

Discussion paper

Đorđe Pavićević: Regimes of public memory

The paper is presentation of the work in progress based on the larger project of analysis of political memory regimes. It is an incomplete conceptualization of the argument articulated on the background of Serbian experiences with political effects of the living past articulated as political memory judgments. The argument says that for effective functioning of political societies some kind of stabilization of public memory is necessary. Stabilization has to respect the inherent logic of memory related to exercise of public power. This logic is inherently normative, and the task of political theory is to offer criteria for its evaluation.

'I told you the truth,' I say yet again, 'Memory's truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events; and no sane human being ever trusts someone else's version more than his own.'
(Rushdie, *Midnight Children*)

Political theory and memory

Many words were spent during the last two (or three decades) to explain a “memory boom” in different societies as well as in academy around the globe. List of causes is very long: modernity, globalization, technology, media, capitalism, Enlightenment, rationality, even democracy (Sennet 1998; Müller 2004; Melluci 2006; Booth 2006, Assmann 2006; Bell 2008). All of them were blamed for inability of individuals and groups to come to make a sense of their own past. WWII and Holocaust were clear warning. Since we are on the edge of disappearing generation of witnesses, and in danger to forget this warning, mnemonic practices starts their blooming. In proliferated literature in different fields, revival of memory is evaluated according to criteria of identity (temporality), truth, justice, responsibility, common values and political legitimacy.

Dark side of memory is usually delegated to memory of traumatic experiences, but it includes more than that. There are many ills that memory brings with it. One is ability of memory to “keep alive ancient hatreds” that “have fueled conflicts around the globe”. Memory keeps

‘wounds green’ and the embers of conflict glowing” (Booth 2006: 177). The other is what Dubravka Ugrešić call “terror of remembrance” (Ugrešić 1998, 81) which is coming from the “surfeit of memory” (**Nietzsche, Meier, Blustin**). The pressure to keep the common past alive is seen as a burden and obstacle to action. The same observation (in different context) could be found in the memorable Karl Marx’s passage from *The Eighteenth Brumaire*: “The tradition of all the dead generations weight like a nightmare upon the brain of living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things ... anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service ... in order to present the new scene of world history in this time honored disguise ...”

Memory brings opposite normative possibilities in its train. It is able to do justice and fuel conflict, provide identity and terrorize. This characteristic points out to essential normativity of memory: “It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also” (Rushdie, op.cit). It is normative on particularistic grounds. According to Jeffrey Blustein, memory is normative and particular at the same time because it includes “normative self-conception” based on: a) retrospective reconstruction of the meaning of the past, b) appropriation of the past as my (or our) own past, c) selective thematization of the past episodes; c) interconnections of previously listed. (Blustein 2008: 66 – 76, 84-86). According to this view, we are responsible for our past because our self-conception stem from judgments and interpretations based on memory. This view does not imply that creation of normative self-conception is self-designative mnemonic practice. Self-conception imposes an ethical burden on memory which discourages creation of arbitrary and unreasonable self-conceptions and limits possibility of exemption from responsibility for past wrongdoings.

However, ethics of memory is not able to provide criteria for public conception of memory. It is not reasonable to decouple public memory from the memory-based ethical claims, but there is no straight way from one to another. The idea of ethical community based on memory does not have “unique political expression”. (Booth, 2006: 173) To consider nations as ethical communities of this kind, as Avishai Margalit in the book *The Ethics of Memory* (2002) did, includes nationalization of memory with all its ills. For that reason, we need political theory that is able to offer criteria for evaluation of public conceptions of memory.

Conceptual issues

Dealing with the topic of memory is frustrating in many ways. First, it is elusive concept that looks ineradicably unclear, so that it is difficult to decide where to begin and what to begin with. It is a cluster concept comprising different processes and phenomena. Memorizing information is the process comprising encoding and storing information in symbolic forms. Remembrance refers to the process of inscription and retaining information in material medium. Recollection, recalling, retrospection or reminiscence are different types of retrieval and decoding of information. Further, it is not clear how much autonomous this process is and how much it depends of external memory tools and technologies. Some variables are at table a) the content of memory is dependent on mnemonic values that are cultural in character b) the process adapting itself to different mnemonic practices and technologies and c) changing of concepts of memory have influence on memory process.

Second, the concept has long history with lots of shifts in meaning and changes in mnemonic practices. It is difficult to compare mnemonic technique and concepts of memory of ancient bards and storytellers, or a medieval student practicing *Ars Memoriae* to memorize large portions of *Holy Scriptures* or Latin declinations and conjugations, and person who memorize how to use meta-mnemonic tools: pin codes and passwords, organizers and reminders, data bases and search engines.

Third, memory is omnipresent in the way that it is impossible to imagine our self stripped of all memories. Cases of amnesia or partially distorted memory give vivid examples of that. Nevertheless, it is in different way important for the different types of activities. Thus, we are talking about different types of memory related to these activities and assume that they have different characteristics. Memory applied in learning process is not the same as those used to driving bicycle, watching family photos or performing some collective enterprise. Fascinating amount of different kinds of memory could be found in the literature: individual, collective, social, cultural, communicative, traumatic, distorted, disruptive, divided, repressed, cognitive, semantic, habitual, procedural, emotional, manipulated, internal and external memory, episodic, biographical, etc. Some of these concepts are used as synonyms, but usage varies across disciplines. However, it is difficult to ascertain whether the concept of memory refers to same ability in different forms or comprises different abilities. Particularly controversial is the concept

of collective memory, which makes sense only if we use notion of memory metaphorically, like we use it for computer's memory.

Forth, recent "blooming" of memory studies literature have unclear disciplinary boundaries, but still boundaries. Every discipline considers itself special and different, but this is usually more a matter of institutional division of scientific labor, than argumentation. Thus, we have to be even more careful not to confuse division of labor, disciplinary contributions and arguments. To solve mystery of memory different disciplines could offer its contribution. Political science is in this sense well behind recent developments in many other disciplines that are more open to interdisciplinary contributions.

Despite confusion and elusiveness of the concept it is possible to proceed in memory research. Memory is always a concrete conceptualization, memory of something that is absent from present experience. Veracity of the representation is not the issue here, what is more important is that we use these representations in orientation in physical and conceptual space. We recognize these representations as a part of memory because they are linked to direct past experience, reconstruction of traces of the past events or someone's reliable witnessing. For that reason, memory is recognized as fragile and often unreliable, but no less important because of that. This process has its own "logic" which establishes particular nexus between memorization, remembrance, and recollection to different types of activities. The concept of political memory is introduced to refer to this particular "logic" for the case of politics.

Stipulation of the logic of memory does not imply that memory is an autonomous system. "Remembering ceased to be something that people just do without being conscious of what they are doing" (Danziger 2008: 7). Since then, different concepts, models, practices are introduced and induced changes the nature of memory. Besides biologically constrained equipment of an individual, "memory concepts, technology, mnemonic values, institutional practices and memory performance were linked in a network of reciprocal influence". (Danziger 2008: 9). All these are included in creation of "heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events" - what Rushdie calls "memory truth". Once established as a part of coherent version of events, memory based judgment become epistemologically privileged. This suggests that a) other things being same, someone believes to its own version more then someone else's, b) even in the presence of

inconclusive scientific evidence. Memory based judgments are difficult to change in spite of their unreliability. To change them, it is usually necessary to rearrange the whole construction.

Memory based political judgments: Serbian examples

Serbian political arena is a battlefield of opposing memory judgment. Different layers of the past are heavy burden for political society in Serbia. Disagreements about interpretation and meaning of the past are charged with disruptive political potential and open a window to divisive memory battles. They divide Serbian political scene in, at least, two opposing political camps, making it impossible to establish a rational political communication among them and to bring closer their positions. Well known case of Kosovo is probably not only the crucial political issue of the moment, but an interesting case of the politically effective presence of the distant past as well. The other hot topics coming from the recent past are dissolution of FRY and following violent wars, war crimes, NATO military intervention against Serbia etc. These are some of the fixed points in Serbian political memory which are missing adequate political articulation. Commenting on Serbian troubles to come to terms with own past, former Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić (assassinated in cooperation of members of regular police units and criminal groups on March 12th, 2003), in the article devoted to the first anniversary of October 5th, day when Milošević's regime was overthrown, noticed that Serbs and their elite are not able to recognize their own greatest historical events as victories (Đinđić, 2003a: 312). This is probably main reason why Serbia is the state with very few public holidays, and only one of them is the national historical date celebrating a political event. It is the day of the enacting the first written constitution on February 15th 1835, and it is usually poorly celebrated.

In spite of the deep confusion concerning official interpretation of the political past, deep impact of divisive political memory is still visible on the surface of political life. To take a few vivid examples: Srebrenica declaration was only narrowly passed in Serbian Parliament with lots of reservations and compromises - including those about missing word genocide¹. Similar

¹ The Serbian Parliament has passed (March 31st 2010) the text of resolution condemning the massacre condemning crimes committed in Srebrenica in July 1995. The resolution apologizes to the families of victims and state that: "The parliament of Serbia strongly condemns the crime committed against the Bosnian Muslim population of Srebrenica in July 1995, as determined by the International Court of Justice ruling." The resolution is adopted by majority of 127 of the 173 representatives present in the 250-seat assembly.

declaration on Serbian victims unanimously passed in the Parliament recently. Official man-hunting of Ratko Mladić, indicted for war criminal, is accompanied with furious right-wing groups' activism propagate Ratko Mladić as Serbian hero. The political memory work is even more obvious on the lower levels of quasi-political activism. A good illustration is recent case of the honorary title of *Causa Honoris* of Belgrade University to Professor Michael Walzer, worldwide known authority in the field of political theory. The nomination was publicly and institutionally contested by a group of publicly and politically active professors of Belgrade University on the ground of his article written in 1999, in which he (in ambiguous way) supports military intervention against Serbia. The argument was that acting this way Belgrade University would retrospectively legitimize NATO military intervention and that Belgrade University as a national institution is obliged to keep alive the truth of intervention, which is opposite to Walzer's view. Heavy discursive artillery was used against those (including myself) who proposed Professor Walzer for the title. Appointed University commission still deals with "circumstances" of nomination. His scientific contribution is hardly mentioned during this campaign.

What is at stake in these "memory wars" is the memory of real wars waged during the last decade of XX century. Serbia is defeated in these wars, but what was defeated in the war is a matter of bitter (and sometimes violent) political contestation. For the nationalists, it was military defeat in the unfair battle against the new American imperial project. It was ideological (for some identity-based) conflict and Serbia have to endure in her political fight against imperialism. For the moderate, it was defeat of unreasonable political project, and Serbia needs more pragmatic political approach. Liberals believes that it was defeat of immoral and shameful nationalistic project and that Serbia needs a new political approach based on radical reconstruction of political identity. Political parties are divided along these lines. Memory-based political judgments are still able to bring Serbian society over one's side of political axis or another.

Serbia is probably a dramatic case in its need to come to terms with its own past, but it is not an exception. Memory studies in the last three decades demonstrated that a new "guilt of nations" appears with democratization of history and claims for moral responsibility for the past.

Assumed responsibility presents heavy burden on legitimacy of the states, especially in international relations. (Barkan 2007)

Political memory

On the background of the Serbian experience it is possible to articulate a normative thesis of importance of stabilization of the content of political memory for political stability of the society. Political memory is an important public good because it provides a concrete public conceptualization of the collective political experience as a basis of political orientation and action. Divisions and failures in articulation might have serious consequences. According to Bruce James Smith: “Where the images of the past and the affections which attach to these (and around which the action is organized) decay or are pulled apart, where human beings have forgotten or no longer agree on what Walter Lippmann called ‘the first and last things,’ there is open up ‘a great vacuum in the public mind, yawning to be filled’, and men rush in only to exhaust themselves” (Smith 1985: 4).

Same word, “yawning gap”, is used by James Booth in another way, to refer to the loss in memory, which in turn can undermine the wholeness of society and continuity of association across time and “can be pathological, a hole or ‘gangrene’ in their midst” of community (Booth 2006: 179). In other places in the book he refers to deep holes in memory as “tectonic plates” of memory, unpredictable in their ability to undermine reality. Memory battles on filling this yawning gap, in John Keane words, are “times during which the living do battle for the hearts, minds and souls of the dead” (Keane 1988, 204). These are periods of political crisis and danger.² It is not surprising that at the dawn of war in former Yugoslavia such kind of war was

² Walter Benjamin warned on the role of preachers and prophets in period of danger: “Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.” In every society, especially “in the moment of danger”, “attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it.” (Benjamin 1968, 255).

waged by writers, historians, linguists, football fans, believers, etc. of different nations and ethnic backgrounds.³

Stabilization of the content of memory is not easy to achieve, especially after the periods in which “gifted historian” fan the spark of hope in the redemption that is coming from the past. The concept of stabilization refers to condition of equilibrium of different memories which have capacity for resistance to displacement and tendency to recover original position after displacement. Along these lines the problem of stability is defined in mathematics, physics, economy or biology. Simply, political memory is stable if it survives through the period of crisis and disturbances. Several types of equilibrium could be described as stable depending on a kind political regime, content of history and nature of mnemonic practices. What is important is a nexus between individual and group memories on the one hand, and public memory on the other. Quality of this link depends on some general features of political memory and existence of irreducible content of memory which could not be tamed by public memorization (traumatic experiences, mass crimes).

Political memory: general characteristics

For the reconstruction of the logic of formation of political memory three general characteristics are particularly important. Political memory a) is a privileged regime of social memory; b) it is interventionist and c) it pretends to authoritativeness.

a) The privileged status of political memory stems from its relation to political power. It is a memory of power, but at same time constituted and influenced by the power. Power brings the order in stock of different political memories. From the period of its formation, state takes triple role in formation of political memory: as producer of history, record keeper and agent of

³ As an illustration coming to mind bizarre memory war waged in the beginning of Yugoslav crisis in which bones of real and alleged victims of national and ideological massacres during WWII were dug up from mass graves. The bones were reburied according to respective religious ceremonies without serious identification and forensic analysis. In spite of that, respective media were over flood with horrific pictures and reports on the victimization on ethnic and ideological grounds perpetrated in the past by enemies who present actual danger (Ustashi, Communists, Chetniks). Particularly diligent was Serbian Orthodox Church, but the path of victimization was common nationalistic choice of the time (ref.).

memorization.⁴ In order to achieve this task, authority tends to establish “regimes of temporality” reproduced through mnemonic practices. These are regimes of common remembrance and common forgetting. Martha Minow has argued that “the alternation of forgetting and remembering itself etches the path of power” (Minow 1998, 119).

Sovereignty over memory is not necessary always counterproductive, as Timothy Snyder demonstrates in the case study of Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine (Snyder 2006). However, it is difficult to establish the supreme control over the interpretation of the past. As Reinhart Koselleck’s argues in his study of the semantic of temporalization *Future Past*, the present memory is always under the influence of future past - horizons of the past expectation. Simply, “[P]resent experience was not punctiform, but included a ‘comet’s tail’ of just-past experience, a phenomenon to which he [Husserl] referred as the ‘living present’” (Danziger 2008, 181). Political control over public memory is always partial, since decisions are always made in the context already “saturated by memory”.

b) Political memory is a subject of deliberative politics of memory aiming at some important values: peace, reconciliation, justice, democratization. These policies include variety of legal, administrative and political measures which bring to public political imperative of remembrance. Their value and effectiveness is widely analyzed for different political contexts, under the titles of politics of memory and transitional justice. The aim is to intervene in “spontaneous” or “natural” course of individual and communicative memory in order to correct its fragility, corruption and natural tendency of forgetting unpleasant events. This is a kind of distribution of memory work based on impossibility of everyone to remember everything and all the time.

The problem is that political intervention in social milieu of memory has tendency to become ideological. Ideological abuse of memory is a kind of manipulation with aim to justify or legitimize “system or order or power”. It is corruptive form of political memory for it tries to establish hegemony of ruling memory (Ricoeur 2004, 82-83; Northon 1993; Radstone and

⁴ Hegel was among the first who recognized and articulated these intentions of the states in his *Lectures on Philosophy of History*, G.W.F. Hegel stated that “the uniform course of events ... is no subject of serious remembrance; though distinct transactions or turns of fortune, may rouse *Mnemosyne* to form conceptions of them ... But it is the State which first presents subject - matter that is not only *adapted* to the prose of History, but involves the production of such history in the very progress of its own being.” (Hegel 2001,76-77).

Hodgkin 2003). According to Paul Ricoeur, idea of just memory “comes through our reflection on the abuses of a memory manipulated by ideology”. (Ricoeur 2004, 68)

c) Political memory pretend to be an authoritative memory: duty based ~~or obliged~~ memory supported by consideration of legitimacy. What is at stake is political morality, possibility of mnemonic transformation of a body of formal commands and laws into lasting and binding obligations. Consideration of legitimacy depends on a kind of respective memory regime.⁵ Truth based memory regimes prefers discontinuity between individual and group memories on the one hand and public memory on the other. A good illustration of this position is Hannah Arendt’s statement that “The best that can be achieved is to know precisely what was, and to endure this knowledge, and then to wait and see what comes of knowing and enduring”. (Arendt 1968, 20) Identity based memory regimes would prefer continuity in combination with responsibility. What is important is protection and preservation of identity related memories (Margalit, Booth). Democratic regime prefers recognition through critical contestation (Bell, 2008).

Difficult cases are those which include memory of traumatic experiences, mass killings, and massive violation of human rights. No political memory regime is able to stabilize public memory on that basis. These cases have to be addressed on the basis of universalistic moral imperatives rather than on particularistic political memories. But these considerations are going well beyond present argumentation, unless we accepted possibility of global public memory.

References:

Arendt, Hannah (1968) ‘On Humanity in Dark Times, in Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, New York: Harcourt Brace & Company

⁵ For example, Bruce Smith’s recognize three assumptions, but they are valid only for a kind of political regime he calls republic. First, that continuity between individual and public (collective) memories is essential for building stable and meaningful social and political ties. The thesis relies on Walter Lippmann work *Public Philosophy* (1955). Second, political memory is a kind of concrete conceptualization that reduces political action to stories, images, and habits. The conceptualization is able to preserve virtues and vices of action and to transfer this knowledge to the others. This is what he found in the works of Machiavelli, Burke and Tocqueville. Third, the remembered stocks of memories have to be big enough to create a “fabric of understanding” and provide means for perpetual reconceptualization of political memory.

- Assmann, Adelaide (2006), "Memory, Individual and Collective", u: Robert E. Goodin and Charles Tilly (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis*, Oxford University Press
- Barkan, Elazar (2007), *Krivica nacija: restitucija i ispravljanje istorijskih nepravdi*, prev. Lidija Kapičić, Stylos, Beograd
- Benjamin, Walter (1969), "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zolin, New York: Schocken Books
- Bell, Duncan (2008), "Agonistic Democracy and Politics of Memory", *Constellations*, Vol. 15, No. 1
- Blustein, Jeffrey (2008), *The Moral Demand of Memory*, Cambridge University Press, New York
- Booth, James W. (2006), *Communities of Memory: On Witness, Identity and Justice*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London
- Danziger, Kurt (2008), *A History of Memory*, Cambridge University Press
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich *The Philosophy of History*, translator, J. Sibree, M.A. Batoche Books, Kitchener, Ontario
- Keane, John (1988) 'More theses on the philosophy of history', in James Tully (ed.), *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics*, Cambridge: Polity, 204–217.
- Koselleck, Reinhart (2004) *Futures past : on the semantics of historical time* / by Reinhart Koselleck ; translated and with an introduction by Keith Tribe, Columbia University Press
- Maier, Charles S. (1993) "A Surfeit of Memory? Reflections on History, Melancholy and Denial", *History & Memory*, 5, 2, 136–52.
- Margalit, Avishai (2002), *The Ethics of Memory*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press
- Melluci, Alberto (2006), "Pamćenje, solidarnost, identitet", u: Cerruti, Ferio (prir.), *Identitet i politika*, prev. Vesna Pavković, Politička kultura, Zagreb
- Minow, Marta (1998), *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness: Facing History after Genocide and Mass Violence*, Boston: Beacon Press
- Müller Jan-Werner (2004), "Introduction: the power of memory, the memory of power and the power over memory", in: Müller Jan-Werner (ed), *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe*, Cambridge University Press
- Niče, Fridrih (1986), *O koristi i šteti istorije za život*, prev. Milan Tabaković, Grafos, Beograd

Norton, Ann (1993), "Ruling Memory", *Political Theory*, Vol. 21. No.3

Ricoeur, Paul (2002), *Memory, History and Forgetting*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago/London

Sennet, Richard (1998), "Disturbing Memories", u Patricia Fara and Karalyn Paterson (eds), *Memory*, Cambridge: Darwin College

Snyder, Timothy (2004), "Memory of sovereignty and sovereignty over memory: Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine, 1939–1999", in: Müller Jan-Werner (ed), *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe*, Cambridge University Press

Smith, Bruce James (1985), *Politics and Remembrance*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey

Ugrešić, Dubravka (1998) *The Culture of Lies: Antipolitical Essays*, London: Phoenix House