

On Social Memory.

Memory is the act of remembering, the act of recalling past events. Although the act of remembering is often understood to be an individual act, we are here going to explore memory in its social dimension. We are going to try and understand how societies remember; we shall illustrate this situation by analysing how social memory has operated in the case of District Six, a neighbourhood of Cape Town, in South Africa.

Different types of memories

Connerton (1989) identifies three types of individual memories:

•*Personal memory*: memory claims that take as their objects one's life history. Example: "I woke up this morning at 9"; "I arrived in Paris four days ago".

•*Cognitive memory*: memory knowledge, that is to say remembering a mathematical equation, a poem, the meaning of a word, or the lay-out of a city. Remembering here is independent from the context in which we learned for the first time.

•*Habit-memory*: remembering how to read or write, how to ride a bicycle, how to wear a shirt, etc. Habit-memory is fully appreciated when one falls victim to amnesia, after an accident or in the case of an Alzheimer's disease's victim: one is unable to conduct a normal life in society. In that sense, habit-memory is a key element of social life; we can see here that cognitive memory can very quickly acquire the social value of habit-memory – the knowledge of how one's city is designed is crucial to knowing one's way home, for example. Understanding of the space in which one lives is at the heart of the feeling of belonging to a city, that is to say to a community through which some of our sense of identity is negotiated and actually established. So these different definitions are not exclusive of each other – It will be useful to keep this fact in mind in the course of this exposé.

Social Memory

Of the many thinkers who have dwelled on the question of memory, it is Maurice Halbwachs who brought to the fore for the first time the idea that the act of remembering itself is mediated through our belonging to a certain social group – be it a religion, a particular sort of kinship, class. His argument is that it is through these social groups that one is able to localise and recall one's memories.

"Groups provide individuals with frameworks within which their memories are localised and memories are localised as a kind of mapping" Connerton, p37

"What binds together recent memories is not the fact that they are contiguous in time but rather that they form part of a whole ensemble of thoughts common to a group, to the groups with which we are in relationship at present or have been in some connection in the recent past" Connerton, p 36

“Memory is retained through a community of interests and thoughts” Connerton, p37

When one remembers, it very often depends on the context in which one finds oneself to be. This is to say that the act of remembering, although dealing with the past, remains almost entirely dependent on the present. That is why the study of social memory would be incomplete if the process of transmission of the memories is not studied in the meantime.

Memory and history

The main difference between memory and historical discourse is this: history, as a science, obeys a certain methodology. The key rule of this methodology consists in reconstructing past events on the basis of traces: a letter from a soldier during World War I, a Greek inscription in a wall, a piece of clay, etc. From that perspective, historical reconstruction is independent from social memory.

That being said, in situations of totalitarianism, it is in the interest of the regime to refashion the ways in which people have viewed themselves thus far, meaning how people have interacted with their memories as a people. In those situations, the mission of the historian changes, and instead of being preoccupied with methodological procedures, he/she instead acts as the one that is going to uphold those memories. Elie Wiesel, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn were writers in such situations, and their work testifies to these concerns.

The interplay between social memory and history shall frame some of our concerns in understanding the case of District Six and its treatment as an object of remembrance.

The Story of District Six

District Six (hereafter, D6) was a neighbourhood in the city of Cape Town, founded in 1840 when the first municipality of Cape Town divided the city into 12 districts. It was located at the centre of the city, near the harbour. From the start, D6 was a mixed community, made of former slaves (‘Cape Malays’ under apartheid denomination), Indians, Africans, and whites; D6 was a mixed community, though very poor and neglected by the municipality.

So neglected that it had no proper sewage or sanitation facilities. Logically a disease outbreak occurred in 1901; and the bubonic plague epidemic was the pretext for the authorities to remove the African inhabitants of D6 and confine them to the first black township of Cape Town – Uitvlugt, also known as Ndabeni.

In 1948, the National Party won the elections, and came in the first apartheid laws. The Group Areas Act of 1950 separated residence areas according to racial group: there would be white areas, Coloured areas, Indian areas, and African (‘native’ or ‘Bantu’) locations. The cities were exclusively reserved for white people. On behalf of this principle, on the 11th of February 1966, D6 was declared a White Area: this meant that all the people living there would have to be forcibly removed. 60,000 people were relocated to different areas outside the city. The community was destroyed.

District Six and social memory: the Museum

It’s in 1989 that a group of District Sixers (that is, former residents of District Six) decided to create a District Six Museum Foundation, in order to keep alive the memory of their once vibrant community. An actual museum came into existence in 1994, after the huge and unexpected success of an exhibition called Streets, organised by the Foundation.

The founders of the museum explicitly appeal to popular memory as a counter-voice to “the distortions and half-truths which propped up the history of Cape Town and South Africa. As an independent space...[The museum] came into being as a vehicle for advocating social justice, as a space for reflection and contemplation.”(www.districtsix.co.za) As mentioned above, the museum is an initiative of the former District Sixers. They have assigned themselves the task of maintaining the flame of memory alive so that such a traumatic event never occurs again. Here is an instance where social memory places itself above official historical discourse, because of the political situation in the country.

The museum displays pictures of the former inhabitants of District Six; oral testimonies can be heard as well, as they are part of the permanent exhibition. But the central piece of the permanent collection is the map of District Six with all its streets and main landmarks such as shops, churches, mosques. The map is drawn on the floor; former District Sixers come in with their families to show their children where it that they used to live, and what they used to do, where they used to go, telling the story of their life in District Six. It can be very emotional: some people cry, and the stories they have to say are almost always very nostalgic. People talk about the ‘good old days’. Around the map, they recreate *their* District Six – another difference with historical account in that the story they told is a personal one, while historical approaches generally talk to what happened to people as communities, nations, ethnic groups etc. And it is precisely one of the ways in which the District Sixers subvert the discourse of apartheid, for they don’t tell the history of the Coloured in D6, nor that of the Indians, nor of any particular racial group. Rather, they deny these categories in recounting their experience of the place: despite its poverty, lack of hygiene, D6 comes across as a human place, a place in which human beings used to live and interact with each other.

It turns out that visiting District Sixers become part of the museum, in that non ex-residents who are visiting the museum come to them, listen to what they have to say, engage with them in conversation. This museum allows for the re-appropriation by the people of their own past, through the exercise and performance of social memory.

Bibliography

I am heavily indebted to the works of:

Connerton, Paul. 1989. How Societies Remember. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

McEachern, Charmaine. ‘Working with memory: the District Six Museum in the new South Africa’, in Social Analysis, 42 (2), July 1998.

And also to the website of the District Six Museum: www.districtsix.co.za