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Identities and Identifications: Politicized Uses of Collective Identities

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Author: Kristina Khutsishvili, PhD candidate, Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies, Pisa, Italy, k.khutsishvili@santannapisa.it.

Collective Memory, Collective Dreaming, and Personal Narrative Identity

The article is framing the issues of collective memory and collective dreaming and their impact on the narrative identity. While collective memory studies propose quite a clear definition of the faculty, collective dreaming language is less widespread. Collective memory, being related to substantial knowledge or experience is in a way contrasted by collective dreams – reconstructing and over-constructing the past, having less and less common with its factual reality.

Collective dreams include a spectrum of myths false memories, elements related to the past in its ideal sense, past as it “should” had been, but presented as an ultimate reality.

Identity construct is analyzed through its narrative presentation, narrative identity. Myths and false memories are interpreted as a “source” of narrative identity on individual level, following Charles Taylor’s corpus. Collective narrative identity is scrutinized through the lens of imaginary and “amnesias”, following Benedict Anderson’s contribution.

The case provided for analysis is constructed around empire-oriented post-Soviet discourse. This discourse being inspired by Soviet Union past, consists of various metaphors and stamps. Only some of them are related to collective memory faculty, while others symbolize imaginary Empire construct being a product of dreaming about the past on a base of false memories and myths presenting it in idealized and embellished way.

Key words: collective memory, collective dreaming, narrative identity, imaginary.

Introduction

In the essay “Identities: Fragments, Frankness” (2015) Jean-Luc Nancy gives a “negative” description of identity: “An identity is not something one enters, nor is it something one dresses oneself in, and one cannot with one (assuming there is any sense in treating it as an entity or a figure) without at the same time modifying it, modalizing it, perhaps transforming it. Identities are never purely stable, nor simply plastic. They are always metastable” (pp.10-11); “But identity is not a figure. An identity is something more subtle, more delicate, and more evasive. Its force lies in displacing, in changing figures” (p.11).

Contemporary identity studies are justifying identity formation as an open-ended process, and identity itself as a “product” of the influence of different and sometimes competing sources.

Individual identity can be defined following Charles Taylor's tradition, based on a contradiction of the Self and the Other, while collective or group identity may be viewed from Benedict Anderson's position of collective imaginary.

Relation between personal identity and collective identity in political philosophy studies are not simplified to pure aggregation, as it is typically done in, for instance, economics. Marc Auge provides a line between them through the "otherness": "Representations of private otherness, in the systems studied by ethnology, place the need for it at the very heart of individuality, at a stroke making it impossible to dissociate the question of collective identity from that of individual identity" (p.19).

Moreover, while individual and personal identity terms are usually assessed as synonyms, group and collective identity sometimes are differentiated through contextualization – when collective term is put inside authoritarian context and becomes associated with collectivism and certain aggregation.

Although this peculiarity of the meaning can be observed in literature, it is not a mainstream interpretation, but is useful to be taken into account. In this article we assess "collective" and "group" as synonyms in identity scholarship. Another point that should be underlined concerns presentation of identity as a discourse or narrative. It does not mean that we provide an equation of identity being fully presented as a discourse or narrative. However, written or verbal presentation can describe identitarian peculiarities to a certain extent. We do not provide a precise distinction between discourse and narrative in this work, although discourse seem to have a more comprehensive and broader context.

Memories and Myths in Identity Theorizing

Imaginary and imagination is not something necessary opposite to real. Following the concept of Kathleen Lennon's "Imagination and Imaginary" (2015) imagination is not something being in the opposition with the real, but something that is crucial for how the world is made real for us. The imaginary is not a realm set up in opposition to the real. It is found in perception, as well as in dreams and fantasies, in works of art (p.2). This logical implication between imagination, imaginary and the process of dreaming is not thoroughly discussed in contemporary identity works. One of the possible "stands here is to compare processes of remembering and dreaming, as well as their "products" – memories and dreams, in broader identitarian context.

While Taylor (1989) focuses on personal, or individual identity, and Anderson (2006) gives an imaginary estimation to the nation and collective, or group, identity, imaginary may be related to

the “Self” too, and example here is the “imaginary selves” Lennon’s concept, where the imaginary of the self is a dimension within the experience of myself in the world (p.102). Lennon appeals to Taylor in social imaginary theorizing as a way “people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations... common understandings that make possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy” (p.74).

“In fact, we are all in the same boat, – writes Nancy. – We are floating on an ocean of identity-forming materials that nothing seems any longer to be able to crystallize into “identities” – which, moreover, need not be national, and which could include nation and culture, religion, art, and language” (2015).

In “Myths and Memories of the Nation” Benedict Smith (1999) provides such a definition of the nation: “a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members” (p.8). He takes the ethno-symbolic stand on issues of contemporary identity scholarship. A central theme of historical ethno-symbolism, in his opinion, is the relationship between shared memories and collective identities. More explicitly, memory, almost by definition, is integral to identity, and the cultivation of shared memories is essential to the survival and destiny of such collective identities (p.8). This approach does not essentially contradict with Anderson’s or even Taylor’s stand points: while Anderson “imagines” nation as a political community, Taylor elaborates sources of the Self, modern personal identity, using the language of the moral philosophy, that can be expanded and specified to memories and myths, as well as symbols in general, that appear throughout the book.

Narrative related to Ukrainian conflict

Theorizing identity on post-Soviet space includes a so-called bifurcation point of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Passing this point, identitarian ideological sources has disappeared leaving empty spaces in identity narrative. These empty spaces became open for a competition of new sources - among them traditions, religion, memories, myths. It is possible to think that stronger source fills an empty space, however, competition itself may be tough and may not lead to having an ultimate winner. In this case further identitarian shifts are inescapable, and competition itself may be frustrating on both levels of individual and collective identity. An example here can be a competition of religious and secular identities: while first one may or not be supposed to last, second ones may be constructed through the use of religion, and "othering", or may not necessary

use religion in their narratives at all. Religion though is only one example of the "sources" of identity on post-Soviet space and in Russia in particular.

Understanding identity as collective imaginary leads to several points of the Russian discourse analysis. Two main vectors can be underlined. First is related to the Russian Empire past – with the tsar, deep Orthodox traditions, inclusion into the broader European context through the Russian literature and art, certain openness and pluralism. Second is strictly based on the Soviet past – scientific achievements, competitiveness on this level (space, hard sciences), Cold War, belonging to the super power, empire ambitions, and so on.

Rationally and historically contradicting with each other, both of these vectors surprisingly merged in a contemporary Russian discourse. Moreover, the factual component became secondary opening a space for diverse imaginaries, mythologized versions of the past. Collective memories as an identitarian source shared their impact with “dreams”, products of collective dreaming about great empire – in both its variations – past.

From the Taylorian perspective on a personal identity related to contrasting the Self with the Other Russian-Ukrainian case is an example of alienation. “Us” – as savers, missionaries and “them” – as aggressors, traitors, Nazis and enemies. At a certain point of conflict these elements of narrative became well seen from the both of sides, that can be theorized not only through othering/alienation relations, but also as an example of Schmitt’s friend or foe concept.

Bottici (2010) relates division on “us” and “them” to imaginary estimation (p.2). This approach is arguable, although is applicable to the current Russian identitarian narrative.

This empire narrative declined the possibility of existence of autonomous Ukrainian identity, and somehow brought to the conversation particular episodes from the historical context, such as actions of Stepan Bandera during the World War II, and linked it with contemporary context of Ukrainian revolution. Simultaneously old Soviet vocabulary has appeared: suddenly, out of nowhere and without any particular preparation, media streaming spread such words as “traitors”, “enemies”. This vocabulary had a special historical context that is well-known on post-Soviet space and is included in study programmes of the Russian history courses and literature courses stating from the high school. However, the re-appearance of vocabulary concerned also a young generation, people whose memories were not related to Soviet past and even perestroika. This interesting phenomenon needs further reflections. While some scholars, such as Marianne Hirsch, research on transmission of memories to future generations, here is the case when not memories itself became transmitted, but separately vocabulary without a base of reflections and memory’s

complexity itself – totalitarian past peculiarities stayed behind while mythologized details became an essential part of narrative.

This is a fundamental sign of imaginary construction, with its “golden age” immanent implication. At this point it would be reasonable to assess not only collective memories but also collective myths as possible sources of group, or collective, identity construction. Such myths, if contrasting them with memories, are tightly related to the process of dreaming, collective dreaming, in Russian case concentrated on empire reflections. Imaginary empire goes as a red line in identitarian narrative since the beginning of Ukrainian conflict. An interesting point here is that approximately at the same time rhetoric of empire greatness has appeared in identitarian narratives on other spaces, with Turkey as one of the examples. If we look at the vocabulary, we can observe re-appearance of the old words related to the Ottoman empire past – vocabulary, streams of public discourse, frame a process of collective dreaming about great empire past, “golden age”. In Smith’s view the memory of a golden age is closely linked to a sense of collective destiny (p.264). While in Russian case this destiny is tightly linked with a “special way” between East and West, Orthodox Christianity and memories about the victory in Great Patriotic War, Turkey’s case is based on Islam, traditions and great victories of the powerful past. In both cases dominant narrative stream somehow tries to incorporate competitive narratives – pro-Soviet discourse incorporating religious elements, while tsarist empire is honoured for cultural achievements and values - at the same time not denying its place in broader European context.

In 1993 Samuel Huntington’s “The Clash of Civilizations?” was published as an article in “Foreign Affairs”, presenting a view inside the Western perspective. Debate raised by this article, including, probably, the most emotional Edward Said’s response, has not substantially covered the issue of post-Soviet area. However, if we speak about the Russian Empire, the idea of being a territory where the clash of civilizations is literally happening – was articulated at least a century earlier, by efforts of so-called intelligentsia, a non-translatable term, not fully matching with a category of intellectuals. Since the collapse of another empire – Soviet Union – independent Ukraine has been a clear geographical and historical example of the position “in between”.

Anderson’s notion of a nation as an imagined political community (1991) can play a role of lens in application to Huntington’s writing. Ukraine’s geographical and historical position may be interpreted as a space where two collective imaginaries are overlapping each other. Then, in a sense, Ukrainian conflict reflects a confrontation between these imaginaries and their supporters. In a narrative part, since the beginning of Ukrainian conflict, this contradiction was presented by tough

statements about “behindhand”, “vatnik” East – mostly coming from the West of Ukraine, and “nationalist” or even “fascist” West, coming from the Eastern part and Russia.

The clash of civilizations in its imaginary estimation has not been actively scrutinized by scholars – however, it seems a proper explanation of the Ukrainian conflict. Carl Schmitts’ “friend” or “foe” idea may describe a peculiar role of Russia in these dramatic events. A competition of imaginaries was not coming to a feasible result through the years, with none of the sides being an ultimate winner (Viktor Yanukovych, the president voted highly by the Eastern part of Ukraine, have not succeed, as well as pro-Western part president Yushchenko), forming a spare space that is in a sense related to Lacan’s interpretation of trauma, that further started to be “filled” by an image of “foe”.

Conclusion

Post-Soviet space theorizing implies both collective memories and myths as sources of identitarian narrative. Imaginary Empire as an outcome of the process of collective dreaming is very well seen in streams of contemporary Russian narrative since the beginning of the Ukrainian conflict.

The important peculiarities of Ukrainian situation contrasting it to Huntington’s examples are those connected with complexity of so called post-Soviet identity, where religion and traditions for a post-Soviet man are not necessarily perceived as something that is granted, but only as a kind of identity theater, options that can be taken or refused, and both choices will be reasonable. Being in a situation when you can choose from one of the two distinct traditions – such as monarchy with its aristocratic attributes, and Soviet past, with its “power”; from the cultural belonging to the West or special way, or even isolation – with both options being identitarian narratives in different times, and both transmitted through the shared memories and myths – opens the space for conflicts and a certain emptiness that needs to be filled by an ultimately “winning” answer, but is not.

Through this lens Russian-Ukrainian conflict is not a conflict between East and West, it is a conflict of imaginaries, where there are not strictly determined ethnic or cultural sides, and everything is mixed. This is a conflict of identity’s future projections – based just on a choice – choice of the one of competing imaginaries.

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