

Cultural Memory, Identity and Civil Society

The question of collective memory, first raised by Halbwachs, became just recently one of the centerpoints of interest, mainly in the wake of the works of Pierre Nora, Chaim Yerushalmi and Jan Assman. In this article I apply their conceptual tools. When speaking on cultural memory I have not in mind traces of the past stored in a kind of collective consciousness ready for recall or hidden in a collective unconscious buried under the ruins of forgetting which could be retrieved only by systematic work if at all. Cultural memory is rather embodied in objectifications which store meanings in a concentrated manner, meanings shared by a group of people who take them for granted. These can be texts, such as sacred scrolls, historical chronicles, lyric or epic poetry. They can also be monuments, such as buildings or statues, shared material signs, signals, symbols and allegories as storages of experience, memorabilia erected as reminders. Furtheron, cultural memory is embodied in regularly repeated and repeatable practices, such as festivals, ceremonies, rites. Finally, cultural memory just like individual memory is linked to places. To places where something significant and unique event has taken place, or to places where a significant event is regularly replayed. For example, in Europe many villages have a Calvary hill, where at every Good Friday Christ's passion is replayed. Cultural memory is identity constructing and identity maintaining. As long as a group of people maintains and cultivates a common cultural memory, this group of people exists. Chaim Yerushalmi analyses how Jewish people were consciously cultivating their identity through remembrance. The frequency of the injunction »zachor!« remember!, which appears 169 times in the Jewish Bible alone, is a case in point.

Whenever cultural memory enters into oblivion, a group of people disappear, irrespective of the circumstance whether they will or will not be recorded in the books of history. The Chinese

communist government was well aware of this when it commanded its troupes after the occupation of Tibet to destroy all the buildings and statues erected at the places of memory of Tibetan Buddhism. Presence or absences, life or decay of a people does not depend on biological survival of an ethnic group, but on the survival of shared cultural memory.

Strong and complex cultural buildings have represented the ascending high cultures during the axiological age. It suffices to refer to Homer, whose Iliad and Odyssey remained the basic text and living memory for all Hellens, or to the first versions of the first five books of the Jewish Bible, or to all the holy sites where the festivals of the turn of seasons were fused with myths and histories of cultural memory maintenance. Religions were the greatest cultural identity builders, and so were ethnic groups and city dwelling people together with their political institutions, which were on their part imbued by religious practises. In cultural memory the places of memory must remain, concrete and distinct irrespective of the circumstance, whether they are mythological or historical reminders. Sometimes the distinction is blurred. We know that Caesar was not murdered on the Capitolium, but when we visit the Capitolium in Rome we – readers of Plutarch and of Shakespeare – will visit the place where Caesar was murdered. This is certainly cultural memory of the second order. Now I will discuss only cultural memory of the first order, that is the identity constituting cultural memory, when in the performance of ceremonies, rites, at exact date in an exact place the past is constantly becoming present. At every Passover Jews are liberated from the Egyptian yoke, at every Good Friday Christ is crucified. Every generation experiences the past as their present.

The centrality of cultural memory in identity building was known and thus cultural memory has

been cultivated in all cultures known to us when we say »since times immemorial«, we do not mean times without cultural memory, but times the cultural memory of disappeared without traces. As it was also known, that if one changes identity one has also to change cultural memory, e. g. Augustine began to hammer into the Roman heads that their/our fathers are Abraham and Moses, whereas until then their/our ancestors had been Romulus and Remus. The holy dust stemming from Jerusalem was called in his time *memoriae*. Soon there were no Romans left, and not because of the Vizingths but because the Roman cultural identity became a historical subject matter and ceased to be an identity-constituting cultural memory. We know that Mussolini wanted to resurrect Roman cultural identity but without success.

In modern times and particularly since the end of 18th century, political bodies, first and foremost the then emerging nation state, became also the carrier of cultural memory. Religion served at the model for a conscious and novel cultural creation. The French Republic celebrated itself at first on the Field of Mars by performing a ceremony in honor of the Supreme Being. Yet soon, the states enhanced their cultural identity also with secular festivals and celebrations. Like Quatorze Juillet in France, July 4 in USA became the memorial days of the creation of the Republic. Celebrations of these memorial days take place every year with marches, the display of military strength, with fireworks, speeches and so on. In my opinion, no state could establish such a forceful cultural memory as religions did. But if nation, ethnicity and religion – or any of them – reinforces the cultural memory of the state, it can also serve as a forceful weapon. Ideology then replaces mythology.

In the process of the division of the spheres, that is in the process where civil society achieved its relative autonomy from the state which became modern, the work of cultural memory building and preserving became first and foremost the responsibility of the state, or the governments. States – or rather governments – do normally enlist for this work the so-called intellectuals, more precisely teachers, poets, painters etc. I may remind you on the Mexican mural painters who almost on their own created a national myth/ideology which since continues to work.

I do not evaluate the modern story of cultural identity creation. The mythological/ideological content of the stories varies from state to state, from epoch to epoch. Identity creation works on old cultural memories, selecting among them, reinterpreting them, extending them, enlarging them, fusing into them new contents and experiences. Although after a political change cultural memory is newly shaped – while political oppositions shape them in their fashion – there are steady items also in modern cultural memory which will not be dropped from memory by any government with any political interest of inclination, they will just be inserted into another picture. Yet even non-nationalistic interpretations will present an auto-stereotype for an outstanding identity, for the uniqueness of fate, enhancing pride and putting the emphasis frequently – although not necessarily and not always – on the exclusion of the others.

My question is now structural-functional and not evaluative. At the present moment I do not want to discuss whether having a cultural memory is a good or a bad thing. For the time being I want to make a more modest proposal. I want to show that in modern times – that is since it came into being – civil society or »Bürgerliche Gesellschaft« as such has not cultural memory. But in saying this I have already stated something more and else. Namely I pointed at the problematic character of the concept of civil society itself. If civil society has no cultural memory then it has no identity either.

When different people or scholars talk about civil society they talk about entirely different institutions or practises. It is not the difference what is important here, not even heterogeneity. In the modern world there is difference and heterogeneity everywhere. But civil society as a concept has a multiplicity of referents with little or no connection, thus different theorists choose one or the other among them, and do not simply forget, yet also exclude the rest. All the concepts of civil society together include everything what the state is not, or what the state – at a given moment in time – is no more and not yet. Market belongs to civil society, so do at least all non state owned and governed institutions e. g. institutions of education or health, so do trade unions, all civil associations, the mafia, all corporations. Single-issue political movements which might function as pressure groups are also termed civil society, furthermore

movements of organised or semi-organised rebellions against tyrannical governments or states. In addition ethnic groups, groups for foreigners and of the stateless, who also put pressure on the state. Family also belongs to civil as religions and religious institutions are located here. So are representative memory-conserving institutions such as museums – irrespectively of whether they are private, state owned or metropolitan. Thus civil society cannot have a cultural memory. For within civil society there are institutions and activities which are unable and unwilling to create cultural memory, for they are not in need of a cultural identity creation. Yet there are other segments or institutions within civil society which carry further, although selectively, inherited junks of cultural memory and create a cultural memory of their own. Civil society consists thus of a mosaic of identities and non-identities, of a mosaic of groups of cultural memory formation and other groups without any.

Let me briefly speak of the market or of any kind of economic activity. Marx only said that interest has no memory for it is occupied only with itself. Certainly also interest need short-term memory, yet not a long-term one, and particularly not a cultural memory. Self-regulating market rather requires the abolishment, the destruction of cultural memory. The frequently heard complaint that market destroys local traditions is in fact correct, insofar as for the proper function of the market the practices of cultural memory are just as many hindrances. But even if one disregards the idea of the self-regulating market, one will still encounter other interest-regulated activities, all of them exclusively future-oriented. By future orientation I mean orientation towards the near future, the future of the present. Interest is rather competitive, not cohesive, or if cohesive then only in a cooperative manner. Even when not individuals but groups compete with each other, where the groups share interest, such group-affiliations are contingent, also result-dependent, and mostly also ephemeral. To us Max Weber's terminology, they are purposively rational and not value rational. In a merely interest-guided activity there is neither love nor hatred, although there is indifference and cruelty. Interest has no aesthetics, it does not believe in repetition, it is anti-ceremonial.

The central places of economic activity, e. g. the stock market, are certainly not places of memory. Stockbrokers do not assemble every year on the Wall street for the anniversary of the great crash for remembrance and mourning. Yet as I already mentioned, not only strictly economic activities are mainly interest and competition oriented. There are also spectacles of such a kind. Sport events are perhaps the most popular spectacles in our times, yet it occurred in no one's mind during the Sidney Olympic games to make a pilgrimage to Melbourne to pay tribute to the athletes who won victory for their team in 1956. Big shopping centers are sometimes ironically termed the cathedrals of the postmodern age. This hits the mark only in part. True, parents take their children every Sunday to a shopping town just as they used to take them to the cathedrals. But shopping centers are not places of memory. There is no past here to be »presenced«. Here something new must appear or happen during every visit. The need for cultural memory is not satisfied by paying visit to a shopping town. And such need exists. The strong showing of fundamentalism of all kinds and the influence of identity politics of all sorts, yet also the hunger for sense and meaning, clearly signalize the presence of such needs.

But not just interest-oriented activities are lacking cultural memory today. This is the case also with most of the political movements, collective acts of public concern, if they are engendered by civil society and if they stay within the spaces of civil society before falling apart. This happens with the so-called single-issue movements. As long as such movements keep their issue on the agenda, they put a pressure on the state, via mobilizing and influencing public opinion in a few ways such as demonstrations, distribution of leaflets, propaganda activity in institutions, etc. This is often called »the raising of consciousness«. Among the hard-core members of such movements, there are shared symbols, signals, sign of »belonging«, they wear their identity on their sleeves in the literal sense of the word. In spite of sharing cultural marks, such movements are future-oriented. This is true even if the slogans are conservative or romantic. What is, however, more important that single-issue movements do not establish a cultural tradition of their own for future generations. They come and go. They can achieve their aim and

fall apart just because of their – even if limited – success, like abolitionism, or their aim can become entirely irrelevant, and then they fall apart because of that, like the peace movements. They may also leave some traces on civil societies but these will not be memory traces, but pragmatic ones, like changes in customs, behaviour and the like. They normally get a strong media coverage, but when they lose momentum, the media will lose interest of them. The most complex movement of the last decades, that of 1968 changed the life of people in many respects, it has not established cultural memory because it has not created identity and vice versa. The only memory it left behind has been nostalgia.

Broader political movements of civil society, and especially the revolts of civil society against a repressive state can initiate a forceful cultural memory as long as the repression lasts. Since the repressive state will give the event – be it revolution, rebellion or the acts of civic disobedience – an abusive interpretation, the cultural memory of the victims will be an alternative memory, a counter-memory. Since their celebration will remain clandestine, they will not erect monuments. Secrecy in fact can reinforce at least for a while cultural memory. The marrano situation can end in two ways. Either the marranos are beginning to forget and then they cease to be marranos, or their cause will win the day. In the second case the new government will take over the care for the cultivation of the rebellion-created cultural memory. The counter memory will become official memory. The past will be celebrated by the state, the issue will be »etatized«, and the memory will be cease to be the memory of civil society. This happened with the revolution of 1956 in Hungary. October 23 is now official holiday and people mostly cease to remember. Counter memory works also in cases where an act of repression was not preceded by a revolt, such as in the case of the grieving mothers' demonstrations in Buenos Aires.

If I am not mistaken, the trade union movement of the 19th century alone succeeded in establishing a lasting memorial day, a festival, repeatedly taking place every year, namely the Mayday parade. Yet the Mayday parade is not about remembrance, at least it is no more. It is rather a day of making merriment and the day to showing the music of the unions and of socialist

parties while concentrating on issues which had been put on the political agenda in the very year of each and every march or demonstration.

Hegel pointed at the Absolute Spirit – that is art, religion and philosophy – as the carrier of cultural memory. The great political deeds will not be forgotten, because they are immortalized in writing, by artworks and by religion. I sidestep one of Hegel's points, namely that philosophy, the medium of which is conceptual, does not establish cultural identity, but the identity of modernity itself. This is why it does not remember the past, but exists wholly – as recollection – in the present. Hegel belonged to those who believed that modernity is about the full disenchantment of the world. What is, however, interesting, that art began to play the role of cultural memory provider on its own as early as the 18th century. Art, artistic creation and distribution are located in civil society. Since the emergence of the nation state and its increasing effort to create a cultural memory on its own, the state has enlisted the help of the so-called *Kulturbourgeoisie*. And vice versa: the creation of a new national cultural memory contributed to then emergence of the nation state itself. The German case is the most representative. There was no common German state, yet the German *Kulturbourgeoisie* created the forceful myth about the spiritual brotherhood between the ancient Athenian and the modern German culture, thus they extended the German cultural memory to the remote past to encompass Athenian tragedy, sculpture, philosophy and architecture. The German cultural memory was thus formed as anti-Roman and anti-French (the French being associated with Roman). The cult of national poets, composers and painters was invented in civil society, together with the myth of the genius. The houses or graves of those national geniuses became holy sites calling for a quasi religious pilgrimage, like Rousseau's Hermitage, the house of Goethe in Weimar, or Chopin's piano. During the German occupation the Dutch tried to institutionalize a Rembrandt memorial day. Nowadays this kind of cult has assumed a cosmopolitan character as the places of remembrance became also touristic attractions.

The currently widespread identity politics – be it about race, ethnicity, gender of sexual orientation – have also been initiated by the forces of civil

society. In one respect, these identity movements resemble single-issue movements insofar as they put pressure on the state, on the legislature and legal institutions to rectify grievances and to introduce politics of justice the implementation of which have been long overdue. But since they are not issue but identity movements, more precisely, their issues concern their identity, they have to re-establish or to establish cultural memory for their group. Without shared cultural memory there is no identity. Even families have a cultural memory, objectified in old letters, photographs, family lore etc. Among all the groups which were in need for cultural memory, ethnic groups had the easiest task, for they have never entirely lost their cultural memory, sometimes including their language, although they have not used it. Many things which have been forgotten, can be brought to light, fused with new myths, with stories of repression and suffering, combined also with heterogeneous cultural memorabilia such as music, decoration and religious lore. Dissimulation implies the restoration and the creation of cultural memory. In spite of the biological difference, or perhaps also because of it, the attempt to create a forceful cultural memory for women in feminist philosophies and writings was in my mind less successful. Here one faces again a clear case of counter-memory with the need to establish continuity, an attempt which leads to a great amount of mythologizing. In the case of sexual orientation, cultural memory creation mostly stops at the cult of great homosexual artists.

As it was already mentioned, the push and pull of assimilation and dissimulation the repeated pendulum movement between universality and difference, or – to use Foucault's expression – the revolving door of reason, all are connected with cultural memory. Since civil society is not only the heterogeneous mosaic of a great variety of different, sometimes even colliding and hostile cultural memories, yet also a heterogeneous mosaic of activities and group formations in no need of cultural memories, the choice is not as simple as it seems. It is not between assimilation and dissimulation, value and interest, passion and calculation, past and future but among others, also between a life with cultural memories and a life without them. One has to consider that science became the dominating world explanation of our times and

that science is an activity void of cultural memory. Religions and artistic practises, but mainly the first, are playing now a similar role as science used to play before the time of Enlightenment, namely the role of the critic.

Civil society can function without cultural memory, it can smoothly operate through the clashes of interest and cooperation, limited to short term future-oriented activities and to short term memory, without archive and without utopia led simply by utilitarian considerations. Still it seems as if the need for cultural memory were very strong and as if the Weberian slogan about the disenchantment of the world could be one of the many failed predictions. The old conceptual differentiation between community and society comes to my mind. It seems as if pure society could not deliver the goods which are still kept in store by communities. When confronted with the upsurge of myths which offer a kind of feeling or belonging yet also with the soullessness of the utilitarian machines, one loses the old confidence of knowing what is kept in store for the new generation. Even those who, like myself, are committed to the maintenance of open-ended cultural memories, know that one does not remember ahead. ◀