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Excerpt

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# Introduction

## Memories of Post-imperial Nations

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### Memory and agency

Recent decades have witnessed a veritable ‘memory boom’. Scholars who have commented on this boom have linked it to the ‘death of the future’ and to the ‘ideological exhaustion’ which occurred after the collapse of Communism at the end of the Cold War.<sup>1</sup> Looking back seemed to be more promising than looking ahead. But there was also another reason for privileging memory and it is based on human agency which was highlighted at about the same time by social scientists who wanted to overcome deterministic theories of social evolution. However, emancipating the human agent from the fetters of determinism, which made him/her a mere puppet in the hands of a pre-ordained destiny begs the question of reconciling the aims of agents who were guided by their own intentions without taking heed of others. Therefore, the social scientists who speak of agency also speak of negotiation. This refers to a process of open deliberation, which presumes agency freedom.<sup>2</sup> Agency and negotiation are thus interdependent. This would also be applicable to the field of collective memory. Maurice Halbwachs, a pioneer in this field, has stressed that this type of memory depends on social frameworks.<sup>3</sup> Introducing the concepts of agency and negotiation one may say that the collective memory is the product of deliberations among many agents who can construct and deconstruct the contents of this memory. In this process, individual and collective memories interact. Elements of individual memories may enter the collective memory and this then may influence the ways in which individual memories are preserved and expressed.

There is, of course, an aspect of individual memory which is so to speak ‘not negotiable’. This does not refer to the ‘edited’ memory which will be discussed later on, but only to the moments of sudden recall, which then conjure up additional thoughts and feelings. There are many examples in literary works of this type of memory. Marcel Proust is often quoted in this context. His monumental novel *Remembrance of Things Past* is devoted to the exploration of the enigma of memory. But many other writers have also portrayed such personal flashes of memory. Moreover, most people will have experienced such flashes in their lifetime. However, the processes of remembering go beyond this type of ‘flash memory’. Neurologists have discovered that the human memory changes with each recall of an experience. In the process of recalling it, the particular impression is ‘edited’ and then stored in its new version. The individual ‘edited memory’ can only be referred to metaphorically when describing a collective memory. ‘Editing’ collective memory is a process of social interaction. It may give rise to serious conflicts, even to ‘wars of memory’. Each generation will make its own contribution to this process. Master narratives of the past replace the immediacy of personal remembrance. But in recent times such master narratives have lost their attraction. Therefore, attempts have been made to use other means to revive the memory of the past. Pierre Nora has tried this with his monumental documentation of the ‘Lieux de Mémoire’ in France. He focussed his attention on ‘sites where a sense of historical continuity persists’, admitting that such sites were ‘like shells on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded’.<sup>4</sup> Memory should be captured through individual recollection, because ‘the less memory is experienced collectively, the more it will require individuals to become themselves memory individuals’.<sup>5</sup> Nora, thus, attributed agency to those ‘memory individuals’. As has been stated above, individual memory ignited by a flash of remembrance is ‘not negotiable’ and remains intimate and personal. But Nora expected obviously more from his ‘memory individuals’. If they had to share their memories with others they would have to enter a process of negotiation. This seems to need further exploration. It would be particularly interesting to find out how memory individuals turn into memorymakers who make distinct contributions to collective memory. Such memorymakers provide narratives, which confirm the social identity of the group to which they belong. Nora says that ‘memory ... is affective and magical’.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the memorymaker is a kind of magician who controls the affections of his/her audience.

## Memory and history

Memory as individual agency has a tenuous relationship with history, which emphasizes the 'benefit of hindsight' as its solid foundation. History challenges the relevance of individual memory, which cannot claim this fundamental benefit. Those who have lived in a particular time could not have full insight into the causes of events which they witnessed. They could also not know about the consequences of those events which revealed their meaning only later on. At the most, the historian may refer to such memories as evidence for the limited horizons of those whose actions he has to interpret. These horizons were not only limited by the capacities of the respective individuals, but also by the lack of information. Many important actions are shrouded in secrecy. Only the historian could later on try to reveal those secrets by means of archival research. The 'benefit of hindsight' thus not only refers to the knowledge of the consequences of actions, but also to the contemporary awareness of such actions as they were often deliberately disguised. Historians, therefore, discount memory as necessarily incomplete and partial. It is only in recent years that the very subjectivity of memory has been valued by historians as a 'fact' which deserves to be studied in its own right. Human decisions are always based on limited information. Memory supplements current information and thus influences decisions.

Collective memory, which is shared in various degrees of intensity by many individuals, is necessarily 'contaminated' by history. 'Hindsight' affects the process of remembering at every stage. The interpretation of past events by historians and 'memorymakers' constitutes the social framework, which is required for the articulation of memory. This applies to events which are still within 'living memory', but even more so to their recall by later generations. The historians who have participated in the present project on the 'memories of post-imperial nations' are approaching this subject from this point of view. It is surprising that in the midst of the 'memory boom' comparative studies of this field have hardly been attempted. As the subsequent account will show, such studies are urgently needed. In introducing the subject we shall first sketch the trajectory from empire building to decolonization.

## Overseas expansion of nation states and the crumbling of empires

In the early period of modern history, nation-states emerged in Europe. They had well-defined territorial limits. Their rulers recruited standing armies equipped

with firearms. In due course, they employed civil servants who helped them to subject their realms to central governance. Coastal states explored the oceans and derived profit from armed trade. They then acquired territories overseas and imposed their systems of governance on them. Organizational skills rather than mere military prowess helped them to entrench their dominance. They established a parasitical symbiosis with the foreign people they ruled and derived great profit from this arrangement. Large overseas empires were established in this way. They lasted for several centuries. But in the twentieth century these empires crumbled. This was mainly due to two world wars which sapped the strength of the imperial nations. The inter-war depression contributed to the crumbling of empires. It caused a precipitous decline of the prices of colonial products. This made the territorial control of colonies superfluous. A cost/benefit analysis of imperial rule would show that the administration of colonies was expensive whereas the benefits derived from them dwindled. Moritz Bonn, a perceptive German economist who taught at the London School of Economics, coined the term 'decolonisation' in 1931 and predicted that the process which he had characterized in this way would speed up in the years to come. In 1938, he wrote: '...a decolonisation movement is sweeping over the continents. An age of empire-breaking will follow an age of empire-making'.<sup>7</sup> Bonn did not predict the war which began one year after his book was published. He was optimistic about future developments and stated: 'The day of a federated Central Europe is bound to come'.<sup>8</sup> Federation was to him an alternative to conquest. His vision of a federated Europe was premature. Hitler tried to unite Europe by conquest. Only after his defeat could federalism triumph. The European Union then became a new haven for post-imperial nations. Portugal is the most striking case in point. It was the oldest imperial nation and held on to its empire much longer than the other imperial nations, then opting for Europe while abandoning its crumbling empire.

The European Union did offer a new perspective for post-imperial nations, but their memories were still affected to a large extent by their national past. These memories have a distinctly national framework. Outsiders may see this even more clearly than insiders, but only insiders who themselves share their national memory can provide authentic insights into its complexities. This is why an attempt has been made to get together scholars representing six European post-imperial nations. Japan has been added to the list of nations to be studied, because its post-imperial status is in many ways similar to the six European nations though its special connection with the United States sets it apart.

### Amnesia or conspiracy of silence?

Many authors have referred to the blocking of memories concerning the imperial past as ‘amnesia’. But amnesia is an individual mental ailment, which may be caused by physical injuries or a psychic trauma. Therefore, it can hardly refer to the collective memory of a nation. Amnesia is, however, a convenient metaphor, which serves to account for the absence of narratives of experiences which are of such importance that they should be taken note of by everybody concerned. Similarly the term ‘aphasia’ (speechlessness) refers to an individual ailment. Its metaphorical use refers to an inability to articulate experiences for which one cannot find adequate expressions. This may happen if there is no social framework available which permits the formation of collective memory.

From the discussions at this conference there emerged a distinct feeling of dissatisfaction with the term ‘amnesia’ and similar terms which refer to individual psychic phenomena. It was suggested to speak instead of silences which prevailed for some time and were broken only with some effort or due to a fortuitous coincidence of events. A conspiracy of silence rather than amnesia could affect a collective memory. This conspiracy may be due to a feeling of shame or discomfort, an unwillingness to articulate repentance for deeds which one may not have done but which one had tolerated. This kind of silence is the very opposite of amnesia. Whereas those who suffer from a loss of memory usually try to recover it, the participants in a conspiracy of silence do not want the silence to be broken. Nicola Labanca stressed the importance of silence in his contribution. In Italy, this silence was especially due to the fact that in its most recent phase the Italian empire had been a fascist one. But other national memories were also marked by long periods of silence. In Japan, the term ‘frozen memories’ was applied to this phenomenon.

Jay Winter has provided a good definition of this kind of silence in an interview with a Turkish scholar<sup>9</sup>:

Silence is a space where nobody speaks what everybody knows. And it is an area which is socially regulated, socially preserved and socially destroyed. ... The social contract of silence can only be broken in time, over a long period of time. ...

Further research on this ‘social contract of silence’ in post-imperial nations should be an essential part of exploring their memories. By rejecting the term ‘amnesia’ and highlighting ‘silence’, the participants of this conference have

taken a first step in this direction. The silence characterized by Jay Winter may be related to a deliberate refusal of understanding the past. The historian Lucian Hölscher has made a plea for a ‘hermeneutics of not-understanding’.<sup>10</sup> Usually hermeneutics refers to the methodology of understanding texts whose meaning may not be immediately obvious, particularly if those texts have been produced in ancient times or in societies whose social framework is different from that of the observer. Hölscher mentions the ‘intentional refusal of understanding’,<sup>11</sup> but also the incapacity of understanding which is due to a rupture of historical continuity.<sup>12</sup> Historiography which tries to bridge such ruptures faces a dilemma. Old assumptions of a unity of history are no longer tenable.<sup>13</sup> Master narratives are no longer convincing those who have experienced such ruptures. Even Pierre Nora’s invitation to an individual dialogue with the past when visiting ‘Lieux de Mémoire’ may not restore a feeling of historical continuity. Lapsing into silence is a reaction to this quandary. Breaking the silence may then be a painful process. Once the silence is broken ‘wars of memory’ may arise as the process of ‘editing’ of the collective memory begins.

### Memory wars and the surfeit of commemorations

‘Wars of memory’ reflect a contested past. Different ‘memorymakers’ vie with each other with regard to the authority to interpret the past correctly. A typical example is the date of 19 March in France. This date has been fixed as an official day of commemoration of the end of the Algerian War. The date as such is not in doubt, but its meaning is contested. For those who would have never abandoned Algeria, this date marks a defeat and therefore they refuse to celebrate it. This is clear cut conflict, other contests are more complex, involving detailed narratives of past experiences. Demonstrations and publications accompany such wars of memory. The demand for commemorations leads to a veritable boulemie of such events as Eric Savarese has pointed out. Once the silence is broken, experiences are recalled and articulated with a vengeance. Politicians trying to catch votes bend over backwards to please those who advertise their particular version of the interpretation of the past in order to get it enshrined in the national memory. School curricula are the most obvious testimonies of such a national memory. ‘Memory lobbyists’ would try to get an entry into the mainstream of national memory by influencing the authorities in charge of designing such curricula. Another contested field is the creating of places of memory by means of the construction of monuments. Governments may order the construction

of such monuments. The Dutch monument in memory of slavery is a case in point. But municipalities may also adorn their cities with monuments dedicated to leaders whose credentials are in dispute. French and Italian examples were mentioned during the conference. As long as silence prevailed, visibility was also impaired. Once the silence was broken, there was also a demand for visible manifestations of memory. Such monuments are beacons in a sea of oblivion. They belong to the *Lieux de Mémoire* which have been mentioned earlier. It would be interesting to look at these monuments in terms of the dialectic process of agency and negotiation. Those who wished to erect such monuments had to gain support for their plans and convince others of the need for the monument. This required intensive negotiations, which must be documented in detail in most cases. The arguments used for or against the erection of such monuments would shed much light on the construction of collective memory. The activities of memorymakers would be illustrated by these negotiations. There have been incidents of constructions of such monuments in southern France. Presumably similar examples can be found elsewhere.

### Challenge of ‘repentance’

After decolonization, the representatives of the ex-colonies soon raised their voices and demanded apologies from their former rulers for the wrong which they had done to their erstwhile subjects. There were several reasons for the reluctance to respond to such requests. First of all, there was a fear that apologies would lead to a request for material compensation. Therefore, there were at the most some expressions of regret for what had been done. But apologies were also avoided because there was still a widespread conviction that the colonial rulers had tried to do their best to improve the position of their subjects and had not exploited them. The belief in the *mission civilisatrice* did not end with decolonization. In fact, this insistence on cultural superiority was most irksome to ex-colonials who felt that their own cultures had been fine and had been destroyed by their colonial rulers. When the ex-colonials asked for ‘repentance’ they had this aspect of colonial rule in mind rather than material compensation. The Algerian author Ismael-Selim Khaznadar has expressed this very well in his essay ‘Élucider ou se repentir?’ in a volume edited by him.<sup>14</sup> He specifically refers to the ancient concept of *metanoia*<sup>15</sup> which means a change of mind – or a change of heart as Mahatma Gandhi would have called it. In the post-imperial context, this would mean showing respect for the culture of the ex-colonials and



admitting that the insistence on the *mission civilisatrice* was a sign of arrogance. This kind of national repentance is very difficult to achieve. The members of post-imperial nations have been imbued with their cultural superiority for such a long time that they are not amenable to such a *metanoia*. Moreover, they usually interpret the call for repentance as referring to an individual guilt. It was typical for this point of view that President Hollande when asked about repentance pointed to the fact that he was born at a time when he could not have done anything which he should repent. It did not occur to him that he should express a national *metanoia* with regard to the claim of superiority with which colonial rule was justified for centuries. The challenge of repentance still remains and it is usually misunderstood. In France, the term ‘repentant’ has become a term of abuse, hurled at those who appear to be bending over backwards to please the ex-colonials. The memories of post-imperial nations can be adjusted so as to live with the loss of empire, but it is much more difficult to overcome ingrained prejudices of cultural and racial superiority.

### Encounter with immigrants

Much more than the mental challenge of repentance was involved in the physical encounter with immigrants from the ex-colonies who thronged to the metropolitan countries in increasing numbers. As the chapters concerning the different post-imperial nations show, there were many reasons for this migration. The legal provisions which permitted this migration were also rather different. But whatever the legal conditions might be, large numbers of immigrants did join the post-imperial nations. While individual immigrants are usually integrated quite easily, large groups often resist integration. They tend to congregate in ‘ghettos’ and produce a community leadership of their own. They also provide an audience for memorymakers who arise from among them and cultivate a group identity. It is the encounter with such groups rather than with individual immigrants which affects the collective memory of the host nation. Due to the very nature of this immigration, the migrants do not spread in the countryside but concentrate in certain urban areas which enhances their visibility. They do not only claim residential space but also wish to establish places of worship for their particular religion. This adherence to ‘strange’ religions often provokes negative reactions of the majority community, particularly if it is connected with a peculiar dress code.

For many people of post-imperial nations who had only the foggiest idea of



the colonies, the empire only came alive after it had ended because it spawned human beings who settled down as one's neighbours. Initially the immigration policies of several post-imperial nations were rather liberal, because there was a feeling that the imperial connection could somehow survive in this way. Moreover, the governments concerned wished to avoid the slightest impression of racial discrimination. The sequence of British immigration laws provides an object lesson of increasing discrimination which was however so carefully designed as not to reveal a racial bias. Immigrants into the British Isles were not motivated by political reasons, they were looking for jobs – and found them. The Netherlands also had liberal immigration laws and accommodated several waves of migrants, which were due to political reasons. France had to 'repatriate' more than a million people and experienced a rather tense post-colonial encounter. Portugal also had to receive many Portuguese who had lived in the colonies, but they blended fairly well with the metropolitan society to which they returned. Italy's experience was similar as far as Italians returning from the colonies were concerned. There were few African immigrants from the ex-colonies. Italy has only become an attractive destination for African migrants in recent times. They come mostly from African countries, which were not Italian colonies. But the old prejudices inherited from colonial times are now revived due to the encounter with the new immigrants. The Japanese case is a very special one due to the large number of Japanese that had to be repatriated after 1945 and the large Korean group, which has remained in Japan. The post-colonial encounter of residents and immigrants in the metropolitan countries is of crucial importance for the memories of post-imperial nations.

### **Reconstructing memories and rebuilding nations**

Ruling an overseas empire was an essential part of nation-building in the seven nations studied here. Although the common people in the metropolitan nations were rarely involved in the affairs of the empire, the national elites derived a great deal of their self-esteem from the possession of empire. But 'Britannia, ruling the waves' was an image which not only inspired the British elite, it also impressed the nation at large. The vision of empire pervaded national memory. It was revived whenever the nation faced problems which deeply touched its existence. The imperialism of the French Third Republic is a case in point. After the demise of the state ruled by Napoleon III, the new republic extended its empire with a vengeance and took great pride in this.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, after the disaster

of the Second World War and the demise of the Vichy government, the Fourth French Republic hastened to recover its overseas empire. The Netherlands also embarked on such a re-conquest of empire in order to overcome the trauma of the Second World War. Portugal, always concerned with its marginal position in Europe, produced a map of Europe on which the outlines of its African colonies were superimposed, with the caption: 'Portugal is not a small country'. In keeping with this vision, the colonies of Portugal were called 'Overseas Provinces'. These are just a few instances of the connections of European nation-building with the possession of empires. Stressing this fact does not imply an agreement with the radical representatives of the New Imperial History who maintain that the nation was constituted by the possession of empire. But the collective memory of imperial nations was certainly influenced in many ways by the awareness of being in control of an empire.

Memories are malleable and have many dimensions. There is an erroneous idea that memories only have a limited scope, that they are unilinear and restricted in their capacity. There would then be a competition for memory space in terms of a zero-sum game. Against this common prejudice Michael Rothberg has argued for a multi-directional memory which may permit a confluence of disparate historical imaginaries.<sup>17</sup> Such a multi-directional memory could accommodate remembering the holocaust as well as the crimes committed under colonial rule. In fact, such disparate memories could support each other. A recall of the one may induce a remembrance of the other. This would not distract from the uniqueness of the holocaust but help to perceive both types of memory in their respective contexts.

There is a method of 'cross-fading' images in the production of films so as to evoke multi-directional memories. Astrid Erll has referred to this in her work on the representation of the 'Indian Mutiny' of 1857. At the end of the Bollywood film 'The Rising' (2005) the image of the hero of the film, Mangal Pandey, is 'cross-faded' with scenes of the Indian freedom movement led by Gandhi, thus conjuring up a multi-directional memory of resistance to British rule.<sup>18</sup>

In this account of memories of post-imperial nations, it has been stressed that only those who belong to these nations and share the national memory are in a position to reflect it with authenticity. But Rothberg's concept of 'multidirectional memory' would also accommodate a 'transnational memory culture' as Marije Hristova has argued in a perceptive essay on Spanish writers who witnessed the civil war in Bosnia and compared it to the Spanish civil