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Doing Memory, Doing Identity; Politics of the Everyday in Contemporary Global Communities

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Abstract

The special issue Doing Memory, Doing Identity: Politics of the Everyday in Contemporary Global Communities draws on anthropological theory, performance studies, feminism, post-colonial studies and other theoretical traditions for an insightful examination of the everyday practices of doing memory. A series of ethnographies and qualitative studies from locations as diverse as Italy, Norway, Greece, France, Brazil and China complement profound theoretical analyses to investigate the multiple links between individual and collective pasts, futures and identities, especially focusing on emotions, embodiment, the senses, difference and power relations. Taking a critical stance in regard to current social-scientific and socio-political debates, this special issue reflects on the political and ethical aspects of day-to-day memory practices and examines issues related to identity, imagination and otherness.

Doing Memory

Very often memory, identity and imagination have been treated in scientific research as psychological phenomena. We know however – the latest – since the time of the Soviet psychologist Lev S. Vygotsky that the psychological is the social (Stetsenko, 2009; Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004; Vygotsky, 1934/1987). Psychological functions cannot be thought independently of social interaction and the activities or practices in the contexts of which they emerge. The psychological functions themselves as well as the relations among them are socio-cultural and historical and there is no need or possibility to divide what is “psychological” from what is “socio-cultural-historical”. Memory for example depends on semiotic mediation, i.e. presupposes the use of signs and tools that are by

definition social or socio-cultural-historically evolved (Engeström et al., 1990; Middleton & Edwards, 1990; Vygotsky, 1934/1987; Wertsch, 2002). We guess that the readership of *Outlines: Critical Practice Studies* is familiar with this school of thought – which has often been referred to as “cultural-historical activity theory”, “cultural psychology”, “post-vygotskian research” or simply “non-classical psychology” (Kontopodis, Wulf, & Fichtner, 2011).

Middleton, Brown, & Lightfoot have recently tried to advance this thinking about memory by bringing together Vygotsky as well as approaches recently developed in the fields of performativity theory and science and technology studies. They examined organizational practices of email communication and gave particular emphasis to “actants” such as software platforms, tools and technologies that play an active role in remembering and forgetting (Middleton, Brown, & Lightfoot, 2001). In a quite similar work by Michalis Kontopodis the role that documents and files play in determining the school’s institutional memory as well as the students’ and teachers’ visions about a student’s past and future was examined (Kontopodis, 2009).

The work of Middleton, Brown, & Lightfoot has been advanced in Middleton & Brown’s book on remembering and forgetting and pointed out that memory regards not only the past but also the future, and that the relation between the past and the future is not given but depends on human agency as well as on mnemonic tools, technologies and databases (Middleton & Brown, 2005). Both Middleton et al. and Kontopodis suggested the use of the terms “perform” or “enact” to speak about the fact that different versions of the past can be “performed” or “enacted” during material-semiotic action. What is more: an enactment of a particular version of the past, is interrelated with the enactment of a particular version of the future and past and future cannot be thought as independent of each other (cf. also Gutman, Brown, & Sodaro, 2011; Middleton et al., 2001).

Another concept that is very near to the terms “perform” or “enact” is the concept of “doing”. The tradition of pragmatism, which opposed theory to practice in an effort to understand psychological and social phenomena was the inspiration for recent theory and research which introduced the notion of doing – doing things with words (Austin, 1975), doing class, doing disability (Moser, 2006), doing gender (Butler, 1993). In the context of the so-called ‘practice turn’ (Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina, & Savigny, 2001) or of the ‘performative turn’ (Wulf, 2009) quite a lot of social scientists in different disciplines studied everyday practices, rituals, performative gestures, and explored the performative interrelation of discursive, sensorial and visual action (Hüppauf & Wulf, 2009; Wulf, 2001; Wulf, Göhlich, & Zirfas, 2001; Wulf & Zirfas, 2004, 2007)¹.

¹ A related school of thought influenced by Marx as well as Hegel refers to practice not as *opposed* to theory but as *dialectically related* to theory (Chaiklin & Lave, 1993). From this point of view, theory is only meaningful to the extent in which it advances practice in the creation of a more equal society (Chaiklin, in print). Theoretical concepts such as those of situated cognition, of peripheral participation, or of communities of practice have been employed here in fields as diverse as psychology, educational research or anthropology in order to develop an understanding as to how people participate in practices which are cultural-historically rooted and at the same time transform these practices in emancipatory ways (Dreier, 2008; Hedegaard & Chaiklin, 2005; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Another whole special issue would be indeed needed to discuss the general differences and parallels between this understanding of practice and the

Following this approach, the special issue *Doing Memory, Doing Identity: Politics of the Everyday in Contemporary Global Communities* examines memory as a doing that brings together and also transcends different levels of analysis (such as the individual vs. the social/collective or the local vs. the global, the semiotic vs. the corporeal) with a special focus on emotions, the senses, and imagination. Commemorations, histories, rituals, monuments, museums, traditions, claims and belongings, genealogies and ancestors, deaths, languages and cultures, are all a small part of the enormous variety of modalities and artifacts, strategies and resources human groups – from marginal minorities to dominant societies and nation-states – have devised in order to use their past in a way that strengthens their position in the constant and uncertain fight for identity. In this context, the relevant point is that, for the most part our resources for identity are invented (not completely real, but not completely false as well), at both the levels of individual identity and of collective identity. This means – in our opinion – that our world of human beings and human societies is made not only of “imagined communities” (Anderson, 1983) but of “imagined individuals” as well. The articles presented in this special issue are all concerned with different aspects of the very complex interconnections of memory – identity – imagination. Particular attention is also paid on the role of emotions in the mediation and representation of the past, and in enforcing the sense of belonging to a community deeply rooted in that past (see Shweder & Levine 1984; Lutz, 1988; Abu Lughod & Lutz 1990; Ahmed, 2004; Wilce, 2009).

The edited special issue presents thus profound theoretical analyses that make use of classic anthropological theory and recently developed approaches in the fields of performance studies, feminism and post-colonial studies, and investigates through a series of ethnographies and qualitative analyses from locations as diverse as Italy, Greece, Norway, France, Brazil and China the multiple links between the doing of individual and collective pasts and futures.

Sharing, Emotions and Corporeality

It is well known that one of the most discussed points of social theory, mainly in the last century, is the concept of ‘sharing’: that is to say, the idea that all individuals belong to a society and thus share customs, regulations, values, ways of behavior, habits, mentality, beliefs – a ‘culture’, in a word – and that such a culture in its entirety becomes a generating principle of the same compact identity. This ‘culture’ has been theorized as an expression of the material forms of the organization of a society. We can only very briefly acknowledge the crucial intuition of Karl Marx when he writes:

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. *The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and*

tradition of pragmatism. Regarding memory in specific the above-mentioned work of Middleton & Brown (2005) can be seen as a first step in bridging these two quite diverse approaches.

intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. (Marx, 1859: online, *italics added*)

For a long time, cultural anthropology has had to face complicated questions: might or might not the environment or economy of a people determines their values and beliefs? Is or is not the way individuals interact determined by their values and by their beliefs – and if yes, how (Lévi-Strauss, 1964; Sahlins, 1976, 1985; Douglas, 1970; Douglas & Isherwood 1980)? It would take too long to dwell upon this crucial articulation about theoretical reflection in anthropology (see Layton, 1997). What is important for our argumentation here is that critical or deconstructive debates, especially the hot discussion characterizing the latest anthropological theory as a critique of the ‘culture’ concept, have provoked a conceptual removal from the understanding of holistic, coherent and homogeneous cultures towards the study of multiplicity, fragmentation, and internal contradictions (Appadurai, 1996; Hannerz, 1992; Werbner, 2002; Wright, 1998; Friedman, 1994; Mol, 2002).

The new century has witnessed the concept of culture relinquish its place of honor in anthropological theory (together with its explicative power) to a terminology emphasizing the dynamism of socio-material phenomena, embodied interaction, fluidity of cultural processes, power implied in interaction, and imagination as a new constitutional component of modern subjectivity (Clifford, 1999; Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Gilroy, 1993, 2000; Herzfeld, 1997; Wolf, 1982; Appadurai 1996; Keesing, 1994; Kuper 1999; Sahlins 1999; Brumann, 1999; Matera, 2008; Markowitz 2004). In this context many anthropologists have moved away from studying memory, instead choosing to analyse a series of phenomena with reference to the notion of ‘imaginary’ or perhaps more often “imagination” (Anderson, 1983; Crapanzano, 2004; see also: Hannerz, 1996; Herzfeld, 2001)².

² The contributors in this special issue all have their proper meanings for ‘memory’, ‘imagination’ and ‘imaginary’, terms relating to a very complex semantic field. Those from Elizabeth Tonkin for example are most specifically different in that she tries to define imagination and claim that it is fundamental for any kind of writing, including theoretical analysis. In this perspective imagination is not a synonym for ‘imaginary’. Of course, most anthropologists use those terms derived from a specific theoretical perspective referring to ‘l’imaginaire’, translated “the imaginary” (noun) to distinguish it from the ordinary “imaginary” (adj. = ideal, not real). A common point shared by most of the contributors here is the belief that memory also requires ‘imagining’, at least in the form of remembering, which probably includes forgetting (as it is often proved to do, and this is the reason for many historians are suspicious of using reported memories). Likewise, to imagine the perceived futures of one’s contemporary world asks for some representations of pastness. Other analyses in this special issue, on the contrary, are based on other meanings, derived presumably from the different source cited, and of course from the different theoretical frames engaged in. In these we can underline a distinction between ‘past oriented’ action (focus on memory) and ‘present oriented’ action (focus on imagination). The editors sum this bellow by a quote from Hobsbawm who sees, very pragmatically, a contemporary world of people who are bereft of knowledge about past events. This world is presumably instanced by a collection of dreams (not always made real) for a better life. In sum, this note is just to bring out to the reader that there are different available meanings of the key terms here (memory, imaginary, imagination), and our main aim is to offer a deep look of their rich and extensive applications.

As Tonkin argues in this special issue's first article *Writing up Imaginatively: Emotions, Temporalities and Social Encounters*, anthropological fieldwork as such involves imagination as well as a recognition of feelings and emotions, in the observer and the observed. Drawing on a series of resources such as poetry, a locally-published memories by a former English trade unionist, media analysis and anthropological writing and theory, Tonkin examines the interrelations of memory, imagination and emotions in regard to ethnographic writing and interpretation. She analyses the different temporalities of ethnographic writing and the layers of interpretation that mediate between a fieldwork event and its often manifold recensions, emphasizing the notion of subjectivity in representing emotions. From a methodological standpoint, the anthropological and ethnographical study of memory-identity-imagination interrelations is crucial to understanding how much the emotions play a role in creating a common 'sense of past' and a common "imaginative horizon".

Within a similar frame, Joël Candau in his article *Shared memory, odours and sociotransmitters or: "Save the interaction!"* analyses the emotionally-loaded sharing of a memory of an olfactory experience between himself and his informant – a gravedigger. Candau introduces the term "sociotransmitters" in order to explain how sharing memories functions. His analysis takes place on three levels: protomemory, memory and metamemory, and leads to a broader theory of shared memories (public, socialized, or institutionalized) with a focus on embodiment and the senses.

In the next article of the special issue Eleni Papagaroufali maintains this focus on sharing, embodiment and corporeality in order to analyze a concrete case of doing memory and national identity politics. Papagaroufali studies the sharing of blood and bone marrow transplants between the "historical enemies" Greeks and Turks (or Cypriots) in 1999-2000 and speaks about regimes of truth, Disasters that matter and Gifts of life in the arena of international diplomacy. By drawing on recent debates of critical medical anthropology and on a series of empirical materials she studies how unexpected events of memory were materialized in bodies that opened and dispersed themselves to alterity, to "foes' bodies".

Memory, Imagination and Performativity

The enactment of a past usually involves a character, i.e. an actor, or an imagined community (Brockmeier, 2000, 2003; Latour, 2005; Middleton & Edwards, 1990). We often think of this character or this community as the entity that persists while everything else in the course of life or of history changes:

The simple notion of an enduring substance sustaining persistent qualities, either essentially or accidentally, expresses a useful abstract for many purposes of life. But whenever we try to use it as a fundamental statement of the nature of things, it proves itself mistaken. It arose from a mistake and has never succeeded in any of its applications (Whitehead, 1929/1978, p. 79 cited in Latour, 1994).

One cannot distinguish what happens first: whether memory actually generates this character or community, as a defined entity that remains identical to itself throughout all actions, or whether identity is the main principle of how memory functions. As a result, often homogeneity and continuity between the past and the future characterize how

communities remember – which is related to the elimination of novelty and exclusion of difference (Connerton, 1989; Deleuze, 1994; Latour, 1993).

In the article *The Politics of Imagining and Forgetting in Chinese Ethnic Minorities' Museums*, Varutti explores this phenomenon. She investigates the representation of ethnic minorities in the museums of Kunming, China, and discusses the active role that museums play in processes of memory and identity engineering. Her comparative analysis of museum displays in Kunming unravels the ideological tenets underlying the Chinese government politics of ethnic difference and explores the multiple ways in which the image of ethnic minorities is conveyed through remembering and emphasising specific cultural elements while forgetting others. She also examines how the perception of ethnic minorities is performed in relation to the Han majority and as a practice of imagining a Chinese national identity.

Within a similar frame but taking “performance” in its literal sense Anne Kathrine Larsen in the article *Staged History in Local Settings: The Popular Norwegian Spel-tradition* analyses how the enactment of a historical event can present a message of current interest, thus creating memories with present and future significance which shape the identity of the local community. Larsen closely examines how locally-based historical plays are staged in Norway as a regular ritual performance in the community and focuses various aspects of these plays such as the scenery, the scenario, and the audience's (inter-) actions.

The critical analysis of politics of doing memory and identity proceeds in the next article of the special issue: *Identitarian Politics in the Quilombo Frechal: Live Histories in a Brazilian Community of Slave Descendants*. Roberto Malighetti studies the construction of identity of a quilombo, a term originally used by the Portuguese authorities to juridically define the rights of Brazilian slaves. Based on extensive fieldwork, this article shows how the term quilombo has been “re-semanticized” in order to be applicable to the contemporary situations of the Afro-Brazilian population and connote projects of a new political order and nuclei of a contemporary resistance.

The next article in this special issue, *Women's Memories in a Depressed Steel Valley: an Attempt to Deconstruct the Imaginings of Steel-working Lorraine* shifts the focus of attention to another aspect of memory politics – that of gender-related power relations. Here Virginie Vinel intervenes in the community of Lorraine, France with the purpose of enacting feminine memories as an alternative to those created from the perspective of male steel workers and miners. The article shows how academic study can participate in the deconstruction of the dominant imaginings concerning Lorraine's steel-days as well as in the construction of memory in general. A memory practice that is based on the principle of difference and heterogeneity includes the Other and can be seen as an alternative to power-related memory politics. It thus creates openness as well as uncertainty as to what the future of a community might involve (Bowker & Star, 1999; Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987).

Moving to a more theoretical and abstract level of analysis, the next article *Stereotypes and Emblems in the Construction of Social Imagination* by Michel Rautenberg examines how stereotypes and emblems structure collective identities. Rautenberg presents how people appropriate and divert constructions that are more or less generated by institutions, politics and the media—such as stereotypes. He also examines the role of stereotypes and emblems in shaping social memories and social imaginations and suggests that

ethnography allows us to interpret social imagination by situating it in a concrete social context.

When memory is the strongest factor of identity in a social context, we find that there are routes members must follow in order to be (or to become) identical (as is apparent in the work of memory and tradition). In particular cases we can also find 'old' and traditional features which have new meanings in the present, as if they can be used not as elements of memory, but as new, meaningless and 'neutral' elements of one's present identity.

We have a strong power of imagination: in contemporary societies, as a result of a series of complex phenomena mediated by communication technologies (mass media in particular), global geopolitical transformations and the fall of crucial ideological references, it increasingly accompanies (and at times even replaces) memory. Eric Hobsbawm expresses this point in a beautiful passage from his famous book, *The Age of Extremes*:

The destruction of the past, or rather of the social mechanisms that link one's contemporary experience to that of earlier generations, is one of the most characteristic and eerie phenomena of the late twentieth century. Most young men and women at the century's end grow up in a sort of permanent present lacking any organic relation to the public past of the times they live in. This makes historians, whose business is to remember what others forget, more essential at the need of the second millennium than before (Hobsbawm, 1994, p. 3).

To construct our own life by imagination means – in a temporal dimension – getting rid of the past, perceived as a predicament of the present, and embracing a fancy idea of the future in which we could realise our imagined identity (a desired one, an identity we dream of in our very dirty beds of the present, an identity that could push us, together with our children, out of our countries to a better place to live).

But this process of performing a different future is meaningful only if it is collective – if it involves collectives and communities that become different in themselves (Agamben, 1993). It is possible that collectivity can be built on the idea of otherness and that communities can be established without the one having to become more similar to the other (Braidotti, 1994; Stephenson & Papadopoulos 2006). Therefore, performing the past, the present, and the future may lead to very different social relations and forms of collectivity than what exists now. This may happen if memory no longer appears as the main faculty of identity, but mimesis: defined by Michel Taussig as the cultural ability to create a second nature, the faculty to copy, to imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into it and become Other (Taussig, 1993: xiii, see also Gebauer & Wulf, 1995).

Instead of an Epilogue

However, nowadays we do not often find collectives, instead we find single individuals getting away from their 'culture' – albeit always on the basis of a certain intention to reproduce it at some extent – with the aim of being (or becoming) others (and here we can see the work of imagination). This 'ideal' or image, which we could even describe as 'new' in comparison to a traditional local model, guides subjects in the mimetic

construction of their identity and is obtained from images of the ‘elsewhere’ (illustrations from magazines and from TV, for example), or (as Arjun Appadurai tells us about himself in the first pages of his very famous book, *Modernity at Large*) from consumer goods, from exotic fragrances (Right Guard aftershave), from famous actors (Humphrey Bogart). It is an image (and a desired identity) created from a manner of dressing (jeans), a prestigious language (English), an exotic sport (baseball), or the images (as Salman Rusdhie features Saladin Chamcha, in *The Satanic Verses*) made by a series of postures (a sullen face, aristocratic expression, a look of haughty contempt), or by a rational vision of the world (on flight safety belts as a ‘must’, see Appadurai 1996).

This is one of the results of today’s global contests marked by intense media production and by a similarly intense standardisation of ways of life. In this context the ‘wish for somewhere else’ is feeding itself through the images produced by mass-media and through goods represented in them, as well as through the relationship between economy and ideology (or between structure and culture, or superstructure, if we prefer).

As the Italian filmmaker Gianni Amelio has shown us in his masterful film ‘Lamerica’, and as is evident from less spectacular but similarly illuminating ethnographies, often the expectations and wishes of those who have imagined a golden existence in a ‘somewhere else’ shown on TV or in magazines are brutally destroyed by a reality of ruthless exploitation and marginalisation. Television, cinema, Internet, and other communication instruments, together with mobility and cultural traffic in general, represent powerful influences in the structure and creation of imaginary communities. Therefore, they influence the subjects who imagine belonging (and naturally wish to belong) to those communities, just like the characters imagined in our examples. Maybe it is true that, as many assert, Lévi-Strauss’s apocalyptic vision of an ‘advanced monoculture’, advanced and destructive, is a faraway vision: boring, romantic and without any ‘ethnographic acumen’ (Herzfeld, 2001).

The critique of Paolo Favero against contemporary popular Italian culture in the last article of this special issue *Italians, the ‘Good People’: Reflections on National Self-Representation in Contemporary Italian Debates on Xenophobia and War* seems in this regard to be more important than ever before. In his ethnographical study of South-Asian migrant artists in Rome, Favero critically addresses the way in which a new sense of nationhood is being produced in contemporary Italian public culture in an interplay of memory, imagination, history and entertainment. He deconstructs one of the most prototypical Italian national myths, ‘*Italiani Brava Gente*’, and situates his findings in the contemporary socio-political situation of Italy as a country of immigration and an ally in the American-led ‘war on terror’.

And here we return to our starting point, that is, to the appearance of imagination in anthropological theory. As Appadurai has noted:

Implicit in this book is a theory of rupture that takes media and migration as its two major, and interconnected, diacritics, and explores their joined effect on the work of imagination, as a constitutive feature of modern subjectivity (Appadurai, 1996, p. 3).

If it is true that, as Appadurai writes, migration and mass communications are the two phenomena that have modified, today more than ever, the area of imagination, and if imagination is the main power behind personal identity construction, it’s also true that

images of and wishes for modernity and a western way of life capture people everywhere in the world, and can therefore be at the basis of varied existential projects, even in the most isolated places. They can have very high prices, are at times unreachable, and perhaps they are even at the basis of the destruction of existences, of affections, of social ties, of cultural fabrics, which seems to be so typical of our contemporary times.

Numberless 'bricoleurs' have, thanks to the power of imagination, almost infinite new opportunities in respect to the past. They can even try to make them real thanks to extraordinary mimetic processes, and this in turn gives form to wishes and hopes that astute ethnographers (as well as filmmakers and writers) try very hard to pick up and represent. However, we must stress that such complex circumstances risk ending up confined to a merely symbolic level that can do little or nothing against power.

Power, when unleashed, simultaneously attacks the sphere of structure and the one of culture. It shows images of economic advantages (being better off, being able to get more consumer goods, etc.) bound up in the adoption of certain models of development and production; it shows images of modernity tied to the adoption of certain models of life and certain configurations of values. We suggest that our job as anthropologists and social scientists should expose this anything but weakened old and hegemonic program: it is our business to underline what people undermine.

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