Cultural memory between the national and the transnational

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Abstract
This study explores the dynamics of cultural memory against a transnational background. The paper offers a concise discussion of the concept of cultural memory as developed by Jan and Aleida Assmann and as qualified by the most recent scholarship. Focussing on aspects concerning practices of cultural memory, the analysis proceeds to examine a couple of decisive components of Romania's cultural identity. Over time, the arguments attempting to define this identity have drawn on strands of cultural memory that have defied strictly drawn borders: the Latin cultural connotations as embodied by the Romanian language and Eastern Orthodoxy. Mapping the convergence of these two strands within this particular illustration of cultural identity shows one way in which the concepts of cultural memory, of the national, and of the transnational can be applied to a concrete case.

Keywords: cultural memory; national; transnational; identity; Romania

The Assmanns' challenge to Halbwachs's concept of “collective memory” contains a conciliatory note. Jan Assmann's forceful statements that the proper meaning of memory is individual and that referring to the memory of the group “would be an illegitimate act of mystification”, are qualified by the admission that society and culture do determine memory.¹ The consequent establishment of the concept of “cultural memory” with its long historical dimension required nevertheless the quasi-complementary concept of “communicative memory” where sociological aspects come to the fore within the framework of recent history. Jan Assmann gives Halbwachs his due, aware that, once the processes of social and cultural determination are closely examined, these kinds of memory interact to some extent. Reiterating, conveying, and re-ascribing meaning in the short term cannot but have an impact on the venerable sequence of knowledge that shapes experience, in this case, communicative memory may modify cultural memory.² Interaction may take other forms as well. That is why the present discussion of cultural memory closes with an illustration of the convergence of cultural components and their role in Romania's cultural identity.

The manner in which a community relates to the past involves notions and actions such as connectivity, storage, retrieval, transmission, and interpretation. The material that undergoes wholly, or in part, this treatment consists of the values, accounts (of practices, norms), objects, sites, and ceremonies shared by the community. Indeed, sharing and transmission are particularly important in the process that coalesces in the cultural type of collective memory where past meanings and the way they shape tradition are prominent features. In an attempt to clarify matters at the outset, Jan Assmann has drawn a clear parallel between established types of transmission and the kinds of memory he is concerned with: “What communication is for communicative memory, tradition is for cultural memory”.³ He further elucidates the matter by referring to Aleida Assmann’s contrast between communication and tradition. In so far as information is passed on from generation to generation over a long period of time (roughly, more than a century), one can talk...
about tradition; this is a form of communication but it differs from the mutual, near-contemporary exchange of information within the community.  

As defined here, communicative memory, based on “everyday communication”5, is the result of a quasi-synchronic process of interpersonal communication confined to about three generations, while cultural memory is diachronic by its association with tradition, stretching over centuries and millennia. When Aleida Assmann argues that tradition is a special case of communication she has in mind the ways in which cultural memory is stored and handed down over long periods of time. The storage is ensured by artefacts, sites, ceremonies but also myths, rituals, and texts. In order to retrieve, make sense of and pass on these memories, interpretation and attribution of meaning are crucial. Those able to perform these practices—priests, sages, teachers—constitute a specialized groups of memory “bearers”.6 Specialization means that various kinds of practices are particularly important in the case of cultural memory.7 Moreover, systematic memory practices thrive within institutional frameworks. The activity of the memory bearers proceeds rather systematically within frameworks recognizable over quite long periods of time. The resulting stability and objectification of the content of symbolic forms point further to the institutional features of cultural memory.8

When consistent memory practices focus on texts, images, and rituals they result in the establishment and consolidation of a canon that becomes relevant for the identity of the community. The contrast between canon and archive has recently contributed to a conceptual clarification that finds their equivalent in the distinction between “cultural working memory” and “cultural reference memory”.9 At the same time, this distinction admits the fact that these are hardly water-tight compartments. The dynamics of canon elements receding into the archive and of archive elements being revived as part of a revised canon illustrate the interaction both between these forms of storage and between the two kinds of cultural memory proposed here. The significance of canon for cultural memory need not be dwelt upon here; this brief mention only indicates the importance of this strand of cultural tradition in its various negotiated versions for the concept of cultural memory.

The practices of the memory bearers, but also of the members of the community at large, can only occur within the concrete circumstances of the available media, ranging from the intellectual framework of literary genres to the technological capabilities of particular kinds of equipment. Astrid Erll has explored the characteristic impact of certain types of media on the process of recollection.10 The manner in which ever developing forms of media convey information to an increasing audience introduces the issue of popular culture in the overall cultural memory. These new channels and their specific filtering of memory as well as the place of popular culture have enabled Astrid Erll to single out “media which create and mould collective images of the past” more than other media.11 Film and fiction (the novel) serve as examples in her discussion that further deploys the concepts of premediation and remediation to show how they affect cultural memory. Premediation refers to media preceding events whose memory falls into a pre-existing pattern and is handed down in that specific shape. Remediation concerns the recurring accounts of the same memories by means of several types of media (print, electronic). These variations on a theme have a particularly strong effect on the “solidifying” and “stabilizing” of elements of cultural memory.12 It is this sort of dynamics that highlight the importance of some media—in this case, films and novels—cultural memory.13 Exploring the mechanisms of cultural memory requires, therefore, incursions across the boundaries of media but also of more comprehensive spheres of social, intellectual, or material kind.

The composite nature of cultural memory appears quite clearly in the case of the Romanian cultural identity. Two important components have had a decisive role: the Latin legacy (linguistic and supposedly ethnic) and Eastern Christian Orthodoxy. These two cultural and religious strands tend to occur separately in most European cultural contexts. However, they merge in the Romanian cultural history. This illustration has furnished evidence for an argument developed elsewhere about Romania and the European Union.14 The present discussion uses this material in a different and far more concise manner in order to illustrate aspects of the dynamics of cultural memory.

When, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Romanian philologists and historians in
Transylvania expounded the defining features of their language, they attempted to revive the connection with a Roman past and a subsequent Romance sphere of civilization. The enterprise was partly defensive. In a region that was part of the Habsburg Empire, the Romanian ethnic group, as opposed to the Hungarian and German ones, experienced a number of political and economic disadvantages despite being in a majority; indeed, after the 1860s, this time under an exclusively Hungarian administration in the new Double Monarchy, things got worse from the Romanians’ point of view. The need to assert their cultural and national identity became even more urgent.

The attempt to revive the memory of a Roman origin as a way of attaching the Romanian cultural tradition to the Romance (implicitly Western) one sat somewhat curiously next to the Romanians’ Eastern Christian Orthodoxy, evoking a Byzantine memory that shed its Latin connections. Over the centuries, the Romanian Orthodox Church, both in Transylvania and in the Romanian Principalities, ensured a sense of continuity through its religious, social, and educational activity. After 1918, in a newly self-confident Greater Romania that gathered within its borders all territories inhabited by its people, the claim that Eastern Orthodoxy was the defining feature of Romanian identity received an increasingly systematic backing from influential intellectuals as well as fervent nationalists. The philosophy professor Nae Ionescu, extremely popular among his students, who included Mircea Eliade och E.M. Cioran, summed up the matter by arguing that “being Romanian means being Orthodox”. By insisting on the specific features of Orthodoxy as characteristic of the Romanian nation, this claim merged the Romania cultural identity with the wider Eastern Orthodox community in the region that shared these features. The consolidation of this strand of cultural memory could, therefore, work only across boundaries and language differences in the Balkans and Eastern Europe. However, the Romanian language with its cultural affinities supposedly shared with the Romance-language community across another set of borders would locate the nation’s identity within a different strand of cultural memory.

Whether one chose to perceive the Romanian nation as belonging to the (Western European) Latin civilization but, as it happened, stranded at the Eastern extremity of the continent, or as an Eastern European nation happening to speak a Romance language, there was an uneasy tension here. Memory “carriers” in the shape of philosophers, historians, or clergymen attempted to resolve the tension. A number of quotes summing up their arguments show an exercise in gathering within the confines of one national framework cultural legacies that actually transcend borders of any kind. The philologist and politician Sextil Puscariu found that “[t]his felicitous pairing of Latin blood and choice spiritual features derived from the East provides that combination of great and original qualities that elevate the quality of our [the Romanian] race”. In the late 1930s, the theologian and priest Dumitru Staniloae identified an even higher merit in the encounter of the Latin legacy and Orthodoxy within the Romanian nation that therefore “represents the perfect balance between these two poles, unlike other nations where the balance of this tension is disturbed in favour of one of them”. The practice of explaining how these two cultural strands merge has recently pursued the sort of explanation that favours Orthodoxy. The argument has received backing from the Western educated Patriarch of the Romanian Church, who addressed the highly topical issue of the Romanian Christian communion’s contribution as an aspiring member of the European Union. The value of this contribution derives from “the cultural synthesis that Romania has long developed as a bridge between the East and the West. Such a synthesis is the Romanian Orthodox Church itself, uniting in its own identity the Eastern orthodox [sic] spirituality with the Western Latin spirituality”. It is worth noting that in the 1980s Staniloae was Ciobotea’s supervisor before the latter went on to pursue his studies at the University of Strasbourg. Here is a distinct illustration of the process of systematically handing down a set of meanings and values as part of achieving and maintaining “the concretion of identity”, one of the chief features of cultural memory.

A further brief instance of the transmission of meanings and values, this time extending to lay groups, is Staniloae’s conversations with one of the main student leaders of the early 1990s (Marian Munteanu). An influential “bearer” of cultural memory who was active before, during (with great difficulty), and after the Communist
A. Velicu

regime, Staniloaie pursued after 1989 the idea of the juxtaposition of the Latin legacy and Orthodoxy as defining components of the Romanian cultural tradition. Shortly before his death, the theologian imparted to the student leader, and through him to the wider public, a rather extraordinary interpretation that had been circulating for some time: the convergence of Latinity and Orthodoxy, apparently arriving from different directions across different kinds of borders, occurred in fact at a very early stage. The Latin element was present in the zone before Rome emerged as an imperial power and, along with early Christianity, defined from the outset the cultural identity of the Romanian people. Possibly, somewhat embarrassed by this extravagant claim, the theologian did qualify it as “a strong probability”.19

Apart from any reasonable or wild claims about the importance of Latinity and Orthodoxy in this context, the example presented here is significant for the attempt to accommodate within one tradition what may appear as features at odds with one another. The more or less stringent arguments advanced over the years have always had to take into account cultural and political boundaries. The relevance of exploring one or several strands of cultural memory by going back in time is to make sense of the dynamics of a process that is far from being concluded.

Notes

1. Jan Assmann, Religion and Cultural Memory: Ten Studies, trans. Rodney Livingstone Stanford (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 8.
2. Harald Welzer, ‘Communicative Memory’ in Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 285.
3. Assmann, Religion and Cultural Memory, 8.
4. Aleida Assmann, Tid och tradition: Väraktighetens kulturella strategier [Time and Tradition: Cultural Strategies of Duration], trans. Peter Jackson (Nora: Nya Doxa, 2004): 88.
5. Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, ‘Collective Memory and Cultural Identity’, New German Critique 65 (1995): 126.
6. Jan Assmann, Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen [Cultural Memory: Writing, Recollection and Political Identity in Early Advanced Civilizations] (München: C.H. Beck, 1992): 54.
7. Marita Sturken, ‘Memory, Consumerism and Media: Reflections on the Emergence of the Field’, Memory Studies 1 (2008): 74.
8. Jan Assmann, ‘Communicative and Cultural Memory’, in Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 110–11.
9. Aleida Assmann, ‘Canon and Archive’, in Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 104–5.
10. Astrid Erll, ‘Literature, Film, and the Mediality of Cultural Memory’, in Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 389; and Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney, ‘Introduction: Cultural Memory and its Dynamics’, in Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory, ed. Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009) pp. 4 and 8.
11. Astrid Erll, ‘Literature, Film, and the Mediality of Cultural Memory’, in Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 390.
12. Ibid., 393.
13. Ibid., 395.
14. Adrian Velicu, ‘Romania’s Cultural Identity and the European Challenge: Convictions, Options, Illusions’. Conference presentation. “Cracks in the European Project”, Copenhagen University, 20–23 June 2010.
15. Quoted in Gabriel Andreescu, Nationalisti, antinationalisti . . .: O polemica in publicistica romaneasca [Nationalists, Anti-nationalists . . .: A Debate in the Romanian Press] (Iasi: Polirom, 1996), 174.
16. Ibid., 174.
17. Daniel Giobotea, ‘The Orthodox Church and the New Europe. Ecumenical Experience and Perspectives’, in Truth and Morality. The Role of Truth in Public Life, ed. Wilhelm Danca (Washington, DC: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2008), 169.
18. Assmann and Czaplicka, Collective Memory and Cultural Identity, 130.
19. Marian Munteanu, ‘Orthodoxia este viitorul omenirii’. Sfaturi si indenemuri catre tineri adresate de Parintele Staniloaie intr-o convorbire cu Marian Munteanu [‘Orthodoxy is the Future of Mankind’: Advice to the Young by Father Staniloaie in Conversation with Marian Munteanu], http://www.munteanu.ro/Dialog-Staniloaie.html (accessed October 26, 2010). The dialogue took place in 1993.