

# Memory and Identity: how societies construct and administer their past?

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The main interest of the debate on memory and collective (social) identity is the historical one. The richness of the various continents the participants come from, with their complexity and differences, should permit our debate to take in account the variety not only of the European experience (traditionally linking society, nation and state together), but specially those of the emerging, complex, multicultural societies outside Europe's as well.

The major question put by our specialized theme involves the role of memory (and "cultivated" memory as well) in the historical constitution of social identity. Mainly in multicultural societies, the identity issues have taken an important position in the agenda of discussions. The question of identity by assimilation, negation, transformation of done inheritance or experienced (positive or negative) contacts is a major issue. The self-affirmation trend of groups and/or entire societies is often treated under literary, ethnological, anthropological and political points of view. Many so-called contemporary "affirmative actions" have interfered with the practical aspects of social life – and with their consequences for the way people construct and administer their understanding/explaining the(ir) past – in the last decades. The political and anthropological issues are widely known and discussed. This discussion entered more and more intensively the field of historiography. We consider now the role of history in the constitution of individual identity (historical consciousness) and social/collective identity (both the mention of historical roots of "people", "cast", "clan", etc., and the use of historical memory, remembrance, etc. and its content as an argument to sustain the specificity of

this or this society or community on the long, middle or short run) as a reflected historical (re-)construction.

The power of identity is an acknowledged factor of life. Its importance is repeatedly asserted. Many specialists (mainly in the sociology and in the anthropology) but also – in an increasing way – historians have turned themselves to this question. The world in which we live, the lives we have in it, the way we consider time – past, present and future – are being deeply influenced by the conflicting trends of universalisation of experience and reflection and identity – personal or collective.

New forms of social organization reveal the strong degree of globality that is diffusing throughout the world. The traditional frame of culture and institutions are being rapidly transformed, creating new cultures, producing here wealth and there poverty, inducing innovation, and hope, but at the same time acting unmercifully towards weak society's groups and instilling despair. It is indeed a new world that has been produced since World War II. We experience, in the last twenty five years, the widespread surge of powerful expressions of collective identity that challenge globalisation and cosmopolitanism on behalf of cultural singularity and people's control over their lives and environment. These expressions are multiple, highly diversified, following the contours of each culture, and of historical sources of formation of each identity.

Identity is people's source of meaning and experience, as Ankersmit's contribution stresses. We know of no people without names, no languages or cultures in which some manner of distinctions between self and other, we and they, are not made. The founding act of self-definition is also done in contrast to 'root-experiences' that could be very remote in a almost sacral way – as Kumbhojkar analyses in the case of the Vedas – but also more recent although equally important, like the Holocaust for Germans and Jews (Rüsen, Zimmermann) or the war for Australians (Beaumont). Self-knowledge – always a construction no matter how much it feels like a discovery – is never altogether separable from claims to be known in specific ways by others, like Aguirreazkuenaga stresses it in the case of the Basque people.

Identity may be understood as 'process of construction of meaning on the basis of a cultural attribute, or related set of cultural attributes, that is/are given priority over other sources of meaning', as proposed by Manuel Castells. As Castells remembers, identity is to be distinguished from social roles. Identity

is an integrative source of meaning, because the process of self-construction and individuation that it involves. 'Meaning' has to be conceived as the symbolic identification by an individual and by social actors of the sense of his/their past. The process of identification may also be a process of attribution of sense, on the basis of lived experiences or through the cultural assumption of inherited experiences inside or outside the social group one belongs to. Meaning is organized around a founding identity, an identity that frames the others and is supposed to be self-sustaining across time and space. It is no difficult matter to agree on the fact that all identities are constructed. The real issue is how, from what, by whom, and for what. The construction of identities uses building materials from many sources: history, geography, biology, productive and reproductive institutions, collective memory and personal fantasies, power apparatus, religious revelations, psychological experiences (traumatic ones, personal and collective, long lasting or eventually occurring). But individuals, social groups, and societies process all these materials, and rearrange their meaning, according to social determinations and cultural projects that are rooted in their social structure, and in their space/time framework. It is no exaggeration in proposing a first approach understanding of the process of constructing individual or collective identity, in which the operators of the corresponding interpretations and arrangements determine the symbolic of this identity, and its meaning for those identifying with it or placing themselves outside of it. At the first logical step such a construct tends to legitimise traditional identity within the social frame. In a second level it is possible to sketch a self-affirmation 'against' other's identity (as it comes out of Capelato's and Schwarzstein's contribution). A third step combines both aspects of the dialectics of identity and enounces a so-called projected identity, which is linked to the future realization of sense or orientation in society.

The discussion on the manifold comparative approaches to the theme we have to deal with will outskirt how history contributes with important – if not decisive – elements of the dynamic process of identity building.