

MNEMONOLOGIC ESSENTIALISM

Over-generalization in sociomental topography studies

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Book Review

Time maps. Collective memory and the social shape of the past

By Eviatar Zeruvabel (Chicago 2004)

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Modern western nation-states, and their post-colonial 'non-western' counterparts, have each constructed a collective mnemonic tradition in order to consolidate and justify the very state-oriented national collectiveness they pursue. These traditions encapsulate all aspects of social existence within the nation-state, from education to national commemorations.

While the particular mnemonic traditions have never been completely static, as the eventual inclusion of the civil rights movement and African-American history into the United States educational and commemorative traditions for example show, these mnemonic traditions have recently come under stress because nation-states themselves have come under stress.

This is due to increasing globalization, which enables someone in Turkey to follow and identify with the Michael Jackson trial as much as someone in Wyoming or California. At the same time, both globalization-migration and supra-nationalization projects like the European Union have triggered the (re)construction of regional and particular sociomental topographies. In other words, while nation-state oriented sociomental topography is a product of the post-enlightenment Western world, in the current post-modern globalized world it is simultaneously being pressured above the nation-state realm as well as fragmented within it. The question is then whether it is possible to analyze this sociomental topography or sociology of memory in a 'transcultural' and 'transhistorical' perspective, as Eviatar Zeruvabel attempts to do.¹

Before I answer this question, it is useful to describe how sociomental topographies of a collective past are constructed, and 'constructed' is indeed the appropriate term to use. The key elements of sociomental topography are objective time and subjective time. Objective time, dates and chronologies, is given meaning to by the subject that is evaluating it, whether it is a human being or a nation-state. Consequently, a collective memory, when the subject is a nation-state or social group, is constructed. By mnemonic synchronization, in the form of commemorations and national holidays, the collective memory is institutionalized in the yearly schedules of the 'mnemonic community'. Furthermore, this collective memory mnemonically socializes a society with textbooks and museums and so

¹ Eviatar Zeruvabel, *Time maps. Collective memory and the social shape of the past*, (Chicago 2003) 9.

on, since it creates a selective framework of history. In the last fifty years, increasing migration and globalization has also led to mnemonic battles; that is, curricular wars between or within nation-states about whether or how an historical event should be remembered. A good example of mnemonic battle is the one about the Armenian genocide. This mnemonic battle rages between the Turkish state, and consequently the majority of the Turks, and the Armenian diaspora and the state of Armenia. The Turkish state has consistently had a policy of refusing to recognize the killings of Armenians in the nineteen tens as 'genocide'. So, while the Armenian genocide is commemorated both in Armenia and throughout the world by the Armenian diaspora, in Turkey there is a mnemonic socialization of semantic denial where 'tragedies and mutual killings' and not genocide is remembered.

As mentioned, the specifics of sociomental topography and mnemonic tradition are a product of post-Enlightenment nation-states. Even in the Roman Empire, which some argue comes closest to the modern nation-state in terms of governmental and centralist organization, one could not speak of a collective mnemonic tradition or sociomental topography, except for perhaps the monetary system which consisted of coins with the image of the emperor and were valid throughout the empire. Apart from that, there were no socio-historical or cultural commonalities and memories between say the inhabitants of the province of Asia Minor and the inhabitants of Britannia. In fact, even *within* these provinces there was no common mnemonic tradition, since social life was mostly organized in tribal ruralities, like it was throughout the pre-modern era, both in Europe and the Middle East. Therefore, it is impossible to find 'common mnemonic features (...) "bridging" the past and present' before the nation-state era, as Zeruvabel claims to do.²

Instead of recognizing the enormous heterodoxy and particularity of mnemonic traditions, especially in pre-modern times, Zeruvabel wrongly chooses to de-contextualize and focus on 'social memory as a generic phenomenon'³, which does not exist in point of fact. In other words, he *hyperconstructs* where he should deconstruct. Zeruvabel falls into the trap of what I would to call 'mnemonologic essentialism' by consciously approaching the analysis of sociomental topographies in an over-generalizing a-historical fashion and thus creating false universalism.

² Zeruvabel, *Time maps*, 10.

³ Idem, 9.