

Facing the Past: Remembering or Forgetting? - Ata Demirus



The issue around facing the past is extremely sensitive in terms of forming the national identity, determining the heroes and criminals in the historical record. It is also significant in international relations too due to the fact that a past crime or heroism of a nation perceived by others differently, even go as far as to ask moral, financial and in more extreme sense goes to demand of territorial reparations. For instance, the Nazi past of Germany reflects itself in contemporary international relations in the form of remaining humble and giving special priority to diplomacy towards its neighbors and in the global affairs, always refraining from use of military measures. Under the light of this, forgetting and remembering comes to the picture with great tensions. The former emphasizes taking necessary lessons from the past, and then immediately looking forward, whereas the latter prioritizes the acknowledging the past wrongs to not to repeat the same mistakes in the future. Therefore, this article will explore the tension between forgetting

and remembering and which one is more beneficial to come to terms with internal peace within a nation state and external peace internationally.

Introduction

The memory is a quite controversial in the sense of confronting the past. Assmann views it as *"double edged"* (Assmann, 2015, p. 199). It can both serve to peace and reconciliation with the past, or fueling hatred or revenge (Assmann, 2015, p. 199). Indeed, the significant point is that the memory is about how a nation commemorates, and faces the past. Many for instance, view forgetting as failure however, Connerton does not see it in that way, it is *"not always a failure, and it is not always, and not always in the same way, something about which we should feel culpable"* (Connerton, 2008, p. 59) and purging the old and establishing a new cultural memory.

So, the research question that will be tried to answer is: Is forgetting an act of silence, if so, how can remembering has a beneficial role to play, when confronting the past crimes? Because, in domestic politics, there is always potential for ignoring the truth and misreading the historical record, when facing the heroism and past injustice, which in turn, negatively affects the universal memory of all nations in international relations. Therefore the problem of forgetting sometimes comes through hiding the truth or in worse case by suppressing those who try to reveal the facts about the past in the national territorial memory. For instance, in Bull and Hansen's account of Antagonistic Memory, there is populist denial on cosmopolitan memory¹ through deification of the nation-state which revolves around sacred values of a community (Bull and Hansen, 2015, p. 4) that hinders the remembering process of past crimes. However, sometimes remembering the past is too much for the public sphere, after all what is remembered are the tragic crimes of genocide. For Historian Christian Meier, *"...forgetting rather than remembering as a transformative power that leads to overcoming a pernicious past and to opening a new page of history"* (Assmann, 2015, p. 199). In this paper, notions of forgetting and remembering will be touched upon with respect some related thinkers to

highlight the liberal cosmopolitan thinking and antagonistic memory to point out the sharp tension between them and as well as the solution to the problem.

Repressive Erasure

When it comes to forgetting, one way of doing is erasing it like nothing happened, and in fact, it predates the age of totalitarianism. *“The French Revolution sought to eliminate all remnants of the ancient regime in a similar way: monarchial titles and titles of nobility were abolished”* (Connerton, 2008, p. 60). So, it is basically purging the old symbols of political institutions which represent the tyrannical rule. After all, they are all symbols of the old and seen as sign of recalls the tyrannical rule, in this context a second type of forgetting comes to picture.

Prescriptive Forgetting

This type of forgetting is about erasing the past wrongs from the history. Because, for this view, if they are not forgotten, they might lead to vengeance to the past, since it could lead to division of community and eventually to a civil war (Connerton, 2008, p. 62). In this respect, Historian Meier *“...argues as a historian, drawing attention to the policy of forgetting as an age-old strategy for containing the explosive force of conflictive memories”* (Assmann, 2015, p. 200). It is basically can be seen a most common form of forgetting in historical context. For instance, this narrative was famously expressed in 403 BC. In that year, the Athenian democrats after having suffered defeat at the hands of the dictatorship, re-entered the city of Athens and proclaimed a general reconciliation (Connerton, 2008 p. 62). Basically, it was forbidden to remember the past crimes during this era.

In contemporary context, the legacy of the Nazi holocaust and the World War II perfectly fit to that. The Nuremberg Trials basically aimed to make Nazis war criminals to pay the consequences of their actions with the newly defined *“crimes against humanity”* (Assmann, 2008, p. 200). This is of course purging the old

evils, meaning forgetting rather than remembering the tyrants. It was also implemented to galvanize the Western Europe against the emergence of the new totalitarianism, the Soviet Union. The idea is to purge the old Nazi evil and prepare a better future. In this regard, Winston Churchill stated in the year 1946 in Zürich:

We must all turn our backs upon the horrors of the past. We must look to the future. We cannot afford to drag forward across the years that are come the hatreds and revenges that have sprung from the injuries of the past. If Europe is to be saved from infinite misery, and indeed from final doom, there must be an act of faith in the European Family and act of oblivion against all the crimes and follies of the past (Assmann, 2008, pp. 201-202).

Indeed, this kind of approach basically reflects itself as the confession of guilty and therefore is a pact of silence. So, it is forgetting the past to look forward and to make a better future based on the present achievements. Like Germany's restructuring and integration of society, while forgetting the past crimes, which prevailed in the 1950s (Assmann, 2008, p. 200).

Forgetting as Formation of New Identity

Indeed, the forgetting which leads to act of silences is not just random phenomena, but also patterned. For instance, there is forgetting which the lifestyles of grandparents are not transferred to the next generations. There is loss of information on the ancestors' lifestyles. Connerton talks about for instance "*Ethnographic studies of these societies, in Borneo Bali, the Philippines, rural Java, frequently remark upon the absence of knowledge about ancestors*" (Connerton, 2008, p. 63). With their knowledge is gone about their ancestors, they inevitably have to build new identities based on their new ties. So, this is like a generational problem faced by the indigenous people for years.

Forgetting as Planned Obsolescence

This type of forgetting is based on the materialist and capitalist side of forgetting. Basically, it takes account the evolution of a product from its first design, development and its eventual obsolescence, forever to be forgotten in the dustbin of history (Connerton, 2008, p. 66). This indeed refers the consumer culture; however, it also means the culture of making new and being innovative in the future, so replacing the obsolete values with something new and creative. The capitalism prevails over past and future, and creates contingent identities, as result, individuals learn innovation of new and obsolescence of old objects and became aware of how to discard them.

Structural Amnesia

The structural amnesia was identified by John Barnes as remembering which only those links in his/her pedigree, that a person feels closer to them (Connerton, 2008, p. 64). It is in other words, selecting figures from history exclusively, and remembering what is closer to a nation, other stuff which is not needed are forgotten. Bull and Hansen warned in this regard: "*Traditional Nationalist movements have reworked the past in novel ways*" (Bull and Hansen, 2015, p. 5). They for instance decried and rewrite the history of a state in a way to glorify the past in order to touch the ordinary people in elections.

Forgetting as Humiliated Silence

Potentially, this is the most difficult to forget because, "*...occasions of humiliation are so difficult to forget, it is often easier to forget physical pain than to forget humiliation*" (Connerton, 2008, p. 68). German cities' destruction by bombing during the World War II is a good example. There were 130 cities left in ruins; about 600,000 civilians were killed; 3.5 million homes were destroyed (Connerton, 2008, p. 67). Germans in the next 50 years would not take this tragedy to the public. They felt unprepared for this; it is act of silence here again. They only managed to face this reality by proudly presenting their economic miracle in the postwar era, avoiding this tragedy to come to public discussions. So, it is pact of silence. However, the remembering might have some benefits compared to the

forgetting.

Memory as Transforming Power

It is an understandable fact that forgetting is an easy way to get along. In the 1940s and 1960s, forgetting is seen as to purge all the negative memories of the past; it was rightfully believed that forgetting could eliminate the resentment, hatred and vengeance. However, remembering has also benefits for the transformative power of memory. For Assmann there are external factors and internal factors (Assmann, 2015, p. 201). First, external factors compose two dimensions: The one is from opening the Historical Archives. They challenge the traditional understanding of the historical events. *“After the end of the Cold War, for instance, the opening of Eastern European archives changed considerably the prevailing national maps of memory, it challenged some of the firmly established positive national self-images”* (Assmann, 2015, p. 202). France or the German Democratic Republic’s image of pure resisters to Holocaust, and Poland and Austria’s portray of exclusive victims are no longer valid thanks to the opening of new historical archives. This also brings an important remark: Historical memory. For Levy and Sznajder, *“Historical memory on the other hand, is memory that has been mediated, by films and books and schools and holidays”* (Levy and Sznajder, 2002, p.). So, there only remain few people who witnessed for instance Holocaust prosecution, but now there is also representation of them through mediation.

Therefore, a further external factor could be extended to media, books and films; their strength is basically, ability to change public debates and social climate. The American television series named *“Holocaust”*, which was broadcasted in Germany in 1979, managed to attract large masses and led to the opening up of the blocked channels that have empathy for the Jewish victims (Assmann, 2015, p. 202). So, this type of remembrance basically broke the cycle of silence and even attracted to the people go deep on the memories of the Second World War. For instance, Assmann mentioned *“I once talked to a person who told me that his parents had forbidden him to watch the series, which, of course, made his interest in this topic all the more ardent”* (Assmann, 2015, p. 202).

This brings the internal side of the memory. Because, as mentioned above, there was complete silence among German people up until 1960s, the 68-generation put end to this. The generation of 60s basically, rebellious to their parents' silent loyalties for what they did during the Nazi period. They simply broke away from the poisonous silence on the past. In fact, it began to be seen in the German politicians themselves. For instance, the West German President Richard von Weizsäcker made a speech in 1985, when he recognized May 8, 1945 not as defeat and humiliating occupation, but rather liberation from tyranny (Assmann, 2015, p. 203). Because, the older generation faced defeat and imprisonment in the Allied camps, but younger generation experienced democracy, freedom and spirit of liberation.

This broke of pact of silence can also be seen in another country, which freed from dictatorship: Spain. But this time it has different characteristics. During the transition to democracy in 1977, 2 years after Franco's death, the pact of silence was kept for a while, due to the fragile nature of Spanish Democracy. All crimes prior to 1977 were granted an amnesty with the unwritten law of silence (Assmann, 2015, p. 203). Only in 2007, this pact of silence was broken with the official condemnation of Prime Minister Jose Luis Zapatero who is the grandson of a Republican grandfather who was murdered and whose body was never found (Assmann, 2015, p. 204). He passed the law of Historical Remembrance, remembering entirely changed the political climate. However, this does not mean forgetting is invalid against remembering. Because, Connerton when he defined the seven types of forgetting, he did not pragmatically side with any particular form of forgetting. Because, the important thing in the issue of remembering is that if it goes to official institutions, the questioning of a past crime becomes political and demands would automatically increase, which would trigger polarization in a society, that's why, Connerton sees forgetting as a "virtue" instead of a "failure" (Connerton, 2008, p. 59). But still, remembering is also a non-ideal requirement in the form of dialogue between perpetrators and victims. Acknowledging the past injustice is the first step towards making better future.

From Monologic to Dialogic Memory

In classical monologic memory, what matters is “heroic” side of national history. Edward Said defines this situation as *“Memory and its representations touch very significantly upon questions of identity, of nationalism, of power and authority”* (Assmann, 2015, p. 205).

There is direct connection between historical memory and nation-building. This indeed brings us to Structural Amnesia and populist nationalism. As mentioned above, they remember social patterns which are seen as close to a person and apply a counter-memory such as re-imagined territory and “us” vs. “them” terminology (Connerton, 2008, p. 64; Bull and Hansen, 2015, p 4). So, the historical memory is like that, in the nation-building process *“...national memories were mainly constructed around heroic actions and heroic suffering. They are highly selective and composed in such a way that they are identity-enhancing and self-celebrating”* (Assmann, 2015, p. 207). So, unlike the former’s(monologic memory?) focus on past heroic actions as untouchable dogma, the dialogic memory on the other hand does not exclude national heroic memory, but also adds reconfiguration of it. So, focusing both heroic national memories and past crimes at the same time is the main goal here.

In this case, remembering takes more important role than forgetting. It is simply reconciliation with the past which means “forgive and forget” (Assmann, 2015, p. 207). But this scheme cannot be connected to the forgetting. Because, remembering is also about not to repeat the past mistakes, the victims of the past violence must be acknowledged, otherwise a political transformation for development of democracy in a country is impossible to begin. For instance, Assmann provided a good example that:

This transformative power of memory plays a crucial role in the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRC) that were invented in South America when countries such as Chile, Uruguay, Argentina and Brazil transitioned from military dictatorships to democracy in 1980s and 1990s (Assmann , 2015, p. 207).

They were basically established for investigating the hidden past and restore the

social memory according to the results that reached by the commissions. These are all about how to master the past (or memorializing) (Assmann, 2015, p. 207). In the issue of democracy and initiating a progressive political process, the European Union is a good case. It is a result of the traumatic experience of not just the Holocaust, but long history of violence. In fact, the founding fathers of the EU most prominently the French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman highlighted the importance of solidarity to achieve concrete peace. Because a united Europe cannot be achieved in a single day, and for that, it must be always cautious to dangers that could threaten the common European project. In fact, this spirit lived on very long time:

On the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Buchenwald, the former prisoner of the concentration camp and late writer Jorge Semprún said: One of the most effective possibilities to forge a common future for the European is “to share our past, our remembrance, our hitherto divided memories” (Assmann, 2015, p. 209).

The EU experiment is basically acknowledging the sufferings of the past, and mastering it not to repeat the same mistakes.

Making Dialogic Memory a Universal Norm

Yet, the power of the dialogic memory should not be remain in one place, it should be remain universal, because no nation is guiltless, and they have to face it in the end, such as the Israel-Palestine case, where Said saw the issue that *“the Palestinians fell short in the process of national integration through mythmaking which deprived them of mobilizing symbols and rendered them helpless victims of Zionism”* (Assmann, 2015, p. 206). In monologic memory perspective, there is little regard for transformative power, since there is both neglect of the past violence and lack of will to initiate a political process. However, there is an effort by an Israeli Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) to initiate a transformative power referred as Zackrot meaning remember (Assmann, 2015, p. 210). So, they aim to establish an inclusive memory by fusing Nakba and Holocaust at the same

time. So, here again there is an effort to acknowledging the past by recognizing the past injustices of the Palestinians and fusing with the national Jewish memory of Holocaust, to build a more inclusive memory for the Israeli public. Here it can be argued that dialogic memory assumes the role of Cosmopolitanism, because as mentioned by Levy and Sznajder, the slogan is “*Never Again Auschwitz*” (Levy and Sznajder, 2002, p. 99). Because there is always possibility that such crimes could repeat itself in any time, anyone and everyone is responsible. Rothberg points out a related manner: It is not just result of distinct individual actions, but sum of complex interacting behaviors that cause harm on the victim (Rothberg, 2019, p. 50), the historical structural injustice makes each of us equally responsible (Rothberg, 2019, p. 52). The Palestinians and other indigenous people are equal victims like the Jews. Holocaust, Nakba and colonial violence are all universal problems and each individual has responsibility to acknowledge them.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, memory is a sensitive issue in terms of forgetting in the form of removing from the national memory like nothing happened to better look for the future, or facing the past with great responsibility. As explained by Assmann “*Memories to sum up, are dynamic and thus transformed over time. What is being remembered of the past is largely dependent on cultural frames, moral sensibilities and demands of the present*” (Assmann, 2015, p. 211). The remembrance of Holocaust moved from periphery to the center of West European memory in the last two decades (Assmann, 2015, p. 2011). In this essay, the question of whether forgetting is act of silence or not, and how remembering the past can have beneficial role to play was analyzed. Basically, Connerton presented different types of forgetting to show that forgetting is not necessarily a negative phenomenon, but to save society from political dissatisfaction, internal polarization and in fact Assmann does not totally exclude that dimension.

Yet, remembering has much more positive role than forgetting. It is basically a good balance between keeping the wound open and mastering the past (Assmann, 2015, p. 2012). Despite various antagonistic regionalism rejects the cosmopolitan foundation (Bull and Hansen, 2015, p. 4); the EU case is the biggest example of it,

which stance on values of humanism, tolerance and equal dignity as by remembering the past totalitarian discourse. So, the EU is not for instance product of Prescriptive Forgetting after end of a dictatorship, but rather mastering this tragic past. Therefore, remembering offers a much broader and cosmopolitan (universal) insight on acknowledging the past to looking forward through keeping sensitivity on the past violence to also take measures on the current humanitarian crimes in the international area. However, this does not mean forgetting is failure, because it is still needed to avoid vengeance and division within a society.

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