

Albert Balcells

Memory, history and politics

By memory I mean not the unfeasible sum total of individual memories, but the referred imagery of the collective past that gives shared identity. By history I mean the literature generated by professional and amateur historians in both monographs and works of synthesis.

In the first place it is necessary to point out that both memory and history are selective. The past is irrevocably dead and when we remember it with a book or a monument, both the historian researching in the archives and the authority or the group that decides to erect a statue choose from a whole host of events those they consider important for the present.

While the historical memory wishes to commemorate in order to thus draw a lesson with regard to present behaviour, history seeks scientific credibility in a disinterested knowledge, which subjects every phenomenon and every movement from the past to contextualisation, comparison and relativisation. History does not seek applied knowledge. When it does so, it becomes political propaganda. However, the historian does not write history for history's sake but from the present and for the present. All history, it has rightly been said, even the most ancient and furthest back in time, is contemporary history. It speaks always of human problems that, despite the great differences in thinking and culture, speak to us as human beings. The results of written history are open from the point of view of values, which does not mean that the historian's task is amoral, it means that he is not trying to edify, and of course crude history is not usually so at all, it rather tends to scandalize those seeking examples in the past. History also fights against oblivion, as memory wishes to. It also wishes to recover consciously the past that conditions us, but not from the point of view of political, religious or ideological discourse.

Between history and memory there is as much complementarity as opposition, as there is between the socio-political sciences and political action. There is no scientific historical

memory just as there can be no politics that is scientific. We should begin to tremble when a political line of action is presented to us as scientific as this means that it is intended to be unquestionable and that the desire is to impose it on us without recognising the risk and the more or less free —and, therefore, arguable— option that all politics entails. However, in the same way that sociologists cannot pretend to take the place of politicians, historians cannot pretend to substitute the historical memory with written history, as if they did not also need, as citizens, to be part of a historical memory that nourishes identity. We cannot deny the right of a popular historical memory to exist in the name of science, because at the same time the awareness of the high degree of conditioning of the collective present by the past would be destroyed although the past never repeats itself, and this is more important than it may seem. There are no social relationships without rituals and without ceremonies, and rites are associated with myths. Contempt for the historical memory due to the tendency to create myths often contained in it is an intellectualist distortion. Just as the artist is wrong to consider that art and craftsmanship are absolutely opposed and not to admit the mutual ties within their obvious difference, the historian who dismisses the historical memory as a political fraud is doing, either involuntarily or voluntarily, the best service to the politics of collective amnesia and uprooting in order to facilitate the manipulation of the masses by the powers that be. Thus the academic historians who devote themselves to mytho-phobia are usually the ones most given to facilitating the manipulation of the past by the established powers, above all by the power that is above the subordinate ones, easier to criticise without risk.

History and memory have to recognise mutually their respective legitimacy and independence, without the subordination of one to the other or hierarchical superiorities. Obviously, historians have to combat the falsification of events at any level and in any case. Historical reality and truth cannot be sacrificed even in the name of the noblest causes, even those with which historians identify themselves. Contributing to a reasonable and unbiased historical memory is a responsibility that the historian cannot avoid. It should be added that the responsibility for preventing the fuelling of prejudice, resentment and hatred is the duty of any responsible citizen and not only of the historian. This does not mean trying to deny conflict in the past to guarantee peace in the present on the basis of ignoring historical struggles and confrontations. Neither memory nor history should do that. Forgiving and forgetting are not the same thing, although colloquial language regards the two verbs as having the same meaning.

We cannot hope to replace feelings, identifications and emotions with reason or science. And the historical memory is emotive, which does not mean that it is spontaneous or that it emanates from a mysterious popular wisdom. There is a politics of the memory and a struggle between groups to decide what has to be commemorated and what not, which events and figures deserve a monument or a television documentary and which do not, and what hierarchy of importance has to be given to all the events and figures that make up the historical memory, which is plural and moves within a regime of debating majorities and minorities and with changes in the correlation of forces, at least when there is no dictatorship able to impose its censored version of the memory by force, with the aim of having the last and definitive word.

Pluralism does not entail each party or trade union being able to set up its stall of retrospective propaganda in a public museum, devoted to the historical memory.

Memory should not exclude contradictions and has to assume the dialectic between the different forces down through the ages. That the historical memory is not erudite does not mean that it has to rule out the critical dimension. It is regrettable that historical self-criticism is very often conspicuous by its absence in the retrospective exhibitions and pamphlets of parties, unions and religious denominations.

Only the historical memory agreed by consensus is destined to endure in the face of the fragmentary, in which each group mounts its own exhibition, holds its own commemoration, has its own museum, preserves its own sanctuary. Every age has shared values within which the historical memory has to move. Yet political power, local, regional or national, is never absent from it even when the monuments are erected by popular subscription, which has never been enough to achieve the proposed objective.

Nevertheless, monuments, which reflect the values of their times, may in another age be reduced to simple historical patrimony, bereft of the symbolism that was once attributed to them, and they are lucky if they are not simply removed as a leftover from the political propaganda of a period, unwanted by the great majority of citizens in a democratic society.

Just as a building, a place or a sanctuary can become a place of memory through the deliberate wishes of an influential circle, they can later be “stripped of memory”.

One example may be Ripoll Abbey. Reconstructed by Catholic Catalanism —*vigatanisme*— as the “cradle of Catalonia” in 1893, on the initiative of Josep Morgades, the Bishop of Vic, today it is a place of memory without memory.

In the politics of memory historians can act as historical advisors, but not as guarantors of the scientific nature of the options chosen by the representative political institutions. If they do so, they immediately become functionaries of a particular politics of memory, which tends to de-contextualize the events.

A field, on the other hand, in which historians can carry out their research work independently is the history of the politics of memory down through the years and in different countries, beginning with their own. There is a very broad and exciting field for research if we study how a place becomes a place of memory, how and why an old monument is restored or rebuilt, how a place of memory takes on different significances or loses its initial one. It may be worthwhile to research the process, often full of arguments and disagreements, whereby a song becomes a country’s national anthem or the date of the national holiday is decided or a commemorative ritual is created and gradually changes. In the case of a nation without its own state, like for example Catalonia, initiatives have often sprung from below and have taken time to be adopted officially. The arguments prior to the erection of a monument and the reasons why sometimes it never gets set up are revealing, or why its symbolism and its site are changed, or how the monument and the name of the square it is eventually erected in or moved to do not match. It may also be productive to study the subjects of historical painting, so rich in the nineteenth century, with its almost operatic rhetoric, without forgetting that this kind of language also overlaps into the twentieth century, especially in times of change, for example, that which was intended to illustrate the socialist realism of Soviet propaganda in the former USSR.

This very broad field has already begun to be explored, as has the study and interpretation of legends. From contempt for legend, considered the antithesis of history,

there was a swing to an appreciation of legend, also considered a subject for historical study. In similar fashion, the history of the historical memory has to be incorporated and is beginning to be incorporated into the subject matter of historical studies.

Perhaps this coincides with the crisis in the politics of memory, its place taken by the politics of oblivion, under the pretext of combating historicism in order to lead to a post-modern sense of the present. When the places of memory begin to be studied, not to make an exegesis and a justification of them, i.e. to take part in the rite, but to study them as facts of history, it is because they have almost certainly lost much of their symbolic force and their obviousness, as they are losing their potential to mobilize and evoke, because with their official status they have become routine and have lost their emotiveness.

The nineteenth-century monument told a story. Alongside the symbols and allegories of neoclassical roots, there were the allusive scenes, rather theatrical and at times dressed in rather anachronistic clothes, often classicist, but also, at times, thoroughly of the moment as is the case also with nineteenth-century historicist painting. The twentieth-century monument is much more difficult to decipher, with a female figure representing the fatherland or humankind or freedom, and just a medallion in relief or a bust with the portrait, more or less faithful, of the figure remembered. But the predominance of abstraction in the commemorative monument of the most recent period demands a tombstone or an inscription in bronze to explain in greater or lesser detail what is being commemorated.

In any case a minimum knowledge of the facts and their significance has always been necessary. The distracted passer-by does not understand what the monument represents, however figurative it may be. Commemorative ceremonies are needed to make the monument talk. Thus, explanation has always been necessary, in the past and now, so historical knowledge is essential, however basic it may be. The monument is no substitute for the teaching of history and this is found in the printed word, in schoolbooks and in newspapers and books for adults. Teaching today has the aid of television, although it is not used very frequently in the case of the history of Catalonia, in contrast to the television channels of other countries with their own history.

At times, in today's books and magazines and even on the posters announcing history conferences, there is no option but to resort to the old historical painting, so discredited in the eyes of historians, to breathe life into the dead pages of the past, repeating what, as the only recourse, the schoolbooks on Spanish history of the forties and fifties did, when they used copies drawn in pen and ink, and not colour photography, of oil paintings, rather more suggestive, as they now appear in better published history books and magazines.

Exhibitions, museums and, above all, television documentaries fuel the historical memory in a far better way than monuments and the names of streets and squares do today.

History and memory have to recognize mutually their respective legitimacy and independence, without hierarchical superiorities



Needless to say, the historical memory has also been fuelled by historical novels and films on a historical theme, which differ from history documentaries by presenting exclusively fictional scenes with actors or introducing more or less plausible and representative fictional characters alongside the historical ones.

However, the names of urban places, even though their significance may be unknown, are efficient in that they are a constant presence, they penetrate the repertory of public names that the people know and herein lies their advantage over a more direct and explicit but incidental, minority message such as the visit to an exhibition or a newspaper article. The names of public places prepare for and facilitate receptiveness towards more explicit messages when the citizens discover that such a well-known street name corresponds to a figure or a historical event hitherto unknown to them, when the street or square has



| Harar (Ethiopia), Toni Catany (2007)

previously had no added value for them. Well-preserved evocative ruins, suitably restored, are also a sign of identity that is incorporated into the urban landscape with a function similarly commemorative and of the historical memory behind their purely archaeological appearance. When an outstanding old building is the headquarters of a representative institution it becomes a place of memory or an identifying monument.

Maximum commemorative efficiency is achieved when the name of the place, for example a square or gardens, and the figure or event remembered on the monument set there coincide. When for whatever reason this is not the case (because it has been moved or for another reason), the most appropriate thing would have been to change the name of the place and make it match the new or reinstalled monument there. The impersonal monotony of the urban landscape is brightened up by the monuments that become

landmarks, references or points to guide ourselves by. It is therefore a mistake if the name of a crossroads does not coincide with that of the figure or the event on the monument erected in the same place. When this occurs it means that the country's history has been very unstable or that the city has had to change a great deal. Several examples of this anomaly can be found in Barcelona.

The historical memory has been associated with the idea of culture as something sacred, a characteristic accentuated in countries where the distinguishing collective identity is denied in an authoritarian way or, at least, is fragile or threatened. The change from a sacred idea of culture to a managerial one, for example of Catalan culture after 1980, besides being the sign of an ongoing process of normalisation, may entail a lack of models and ideas on the subject of cultural and memorial policy. Efficiency should not result in banality. With an insufficient degree of political autonomy, acting with a lack of concern that would not be advisable even with proper self-government can only be interpreted as a renunciation. The idea of monuments in terms of tourism and recreation, as theme

JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

transfer 02

focus

“Immigration and social change, the Catalan experience”

Aitana Guia, Jordi Sánchez, Salvador Cardús, Isidor Marí, Laila Karrouch, Julià Guillamon

And also: Intelligent design and the assault on science

Juli Peretó; The psychology of terrorism **Adolf Tobefia;** Empire and freedom **Josep M. Colomer;** Labeling modernity **Jordi Sales;** The Holocaust and literature **Rosa Planas;** The end of science **Pere Puigdomènech, ...**

parks, is only valid and legitimate if at the same time one does not try to do away with the cultural nature of commemorative monuments. This is an age of disbelief with regard to both traditional religion and the political doctrines that were hoping to replace it as doctrines of earthly salvation. And, notwithstanding this, a building's original usefulness, even though it may have gone way beyond the limits of that purpose, continues to fuel underlying hostilities as if those beliefs could reappear in their old form or benefit from a public re-emergence thanks to the new scenario offered them. For example, Gaudí's Sagrada Família temple in Barcelona continues to be the subject of underlying love and hatred whose origins are evident.

I have tried to outline the relationships between memory and history without hiding the fact that both constitute fields of conflict and argument and at the same time areas of consensus in search of the support of majority public opinion. The relationships between the two can only bear fruit if they acknowledge their respective autonomy, if they are aware that they are acting in different areas. Both refer to the past but with different criteria and aims.

The problems generated by the political manipulation of history are not going to disappear. The ancient Romans considered that history was part of rhetoric. Machiavelli said that history is the maidservant of politics. Historical research today needs subsidies and these are easier to get if they are in line with official commemorations. History will continue to fight for its political independence, the basis of its scientific credibility. Human society is still going to need, in order to lay the foundations of its collective identity (national, local and group), a historical memory and this will have to be nourished in the most diverse ways: with monuments, street names, annual commemorations, history documentaries, films, general or monographic museums, and radio or television programmes on the subject of history.

The memory has to be constructed on basis of the acknowledgement of pluralism and diversity, but also of shared constructive values, which neither glorify nor excuse imposition, oppression or discrimination. Therefore, while past injustices that may be repeated or perpetuated should often be remembered or denounced, it is necessary to create a collective imagery essential for avoiding anomie and the depersonalisation of today's world. Historical science can and must help memory, but never take its place. Moreover, historical science should not be subordinated to memory. The fact that they share common ground and that the moral reasons may be similar must not lead them to be confused and to confuse us ||

The memory has to be constructed on a pluralist basis, but also of shared constructive values