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CULTURAL MEMORY AS MEMORY MANIPULATION: BETWEEN PAST EXPERIENCES AND PRESENT VALUES

Angelina Banovikj-Markovska

Ss. Cyril and Methodius University, Skopje, Macedonia

Abstract: This paper examines the culture of memory/remembrance outside national confines, i.e., seen against generational practices. As such, it stands far more vital than individual national cultures, present in the former Yugoslav space, since its symbols, icons and myths, still testify to the existence of a rather particular (unique), *imaginary*, multiethnic community, which though never managing to become a nation, exists, today, among people of various ethnicities, as a shared culture of memory/remembrance, in other words a specific kind of cultural memory.

Keywords: culture of memory/remembrance, generational cultural memory, social memory

As a socio-cultural occurrence and an emotional form of remembrance, usually associated with living memory in the past, the culture of memory/remembrance is not merely a theoretical term, but rather the lived experiences of a generational (and with that, communicational) phenomenon, suppressed by the reality of a given historical moment that had replaced 'the iron curtain of ideology' with the 'iron curtain of culture.'

However, even now, more than twenty years after the break-up of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and against the differences present in the transitional processes that its former republics, now sovereign states, all of the post-Yugoslav cultural space shares a similar *emotional and symbolic capital* – a specific kind of cultural memory that can serve as a starting point for a future dialogic platform, necessary to understand and interpret our shared post-socialist reality.

In her 1996 essay, "The Confiscation of Memory", Dubravka Ugrešić claims

that the break-up of the multi-national Yugoslavia also initiated the process of erasing one collective memory at the expense of establishing another in its place, or even more precisely, that a process of confiscation of collective memory took place, which in turn afforded the creation and establishing of a constructed nationalist memory.¹ By pointing out the role that history played, in such a brazen way, by infiltrating in the private lives of the people living in these areas so as to not only alter their biographies but also their identities, "The Easterners" (as Ugrešić dubs these men and women in her essay), grew particularly sensitive to two things: the past and shared living/lives. However, each time they would come into close contact with those they felt as "their own kin", i.e., "people with two lives and one biography," they would spontaneously discover the "beauties of *collective memory*".²

Before going further with the premise I am trying to unpack, I'd like to take a closer look at the two key terms Dubrav-

ka Ugrešić mentions in the aforementioned essay. The first term is “collective” whilst the second is “national”, both referring to memory. However, bearing in mind that many theorists such as Aleida Assmann or Susan Sontag, for example, state that collective memory (or collective remembrance) does not exist, the above mentioned quotation by Ugrešić reads rather problematic. However, before I can speak more on the Ugrešić quote, I’d like to take a closer look at the synonymous meaning of the terms memory and remembrance. In her essay “On the Metaphor of Remembrance” (1999), Assmann³ agrees with Harald Weinrich in terms of the dual nature of memory as a phenomenon, for which Weinrich uses two basic metaphors: “the wax tablet” and “the storehouse”⁴. According to Weinrich, throughout the spiritual history of the West, there were two different images of memory, as a result of its dual nature. Namely, the metaphors that projected memory as a “storehouse” were chiefly grouped around remembrance (as a virtual ability), whereas those that portrayed memory as a “wax tablet” were grouped around memory (as the actual imprinting of specific content in the mind). However, remembrance and memory cannot be separated without causing unfavorable consequences, thus instead of defining them as antagonistic, they should always be taken as “complementary aspects of one whole, which accompany each model in unison [as a pairing]” (Assmann, 2011: 121-122; my own translation from Serbian).

Without divorcing memory from all those components that point out its ability to safeguard, archive and store, we can also say that it does not simply have a spatial dimension, but that it belongs to the psychological dimension of time as well. In Greek mythology, Mnemosyne, the mother of memory and the arts, gives meaning to life, by safeguarding it against

forgetting and annihilation. She is associated with one of the cornerstone attributes of God in the Hebrew tradition – remembrance, seen as mercy and justice for individuals and groups that have disappeared in the darkness of universal History.

Yet, we are not necessarily speaking about memory as a mechanical matter-of-factly remembrance or the sentimental nostalgia for the past (or even the suppression of one memory at the expense of another); but rather, as the basis of each individual and collective identity, built on the freed consciousness in and of the self, as well as self-evident antagonisms and weaknesses. Against all the raping and falsifications conducted by the various nationalisms and totalitarianisms, memory, nonetheless, manages to safeguard (protect) the closeness between those generations whose individual members have remained conscious of the complex character of history.

I write this entirely cognizant of Susan Sontag’s claim that memory is in fact individual, and thus, unrepeatable (in Sontag’s words “unrepeatable” – since it dies with the person who housed it). Namely, she says: “[s]trickly speaking, there is no such thing as collective memory – part of the same family of spurious notions of collective guilt. But there is collective instruction.” (Sontag, 2003: 67). A *stipulation*, she affirms later on in the text, that something mattered, that this something is the story worth remembering, in our consciousness.

Her words take us back to the act of remembrance itself, seen as personal experience. In other words, not as a kind of a passive imprint, but rather as a form of active shaping, susceptible to mediated adjustments. And since we do not respond to historical facts based on their nature in and of itself, but rather due to the ways they are represented, interpreted and valued (both linguistically and

symbolically), memory can be, to us, simultaneously, both representative and a-representational (Assmann, 2011: 361; my own translation from Serbian). Bearing in mind that words and images are bound together with a kind of purpose, we can say that the instrumentalization of memory (remembrance), does not merely point out its use but also its misuse. I can thus suppose that it was this very revelation that had inspired Dubravka Ugrešić to surmise that the Yugoslav peoples knew how to showcase “[their] strongest vitality when finding themselves in a situation, among themselves, to destroy the past (tombstones, libraries, churches, and monuments of cultural and historical value)”, whilst not showing any tenderness or remorse for their own past: “they will either erase it or resurrect it with computer-like swiftness, only because of some need (...) since, collective memory”, Ugrešić continues, “can be erased and written anew, can be deconstructed, constructed and reconstructed, can be confiscated or re-confiscated, can be deemed politically correct or incorrect (...)”, all of this at the hand of current politics, since as Ugrešić states at the end of her essay – “political struggle is a struggle for territory and collective memory”.⁵

However, bearing in mind the claim that memory is closely tied to the question of power, which sovereignly and self-sufficiently defines and decides on national myths, identities and cultures, we can say that Ugrešić, perhaps quite unconsciously yet quite rightfully so, takes the syntagma “collective memory” to stand synonymous (identical almost) to the syntagma “national memory”, which cannot be anything else but a form of *official*, or even better, *political memory*. Namely, each nationality favors their own collective memory by displaying it in their museums, libraries and archives, i.e., images that support its existence/consti-

tution. And since memory can be and is manipulated as a kind of monetary truth on the stock-market, I take liberty at substituting Ugrešić’s claim on collective memory with Assmann’s claim on ideologically-colored memory, as presented in her work *The Long Shadow of the Past* (*Der Lange Schatten Der Vergangenheit*, 2006). With that in mind, I believe I also need to focus on two more terms necessary for understanding the different formations of memory. The first addresses the “culture of memory”, whilst the latter about “the politics/policies of memory”.

According to Assmann, *the culture of memory* (Erinnerung) represents a form of independent, civil interest in remembrance. In fact, it is the result of a cultural mnemo-technique that starts from the bottom-up and helps forge collective identities, unlike *the politics of history* which in turn points to a mechanism regulated by the state, moving top-down, thus violently creating homogenized forms of memory that instrumentalize the past. Bearing in mind that the two terms operate within opposing vectors of value, it seems important to point out at this juncture something referred to as “emotional history”. Emotional history is present in many autobiographical and family sagas, documentary series and films, even certain debates present in print and digital media. Certainly, it would be wrong to assume that the carrier of that memory is some sort of a “collective We” that metonymically represents the nation since memory and remembrance “enter solely relationships with individuals or groups that belong to different generations or social strata,” concludes Aleida Assmann (2011: 356, my own translation from Serbian). Hence, it is quite logical to surmise that in a plural and democratic state there are certain civic and individual initiatives that work on the safekeeping and safeguarding of a so-called *counter-remembrance* that

would stand apart from the official one. One such initiative, announced publically, came to pass as early as 1989, by Du-bravka Ugrešić and the two editors of the then weekly paper *Start*, Dejan Kršić and Ivan Molek. Announced as *Lexicon of YU Mythology*, the project was intended to focus on Yugoslav (plural!) identities, henceforth the unpacking of popular culture terms from that with time would/could produce a different kind of an outlook on the former socialist period. In fact, we are here dealing with identity (re)defining, through the processes of retrospection and articulation vis-à-vis the popular cultural terms (contents), in a set time/historical context, emblematic of the then socialist Yugoslav ambience.



Namely, pop-culture marked an entire generation (the one from the 1950s), which in the then socialist spirit created new cultural codes. Said pop-culture, quite incorporated by the social system, throughout different political celebrations and announcements, kept celebrating the state, its socialist system and leader, advocating for a culture of “Yugoslav fraternity and unity, disavowing the fast-growing chauvinism” (Perica and Velikonja, 2012, 98; my translation from Serbian). However, with the break-up of the state, the need for this Lexicon also died out. It wasn’t until 2011, when the Zagreb-based magazine *Arkzin* launched a web-initiative, while in 2004, on the 25th of May (a symbolic date that references the once celebrated state holiday “The Day of Youth”), the first print edition was published, as a joint effort of the Bel-

grade publishing house *Rende* and the Zagreb publishing house *Postscriptum*. The second edition came out almost a year later, when the Macedonian translation of the book was published. A sizable part of the texts are written in Croatian and in Serbian, while there are also texts in Slovenian and Macedonian, even some in English (as the memory of a man from the former DDR (the former Eastern German state), about the shooting of the film *Winnetou*, in 1962, in the Plitvice and Zrmanje regions of Croatia).

The discourse of *The Lexicon* rests on a combination of styles, stemming from both high and low culture, which also marked the reception for the book. Certain circles found *The Lexicon* “a useless sentimental memory of the past” (as a kind of “layered and sunken cultural good, as a kind of Yugoslav *common culture* (...) an interesting third party (...) a typically uncritical product of Yugoslav mentality” (Dean Duda, the Croatian *Feral Tribute*, 28. 10. 2004; my own translation from Croatian), which helped foster a false cultural harmony by producing a totally conflict-free imaginatum of Yugoslav pop-culture, while other circles received *The Lexicon* as an event that signaled “a serious therapeutic process of decontaminating the memory of Yugoslavia” (“a kind of *Hazards’ Dictionary* of a lost cultural space which was marked from beginning to end by the syndrome of a constant emergence-resurgence (...) as if resembling the medically familiar pain of a *phantom phallus* (...) differently cognizant when it goes to different *patients*” (Tihomir Brajović, Serbian *NIN*, 22. 10. 2004; my own translation from Serbian).

What is worth mentioning, however, is that this *Lexicon* attracted attention not only among regular folk, but also in certain academic circles and relevant media outlets. For example, Radio BBC, in 2005, stated that this book, in less than a year,

as a cultural event had “played a far more significant role in establishing a postwar dialogue than the previous five-year joint efforts of all the politicians in the region”⁶ However, though not the first, *The Lexicon of YU Mythology* is not the only project that has described and sublimated our shared socialist past. Filmed in 2009 and 2010, as an independent production of the Serbian director Igor Stoimenov, the documentary series *Shopping Centre* (in the original: *Robna kuća* speaks of the events that surpass the borders of the now non-existent state). It encompasses almost all of the popular phenomena of past times: from Partisan-infused cinematography all the way to the musical and sports’ successes of the ex-Yugoslavs. Many to this day call this series *the film lexicon of YU myths*, alluding to the title of said literary genre. As a specific form of the collective unconscious, this documentary, too, speaks about the pretty side to the shared past, so it is does not come as a surprise that the series’ subtitle borrows from one of the last big marketing slogans of the day “For some – all, for all – some”.



According to the author of this documentary series, perhaps it is not so much about nostalgia, as it is about the phenomena that marked the former shared state, phenomena that are still present in these parts, independently of the political conditions in the greater region. Once again, we are speaking about the aforementioned phenomenon – *Yugoslav pop-*

culture – which has to be further examined not only from a cultural standpoint but also from a position that criticizes ideology, as it is well-established that there are no ideologically neutral cultural contents. Henceforth, from today’s standpoint, the ex-Yugoslav case “of returning to our (partial) past”, we cannot merely speak about a nostalgic form of a post-modern condition, but rather of an ambivalent occurrence which oftentimes receives political connotations, too.⁷

It is well-established that as social constructs, memory and remembrance are built and nurtured not only through interpersonal contacts, deemed by psychology as vital, living, non-formal communication, even going as far as dubbing it *conversation remembering*, which in turns sustains shared memories, but also through a media (internet)-based exchange that uses material data carriers: films, books, photographs, notes, posters. They all compose the material depot of memory which in turn belongs to the cultural archives. However, each memory, each individual recollection, belongs to a wider horizon called generational memory.

Namely, we share certain kind of sensibilities (sentiment) with the members of our generation. In turn, it affords us the time and space to share similar viewpoints, values and persuasions, i.e., an entire cultural matrix which helps us interpret core cultural codes. With generational overturn, which takes place approximately every thirty years, a society’s memory profile changes. This memory profile plays a key role in the way memory is processed, be it traumatic or previously historically glorified. However, memory of the past can also be critically thematized: through motion pictures or documentary series, through memoirist biographies or family sagas, but also other forms that belong to *the public culture of memory*, a part of cultural memory.

Henceforth, if the culture of memory is a form of independent, civil interest in the past, i.e., a collection of cultural mnemotechnique that helps foster cultural identities, then cultural memory does not only surpass the individual, but rather entire generations and epochs. Thus, we deem it one potential collective memory.

Experience teaches us that any understanding which points out the similarities between our culture and that of other peoples (ethnicities), can in fact produce great ideological differences, inspired, probably, by an inherent need to remain apart (different) from the rest (others). This oversensitivity towards otherness is referred by some theoretical discourses as *the narcissism of small differences*. This narcissism showed that for all of the newly established countries in the Balkans the former Yugoslavia became a substitute for *the Other* related not only to their joint history but also to their joint culture. According to Arjun Appadurai, depending on the power-structures and the prism of observation, this Otherness can be essentialized (an otherness we carry within), exoticized (when we consider ourselves entirely different from others), and totalized (when we are convinced that we are all the same as we once were.⁸Henceforth, using Max Weber's terminology, this imaging of otherness renders ideally typical not only the negative valorization of the once joint state but also the positive celebrations of the same, introducing, at the same time, one more distinction: on the one hand, the Balkan Other as an external form of Otherness, whilst on the other the Yugoslav Other as an internal form of Otherness.

In his research on the "imaginary" Yugoslavia, contained within *Heavenly Yugoslavia* (in the original: *Nebeska Jugoslavija*), the Slovenian culturologist Mitja Velikonja uses the term "new Yugoslavism", calling it an ambivalent and antago-

nistic discourse, which speaks of the former Yugoslavia as "a complex, schizophrenic and conflict ideology." (Perica and Velikonja, 2012: 84-85; my own translation from Croatian). He states that "[we are dealing with] an a posteriori construction of images that reference the Yugoslav political system, its constitutional framing, its cultural productions, its everyday life, and partisan resistance. (...) This discourse is internally antagonistic for it binds, seemingly so, the unbindable" (2012: 84-85; my own translation from Croatian).

Namely, when it stopped functioning as a state, the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia survived as a nation. Faced with this realization, Velikonja's co-author (of the aforementioned book), Vjekoslav Perica, in the chapter titled "A Generation against the Nation", states that Yugoslavia continued to exist, not only in "the nostalgic culture of the memory of those who became aware of what they had lost," but also in the "selective borrowings of its history and culture by the post-Yugoslav states" (2012: 242; my own translation from Croatian). But most of all, through the aforementioned phenomenon of popular culture, characteristic of the then state and its socialist era, which in a synthesis with the culture of the so-called post-Yugoslavism, even to this day, helps sustain an unusual collective identity. "We are dealing with *the generational identity and the said generations as socially-historic factors* (...)" states Perica (2012: 24; my own translation from Croatian; my italics), who can still remember...

However, no matter those repressed memories that can hurt and ail us from time to time, none of us are capable of forgetting all that had come with our disturbing past. "In the end, however, what is left is a piece of life that cannot be translated," writes Dubravka Ugrešić in her essay "The Confiscation of Memory",

i.e., “an experience that marked a shared existence in a given country, in a given culture, in a given system, in a given historical moment (...) This unfamiliar space, deep within us, equals our shared ‘childhood’, a hearth shared by a group of people, a space reserved for some future *nostalgia*.”⁹ However, today, when we are surrounded by such strong attempts at erasing one memory at the expense of another, when even “the least dangerous of nostalgia (could be) taken as lethal,” I wonder if in fact there is any of that Ugrešić calls collective memory, or perhaps something entirely different is at stake?

In the text titled “Being Yugoslav Need Not be a Nationality or a Citizenship Claim”, posted on an online portal (Protest.ba: Portal za mentalno preostale i one koji to žele postati), Predrag Matijević writes: “There is a kind of Yugoslavian-ism that need not be a matter of nationality or citizenship status; it does not forget nor does it erase the shared part of the past and history whence generations shared common ideas and ideals, hopes and delusions, exaltations and disappointments”; and further down, he writes: “The Yugoslav idea, was often-times written down with bad penmanship, on the pages of our history. What is left of it today, may be incorporated within European frames, but better than before.”¹⁰

It is apparent that, mentally speaking, Yugoslavia still exists, perhaps quietly and subduedly; however, many cultural bonds that are ongoing today in our midst, on these lands, and which are not related to Yugo-nostalgia, confirm the realization that the once shared culture is not merely memory and poetics. And Vjekoslav Perica’s words in the book *Heavenly Yugoslavia* point out that the death of Yugoslavia, as a nation, never took place, “since many elements of that nation carried on with their existence. Thus, we can speak only of the end to the

functions of the state, which took place between 1989 and 1991, followed by a long and ongoing process of the dying of the nation (...) This process is marked by a surprising vitality, mostly due to the continuity and revitalization of Yugoslav popular culture.” (2012: 239; my own translation from Croatian).

However, also due to the fact that the nation cannot be looked upon as a finite construction, for it is a lasting process, a continuous “daily plebiscite,” to borrow from Ernst Renan.

I’d like to conclude this essay with a quote from Renan’s most known lecture (“Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?” – in English: “What is a Nation?”), given on the 11th of March, in 1882, at the Sorbonne. In it, he states: “A nation is a spiritual principle, the outcome of the profound complications of history; it is a spiritual family not a group determined by the shape of the earth (...) Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle (...) One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together (...) More valuable by far than common customs posts and frontiers conforming to strategic ideas is the fact of sharing, in the past, a glorious heritage and regrets, and of having, in the future, [a shared] programme to put into effect, or the fact of having suffered, enjoyed, and hoped together. These are the kinds of things that can be understood in spite of differences of race and language (...) A nation’s existence is, if you will pardon the metaphor, a *daily plebiscite*, just as an individual’s existence is a perpetual affirmation of life (...) The nations are not something eternal. They had their beginnings and they will end. A European confederation will very probably replace them. But such is not the law of the century in which we are living. At the present time, the existence of nations is a good thing, a necessity even (...) If doubts arise regarding its frontiers, consult the popu-

lations in the areas under dispute. They undoubtedly have the right to a say in the matter – writes and warns Renan, since – [t]he best way of being right in the future is, in certain periods, to know how to resign oneself to being out of fashion.”¹¹

ENDNOTES

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