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Identities and Identifications: Politicized Uses of Collective Identities

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Baltic identities in quest between the competing memory discourses

Abstract

Identity, according to modern social theories, is seen as the product of multiple and competing discourses, among them can be marked out discourses and narratives on historic issues. Identity is sustained by memory. Collective memory about common past is a foundation of group identity. In regard to that, memory represents the way in which national communities incorporate (or exclude) the past into the present to make this past usable for present needs. The memory becomes a space of political struggle. It represents the efforts of different groups to make their version for the basis of national identity. Memories, narratives, and ideology had formed discursive field authorizing subjects to remember or to forget, to take a voice or to be silent regarding specific representations about recent Soviet period. The master narrative in Baltic states has a serious effect on ethnic relations actually dividing the society in two communities of memory – roughly natives and Russian-speakers. Therefore the given memory regime allows reinforcing cultural (linguistic) differences to construct these conflicting ethnic identities. Society may contain powerful communities of memory, so different collective memories are in a play in the field of historic representation. Many of them are rather contesting. It is a work of intellectuals and researchers to find a platform for reconciliation, to conceptualize a common base for integration of society to escape a trap of adversative memories and identities.

Key words: national identity, historic narratives, communities of memory, Latvia.

Introduction

Groups are integrated on the basis of their collective memory (Halbwachs, 1992), and collective identities are constructed through strategic use of historic narratives and memory discourses. While individuals 'do remembering' the content of memory comes from outside the individual, and rests on different collectives (Olick, 1999). The collectivity like a nation and its identity is constructed and redefined by employing different meanings (Poole, 1999; Wodak et al. 2009). These arguments are vital in analyzing emerging and conflicting identities in the space left by Soviet empire. The decades were passed, however, in many countries the national identity is constantly challenged because of instability of memory discourse which is shaken by entering into public discourse various contesting topics. This is endemic feature of the Baltic states, the Ukraine, and other post-socialist republics. In Latvia because of considerable amount of settlers from former Soviet countries both the politics and the civic sphere are generating conflicts on citizenship issues due controversial historic understandings.

Here we turn to the assumption that nations can not be described just as political constructs, but also as systems of cultural representations (Bhabha 1990, Hall 1996, Guibernau and Hutchinson, 2001). What is a main frontline between conflicting "grand narratives" which splits society into communities of memory; and what kind of politicized identities it produces? Politics of memory may escalate contradictions among different linguistic (connected with ethnicity) and mnemonic (related to commemoration) communities. The current issue for researchers and experts in the field of social integration is a question of how to draw together distinctive communities of memory in spite of conflicting historical representations.

Forging national narratives

The breakdown of the Soviet Union resulted in its falling apart in fifteen pieces – new and re-established republics with they own path to liberty and state building. After the crash of empire the considerable part of so-called Soviet citizens found themselves somehow in a "foreign" country. Under the communist rule The Baltic

states - Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia - were among those countries where people have had come from different parts of Soviet Union to live and work, and now they are minorities. Although their status changed rather fundamentally many of these workers and their descendants remained in the Baltics after independence¹. Their history and continued presence in renewed states has become the topic of political and public discussions on citizenship, integration, identity, education, and language policy in each respective state even if in different extent. These questions quickly caught the attention of many researchers and we can just refer to almost classic works of R. Brubaker (1996) and D. Laitin (1998) though they have been quite seriously discussed, and some others (Smith etc, 1998).

After the collapse of Soviet regime we were witnessing real revolution in *memoryscapes* of former Soviet states and countries of Warsaw pact. Every country revisited its relationships with history, they raised new memory cultures, and new remembrance practices transformed collective memory. In the beginning of 1990-s after re-establishment of independence there was a necessity to shake down soviet historiography and to rewrite the history according to the needs of new state ideology. To the forefront is brought excavation and commemoration of tragic events of the past time – there are museums of occupation, centres for documentation of totalitarian crimes, memorials of victims and so on.

We can admit that on one hand there were liberation of repressed recollections (of independence, occupation, deportations etc.), on other hand each nation are experiencing its own kind of amnesia regarding particular questions of Soviet-life experience. Such is the process of the forging new national historic “grand narrative” which can function as cultural reference along which community members might position their personal experience. That narrative was demanded by the state to draw a distance from Soviet past as something accidental for Baltic states, and to detach itself from soviet heritage to imagine the nation in terms of new collective identity.

There were also a social demand to restore and to save memories which were not sympathetic to soviet regime and thus were repressed, expelled from textbooks and milieu. It was time of awakening and of popular history. And in our endeavour too we have put in front silenced voices – The National Oral History project (NOH) was opened at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology in University of Latvia, and it has been financed by the Science Council of Latvia since 1992. The aim of the NOH project was and still is to explore the lives of the Latvia’s people in their real social and historical contexts and to record the memories of older generation whose life experience covers the most important changes and historical events of Latvian recent history. Life-stories are our main source for historical, cultural and sociological studies. There are approximately 4000 audio-recorded life-stories in the collection at the present. Collected stories range from recollections of pre-war republic, establishment of soviet rule, forced collectivization and resistance in forests, refugee movement and then prolonged exile, memories of those who were target of persecutions².

The making of state’s historic image is a part of national identity construction, and it is performed through certain politics of memory. The nation may be approached in terms of “mnemonic community”, as B. Misztal said “its continuity relies on the vision of a suitable past and a believable future. In order to create a required community’s history and destiny, which in turn can be used to form the representation of the nation, the nation requires a usable past” (Misztal, 2003). Usually there is one main dominant model of historic representations within the state. All official manifestations concerning the history of such countries like Baltic states might be called *Grand narrative of Resistance and Suffering* (see, Hackmann and Marko, 2010; Velmet, 2011). That narrative is very sensitive, and any questions about it may be perceived as attack on national identity and therefore even on the sovereignty of the state. These established interpretations of history can be defined “official memory”, and it reflects the power of certain groups in society to describe the past according to their present needs and interests. In democratic societies, however, it is in constant contest with other more or less salient versions of the past.

We can distinguish several contentious themes concerning the recent past that regularly appear in the public sphere, in the mass media and political agendas in Latvia nowadays. There are some main historical views or narratives which split “mnemonic community”, and the sharpest among them are:

- The narrative of aggressive occupation of the independent Latvian state versus the peaceful incorporation into the Soviet Union (in 1940 and 1945);

¹ The proportion of „indigenous ethnic” in respective country is following – Lithuanians app. 84 per cent, Estonians app. 69 per cent, and Latvians app. 60 per cent of entire population. For details, see Muiznieks, el al. (2013).

² More information can be found www.dzivesstasts.lv/en/default.htm

- Latvian Legionnaires – freedom fighters or Nazi criminals? The Red army – liberators or occupants?
- The extent of collaboration with the Soviet regime on the one hand, and more or less active resistance against an alien power on the other hand.

Studies of collective memory assume that remembering is a highly contested and negotiated process in the public sphere and that it is driven by the need to create an exploitable representation of the past. The master narratives are a kind of template for interpretation of the history to give a shape for collective memory (Wertsch, 2002). And it is used by various groups which are interested to maintain their particular identity.

Mnemonic praxis (commemoration, remembrance, and oblivion) is not uniform in society, and it differs from group to group in Latvia, too. In that case we can employ the notion of “communities of memory” that describe groups and their boundaries which are formed because of different views and opinions regarding the recent past under the Soviet regime. It is especially vivid in the public manifestations near one or another site of memory, for instance, in Latvia these are the Freedom Monument and the Monument to Soviet Soldiers.

Hegemonic narratives, identities and counter-memories

In pluralistic societies different groups may put forward conflicting versions of the past and fight for their recognition. Each project aiming towards memory culture can face a variety of counter-movements which could be called "counter-memory", "informal memory", "memory of the opposition" etc. And it shows the potentials of the ideas of Michel Foucault on the "counter-memory" as a form of resistance to the dominant complex of power-knowledge.

Manipulation of collective memory are the most effective strategies in the field of "identity politics", allowing to create, destroy, or to correct one or other images of the past, thereby changing the image of themselves and the other for respective community. The construction of national identity has to do with delineating one's group from what the group is not, that is, with the creation of in-groups and out-groups (Wodak et al. 2009). And one way a group can delineate itself from another is through its understanding of the past.

To comprehend the memory culture in Latvia, and to distinct divisions in society concerning identity and historical narratives we propose to intersect it with construction of national identity. It can be pictured as a chart or matrix representing social memory in Latvia and various discourses around that.³

To illustrate different (competing and in some ways overlapping) discourses we can put different stories (templates, clusters of representations) on a dimension of narrative. This (horizontal) narrative continuum in Latvia on the one side comprises discourses on trauma (deportations, repressions etc.), but on the opposite side the discourses of heroism (devotion, sacrifice etc.) can be located. This “narrative dimension” is similar to “schematic narrative template” described by Wertsch (2002) as an abstract, generalized form underlying diverse narratives.

Memory becomes field of conflicts especially when it is politically linked with cultural characteristics, and tends to be ethnically framed. Keeping in mind the ethnic structure of Latvia population we need another (vertical) dimension which stands for preferable national identity construction. Identities are expressed throughout narratives, and some historic narratives are most likely having been attached to particular identities. Specific national identity requires particular narratives about the national past. We know distinction between two types of nationalism – so called ‘civic’ or ‘territorial’ nationalism, characteristic of Western countries such as Britain, the United States, France, and an ‘ethnic’ nationalism more found in Eastern countries. In Brubaker words it shapes two forms of nations – whether it is a ‘territorial community’ (where political factor is of importance) or it can be ‘community of descent’ (where national identity is primarily made of cultural components). It rests on different discourses and produces different kind of narratives.

Thus we got various areas to classify discourses on history and identity mentioned above as contentious themes in public discussions. For instance, there is an area for ethnically (Latvian) based trauma narratives, and an area for heroic narrative on Great (Russian) Patriotic war. These two are tending to split the nation because ‘ethnic element’ is strongly present there. Therefore we need to accent more ‘civic oriented’ discourses, for

³ To be presented in a slideshow at the conference.

instance, those linked to narratives on popular resistance both to Bolshevik and Nazi regimes. These fields altogether shows the main features of memory cultures in Latvia and other post-Soviet countries. In deeper study this rather schematic design of most visible historic discourses may be confronted with reality which in fact consists of various “grey zones” of mixed memories, identities and representations (Holocaust, post-Stalinism “normalization”, Roma minority etc.).

Conclusion

The link between memory and identity is well describe saying both “depend upon each other since not only is identity rooted in memory but also what is remembered is defined by the assumed identity” (Gillis 1994, 3). New post-socialistic identities tend to be embedded in specific dominant discourses concerning memory. It means that discourse states rules on what is to be included or excluded from memory; it guides what is supported by community or not. People in Latvia still have very personal memories of Soviet time and certain problems to reconcile them with present national identity which, as it was shown, is tied with specific master narratives.

Popular discourse on national identity comprises historical representations, myths, and narratives about the enslavement of Latvians by Germans, Swedes, and Russians, then the national awakening and the fight for freedom, followed by a destructive occupation and heavy suffering along with constant resistance to Soviet power. In my mind, this version of national history expressed in a grand historic narrative has two downsides: it reinforces the discourse on trauma and largely portrays Latvia as a mono-ethnic country. For Russians and other minorities there is little and marginal space or even negative representation due to the sensitive perception of the occupation that caused massive immigration, endangering the persistence of the Latvian nation. Although the centralization of memory around the official Grand narrative and traumatic experiences unites particular groups, it also simultaneously splits society at large. Discourse is never established as a monolith entity (Fairclough, 1992); within each society can be found more or less salient alternative movements – public communication that represents counter-discourses and abandoned narratives which can be approached by the means of oral history.

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