

Societal psychology, history, identity and narratives

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Why are history, identity and social representations European issues from a social psychological perspective?

Mainstream social psychology is dominated by North-American paradigms, which are rooted in the pragmatic philosophical tradition. Historical consciousness of the North-American society is low. Historical perspectives, such as Gergen's social constructionist approach (e.g., Gergen, 1985), did not gain popularity. History there is not an everyday issue, whereas history and tradition permeates European life. This simple fact derives from the much longer and rockier history of the European societies.

The idea of group history, as collective memory of the past, was first proposed by Halbwachs (1980). We should note that, in terminology, Halbwachs distinguished between "memory" and "history". He conceived the former as group specific whereas the latter as "divine" or objective, as positivist historians, e.g. Ranke do.

Contemporary historians, e.g., Hayden White (1981) or Peter Burke (1992) convincingly argue that not only oral history, but also historiography is a form of collective memory. Halbwachs' theory claims that individual memory based on the neuronal capacities of humans is social in origin. The past is constructed according to the needs of the present by social frames. The theory also explains forgetting: everything decays that do not have social frame of reference in the present. He did not elaborate in details, but he also refers to the close interrelatedness of collective memory (thus history), and group identity (i.e., identity of the group members).

There are historically distant and proximal reasons why I count identity a European issue for social psychology. Distant reasons draw back to the middle age when the European national states have emerged. The concept of nation have ever since played an eminent role in European history inasmuch people have lived in national groups and have felt identity with their respective nations. Although the development of the three historical regions of Europe –West, Central and East—was different, they are common from West to East that history is national history, and national identity is a substantial component of the social identity of the European people. This is also the case in professional historiography, despite the contemporary flourishing of micro history or social history.

The proximal reasons are related to the cataclysms of the twentieth century European history. Tajfel's social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981, Tajfel and Turner, 1986), and its offspring, Turner's self-categorisation theory (Turner, 1987) are ultimately meant to explain irrational forces of the human nature. This irrationality ultimately originates from identity needs of people who live in social groups, and articulate their identity in these groups. Distortions of national identity are salient in the past century's extremist movements. This stresses the necessity of psychological theorizing on the human social existence, in which identity is a core issue.

Representation became a European issue in the contemporary social psychology by Moscovici's social representations theory (Moscovici, 1976, 1984, 1988). As opposed to theories of various kinds of cognitive representations, social representations theory does not stop at the cognitive system of the individual or groups of individuals. It directs inquiry into how representations are forged by social forces according to the needs of social groups, and how they are transmitted in communication. Cognitive categories such as attitudes, stereotypes, values, opinions, etc., and manipulations with these categories are only part of the story. Identification of corresponding communication process, such as e.g., dissemination, propagation, or propaganda in the famous psychoanalysis study, as well as identification of the social conditions that give rise to evolving certain representations and not others are in the focus of the study. This construction process is not random. "In effect social representations, to rephrase a common expression, are ways of world making. There is nothing arbitrary in this process, since the regularities of thought, language and life in society all act together to delimit the possibilities. That is why the concept of construction, once it is trivialized, loses its exact, emancipating character, if it is envisaged as a simple product of talking and of consensus among individuals. If anything goes, then the act of constructing is less a creative liberty of reality than an illusion about the conditions of this liberty" (Moscovici, 1988, p. 231).

I conceive history, identity and social representations the core concepts of societal psychology. In this sense, societal psychology is a branch of social psychology, which retains methodological individualism and resources of empirical inquiry by relating individual processes to social processes.

The above paragraphs may sound Europe-centric, therefore I should add a caveat. Of course, I do not think that scholarship would geographically be divided. There are valuable works in societal psychology in all around the globe. I only claim that this type of theorising has a better intellectual climate and a historical tradition on the European ground.

Collective memory and social representations

It is not a mere play with words if we say that Halbwachs' collective memory and Moscovici's social representations can be translated into each other. Both concepts have been worked out on Durkheim's lead, explicitly contrasted to Durkheim's collective representation concept (Durkheim, 1974). Whereas collective representations, as social facts, were instrumental for Durkheim in detaching sociology from psychology, both Halbwachs and Moscovici try to conceptualise the interplay between social and psychological phenomena. This psychological leaning is reflected in coining the term "memory" instead of representation by Halbwachs, and "social" representation instead of both collective (sociological) and individual (cognitive) representations by Moscovici.

This psychological stance is obvious when they more or less explicitly refer to the human cognitive capacities when talking about the material of the representation. Halbwachs emphasises that as opposed to the abstractedness of thinking, memory is always concrete. He says (1941, p. 151) that "Any truth should take the form of a particular, concrete event, person, or space, concept and image should merge, so as to be preserved in collective memory. Moscovici (1984, p. 33) emphasises that concept and image are undetachable two sides of the same coin in social representations.

For both Halbwachs and Moscovici, representations are constructed around a central pattern. Halbwachs calls it as image, Moscovici, as figurative nucleus. It is clear, however that they allow other organizational forms, as well. Halbwachs explicitly writes about the preserving and organizing force of narrative. Moscovici is rather implicit on the narrative function, however, when talking about "finalities" or goals in

social representation process, he refers to the essential narrative category of intentional or goal-directed action (see László, 1997).

There are, however major differences between the two approaches. One of these differences, I think, explains the different affinity of the two theories exhibit toward the problem of group identity. Although memories or representations are constructed in social communication according to both theories, Halbwachs' collective memories encompass the whole past of the group, whereas Moscovici's social representations are clearly directed toward the "new" phenomena, i.e., the present life of the group. Halbwachs contrasts collective memories with scientific knowledge, but he is not interested in communication between the two knowledge domains. He concentrates exclusively on the accumulation and preservation of group experiences. On the contrary, SR theory is preoccupied with transformation (or "familiarisation") from scientific knowledge into everyday knowledge. As Moscovici notes, novel phenomena are produced and/or first being tackled by sciences in modern societies. This knowledge is transformed to everyday knowledge by social representations. (In earlier centuries the rout was reverse: scientific knowledge was fuelled from the common sense.)

At this point it seems to be useful to introduce a distinction of *cultural* versus *communicative* memory, which has been proposed by Asmann (1992). The communicative memory embraces memories from the proximate past, shared with contemporaries. A characteristic example is the generation memory. It emerges in time and it decays with time, i.e. with the decay of its carriers. The span of communicative memory is about 80 years, three or four generations. Several interesting, and so far unexplained phenomena were observed in autobiographical memory studies that concern communicative memory of a society from the perspective of the individual. For instance, regardless of the type of the event, those events prove to be the most memorable for each generation, which they experienced in their late adolescence-early adulthood (between age 15-20, see, Rubin, 1996). Forty years, i.e., half of the communicative memory period is again a critical threshold. After elapsing forty years, those who experienced a significant event in their adulthood, fearing that their memories disappear when they are parting, feel to

be motivated to record and transmit their experiences. A close example is the proliferation of the holocaust literature from the mid-eighties.

	Communicative memory	Cultural memory
Content	Historical experiences in the individual life course	Myth of origin, archaic history and absolute past
Form	Informal, natural, based on interpersonal communication	Formal, festive, ceremonial
Media	Human memory, immediate experiences, oral tradition	Recorded, objectified in writing, dancing, pictures, etc.
Time structure	80-100 years, 3-4 generations	Absolute past to the mythical times
Carriers	contemporaries	Professional carriers of tradition

In terms of communicative and cultural memory, Halbwach’s theory is rather directed to cultural, whereas Moscovici’s theory to the communicative memory.

How are related collective or social representational processes to identity?

The concept of identity has at least two meanings. Originating from the Latin *idem* and *ipse* categories, it means identity or perfect similarity with something on one hand, and identity or “sameness” in time and space on the other. For distinguishing these two aspects of identity, Ricoeur (1991) suggests to use the category *ipseity* for the latter. In social psychology a similar distinction is made with adjectival constructs. *Social identity* designates belongingness to a social group, sharing its norms, getting value and security from the group. Stability and continuity of the self despite the manifold of changes in one’ life course is expressed by the term *personal identity*. For social identity, collective memories or social representations are relevant, because participating in the representation process and sharing the representations

in the group, in other words having a common rationality are reinforcing to the group members, moreover, shared social representations symbolically set the boundaries of the group. This is the train of thought in which Breakwell (1993) and her group attempts to integrate social identity theory and social representations theory (see also Elejabarrieta, 1994). There are some interesting studies in this direction. For instance, Liu et al. (1999) in this framework compared social representations of New Zealand's innate Maoris and immigrant Pakehas.

There is a more dynamic aspect, however, of collective memory, which serves maintaining group identity, and connects individuals to the group.

Most part of collective memory is part of the cultural memory. Several anthropological observations in illiterate archaic cultures show that knowledge of the origin and past of the group has been vital for tribal society. Specialists, like *griots* in African tribes, were trusted to preserve and narrate history of the group. Ceremonial history-performances were usually accompanied by music and dance (Assmann, 1991). Specialists of group memory enjoyed privileged status in the group hierarchy. They played central role in the initiation rites, in which adolescents acquired adult identity partly by "merging" into the group's history (Leach, 1976). Historical consciousness or the "sense of the past" (Shils, 1981) thus is not the invention of the literacy.

Literacy, however, dramatically changed historical consciousness. As opposed to oral history, which is tightly bond to the group and provides cohesive force to it, history gradually became a matter of epistemological curiosity, a record of the past "sine ira at studio". New specialists emerge –priests, chronicians, historians, not the last writers and artists--, who preserve in writing or other symbolic form the past of the group for cultural memory. This process is depicted by Hayden White (1981), who distinguishes three stages in historiography from *annals* (first appearing in the ancient Egypt) through medieval *chronicles* to *historical narration*. This narrative character of historiography, i.e., that historians set "bare facts" of the annals into the web of political intentions casts doubt to the objectivity of historiography as a science and initiates severe discussions within the discipline. There has several alternatives been suggested, e.g., micro-history, social history, rehabilitation of Oral History, structural history, etc., to replace narrative political history, but this type of historiography based on the critique of historical sources apparently has its

strongholds. Bruner (1986), one of the leading proponents of the narrative approach in psychology explains this perseverance by the built-in capacities and needs of the human mind to construct psychological and cultural reality through narrative thought. National-political history: themes of power, leadership, territory, etc., -- remain major topics of historiography not only because they are well amenable to narration, i.e., for their *narratibility*, but also for their contribution to the nation's cultural memory. Of course, this type of historical-cultural memory, which is objectified in history books, monuments, national holiday ceremonies, etc., in socially and ideologically diverse modern societies or with Levi-Strauss' term "hot cultures", is also exposed to changes. Not only ongoing history, elevating and representing certain events in social communication or communicative memory to historical status become issues for collective memory (for research in this domain see Pennebaker, Paez and Rimé, 1997), but old stories of old events buried into cultural memory are revived time-to-time, often even without finding new documents or evidences. One of the most conspicuous features of any radicalism is the striving to erase the past, and to invent a possibly uniform new one.

Nevertheless, history is plural in many senses. Not in the sense that there would not be correspondences between the different group- or national histories, or world history would be a meaningless concept. There is certain stability or canonicity, particularly from Western perspective, for what belongs to world history. In a recent study, Pennebaker at al. (2001) found consistencies in six countries for listing the most significant historical events for the last 10, 100 and 1000 years. However, this study has also pointed out differences along nationality, age, and gender. Laszlo at al. (1999, 2000) obtained similar results with a Hungarian sample.

Not only selection of historical events, but also ways of explanations (scientific, rational, and narrative, see Morawski, 1984), and within each way of explanation, modes of interpretation may change. To borrow Peter Burke's (1992) example, the narrative explanation of "The commands were late, because Philip II hesitated" is radically different from the scientific or structural explanation of "The commands were late, because it took weeks for 16th century ships to cross the Mediterranean." But the commands could be late, because Philip II had a different plan, or because of meteorological circumstances.

Professionals of history making by digging and interrogating the past are shaping the past or the cultural memory of social groups, including ethnic groups of nations. This plural and changing past becomes a matter of communicative memory, a matter of debate and cultivation or even war (see the 19th century nationalism or the contemporary Balkan wars) not only in academic circles, but also in social groups, and it is what actually connects group identity with personal identity.

How people re-tell and ruminate historical past of their groups according to the group's actual needs is a matter of social representation process. Not only scientifically articulated new phenomena become objects of social representations, but "old" historical issues are time-to-time re-processed –sometimes in the light of new results in historiography, sometimes parallel, or even in contradiction with it. These social representations are particularly important in maintaining group identity in the sense of categorical identity (group boundaries and values) as well as continuity, and they connect individuals to the group in both sense. They naturally take narrative forms. Study of these representations are revealing to the *identity states and identity qualities of groups*.

I will illustrate the above statement with an example taken from a recent study of ours (Laszlo et al., 1999). We asked a 500 sample of Hungarian subjects to tell the story of the most positive and most negative Hungarian, and, in the same way, European historical events. Typology and time span of the selected events are interesting in themselves, and they are particularly meaningful, if we compare them with Pennebaker et al. (2001) results. Here I concentrate on only one aspect of the results.

World War II is the most frequent event among the negative events for both Hungarian and European history. The number of mentioning the Holocaust, however, sharply differed between the Hungarian and the European World War II stories. Whereas in the "European" World war II stories 22% of the subjects mentioned it, in the "Hungarian" stories this percentage was only 6%. This result would speak for itself, if further results of the narrative analysis did not contribute to the interpretation. Narratives necessarily involve causal explanation of actions. It implies the attribution of responsibility for the actions. In accord with the classic

Heiderian view this attribution can be internal (own group's, i.e. Hungarian responsibility) or external (other groups or external circumstances are responsible for the action). For both, European and Hungarian World war II stories, the cause of the Holocaust (if this element of the war is mentioned at all) is almost exclusively the German fascism, i.e., Hungarians, even Hungarian fascists do not have any share in it. We can, of course, further think of the productivity and functions of this type of defence, but it certainly defects agency potential of the group, in this case, Hungarians as a group.

Another example will give some evidence for this. The mentality that "history unfolds beyond and above us, we are not responsible for it" occurs in the stories of positive historical events. The system's change in 1990 was mentioned as one of the positive events in the Hungarian history only by 9% of the respondents, and active agency, such as the Pan-European picnic, or opening up the border for East-German tourists, was scarcely mentioned.

These illustrative examples point to the role of agency in history-stories for events in the proximate past available for the communicative memory, i.e., represented in social communication. The paper has argued that not only narratives that refer to the proximate past become part of the communicative memory, but also those, culturally stored historical narratives that are embodied in history books, as well as in objects of several art forms from historical novel to architecture, which are time-to-time re-activated and re-represented in social communication. Thereby they reflect several psychological qualities –intentions, capacities, traumas, intergroup relations, etc.—relevant to the group's identity and its current state.

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