CONSIDERATIONS ON CULTURAL MEMORY AND ITS INSTITUTIONALIZATION PROCESS

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─ **Abstract** ─

This study emphasizes the connection between the sites of memory and the national identity, having as main objective to highlight the institutionalization of the cultural memory. Two main sites of memory are analysed: the archive and the library, as representative for the cultural memory. The ideological and political influences are also revealed. The final part of this paper points out new challenges in the global digital age.

Key Words: Cultural Memory, Identity, Library, Archive, Sites of Memory

JEL Classification: Z00

1. INTRODUCTION

Pierre Nora is one of the promoters of the idea of a specific collective identity, the national one, through his concept of *lieux de mémoire* or sites of memory, which he successfully imposed in the memory related studies. Nora defines the sites of memory as places "where memory crystallizes and secrets itself", maintaining the distinction between history and memory and even assuming the fact that "we speak so much of memory because there is so little of it left" (Nora, 1989: 7). In his monumental edited work, *Les lieux de mémoire*, different sites of memory are included and analysed, their main role being that of the "artificial placeholder for the no longer existent, natural collective memory" (Erll, 2011: 23). The concept,

initially related to the French national identity, knew in time ample developments in different national spaces, as sites of memory specific to different historical contexts, such as the analysis made by Jay Winter, or that of *luoghi della memoria* in Mario Isnenghi's work, but they also had their share of criticism, e.g. the approach made by Pim den Boer in his essay "*Loci memoriae – Lieux de mémoire*". Using the three criteria assumed by Nora as essential in order to distinguish a site of memory: the material, functional and symbolic dimension, I am arguing for the necessity to include the archive and the library among the *lieux de mémoire*. The objective is to analyse the institutionalization process of the cultural memory and the transformations that occurred in time, related to this process. The main direction of this study is centred on three concepts: book, archive and library, which are used to reveal the cultural transformations related to the instrumentalization process of memory.

The cultural memory does not represent the object of a single discipline, and this fact can be a source of difficulties; being a trans-disciplinary phenomenon the cultural memory implies a multitude of methods and perspectives, and the success of many studies in this field depends on the cooperation between different disciplines. This perspective is sustained by the three dimensional framework of culture, comprising social, material and mental aspects, and also by the frequent usage of the cultural memory concept as an umbrella term in which the three aspects are included: "social memory," "material or medial memory" and "mental or cognitive memory" (Erll, 2008). Even if the study is especially focused on the cultural aspects, its objectives cannot be accomplished without taking into consideration the ideological representations of memory and also their material forms.

2. CULTURAL MEMORY

In order to fully understand the concept of "cultural memory" one needs to follow the collective memory implications (Halbwachs, 1925) as a memory not only specific to a community or nation, but one that is dependent on social structures. Recognizing "two different modi memoranda, ways of remembering" (J. Assmann, 2008: 110), Jan Assman and Aleida Assmann have included the cultural sphere in the initial area of the collective memory concept, preserving at the level of "communicative memory" the main characteristics identified by Maurice Halbwachs as the social aspects of the individual memory. The concept of cultural memory was defined by assuming a distinction made at the level of the collective

memory between a communicative and a cultural form of memory. The cultural memory is defined mainly by its exteriorized, objectified and stored symbolical forms that can be transferred in different contexts and times, using the external objects as carriers of memory (J. Assmann, 2008: 111).

Aleida Assmann steps forward and makes a very clear distinction of two realms of cultural memory: "the canon, an actively circulated memory that keeps the past present", and the archive, "the passively stored memory that preserves the past past" (Assmann, 2008: 98). This distinction is related to the observation that the cultural memory is based on two functions: the presentation of a selection of texts, art work, or key events, and the storing of documents and artefacts of the past that do not correspond to these standards, but are important enough not to let them disappear. The active dimension of the cultural memory translated at the level of the canon supports a collective identity, argues Assmann, and the elements of the canon are defined by three characteristics: selection, value and duration. Describing a Christian church as an institution of the active cultural memory, Assmann underlines some elements that can be used in order to analyse the library and the archive as sites of memory: the special features that remind of a collective past and a special architecture translated into an image-representation inscribed at the level of the collective memory. Even if in a library the liturgical rites that have the role of performing the past are missing, they are replaced in a specific way by the act of reading that might invoke through its repeated performance the "belonging memory" register. On the other hand, the passively stored memory, the archive, is described as the "unhallowed bureaucratic space of a clean and neatly organized repository" (Assman, 2008: 103) that was developed in ancient cultures as a necessity, serving the ruling class in its economic activity, but also serving as tools for the symbolic legitimation of power. From this point of view the future of the archive seems to include only two possibilities: the disappearance, if the relevance and the political use is lost, or the chance to enter into the context of the historical archive (Assmann, 2008: 103), and in this way in the area of national library.

Furthermore, assuming the fact that the two realms of the cultural memory are in permanent relation, the elements from the canon being able to become elements of the archive and reverse, I am arguing that the library corresponds to both functions of the cultural memory and it is the only site of memory in this situation, bringing together the cultural force of the monument, museum and also of the store house, of the "working memory" and also of the "reference memory". There are many other

elements that need to be taken into consideration, such as: the social and cultural context, the key factors that determine the library to assume one function or the other, and the conditions in which the library becomes an institution of active cultural memory.

3. NATIONAL AND POLITICAL PERSPECTIVES

We define ourselves using our individual memories but also the memories of the collective, shared past, revealing the connection between memory and identity. Referring to the task of the archivists, Terry Cook argues that we "are defined by what we keep", but "the obverse is true as well: we keep what we are. We create tools for appraisal and acquisition, but in turn, they make us, define us, become part of our identity" (2011: 173). Subsequently, Terry Cook discusses the other side of the dynamicity that characterize the relation between memory and oblivion: we also are what we do *not* keep, "what we consciously exclude, marginalize, ignore, destroy" (2011: 174). The present study is centred on "the exploration of unintentional and implicit ways of cultural remembering" (Erll, 2008), materialized in the process of transformation from the individual memory to the cultural one, passing through political and social memory. The relationship between memory and past has changed profoundly in the course of history and the media technologies have a major role "in shaping what it means to remember: being able to read and write fundamentally alters what we remember and how we remember it" (Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi and Levy, 2011). In the act of remembering we are also introducing an order and a structure that are also present in the institution of archive. Thus, this approach also needs to make appeal to the concept of art of memory developed in antiquity, and to the geography of memory, the spatiality being a necessary condition for the act of remembering. The *loci memoriae* as they were developed in *ars memoriae*, were mental tools, "free of ideology", "independent from the social values or historical times", but the notion of *lieux de mémoire*, places that are also used as mnemotechnical devices, is saturated with an ideological perspective, "full of nationalism", being created or invented in order "to serve the nation-state" (den Boer, 2008). On the memory map, one can place the sites of memory, and, of course, what is named the memory landmarks. I also make a distinction (that will be further developed) between sites of memory and memory landmarks, the last one being a useful concept for the area of identity references. "Brought together in multitudes, heaped up and pared down, read and forgotten, library books take on lives and

histories of their own, not as texts but as physical objects in the world" (Battles, 2003: 10). In the present study the book is considered a memory landmark, based on the whole range of cultural possibilities, values and implications that a book can materialize. As Jan Assmann asserts, the first normative texts, such as *Torah*, the *Book of the Dead*, the Gilgamesh epics or the Homeric epics, constitute different nuclei "around which whole libraries have developed" (2006: 29).

One cannot speak about cultural memory, archives and libraries, without taking into consideration the influence of the political power; there is no political power, argues Derrida in *Archive Fever*, without control of the archives. The archive as site of documentary preservation, defines what is important enough to be named "knowable" and also "known" about the past, being part of the "official memory" of the state. Every nation-state produces a specific narrative version of its past that is elaborated, presented, taught and assimilated in time into the collective narration. This version of the past suffers mutations only after major social and political changes, and these can result in new interpretations of the old "symbols" or "icons" of memory, including the old history textbooks. The records, argues Eric Ketelaar, may be instruments of power but also instruments of liberation and salvation. The record-keeping system used by a totalitarian regime for control can become in different times source of documentation for the processes of restitution, rehabilitation and reparation. Such was the case with the Nazi's record system or with those of the Australian church missionary societies. "The archives have a twofold power: being evidence of oppression and containing evidence required to gain freedom, evidence of wrongdoing and evidence for undoing the wrong" (Ketelaar, 2007: 146).

The social memory depends on the social relations, we need the other in order to remember, to bring at the surface various memories; we remember because the social context requires so. Following the concept of "bonding memory" (Assmann, 2006), defined as having a normative, contractual character, and implying the necessity to fulfil the assumed obligations, it is very important to highlight the cultural role and the implications of the human promise, materialized sometimes as a contract (human or religious – let us remember that one of the first documents, collections and libraries were religious). In various situations a contract needs to be written in order to assure its perpetuation and the engagement to respect it. The main function of writing proves to be that of storage. A close analysis can reveal different cultural aspects and forms of representation that can

sustain the hypothesis of storage, such as the tattoo interpreted as a way of preserving information (Caplan, 2010). The attention also needs to be channelized on the process of text preservation, making a step forward and analysing the cultural implications of this process. The theory of cultural memory has as objective the study of the conditions that enable the text to be established and handed down (Erll, 2008). Individual memories are passing in the register of the social memory through their fixation in texts and images and thus become available to others. If they serve to the general interest in the temporal, cultural and social context, they will become part of the active memory. The memory is always connected to specific horizons of time and identity, and if this connection is missing one speaks about knowledge (Assmann, 2010). This is the reason I am regarding the book not as simple instrument of knowledge, but also as part of the cultural memory, connected to a specific time and identity and being part of a collection of intertextual meanings.

A special interest should be given to the moment and conditions that determine the information to pass from the latency of the archive and enter, with the help of the cultural institutions and public media, into the field of living memory. This is the reason why the cultural memory is characterized by a great potential for changes, innovations, and reconfiguration. However, any investigation in this field must have as goal not only to analyse the process of this transformation, but also to describe and evaluate the whole range of cultural changes than can emerge.

As sites of memory both libraries and archives contain various collections of books, have a special architecture, and are special places, spaces for reading, dedicated to the "communicative memory," but also places that can be situated on a cultural map. Another point of interest is the physical aspects related to the libraries/archives. Was their architecture modified in time, what transformations occurred at the spatial level (from private to public, including the act of reading that becomes performed publicly), and what were the correlations resulted at the cultural level? This kind of approach is sustained by factual examples: in the ancient Egypt the hierarchy of the priests corresponded to the structure of the library temple, and we can find the same concern regarding the structure of the library and the qualifications of the librarians in the description of the monastery libraries from the Middle Ages. One can observe a tendency to equate the personal, individual memory with knowledge. A typical library temple from the ancient Egypt contained a number of books equal to the specialists' capacity to

memorize them (J. Assmann, 2008). Can we speak at this level of a cultural memory that is the same with the specific knowledge of that time? The temples and churches were used for the storage of archives and through their architecture they also transmitted the idea of established, even institutional power. Eric Ketelaar points out that in "our world, many archives are temple as well. Some are built as a classical temple, such as the Archivo General de la Nation of El Salvador and the National Archives of the United States. (…) Modern French archival buildings have been linked to cathedrals (…)" (2007: 146).

4. ARCHIVES AND LIBRARIES

Both library and archive can be situated in the field of cultural memory, but also in that of political memory, especially when they become an instrument of the existing political power used to consolidate a national identity. Speaking about the act of appraisal and the task of the archivists, Terry Cook highlights that the archivists need to be very sensitive to "the political, social, philosophical, and ethical nature of the archival appraisal", this process defining all the activities reflected in archives: "which related documents are to be preserved permanently (…) and (…) which documents are destroyed, excluded from archives, their creator forgotten, effaced from memory" (2011: 174). The past is "the decisive resource for the consciousness of national identity" (J. Assmann, 2006: 87) and the fact that the feeling of belonging is determined by the shared memories makes the "bonding memory" the first source of the instrumentalization process. The nation creates its own memory, producing a narrative version of its past in order to create an identity, using the memorial places and sites of memory: monuments, museums, ceremonies and commemorations, a whole range of memory symbols. There is a powerful connection between the rise of the nation-state and the status of historical writings; the library was used not only as a site of memory in order to sustain the national identity, but also as a materialization of the cultural memory, offering the possibility of institutionalization, making easier the trans-generational transmission of political memory, an "institutionalized *top-down memory*" (Assmann, 2010: 42). The archives were developed in the ancient cultures together with the writing systems, serving to the ruling class, giving information and being a tool of "the symbolic legitimation of power" (A. Assmann, 2008), but also being a way of presenting the public memory, as it was created by the ruling class. This was the case in the ancient Egypt, a model that was assumed also by different political regimes. For example, Matthew Battles observes that by bringing scholars to Alexandria and

inviting them to work among an "enormous store of books, the Ptolemies made the library into a think tank under the control of the royal house. The strategic implications of a monopoly on knowledge – especially in medicine, engineering, and theology, all among Alexandria's strengths – were not lost on the Ptolemies" (2003: 29), and in this way "the Ptolemies made good on the essentially Alexandrian intuition that knowledge is a resource, a commodity, a form of capital to be acquired and hoarded at the pleasure of the regime" (2003: 31). Battles also observes the problematic nature of the great libraries when the social and political context is not stable, "their fate becomes the fate of the literatures they contain" (2003: 31) and in many cases the old manuscripts survived only due to the fact that they were held in small private libraries/collections. These sorts of collections were created in Renaissance by the "appetite" of powerful families as a "performance of their intellectual authority" (Battles, 2003: 69). For example, for the Medici family the library was an instrument used to "demonstrate their intellectual integrity, their curatorial acumen, and their alignment with Renaissance values – they could perform these things publicly" (Battles, 2003: 69).

The processes of destroying the libraries under different political regimes "are as much about losing the truth – satisfying the inner barbarians of princes, presidents, and pretenders – as about discovering it" (Battles, 2003: 31). Together with the existence of an official version of the past comes the tendency to integrate the cultural aspects into the political memory, the accent being put on the dominant group or even the national identity and on how to use the cultural elements to sustain a specific desired identity. The book burning events are sadly related to this attempt to control the past and, in this way, the social identity. The practice was used in antiquity as a way to revision the past, to eliminate what was not considered deemed to be kept or even to erase some authors or events from history. The modern time also knew this practice, and two historical moments can be given as example: the book burnings practiced by the Nazi regime, the number of books destroyed being estimated at one hundred million, and the destroying of Bosnian National and University Library in the night of August 25, 1992, in an operation that targeted many other cultural institutions: the Oriental Institute, the Bosnian National Museum, the National Archives of Herzegovina or the library of the University of Mostar, all symbols of "common heritage". The reverse is also true: the books and libraries were used as an instrument of cultural identity survival; such was the case of some ghettos and Nazi camps. Theresienstadt camp with its library

of some 100,000 books was "a portrait of what reading meant to members of a community exiled to hell" (Battles, 2003: 175).

5. DIGITALIZATION AND GLOBALIZATION

Can we speak about a new type of library, a digitalized one, having in mind the observation that the materiality is always present? Even if in the digital age the idea that the book is dead has its followers, the materiality of the book can't be denied. The main implication of the transformation brought by digitalization does not concern the material form, because we witness a "different materiality", and also "the emergence of parallel materiality" (Tötösy de Zepetnek, Lopez-Varela Azcarate, Saussy, and Mieszkowski, 2011). Memories were always carried across the national borders by humans or in the form of books, but now they extend to a global level. They use telecommunication satellites, the channels of mass media, and the internet (Assmann, 2010), becoming more mobile, ephemeral and fluid (Assmann and Conrad, 2010). If the memory is related to a particular identity, national or cultural, the globalization has as supposition the diffusion of these particularities and the overcome of these differences; thus, the main challenge is to find and analyse the different forms used by the cultural memory in order to adapt, reorganize, and preserve the cultural differences. The modern people, as David Lowenthal observes, "wander along the endless corridors of Borge's Babylonian library, surrounded by all possible books in the universe but unable to locate what we seek among the infinite clutter of useless gibberish. The dream of unlimited access becomes an anarchic nightmare" (2007: 196). Digital media also brought the danger of an increased difference between the internalized information and the externalized one, the distinction between the cultural working memory and the cultural reference memory, two functions of the cultural memory that become more and more separated. The digital culture is an important trait of the contemporary life that tends to become a global one.

Alongside cultural studies, one must take into account the technical studies concerning the development of the digital archives and the digital preservation of the information. The implications of digitization and of the digital culture for the problem of cultural memory have not been fully explained yet. One witnesses certain tensions between the technical and theoretical approaches, and also limitations of some research programs, especially if one is interested in getting a wider picture of the field. We need to develop further analyses regarding the new forms of interaction at this level and take into consideration various kinds of

disorders or maladies that can affect the cultural memory under the globalization effects. Can we speak about cultural disorders affecting the cultural memory or does this concept need to be more carefully used?

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