

The vague and complex character of collective memory: On *The Collective Memory Reader*

Rosa E. Belvedresi*

Reviewing a *Reader* is always a difficult task. The *Reader* itself is a complex textual object. It presents different stands and articles that have been issued around some subject or topic. At the same time it is an account of the particular constellation that, in the editors' view can be built up about the history and the constitution of the object. Besides these, there is another difficulty, which in this case is explicitly acknowledged by the editors: the complex, diffuse, and multi-dimensional character of the core concept ("collective memory") whose theoretical trajectory they propose to clarify by means of the selection chosen. Thus, the present *Reader* is an expression of the ways that the editors –Olick, Vinistzky-Seroussi, and Levy- consider that the constitution of an academic field of studies –memory studies—can be displayed. This being a field that, even though it feeds on theoretical work from diverse social sciences, has acquired an autonomous status already. As the editors write in the introduction: "we do not disagree that use of term 'memory' –individual or collective- has been imprecise and occasionally profligate" and is often used "to cover phenomena that are not obviously articulated with that term" (35)¹. Also, memory studies, a field whose object is memory, "is still rather a broad one to constitute a coherent field" (40).

Starting with this diagnosis, we can say that this *Reader's* existence is an aid for those of us who include the subject of collective memory in courses and encounter the difficulty of finding a diversity of texts that may display the complexity the concept has acquired in recent years. A virtue of this *Reader* is that it shows the present state of the concept while it also presents a wide selection of testimonies of its long history. Thus, through the selection it can be perceived that studies about collective memory, and the concept itself, are not a result of chance, nor are they recent developments.

The selection can be said to achieve a wide and rich panorama. The reader, however, may be overwhelmed by an excessive number of fragments, and might miss a sense of the specific character of the concept of "collective memory"; even though it is an aim of the editors to show this specificity: "'collective memory' clearly still has its residual value as an emblem" (41); "our effort here is founded on the conviction that memory studies –and the terms 'memory' and 'collective memory'- adds unique and valuable perspective to our understanding in ways that would otherwise be missed" (36).

Here the *Reader* steps on slippery ground. Indeed, the editors' introduction and the fragments selected in the five parts into which the book is divided create an impression of dispersion. This dispersion is partly due to the formation of the concept of "collective memory", but it is reinforced by the editors' decision to narrate its history and present consolidation. One can identify two types of ambiguity that operate in different levels of analysis, and could constitute the origin of the dispersion evidenced in the selection. The first one is related to the concept of "collective memory": what phenomenon of the social world it can describe, how to determine whose memory it is, what actors

* Professor of Philosophy of History, (Faculty of Humanities - National University of La Plata); member of the National Council of Scientific Research - Argentina

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, numbers in parentheses refer to the pages of *The Collective Memory Reader* (N.Y., Oxford University Press, 2011).

produce it (and re-produce it), how to determine its duration, its material substrata, etc.; we might speak of the “empirical” problems associated to the identification of certain aspects of shared life. The second level of analysis is related to the disciplinary framework in which the concept of “collective memory” is inserted and develops: Is it a subject-matter of history? Of sociology? Of philosophy? Of psychology? Of anthropology? ... This is a question which the editors emphasize in the introduction, where they point out the multiplicity of crisscrossing traditions. Clearly, the social world is complex enough for any theoretical approach to be able to claim exclusive rights; after all, social phenomena like work can be the object of economics, sociology, gender theory, psychology, etc.; and these disciplines fan out in sub-disciplines with fuzzy boundaries: no theoretical purity is possible and any analysis of social phenomena demands interdisciplinary communication. The answer to the question about the theoretical perspective that should be used to study collective memory is complex, because it lies in a domain which is disputed by the already mentioned disciplines, and even others.

As the editors correctly point out, one level of the question cannot be decided without paying attention to the other. According to the particular concept of “collective memory” we deem more adequate for studying what we consider worth understanding, we shall decide the disciplinary framework and with what other disciplines we can converse: “without the frameworks of ‘collective memory’, we believe, it is impossible to determine how much memory there is and what kind it is”. At the same time, our disciplinary background, or the theoretical choices we make shall determine that for us a certain definition of “collective memory” becomes more useful or more attractive than others. The editors acknowledge that even though the development of memory studies is related with the “rise of memory in the culture and politics of the second half of the twentieth century”, it cannot be restricted to that phenomenon (29).

The manifold nature of the concept and the wide variety of theoretical approaches that make use of it are insufficient to explain some problems that arise in the *Reader*. Among the various items that could be pointed out, there are at least three that I find relevant. The *first* one has to do with the selection criteria. The collection of fragments includes some authors that have not dealt explicitly with the subject of collective memory (in any of its versions): the editors state they are included, “though not necessarily for their insights on collective memory, and we present excerpts of their work here in the hope that they will become more common landmarks for, and within, social memory studies” (64). In the first part, “Precursors and Classics”, they include such authors as Marx y Nietzsche, together with Halbwachs, a combination that in my view endangers the very concept of “collective memory”. From such a loose perspective, collective memory is not distinct from a vague historical consciousness, which is understood broadly as the diverse ways in which human groups relate to the past (together with the ways in which they define and represent it). Now the concept of “collective memory” does not necessarily apply to any relation that a community establishes with its past (social practices such as religious or funeral practices, are related with social reproduction, and hence with the historical background of a community, but this does not, of itself, imply they *are* collective memory practices). This first objection demands clarification of the concept of collective memory, so as to ensure that it does not merge with other concepts with which it is without doubt related (“historical consciousness” has already been mentioned, also “past”, which can be diversely qualified, as

Oakeshott (1999) pointed out). The confusion that this first part generates is reinforced by the editors themselves in the presentation, when they state they could have included other authors such as Vico and Hegel, even though they have chosen not to (64).

A *second* problematic issue has to do with the links between memory and identity. In order to analyze this link two dimensions can be identified: the relation between collective memory and shared stories, and the plurality of collective memories. These issues are taken up by the fragments included in parts 2, 3, and 5. The two dimensions just mentioned though analytically distinguishable, are tightly linked. The shared nature of the stories that express the collective memory often hides the tensions among alternative constructions: the opposition collective memory vs. official memory is just *one* example of this. It is possible to identify constructions of collective memories *within* the societies that are in conflict with one another and not only with the official memory. The editors here have been doubly imprudent. By insisting in the narrative character of collective memory they run the risk of concealing the disruptive, dissident character of alternative constructions. The issue is evidenced both by the association with the concept of “tradition” and by the authors cited in the pages preceding the second part (MacIntyre y Gadamer). The narrative character of memory –and, in general, of our relation to the past—has been sharply criticized by the so-called narrativist philosophy of history (represented by H. White and F. Ankersmit among others). But also, the link between “tradition” and “collective memory” with its Hobsbawm resonances reinforces the idea that the identity that links with collective memory is *national* identity. Although in the preliminary words to the third part the editors point out that “different groups in societies struggle to advance their own view of the past and its meanings”, and also that there exist collective memory constructions “articulated in reaction to official or otherwise dominant views, and they frequently do so with recourse to the idea of competition between official memories and ‘counter-memories’ ... the main point of ‘counter-memories’ approaches... is often a suspicion of the motives and mechanisms of official memory (249), some of the selected texts as well as the explanatory remarks of the editors seem to concentrate only in the construction (or invention) of national traditions.

The *third* and final observation I wish to make has to do with what is characterized as the “globalization” of memory. This issue is related to the subject matter selected in parts 4 and 5. Again, globalization is a complex phenomenon that, among many other ways, can be analyzed in relation to the collective memory in two levels. The first level is directly associated to the possibility of transmission of world news in the information era –that we associate today with the Internet, but can be traced earlier with the publication of war photography in newspapers and magazines. These images and news have not contributed to the avoidance of the repetition of social catastrophes. As S. Sontag (2003) so well pointed out for the case of photography, (but can be extended to images in general), it is a fallacy to believe that the “proximity” provided by those images generates a bond between “those who suffer remotely and the privileged spectator” (118), “the problem is not that people remember by means of photography, but rather that they *only* remember the photographs” (103, emphasis added). The effects of the *media* on the shaping of the collective memory make it relevant to ask about its character as a social practice and force us to keep a watchful eye on the plurality and the diversity that pervade it. Thus, to mention a South American example, September 11,

since 1973 has been associated to the remembrance of the violent *coup d'état* in Chile, which was also associated to dictatorial processes in many South American countries. With the advent of democracy the date was turned into a space of struggle between groups in favor or against the Pinochet government, and also a reference for those who denounced the transnational character of State terrorism in our region. As such it is an enlightening example of the contested character of the collective memory, and of its complex link with different identities (group, social, national, regional identities, and so on). However, since 2001 the date has acquired other worldwide meanings (as a consequence of the overexposure that the attack on the *World Trade Center* has had and still has in the *media* and other forms of cultural transmission). We could ask ourselves whether we are facing a global memory icon, and about what symbolic challenge about the meaning of the dates it could represent for local collective memories, insofar as the expression “9-11” is widely used to refer to the terrorist attack on the *Twin Towers* (a use that extends to Chile).

The other issue related to the globalization of memory can be seen as a reformulation of the relation between memory and justice. This relation probably lies in the origin of the construction of collective memory (as Todorov and Ricoeur have noted, as well as Primo Levi before them) and is expressed in the so-called “duty of memory”. In recent years this issue has acquired prominence due to the rise of “transnational justice”, that is, the international prosecution of “crimes against Humanity”. Now collective memory seems to acquire global character since its subject is Humanity. This transformation (related to the Holocaust itself as a symbol of collective memory, since the late 1970's) associates collective memory with the analysis of the historical trauma and inspires new investigation of historical events (even of events before the Holocaust, such as the Armenian case). In this context, as the editors rightly remark, the concepts of “generation” and “transmission” –subject of part 5 of the book—gain centrality.

The foregoing observations have not been put forward as objections to the selection or to the theoretical framework proposed by the editors of the Reader: they have taken on a complex task which they have carried out quite satisfactorily. My observations originate in their own statement that they had “a modest aim to invite debate, dissent, contestation, and continuous revision” (48). I have tried to take the opportunity to do just that.

References:

Sontag, S. (2003), *Ante el dolor de los demás*, (*Regarding the Pain of Others*, 2002), Barcelona, Alfaguara.

Oakeshott, M. (1999), “Present, Past and Future”, in: *On History and Other Essays*, Indianapolis, Liberty Fund, 1-48.