

# Memory as Politics

A comment submitted to the international symposium at the Tokyo  
University of Foreign Studies (Feb. 2, 2001)

OZAWA Hiroaki

By way of this brief comment, I would like to raise four problems about the relation between memory and politics.

1) First, memory is a part of political process. History of Memory is an essential part of political history. Therefore, a process of selection and exclusion of a particular memory is always performed systematically. Through this process, “traditions” are invented, mixed, and used for political purposes.

Moreover, such traditions are interpreted from various positions, such that the same image and the same symbol are often used to perform different purposes. During World War II, the Nazis advertised the peasant rebellion of Tyrol in the age of Napoleonic War as a fight between the Germans and the French. Conversely, the Austrian resistance movement during the period of annexation to Germany tended to interpret this peasant rebellion as a resistance movement against a foreign rule in general, with the intention to liberate the so-called Austrian nation from German nation.

In a contest over such memories, the struggle over “being authentic” is always repeated. “Being authentic” involves a process that leads inevitably toward the construction of historical myth. So, I think, it is of no use to lament the existence of such historical myths.

2) Second, official memory and the public memory of an opposition group always follow the same form and sometimes involve the same content. It is precisely this imitation of form that constitutes “the place of struggle” over memory as elaborated in the argument about “Mimesis” by Erich Auerbach.

As Benedict Anderson has pointed out, national communities are imagined and renewed from a set of modules. A “history” is one such module. A particular form of “history” is repeated among nations, and a form of “history” is shared among peoples of the same nation as well.

History always has the character of an “anniversary commemoration history” (in German, “Jubiläumsgeschichtsschreibung”). History must be a “long and rich history.” Romania in the era of Nicolae Ceausescu asked Dacia for the origin of Romanian Nation-State, and the Bulgaria of the Todor Zhivkov celebrated the year 681 as the founding year of the Bulgarian (nation-)state.

Recently, in 1996 “democratized” Hungary celebrated 1100 jubilee of founding of her country, and Austria celebrated the same year as a millennium jubilee of her name’s

appearance.

In this way, the “beginning” of each nation’s history has a character of mutual confrontation. “A History of the Croats” which was recently published in Zagreb, begins with a chapter called “Croatian Lands Before the Arrival of the Croats,” providing a suggestive example of such confrontations.

Since people’s memory is a means of mobilization, an opposition group also uses this type of memory. The memory of an opposition group is intended to counterpoise official memory. Various opposition groups (dissidents) of Eastern Europe during the socialist era sought to use “politically correct” and “authentic” national memory.

Thus, sharing the form of memory (constructing statues, replacing place names, writing history and so on) not only strengthens national memory, but also constitutes the place of struggle. It can hence be regarded as “a civil war of memory.” This civil war of memory is also inevitable.

3) Third, the twentieth century had a very serious influence on the formation of ordinary people’s historical consciousness (or what may be referred to simply as memory). Since memories became the means of mobilization, and the mobilization of such memories became contradictory, the reconciliation of memories became very difficult.

For example, in the case of twentieth century Austria, it was very difficult for ordinary people to continue having systematic memory. People who belong to a particular political camp (Lager) have experienced both times of victory and times of defeat. The camp of Christian Socials experienced times of victory in the Habsburg era and during the Austrian fascism between 1934 and 1938; the Social Democrats highly appreciated the time of the First Republic after 1918 and the time of Second Republic after 1945. In contrast, the German Nationalists welcomed the Nazi rule between 1938 and 1945. Victory for one is an other’s defeat.

It is thus difficult to sustain coherent memory. So “forgetting” and “oppression” of some memories and retreat from the public sphere into the private sphere became the strategy of ordinary people. When it is difficult to sustain coherent memory, the choice of upholding no public memory is (at times) adopted.

4) Fourth, concomitant with the age of globalization, identity politics has developed in central and east European countries, especially after the end of the cold war. In a time without a fixed direction, ordinary people seek to find, if possible, a positive guidepost to the future.

Both official memory and the memory of an opposition group seek to construct a coherent (consistent) memory. For this purpose, contradictory memories tend to be adjusted. Hence, the process of Mapping and Remapping memory emerges.

It is necessary for both sides to continue remapping the memory, since inconsistent memory is a common situation. This is the reason why memory always acts as a place

of struggle.

On the other hand, memory is used not for the past but for the present and future. In order to cancel (and adjust) the present inconsistent memories, we cannot help but imagine a future in which memory is more “properly” constructed.

Nowadays, European memory and the memory of civil society are introduced and used frequently, because such memories are intended to be substitutes for a Utopia (Ersatzutopie) (or we may call it, as Immanuel Wallerstein does, utopistics).

My conclusion is as follows.

What is necessary at this time is not adjusting inconsistent memory. Rather we should think about the condition of the subject who can endure such inconsistent memory.

Memory will always be a place of struggle and we should not try to eliminate this place. We should rather actively maintain this place of struggle.

(Ozawa Hiroaki Chiba University)