

Migrant Memories and Temporality

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Social memory does not exist only as a collection of remembrances that a group recognizes as theirs. Much more than simple forms of expression of memory, the more or less ritualized situations it is involved in serve to express its continuity. Rituals are an attempt to preserve the cultural identity of a people, or a section of a people. It is clear that the social imaginary more often than not tends to give them a very big part to play. And so rituals appear to be an expression of *memory* that should be represented, or presented again, as synonymous with *history*. This imaginary sets up memory as something absolute: it must know everything. Symbolically confused with history, memory may even, in this imaginary, make it possible for people to find their place in the world. Memory and history may then be the elements making up *reason*. In losing their memory – or their history – they would lose the ability to distinguish and discern.

This omnipotent, omnivorous imaginary forgets that the writing of history also moves forwards with gaps, with lapses, whether momentary or not, partial or not. The imaginary overlooks the fact that, without forgetting, memory could quite simply not exist, because it would suffocate under the over-abundant, infinite accumulation of that prolific, dominating god, history.

For the migrant, for the migrant memory's imaginary, the present seems a terrifying challenge because it can cause loss of memory, loss of the motherland and kinship that can soothe us just as it can inhibit and embarrass us. Even notions of travelling, instability, wandering tend to lose their charm and their effectiveness. What happens is a leap between one fixed *point* and another.

It is important to highlight something that normally goes unnoticed, even by anthropologists. I am referring to the notion that a ritual is conscious of *its own origins*, which is inaccurate. While it is ignorant of its own history, the ritual associated with memory has the curious, paradoxical characteristic that it is culturally charged with reproducing . . . history!

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What follows could mostly be generalized, but migrants' memory is their horizon. We have only to think occasionally of those ritual situations to have an idea of their *diversity*. Thus church services, festivals, commemorations of historical events, meals and talks are examples that reflect the huge 'internal' difference such phenomena can display. But something unites and shall we say *organizes* these phenomena as agents of preservation of social memory, the social memory of migrants and their effort – as well as their pleasure and struggle – insofar as they somehow perpetuate what they feel is their historico-cultural heritage.

These ritual situations are extremely important because they are, in my view, privileged forms of acting out memory. Not just any acting out, or one that has a purely individual impact, but a collective representation where the audience is given the opportunity to *see*. The opportunity to see oneself looking at others, in a mutual reinforcement of looks and actions dictated, or rather occasioned, by the existence of a code common to all, a code recognizable by all: that of ritualized memory in a dance, a mass, a church, a community life, a civic commemoration.

This *unifying character* of the ritual code is absolutely fundamental for it to be understood. It is the feeling of belonging that is confirmed by the presence of those we consider our equals, our peers from the same origins. And the repeated ritual of memory makes possible a unique imaginative situation that consists of *experiencing the community* at the same time as we observe it. A simultaneous experience and visibility that are mutually reinforcing . . .

It is not because the rituals of memory have a character of reunion, which is clearly homogenizing, that they should be seen – that would be naïve – as a simple type of suspension of history by emphasizing the primal scene of union. The rituals of memory are not, as might ingenuously be supposed, simple representations of communion, celebrating *communitas*, the perfect articulation of the interpreters of one same code. An *anthropology of memory* could help us to understand this question, as we shall see later.

Social memory seems to be preserved by certain groups that take it upon themselves to act in order that events such as those mentioned above might take place. And I am not referring in particular to the practical aspects of organizing a party or a service. I am alluding to the *unequal division of ritual knowledge* and its *social effects*. In any complex society, any emigrant community, not all the members take responsibility for perpetuating social memory – and among those who do take part, not all have the same importance, the same function, the same role.

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There is no doubt that socio-cultural analysis of social memory, its rites and institutions, is an essential research task. In this way I think we would be encouraged to observe and distinguish *who* attracts the attention of which particular group to *which* aspects of memory to be rehearsed and in what different ways. It is nearly always the same people who take this on board. I would almost venture to say that there are 'castes' of preservers, 'castes' that are not the same worldwide in their significance, which is unique for each type of activity, but who do have the general function – assigned by whom and how maintained? – of *preserving themselves* and *preserving the*

heritage that is seen as common to all. A heritage that is therefore considered as an antidote to forgetting and absence.

What we have just said is related to a sociology or anthropology of ritual that both breaks up the apparent uniformity and homogeneity of ritual and brings it down to its human reality. However, we should not remain limited to analysis of the social roots of ritual, analysis which, as we have seen, identifies a complex situation where, alongside the visibility of the community to which it is linked, there is the socially determined division of social activity. It is not only the figure of perfect and absolute social unity that I think should be given greater emphasis, but also the reifying assumption that implies a *unity of the event*.

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Beneath the positivity of memory rituals there is a *plurality of positivities*, which hang together to make up the whole. By this I simply mean that the forms of appropriation of a phenomenon are socially unequal. In general we tend to study only the modes of *production* and *enunciation/formalization* of cultural phenomena; their modes of *dissemination* and *appropriation* are made far less obvious. And this is not because they are few and far between in cultural life, quite the reverse. We have very many ways of re-appropriating what is seen as a single object. Neither can these forms of appropriation be viewed from an empirical standpoint that would see a continuity between subjects and objects. I do not think ways of seeing, living, organizing memory fall into the category of *intellectual constructions*; they are *socially rooted constructions*. Thus there are differences – which I feel are often accentuated – for instance, between spectators and those who ‘preserve’ memory by organizing and presenting it.

My argument will become clearer if we look at how this object that we generically call memory is composed of parts with quite different characteristics, dimensions and contents. There are, for example, ‘stones’ for this ‘memory building’ that are seen as noble and require an equally noble knowledge. Nobility here is synonymous with control of a knowledge that is rare or specific or initiating. Knowledge and ability are linked together to develop differentiated models of the ‘ritual population’. For, as we have seen, this population is not an undifferentiated collection of individuals.

What we might call the ‘audience’ for a ritual with a high degree of formalization, or even for a ‘ritualized situation’, is not uniform. The ‘audience’ is an essential part, even if apparently ‘passive’ or ‘more passive’ than the ritual’s chief actors. So this is an ‘active passivity’, since the ‘audience’ must of necessity get involved at the ritual moment for this to be considered a social celebration. Therefore, there are different levels of participation and *consciousness* (understanding, knowledge) of what is happening. These are differentiated degrees and modes of ability that are taking shape.

The participants in a ritual – even though they are merely ‘co-assistants’ or ‘audience’ – intervene in one way or another in the construction of *ritual knowledge*. Thus, even though they do not know, for example, the ‘official’, academically confirmed history of a festival – which is knowledge held by others – they know *what to do and*

how to behave. They have what we might call 'horizontal' knowledge; one that allows the ritual festival to take shape, to have a structure. In this way memory is constantly 'actualized', put into practice, experienced and lived.

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As for the illusion of memory as a *whole*, I should like to make a critical remark. First, it appears to be a unity or, before this, a whole. So it is seen not only as itself but as an *all*, a greedy, dominating *all*. It is thought to record everything, know everything, it is the complete *thesaurus* of the human race. Human beings would only need to reproduce and worship this huge colossus, eternally and compulsorily offered to the whole of humanity. An immense task, an infinite effort, a swollen voracious heritage that would burden its supposed beneficiaries with what is presented, not as a punishment or sacrifice, but a *gift*.

Second, this illusion would suggest another step, a step that reveals a delicious paradox: in fact this notion of totality always presents itself as a kind of inversion. It always appears in the form of a . . . *fragment*. Memory as a totality would thus be a sort of presence that is forever absent. And always assumed, always imagined as existing without ever appearing, without *ever* showing itself. By doing so it enjoys the immense power of intangibility.

Coming back to the *fragment*, this is never seen as such: a single, positive fragment. It is (seen as) a *part of a whole*. It must *always* refer to a whole because it is 'ancillary' to the whole. In fact this fragment that is an event, for that imaginary of memory, for that ideology of history which I am critically observing – that fragment exists *in order to* invoke the whole. This is dramatic teleology that comes into the category of metonymy. The whole is invoked because the part is integral of it. As if the 'preserved' historical part – a procession, a date, a regional dish – could have the capacity to 'transport' participants into the past, a past to which it is seen to belong as a simple compression of its essence.

Furthermore, the fragment tends to derive its character from its 'beginnings'. In other words, the 'moment of origin' becomes sacred. This is easy to understand when we think in everyday language. We say: this picture belongs to such-and-such a school of painting, to this century, that country; that ship dates from such-and-such a period of colonial expansion and comes from this or that marine architect's office, etc. It is clear that we are all very interested in historical, or even chronological, accuracy. But that cannot cover up what we were stressing a while ago: modes of appropriation are many and varied, hard to predict and . . . *they are no less historical* than those stamped 'original' – which are always so highly venerated.

Another thing that is promoted by this notion of the part seen as the *invocation of the whole* is the illusion of the *purity of preservation*. What that means is simple: according to this notion we imagine that we can reproduce any ritual thing, and/or socially just as it was, just as it always has been. We call the choice of one procession out of a thousand, for instance, natural. I would say rather that, though the choice is apparently 'natural', 'self-evident' and 'goes without saying', it is in fact a *social choice*. A Portuguese Catholic religious procession – whether in Brazil or Hawaii – did not spring, does not come directly from nature. It is a socially grounded *option*

that is reproduced because it continues to be chosen for *social reasons*. There is always a choice, with a more or less explicit determining basis. This choice is always made in history, even though it seems to escape from it through its historico-temporal duration – which may possibly be exceptional. This cultural choice is also an operation of forgetting and suppressing.

The procession – and I think we could quote many other examples in its place – is always the same and at the same time *never* the same, and for this reason, though it does not know it, it can *never* invoke the same *whole*. And this is because of a banal logical obstacle that is easy to understand. It is always the same in the sense that it has a form recognizable to everyone (though there may be different ‘forms’ in one and the same procession), but everything is vague, contingent, variable. In my view the fragment must be a *dislocation referring to a code*, a socially shared ‘form’. It does not depend on any totalization, whether the latter is called memory or not. To give an explanatory example drawn from linguistics, we could say there is a permanence of signifiers and an ‘instigating’ variation of signifieds.

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Since social memory is in my opinion not susceptible to being *naturalized* – insofar as I consider it is always the result of resistance and historic struggles – it cannot be *universalized* either. If we focus on the analysis of modes of preservation of memory, we will see they speak – at the outset at least – for the *initiated*. When neophytes are admitted, they have to go through a kind of socialization; there are more or less open rituals, but . . . all memory’s rituals are profoundly . . . ethnocentric. And here lies another ‘failed act’ of that imaginary. Since they are ethnocentric – and they cannot deny it – how should their ‘naturalness’, their ‘wholeness’ be indicated? In fact the main imaginative formations/constructions in social memory above all defend their borders, their faces, their bodies, their specific alterity, which they see as constituting their identity. Basing themselves on differences, they work at the constitution of *social identities*.

The notion of social memory as something permanent, unchanging, a-historical is, as we know, extraordinarily common and powerful in the collective imaginary. If, on the one hand, it arouses the criticisms we have just noted, on the other hand it allows us to draw attention to a crucial point for future analyses of memory: the effective ‘resistance’ of social memory to the creation of a sociology – or an anthropological history – with its own dynamic. Why? First of all because there are zones of social memory that might be seen as ‘human’ in the sense of ‘universally human’ – I am even tempted to say ‘biological’ – because of their *generality, persistence through time and widespread cultural incidence*. Now, second, these characteristics are connected to the *contingent, ephemeral* or what is *historically episodic*. This articulation between the ‘permanent’ and the ‘transitory’ is already – by itself – extremely problematic from the theoretical viewpoint. But here there arises a third disturbing element that opens up a number of possibilities for research.

We might call this third element ‘retrieval’ of memory. In this case *retrieval* would be the property memory has of going off and looking in its endless boxes for facts, dates, festivals, etc. – or even ‘fragments’ of these – which have been completely

forgotten or thought to be anachronistic or dead. Other than 'substantial elements' such as those I have just mentioned, what are likely to surface are 'forms', behaviours, attitudes, social dispositions (for instance, the fear of or demand for utopias). And these retrievals are *interventions*; they are much more difficult to distinguish and even harder to foresee. The reasons for their appearance or disappearance are obscure, their plausibility is rarefied.

Thus this third element is, in a salutary way, disturbing because it forces on us something that is not familiar to researchers in the social sciences: humility. This humility is forced on us by the impossibility here of even imagining a controllable history, docile to our educated eyes, and always subject to the temptation of the linear and evolving.

I think observing this third element – and how it gets closer to and moves further from the two other elements mentioned above – prohibits (or at least makes considerably harder) totalizing interpretations of memory. In my view all social memory is composite; it is made up of a combination of material elements ('substances'), unequal and irregular rhythms and tempos. Analysis of concrete modes of appearance, permanence, transformation and disappearance of memory traces seems to be even more delicate in the case of studies of peoples or ethnic or social groups, since it implies the always so reified questions of the *distance* of the places consecrated (and made sacred) by memory and the *adaptation* (or rejection) of this culture of memory.

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The imaginative constellations associated with social memory tend to be *substantial, material* in nature. This 'materialist' character tends to identify memory with what we might figuratively call the 'furniture' of history, in other words the visible objects of history in common use. When such ideologies defend visibility, at the same time they praise the 'social need' for exhibition. This 'social visibility' is one of the preferred methods of allowing memory to become fixed because of its aspects, both didactic and sympathetic between ethnically identified groups.

So the problem does not lie in the fact that this visibility exists – and that it has extremely important social functions in emigrant communities and among their descendants. The problem is in the fact that people start to imagine, on the one hand, a festival, a meal, a civic celebration as so many revivals of the past through a merging of each of these events and, on the other hand, the profound 'historical essences' that they wish to signify. Or, if we wish to take this further, the problem with this imaginary of visibility is that it is an obstacle to *getting acquainted with . . . forgetting*. In other words, there are vast zones of shadow and void that cannot be permanently exhibited. 'Social forgetting' is an unconscious stock of facts – and arrangements of facts – that, although they are concealed (invisible), nevertheless very often have an effect over a very long period. Or quite simply we cannot know them, but 'they are there', they exist, if only potentially.

The 'visible' appearance of this 'social' or 'cultural forgetting' does not normally manifest itself *en bloc*, in a compact, simultaneous and total construction. In most cases I think it manifests itself in forms or formations that are often criticized as

'irrational' or 'excessively emotional', because they seem inexplicable, alien to reason, if not disproportionate, excessive or misplaced.

Institutions designed to preserve memory are very often innocent prisoners of a perverse race against time. Perverse because they wish to act swiftly (and in this sense they are 'racing against time') in order to try to people the past . . . sorry, the present . . . with the signs of the past. The signs of the *whole* past, *in its totality*. The totality of the whole past and of each past, as they imagine, so that 'the' 'memory' should not be lost. In the end, they think that, without distinctive signs, without the visible, conscious 'furniture' we were mentioning earlier, history might be lost, both literally and figuratively. History might wander – mistaken and confused – just as even humans, they believe, would be capable of losing their way if they did not have their family trees, dates, military salutes and signposts. These institutional attitudes – which sometimes take on the guise of important public 'museologization' policies – are prisoners of what I would call 'security ideologies' of history and memory. Soothing ideologies of society that are the official guardians of what they wish to see remain alive, even though it is thoroughly dead . . .

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Social memory is inclined – particularly in the context of emigration, I think – to deny the *negative* aspects of the past. Those feelings of *personal rejection* that well up from the experience of having been expelled from one's homeland, and the consequent feeling of *social injustice* – we need to examine these. And not seek this especially – or tactically – among the groups that are the most politicized in their actions and words, because they have already focused heavily on the social aspect of injustice. I think the most productive, profound, neglected direction leads to the scenes of happy memories of a cloudless past. It is here, in these scenes of suppression and sublimation, that cracks can be discovered in an edifice presented as monolithic, unified, without contradictions, conflicts or concealments. Of course the practices and discourse of those who 'are forgetting', who are 'magnificently well integrated', who conceal their language, their origins and everything they consider 'past and over' – all such practices of concealment echo in response to the weepy defenders of an idealized past.

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