

Marta Rovira

The symbolic representation of the Nation's past

INTRODUCTION: THE SOCIAL CONTEXTS OF MEMORY

Our memories, says Halbwachs, always belong to a social space. In this regard, we may think of the individual memory as an illusion¹, as an imaginary line that connects the different groups we belong to. For our memories, also according to the same author, are always to be found in a social space, insofar as we ourselves are social beings.

It is pointless us recalling memories in isolation: the others are there in some way or another.

But our memories remain collective, and they are recalled for us by others, even if they are of events in which we alone have been involved, and objects that we alone have seen. The fact is that in reality we are never alone.

[HALBWACHS, 1968:2]

These social spaces Halbwachs refers to are the social contexts that shape the experience and the memory of individuals. For him, they are the social groups as the basis of memory, not just because they help to establish memories or because they articulate the space and the time of shared experiences, but because moreover, the group as such is the bearer of a way of *feeling* the past. The memory of musicians, the memory of religious groups, the memory of the working class... Halbwachs identifies the group as a structure that contains symbolic links (the memory) between individuals, which transcend each one of them, and which can only exist collectively. This is how shared values are established,

a logic that goes beyond rationality and which transmits a lasting view of the past that eventually forms part of the group in a preconscious way.

But for Halbwachs the memory was still that which is made to last by people, and which is different from history in that it goes back no further than one generation. History, on the other hand, traces the path back into the distant past. When he compares memory to history, he attributes the former with a way of learning about the past more deeply rooted in collective consciousnesses, whilst history is understood as a science that interprets the past beyond people's experiences. We have to understand, then, that Halbwachs saw historical endeavour as a job for specialists, as something set apart from the broad and popular path of social evolution. Had he survived the extermination camp he would have lived through a period, since the Second World War, which has been characterised precisely by historians intervening in the life of society.

The person who has best approached this connection between history and memory, and who has made the relationship between them clear is without doubt Paul Ricoeur (*L'Histoire, la mémoire, l'oubli*, Seuil, 2000). Ricoeur distinguishes between the work of historians and the work of the memory. However, these are by no means alien to each other. For Ricoeur, the collective memory constitutes the ground in which historiography is rooted. In other words, memory is history *experienced*. In this sense, Ricoeur sees memory not as something close that does not require written documents in order to be remembered (subject of immediate memory), but as a way of appropriating history, the more distant past.

If one looks at it not in a linear but in a circular way, memory may appear twice during our analysis: first as a mould of history if one looks at it from the point of view of writing history, then as a channel for the reappropriation of the historical past as it is presented to us by the historical accounts given.

[RICOEUR, 2004:21]

This connection between history and memory does not presuppose an insurmountable epistemological difference, as history contains memory, and memory contains history. And this is the most important thing. The social commitments occurring in the field of memory are not removed from the intervention of academic history. In many ways, the conflicts of memory are also the conflicts of historiography, despite the fact that society reserves different social spaces, and different social roles, for them and that the academic discourse on the past has potentialities of its own, characteristics that distinguish it from the construction of memory made from outside the field of science. But there is a point at which history and memory necessarily come together, where they constitute two aspects of the same phenomenon: the representation and recounting of the past. In this article I refer to this link between history and memory and the representation of the past in the context of the nation, through symbolic action.

■ ¹ Just as Bourdieu was later to put it when talking of the construction of the biography from life histories. "L'illusion biographique", *Minutes de la recherche*, no. 62/63, june 1986.

THE REPRESENTATION OF THE NATION'S PAST

A common problem indeed runs through the phenomenology of memory, the epistemology of history, the hermeneutics of the historical condition: that of the representation of the past.

[RICOEUR, 2000]

It is in the context of the nation, better than in any other, that we can give expression to this link between collective memory and history. The representation and the recounting of the past is the means by which the nation is *explained* (legitimated) as a collective subject. Although we may consider the awareness of history as a human characteristic, the awareness of distance as regards the past is a characteristic of modern times. And what is more, the development of an established collective memory is a result of the celebration of the nation as a product of enlightened modernity; an establishment that is sustained by way of two very modern artefacts such as chronology (and the ritualisation and symbolisation of this chronology) and the personification of the past (individualisation of historical action).

Some authorities, like Hobsbawm (1988), have wished to see in this process of symbolisation of the national past a contrivance that reveals a supposed unreality of the nation. However, the national memory has the characteristics of any reality constructed socially: it is a shared discourse, a discourse assumed collectively; a reality *based on experience*, containing an aesthetic perception (Gadamer) and a reappropriation of the past (Ricoeur) that we can clearly observe in the use of symbols.

A collective reality that even so does not cease to be the subject of conflicts, of differing interpretations, and that in short contains different levels of significance for the various social agents. There are *national* memories and *nationalist* memories, *official* memories and counter-memories, memories of specific groups and *social subjects*: of women, of workers, of clandestine struggles... In all these memories there is a message that promises a "truth", namely, a component of *recognition* that, as Ricoeur says, history in itself does not have. We recognise ourselves in the act of remembering because in it we represent "our" past. It is the "we" that endures in this memory beyond the here and now.

Although being no more, the past is recognised as having been. Of course, one may place in doubt such a pretension to the truth. But we have nothing better than memory to assure ourselves that something is far back in the past before we may declare ourselves as remembering. Such is at once the puzzle and its fragile solution that memory transmits to history, but which it also transmits to the reappropriation of the historical past for the memory because *recognition* becomes a privilege of memory, which history lacks. However, the reappropriation of history for memory is equally lacking.

[RICOEUR, 2006: 22]

This recognition is possible not only because of the content of the story that we are told, and which we adopt, but of the way it tells it. The late 20th century was characterised not just by the growing interest in remembering the recent past (trials, commemorations, anniversaries, museum representations, reproductions), but by the development of formats based increasingly on *experience*; going as far as the dramatisations and guided

tours of today, the latest thing in historical tourism (Lowenthal). Today it is not possible to speak only of a social memory and of a vague memory, implicit in the people's minds. We have to talk of politics of the memory, a market of the memory, of "commemorative bulimia", as Pierre Nora said. The memory is a form of social action less and less internalised and more and more emphatic.

SYMBOLIC ACTION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE NATION

Symbols are tools for condensing meaning. They contain quite different interpretations, uses and forms. Indeed, all culture is symbolic by definition. However, there are symbolic elements, be they icons or rituals, that are clearly outlined, that correspond to easily identifiable patterns, because they have gone through a process of institutionalization (Berger and Luckmann, 1986). This is the case, for example, of national flags. Michael Billig (1995) correctly points out the existence of *recognised* symbols, which are repeated in an international phenomenon that embraces all nations.

Each flag, by its conventional rectangular pattern, announces itself to be an element of an established, recognisable series, in which all flags are essentially similar in their conventions of differences.

[BILLIG, 1995: 86]

I have already said that the national memory is expressed through symbols. The flag itself contains the national history ("the four bars"). But there are symbols that remind, that make memory present. Symbols are therefore the tools for *experiencing* the past. If the nation is a collective link that expresses itself in a sentimental register (one feels identified), a sentimental memory is needed to construct a national identity. And this way of *feeling* the national identity is expressed through adherence to shared symbols, or by way of shared symbolic rituals. Through this sentimental experience of the symbol, people can *recognise* themselves in it, they can *feel* represented by it.

The name symbol is given to that which has value not just for its content but for its capacity to be shown, i.e., to that which is a document in which the members of a community recognise themselves: whether it appears as a religious symbol or in a profane sense, whether it is a sign, a credential or a redeeming word, the meaning of the symbolon rests in any case on its presence, and it only gains its representative function through the topicality of its shown or spoken self.

[GADAMER, 1977: 110]

As Hans-Georg Gadamer points out, one cannot *experience* the past in just an *objective* way. Positivism (be it Marxist or functionalist) overlooks this essential connection between *being* and *feeling*. Gadamer thus places the reflection in the terrain of the sensitive, the aesthetic, which allows us to expect something from a representation of something that goes beyond our own selves.





The allegorical process of interpretation and the symbolic process of knowledge base their necessity on the same foundations: it is only possible to know the divine through feeling.

[III]

Thus, national symbols are shared, not through legal obligation, but through learning based on experience, in the institutionalised social contexts to do so: the school, the family, public rituals like the 'Diada Nacional', sports competitions or tributes to representatives of culture. Learning the institutionalised symbols means that individuals, in their process of socialisation, unconsciously incorporate the symbolic patterns (Douglas, 1978) of the society in which they grow up. Thus, a child will learn the symbolic force of its country's flag before the entire scope of its meaning; in the same way, it will learn the symbolic force of a punishment long before understanding the reason why it is meted out.

Therefore, symbols are tools of power, of shaping the knowledge and the values that the individual acquires of the world, through verbal and non-verbal forms. We have to speak, therefore, of symbols not as elements found among us waiting for someone to interpret them, but as tools for action, be it educational, economic or political. Symbolic action develops in all areas of our society, with different intentions but with equivalent guidelines. Whereas in education the teacher's or the parents' authority over the

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child is symbolised, in economic relationships the symbols express and determine social status, as social differences are also symbolically expressed in linguistic registers. So we find that certain prestigious professions develop an entire highly visible and specific range of symbols (doctors, journalists, etc.).

However, what is peculiar about the field of defining national reality is the globalising (and therefore integrating) wish of symbols to represent the nation. If the nation is

the construction of a political whole on the basis of shared cultural traits (Resina, 2006), the symbols through which the nation is represented form a "selection" taken from the shared history. Potentially, there are numerous cultural expressions that can become "national symbols", i.e. institutionalized points of reference. However, only some of the symbolically important elements of this nation are raised to the category of national representations, with the ability to generate consensus and cohesion around them.

A consensus, but one that does not exclude disagreements. The struggle for symbolic representations is the struggle for the imposition of one ideological option over the others. In this struggle for the imposition of the symbols that are considered ideologically more appropriate, the symbols themselves (going back to the idea of *symbolic action*) become tools of political strife. When the definition of the nation is the subject of political strife, there arises a struggle for the symbolic representation of the nation being fought for.

The potential fractures in the symbolic national discourse do not appear only in the different national political options and in the “internal” power centres in a national identity. In the case of nations not formally recognised, there is a competition established to occupy the *official* ground of the nation, to counteract its symbolic power. There is established, then, a link between symbols and counter-symbols, a competition between forms of national representation that become conflicting. In the case of Catalonia, we can see this play of symbols and counter-symbols in the symbolic conflicts arising in the relationship between the national flags of Spain and Catalonia.

The paradox of the conflict is that it is also expressed in a non-conflictive way. Namely, the simultaneous presence of symbols that represent different national options has become something that Catalan society has accepted as normal. However, those living in this society, even those who have only just arrived, immediately perceive the nationally differing relationship represented by each flag, so that individuals identify themselves “nationally” with one or the other, but rarely with both as *equally* national symbols.

THREE ASPECTS OF SYMBOLIC ACTION

National conflicts are expressed symbolically, just as relationships of power between nations are. In this way, the subordination in terms of political power of Catalan national reference points without doubt weakens their institutional scope, their ability to formally become what the whole group represents, which is expressed through rituals shared by all the ideological trends present in society. The globalising effect of national symbols is diminished in this case, and their ability to *represent* goes on to depend in good measure on the means that glue society together on the fringes of institutional political power².

The weakness of the institutional aspect of symbols increases the importance of alternative symbols, which do not so much have the function of gluing together, as of compensating and emphasising. That is, they represent not that which “is”, but that which “could be”, or that which “would like to be”. In the national sphere we find, then, different symbolic aspects, which I identify with the following concepts:

- Institutional symbols.
- Militant or protest symbols.
- Symbols for private use or of popular culture (in the sense of ordinary culture).

When institutional points of reference are in a situation of ambiguity and confusion produced by the existence of different competing symbolic systems or mechanisms, symbolic action generates points of reference that combat this confusion. A symbolic action occurs that expresses itself as a counter-power, as a transforming desire or as compensation for what the national institutional points of reference do not contain. We should bear in mind that the symbols in themselves contain different and diverse possible interpretations. Therefore, the use made of a symbol (its presentation) is as important as what it represents.

■ ² We have to study the role of association membership in the shaping of national identity, paying attention to its ability to make up for the lack of national institutions and media to support a truly national set of symbols.

Through symbolic points of reference, then, the official definition of reality is debated; for example, the national points of reference of the Catalan Countries counter the national points of reference of Catalonia. However, the official interpretation is also combated through differing interpretations of the symbols; the *senyera* is for some the flag of the “autonomy” of Catalonia (which they counter with the starred flag as a symbol of the wish to become an independent nation) and for others a perfectly “national” symbol. Thus, militant symbols try to overcome the loss of present points of reference that resolve the

In the particular case of symbols as icons of memory, the first consequence of the changes taking place in the social contexts is their constant process of *updating*

consensus concerning the national identity, but they themselves cannot perform this globalising function. They are restricted to the function of emphasising (in this case, a wish for change) and compensating symbolically the lack of institutional presence of certain points of reference, namely, by way of representation and performance in the public sphere (often without much coverage in the mass media).

Alongside the militant or protest symbols —like the starred flag, the concept of Catalan Countries, *El Cant dels Maulets*, etc.— we find, in another aspect those we call popular symbols or for private use. We could almost talk of private consumption, as these

symbols are bought, consumed and expire after a while. This is the case of the “Catalan donkey”, a marketing product that has become popular in certain parts of Catalonia and has the characteristic of being a *national* point of reference used as each person wishes. It is not an explicitly national symbol, as its potential for institutionalisation is fairly low. However, it implicitly becomes a sign of identity, which corresponds at the same time to market criteria: meeting a need, being attractive, generating a “brand”... So at any time it could be replaced by another icon that meets the same requirements. However, the force of the “Catalan donkey” as a symbol comes in good measure from the existence of a counter-symbol, the “Spanish bull”. In this case, the antithetical relationship reinforces the functionality of the “Catalan donkey”. And indeed, it seems that the existence of the two has increased the presence of each among the people, as if it were a competition. On the other hand, as a compensatory symbol for the absence of a Catalan badge on car number plates, it could quite easily be substituted by another.

Perhaps the symbol that most clearly acts as compensation for the lack of institutionalised national points of reference —in this case the lack of a national football team— is Barça. In the years since the Francoist repression, Futbol Club Barcelona has become the channel for the expression of Catalan identity through sporting competition. Presently, it is one of the most consolidated symbols of Catalonia, which has gained in force as social changes have made sport more important, and football especially. Barça’s capacity for social implication has as much to do with the dynamics of the world football market and its repercussions in the media, as with its importance as a national symbol, which moreover stamps a specific associative culture on the club.

THE CHOICE AND UPDATING OF SYMBOLS

I began this article talking about the collective memory, and how the work of historians offers points of reference for the construction of national symbols, especially through the personalisation of history and chronology as narrative tools par excellence in contemporary historiography. These elements are part of the collective memory through shared symbols and points of reference. However, these symbols belong to the collective memory insofar as the current “social contexts” —as Maurice Halbwachs said— sustain their fit in the network of collective references.

Insofar as the social contexts change, the context in which history appears to us is also transformed. Indeed, the highly fluid way in which current cultural production functions also affects historiographical output and the representations of the collective memory. This constant changing of cultural products and formats may suggest that history and memory have ceased to have a *market* these days. Nothing could be further from the truth. We might even say that history is more present than ever in today’s society, thanks to the possibility that exists of “acting out” the past. Audiovisual techniques have revolutionised the telling of history aimed at the general public: documentaries, television programmes (*El favorit*), advertising language (institutional and commercial), the organisation of public events... Eric Hobsbawm does not know how right he was when he spoke of the “invention of tradition”. He was referring obviously to the origins of the nation, but never before have so many new traditions been invented.

In the particular case of symbols as icons of memory, the first consequence of the changes taking place in the social contexts, and which have also to do with the lack of institutionalisation, is their constant process of *updating*. When I say updating I am referring not only to the renewal or transformation of symbols, something inevitable with the passage of time, but also to a change in functional relationships, in which aesthetic and formal language becomes a prime factor for constructing the symbolic points of reference, rather than their ideological content —a language that takes the present to the past, rather than the past to the present.

The past is no longer the strange country that Lowenthal (1986) discovered, because the characteristics of the heroes seem very similar to those that appear in Hollywood movies, and are represented with wholly contemporary personality traits. The cinema, popular historical magazines (for example, *Sàpiens*), tee-shirts and caps with 1714 on them or other products for popular consumption that we have available transport the reference points of the past using cultural tools that update their format, and, of course, their potential meaning. As an example, we can see how the starred flag has acquired a new aesthetic and youthful aspect that it did not have to begin with. The young people who carry it (more and more each day) do not appreciate at all the ideological differences between the blue-starred flag and the yellow one, rather its aesthetic and militant contrast

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with the *senyera*, which has become too institutional and also rather old-fashioned, and, it goes without saying, less flashy.

The force of this trend, as I have said, is due in part to the lack of clear institutionalisation of symbolic national points of reference. And this is what allows these *updated* points of reference easily to become direct replicas or substitutes (in compensation) of the institutional symbols. The need to seek out new symbolic elements is so strong that the

public institutions of Catalonia themselves take part in the creation of new symbolic formats, in a sort of construction of par-national reference points (Delgado, 2003). We find examples of this in the attempt to change the design of the municipal badge of Barcelona (which in the end has been impossible for legal reasons), the attempt to drop the traditional floral offering to Rafael Casanova or the increasingly frequent use of *flags* of purely *decorative* colours instead of the traditional use of the *senyera* at the *festes majors* of towns and villages.

The very fluid nature of the culture industry that leads to the constant renewal of the symbolic elements available on the market is a universal fact, but in other

nations we will surely find symbolic national points of reference that are completely outside this market, beyond question. We may suppose that the English national points of reference, for example, determine the acceptance of more up-to-date formats in its institutional nature, if they really are *updated* at all.

The second consequence of the de-institutionalisation of the symbolic patterns is that the symbolic references cease to be accepted as a collective legacy, and become a question of personal choice. In the case of Catalan national identity the awareness of an identifying choice is very strong. An awareness that is hard to find in other national contexts, where the people even consider it absurd that someone should ask about the feeling of national identity (apart from the case of immigrant groups and in certain circumstances)³. We must also be aware that Catalan sociology formulates questions⁴ that are not appropriate in nations institutionally beyond question. This article almost certainly contains examples of them.

CONCLUSION

The reflection I have put forward schematically here would doubtlessly need to be more broadly developed in order to be presented exhaustively, something I hope to do in

■ ³ Moreover, this awareness makes us more *critical* and lucid citizens with regard to this matter, as it enables us to perceive what in other contexts is taken for granted.

⁴ The same research I am doing on the symbols the Catalans identify themselves with, thanks to the support of the CETC, would be pointless in England or the Île de France.

the future in a wider study. In synthetic fashion, I have tried to answer the question of how the nation's past is represented by symbols in the present. My reflection leads me to conclude an answer based on four ideas concerning this matter:

1. Social contexts make up the collective memory. Symbolic patterns are the institutionalised basis of the representation of this collective memory in the national fact. The institutionalisation of symbolic points of reference is what allows a shared national symbolic context to exist.
2. In the case of nations without a state (or where the state is not formally recognised), institutional weakness prevents the shaping of a symbolic pattern with which to construct a shared collective identity. The symbols may be there, but they will not become undisputed points of reference.
3. The lack of institutionalisation of a national reality does not entail the complete disappearance of symbolic references as such. The political struggle for the imposition of national symbols of one type or another is seen precisely in the abundance of symbols. Moreover, symbolic action encounters a path favourable to the production of symbolic property in the techniques of cultural output and performance of advanced societies.
4. The two most visible consequences of this specific context of symbolic representation of the nation's past are: a) the updating of symbols as a strategy of change and of ideological competence (as a protest or as a show of force) rather than as a strategy of permanence, and b) the existence of a situation of individual choice of collective points of reference, rather than a socialisation of individuals in the context of a collective cultural legacy. The result is a great deal of national ambiguity ■

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