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**Memory and History: Working Through the Past**

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The tenor of the talks process, chaired by Dr Richard Haass, on parading, flags and dealing with the past seems to have shifted gear. Haass, himself, while speaking of a movement from consultation towards negotiation reminded the local parties that he would not entertain thoughts of ‘deal breakers’. The British and Irish governments have also seemingly become more responsive, with both the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the Tánaiste recently making supportive and encouraging statements.

While a certain optimism may be discernible that ‘deals’ can be reached over parading and flags, the possibility of reaching agreement on dealing with the past remains uncertain. This short paper outlines some potential pitfalls and alternative ways forward.

Memory and the Surrogate of Commemoration

Just as essential individual identity is based on memory so too are national and community identities based on some form of collective remembrance. The relationship of collective identity to ideas and stories about the past is well known to students of nationalism. In a much cited speech of 1882 the French historian Ernest Renan, for example, defined a nation as

constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future. It presupposes a past; it is summarized, however, in the present by a tangible fact, namely, consent, the clearly expressed desire to continue a common life. A nation’s existence is, if you will pardon the metaphor, a daily plebiscite, just as an individual’s existence is a perpetual affirmation of life.

However, memory, in and of itself is – as the English historian Tony Judt pointed out – a ‘poor guide to the past’. Surveying the history of neglect, evasion and selective framing, which characterized many European countries’ remembrance of the Second World War and the Holocaust, Judt argued that despite a surfeit of commemoration little was actually achieved in confronting the collective trauma of 1933-1945. It was only when, for example, Germans began to appreciate and digest the ‘enormity’ of their past that they were able to begin to ‘put it behind them’.

For Judt, it was history – both in the sense of ‘the professional study of the past’ and the ‘passage of time’ – rather than memory or commemoration that facilitated this process.

One example, of this can be seen in the Enquete Commission that attempted to address the legacies of Germany’s two dictatorial pasts (Herf, 2009). Although, as Arkiv has pointed out previously, the Commission could not provide the type of justice that many victims in Northern Ireland seek, it did provide a means of delimiting broadly accepted ideas about the past that were in line with the publicly available historical record of Germany’s past.

While the differences vastly outweigh the similarities, a commission of historical clarification, would not stop debate about Northern Ireland’s own violent and divided past, but it could serve to delimit the number of myths and self-serving ‘truths’ that are told about it. It could do so in a number of ways:

1. A precise, contextualised analysis of what occurred historical events could ensure that the sectarian and violent elements of the conflict would be understood in the larger perspective of British and Irish politics should never have a political chance again in a peaceful, democratic Northern Ireland.

2. Although an explanation of the planned character of the paramilitary campaigns would have limited effect on judicial or material compensation, it would offer a kind of historical justice by allocating responsibility and repudiating self-serving exculpations for the violence and killings that occurred.

3. An account of how the conflict affected the lives of individuals would show how deep an impact the terror campaigns had on Northern Irish society.

4. A historical clarification commission could offer suggestions for legislation aimed at overcoming the legacies of the Troubles.

A commission of historical clarification offers an alternative to the focus on the recognition and acknowledgment of individual hurts. As we pointed out in our submission to the Haass talks, ‘it is one thing to claim that all stories should be heard. It is another to claim that all stories should be equally valorised’.

In a similar way, if commemoration and politically loaded memory-work is taken as a surrogate for the historical record then we risk, paradoxically, a surplus of memory being used to construct a political and historical reality that has more to do with the cult of violence than the actuality of hurt. Judt frames this idea as a basic political and moral principle: ‘Human suffering should not be calibrated according to the goals of the perpetrators’.

In Northern Ireland we see this occurring through the propagation of myths of the inevitability – the idea that ‘if you had been there you would have done the same’. The implication being that peace then becomes a gift of those who inflicted violence. In such a way, the cult of commemoration slips quickly into substituting innocent victims with the claims of perpetrators.

A similar danger may be involved in a truth recovery process on two counts: first where individual issues become abstracted from historical context make it difficult to get a general perspective ; and second where a generalised ‘acknowledgement’ of ‘shared hurts’, perhaps derived from non-accountable amnesties, makes it impossible to get personal accountability, a sort of Catch-22 effect.

Split-Screen Memories

The idea of looking to the past in order to move forward into the future was alluded to in the epigraph of the Consultative Group on the Past’s Report. In a similar way, Barack Obama has spoken of the psychological importance of giving leadership over issues involving historical legacies. Breaking with the politics of the past, he argues, allows individuals and communities to dream of better futures. Although addressing the specific topic of race in America, his insights have applicability to the nature of those politics and leadership in Ireland. For dealing with historical legacies, he says, ‘requires us to see the world on a split screen’ – setting our sights on the kind of society we want while also looking squarely at where we are presently at, in other words, to ‘acknowledge the sins of our past and the challenges of the present without becoming trapped in cynicism or despair’.

The idea of a split screen approach is, however, not without its difficulties. It is difficult to hold two images in place at once and often the temptation can be to focus on the positive one and neglect that which is more unsettling. In this way, rather than a split screen, one image covers or screens the other. In her paper ‘Europe: A Community of Memory?’ the German sociologist Aleida Assmann, for instance has argued that

Psychologists speak of ‘screen memories’ that suppress other memories and serve to protect a positive self-image. To put it another way, one remembers something in order to be better able to forget something else.

Assmann goes on to outline how this occurs politically: ‘When applied to the realm of national memory, this means that one recalls one’s own suffering in order to avoid being reminded of one’s own guilt’.

Assmann, like Judt, believes that the real danger of exclusivist and exclusionary memories is not in simple forgetting, as Renan saw as lying at the heart of nationalism. That is to say, it is not so much that nations forget their pasts; rather, they select stories to highlight that suit their present purposes. In other words, it is not necessarily historical rewriting or falsification as much as a ‘strategic selection of expedient recollections’ that characterizes the politicization of the past.

Again, recollection, recall, memory can be the key mechanism that facilitates this. And, again, we often see this organized revision or reframing of the past in Northern Ireland through the avoidance of accountability and the promotion of amnesty or the valorization of self-exculpatory myths of inevitability arguably serve as local examples.

Working Through the Past

Perhaps the idea of ‘dealing with the past’ is too definitive and lends itself too easily to those who wish to parcel history into ideologically driven narratives. In Germany the process of confronting the past is more readily understood as ‘coming to terms with’ or ‘working through’ (Vergangenheitsbewältigung) and is a much more open-ended process. Arguably, a reframing of the ways in which we approach the topic in Northern Ireland may offset tendencies towards defeatism and the deferral of difficult subjects in favour of some form of ‘reconciliation’ such as has been advocated by some commentators.

Assmann offers seven principles to enable recognition and rejection of the politicization of history that may be worth briefly mentioning:

Firstly, memory should be separated from argument. By this she means to draw a line between what has happened, what has been experienced and what follows from the experience – events don’t change, merely our framing of them; we must, she argues, be conscious of both.

Secondly, guilt should not be offset. Memory, Assmann argues, often acts like a club: ‘The only memory that is important is the guilt of the other, and establishing that guilt is seen as wiping out one’s own guilt’. While she speaks explicitly to the idea of a club as something to hit one’s opponents, of course, as alluded to above, national identity is itself a kind of selective memory club, defining what narratives and beliefs about the past are acceptable and which are taboo.

Thirdly, competition between victims should be mitigated. ‘Placing one trauma in a privileged position can serve to eclipse another trauma’. This should not be understood that there is no hierarchy of victimhood, but rather, that the very idea of victim-status can be easily mobilized to cover up a multitude of sins. As Assmann goes on to explain, the appropriation of claims of suffering on the part of perpetrators work to ‘cover-up’ what is worse with what is bad.

In a similar fashion, the historian Richard Evans dismissed claims of victimhood among Nazi soldiers responsible for atrocities during the Second World War by alluding to the fact that, unlike their victims, at one point they had a choice: ‘A murderer is a murderer, however persuasive the mitigating circumstances of the fact’.

Again, we might return to Judt’s idea about calibrating history according to the stories of the perpetrators by way of expanding this thought – which, in many ways, lies at the heart of the suggestion that everyone in Northern Ireland (or Ireland) is responsible for the conflict.

Fourthly, Assmann urges a movement from exclusion to inclusion of memories. ‘Memories that support a collective identity,’ she argues, ‘are not only selective but also tend toward uniformity. One memory grows in size to crowd another out’. Arkiv has made a similar proposition as regards the need to recognize the complexity of Northern Irish history and the imperative for trying to avoid simplistic myth-making; we saw this as part and parcel of what, for example, trained historians do as part of their jobs – namely, ‘to reintroduce the complexity which, intentionally or unintentionally, others exclude from their stories’.

Fifthly, she argues that we should try, if possible, to move from divided to shared memories. Extrapolating from this notion we might argue that conflicts are driven by notions of division, but critical empathy, based on events and supported by evidence, suggests that not everything in history is a matter of opinion and that we might, indeed, be able to reach consensus or shared ideas about the past.

Sixthly, she points to the importance of contextualization. It may be worth quoting her at length to try to avoid confusion:

…nothing is gained by discarding lived experiences merely because they do not conform to a broader historical perspective. Everyone has a human right to his or her memories. That, however, does not exclude the necessity to place such memories that have been articulated and recognized on a wider horizon. As contextualized memories, they lose the taint of irreconcilable solipsism. Only by retrospectively placing them in a larger context can they be made compatible with other memories.

This is, in our view, corresponds closely to the argument that Arkiv has put forward in our Submission to the Haass talks process and a point that we reiterated in our last post, for example, when we talked about the importance of ‘…engaging the contextualising skills and professional integrity of historians in any publicly funded and officially sponsored “process of dealing with the past”’

Finally, Assmann points to the importance of developing what she calls a ‘common framework’ of ‘values and goals’: ‘Memories are not just located, but also framed within this horizon of values that challenges their built-in tendency towards self-hypnosis’.

Ethnicization of history can take many forms – from decontextualized myth-making and conspiracy theorizing to the imposition of one ‘screen’ that shields from view another more discomforting one. Arkiv has argued that alternatives exist and should be considered seriously. This paper has hopefully pointed to some of the directions in which those alternatives may be usefully located.

References

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