

Collective Memory and Construction of Identities: Towards a History for Peaceful Co-existence

Ensar nişancı⁰

It is possible to mention a tight connection between collective memory and narration of the *past*. Collective memory is the forerunner among the factors which shape any identity, whether in an ethnical or national axis, or, whether in a cultural or civilizational axis. In addition to the operator role of limiting, including, or excluding functions which are the defining elements of identity, collective memory⁰ is also a *sine qua non* factor in the development of the sense and consciousness of commonness between the ones within the limits of a supposed border of identity: Therefore, collective memory is not only a towering constructor of the identity, but also the most important protector of it. Then, identities as a source of belonging are constructed significantly through memory. Acting as a host and a providing space to the models conceived in one's mind, which concern the one and the outer world, individual memory stands out with its capacity to provide a source for the functions of defining the objects in the world, understanding what transpires, and attaching a meaning to what transpires. Then, lack of memory takes shape as a loss of identity, as the estrangement of one's own self, as a kind of exile. On the other hand, when the subject matter is identities, which can be defined as a collective persona, collective memory assumes the same role which personal memory assumes in the creation and maintenance of one person's identity and persona. Accordingly, the situation encountered in the loss of personal memory again manifests itself when the collective memory is weakened or damaged; identity acting the role of existential host of societies is thrown in to an existential crisis.

However, the emerging memory problem in the case of identities is not limited to the loss of memory only: there is the possibility of a break-out of crises regarding the form of the construction of the memory. If the dialog between the memory and the outer world is damaged or destructed due to various reasons, or, worse, if the meanings and images in this dialog become distorted due to several causes, memory no longer acts as the protector of the identity, transforming into some kind of a prison for the identity. Then, the "world" constructed and protected by the identity is not "any" world, but, as Spivak states, a world worlded through language and various contrivances. (Spivak, 2004: 81-111) The leading example for this kind of worlding is, without a doubt, orientalism⁰, which acts as a provider of source for prejudices of the West regarding the East, divides the West and the East with absolute lines, and legitimizes the West's inequality-based relationship with the East and its politics based on colonialism (Said, 1978:1-9).

Therefore, one can mention three important issues regarding the memory acting as a constructor of identity. These problems are, in respective order: loss of memory, issue of trust emerging in the process of distortion, and imprisonment manifesting itself in the finitude function of distortion. A significant result which can be deduced from this remark is: in the last analysis, the crises memory may face, by its nature, are also the crises of identity. The inability of identity to historicize, its exclusive nature, and its acting as a provider of negative prejudices are examples of these kinds of crises. Another conclusion which can be deduced in connection with these factors is that it will be quite misleading to position (collective) memory as a compass always showing the right path, considering its high capacity in the creation of identities as personal egos and collective personae.

Among several valid reasons for this sceptic attitude regarding the reliability of memory, the forerunner reason is the indirectness, in other words, the "secondhandness" of its contact established with the outer world, and even, with the person. Apart from the weakness or power of the memory, which acts as a perpetuating machine with its function as a bridge between past and now, it is always possible that images, meanings, and attached meanings recorded in the memory by being decoded in the mind can be distorted due to various reasons, such as interest motif, prejudices, ideological attitudes, and will to power. In this situation,

memory can quit being a bridge between “past and now,” “here and there,” and “us and them.” Memory can quit being a unifying and a binding device. It can transform into an apparatus that corruptingly reconstructs “yesterday,” “there,” and “them,” and for this very reason, ontologizes the differences between them as oppositions: a debasing apparatus which ruptures the dialog between today, here, and us and the others.

It should be noted that the identities feeding from a memory of this kind may also be problematic. If one is to concede that memory is one of the important sources, even, the most important one that consciousness feeds on, it will be obvious that its possible crises will also be the crisis of its identity. It is known that although collective memory is in a state of object at the beginning, in other words, it is dependent on the receiver-perceiving agent, once it is formed; it becomes subjectified and starts to objectify the perception object. This problem is also relevant to memory’s finite nature, in other words, its imprisoning aspect. Nevertheless, it is indeed possible to make an infinite reading of the outer world, let alone its endless openings⁰. In such a case, it should be noted that the wrong positioning of the perception optic or possible defects in the optic will not convey a true copy of the object of episteme, but a distorted form, or it will freeze the object. Therefore, both negative situations – the loss of memory and mind colonized by distorted images – will have a negative effect on the person’s relationship with the outer world and himself. As the first one manifests as a kind of exile, homelessness, being without a home for the person, the other takes shape as the imprisonment of the mind and personality. If one is to draw a logical inference, it is possible to reach an assessment which claims that the situation applying for the person will also manifest in the relationship between identities as collective selves.

In this paper, given that there is an epiphenomenal relationship between identity and collective memory as a departure point, it is emphasized that collective memory significantly feeds on history and manner of reading, conveying, and teaching history. Exactly like memory, history is, principally, in a passive position; in other words, it is being written and shaped according to the positioning of the human subject⁰. However, as a standpoint of history takes shape, history determines the perception regarding the past; it quits being an object, becoming the subject. Consequently, “the perception of the day” and projections regarding tomorrow are heavily influenced by historical perspectives.

Why and how is history, a rich source in the creation of collective memory, being distorted? This is an important question requiring an answer at this point⁰. Certainly, it would be not right to depict historiography itself as a distortion. Nonetheless, it should be noted that historical narratives depict the past by reducing it; that is to say, by highlighting certain moments, by underestimating some, and by completely missing some others. This depiction of distorted past can be defined as an ethno-historical perspective. How is history instrumentalized for the creation of a collective memory which is needed, even, desired to be invented, to be discovered? Why do historians not pursue history-related information just as a bowling player pursues her ball? This question alludes that not only the collective memory or the common consciousness is wounded, but also the narratives told as history may be handicapped due to certain defects, or even, distortions. Indeed, a narrative of the past as history is constructed with “mediation,” the will to learn and to teach history is mostly realized in an “*indirect*” way; that is to say, the study of history is not a self-contained objective but a mediated one. In other words, the aim to know and understand the past is not the only factor for the interest in history. The more important factor is the aim to construct *today*, and to legitimize the social and the political struggles of today. Therefore, there are several screens, in other words, *agents* between history and collective memory. An ontological gap almost impossible to close emerges between the past and the history taking shape as a narrative of the past (Jetkins, 1991: 19, 22, 23, 25). To articulate by a metaphor, history gets into the (collective) memory by being translated twice. Thus, the information extracted in relation to history, rather than being a provider to permeate history, emerges as distorted images of it, assuming a founding and legitimizing role in the construction of today. In addition, when history is also politicized, it becomes clear that the emerging representations and images will not only be very different from their originals, but also extremely distorted in a certain way within some narratives.

Just as history is a source in the shaping of the collective memory, reading history and teaching history, which takes shape according to the form and depth of the reading are two very significant agents between history and collective identity. Thus, a very important source in the creation of identities, teaching history will no doubt determine the form of the relationship between identities. Specifically, when the point of issue is the installment and the establishment of the nation-state, this situation emerges more clearly: history is used as a source in the making of the collective memory. In other words, teaching history is submitted to the service of identity. Today, it can be stated that, as sources of collective memory, history and teaching history have a great deal of responsibility for the attitudes based on exclusion, marginalization, or assimilation towards “the other” elements such as ethnic groups, cultures, sects, religions, and civilizations in the several regions of the world.

However, today, at this point, this attitude should be eliminated due to three reasons: 1- An ethic obligation. To abandon unequalizing and marginalizing attitudes is an ethical responsibility. 2- The autonomization⁰ of history. In other words, the striving for closing the gap between the “past” and history as much as possible and not using history as the backyard of a political and ideological cause. 3- The necessity of co-existence with what we define as “the other,” in a milieu where globalization, as the forerunner motif of social, political, cultural and economical processes, erases the borders.

This situation, as particularly evident in the matter of immigrants, is one of the most crucial problems the Western world faces today. Then, it is an ethical obligation before us to purify collective memory of excluding and marginalizing images, and to reshape its self-image with a critical perspective. Without a doubt, this is a very hard obligation to undertake. Nonetheless, the more this hard task is achieved, the more the chances for co-existence will rise. In this perspective, in order to live together in peace, it would be an important step to critically revise the types of reading history and purify it from its ideological burdens, rather than adopting a strategy of rupturing history from the past. In other words, it holds great importance, in this perspective, only to overcome problems resulting from the distorted narratives of history.

To concretize this debate, which can be regarded as theoretical, the example of Turkey will be an important source. As a scholar of political science, to focus on the reading and teaching of history as a collective memory in the making of national identity is a crucial step that must be taken. This step will make it possible to reach concrete data and to point out to the fallacies in the teaching of history. We believe that the more these fallacies are overcome, the more the chances of co-existence in peace will be a feasible target.

History and history teaching in the process of creating a collective consciousness

We can say that the problems emerging in the context of the construction of the collective memory can also be witnessed in the historiography and history teaching in Turkey. The main element which primarily determines the shape of history, the manner of reading it, and its way of conveyance to the society in Turkey is, undoubtedly, the nationalist ideology. Benedict Anderson’s statements on the nature of national identities⁰ are very much explanatory when the case is Turkish national identity. If we are to follow this point while keeping in mind what Ernest Gellner has commented on national identities(1983) in the matter of nationalism and what Eric Hobsbawm(1983) has expressed concerning “invented tradition,” we see that the Turkish national identity is not only *imagined*, but also woven with the teamwork of *invention* and *discovery*. Indeed, the thought, ie, the conception of the Turkish national identity has appeared before its “matter,” ie, its content. The Turkish national identity is determined *a priori* by the elites who founded the nation-state (Kadioğlu, 1995; 6-10); then, with the help of the state institutions, a concrete nation compatible with this identity is tried to be created. Certainly, this new society, which would be binded with an identity, would have to have a new memory. Then, in the formation of

this memory, a rereading of history, and benefitting from a history teaching, taking its shape according to this reading is adopted. In accordance with this objective, the aim is to investigate the past of Turkness in a right manner, and to show/discover that the Turks-to be-created-today, in fact, existed since the very ancient times, and, even, they were equipped with the ideals of today in those very days. Told with half-mythological images and a commending style, this history is marked as the greatest period of Turkness; in a way, Turkish identity is blessed; this identity is put in the circuit as a “hyperrealist” source of confidence. In the history books, this blessed identity is narrated through various representations, such as generals with samples of heroics, women achieving extraordinary success during the Liberation War. Moreover, with the extracted values from this invented/discovered “imagined identity,” Turkish youth, for instance, is socialized. In this way, history teaching, essentially, is functionalized as a device of social engineering. As history becomes an area where the roots are rediscovered, it is also held as the most important witness of authenticity. Furthermore, it is advised that history is to be purified of *elements* which distort this authenticity, and which mudds, defiles, and weakens the imagined Turkish descendance which flows crystal clear and all-powerful from the depths of history.

Turned into a branch of this effort, history becomes a kind of missionary agent; the main theme which mainly determines the narration of the past has become the construction of national identity and nation-state. Another fact is that history is also used, as an agent, as a self-legitimizing element in the creation of the nation as an “imagined community.” In a sense, history is read in a nation-centered manner, thereby becoming the main perspective which fills the future-reaching identity. A recently academic research (Ozbaran, 2003:155-165), which was carried out by 11 Turkish universities, displays this situation: the main focus in the history lectures of these universities is on the Otoman history, and Turkish and Islamic history. As these three make up nearly 90% percent of the whole history lectures, Asian, European, and World histories get a less percentage than what they actually deserve. The studying of Turkish history without the context of world history context is another important matter; “past” is narrated as Turkish history-centered. Just like the West and the Western nations put their history in the center via orientalist language, determining the distance of the other geographies of the world according to this positioning (East, Near East, Far East, etc), (Mutman, 1999: 31, 45) the attitude, which positions Turkey into the center of the world map, reads and interprets history in an almost Turkey-centered manner. As Turkness is complimented with the narrations of Turks’ impact on the history, like how they rode their horses across three continents, to which these heroics were achieved is told indirectly. The defeats in the history are regarded and depicted not as a weakness of this nation, nor as the overcoming power of the enemies, but mostly as a result of treachery. As for the matters like democracy and human rights, they belong to the category of pretty-neglected among the subjects of history⁰. Moreover, there is a similar type of apathy towards the local and the past of the local cultures. History regarding the local finds itself mostly within the context of the tension with the national in historiography and history teaching. Furthermore, the near past is almost not accepted as a history; for instance, post-1950 era is only narrated in the lectures of politics or economics.

Studies made on the history books of the high-schools interestingly reflect the perception of the nationalized history from another perspective. In these books, the past is not only ruptured from the world history, but also depicted like it only consists of wars. In these history books, the depicted painting regarding the past tells us this: in the past, among states, societies, cultures, religions, and sects, the dominant type of relation is that of contrast and tension. There is no whatsoever a dialog or mutual interaction between them, nor a perception for one to perceive the other as a rich source of culture. The most important result drawn from this depiction is the narration of the nationalized history with a military attitude and the politization of it (Özbaran, 2005: 101, 155).

Undoubtedly, the narrated wars in the history books actually took place in history: there were wars, alliances, treaties between states; there were wars and strifes which ended for us or against us. These are all true; however, the styles of narration and the language adopted are significantly striking. For instance, when the subject matter is wars, there is no mention at all about the fact that war is a great tragedy itself, but the extraordinary

heroics are especially underlined: The dead are martyrs, the survivors are war veterans. As in the collective memories of other nations, martyrdom is very highly-valued in the collective consciousness of the Turkish society. In this type of history narration, the other societies are whether friends or enemies. When the subject matter is “the others,” the collective image in the collective memory based on this history narration is attached with a negativity of this kind. Unavoidably, in that very long space of past, there can be a border tension, a war, or a dispute over conflicting interests with the others. However, there are peaceful “in-betweens” with these societies of deep tensions. The emphasis on the past wars, in a sense, means the shadowing of friendships. The most striking example for this situation is, without a doubt, the relationship between Turks and Armenians. It is known that there had been great tragedies between these two nations in the climate of the World War I. However, it is also known that Turks and Armenians lived together, peacefully, and on mutual consent in the pre-war era.

Another similar situation can be seen in the history of the European nations: What European continent means for the English is nothing but the two World Wars. For an ordinary Dutch, Germany recalls the image of Germany during the World War II. (Özbaran, 136) Just like in today’s Western world, especially after 9/11, the forming of a terrorist image and Usama Bin Laden when the matter is Arab Muslim.

In this context, World War I is a milestone in the Turkish historiography and history teaching. As the old history is a source of confidence for Turkness, the invasion of Turkish homeland is given as the evidence of the great threat the Turkish nation faced. Therefore, just as the Turkish history in the past glitters, the pre and post Liberation War era is filled with numerous dangers just the same.

It is just as wrong to see the past as a compilation of wars, as it is wrong to perceive the other societies as enemies. However, when the subject matter is identities, the emphasized point should be that it is not only enmities that are ontologized. We, namely, the identity itself is being ontologized with the narratives in this mode. The others are always malevolent, antagonistic, and waiting for opportunity to attack. Nonetheless, the homogenization and ontologization of identities through specific representations can transform identity from a house into a prison. The exclusion and marginalization become the defining quality of this identity. It is certain that, at best, the other will be subjected to assimilation.

A historical perception and narrative of this kind also determines on what axes the Turkish identity will take shape: on one side, an axis with a dominating excessive self-confidence; on the other, an axis with a dominating excessive fear. The identity formed on these axes of oppositions neither has the ability to know and understand on a right and existential ground, nor to establish an undistorted communication with the others regarded as the source of the dangers. The relationship between identities taking shape on the **polarized** axis occurs as a dialog between hyperrealist identities. For instance, as the EU is perceived as a Trojan horse to take Turkey’s national independence away by an influent fraction of the Turkish society, which is kept waiting to be accepted as a full member to EU, for a great majority of the EU members, the Turk image emerges as an Ottoman image. These produced fears are significant obstacles preventing the sides to understand each other correctly. Undoubtedly, both the image associated with the Ottomans and the Islam in the West, and the European image of Turkey act as both discoverers and inventors of truth, mostly putting a wall before a chance of a dialog. While the West defends dialog within itself, in its relationship with the excluded ones, and especially with the East, its efforts to construct a Western castle stands as a great conflict. However, the inability to establish a dialog with the other implies that, in fact, the dialog within itself is also over, or, it is not a genuine dialog. The West succeeded in transforming the class struggle into a dialog somehow: without a doubt, the concrete result was the welfare state. Nevertheless, the same West has a responsibility of transforming the struggle between civilizations into a dialog.

The Last Words

The functionalized history as a process of creating collective memory has a special importance in the

removal of the obstacles standing before a peaceful co-existence. In this perspective, it is important to overcome reading history in a reductive manner. Without a doubt, every possible style of history narratives will not be able to consume history. Therefore, it must be kept in mind that knowing the possibility of making an endless reading of history through the past should prevent history from being functionalized and distorted. To save history from the colonization of this type of reading, it is imperative not to read history as a national history. It should be stressed that history education seems to have much to do for keeping itself away from political and ideological distortion. To achieve this, for instance, it is of great importance to include different varieties of historical narratives, such as history of civilizations, cultural history, demographic history, economical history, local history in the syllabi of educational institutions. This attempt to understand the past of any kind of identities in a broader perspective would make history education more functional to leave a peaceful world to our children and next generations.

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