

Constructing communities: From National to Transnational and Activist Politics of Memory in Europe

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Abstract

Within the European Union at least since the failed referenda on the EU constitution, there has been a strong realization that nationalism has been strengthened in the European countries, even in Western Europe, which has been seen as the civilized counterpart of the nationalistic Eastern Europe. In my paper I look at the construction of political communities through processes of memory and the politics of memory. I seek to highlight that there are politics of memory on different levels of political community building, not only the national or the European federal level. This invites us to think forward the way in which the overlapping and competing levels of political memory – and not only the interaction between different groups or nations – have an impact on the memory processes and the articulation of key signifiers such as the nationhood or Europe. In the final instance, it should enable us to see how the multiplicity of levels is an ever-present issue, even if certain groupings and actors would want us to focus our collective imaginary, or the imagining of the collective, on only one level of political community.

In this paper, I will offer a brief look at the politics of memory at the European federal and national level, on the national and metropolitan level, on the metropolitan municipal and local district level, as well as lead my analysis towards the politics of memory in the activist – often anti-(state) institutional – level. The last move would highlight the existence of memory building in the activist communities, which shows the importance of memory for political communities, and the function as a creator of continuity and even institutional base. It also highlights the multi-level character of these memory projects and community, which are, crucially to their political character, not without conflict.

Introduction

Within the European Union, at least since the failed referenda on the EU constitution, there has been a strong realization that nationalism has been strengthened in the European countries, even in Western Europe, which has been seen as the civilized counterpart of the ‘nationalistic’ Eastern Europe. One of the problems in the existing literature and prevalent conceptions on politics of memory – a flourishing field since the research initiated by seminal work of Pierre Nora – is that the community is

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imagined to be singular, and the conflict is perceived as occurring on the single level, such as the nation, or between two levels, such as the European federal and national ones. Looking at the construction of political communities through processes of memory and the politics of memory, I seek to highlight that conflicts and politics of memory occurs on different levels of political community building. This encourages reflection on the overlapping and competing levels of political memory – not only the interaction between different groups – and their impact on the memory processes and the articulation of key signifiers such as the nationhood or Europe. Finally, it should enable us to see how the multiplicity of levels is an ever-present issue, even if certain groupings and actors would want us to focus our collective imaginary, or the imagining of the collective, on only one level of political community.

In this piece, I will consider the competition over politics of memory at the European federal and national level, the national and metropolitan level, the metropolitan municipal and local district level, as well as lead my analysis towards the politics of memory in the activist – often anti-(state) institutional – level. The last move would highlight the existence of memory building in the activist communities, which shows the importance of memory for political communities, and its function as a creator of continuity and even institutional base. It also highlights the multi-level character of these memory projects and community, which is, crucially, not without conflict.

Memory and Discourse

Memory processes, such as commemoration, constantly articulate the ‘us’ and ‘them’, (temporally) fix values, and ultimately (re)produce the community. Following Ernesto Laclau (1990), political communities as totalities are impossible, yet there are constant attempts to articulate the ‘impossible community’ as a totality. Borders and fixed through nodal points, the moves towards its sedimentation are totalizing (hegemonizing), but also constantly in flux rearticulated, which offers the democratic ethos to the community: it is ultimately not fixed and contested. In a Carl Schmittian as well as Laclauian vein, I argue that politics is about the construction of us and them. Political frontiers are also at stake in politics of memory.

My aim here is to show that there are overlapping projects of memory in Europe, which compete over this ‘total identification’. As political communities exist through their difference to other such communities, moving to a multi-level analysis,

it becomes clear that there is not only contestation between the different groups on one level but also between different levels. Furthermore, same nodal points – such as symbolic homelands, heroes or key events – are contested between levels. The cross-level contestation also marks the nodal points, such as the perceptions of the past and uses of it, in the debates within one level, because the elements now carry traces of the articulation process on the other levels. Similarly as the events would carry different meanings when tied to the discourse of particular parties, also in the contestation between levels nodal points may contain different meanings.

Nation and Europe

In contemporary (Western) Europe, while national institutions continue to produce ‘banal nationalism’ (Billig 1995), the more pronounced nation-centered projects are usually carried out by political parties and groupings (see e.g. Du bist Deutschland, <http://www.du-bist-deutschland.de>). The state institutions themselves, as these, as members of the union, also often produce identifications with Europe, or join the two levels in commemorations. For instance in Hungary, the year 2000, which marked the establishment of the Hungarian ‘statehood’ was also celebrating the joining of Hungary in the European cultural sphere, as the Hungarian kings chose the Western Catholic Christianity as their religion.

The European Union for its part tries to create its own history, in the same way as it has been creating its own symbols. At its webpage it presents a chronological history of key events (http://europa.eu.int/abc/history/index_en.htm). As the memory project of the European Social Forum (ESF) process shows (see below), the EU memory building has a practical aim: an archive. The Historical Archives of the European Communities opened in 1986 after three years of planning. But besides acting as a depository, it also tries to create a legacy of conduct, and even a canon of heroes. The archives of the European Union, located in Florence, contain documentation even of key personalities – a canon of great men – of the history of unification. In their declaration on the 20th anniversary of the Archives, Romano Prodi, the president of the European Commission, and Yves Mény, the president of the European University Institute, stress the importance of the archive for a coherent history of the European construction (see <http://www.iue.it/ECArchives/pdf/dc.pdf>). In their usage, calling for a “*mémoire communautaire*”, archives blend with memory in the same way they do in the activist project. In both cases, the pragmatic aims

conceal a target of permanence, duration and coherence (in the case of the ESF this is linked to projects on translation, vocabulary, and politics of linguistic difference, such as the Babels group, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Babels>, and Boéri and Hodkinson 2005), and thereby to community building.

There is a worry that the model of EU ('European') history, similarly to EU political symbols, draws from nation-statist ideals, the Cold War experience of simple homogeneous units, and the U.S. experience. Much of the rhetoric on 'European history' is totalizing, trying to cover differences in the 'European experience' (is it feasible, for example, to try to find out what *really* happened in the Second World War to cover over national or sub-national perspectives to the war?). In this picture, the actually existing plurality of political experience and communities in Europe are wiped out as 'noise' to the unison sound of the community (e.g. the experiences of the EFTA countries, and the Central Eastern European member states). The transnational memory projects, such as that of the EU, should be highlighting their *transnational* character – without overemphasizing the national.

Nation and Metropolis

Most of the observed politics of memory occurs on the national level, there is a competition between various political groups over what should be commemorated or forgotten, how and why. In a short paper like this, I refrain from the discussion of this well known issue, and rather highlight the national vs. sub-national debate. The beyond-the-*transnational* character of the EU has given prominence to the regions and cities, which allows us to contest the singular role of the national states in the formation of the political community, while at the same time the EU policy on regions can also create space for totalizing regional identifications with imagined fixed borders to substitute national states rather than compliment them and reveal the *de facto* layered character of these regions. Instead of regions, I will here look at two metropolitan cities.

I start with the case of London to highlight the tension and frontier-building between the national and metropolitan levels. Perhaps the most prominent recent case of politics of the past in London was the proposed removal of two Victorian military heroes from Trafalgar Square in 2000. I draw here on my MA thesis (Palonen 2000), where I argued that the London Mayor Ken Livingstone's proposal to remove the two statues in the space which he was governing and through which he was projecting his

vision of London was a way to make a break with the past, to contrast the ‘old’ imperial Britain with ‘new’ multicultural London. Besides creating the political frontier to the past and the conservative Britain, which prevails in the whole discourse of Livingstone, this act highlighted the role of London in the world. The support for the Nelson Mandela statue and the Euro raised the status of London as an international player in Europe and the world even in contrast to the UK and the New Labour government of Tony Blair, while Livingstone still was expelled from the Labour Party.

Similar cases can be seen elsewhere, such as in Budapest and Hungarian politics (Palonen 2005). Here, both the metropolitan leader and the conservative government in 1998-2002 imposed their own views on the cityscape. The Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz government was building a frontier between the nation and the city, run by a left-wing coalition and a left-liberal mayor. This is visible not only in the rhetoric of the party, drawing on an old urban-rural cleavage, in the economic policy favoring the regional towns over Budapest, but also in the way in which politics of the past was done with publicly funded architectural projects. For example, once in power, the government halted the construction of the National Theatre, which had started under the previous left-wing government. This building of the National Theatre had been a long-term project to replace its 19th century predecessor. The conservative government wanted the glory of its construction for themselves and expressed a clear preference for a different, ‘more national’ architectural style and they built the theatre out of the center on state owned land, on the location where the Budapest Expo 1995/6 had been planned (until it had been cancelled by the left-wing government in 1994). Here the ownership and choice of the legacies of the past was under political debate in a way in which also constructed the ‘left’ and the ‘right’ on the national level, as well as the positions of the nation(al government) and the metropolis. The city and the past emerged in both of these cases as the fields of inscription of the political discourses and the frontier of the community.

Local Districts and the Metropolis

The case of Budapest also revealed that politics of memory appears on the contestation between different levels of local government. The city has twenty-four districts and a weak municipal structure, an umbrella of the municipal council and the Mayor, who take care of certain issues related to the infrastructure of the city – here

statues, memorials and commemorative street names are relevant. The municipal council has been lead by left-wing parties, and the Liberal Democrat Mayor Gábor Demszky has been in the office for the whole post-communist period, since 1990. In terms of the politics of memory the biggest debate has been over the statues and street names between the conservative or right-wing districts and the municipality. These numerous cases of contestation include the returning the name of the interwar authoritarian leader Admiral Horthy on the main street of a district, when the municipal council made a reservation for a smaller street to be named after him, but not the replacement of the street named after the composer Béla Bartok. The conservative districts also were fighting over the right to remove statues of the state socialist period and to erect those for the interwar period (see Palonen 2006).

The most recent debate is about the four and a half meter wide memorial to the victims of the WWII erected by the XXII district without the consent of the municipality or the Budapest Gallery granting the permission to erect statues in the public space. It features a Turul bird, an old Hungarian symbol which was used in the interwar period by the Hungarian fascists. Thus it had been tainted with the meanings of the previous era, which it still carries to the debate and hardly acts as a 'neutral' symbol, and the left wing parties, particularly the Liberal Democrats carrying the Jewish heritage, were holding protests against the statue. The city has ordered its removal after which it can be re-erected on private property, not, however, to the statue park of the state socialist statues run by the Budapest Gallery (see e.g. *Népszabadság*. Oct. 22, 2005; *Magyar Hírlap*. Oct. 24 and Nov. 21. 2005) This fight over the definitions, use and ownership of the past, but also a competition over public space, is also about the construction of the different political communities.

Activist Memories

This last part of my paper is devoted to the alternative political communities, which all non-governmental organizations (NGOs) also try to constitute. These organizations build their own memory. Just like more recently private companies, the organizations write their own histories. They carry symbols and form their legacy with the reference to the past. This past building aims also to mark them apart from other organizations. The European Social Forum, a process rather than an institution, stands apart from the firmly instituted NGOs. Social Forums are loose collectives, networks of different groups and NGOs. Political parties and often trade unions are banned from these

networks, they aim at offering a regular point of contact for different groups, connected to or interested in anti-capitalist or global justice movements – and importantly offer an ‘embodied experience’ of the wider and diverse activist movement (e.g. Böhm, Sullivan and Reyes 2005). The social forums exist on different overlapping levels from the World Social Forums to the regional and local ones, which obviously would be interesting from the point of view of my analysis. I look briefly at the politics of memory of the European Social Forum process.

Memory appears in the SF process in many ways, mainly as systematization, archiving and openness, but also as the collection of experience. Mayo Fuster i Morelli (2004) writes about the memory projects as intersection of political action and investigation: ‘Their aim is to put archiving and research techniques at the service of the process of social mobilization and social change. [...] It’s more a “network” of concepts that are growing together such as archiving, documenting, reporting, memory, systematizing, investigation and activist research.’

The ESF group proposed in 2004 a new ‘methodology’ for the organization of the fifth World Social Forum (WSF), which included the aim to ‘ensure that the Forum develops a systematic collective memory’. Part of method was to ‘accumulate a living memory’ or ‘the construction of the WSF’s memory, the “memoria viva” project’, including the NOMAD project (live streaming and archiving), collecting memory of cultural events, gathering the communication of the group working towards the Forum and documentation of the proposals discussed at the Forum. (Wainwright 2005) The ESF ‘memory project’ is an international working group launched at the Berlin preparatory assembly in June 2004. There was also the so called ‘French memory project’ which was initiated by a funding of 20 000 GBP left from the Paris ESF 2003, this money has been in part used for the Nomad project, in part for offering chances for the Southern (and Eastern) participants to access the ESF process (Minutes of ESF NGO Meeting. August 8, 2004). The two produced a document asking the UK organising committee to support memory collection. In 2005 the Systematize working group (the memory project) published its notes, criticizing the lack of ‘systematization and memory work’ and promoting archiving, recording and storing, as well as ‘action reserarching’ (Reference Text for Systematize Group. April 13, 2005. http://www.fse-esf.org/article.php3?id_article=86). These offered the initial framework for the memory accumulation, collection and protection.

The objectives of the memory project are:

preserving what happened for future memory; making accessible the knowledge spread at international meetings for people who cannot participate to them, which helps to turn them into parts of a process and not just single events; creating networking tools to enhance the effectiveness of the process itself; critical analysis that sheds light on the contradictions of the process, etc. (Fuster i Morelli 2004)

All of these point to politics of memory at stake in the SF movement: the continuity of the SF process, wider accessibility and socialization to the process, coherence of the process, and openness. The aim is to learn for the future from the techniques of the process, but also share the content of the SFs: ‘reporting of who did what in terms of the event [and] keeping alive what was discussed so that it gets into our collective consciousness.’ (Fuster i Morelli 2005) These aims bear similarity both to the documentation process of the EU – which, however, started significantly later than the process of unified Europe – and to the national state model of creating a community by enhancing national (here SF activist) consciousness.

In the issue of the conflicting levels, the point of openness is a tool of critique. It has two main targets: the WSF process, which is run by a selected group of people, the ‘wise men’, and the ESF in London 2004, which Fuster i Morelli’s, as so many others, critique of a concealed the process: for instance the materials from or access to meetings were not made publicly available. The debate over the ‘horizontal’ and ‘vertical’ was heated as the London ESF was dominated by the main sponsor of the event, London Mayor Ken Livingstone and his administration were accused of having run as a PR event (e.g. Panayotis 2004). For the purposes of a multi-level analysis, the realization of a potential conflict or repression between the horizontal and vertical – not only the different levels, such as the WSF and ESF – is important and should make part of a reflection on politics of memory. Nevertheless, as Reyes et al. (2005) have pointed out, these terms should refer to the mode of organization, not act as ‘total’ identifications (e.g. ‘us the horizontal’). Furthermore, the memory projects of the transnational Social Forum processes show that the memory processes are is an activity which involves a plurality of actors and a context where the memory-community is built through frontier building.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that since politics of memory deals with community construction in a conflictual terrain, one should look at different kinds of communities and processes of this, beyond the traditional unit of observation, the national one. The above examples show how community construction occurs through protected and centrally preserved ‘common memory’, from the local levels to the national one and further to transnational communities such as the European Union (EU) and the activist networks, such as the European Social Forum (ESF) process. From the discourse theoretical perspective of Ernesto Laclau, societies and communities exist through their constantly rearticulated and negotiated frontiers and nodal points, unifying elements. This process of content choosing, inclusion and bracketing out is part and partial to the politics of memory. Furthermore, the process is never done in isolation, but always in the context of others: community creation through politics of memory is therefore a trans-community, e.g. transnational, activity.

The examples above show that the politics of memory occurs on an uneven terrain, where meanings are not fixed but constantly negotiated. This contestation over the past, deals with its meanings and ownership is a political process, which also works to create political communities, points of identification that stand in contrast to others. The cases reveal also the function of memory in creating an impression of lasting legacies, setting example, socializing people to the ideals of the community in question and offering a ground of contact for the people. The politics of memory also enable us to articulate contents of our discourses and the sediment them through the difference to others, such as other priorities or readings of the past. The past as a ground for debate – and thus for political identification – is visible in the cases of national or local contestation.

In contrast, the systematising process seems to assume that the past can be systematically written down and recorded. Even if it is clear that there is need in the SFs for transparency and documentation, there is a surprising lack of self-irony in this process. Surely, the postmodern era has as its ideal that a plurality of opinions takes us closer to the truth, but even this lack of the ultimate or reachable truth is not voiced out in the documentation of the SF memory project. Similarly, the case of EU deals merely with facts, documentation, chronologies and great men. There is no acknowledgement of a postmodern or pluralist character of the history or memory of the EU. Politics at the ESF is carried over the existence or non-existence of memory

(here, records). There is a lack of acknowledgement of the politics of memory, and the conflicts it implies, as such.

Given the above, my response to the situation of perceived 'chaos' between the national and EU identifications, is that the contestation between a multiplicity of political communities and the politics of memory should be seen as an asset to democratic politics and community-building, rather than a problem. The EU as a political community with its own memory, even an institutionalized 'history', can only exist in the network of these other political communities, through shared and 'own' memories, and memories of past international networks and periods of nation-state building.

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