

Memory and identity as social constructs

We know who we are since we remember whom we were. That is the way in which we can describe relationship between social memory and social identity. Self-awareness of whom we are is one of the existential needs of both individuals and social groups. Individual as well as collective feeling of security is conditioned by how strong is our conviction of who we are. Jakub Pieńkowski and Radosław Zenderowski following Jan Szmyd and Barbara Szacka explain this correlation in the following way:

Answering the question: who are we? is preconditioned by the character of an attitude towards our own past (whom we were?). According to Jan Szmyd, a history of particular community, common experience, imagined mainly literature (less documented by critical historical investigations), "shape profoundly collective consciousness, character and psychological type, cultural and national peculiarities, ethos and life styles, and in consequence a feeling of collective identity." While analyzing particular cases of national identities one needs to emphasize that irrespectively of how distant and rich a history of a given national group is, accentuating own past and constructing a its meaning is a common phenomenon. Collective memory in times of dynamic and ever changing political, cultural and economic relations seems to be more and more important as a certain point of reference, a kind of 'anchor', something which is not a subject of arbitrary change and questioning. Unlike the future and the question of 'whom we wish to be?', the past is 'collected material' and not so much a postulated, uncertain one⁸⁵.

The influence of memory on identity construction has been recently one of the major leads within social science broadly understood, as well as the so called historical policy aimed at constructing a certain model of national identity in the context of globalization of culture and renationalization of international politics. This motive is summarized by Paulina Rychlewska, who analyses the role of tradition in an interplay between memory and national/local identity, referring to research conducted among others by Marian Kempny, Andrzej Szpociński, Jan Szmyd and Joanna Kurczewska:

Tradition constitutes a mechanism of enduring a culture, it guarantees cyclical character of structures, patterns of behaviour and thinking. It bridges the past

⁸⁵ J. Pieńkowski, J. Zenderowski, *Wyszehrad i jego pamięci zbiorowe, Visegrad.info Internet Magazine*, p. 2; www.visegrad.info (accessed: 12.09.2015).

and the present. This interplay between the present and the past is an opportunity for survival of culture (...). This canon being a backbone of identity tides up subsequent generations 'safeguarding their identification around historical destiny of nation' (...). Tradition is in a way „a power of the past over subsequent generations living within their realms [since] (...), habits imposed by tradition become instincts” (...). Regional culture determining both individual and generational beliefs leads to ever stronger sense of belonging of an individual to society as well as its sense of independence (Szulżycka, 2000). Drawing from patterns of tradition enables both, individual and collective identity construction (...). If these kind of bonds disappear 'a society (...) – a kind of long-lasting reality (...) disappears as well' (...). Consequently, we can include widely shared pictures and knowledge of social events from the past (subjectively perceived and valued) into category of collective memory (...). That is why when answering a question 'whom we are?' we need to relate ourselves to the past (whom we were?)⁸⁶.

Memory and identity belong to the canon of social and human sciences in the sense that they denote multiplicity of meanings and interpretations that is why they attract attention of sociologists, anthropologists, historians and political scientists who try to grasp the meaning that is attached to these notions both as a result of social interactions and scientific investigation.

Jacek Nowak offers an interesting anthropological conceptualization of the very sense and scope of collective memory as related to social identity construction:

I argue that memory constitutes foundation of individual and social identity. I believe that each individual and collective identity is retained by remembering and forgetting. Self-perception and social consciousness, which enable us to identify ourselves with the group, are constructed on the basis of our memory precisely. Memory is not in-printed in human mind as copy or document of daily experience. Instead, it is rather its interpretation.

This means that our memory is constructed and that identity depends on the character of narrative connecting the past, the present and the future. This is related to transformation of existing memory as well as its deformations and selective forgetting and remembering. The memory of the past is being permanently adjusted to our identity and identity processing is contextualized to social class, ethnicity or power relations, which in turn determine what is being remembered and what is being forgotten by who and for what purpose. Thus, I believe that identity and collective memory are social constructs. I argue that we are overwhelmed by memory. On the other hand, social world cannot exist without memory. Social groups, families, friends, governments and all sorts of institutions cannot relate to each other without memory just like they would not be able to cooperate with one another. Beginning with simple daily tasks and

⁸⁶ P. Rychlewska, *Różnice w pamięci zbiorowej mieszkańców warszawskiego Młynowa i podwarszawskiego Pomiechówka*, "Kultura i Historia", no. 16/2009, p. 1.

ending up with complex problems we face, we rely on our memory in order to know whom we are, what we need to do, what kind of group we belong to, and finally, how we should establish our relationship with one another. Remembering is constant and dynamic process, which becomes an arena of permanent struggle of our memories. Remembering is also selective. It is based on either on subjective images or intersubjective collective discourse⁸⁷.

In order to grasp the full complexity of dynamic relationship between memory and social identity it seems essential to differentiate between two fundamental forms of memory, which in anthropological and sociological perspective are referred to as generational and cultural memory. This categorization is frequently associated with works of Jan Assmann⁸⁸.

According to Assmann generational memory is a result of personal messaging and subjective experience being passed to next generations. Cultural memory, on the other hand, is an outcome of memory institutionalization in the form of a ritual and symbolization. Cultural memory is, in this sense, more enduring as compared to generational memory since it plays the role of a foundation of collective memory integrating social groups such as nations organized in the form of state⁸⁹. As Jelena Jerochina explains this problem:

Assmann defines 'generational memory' in terms of a modus of biographical memories connected to direct experience, which comes out of natural communication processes. Unlike generational memory, which is accessible to all, cultural memory is not possible out of the figure of the carrier (a spiritual leader, a fortuneteller in traditional societies or an expert in modern societies). Cultural memory is placed in the modus of foundational memory connected to the source, pre-existence and that is why it has mythological roots. It requires an official tradition (handbooks, monuments). It is based on constitutive systems of signs (myths, rituals, habits, ceremonies). It is petrified in institutional forms: public holidays, anniversaries, anthems, national symbolism⁹⁰.

Barbara Szacka explains this phenomenon in similar vein by emphasizing metaphorical character of cultural memory construction process:

People do not remember what has happened one hundred years ago (...) in the same way they remember what has happened in their lives a few years ago or a few days ago. They 'know' about it from somewhere. However, as this knowledge is related to the past, which is framed by our memory, it is legitimate and useful to describe it in terms of 'memory'. However, this description has mainly metaphorical meaning⁹¹.

⁸⁷ J. Nowak, *Spoleczne reguly pamietania. Antropologia pamieci zbiorowej*, Kraków: Nomos 2011, p. 12.

⁸⁸ See: J. Assmann, *Pamiec kulturowa. Pismo, zapamietywanie i polityczna tozsamosc w cywilizacjach starozytnych*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego 2008.

⁸⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁹⁰ J. Jerochina, *Pamiec i wiedza o przeszlosci jako formy bytowania swiadomosci historycznej*, "Sensus Historiae", vol. XI, no. 2/2013, p. 63.

⁹¹ B. Szacka, *O pamieci spolecznej*, "Znak", no. 5/1995, cited after: M. Saryusz-Wolska, *Pamiec zbiorowa i kulturowa. Wspolczesna perspektywa niemiecka*, Kraków: Universitas 2009, p. 18.

This interplay is used especially in research on interpretations of history of European nations⁹². The metaphor of God's playground, for example, was adopted by Norman Davies to explain historical meaning of Polish reason of state defined in terms of geopolitical determinism – an imperative to struggle against two imperial powers, Germany and Russia, building their hegemony in Europe by expanding at expense of Poland since 18th century⁹³.

Metaphorical character of cultural memory found its special reflection in Pierre Nora's concept of *lieu de mémoire*. Innovative character of Nora's concept relied on explanation of correlation between symbolization of phenomena and cultural processes within *lieu de mémoire* and social identity construction. The very understanding of *lieux de mémoire* in Nora's perspective goes beyond designation of the place as material object. As he clarifies:

My project offered in-depth analysis of 'places' – in each and every meaning of the word – where collective memory of the French nation would be condensed, mirrored or crystalized instead of being a subject of chronological and linear research⁹⁴.

An interesting application of Nora's concept in contemporary research on collective identity construction of European nations and the impact of *lieux de mémoire* is a debate on the *lieux de mémoire* of the First World War. Łukasz Gałuska in an interview with prominent historians: Jacek Purchla, Andrzej Chwalba and Robert Traba this question finds its reflection:

Searching for Central European *lieux de mémoire* related to this war we immediately find the two of them – Sarajevo and Trianon. The first is already completed. The place where the war begun finds its reflection the city under siege in the 1990s. Some even tend to argue that history of Europe in the 20th century is a history from Sarajavo of 1914 until Sarajevo during the Yugoslavian civil war. Trianon, on the other hand, is still an open narrative, especially for Hungarians who consider it to be a major national trauma. What are the other important *lieux de mémoire* related to the First World War for Central Europeans? Robert Traba: Versailles. It is the Treaty of Versailles that opened up a room for the Polish independence. I believe that a historian should not pretend to be a prophet. This is not what is intend here, but observing what is happening within the process of memory construction – although I do not like to overuse this notion very much – or in historical policies of Central European countries, except for Serbia, I have the impression that memory of the First World War has been marginalized to such an extent, that even its one hundred anniversary does not change very much. For those in their thirties or forties, the years 1989/1990 were what influenced their historical memory the most⁹⁵.

⁹² N. Davies, *Boże igrzysko. Historia Polski*, Kraków: Znak 2010.

⁹³ *Ibidem*.

⁹⁴ P. Nora, *Zwischen Geschichte und Gedächtnis*, 1998, cited after: M. Saryusz-Wolska, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

⁹⁵ *Wojna i pamięć*, Z profesorami Andrzejem Chwalbą, Jackiem Purchlą i Robertem Trabą rozmawia Łukasz Gałusek, 10 HERITO, no.16(3)/2014, p. 19.

One needs to emphasize at this point that it is *lieu(x) de mémoire* of the Second World War rather than the First World War, that constitutes the backbone of collective identity of contemporary Poles. Katyń and Monte Cassino cemeteries have permanently been present in memory discourse in contemporary Poland. Martyrology of Poles fighting 'for your freedom and ours' is a key motive to understand specific character of the Polish memory discourse as set against the background of the memory discourses of other Central European countries. This has been particularly visible in the case of memory of August 1980 mass movement and the symbolism of Gdańsk Shipyard, as well as Solidarity ethos manifestating Polish spirit of freedom, which in Polish collective memory - more than the collapse of the Berlin Wall - contributed to the Fall of Nations of 1989.

It is worth emphasizing here that Central European nations differ substantially in the way they apply their lieux de mémoire in national identity construction.

The research conducted by Jakub Pieńkowski and Radosław Zenderowski on the impact of reconstruction of *lieux de mémoire* for collective identity construction of the Visegrad Group countries, seems to be of high value⁹⁶. Contrary to common understanding and the various myths depicting assumed similarities of national characteristics of Poles, Hungarians, Czechs and Slovaks, we see rather deep differences both in terms of the form, contents and meaning of *lieux de mémoire* and their impact for collective identity construction in the Visegrad region. It is also important to note that stereotyping and mythological reasoning are still present in mutual perception and communication of the Visegrad region countries. As authors of this research argue

If names of streets reflect something, which could be described in terms of 'national character' it is culture and art, which seem the only serious 'common denominator' even though we may find certain significant differences resulting from different national histories. Findings presented here illustrate how dynamic the process of transformation of the very hierarchy of social life categories has been elevating some and downgrading others.

Those categories do not determine our attitudes completely. They only identify places from which we perceive each other. They finally enable us to identify obstacles in international communication and avoid misunderstandings. Understanding historical construction of a given collective memory we should be less inclined to irrational behaviour, misinterpretation and stereotypical judgements⁹⁷.

The differences with regards to national character or more precisely national identity of the Visegrad region nations are to be seen in national anthems understood in terms of Pierre Nora's *lieux de mémoire*.

Jakub Pieńkowski and Radosław Zenderowski point at the differences of constitutive features of Central European nations states' collective identities by relating to heterogeneity of collective historical experience, and its contemporary meaning. By

⁹⁶ J. Pieńkowski, J. Zenderowski, *op. cit.*

⁹⁷ *Ibidem.* p. 18.

doing so they analyze the national anthem of Poland through conceptual lens of its symbolism and metaphorical meaning. Pieńkowski and Zenderowski emphasize the messianic character and heroism and more specifically the identification of the State with the nation, understood as a community of fate and collective imperative:

The Polish anthem is heroic. It expresses brave character of Poles and their determination to fight for the independence ('by sword'). Poland and Polishness are related here to *genos* and 'human potential' – Poland did not die as we live', as well with *topos* – We cross the Vistula river and the Warta river, we will become Poles." These passages express also ethnic-cultural and politico-civic character of the Polish nation, which seems pretty unique in the scale of the whole Europe. The Polish anthem seems most dynamic among all Visegrad countries anthems⁹⁸.

Unlike the heroism and the imperative for state independence as designated in the Polish national anthem, the Czech national anthem is filled with affirmation of Czech *topos*, understood as daily life joy. In the Czech anthem:

There is no trace of fight or struggle with other nations to maintain national identity as well as a fight for the state territory. It is the beauty of natural landscape that dominates. The Czechness is expressed in mildness, affirmation of the Czech land and natural environment. „The river flows..., the forest whispers..., the flower blossoms.... This *topos* is earthly paradise for Czechs. This anthem is exceptionally mild and optimistic⁹⁹.

The national anthem of Slovakia expresses historical dilemmas of Slovaks in their search for national identity as set against the background of the national history of its neighbours. According to Pieńkowski and Zenderowski:

The national anthem of Slovakia (...) embodies elements typical for Polish and Czech anthems. We find here reference to nature (Tatra Mountains), which is typical for the Czech anthem, however not so much in terms of its mild character but rather in terms of its wild majesty ('Thunder is coming over Tatra Mountains'). Like the Polish anthem, the Slovak anthem calls for national awakening. We need to remember, however, that a passage referring to the need to 'stop them' (meaning thunders over Tatra Mountains) is present only beginning with Slovakian independence. Before independence, this passage was phrased along the lines 'let us stop brothers', which indicates defensive character of Slovak national character. Second part of Slovak anthem requires special attention. Slovakia is portrayed here as 'sleeping beauty', who needs to be awoken for the collective good of Slovaks. The 'sleeping' motive is characteristic for Slovak identity as Slovak identity is considered to be hibernated from Middle Ages until first half of the 19th century. In this sense Slovak national identity was overshadowed by strong national identity of two neighbouring nations – Hungarian nation and Czech nation¹⁰⁰.

⁹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 8.

⁹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 9.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibidem*.

The Hungarian anthem seems to be determined by national trauma of lost greatness. National trauma, specific feeling of historical punishment for historical mistakes made, but also hope for turning over the bad luck card of national history, constitutes the backbone of the Hungarian anthem, which makes it somewhat unique among all Visegrad countries' anthems. As Pieńkowski and Zenderowski argue:

Hungarian anthem unlike other Visegrad countries anthems is overwhelmed by deep sorrow: 'Fate that humiliated Hungarians for so long' as well as 'put down their sorrow, which paralyses them'. There is also a specific invocation to God in Hungarian anthem, a prayer to God for consolation and new opening in national history. Further on, we find references to national glory and pride but still counterbalanced by the motive God's punishment for historical mistakes. Hungarian identity is seen in this perspective as struggle against all odds as well as longing for positive change¹⁰¹.

By way of concluding, it needs to be emphasized that memory and identity have been, and remain closely interwoven constructs of social life, shaping fate of nations both those who have and do not have a political roof for themselves, referring to Gellner's famous metaphor¹⁰². Presently, we observe a certain kind of revival of the very problem of memory and identity among sociologists, anthropologists, historians or political scientists, who try to provide a convincing answer on why it is so important to know who we are, what do we have in common and how we differ. This seems particularly important in times of political, cultural and economic globalization.

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¹⁰¹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰² E. Gellner, *Narody i nacjonalizm*, Warszawa: PWN 1993.

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