



Literature Review:

The role of nation states in managing memories of disputed territories

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Part 5 of 8: The Politics of Remembering
– Ammar Ali Jan

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The Politics of Remembering – Ammar Ali Jan

In this section Ammar Ali Jan (Assistant Professor, Forman Christian College, Pakistan) explores how the study of 'history' has evolved alongside notions of the 'nation state'. In turn, reactions against this by historians to make 'ordinary people' the subject of historical processes, demonstrates how memory is central in this battle ground. Through the case study of partition in 1947 between India and Pakistan, Ammar discusses how the processes of forgetting and 'silencing' are also crucial when engaging with memory.

Memory studies has emerged as a major discipline over the past few decades. The discipline points to a larger tension within the realm of modern social sciences in relation to the study of the past. The modern study of "History" is a specific way of relating the past to the present. Leopold Von Ranke (1981) was perhaps the most prolific and influential thinker who worked on methodological challenges in writing the history of any particular subject.

Apart from emphasizing coherent narratives based on evidence, the Rankean notion of history also seeks to compartmentalize time into neat categories of the past, present and future. This maneuver permitted historians to construct linear narratives of historical events but placed them in sharp contrast to more popular ways of remembering the past. These includes myths, folklore, poetry, literature and other methods through which the past is remembered in the present. Yet, these forms of remembering do not create a rigid distinction between the past and the present, as the past perpetually seeps into the present in order to reshape the latter.

If we look at the study of past undertaken by historians, we can make a broad distinction with the ahistorical imaginings of the past. If popular memory allowed for a movement of time that was interlaced with elements of the past, present and future, historical narratives had to be made "objective" by teasing out the past from the present. In other words, popular memory was confronted with the "disciplined memory" constructed by the historian through a careful study of the past. The age of the archive was born (Hobsbawm, 1998).

While objectivity was one of the primary goals of this new form of remembering, soon it became increasingly evident that the discipline of history itself could not extricate itself from the historical context in which it came into existence. This context was shaped by the emergence of the nation-state that required a disciplining of popular memory in order to impose a national identity on a disparate population (Chatterjee, 1994). This political project required a homogenization of the past in which historical events could be narrated in a linear trajectory that ends with the realization of the nation-state. History, which appeared to be “objective”, now lost its innocence as it was deemed to be manipulating the past to serve a concrete political project (Guha, 2003).

The imbrication of history with state power led major debates on methodology among historians. British historians such as E.P. Thompson (1966) and Eric Hobsbawm (1998) developed the notion of “History from below”. They aimed to decenter national histories in order to make ordinary people the subject of historical processes through a methodology that focused on quotidian forms to resistance to understand major events from the past. Their interventions turned History into an overt battleground for shaping memory, further diminishing claims of history to represent an objective view of the past.

Memory Studies

Such debates have placed memory as the central theme in history writing. This begs the question; is memory itself a force in history? Or to put it differently, can memory of the past play a role in shaping the past, present and future of society? And finally, what does the recognition of memory’s importance do to History as a subject which posited itself in contrast to popular memory?

Perhaps the biggest catalyst towards memory studies was an interrogation of the tragedy of the Holocaust. The problem arose with the lack of conventional evidence to match the scale of crimes and barbarity experienced during the genocide of Jewish people in Europe. The fact that it was difficult to find an official archive of the events meant that the legal as well

as historical records had to rely on witness testimony, foregrounding affect as a major component of history and memory (Hirsch and Spitzer, 2009). The issue became more complicated by debates on the political import of this memory to ensure that such catastrophes are no longer repeated by nation-states.

James E. Young's work on the Holocaust shows the ways in which the past continues to be weaved into the present through the work of memory (1994). In particular, his work on monuments and public art show how objects related to the past are invested with a power to both reflect past events but become political symbols within the present. This work has been further developed by historian of India, Chris Moffat, who shows how monuments dedicated to anti-colonial activists become sites for political claim-making in contemporary India (2019).

What is at stake is not only the details of the past, but also the ways in which memory itself becomes an agent of history. Yet, such an approach produces a dilemma for historians who believed in creating a disciplined memory were confronted with myths and oral history in place of the archive, and affective attachments in place of official documents. Not only is the importance of popular stories and actions become integral to history writing, but also the hitherto ignored questions of silence, forgetting and trauma became major issues in engaging with memory. In other words, there was increasing borrowing from anthropology and psychology as historians and political scientists attempted to deal with the problem of popular memory.

Capitalism, Memory and History

The turn towards memory studies has led an intersection between history, theory and psychoanalysis. Perhaps one the earliest manifestations of this trend can be seen in the works of the Frankfurt School that aimed to combine Marxist theory with Freudian analyses. Ernst Bloch, one of the pioneering members of the schools, argued that modernity desires a homogenous, linear time for the present. Yet, the present remains haunted by vestiges from the past that continue to interrupt the perpetuation of the present (1995). Bloch criticized

the Left for failing to grasp that the hyper-rationalism of modernism is unable to connect to the dreams of the past that are conjured up by subaltern classes in the present. The victory of the fascists was partly a result of their ability to mobilize these latent “pre-modern” sentiments and turning them into a terrifying political project (Bloch, 1995).

This idea was further developed by Walter Benjamin who asserted that the dreams of the past had a subterranean presence in the present. This presence of the past made any clear distinction between the past and the present difficult, as the past could be mobilized to overthrow the existing rationality of the capitalist system. Reason was then not on the side of linear progress, but on the side of those who could disrupt this alleged “progress” by remembering the alternative paths foreclosed by the onslaught of capitalism (Benjamin, 1995).

One can argue that memory remained central to Marxist thinking since the publication of *Das Kapital*. In the book, Marx discusses the problem of primitive accumulation as a process of loot and plunder that opened the possibility of capitalist social relations. Yet, Capital wipes out this history from popular memory in order to make commodity exchange the natural state of human affairs (2010). This erasure of memory is central to the commodity fetishism characteristic of capitalist society, where the loop of production and consumption prevents access to a past (and present) of violent dispossession.

Therefore, repression of memory remains a central feature of modernity both for the homogenizing tendency of nation-states as well as the fetishism of the commodity. In such a situation of erasure, remembering becomes an important tool for challenging the status quo and for asserting erased identity. To that extent, one can argue that battles over controlling and remembering the past are at the heart of modernity.

Discussion from Indian historiography

The Indian sub-continent has seen contestation over memory as an integral part of forming national identity. One of the main reasons for this conflict was the excessive anxiety of

creating a national identity on a region that contained a multiplicity of religions, languages and ethnicities. To discipline these disparate histories into a homogenous “national” narrative required discursive violence which often turned into physical violence among different communities. Perhaps the most spectacular example of the violent potential of these contesting memories can be viewed in the antagonism between Hindus and Muslims, a conflict that has led to repeated violence including the infamous riots during the partition of 1947.

One of the disturbing elements of the 1947 violence was that despite mass killings and abductions, the events have not been officially memorialized (Kapila, 2010). This led many scholars to engage with the question of silence and forgetting as productive processes that play a role in identity formation. For example, the basis of Pakistani and Indian national identity is premised on the originary violence of 1947, when the ambiguous divide between Hindus and Muslims was cemented through unprecedented communal violence. In that sense, this violence was generative of the nation-states who could claim legitimacy by pointing towards the impossibility of communal harmony by referring to this event.

Yet the scale of violence meant that this originary event had to be disavowed by the newly created nation-states. Urvashi Butalia’s (2000) work on the survivors of the partition violence showed how “silence” was one of the most important coping mechanisms of women who survived abductions and rape. Many were living with their former abductors and had converted to their rapist/husband’s religion. The silence and shame associated with individual families was also reflected in the state’s relation to the events of partition, as female bodies were often equated with national honor that had been allegedly defiled.

For this reason, there are no monuments or memorials for the victims of partition violence. Instead, there is a generalized silence that allows for the perpetuation of national identity without acknowledging the violence that cemented it. Such silencing has again compelled historians to enter the realm of psychology to see how certain events are remembered, forgotten or disavowed in order to build local communities in the present. For example,

Gyan Pandey's work titled "Remembering Partition" shows how certain aspects of the violence of the partition are highlighted while others are emphasized to construct feelings of communal belonging. He also critiques nationalist historiography for its claims to neutrality even while it indulges in rewriting the past to fit the myth of an eternal, homogenous Indian nation (Pandey, 2002).

The recurrent communal violence has also led to discussions on the place of trauma in history. Indeed, the reason for Hindu mobilization against the Babri mosque in 1992 was that it was allegedly built at the site of a temple destroyed by Muslim invaders. Thus, the destruction of the mosque by Hindu mobs and the subsequent killings of hundreds of Muslims was justified in the name of the historical trauma felt by Hindus for their violent subjugation at the hands of Muslim invaders. This episode led to debate among historians on whether collective trauma can be sustained over generations and be activated in the present (Pandey, 1994). Such debates have also taken place in the context of slavery in the United States, where psychologists are working with historians to see whether trauma can be transferred over generations.

One of the classic works in this genre in the Indian sub-continent is by Romila Tharpar (2005) who investigates the case of temple razing in the 16th century by the Muslim king Babur and trace the history of trauma around this event. In her study, Tharpar shows that there was no historical memory of trauma associated with the events among Hindus. This changed in the mid-19th century when the British seized upon this marginal event and publicized it throughout India to mobilize Hindu sentiment in favor of their war efforts in Afghanistan (Babur entered India through Afghanistan).

This story was later picked by Hindu reformers who were looking to consolidate their community through stories of collective suffering. The trauma from this 16th century event appears in public discussion in the late 19th century and becomes a national issue only at the end of the 20th century (Tharpar, 2005). In other words, this was a case of manufactured trauma that was produced and deployed in order to intervene in existing conflicts.

Therefore, much like personal memory, collective memory is open for manipulation, where the elements of highlighting and underemphasizing certain events, inducing silence or creating phantoms from the past in order to confront the battles in the present.

It is such contestation over methodology, history and memory that propelled the formation of the Subaltern Studies School in India. The claim of this group of scholars was that history writing remained an elite affair that did not center the people in their analysis. In this sense, they were close to People's History project in Great Britain led by E.P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawn. Yet, they made a stronger intervention on methodology by claiming that non-European history could not be grasped without engaging with the multiple temporalities that characterize it and the concomitant imaginaries that proliferate the public sphere (Guha, 2010).

In his essay titled "The Public Life of History: An Argument from India", Dipesh Chakrabarty examines the ways in which history becomes embroiled in debates about representation in postcolonial India. Instead of a neutral and objective belief in history, different caste and ethnic groups claimed that anyone unaffiliated to their community had no right to record their history. In other words, history writing became an avenue to engage in producing specific memories that can intervene in contemporary conflicts, as well as right historical wrongs from the past (Chakrabarty, 2008). In this way, history no longer remained a discipline contained at the site of the university, but was immediately implicated in social and political battles. In this sense, history could not rise above the historically sedimented conflicts in society, but had to respond to the demands imposed by these struggles in the present.

Subaltern Studies has also allowed us to rethink the consciousness of ordinary people away from its depictions in the archive. For example, both Indian nationalist historiography and colonial writings depicted Indians devotion to Gandhi as irrational and backwards. The trope of backwardness was used by colonial powers to prevent indigenous rule, but it was also used by nationalist elites to use high-handed tactics against subaltern resistance in

postcolonial India. Yet, Subalternists such as Shahid Amin (1995) demonstrated how beyond the veneer of simplicity, the peasants of India were reinventing the image of Gandhi to grasp the social world they inhabited and prepare a fight against it.

For example, while Gandhi had little to say on the forceful overthrow of land relations, the peasantry developed myths about Gandhi's decision to abolish landlordism and usury. They also spread myths suggesting that Gandhi had permitted the use of violence against colonial officials, a stark contrast to Gandhi's official position of non-violence (Amin, 1995). Similarly, Chris Moffat has studied how the image of another revolutionary figure, Bhagat Singh, is conjured up by groups as different as liberals, communists, and Hindu/Sikh extremists for political claim-making in the present. What is at stake is not always a separation of myth from facts, but the development of a narrative that can aid in battles in the present, a move that cements tension between objective history and the exigencies of politics (Moffat, 2019).

Conclusion: Agonism and the Way Forward

This discussion brings us to the framework of our research set up by Anna Bull and Hans Lauge Hansen (2016). In their remarkable essay on the subject, they compare antagonistic and cosmopolitan forms of memory. An antagonistic form of remembering the past requires the presence of permanent division between enemies and friends, a form that lends itself to nationalist, chauvinist and even fascist forms of politics. The Hindu-Muslim divide discussed above is characteristic of an antagonistic form of memory that fixes an enemy in history, leading to deadly clashes between the two communities.

On the other hand, the cosmopolitan form of remembering aims to counter this tendency by claiming a multiplicity of experiences and celebrating them in a culturally diverse society. Yet, such emphasis on multiculturalism does not take into account the divisions and antagonisms that shape any political conjuncture and opens itself to criticism from those opposing a stifling status quo. Inadvertently, cosmopolitanism appears to be a conservative

form of thinking that does represses social contradictions and the possibility of conflict and change.

Agonism aims to bridge this divide by allowing for the possibility of conflict without fixing the lines between friend and enemies. The contingent and fluid nature of political contestation means that political and ideological battles would not be repressed in the name of harmonious whole under the name of “humanity” or “Europe.” On the other hand, it allows for the perpetual reconstitution of political identities based on ideological demarcations within a conjuncture, rather than a permanent division among historically determined communal affiliations.

The task of relating memory to conflict is then two-fold. First, how do we read the history of conflict without making conflicting identities permanent? Second, how do we accept the antagonisms of the present while studying the past without succumbing to the temptation of fixing the past through the lens of the present? Agonism opens the possibility of navigating this complex terrain while proposing forms of remembering that can further the cause of social justice while avoiding an antagonistic approach to historically sedimented conflicts. What is at stake is not only politics, but also the way we conceive history in the modern world.

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