



# Cultural Base

Social Platform  
on Cultural Heritage  
and European Identities

## Is the invention of memories necessary to identities?

### AXIS 1. CULTURAL MEMORY TF2. Memory and identities

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### **Introduction**

The situation of memories is now an issue of the European integration, when the European ideal needs to deal with some needs of recognition of memories and identities in a new way. Carlos Closa Montero wrote recently about the necessity to renegotiate European identity and to make it "more inclusive of these memories which did not provide substantive referential elements". (Closa, 2011: 5). If we move "from a specific model of a community of states towards a model of a community of citizens", he wrote, we need to think about "what kind of memory facts are or are not compatible with the moral perception that we- Europeans- have of ourselves in the XXI century". The nexus between old-fashioned memories and new European identity is a question that social sciences have repeatedly studied, and this is clearly an issue for stakeholders of heritage (Delanty 2010).

### **The development of the "memory studies"**

Memory is for the last 20 or 30 years a central subject for a large part of the social sciences, largely beyond the territory of social psychologists or historians. Before the Memory "Industry", in its first steps, the study of memory was the matter of philosophical literature (Bergson, 1896), or of literature (Marcel Proust). The establishment of memory as a field of enquiry in the social sciences is largely due to the work of the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945) and more particularly to his work on *The Social Framework of Memory* (1925).

More and more the category of "collective memory" has been elaborated as a specific one, and became an object of research of its own, related to cultural identity for anthropologists, (Connerton, 1989), and to cultural landscapes for geographers (Lowenthal, 1996). In the historical field, the collective work initiated by Pierre Nora about "realms of memory", or "memory sites" (for "lieux de mémoire") has been mostly influential. The



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result is that a lot of more or less successful attempts have tried to apply, so to speak, the model to other European countries : Italy, Germany, Netherlands, to only cite a few of them. All these national histories, as Astrid Erll made it in an introduction to an handbook on cultural memory studies, are more or less "restricted to the study of those ways of making sense of the past which are intentional and performed through narrative, and which go hand in hand with the construction of identities " -- in sum they paint the same " nexus : intentional remembering, narrative, identity" (Erll, 2010).

### **The new agenda of "cultural memory" and cultural heritage**

But the agenda of research about cultural memory is becoming more fluid : for the historian and sociologist Jeffrey Olick, as for many other historians, "collective memory", being a highly complex process, involving numerous different people, practices, materials, and themes, is no more "either the authentic residue of the past or an entirely malleable construction in the present " but "a fluid negotiation" (Olick, in Erll). In the field of memory studies, the notion of 'cultural' memory appeared now central, coinciding logically with this turn. Aleida and Jan Assmann have set recently a whole range of categories of memories, according to the passing of time, and the dialectics of public and private memories. They introduced the term "communicative memory" "in order to delineate the difference between Halbwachs' concept of "collective memory" and their understanding of "cultural memory". The cultural memory, supported by some classic frames (monuments, museums and archives) but also by the artifices of contemporary media related to an age of technical reproducibility, plays a role of unprecedented importance in the public sphere, fuelled by claims that lead to new memorial obligations.

Aleida Assmann makes uses of a division imagined by the cultural historian Jakob Burckhardt in the material past between two categories: "messages" to posterity and simple "traces". So we have at one end of the



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spectrum the museum, and at the other end " the storehouse for cultural relicts " for a "specialized historical curiosity". But there is no strict separation between the two functions of cultural memory, between passive cultural memory and memorial places or spaces.

### **The legacy of memories' wars**

Throughout European history, material elements of the past, presented as repertoires of monuments, collections and relics, have been identified with the prestige of a territory or a specific political regime. Throughout the nineteenth century, the use of the past in the museum progressively became an element in a larger construction of historical consciousness. This new narrative of "identity" was born from the changes of consciousness related to the ruptures in specific historical circumstances. That is why Renan expressed in the same time a need for forgetting, as Benedict Anderson explained : "Renan's readers were being told to "have already forgotten" what Renan's own words assumed that they naturally remembered" (Anderson, 1991).

A notable turn of the twentieth century, in terms of the different pasts privileged or used by the heritage and its memory, is without any doubt related to this development of notions of temporal breaks. With *The Modern Cult of Monuments*, written in 1903, Alois Riegl (1858-1905) invented a new way to think memories and identities in the process of heritage. His essay identifies the democratic instantaneity of the relationship to ancient monuments as the principle that explains the further extension of the meaning of heritage in an age of the masses, which he believes will be dominated by sentiment – *stimmung* – and not but the idea of erudition up until then tied up with the *historical monument* or the idea of memory tied up with the *intentional monument* (Gubser, 2005). The resolute opposition to essentialism that is manifest in *The Cult* puts the accent on the values of relations and associations in heritage terms, but not in a memorial way.



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In the mid-twentieth century, the propositions of Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History* written in 1940, shortly before his suicide in Port-Bou brought in a new mutation. His formula may be applied more widely to a large part of the twentieth century situation in terms of the relationship between heritage and history writing. "(...) without exception the cultural treasures he surveys have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror. (...) There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism". (Benjamin, 1971-1983). A lot of these situations, in the case of heritages, are linked, as Benjamin pointed rightly, to transportation of goods, works of art or personal belongings, linked to voluntary and involuntary moves, notably from peripheries to center. They can nurture an counter-memory of the vanquished people, and initiate anti-monuments such as in the art of J. Gerz.

### **"Possessors " and "Possessed ": Can cultural memory be mobile ?**

The question of the mobility of the heritages and of precious things in European context, in their relation with national or local identities, is today very important in the nexus of memory/identity. The history of the movement of works between different owners and through different types of collections provides a starting point from which to begin an examination of the constitution of a memory taking possession and ownership of its identity.

Generally speaking, throughout the nineteenth century, the relationship between public and private property progressively defined liberal ideology - the demonstration for the English case is eloquent (Bailkin 2004). The status of the collector or amateur was also progressively determined, as a reference to a particular sensibility, to forms of attachment, though related to a long tradition of collecting that took on a new tonality.

Second, the development of "ephemeral museums" and its supposed excess (Haskell, 2000) has been reconfiguring the value of objects from



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the very beginning of such events (in Manchester 1857) and at different levels, the most obvious being the recent creation of the the "lending for Europe" project that aims to facilitate museum object mobility ([www.lending-for-europe.eu](http://www.lending-for-europe.eu)). The status of this mobile property, considered from the point of view of a selection of major national museums on the one hand and from a selection of specialized exhibitions dealing with specific territorially defined heritage, testifies for some privileged networks of circulation and of cultural transfers in Europe, highlighting the specific role of "ambassador objects". The idea of a "portability" of things is an interesting one, which could be used as a means to develop a new sense of heritage, of identity and of memory in the modern culture. But it means that we could resolve the issues of the recognition and acceptability of different memories and identities in the Europe today.

Finally, in some specific cases debris have been transformed into relics and the weight of material culture is manifest in the visitor practices that in certain contexts recall religious pilgrimage. As Aleida Assmann wrote, one must give attention "to a problem that confronts all visitors to a place that is at one and the same time a museum, a crime scene, and a memorial" (Assmann, 2011: 365). In this framework, museums attempt to represent the "unspeakable" or the conflicting histories of some key figures and objects, often in a transnational perspective. The practice of collecting memories in museums dedicated to the Holocaust, or to terror, genocide or more generally speaking difficult memories is a major manifestation of this phenomenon. The past is conjugated in the present according to the rhythm of exhibitions that run in parallel to commemorations.

In these cases, the museum is no longer an "attic full of facts" ("grenier à faits") (Febvre, 1948) that the historian visits at his leisure, or a means of vulgarising historical knowledge, but rather it has become "a clinic for acts of memory" (Andrieu & Lavabre, 2006), and first and foremost for those



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memories that are felt as most traumatic, related to issues of memory and history under public discussion. More or less, a lot of new museums of migrations are in this case, as in Paris the blurred identities of a Palace of colonialism and of a Museum of national Immigration and Integration. The question of identities/memories is then very clear, as some social movements of immigrant workers without legal status ("*les sans-papiers*") have demonstrated in the last decade.

### **Dealing anew with national memory: the French identity**

In the social construction of identities, traditions and cultural ideas based on representations of the past, heritages have always been caught in the tension between the display of a collective self-presentation, and the embarrassment of a self-knowledge of collective failures, however today they may represent shame as well as images of glory, as a political means of enhancing the present greatness of the country.

In France, in the last decade, "national identity" is entered directly into the political field with the invention of a "ministry of the national identity" for some years by president Sarkozy. In fact, in all countries that have known more or less violent debates about the writing and teaching of national history one of the main issues was to consider if the history could be changed according to the new demands by newcomers, or if it must be adapted in a better way to instruct the citizens, and to build the community. Especially, the new universal, or European, ideals about national memories could also take part in patriotic needs and propaganda. In France today a reform of the schools' programs gave place to an inflammatory debate about the new teaching of national history. Against a first project that seemed to be too strongly focused on the dark side of the national history, leftish and right-wing politicians and intellectuals are in trouble.



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A first divide is between the conviction that teaching history is not only about building the (national) citizens, but about general skills and intellectual criticism, and the opposed conviction that each nation needs always a collective cultural memory that is built in the schools' program of history. In this second option, another divide is between those who want to maintain the "national novel", being assimilated to the right historical narrative, and others who stress the importance which could be given to some anticipations of the condemnation of slavery and trading, notably in the French laws of 1794 and 1848. The aim is to make clear that the universalistic ambition of the French Republic was anticipating the idea of crime against Humanity which was conceived during the Nuremberg trial, and that, finally, France has been really the "patrie des droits de l'homme" since the beginning of the Republic, and even before, especially with the anti-slavery movement of the French Enlightenment (Weil, 2015). So it would possible to imagine a confirmation of identity and of national memory according to new standards of the European community of citizens and the new ethics of political ideals.

### **The recognition and acceptability of "incorrect" traditions in a new memory**

Some supporters of supra-nationalism such as Jan Werner Müller (2004) have stressed the eventual capacity for building an Euro-nation with respect to its collective pasts and the "admonitory meaning and moral purpose". Many social scientists suggest in this way not to create a single "European memory" but to define procedures to help specific national communities to revise their "darker legacies". How to take into account the legacy of traditions, according to a new agenda ? In fact, the possible (re)inventions of traditions is a lot more complex than purely therapeutic tactics.

James Clifford in a commentary of a precise situation involving memory and identity in a part of Europe made clear the difficulties. He uses for his



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demonstration an article by Mieke Bal about the Dutch tradition of "Zwarte Piets", blackface clowns, linked to a racist and colonialist legacy. So the question, an usual one, is : "Is this a tradition that can be reformed ?" The answer by Bal is a very complex, one that James Clifford summarizes as such:

" An imposed, politically-correct moralism would merely evade the deep historical problem. Bal suggests that living traditions cannot, indeed should not, be cleansed of their dissonant, painful elements. The questioning they persistently evoke is an element in the critical, hermeneutic process of cultural transformation. (...) Such processes of difficult self-examination can contribute to a genuine 'working through' of a past,' bringing that work to bear on today's ambivalences.' (...) 'Until...one day the culture will wake up sick of the pain. Only then can - perhaps - this tradition be given up, wholeheartedly; not suppressed by moralism but rejected for the pain it causes. By that time, another tradition will have been invented, one that fits the culture better, that hurts less.'

But in his comment of Bal's position, Clifford wrote that " (...) moralistic suppressions, hostile disarticulations, will always be necessary parts of a process which produces less 'reasonable' cultural solutions than the one Bal projects. " (Clifford, 2004).

### **Conclusion**

Everywhere national identity, in its relationship with historical traditions, and memories, seems in crisis, due to globalisation, post-colonial issues, sense of guilt and fault to be redeemed, and more generally the idea that the citizens don't recognize their nation and its tradition anymore. This process has begun probably three decades ago, but the feeling is now more acute than ever. The invented traditions of the last two centuries



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were supposed to secure the national identities in each country, democratizing and publicizing history and memory. The various studies written at the end of the previous century and at the beginning of ours about the writing of history have been instrumental in the de-construction of historical narratives in the academic field, but they were not so influential in public history and commemorative practices, museums and heritage sites. On the contrary, everything seemed to be possibly dignified by heritagisation, and especially in the new European way. Lucien Febvre, the great French historian, was indignant in 1953 when he learned that Carlo V was supposedly greeted to be one of the makers of Europe : "Many thanks ! Why not Napoleon or Hitler?" (Febvre, 1953).

This protestation about "truth" as a professional stance against the political and institutional uses of history/memory was exemplary, and fifty years after the situation is a lot more complicated. As Heidrun Friese wrote, comparing the social sciences, since the 1940's, and the political issues today, there is a paradox : "within social theory and philosophy one can observe tendencies to question and ultimately dissolve the concept "identity", whereas social practices emerge and increase in significance that persistently thematise, create and strengthen "identities"" (Friese, 2005). In fact, during the decades of 1980 to 2000, "memory", "identity" and "heritage" have benefitted from nearly unprecedented success in the public discourse, and the idea that one could build an identity without memory/memories is very difficult to sustain - more than after WWII? - We are left with perhaps a lot more difficulties than expected in the 1950's in dealing with "tradition" and "memory", and the call for historians to 'go public' out of a presentism is not helpful enough in the dialogue between the stakeholders and the social scientists (Guldi and Armitage 2014).