

MEMORY AND THE POLITICS OF THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

Remembering, like experiencing and sensing and a host of other mental acts, is an exclusively first-person singular affair. In view of the moral and political store set by memory, especially peoples' (or collective, or national) memories, this may be an irritating fact, but it is one which needs to be faced right from the outset. Strictly speaking, I cannot remember except what I personally remember, just as my experiences are my own experiences, and no one else's. By extension, we can and do speak of the *same* experience which different people have, and of the *same* memory. But this manner of speaking is different from that of speaking about two people or more seeing the same *film*, or reading the same *book*, for example, or even of *remembering* having seen the same film together, or of having read the same book. In the latter cases, we would be speaking about *one* object (a film or a book) actually existing in the external world. But *two* people "having the same memory" involve *two* acts of remembering, not one; and two people remembering having read the same book is also a case of two acts of remembering, not one. In the case of remembering, the act is personalised in the conscious experience of the agent. Its instantiation is private. It is not experienced by anyone except the agent himself. I can of course remember what someone else tells me they remember having happened. If they remember, truly, *x*, (thereby implying *x*) then I can claim, secondarily, that I remember *that x*. This second-order act of remembering is propositional -*that x*; for example that Ghandi was assassinated, but not *x* -the assassination itself.

So much, I think, is quite straightforward. Many Palestinians who are old enough to have lived through the '47-'49 fighting that took place in their homeland, will claim they still remember having been forcefully expelled, or terrorized to leave their homes. If it is a family or the inhabitants of an entire hamlet or village who were affected and are the subject of discussion, we can almost begin to talk of a *shared* experience and a shared memory, meaning a memory shared by more than one person. But in doing this we must be careful to realize that we would already be crossing that threshold between the literal and the figurative: a so-called *shared experience* is not *one* experience, but two, or more, in direct proportion to the number of persons who have gone through it or felt it. Strictly speaking, each person's experience of a so-called single event or episode is just that person's own experience, and their memory is likewise exclusively their own. We sometimes realize this as we try to put together the pieces of what seem like inconsistent memories of the same episode or event. Famously, the different accounts that were later written by different American, Israeli and Palestinian participants of why Camp David 2000 failed seem like accounts of different negotiation events. Notwithstanding, we will generally take to be a shared memory of an event that which is related to us by two or more people, whose accounts of that experienced event- making allowances for minor differences- more or less correspond.

Putting all these personal memories -single or shared- together, we can build up a picture in retrospect of what we think must have happened. However, *the past is a foreign country: they do things differently there!* My take on this quote from the Hartley novel (L.P.Hartley, *The Go-Between*, London, 1953) in this context is that, unlike the famous dictum that to know x is to imply x, remembering is not quite as

straightforward as knowing, which explains why I modified remembering with the adverb “truly” earlier when I deduced x from remembering x . The prodding question “What do you remember?”, asked of someone through whom we are trying to find out what happened is one whose answer we *allow* to be an inexact, muddled, and even wholly imagined account. Cases of the latter kind -where a subject falsely believes they are recounting a true memory, or remembering an episode- are well-known and have been documented in the psychological annals. We may also know that the person being interrogated was drugged against their will, and so we will *expect* their account to be confused. More commonly, it is well known that the passage of time often “plays with” memories, making them windows that look out on landscapes that have become transformed beyond recognition. Many of us “remember” enormous hallways in our parents’ homes when there were only humble passages. Likewise, Palestinians will sing the praises of their expansive lush orange-groves where perhaps only a few orange trees stood in their back-gardens. And sometimes, we are all too well aware, just as we sometimes fail completely to see what is right before our eyes, we also manage to forget or blot out completely how something happened to us, or indeed, whether it happened at all. Although, therefore, to remember x , truly, is to imply x , there are any number of reasons to render memory-claims, whether personal or shared, unreliable as being in themselves sufficient mirrors of reality, or of that strange country of the past. That is why “I know x ” is not analogous to “I remember x ”. The first (at least, all things being equal) is sufficient to imply x . The second isn’t.

Then we have that famous historical ascent from the particular to the universal, or to what is called “a collective memory”. Beginning with a particular community, such as

the Palestinians of '47-'49, and a repertoire of various kinds of individual memories all relating to a common event, some of which are wholly accurate, and some which are less true; some that are straightforward but also some that have become, through time and the imagination, embellished; those that are first-hand, and those that are only second- and third-hand; some that are unique and singular, and some that reflect a common experience and are therefore shared; and then, imagining how, through a natural dialogical process of societal evolution all these accounts can come to be mixed together, without due care as to what, being true and objective, should be included, and what, being less reliable, should be left out or amended; and finally, seeing how the mixed product now begins to be recounted, whether orally or in written form, privately or publicly, we eventually come close to recognizing how a constructed cobweb of a common narrative is gradually created, slowly coming to occupy central place in what becomes, or comes to be described as that community's *collective memory*. It is in this, or another analogous way that Palestinians can retrospectively make the strong claim of having a collective memory, the "collective" element of the claim tacitly corroborating, whether consciously or unconsciously, both the *existence* of a collective or national entity, as well as that national entity's historical narrative of what became of them or befell them and their country -the tragic *nakbah*, or disaster of 1948. This is not just the account of one or a few dispossessed individuals which can therefore be discounted or settled in a court of law: it is the story of dispossession of a whole country "as remembered" by *its* people (the people, clearly, not being, as we said right from the beginning, a proper subject for such an experience, but now coming to be posed, through such a narrative, as a *single* political player, seeking national self-determination &c.).

But if this collective memory was formed initially from live memories through this interactive process of generalizing ascent, then, having so to speak achieved that second-order status of generality, this “national” or “collective” memory begins after a while a journey in the opposite direction, or a journey of *descent*, now coming to be imbibed and adopted through a variegated process of dissemination by new waves of individuals joining the community, in such a way that it becomes instantiated in these new individuals, becoming as constitutive of their individual memory banks as their own personal, first-order memories. In some way, this “collective memory” becomes *appropriated* by these newly-joined or newly-born individuals. It is in this way that second- and third-generation Palestinians living in refugee camps will “remember” “their” expulsion from their homeland, even from their specific homes, hamlets, villages and towns, and will therefore hanker for “their” return, specifically to homes, hamlets or towns to which they have never been, and most of which are no more.

Narratives being what they are, and collective memories coming to be weaved as described, it is little wonder that, when prodded one day by the author of these lines to simply recognize the *principle* of the right of return for those Palestinian refugees, Israeli leader Tzippi Livni protested in shocked disbelief: “You want me to recognize, against the fibres of my soul, that Israel was born in sin?” (the sin being Israel’s expulsion of the Palestinians). Clearly, Israel’s collective memory of its “glorious war of independence” does not correspond to the Palestinian recollection of the same episode, experienced as their *nakbah*. Israel’s birth, to Tzippi Livni, and to countless Israelis, was *righteous*, an unadulterated case of an immaculate conception! If some Palestinians left, then they left or fled of their own accord. Indeed, so

salient did this incongruity of narratives become that Israel's second largest Knesset Party (Israel Beiteinu) proposed to pass a law in the Knesset recently to *prohibit* Palestinians who have Israeli citizenship from commemorating the *nak-bah!* (A "softened" version of this law -not to subsidize such activities- passed a first reading in the Knesset in March of this year).

The Tzippi Livni story alerts us to something of extreme significance: memories are constitutive of the self- of that inner, private domain which is accessible only to the subject herself; of her character, her repertoire of knowledge and skills, her behavior as expressed in likely choices she might make and attitudes she adopts or positions she might take, as well as in her sensibilities and emotions. In the Hartley story cited above, the main character cannot escape his role as go-between for the woman he was in love with as a child, even in old age as she uses him again in pursuit of her own love fantasy. In short, memory is constitutive of identities, as Locke -with a tinge of exaggeration, perhaps- might have been the first to point out, of groups as much as of persons. Israel's collective memory, formulated through a curiously twisted journey of ascent as earlier described, and later instantiated in Tzippi Livni, and helping shape her identity, makes it hard if not impossible for her therefore to deny an entire narrative, an ingrained self-identity structure, and to declare that Israel was born in sin, for which she would willingly acknowledge, and apologize for, the harm Israel caused to Palestinians. Assuming, from the opposite perspective, that Palestinian readiness to compromise on the *implementation* of the right of return is psychologically conditional on Israel's recognition of the *principle* that Palestinians have that right, it becomes hard to see how then

progress in the political sphere to resolve -that is, to *end*- the conflict between the two sides can be made. (Israel makes much of its need to have its right to exist be *recognized* by the Arab world at large. Here we have another need: that of the *tragedy* that befell the Palestinians at the hands of the Israelis, and the pain and suffering that was caused, whose memory cannot be erased, to be recognized by the Israeli people).

In Tzippi Livni's case, as in that of many Israelis and Palestinians, what we called the "instantiated" collective memory which she comes to imbibe or to appropriate is one that can be described as still being "fresh", or "live", in that it was personally transmitted to her partly through her own parents, exactly as, for example, I personally came to imbibe and recognize our own Palestinian collective memory through my own parents and elder relatives and acquaintances. But as one generation is superseded by another, such collective memories can become transformed into so-called received traditions, often transmitted in semi-official documented form, and they can sometimes also come to assume a sanctity or holiness of sorts, especially with the passage of time, and more so if rooted in that distant past where the two worlds, the natural and supernatural, merge as they often are wont to do in their mysterious and unfathomable ways. Notwithstanding, so reified these "personalised" narratives or histories become that they begin to function *as if* they were actual collective memories, constituting the identities of present-day followers of that tradition, and determining their politics. It is, perhaps it is needless to say, in precisely such a light that present day Israelis for example will lay claim to a hilltop here or an ancient tomb there, in total disregard to present day realities. It is easy to see how a past

myth about the birth of a nation, a kind of fairy tale, can first be drawn up by an early generation of elders, and then be transformed into a collective memory, and then into a tradition, sometimes assuming a sort of sanctity or holiness, until it finally becomes instantiated in individuals years later, determining their identities, and informing their thoughts and actions.

Often also, so warped the transmitted written tradition is in the first place, that even past realities are totally ignored, as for example in those biblical narratives that portray Palestine as having been inhabited primarily by Jews, and otherwise by transient tribes who have altogether faded out from history; and which has been raided by foreign invaders, like Persians and Romans, the latter eventually clearing the land of its native population having destroyed their major Temple. Extrapolating from that narrative, the argument may run, it is the descendants of that people who finally manage heroically to reclaim the land, and this only in the 20th century. Thus that famous motto, A land without a people for a people without a land -the land in question, meantime, and since the said expulsion by the Romans, having to all intents and purposes remained empty, the rest of its inhabitants having mysteriously faded out of existence altogether.

While of course the similarity is altogether accidental, yet it is of significance to note in this context the glaring absence of a Palestinian voice in a major contemporary philosophical work on memory, written by Avishai Margalit. In his award-winning *The Ethics of Memory* (Harvard, 2004), Margalit –a founder of Peace Now, and a strong “believer” in a two-state solution- curiously avoids any mention of Palestinians as he presents and deals with cases he believes are noteworthy of comment and analysis as cases of remembrance, where the concepts of ethics and morality may be invoked, whether

these memories are associated with torture, pain, humiliation, grievances, deaths, traumas, tragedies, or suchlike. All his examples, while entirely deserving, are curiously either those of the persecuted European Jews, or of European peoples and nations, with references abounding and scattered in the text to every conceivable poet or playwright or philosopher from “the West”, excepting the biblical references to Jews in the Land of Canaan. What is the significance, one cannot help asking oneself, of a secular Israeli philosopher writing on the ethics of memory in the present-day who will refrain from addressing issues of clear relevance in his own country, and who will refer to everything in his argument but the ethics of a collective memory which ignores Israel’s birth, and the accompanying Palestinian *nakbah*? Should we recognize here (in spite of the wide ideological gulf separating between them) a *denial* akin only to that of Tzippi Livni? And if so, what lessons should we draw from this? That it is too idealistic to conceive of a resolution to the conflict which can be predicated on a “truth and reconciliation” effort? That it is best, if one wishes to move forward, simply to let “sleeping dogs lie”, or simply to sweep conflicting narratives under the carpet?

Such a conclusion would be an attractive one to draw. Why remain prisoners of a past from which every departure point to a new beginning is knotted beyond repair? Why not simply accept the irreconcilability of past narratives, and move forward, guided by what international political theory in any case tells us in real life guides political actors and determines their decisions, namely, pure interest? The simple (and possibly) sad answer to these questions is that political actors are not necessarily rational, and they do not necessarily therefore allow themselves to be ruled by their interests. Indeed, the very fact that so-called “collective memo-

ries” constitute identities to one degree or another is what often stands in the way of allowing political actors to transcend conflicts. I believe Israel is a prime example of this. Whereas its presumed and stated interest as a project is for the establishment of a safe, democratic Jewish State; and whereas the shortest step towards achieving this aim- demographically as well as geographically- is by accepting the Arab Peace Plan which calls for ending the conflict through ending the occupation of 1967, nonetheless the actual trajectory of its policies leads in exactly the opposite direction of entrenching itself in those territories it occupied in 1967. One of the major engines powering this trajectory is a fairy-tale, a narrative bringing myths from the distant past together with daydreams about the future. It is this narrative that has defined Israeli policies in the occupied West Bank over the past 43 years, making it encourage the settlement of just under half a million Jews in that territory, including in East Jerusalem, and making it create a political culture that has come to see that settlement activity as the be-all end-all of the State, as indeed of the Jewish people themselves.

Let me conclude by pointing out a couple of things. First, I hope that, although I have focused on the negative aspects of memory, it will nonetheless not be assumed that I am therefore an all-out “enemy” of memory- whether personal, shared or collective. My aim, rather, has been to warn against memory’s *misuses*. Second, I should perhaps add the one piece of good news about memories and identities is the existence of the will. If memories, whether imagined or real, are fixed -that is, are typically considered by the receiving agent and by us as being “given”- identities, in whose shaping memories play a major role, but which are not made up entirely and exclusively of such memories, are typically considered by us to be amenable to our *conscious* in-

put: we typically act in this world in the belief that we *can* shape who we are, that we are not fatally pre-destined to be prisoners of our pasts. Lessons from history further support our belief that individuals have the power to break from pre-existing molds. Although a multitude of factors go into this process of conscious change, not least being the factor of time, yet such could be the nature of the change that individuals and peoples need no longer feel they are necessarily chained by their pasts. There will always be a time when the force of attraction exercised by a vision of a better future, for example, will outweigh the gravitational pull of the past. With this knowledge, we can either simply wait for such a time, or we can help bring it about.

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