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**MORE FORGETTING
AND LESS ELABORATION
OF THE PAST
IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION**





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A Lucrezia

Those who knew
what was going on here
must make way for
those who know little.
And less than little.
And finally as little as nothing.

W. SZYMBORSKA, *The End and the Beginning*

They encamped by the river of Ameles, whose water no vessel can hold; of this they were all obliged to drink a certain quantity, and those who were not saved by wisdom drank more than was necessary; and each one as he drank forgot all things.

PLATO, *Politeia*

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INTRODUCTION

During my experience as a humanitarian worker, I regretfully noticed some level of acritical adhesion to certain ideas: refrains that operators and activists in this field consider self-evident and not criticizable. Likewise, during my academic experience, some students, and even a few lecturers, apparently assumed certain statements simply as untouchable given: unfortunately, my strong philosophical background “forced” me to refuse this stance. Strengthening humanitarian ideas to be able to successfully advocate them is crucial in the international relation field and, as a matter of fact, the strength of a belief comes from the knowledge of its reasons, assumptions as well as biases or weaknesses.

This work is devoted to challenge and resolutely criticize one of the abovementioned notions: the importance of the elaboration of memory, or the past, in post-conflict scenarios. I consider this an especially important issue, since a lot of efforts and discourses are favoring the elaboration of memory during conflict management and, most of all, reconciliation processes. At the same time, surprisingly, it does not look like enough critical thinking is applied to the confidence in its positivity.

More precisely, the aim of this work is to argue that focusing on the elaboration of the past and insisting on remembering and memory are not necessarily vital steps to achieve a peaceful coexistence after a conflict and, on the contrary, can even be detrimental to conflict resolution

and reconciliation. Moreover, oblivion or partial forgetfulness might often be preferable options.

Therefore, this work will revolve around the following questions: why is the elaboration of memory so much considered? Can memories teach communities how to stop or avoid a conflict? What are the defects and dangers connected with the elaboration of memories in post-conflict situations? Can memories of past conflicts and their elaboration be a source of conflicts and divisions? May oblivion be an alternative? What about thinking of the future, instead?

I decided to concentrate on the negative aspects of elaboration and insistence on the past, and to evaluate alternatives. No space will be given here to the positive effects of memory: there are indeed, but many pages and words have already been dedicated to this aspect by eminent authors and in public events.

This work will be mainly theoretical, with some insight into case studies, and will consider political, social, moral, and psychological aspects. In the first chapter, I will address some theoretical and preliminary aspects that will be utilized in the rest of the work. I will also investigate where the great value often accorded to the elaboration of memory comes from. Moreover, I will start reflecting on its limits and whether we really need it for conflict resolution and peaceful coexistence.

The second chapter will be dedicated to the discussion of the possible dangers connected with the excess of the elaboration of memory in conflict resolution: I will question its fairness and whether it can provoke or reignite a conflict and why. The utility of oblivion for conflict resolution will be then investigated.

In the third and last chapter, I will hold that peace might have priority over justice and that concentrating on a common future, rather than on the past, can often guarantee more opportunities to cultivate a peaceful community. Finally, I will discuss some cases of oblivion, drawn from the recent past, and provide some proposals.

Methodology

This study is largely the fruit of desk research, performed through a variety of sources: academic and field expert literature was examined, ranging from theoretical to case study articles and monographies, with international and local focuses. For information on recent events and latest developments, newspapers' articles were also compared and cross-verified. In addition, UN documents, think tanks and NGOs' studies on the topic were taken into consideration.

A role has been certainly played by more or less informal conversations that I had the luck to conduct with scholars, activists and people from Lebanon, Syria, Sierra Leone, Bosnia, Libya, Palestine, Israel, Spain, Italy and Germany during the last five years. Finally, this is also the outcome of personal reflections based on experiences and studies in the fields of conflict management, humanitarian aid, international politics, and philosophy.

Specific cases of communities recently involved in post-conflict processes have been taken into considerations, such as Lebanon, former Yugoslavia, Mozambique, Sierra Leone, and Northern Ireland, as well as some slightly older situations, such as Spain, Germany, and France. Also, thematic cases have been considered, such as the treatment of the past in school curricula and religious reconciliation.

I decided not to provide a unique wide case study, for two reasons. First, I deemed more effective to disseminate specific observations from several cases to strengthen specific theoretical passages and personal reflections. Secondly, I wanted to make a general and possibly comparative discourse, so bringing a single case could not lead to any confirmation, as also G. Sartori suggests⁽¹⁾, while multiple cases may possibly help to clarify concepts and generate hypotheses.

Finally, I decided to assume a rather strong and, sometimes, radical approach with the aim to force myself to highlight with clarity the consequences of the excess of the elaboration of memory.

(1) Sartori G. (1991), *Comparing and Miscomparing*, "Journal of Theoretical Politics", 3, pp. 251–252.

CHAPTER I

EXCESS OF MEMORY?

1.1. Past, Memory, Collectivity, Groups, and Identity

This work will not consider only past and memory, but also present, future, reality, and desires. How much do their meanings change from one culture to another one? Are they in the western cultures the same as in some African cultures, where the time is essentially the present with a little projection in the past or the future⁽¹⁾, or as in some Asian cultures that rebuild their temple every few years⁽²⁾? Perhaps some culture thinks of the past as something real and alive no less than the present. Memory cannot be thought about in the same way for every culture on this planet and so in this essay I will modestly rely on my own idea of memory which is the one widespread in the western countries and that through a ruthless cultural colonization has affirmed in a vast part of the world.

In this first paragraph, I will consider some theoretical and preliminary aspects of concepts that will be used and deepened in the rest of the book. Many philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, and historians have written about the role of history, past or memory for the present and the future. Some of their ideas are worth to be mentioned.

The utility of memory of the past events for a better future was

(1) Fumilola Babalola S. & Ayodeji Alokun O. (2013), *African Concept of Time, a Socio-Cultural Reality in the Process of Change*, pp. 144–145.

(2) Ruseva G. (2015), *On the Notions of Memory in Buddhism*; Nuwer R. (4/10/2013), *This Japanese Shrine Has Been Torn Down and Rebuilt Every 20 Years for the Past Millennium*.

rather controversial for Friedrich Nietzsche, who dedicated many pages⁽³⁾ to the issue. According to the philosopher from Röcken, if the historical element is excessive and the past becomes “the gravedigger of the present”, the vitality of an individual or a community is impaired. Nietzsche raises an important point: the value of remembering and working on history and memory is linked to its capacity to promote a positive action for the future. If history and memory provide something meaningful for the present or the future and they promote action without hindering it, they are an immense source. Bridging these ideas to the issue under examination in this work, we can already anticipate a recurring question: can brooding over a past conflict promote positive actions for the future?

Even more emblematic is the role of Maurice Halbwachs⁽⁴⁾, who was the first scholar that dedicated enough attention to memory as a social phenomenon, which is of great concern for this work. In societies, there are not only individual memories, but also collective memories that exists outside of and lives beyond the individuals. These memories belong to groups or parts of the society: therefore, the many collective memories in a society are, at least, as numerous as the groups within it. These memories are dependent upon and are shaped by the “cadre” or framework within which a group is situated in a society. Memory is also a collective experience and the individual’s understanding of the past is strongly linked to these groups’ consciousness. Individual memories cannot be separated from collective ones, individuals do not have full control over recovering the past. Moreover, individuals can belong to more than one groups and then participate in more than one collective memories.

A first strong consequence of Halbwachs’ studies is that the memory of an individual belonging to a group is highly likely to differ from the one of members of another group: while inside a group, members share social memories in a fairly homogenous manner, members of different groups usually have different ideas, memories, and beliefs about relevant past events. From this approximate homogeneity inside a specific

(3) Nietzsche F. (1874), ‘On the Use and Abuse of History for Life’, I, 4.

(4) Halbwachs M. (1925), *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, ch. 2 and (1950), *La mémoire collective*, 4–iii, 5–i, Conclusions–i, iii.

group, it stems that the groups' identities are strongly associated with their memory, with what makes their memory special and distinctive from the ones of another groups.

It must be noted, following several studies on this topic⁽⁵⁾, that memories, as collectively shared across a group or a society, have a great emotional component, with huge and different roles: the more there are emotions, the more the event will be regarded as important, because emotions increase the weight of memories⁽⁶⁾. This link is even stronger in conflict situations. Memory is transmitted through generations; it reawakes emotions of the past events but also new emotions for the present. Hence, shared memories become emotional experience of belonging and any attempt to modify groups' memories can be perceived as a threat to their emotional identity and a threat to the intimate reality principle for individuals. In fact, a change in this memory means to superimpose another memory and it should not be surprising that a fierce resistance arises, especially if the alien memory is perceived as belonging to another group, even antagonist, which is usually the case⁽⁷⁾.

In addition to being a collective phenomenon, memories are also constructed ones. Memory is not something static and passive, it is an active process which implies construction. Social constructionism suggested that reality is a subjective and fluid entity where meaning cannot be separated from the belief and goals of those who "create" it. When applied to memory, constructionism addresses how the present informs the reality of the past and how both individuals and societies select and shape their remembrances based on their current needs, beliefs, and goals.

The main point that should stem from constructionism and Halbwachs' views is that memories and interpretations of the past are not abstract entities, they do not exist as such in the immaterial realm of truth, there is no demiurge picking them from Hyperuranion and placing them in front of us where, with a cartesian "clear and distinct"

(5) E.g., Finkenauer C., Gisèle L., Luminet O. (1997), *When Individual Memories are Socially Shaped: Flashbulb Memories of Sociopolitical Events*, pp. 82–85.

(6) Tint B. (2010b), *History, Memory, and Conflict Resolution: Research and Application*, pp. 380, 389, 390, 395.

(7) Mack, J. (1983), *Nationalism and the Self*; Gillis, J.R. (ed.) (1994), *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*, ch. 2.

mind, we would be able to recognize them. They are born into someone and, as Halbwachs clearly pointed out, they belong to someone (a group, an individual) and if one version of memory is preferred among others, then someone will feel more entitled and someone else will feel disrespected or refused or will lose his identity if he conforms to the mainstream memory.

Oblivion is the other side of the same coin which memory belongs to. As Nietzsche stressed in its *Untimely Considerations* and Borges emphasized in his famous short story, *Funes the Memorious*⁽⁸⁾, in order to remember it is necessary to forget: oblivion is necessary to life. Each one of us is what he remembers and what he forgets, as also Castelli Gattinara⁽⁹⁾ observed: not just as individuals, but also as societies or States. The role of collective oblivion, as opposed to collective memory, is also analyzed by Paul Ricoeur in *La mémoire, l'histoire et l'oubli*⁽¹⁰⁾.

Politically and legally oblivion has often taken the shape of amnesty (from the Greek *amnesia*, i.e., forgetfulness). The primitive goal of this instrument was to pacificate and reunite citizens divided by an internal conflict through a collective amnesia, as it happened in Athens after the reign of the Thirty Tyrants or as Henry IV tried to do in France with the Edict of Nantes. As also Ricoeur observes, a society cannot be forever angry at itself (or at a part of itself): as soon as the weapons are down, silence must be done. In fact, according to these measures, it was forbidden to recall the events, as if the conflict had never happened, under severe pains. Further on in this work, oblivion as an exit strategy from a conflictual situation will be considered.

A theoretical problem that might arise with the idea of indulging on a shared vision of the past is that there is no such thing as “the real past”. It is almost impossible to have a common universal view on past events, a common interpretation of them: the positivistic idea of facing pure facts or events is already doubtful in the present (see criticisms by existentialism, hermeneutics, constructivism, and postmodernism) and it becomes even more if the events have taken place in the past. Different interpretations are always present in the events, anyhow they

(8) Borges J.-L. (1944), ‘Funes the Memorious’.

(9) Castelli-Gattinara E. (2001), *Il non luogo della memoria e dell'oblio*, p. 154.

(10) Ricoeur P. (2000a), *La mémoire, l'histoire et l'oubli*, part 3, ch. 3.

are reported or directly witnessed: “there are no facts, just interpretations”, wrote Nietzsche⁽¹¹⁾.

The issue is further thickened by the difference between memory and the so-called “facts” of history⁽¹²⁾. The first one is in people consciousness, in groups’ consciousness, as also Halbwachs highlights, and it is constructed and manipulated, by definition. Controversies may arise, especially if memory involves a conflict whose stakeholders are still present in the society. Unfortunately, that is right the kind of situations that this work is dealing with: events connected to conflicts. As Barbara Tint stresses⁽¹³⁾, under circumstances of extreme intensity, memories will be formed around the high emotionality of an event. Such events will be recalled in such a way as to validate the current perception and emotional world of individuals or groups in question. For such events, the possibility of the neutral spectator, able to grasp something like the pure facts whose features are universally accepted, is totally delusional, because the emotional and political biases are at their peaks. Personal opinions, emotional experience and personal involvements are too strong to be neglected and enough strong to permeate any visions on the past.

1.2. Why is Elaboration of the Past so much Considered in Conflict Resolution?

In recent years, less than a century, one of the recurring mantras and moral dogmas of conflict resolution, peacebuilding and reconciliation processes has been the importance of memory, in particular of the elaboration of the past⁽¹⁴⁾.

One reason is certainly the obvious reality of memory. Memory is there,

(11) Nietzsche F. (1901), *Will to Power*, 481.

(12) Nora P. (1989), *Between Memory and History: ‘Les Lieux de Mémoire’*, p. 8.

(13) Tint B. (2010), *History, Memory, and Intractable Conflict*, pp. 246–247.

(14) Just a few examples: Margalit A. (2002), *The Ethics of Memory*; De Grieff P. (16/5/2016), *The Duty to Remember*; Jankélévitch V. (1986), *L’imprescriptible*, especially the essay ‘Pardonner?’; Todorov T. (2000), *Mémoire du mal, tentation du bien*; Portinaro P. (2011), *I conti con il passato*. See also the literature and NGOs related to transitional justice: the work of the International Centre for Transitional Justice provides a representative example of the role attributed to memorialization.

remembrance springs out after events and its existence must be considered whenever it might have a strong effect on conflicts. But this is not enough to explain the recent obsession with the work on memory. The pressure to “memorialize” has been growing and becoming a concern in the field and in academia, among activists and scholars. Why so much attraction towards the use, revive and elaboration of memory?

Apparently, the idea is to look for a just and “true” version of it, in order to amend past injustices and violations, bring truth and justice to light, avoid repetition of wrongdoings and achieve a sustainable peace. Truth commission, ad-hoc tribunals, memorial days, monuments, reforms of history and civic education curricula in schools, are just some of the many ways through which governments and legislators try to deal with the past, and modify and control people’s perception of it, with long lasting effect on future generations.

There are prevalent ethical reasons, both theoretical and based on the so-called lesson learned. One point I would like to stress is that the theoretical ones (justice, accountability, morality...) partially derives from one main lesson learned, this being the Holocaust.

Obviously, there is no need to describe or explain this overwhelmingly tragic event, but rather the paradoxical effect that it has had on the worship of memory. The starting point is the importance to remember this event: the Holocaust has changed the way we see the relation between a state and his citizens, the way we see racism, the way we see war, the way we see international law and also the way we see memory. It will not be discussed in this work if this change was justified, but, as a matter of fact, memorializing the Holocaust has been considered of vital importance for the whole world. Long before that the Resolution 60/7 of the General Assembly in 2005 established a Remembrance Day, it was already rooted in the culture of most of the countries of the world the idea that the Holocaust had been an event impossible to forget and necessary to remember, as generations of students have learnt in schools. It is a moral duty, a dogma of a new civil religion. But not just remembering, because immediately in the aftermath it was clear the necessity to understand why and how this had been possible: hence, also elaboration, interpretation, deduction...all kinds of theoretical and practical works have been produced and worshipped about this event and its memory.