



Napoleón Tapia-Balladares

Institute for Psychological Research, University of Costa Rica, Costa Rica

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## History Begins When Tradition Finishes

Rosa-Rivero, Alberto, Bellelli, Guglielmo, & Bakhurst, David (Eds.), *Memoria colectiva e identidad nacional*. Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva, 2000. 475 pp. ISBN 84-7030-769-X (pbk).

*Memoria colectiva e identidad nacional* is the result of a workshop that took place in Puglia, Italy, in May 1997. This encounter was summoned by the Department of Psychology of the University of Bari, and the Department of Sociology of the University La Sapienza of Rome. Researchers came from universities in Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Spain, the United States, Holland and Italy, revealed their investigations, and over the course of two days discussed the category of collective memory, as well as the categories of personal, social, national and supranational identity. The editing process behind this book is enormous. It has been necessary to carry out multiple translations, from Italian, Castilian, English and Portuguese, in order to complete the Castilian and Italian versions. The Italian version (published by Liguori) appeared, according to the editors of the Spanish version, with few differences and almost simultaneously with the release of the Spanish version. Fortunately, the international effort to expose this group of research on collective memory and national identity is abundantly rewarded.

The book is divided into four parts, preceded by an introduction and an initial chapter written by the editors. The chapters of the first section

refer to how memory consists of a process located between the individual and society. In the second part of the volume, the chapters deal with the topics of emotion, social communication and memory. Their aim is to show the deep relationship between the public and the private when explaining the formation of memoirs and the elaboration of memories. The chapters of the third part approach the cultural tools for collective memory; specifically, they look for an explanation of why memories assume a certain form when they are evoked. This evocation cannot be distinguished from their contents, which in turn depend on cultural devices for the collective and personal actions that impact on the constitution of identity. The fourth and last part includes chapters that refer to the topics of collective memory, history and national identity. Here the phenomena of identity, which start with representations of the past and whose purpose is to constitute or to justify ethnic and national visions, are approached in a clearer way. The four sections of the book are composed of four chapters each, except the last part, which includes five chapters.

The contributions to this book are best located within a cultural reading of the social psychology of memory. The collection seeks to transcend some exclusively nomothetic principles of explanation, and enlists the use of a unique method that opens a new path to social psychology, conceived in systematic interdisciplinary dialogue with the social and human sciences. *Memoria colectiva e identidad nacional* suggests diverse ideas with which we may begin to dialogue. It is not possible to establish a global vision of the broadly heterogeneous studies presented without running the risk of distorting them, and thus our dialogue must begin with the fundamental dimensions of the book.

### **Identity, Time and Biography**

The category of identity involves different frames of understanding action: either as personal identity, social identity, or national and supranational identity. Certainly, identity 'is not a synonymous concept with the self concept or with autobiographical memories' (p. 51). Even more, one could say that identity consists of acts that do not merely show *a* form of being, but rather manifest *the* form of being of an individual at a certain moment, and vis-à-vis people and particular circumstances. The self's understanding inserted in the structure of language and speech acts also implies an understanding within the social frame. Neither the self, nor self-identity, can be constituted on the basis of a centre or the idea of a self-contained subject, since the

discursive structure in which the self is created submits the self to scenes and situations of interactive communication. Personal identity and collective identity are but the result of speech acts of individuals who act through the mediation resources available in society and culture.

This perspective assists our escape from psychological essentialisms, presenting a progressive step from a philosophy of the conscience to a philosophy of communication (Habermas, 1987). However, it is impossible to overlook the risk of dissolving the self in interaction and communication (p. 282), annulling any possibility of a topology of the intrapsychic or of the intrapsychological. In this sense, the mainstream tradition in the developmental psychology of identity is bound to Erikson (1968) and to Marcia (1993). Even when this tradition suffers from a lack of imagination in the study of identity, it does not annul the dialectical tension between individual and society. It enlarges an understanding of identity and the self, to leave a paradigm of the conscience without being dissolved in the language. In short, it is in the self that the possibilities of singularity and difference, continuity and change, of self-esteem and devaluation of the self are located. It is the self and its own representation, the one that allows it to be located in a plot of scenes and situations of communicative interaction, and within the agency categorization, that is necessarily a part of speech acts.

Unfortunately, some unavoidable theoretical consequences are not extracted from the study of collective memory. In fact, in the book there is no developmental conception of identity. Naturally, this was not the objective, nor are we asking the editors to satisfy that aim. However, it is clear that the study of collective memory summons a concept of the subject that transforms in time, producing novelty. Therefore, it is certain that 'memory—even more when this is collective—is not only a necessary condition of identity, but rather it is also a requirement for the preparation for the future' (p. 82). Therefore, the consideration of the implicit category of time in the study of memory, either as retrospective historical time, or as a prospective time whose future is associated with moral responsibilities, does not escape from the subjective constructions of the interaction between cognition, emotion and communication. Since for psychology there cannot be time without the self, the connection of the individual in time, in social and collective history, as well as in personal and singular history, leads us to the question of biography.

It seems strange that the book contains only isolated references to the question of the connection of autobiography and biography to

identity, with no systematic consideration of these categories. Such a consideration of the biographical question would allow us to articulate a better understanding of what Legrand (1993) characterizes as the 'social personality'—in this case, how collective memory is articulated from the individual level and point of view. The German tradition of critical theory of the self has already revealed the complex relationships among biography, culture and history (Jensen, 1986). On the other hand, it could be affirmed, indeed, that it is in adolescence that 'biographical ability' appears. It can be said, then, that it is in adolescence that history begins; history as the capacity of the human subject to make his or her own personal history. There, memory and biographical forgetfulness emerge as novelty, and the social capacities of memory and forgetfulness begin to be configured. So 'the best description/explanation of collective memory process, in spite of a seeming paradox, is the one that not only does not suppress, but rather better expresses the individual dimension' (p. 284). But the narrative analysis of memory is not exhausted by setting the analysis in the dialectic between the subjective/autobiographical dimension and the historical/collective dimension. At least, it is not exhausted in the sense of the narrative and communicative analysis of discursive productions. Through appealing to the narrative coherence of the self (in Paul Ricoeur's sense), the narrative analysis of memory is not depleted, but rather seeks to identify how the individual sustains his or her world over time; it looks to establish how the coherence of self and identity is maintained in biographical time and in the discursive order (Lipiansky, 1992).

### **Epistemological and Methodological Issues**

Around the methodological issues, another noticeable conceptual axis of *Memoria colectiva e identidad nacional* is articulated: the always effective epistemic disputes between the empirical-analytic and nomothetical position vs. the dialectical-contextualist position in the social sciences, of which Habermas (1990) gave us, some years ago, a revealing panorama. The dispute is set in the study of memory and it adopts the vestments of opposed cognitivism and social constructionism, either radical or moderate. One of the authors' successes is to explicitly expose the controversy among these positions. It is also right to adopt a self-critical position concerning radical social constructionism, and to discuss the aporetic position of cultural and discursive social psychology. The self-critical position already represents a way to solve theoretical and methodological problems. In fact, the hypothesis of a



partial reconciliation between cognitivism and social constructionism in the study of memory postulates that 'it is necessary to grant particular importance to methodological aspects, since the conflict is often posed in terms of a judgement about the scientific quality of researchers' results as a function of the different criteria of empirical validation' (p. 108).

Even when this epistemic and methodological optimism is risky and asymmetric, with conciliatory efforts apparently coming more frequently from social constructionists, it constitutes an attitude worthy of exploration. However, such an exploration must consider two cautions that the same authors outline. In the first place, the conciliatory attitude is acceptable whenever it is not conceived as a 'naïve eclecticism' that leaves strong social constructionist hypotheses about memory and identity without content. Eclecticism does not follow the same patterns of methodological opportunism. In the second place, conciliatory efforts will follow more closely from the epistemic and methodological points of view if, when conceiving empirical research and hypotheses, one starts either from 'analysis levels' (pp. 53, 306) or explanation levels, or from 'integration levels' of the phenomena under study.

From this starting place, the disjunctions of the individual and the collective in the memory tend to be solved, as do those of social identity and personal identity. Therefore, through the analysis levels perspective at least four levels are recovered: the level of biological analysis related to the activation of biological structures; the level of computing analysis, referring to parallel and distributed interpersonal processing of information; the level of individual analysis, referring to actions and internal operations; and, finally, the level of social-ecological analysis, linked to the activities carried out in a physical and social environment.

In my opinion, however, it is necessary to articulate at the analysis, explanation and integration levels of the phenomena. The integration could come from the micro-elemental level and progress to the macro-process level, going through intermediary levels of explanatory and analytic integration of the phenomena, which becomes particularly necessary as a heuristic caution. We can take as examples the cases of the social-ecological analysis level and of the computational analysis level. The social-ecological analysis level admits, in a pertinent way, that the self transforms itself and its environment through action. But, in the same way that the non-existence of a unilateral influence of environment over the self is accepted today, it is not possible to admit a monist construction of the environment by the self. This means that

the level of social-ecological analysis cannot be conceived of in a diminished and simplistic way. The social is not simply an environment for the self, nor can it be reduced to its constitution by the interpersonal processing of information; nor is it only constituted by the semiotic mediations of the mass media. The social cannot be conceived of as an abstraction that expels a systematic analysis of the political system. It is imperative to conceive of society and the social analytic sphere as in interaction with the construction of meaning (culture) and the person. Moreover, their conception must enlarge the entirety of complex relationships that occur among social groups and between groups and social institutions. A similar observation can be made about the computational level of analysis. It is not only necessary to establish the analytic and integration mechanisms that make it possible to recuperate the outcomes of the computational level at a superior level (individual level). It is also necessary to establish the mechanisms by means of which, at a superior level (the social-ecological level), it is possible to recuperate the theoretical elaborations concerned with the processes at this last level.

Although in *Memoria colectiva e identidad nacional* the previous aspects have been clarified, most of the studies in the book are not aimed at distinguishing the analytic levels, as is made clear in chapter 15. In this chapter, a particularly interesting and unusual methodological approach reveals a type of analytic level. The research demonstrates the empirical existence of collective processes of memory. It is beneficial that 'the results suppose a change in the—implicitly individualist—methodology of social psychology and reinforce interest in collective models of memory' (p. 410).

## **Cultural Social Psychology and the Identity of Disciplines**

*Memoria colectiva e identidad nacional* is a successful addition to current investigations of memory from the point of view of the dialogue of social psychology and the social sciences. The fundamental issue of analysis is elaborated from the points of reference of a cultural and discursive psychology. Therefore, main sections of the presented research are outside of the habitual studies of social psychology. This is particularly true for the study of collective memory, which 'is carried out adopting a historical vision of the psychological processes' (p. 208), not only through a historical perspective, but also through the perspective of the analysis of communicative (Habermas, 1987, 1990) and semiotic processes. In these analytic processes the ontological role of language

appears every time with more relevance, in spite of the fact that in some cases there appears to have been an underestimation of the potentialities of 'linguistic analysis' for solving methodological problems (p. 121).

In general, *Memoria colectiva e identidad nacional* represents an original contribution to contemporary critical social psychology. Unfortunately, such contributions are not very frequent in the context of Hispanic social psychology. In this book there is a desire to emulate the width and depth of the theoretical reflections, as well as the rigour of the empirical explorations and methodological contributions, of individuals like Maurice Halbwachs—a precursor in studies of the memory. It is in fact Halbwachs' idea that 'history begins when tradition finishes'. *Memoria colectiva e identidad nacional* provides a deep comprehension of the traditions created by human processes and their concrete protagonists, who finally configure our history, collective memories and identities. The investigations of González-Ortega and Solís-Avenidaño (2002) also lead us to wonder about the validity of the 'tradition' of social psychology, strongly centred as it is at the intra-disciplinary level. These researchers make it clear to us that objects of knowledge, like collective memoirs and national identities, involve different disciplines of the social and human sciences. Specifically, they force us to question the relevancy of keeping disciplinary limits vis-à-vis objects of knowledge, which forces investigators to break them. In this sense, does history begin when tradition finishes? In this sense, too, does the object also end up retaliating against the knowledgeable subject?

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### **Biography**

NAPOLEÓN TAPIA-BALLADARES is a researcher in the Institute for Psychological Research and Professor in the School of Psychology at the University of Costa Rica, San José, Costa Rica. His research interests include the study of adolescent and adult personal identity from a clinical-developmental approach, moral development, psychology of religion and psychology of memory. ADDRESS: Prof. Napoleón Tapia, Institute for Psychological Research, University of Costa Rica, San José, Costa Rica. [email: naptapb@fcs.ucr.ac.cr]