In the Labyrinth of Remembrance: Historical Thinking and the Pluralism of past-interpretations

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Abstract

The study explores the issues of European remembrance politics and common culture of remembrance, analysing the relationship between collective memory and historiography. It points out that history is a constructed narrative that serves political ends and that national identity is closely intertwined with the national image of history. The study takes stock of the dilemmas of a common remembrance policy at the European level: the divergence of national narratives and the question of a single European identity. Finally, presents the issues of European memory culture, from the Holocaust to EU integration and migration, and makes proposals for an unbiased, diverse and common European memory policy.

In a study (Gross, 1996), John Gross points out that the danger of the globalisation process is that historical memory is endangered, that the European man may lose it. Gross is not optimistic about the future of European culture, which he sees as losing its roots and becoming less 'European'. In this situation, knowledge of the past, the ability to learn from past events and mistakes, becomes a cardinal issue, a quasi-moral duty precisely for the sake of preserving culture. Gross also uses examples to highlight the importance of teaching history, the dilemmas associated with the shrinking of specific curricula, the changing knowledge base, and the decline in the new generations' knowledge of culture, particularly of the culture of the past. This is related to the process described by George Ritzer (Ritzer, 2009) as the *McDonaldisation* of society. The organisational principles applied to the fast-

food chain are being applied to more and more areas of society, including education and culture. The rationalisation of knowledge, its categorisation into valuable and useless categories, the increase in the 'efficiency' of knowledge transfer and its measurability in as many areas as possible, and the increasingly emphasised guiding principle of cost-effectiveness - are all products of this approach. In this cultural context, history teaching is easily victimised by rationalisation, especially in societies where the official, standard view of history has changed several times over a quarter of a century.

It is also worth examining the relationship between the past and historiography before we turn to the specificities of European memory culture. In the early nineties, the British historian Keith Jenkins (1991, p. 31), in a volume entitled *Re-Thinking History*, provides a complex definition of history: "*History is a shifting, problematic discourse, ostensibly about an aspect of the world, the past, that is produced by a group of present-minded workers (overwhelmingly in our culture salaried historians) who go about their work in mutually recognisable ways that are epistemologically, methodologically, ideologically and practically positioned and whose products, once in circulation, are subject to a series of uses and abuses that are logically infinite but which in actuality generally correspond to a range of power bases that exist at any given moment and which structure and distribute the meanings of histories along a dominant-marginal spectrum*"

What is essential is that Jenkins sees history as a discourse organised along ideologies and power-dominance relations, challenging its interpretation as an objective, independent reality. The political and power relations of the present determine the way the past is viewed, and the historian himself does not remain independent in this process, i.e. although the past remains unified, the possibilities for interpreting it are infinite. Gábor Gyáni (2013) mentions that modern historical consciousness is essentially a construction of historians and has been closely linked to the issue of national identity from the beginning. For this reason, politics has also sought to instrumentalise history and historiography as a scientific way of discussing the past to use it for its ends. The emergence of modern forms of power and the birth of modern states is closely linked to the birth of new nations and the emergence of new national (Tomka & Szilárdi, 2016) traditions and national historical canons. As Hobsbawm (1987) points out, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, a multitude of traditions were invented and disseminated by historians, propagandists and specialised bureaucrats in order

to achieve specific political ends. These 'invented traditions' helped to shape identity in a comprehensible and simple way while at the same time constructing an image of the past. Even in later periods, such as the period of state socialism, the context of historical events and processes is reassessed and reconstructed based on political initiative, resulting in a new image of history in line with the dominant ideology. This is one of the reasons why, following the regime change, there has been a great distrust of historiography and the picture of history painted by historians in Central European societies.

In the context of Central European historiography, it also seems to be confirmed that nationality is a fundamental determinant of historical reflection. This is the case in official historiography, especially in so-called *public history.* The public history is the image of the past that its representatives create for the community and the needs of the community feed that. In many cases, public history is a use of the past for direct political purposes, drawing on collective memory and bringing its traditions into play (Gyáni, 2006). It also takes a variety of forms: educational journals, heritage groups, festivals, video games, and films. It is crucial to consider the needs of the public and consumer expectations, which shape the collective memory tradition.

The most popular topos of this public history are those that form the backbone of what György Gyarmati (Gyarmati, 2016) calls *pre-scientific* historical culture. Gyarmati points out that there is an asynchronicity between *pre-scientific* public history and professional historiography: the former has "a different chronology". It is precisely this that makes this public historiography useful for politics since it serves the political-ideological intentions that are intended to shape public thinking. They also offer a more convenient solution for the wider society: confused and often contradictory theories, explanations and constructed traditions act as a kind of panel from which anyone can construct their own identity without much effort (Szilágyi, 2011). Of course, these identities are vulnerable because of their *bricolage* nature, and it is easy for their defence to become a programme and almost religious, as we sometimes see.

The pluralism of interpretations of the past also means that professional historiography has to position itself in a context where the methodological approach of the discipline is at a clear "competitive disadvantage". Gyáni (Gyáni, 2015, p. 65) warns that "*historians' history is inherently not the sanctioning and further enrichment of a particular tradition, its re-creation as a fixed canon, but the production of*

rational knowledge about the past", but the expectations placed on historians by politics as a "client" are stretching the limits of the possibilities of scholarship free from ideological influences in many countries.

Memory, history and remembrance politics

The attempts at re-nationalisation that followed the relegation of national historiography to the background after the Second World War were unsuccessful, partly due to the rise of the unifying idea of Europe, which also meant that "*the historian is less and less able to contribute to the creation and constant cultivation of the intellectual construction of collective, and in particular national, identity*", writes Gyáni (Gyáni, 2006, p. 266). Just as there has been strong resistance to instrumentalising tendencies at the level of the discipline, public history has taken up this task, assuming the role previously reserved for historians. At the global level, this period has brought with it the fragmentation of identities and the heterogenisation of historical consciousness. However, from the mid-2000s onwards, national identities have also been given a new and enhanced role (Szilágyi, 2010; Szilágyi, 2015). We can see that depoliticised memory and alternative constructions of the past easily come into conflict with historical knowledge. An intriguing question is how memory politics - which is fundamentally strongly tied to the nation as an imaginary framework - can operate in supranational political entities, and can the conflicts between memory politics and historiography be reduced by decoupling memory politics from its national ties?

The extent to which this classification of the past will work as an identity-forming factor at the European level remains to be seen. At the national level, however, the canon of memory politics is indeed organised differently, and this will not lead to a short-term consensus regarding a shared culture of memory.

Péter Kende (Kende, 2003) refers to István Bibó when he points out that the nation as a democratic community has everywhere managed to turn towards itself the emotional warmth that was previously reserved for smaller, more local communities, and this, he argues, is the origin of the 'heat of nationalism'. For him, the question remains whether the emotional transfer that characterises nation-building can be repeated in the new context of Europeanism: '*Is there any prospect of Europe as a political extended family having the same' warm and direct feelings 'as the nation'*? In addition to 'warm and immediate feelings', a

fundamental question is that of political identity, on which Kende is sceptical (Kende 2003:11): '*The fact that it is a civilisational community does not make Europe, or the wider West, an entity with which it can be politically identified*'. Can a shared memory help this process? Europe as a civilisational community is not unified in its collective memory either; the national memories of the states that make up the European Union are mosaically assembled into a visionary 'European remembrance'.

According to Claus Leggewie (2008), this supranational memory should be imagined as a concentric circle with the Holocaust at its centre. The contemporary relevance of Holocaust remembrance is given by the rise of xenophobia, anti-Semitism and racism in Europe - in the context of which Holocaust remembrance has a pedagogical role. Another contemporary issue is the issue of Holocaust denial and relativisation, which is legally sanctioned in many European countries. In the second circle are the crimes of communism, the denial and questioning of which are also punished in many countries. An important issue is the competing comparison between the crimes of the two totalitarian regimes, which appears in some political narratives, and their asymmetry in European memory. The reasons for this can be traced back to several sources: the historical uniqueness of the Holocaust and the suffering of the ethnic groups living in the territory of the Soviet Union have created a kind of collective 'blindness' to the significance of the Red Terror in post-war Western Europe. A second reason is that the tragedy of the Jews in the Second World War was more transparent and visible to Europeans - while the victims of the Nazis were mostly Europeans from other nations, the victims of the communist terror were mainly 'their own'. Thirdly, the geographic nature of communist terror should be highlighted: it did not affect the Western states; they had no real experience of it.

A dominant element in European collective memory is the memory of ethnic cleansing, forced displacement and population exchanges, many of which are not fully processed even at the national level, such as the atrocities committed against Hungarians in Voivodina (nowadays a province of Serbia) after World War II (Forró, 2013, 2016). In many cases, national memory narratives contain different elements of certain events - for this reason, it is essential to develop a unified concept of remembrance at the European level.

Fourthly, the unresolved nature of the Armenian genocide is a significant challenge both in terms of historical memory and international relations, which

also has a substantial impact on Turkey's European integration. The tragic events of the early 20th century, during the Ottoman Empire, are still the subject of intense debate. Recognition of the genocide and the failure to face up to the past is essential not only for historical justice but also for future peace, reconciliation and stability. Addressing the memory of the Armenian genocide is thus not only a matter of historical awareness but also a test of European remembrance.

The fifth circle is organised around the sins of colonialism. These are the rediscovered elements of European memory centred around the genocides committed by the European colonial powers (Belgium, Germany, France). The atrocities committed in the colonies, the atrocities of the European colonialists, have long been a forgotten (or hidden) chapter in European history. In recent decades, for example, the series of massacres perpetrated by Germans in South West Africa (present-day Namibia), whose racist character is seen as a forerunner of the great tragedies of the twentieth century, has gained attention and become part of the European canon of memory. In the sixth circle, the story of migration and immigration is presented - linked at several points to the colonial past. Migration has a prominent place in the history of twentieth-century Europe: the waves of migration that followed the collapse of colonial empires are as much a part of European memory as the millions of refugees fleeing communist rule in Eastern Europe or the Balkan wars. Nowadays, the issue of migration has become particularly important in European politics, and the historical experience of immigration and the way it is processed and under-processed is repositioned in European memory culture.

Finally, in the seventh round is European integration. The political process that started in the 1950s and led to the integration of the post-communist states and the emergence of a supranational economic-political entity in the 1920s is clearly a success story. The extent to which the criticisms of the way the European Union functions today are valid, or the long-term consequences of the problems brought to light by the migration crisis, are irrelevant factors in the culture of memory. The successful establishment and maintenance of economic and cultural relations between nations, the democratisation of societies in transition, the unification of European values and orientation - these are becoming important elements of European memory culture.

It can be seen that the first five of these are among the great tragedies of the twentieth century, while the sixth (migration) is ambivalent in nature, and the

only positive one is the European integration process. These circles of memory are organised around a pragmatic politics of memory and are intended to shape a common European identity. The extent to which this classification of the past works as an identity-forming factor at the European level remains to be seen. At the national level, however, the canon of memory politics is certainly organised differently, and this will not lead to a short-term consensus regarding a shared culture of memory.

Narratives of forgetting

In several works, the Bulgarian-born French philosopher and literary scholar Tzvetan Todorov has analysed issues of collective memory and identity and drawn attention to the distortions of memory: "*The totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century showed that there was a danger of which no one had been aware before the disappearance of memory. (...) The tyrannies of the twentieth century, having understood that lands and people could be conquered by the conquest of information and communication, systematically took memory under their control and sought to keep it under their control down to its most hidden corners*" (Todorov, 2005, p. 109).

In his study "Memory as Remedy for Evil" (Todorov, 2009), he explores the complex relationship between memory, justice and the inherent evil in human society. Todorov analyses the narratives of good and evil, the process of remembering past atrocities and the consequences of justice and reconciliation. The author identifies four main actors in narratives of good and evil: the villain, the victim, the hero and the beneficiaries, and points out that memory often leads us to identify ourselves with heroes or victims while keeping villains at a distance. According to Todorov, preserving the memory of past evils is not sufficient in itself if we use it to put an inseparable wall between ourselves and evil, identifying only with heroes of integrity and innocent victims. He stresses that to understand, contain and tame evil, we must recognise that it is also present within us. Todorov believes that true hope lies not in the final eradication of evil but in understanding, containing and taming it, recognising that it is part of us. Todorov notes that adequately addressing the memory of past evil can help not only to comfort victims but also to influence perpetrators and would-be perpetrators not to repeat their actions in the future. He suggests that memory and justice must take into account the complexity of human nature and its capacity for evil and that good and evil come from the same source and are not clearly separated in most historical events.

Aleida Assmann, one of the best-known experts in the field of collective memory and cultural memory research, stresses that the incorporation of past traumas into collective memory is key to the process of inter-group reconciliation. According to Assmann, understanding the dynamics of memory and forgetting is crucial to resolving social conflicts and building a shared vision of the future. *'When thinking about memory, we must start with forgetting'*, she writes in her study "Canon and Archive" (Assman, 2010, p. 97). Forgetting is made sense of in social and cultural contexts, so it is worth examining the dynamics of remembering and forgetting in specific socio-historical contexts. As a fundamental human and social phenomenon, forgetting is an indispensable part of cultural evolution, whereby past events, objects and experiences are removed from shared memory over time. Remembering requires conscious effort, whereas forgetting is often automatic as a result of social and technological change. As social and cultural contexts change, so do the forms and functions of remembering and forgetting, reflecting changes in social development, technological innovation and ethical norms. The dynamic between remembering and forgetting is thus a complex, multi-layered process that plays a key role in shaping individual and community identity, historical consciousness and cultural heritage (Assmann, 2014).

Assmann points out that silencing and forgetting the divisive, traumatic events of the past does not lead to conflict resolution and social reconciliation. On the contrary, the politics of forgetting preserves and reproduces inter-group confrontations and antagonisms. Instead, integrating the traumatic past into shared memory can help to process grievances and reconciliation. Only through an honest, critical confrontation with the past can dialogue and understanding between groups be achieved.

Way out of the labyrinth

Building a common European culture of remembrance is a major challenge for the EU institutions. Over the past decade and a half, a variety of solutions have been proposed, taking into account the gap between divergent national narratives and the need to develop a unified European identity, which is key to the success of EU integration.

The experience of the past decades clearly shows that promoting dialogue between historians exploring different national narratives is inevitable in the construction of a common European culture of memory. Scholarly dialogue

makes it possible to explore the reasons for the differences between national narratives and to bring positions closer together, thus fostering mutual understanding. A complex, multi-perspective approach to historical events, which helps to present the diversity of national narratives by representing certain events, is key to promoting an objective assessment of cultural and historical issues. Emphasising common anti-Christian roots and values can also be an important basis for a common European identity, as this common point of reference can help to provide a cultural and ethical foundation that bridges differences arising from different geographical, historical and political pasts. A forward-looking approach, focusing on future challenges rather than dwelling on past grievances, can also facilitate cooperation and a move towards common objectives. Cooperation between civil society actors and joint professional and cultural programmes are of particular importance in fostering a sense of belonging, as they bring people together directly, helping to break down prejudices and share common values. Programmes that focus on highlighting shared cultural heritage and artistic collaborations can also contribute to understanding cultural diversity and strengthening a common European identity. Finally, fostering critical perspectives on national narratives and educating people to examine historical events objectively and impartially is crucial in promoting an objective understanding of history and cultural openness.

Taken together, these can be the key to an unbiased, forward-looking common narrative that can foster even closer European integration and a stronger common European identity.

In this study, I have tried to highlight that the development of a European remembrance policy and a shared culture of remembrance is a significant challenge for EU Member States. Often, sharp differences in national narratives, past grievances and a subordinate view of history to political goals make it very difficult to establish common ground. What is clear is that a central, integrative European memory policy is essential to achieve real unity. The critical elements of this should be a dialogue between historians, a multi-perspective and interdisciplinary approach, the identification and emphasis on shared core values, a future-oriented approach and a critical perspective. By developing a shared narrative within an unbiased and democratic framework, a European culture of remembrance can be created that strengthens cohesion and shared identity, while

respecting national specificities and diversity. This can best serve the future of a united yet democratic Europe.

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