregated individual memories of members of a group which can be researched through surveys and oral history collection, and ‘collective memory’, which is the public manifestation as mythology, tradition and heritage” (Garde-Hansen 2011, p.38). Other terms include ‘postmemory’ to describe memories inherited but not yet part of one’s psyche, and ‘prosthetic memory’, to refer to memories that circulate through mass culture (Sturken, 2004).

3. Research in the field

Hoelscher & Alderman (2004, p.349) argue that social groups employ various recollections as a way to constitute (or dissolve) themselves, that these uses intersect with power, and therefore that “the study of social memory inevitably comes around to questions of domination and the uneven access to a society’s political and economic resources”. In other words, “individuals and groups recall the past not for its own sake, but as a tool to bolster different aims and agendas” (Hoelscher & Alderman 2008, p.349). “Throughout history collective memory has been central to the creation of community, from a small unit such as a family to an entire nation. The social practices of collective remembering allow the members of a community to preserve a conception of their past” (Wang 2008, p.307).

Wang (2008) argues that collective memory can serve as a therapeutic practice for a community and its members, as it comprises an active constructive process during which the members of a community participate in interpreting and processing shared past experiences (particularly traumas) into eventual memory representations, often in such forms as narratives, dramatisations, art, and ritual. She further argues, that “to understand the processes, practices, and outcomes of social sharing of memory, or collective remembering, one must take into account the characteristics of the community to which a significant event occurred and in which memory for the event was subsequently formed, shared, transmitted, and transformed. In other words, one must look into the social- cultural-historical context where the remembering takes place” (Wang 2008, p.305).

Methods in memory studies

Attention to questions of methodology have been limited in memory studies because much research has been concerned with theoretical concerns, though Keightley and Pickering (2013) argue that paying practical attention to how memory can be empirically studied will help in the intellectual coalescence of the field. Memory studies spans many disciplines and methods used are thus quite diverse. These methods include studying primary historical and archival sources, oral histories, case studies, interviews, surveys, though Roediger and Wertsch (2008) call for systematising and improving the methodological foundations of the field, reflecting that rigorous qualitative and quantitative approaches are also applicable to memory studies. However, oral historians have not engaged in any extensive way with the public dimension of memory and how it is constituted; and those involved with memory studies have failed to engage with oral history because of “a leading preoccupation in memory studies with collective trauma, national history and heritage, grand-scale ritualistic social practices and macro-cultural memory, rather than with individual and small group micro-processes of remembering (Keightley and Pickering, 2013).

Other methods include discourse analysis, which has been used in processes of remembering, showing how people co-construct the past in their joint production of the social worlds they inhabit through speech and language (Keightley and Pickering, 2013). Further methods include the creation of cultural “memoryscapes” and multi-sited research. In researching painful pasts specific techniques can be used to elicit memory, e.g. taking photographs as vehicles for the remembering process. These kinds of stories are more than chronological descriptions and provide an evaluative and interpretive framework – memory is socially constructed in everyday storytelling that is shaped by cultural narrative frames (ibid). The ‘cultural memoryscape’ may be understood as comprising multiple sites of memory connected by a particular associational logic (e.g. national, ethnic, religious, village, etc.). Memoryscapes include a plurality of different forms of mnemonic phenomena, ranging from individual acts of remembrance to transnational contexts (Keightley and Pickering, 2013).

Roediger and Wertsch (2008, p.18) also argue that the field of memory studies will need to develop unique theoretical perspectives, as currently it often draws

uncritically on terms from the study of memory in individuals, such as 'repression' or 'collective amnesia'. "These uses might be considered broad metaphors, but as much may be lost as gained in using such terms". Roediger and Wertsch (2008, p.19) argue that memory studies is too broad a field to have overarching or unifying theories. They write that "memory studies has a long past but its real history is short. In fact, unless and until proper methods and theories are developed to lead to a coherent field, memory studies as a proper discipline may still be awaiting its birth".

Memory studies and media studies

"Culture and individual memory are constantly produced through, and mediated by, the technologies of memory. The question of mediation is thus central to the way in which memory is conceived in the fields of study of visual culture, cultural studies and media studies" (Sturken, 2008). Kitch (2008, p.312) argues that the relationship between journalism and memory is complex, as journalism is a primary source of information about the past and shared understandings of the past, as well as a main site for public anticipation of memory as the 'first draft of history'. Moreover, she argues that journalism constructs memory with regard to discrete events and across time, place, and types of journalism, as its eyewitness relationship to real events allows it to make claims about the past, present and future. In local news, journalists use an inclusive language and address their audiences as members of a social group with shared values, similar problems and needs, and a shared understanding of its past (Kitsch, 2008).

The mass media plays a key role in the constitution of memory – and this politics of remembering is intrinsically connected to power e.g. who is entitled to select topics and forms of remembering in the public discourse? (Erl and Nünning, 2008). Garde-Hansen (2011, p.3) describes media as "the first draft of history", recording events as they happen, negotiating history and memory. She also lists several example of recent theoretical explorations of memory which have come directly from media theorists, for example Alison Landsberg's (2004) work on cinema and memory has explored the ways film results in emotional connections between distanced audiences and past events as a kind of prosthetic memory; Andrew Hoskins (2001, 2004) who proposed the concept of 'new memory' in his analysis of 24-hour television news and the mediation of war and terror; and José van Dijck (2007) who provided a paradigm of mediated memory. Mediated events "such as celebrity deaths, assassinations, funerals, anniversaries of tragedies, media representations of conflict...all provide key investigations of media and collective memory" (Garde-Hansen 2011, p.38).

But as Zelizer (2008) points out, there is no default understanding of memory that includes journalism as one of its vital agents, as the popular assumption has been that it provides a first (not a final) draft of the past, restricted by temporal limitations of deadlines. But Zelizer argues that journalism's treatment of the present often includes a treatment of the past, and that the latter is as variable, malleable and dynamic as other kinds of memory work.

Critiques of memory studies

Most studies on memory “focus on the representation of specific events within particular chronological, geographical, and media settings without reflecting on the audiences of the representation in question (Kansteiner, 2002). Kansteiner (2002) further argues that collective memory studies have not sufficiently conceptualised collective memories as distinctive from individual memory; that collective memory studies has not paid attention to the problem of reception (in terms of methods and sources) and thus cannot illuminate the sociological basis of historical representations.

4. Conclusion

One of the most important political and ethical questions facing societies in transition is how to deal with legacies of repression, a process that can destabilise a transitional process. Varying political, social and institutional constraints can affect the solutions adopted or limit opportunities to deal with the past and often unofficial and private initiatives, primarily civil society organisations, emerge from within society to deal with the past (de Brito et al., 2001). Remembering, whether involving individual, social or cultural representation of the past, is a process which involves selections, absences and multiple, potentially conflicting accounts.

The relationship between memory studies and media is of particular pertinence to MeCoDEM. Neiger et al. (2011) raise questions of agency, regarding the role of the media in shaping collective (national/regional/local/sectarian etc.) identities. They ask: who has the right to narrate collective stories about the past; what is the source of authority of the media in general and of specific media outlets, to operate as memory agents? “This brings to the fore the question of the cultural authority of the media as narrators of the past; that is, how the media work through, or rather reconcile their role as a public arena for various memory agents within their own role as memory agents and readings of the past” (Neiger et al., 2011, p.10). We can draw on this field of memory studies in order to further interrogate the nature of media’s role in constructing and disseminating collective memories of conflict in the transitional countries we are studying. Collective memories are embedded in public discourse and are a source of group identity. The emergence of new communications technologies, particularly social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, presents new opportunities and spaces for the formation of these collective memories. As we consider the role of the media in conflict events in transitional societies, collective memory may form a significant backdrop to our investigations.

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