

# Past, future and change: Contemporary analysis of evolving media scapes



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# Historical Memory, Ethics and Communication

Manuel Parés i Maicas

## 1. ETHICS AND MEMORY

Any study of a historical memory of a political community has to be founded upon the prevailing ethical requirements. Given that there are many definitions of ethics, I would like to outline a global one that can be found in my book, *Ètica, deontologia i comunicació*:

*"[Ethics] is the study, evaluation and promotion of behaviour considered right according to parameters judged to be morally appropriate. Thus, consideration needs to be given to how people interpret, apply, balance and modify their principles in the light of new facts, the impact of technology, new social attitudes and the changing economic and social situations. It presupposes that the role of social change is paradigmatic, because ethics is never a static phenomenon. It is linked to permanent and dynamic trends in the principles and values of a society."* (2011: 27)

According to Mel Thompson (2005: 1-2), we have to distinguish between *descriptive* and *normative* ethics. Descriptive ethics deals with moral options and the value they receive in a specific society. It expresses what people do and contributes to the arguments citizens use to justify their behaviour. It contains sociological and psychological references and does not judge what is good and what is not. Normative ethics, on the other hand, analyses the norms used by people to formulate their moral options. Normative ethics judges the duties of people, what they should accomplish and the role of deontology, as well as studying those values as expressed through moral actions.

The underlying ethical dimension in the study of collective and historical memory is particularly apparent in cases where countries – such as Spain – have gone through a period of modern history under a dictatorship. The

historical memory and practices of remembering of these periods are, as will be shown below with reference to Spain, particularly sensitive and contested. But before engaging with the concepts of collective and historical memory, I would first like to briefly address the concept of personal memory. Simply said, it is the individual's capacity to register, conserve, remember and evoke experiences through images, events, feelings, etc. The *Diccionario de la lengua Española* (2007) defines memory as "power of the soul, through which the past is kept and remembered". It has also been defined as the "aptitude to keep all the impressions, especially those related with the mind, and to reproduce them, consciously or not, in a form of conduct, images or ideas".

The Catalan philosopher José Ferrater Mora, in his well-known *Diccionario de filosofía* (1944/2004), devotes a large entry to memory, and states:

*"The memory would be the faculty of what you remember that is sensitive, to retain the impressions and the perceptions, whereas the keepsake would be a spiritual act, namely the fact through which the soul sees in what is sensitive in the possibility of interpretation following the models or archetypes envisaged when he/she was taking away of the chains of the body."*

Regardless of the allegoric tone employed, I believe that this is a pertinent position, and, in my opinion, the keepsake, which is normally an individual act, belongs to the memory as a whole. In this chapter, I limit my investigation to the phenomena of collective and historical memory, but I wished to start this investigation with the general (individual) concept of memory, since I believe it explains the development of both of these specific (collective) forms.

## 2. COLLECTIVE MEMORY

In his book *On Collective Memory* (1950/1992), the great French researcher of Jewish origin, Maurice Halbwachs, takes as a point of departure the idea that the individual memory only exists as a function of the social frames that offer the possibility to reconstruct the past. We rediscover our memories as a consequence of the requirements of the present. And what is essential for this is that we obtain it from the frames and the notions that we receive from the collective. He remarks on the role of social groups. And he observes that we only remember what makes sense for our community.

I want to add that, for him, collective memory is shared, transmitted and built up by our social groups. He states that the groups have collective, familiar, religious, class and mnemonic senses. It is what permits them to preserve their institutions. Halbwachs also points out the role played by external influences, and I believe that it is particularly relevant to observe the role that ideologies and culture play in these processes, something that can only be achieved through a transdisciplinary approach and conceptualisation of the identity of citizens.

German Egyptologist Jan Assman (1992/2011) distinguishes between cultural memory (whose function is to store the different elements) and communicative memory (daily memory connected to actuality). In his opinion, the functions of cultural memory are to situate the individual psychology in the social models that organise and to define the temporal function of the ideology. In short, Assman's work indicates how the past is put to the service of the present.

Any comprehensive study of collective memory also has to incorporate the dimensions of space and human body, as outlined by French historian Pierre Nora (1996), who emphasises the importance of the place and of the spaces of shared memory, and by sociologist Paul Connerton (1989), who sees the human body as a place for the collective processes of memory retention and propagation.

At this point, I believe I must stress that governments and the media attempt to influence the collective memory of a community by rewriting history, by praising or criticising prominent public figures such as political leaders or intellectuals. If these efforts are consistent and are made over a longer period of time, they may change the political memory of a generation, building up its historical memory. If we compare the concept of historic memory to that of public opinion, we see that the former is characterised by stability and durability, while the latter is a more fluid and unstable phenomenon. The role of (mass) media in relation to the collective memory of a nation was importantly theorised by Irish political scientist Benedict Anderson (1983/1991) through his concept of *imagined communities*, which implies a shared sense of belonging and heritage for a large number of individuals who will never meet in person. Moreover, James E. Young (1994) has brought to the fore the notion of "legacy of memory" in opposition to the collective memory, through its fragmentation, recompilation and singular character.

### 3. HISTORICAL MEMORY

As I have said before, the role of historical memory is linked to the concept of social or historical change. According to Francesc-Marc Álvaro (2012), historical memory is a consequence of a trauma, and we cannot separate it either from the emotion or from its own emotional signification. It does not have a relation to the truth in the cognitive sense. It is not synonymous with remembrance, as its construction depends on social tensions and on selective forgetting, which connects it effectively with cultural practices of narration, such as cinema, comics or literature.

The relationship between ideology and political behaviour is highly interconnected, especially in authoritarian or totalitarian regimes where governments repress basic human rights. Often, political parties, media and public opinion are strictly controlled by the political or the economic power and serve their interests. Under such circumstances, construction of historical memory is subjected to the malicious or biased interpretation of history. An example of this would be the interpretation of the Spanish Civil War provided by *Diccionario de la Historia de España*, particularly the texts elaborated by Luis Suárez Fernández, a well-known Francoist scholar. From a democratic end ethical point of view, it is necessary to avoid any historical narrative that is false or does not respect the truth. It is vital for every society that there should exist a balanced formulation of historical events, such as those of the Catalan Josep Fontana or the British Paul Preston in respect of recent Spanish history. Herodotus asserted that history is a work of the memory, a battle against forgetfulness. However, the study of historical memory opens up the question of objectivity and subjectivity in relation to memory, history and truth. Memory is subjective, but we cannot assert that history is always objective, because both are subject to the risk of manipulation, in particular when it comes to traumatic social events. In Spain, the debate on the issues of truth and history has brought about polarising views on the relationship between those issues and historical memory.

For example, Stanley Payne claims that:

*A historical memory is neither memory nor history. What is mentioned as such or 'collective memory', is not that, but a version or versions, created by advertising experts, political activists, journalists or even certain biased historians. Essentially they are myths or legends created in connection to the past. It may have a certain part of empirical truth or nothing. The memory is individual and subjective. Never is 'historical' or 'collective' as such. The history, on the*



*contrary, it is not based upon individual or subjective memories, but on the intellectual research of the empirical data that survive on the past. In fact, there are some researchers who are hollowing out graves and carrying out serious studies. This is always relevant and as far research is concerned, should be praised. But it is totally unacceptable to impose an unbalanced and partisan version which refuses to accept the results of a serious research. The truth is that it is a 'revision', what it is the majority of the serious research. If we do not want to discover new data which may enrich and revise our understanding, why to investigate? But a version simply politicised of the promotion of the historical memory does not intend to revise, but just to repeat and impose a version. This political movement does not have interest in the history. It means that it is not a revision, but its politicisation" (in an interview on ABC, December 17, 2006)*

Similarly, historian Santos Julià asks: "What is a historical memory in a country divided to the death by a war between brothers?" The question suggests the answer that, where there are such deep divisions, shared memory can only be built on the basis of forgetting the past. This is the sense of a general amnesty, as understood by Indalecio Prieto and José María Gil Robles.

I should like to formulate some comments on these views. In connection with Payne's opinion, it is evident that he does not agree with the objectives and the content of the *Law of the Historical Memory*.<sup>1</sup> His perspective on history and historical memory excludes the possibility that they might have an ideological origin, and is based on a feeling founded more on the democratic sense of life than on the reason *stricto sensu*. Those who, like my generation, have suffered from repression of their own historical memory are very well aware of the weight of affective and sentimental factors. As far as the position adopted by Santos Julià is concerned, I should like to note that historical memory is never shared in a general way in a particular country, especially in cases of class or armed conflicts. It can only make sense in terms of a specific ideology and how that ideology judges these confrontations. This is especially evident in citizens negotiating over the meaning of symbolic and ritualised manifestations of history that are adopted by the state and its institutions, such as places of memory and remembrance, symbols and commemorative acts and celebrations.

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1 The *Law of the Historic Memory* was passed in Spain in 2007 and grants rights to victims (and their descendants) of the Spanish Civil War and the dictatorship of General Francisco Franco. It also formally condemns the Franco regime.

#### 4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In authoritarian regimes such as Franco's Spain, historical memory is usually related to violent and conflictive acts of repression committed by the authorities against citizens. Moreover, the sense of disempowerment over the (re)construction of one's historical memory often continues after the end of repression.

The physician Francisco Etxeberria, who has exhumed 500 executed victims of the Civil War, has voiced an opinion with which I fully agree: *"It should not be the case that there are still people who show fear when they refer to the Civil War and the Repression. We have to tell them that it was totally unfair and terrible, that we understand them, and that we will do our best to help them. It is very sad that there still exists a feeling of fear."* (cited by Nuria Tesón in an interview in *El País-San Sebastián*, 18 December 2006).

In the light of this, full access to information and archive material should be granted to experts and citizens, something which in many instances is still not the case. One example of this often quoted is the alleged partiality of the *Fundación Francisco Franco*, presided over by Franco's daughter Carmen Franco Polo, which keeps Franco's personal archive.

As I have shown above, in authoritarian regimes, historical memory is subjected to powerful ideological pressures which are linked to a regime's political and economic power. However, I also hope that I have managed to indicate that such pressures can also be strong in non-authoritarian regimes, since they are in essence linked to the degree of citizens' freedom and respect of their rights by political and economic elites. As the Spanish case clearly indicates, the use of propaganda and disinformation techniques has been extremely damaging for victims of the repression.

The protection of historical memory is an essential task for any democratic and by extension ethical society. I have tried to approach this subject from a non-engaged perspective, focusing not only on the concepts of memory, collectivity and history, but also on the underlying ethical dimension of these processes. Even if this subject has not yet drawn the degree of scholarly attention it deserves, I maintain that, from the Spanish viewpoint, and even from the democratic one, this is a question that should very much evolve in parallel with historical and social change.

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