

Text and dialogism in the study of collective memory*

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Abstract

Bakhtinian ideas about text and dialogism provide important tools for bringing order to the otherwise chaotic and fragmented field of collective memory studies. While the definition of collective remembering may remain unsettled at this point, some appreciation of the range of options can be derived by situating discussions in terms of the contrast between strong and distributed versions of collective remembering. Building on the notion of semiotic mediation and associated claims about a distributed version of collective remembering, Bakhtin's notion of dialogically organized text is invoked. The fact that the "language system" envisioned by Bakhtin includes the dialogical orientations of generalized collective dialogue as well as standard grammatical elements means that it introduces an essential element of dynamism into collective remembering.

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The study of collective memory has recently got a new lease on life as scholars from a range of disciplines bring their efforts to bear on it. It has been examined by sociologists (e.g., Schudson, 1992), anthropologists (e.g., Cole, 2001), psychologists (e.g., Pennebaker; Gonzalez, 2009; Schacter; Gutchess; Kensinger, 2009), historians (e.g., Blight, 2009; Winter, 2009), and others, but the dearth of interdisciplinary collaboration remains striking. Publications by psychologists that purport to cover the general topic of human memory often include no mention of Halbwachs or any other figure outside psychology or neuroscience who has studied collective forms of remembering. Conversely, it is not hard to find treatments of collective memory by historians or sociologists that show little knowledge of the psychology of individual memory. In some cases, to be sure, authors have made an effort to draw on ideas

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and findings from a range of fields, but the constraints of disciplinary discourse remain striking.

The possibilities for interdisciplinary collaboration on collective memory will remain just that — possibilities — until some powerful means for intellectual synthesis is brought to bear, and this is one reason for invoking the ideas of Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin. As I shall outline below, his intellectual vision provides a powerful framework within which interdisciplinary cross fertilization can occur. A second reason for bringing him into the picture concerns an issue that plagues many discussions of collective memory, namely the tendency to consider it to be some sort of vague presence that is “just out there” in the cultural ether. This is what I have called a “strong” version of collective memory, an approach that stands in opposition to a more realistic and theoretically grounded “distributed” version. As the father of modern psychological studies of memory Frederic Bartlett (1932) pointed out, strong versions commit the error of focusing on memory *of* the group rather than restricting themselves to memory *in* the group. These versions assume that some sort of collective mind or consciousness exists above and beyond the minds of the individuals in a group.

As I have argued elsewhere (Wertsch, 1998; 2002), several variants of the distributed version of collective memory exist, but they are similar in that: a) the representation of the past is viewed as being shared by members of a group, while b) no commitment is made to a collective mind of the sort envisioned in a strong version of collective memory.

The key to avoiding the pitfalls of a strong version of collective memory is *mediation*, especially *semiotic mediation*, notions whose genealogy can be traced to several origins. In what follows, I shall rely primarily on the ideas of Lev Semënovich Vygotsky (1981; 1987) and Bakhtin (1986). From this perspective, humans are basically sign-using animals, and the forms of action in which we engage, especially speaking and thinking, involve an irreducible combination of an active agent and a cultural tool (Wertsch, 2002). In the parlance of contemporary cognitive science, human action, including speaking, thinking, and remembering, is “distributed” between agent and cultural tool and hence cannot be attributed to either one in isolation.

This is a line of reasoning that has been developed by figures such as Malcolm Donald (1991), who argues that the sort of semiotic mediation I have in mind emerged as part of the last of three major transitions in human cognitive evolution. This transition involved “the emergence of visual symbolism and external memory as major factors in cognitive architecture” (p. 17). At this point in cognitive evolution the primary engine of change was not within the individual. Instead, it was the emergence and widespread use of “external symbolic storage” such as written texts, financial records, and so forth. At the same time, however, Donald emphasizes that the transition does not leave the psychological or neural processes in the individual unchanged: “the external symbolic system imposes more than an interface structure on the brain. It imposes search strategies, new storage strategies, new memory access routes, new options in both the control of and analysis of one’s own thinking” (p. 19).

A major reason for introducing the notion of semiotic mediation, then, is that it allows us to speak of collective remembering without becoming committed to a strong version account. In this connection it is worth noting that although Halbwachs (1992) did not give textual mediation the degree of importance it would have in an analysis grounded in mediated action, he clearly did recognize it as a legitimate part of the story. In a striking parallel with Donald, he argued that

[...] there is... no point in seeking where... [memories] are preserved in my brain or in some nook of my mind to which I alone have access: for they are recalled by me externally, and the groups of which I am a part at any given time give me the means to reconstruct them. (p. 38)

In describing the collective memory of musicians Halbwachs (1980) fleshed this out in the following terms:

With sufficient practice, musicians can recall the elementary commands [of written notations that guide their performance]. But most cannot memorize the complex commands encompassing very extensive sequences of sounds. Hence they need to have before them sheets of paper on which all the signs in proper succession are materially fixed. A major portion of their remembrances are conserved in this form — that is, outside themselves in the society of those who, like themselves, are interested exclusively in music. (p. 183)

In analyzing such phenomena Halbwachs focused primarily on the role of social groups in organizing memory and memory cues and said relatively little about the semiotic means employed. In what follows, I place these semiotic means front and center. It is precisely this step that encourages us to talk about collective remembering without presupposing a strong version of it. Instead of positing the vague mnemonic agency that is a thread running through the members of a group, the claim is that collective memory is collective *because the members of a “mnemonic community” (Zerubavel, 2003) share the same basic set of semiotic resources.*

Bakhtin’s account of text

This approach to collective remembering outlined begs the question of what forms of semiotic mediation might be involved. It is in this connection that I propose Bakhtin’s notion of “text.” In his article “The Problem of Text in Linguistics, Philology, and the Human Sciences: An Experiment in Philosophical Analysis,” Bakhtin (1986) outlined “two poles” of text.

Each text presupposes a generally understood (that is, conventional within a given collective) system of signs, a language (if only the language of art) . . . And so behind each text stands a language system. Everything in the text that is repeated and reproduced, everything repeatable and reproducible, everything that can be given outside a given text (the given) conforms to this language system. But at the same time each text (as an utterance) is individual, unique, and unrepeatable, and herein lies its entire significance (its plan, the purpose for which it was created). . . With respect to this aspect, everything repeatable and reproducible proves to be material, a means to an end. The second aspect (pole) inheres in the text itself, but is revealed only in a particular situation and in a chain of texts (in the speech communication of a given area). (p. 105)

Bakhtin is well known for his theory of the utterance, a concern that is reflected in the assertion that the “entire significance [of a text] (its plan, the purpose for which it was created)” can be traced to its “individual, unique, and unrepeatable” pole. In what follows, however, I shall focus largely on the other pole of text, that concerned with “repeatable and reproducible” elements provided by a “language system” that is “conventional within a given collective.”

The first inclination of those influenced by ideas from contemporary linguistics would be to understand what Bakhtin called a “language system” in terms of morphology,

syntax, and semantics. This, however, reflects a much more limited perspective than what Bakhtin had in mind. To be sure, his account of the repeatable and reproducible pole of text recognizes these elements, but it also includes a second level of organization in the “language system” and a corresponding second level of analysis. In this view the first level has to do with the structural analysis of decontextualized sentences and the second focuses on “social languages,” “speech genres,” and the “chain of texts” in which a text or utterance appears.

Formulating Bakhtin’s ideas in terms of a perspective more familiar to Western readers, Michael Holquist (1986) writes:

‘Communication’ as Bakhtin uses the term does indeed cover many of the aspects of Saussure’s *parole*, for it is concerned with what happens when real people in all the contingency of their myriad lives actually speak to each other. But Saussure conceived the individual language user to be an absolutely free agent with the ability to choose any words to implement a particular intention. Saussure concluded, not surprisingly that language as used by heterogeneous millions of such willful subjects was unstudyable, a chaotic jungle beyond the capacity of science to domesticate. (p. xvi)

Accepting this stark Saussurean opposition means that learning a language is a process of mastering a set of rules of *langue*. Furthermore, it assumes that the appropriate use of language forms involves some combination of individual choice and cultural context. In short, issues of language use and of how utterances are shaped by their positioning in a “chain of texts” fall outside the framework of what is properly considered language.

Holquist (1986) emphasizes that one of Bakhtin’s insights was that the semiotic world need not be divided up so starkly as the *langue-parole* distinction suggests. In this regard Bakhtin (1986) wrote

the single utterance, with all its individuality and creativity, can in no way be regarded as a *completely free combination* of forms of language, as is supposed, for example by Saussure (and by many other linguists after him), who juxtaposed the utterance (*la parole*), as a purely individual act, to the system of language as a phenomenon that is purely social and mandatory for the individuum. (p. 81)

Instead, as Holquist (1986) notes,

Bakhtin . . . begins by assuming that individual speakers do not have the kind of freedom *parole* assumes they have. The problem here is that the great Genevan linguist overlooks the fact that 'in addition to the forms of languages there are also *forms of combinations* of these forms'. (p. xvi)

What Bakhtin has to say about these forms of combinations of forms amounts to a call for a second level of analysis associated with the pole of text having to do with what is "repeated and reproduced." It expands what needs to be taken into account when talking about a "language system" or "a generally understood (that is, conventional within a given collective) system of signs." By taking these comments into account we are naturally led to ask a different set of questions about the semiotic mediation of collective remembering. In particular, we are led to recognize a form of dynamism in the forms of semiotic mediation involved, and hence in remembering itself.

The key to understanding the implications of Bakhtin's insights is his concept of "dialogism" and the related notions of "voice" and "multivoicedness." Throughout his writings Bakhtin emphasized that a defining property of utterances is that they exist only in dialogic contact with other utterances and hence are "filled with *dialogic overtones*" (1986, p. 102). It is this dialogic contact that provides the key to understanding the second level of phenomena involved in Bakhtin's second pole of text.

Key to understanding this issue is Bakhtin's (1981) assumption that the word never belongs solely to the speaker; instead, is it always "half someone else's", the result being the inherent multivoicedness of utterances.

[The word] becomes "one's own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's concrete contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own. (p. 293-294)

When dealing with utterances from the perspective of Bakhtin's first pole of text, contemporary sociolinguistic analyses have little trouble making sense of the phenomena involved. For example, his claims are consistent with analyses of how utterances can be co-constructed or how they can be abbreviated responses to a question (Speaker 1: "What time is it?" Speaker 2: "Two forty-five.").

What is significant, however, is that Bakhtin saw the claim about how words being half someone else's as applying to *language* — not text or utterance. And this raises the issue once again of a level of analysis that goes beyond the categories of *langue* and *parole*. Specifically, it involves a level of language phenomena that exist as collectively shared social facts about the organization of utterances, on the one hand, but are not reducible to standard accounts of grammatical categories, on the other.

In an attempt to get at what Bakhtin had in mind in this regard, it is useful to introduce a distinction between “local dialogue” and “generalized collective dialogue” (Wertsch, 2006). Local dialogue is what Bakhtin (1981) sometimes called the “primordial dialogism of discourse” (p. 275) and involves ways in which one speaker's concrete utterances come into contact with, or “interanimate,” the utterances of another. This form of dialogic interanimation involves “direct, face-to-face vocalized verbal communication between persons” (Voloshinov, 1973, p. 95) and is what usually comes to mind first when we encounter the term “dialogue.”

For Bakhtin (1986), however, the voices of multiple speakers come into contact at the level of generalized collective dialogue as well, and this leads to additional ways in which words can be “filled with *dialogic overtones*” (p. 102). The notion of generalized collective dialogue has to do with ways that utterances may reflect the voice of others, including entire groups, who are not physically present in the immediate speech situation.

From his writings it is clear that Bakhtin (1986) had something like this distinction in mind. He viewed dialogue as ranging from the face-to-face primordial dialogue of discourse noted above, which falls under the heading of localized dialogue, to ongoing, potentially society-wide interchanges, which fall under the heading of generalized collective dialogue. An addressee can be “an immediate participant-interlocutor in an everyday dialogue, a differentiated collective of specialists in some particular area of cultural communication, a more or less differentiated public, ethnic group, contemporaries, like-minded people, opponents and enemies, a subordinate, a superior, someone who is lower, higher, familiar, foreign, and so forth. And it can also be an indefinite, unconcretized *other*” (p. 95).

Dialogically organized textual resources and collective remembering

The approach to collective remembering outlined here gives central place to semiotic mediation. Specifically, it gives central place to dialogically organized textual resources as envisioned by Bakhtin. On the one hand, this means that memory cannot be equated, or reduced to semiotic mediation in isolation because the “individual, unique, and unrepeatable” pole of text ensures a role for an active agent in a concrete context. On the other hand, because the word always is “half someone else’s,” any account of the past reflects resources provided by a broader sociocultural setting, and as envisioned by Bakhtin these entail the tendency toward contestation, opposition, and other forms of dialogic encounter. Among the forms of dialogism suggested by his analysis, I shall focus on one in particular and its implications for collective remembering. This is what Bakhtin (1984) termed “hidden dialogicality.”

Imagine a dialogue of two persons in which the statements of the second speaker are omitted, but in such a way that the general sense is not at all violated. The second speaker is present invisibly, his words are not there, but deep traces left by these words have a determining influence on all the present and visible words of the first speaker. We sense that this is a conversation, although only one person is speaking, and it is a conversation of the most intense kind, for each present, uttered word responds and reacts with its every fiber to the invisible speaker, points to something outside itself, beyond its own limits, to the unspoken words of another person. (p.197)

As an illustration of the implications of hidden dialogicality for collective remembering, consider the analysis that Tulviste and Wertsch (1994) have provided of official and unofficial history in Soviet Estonia. They argue that the emergence of unofficial history among ethnic Estonians derived from precisely the kind of dynamic outlined by Bakhtin. In this case the two voices involved were the Soviet authorities and the historical narrative they produced in public institutions such as schools, on the one hand, and the responses produced by ethnic Estonians in nonpublic spheres such as families and peer groups, on the other.

These responses were grounded largely in personally meaningful observations of individuals, but they were shaped by the textual resources provided by the culture of resistance in which they lived. Specifically, the textual resources they shared were largely organized around an effort to rebut the official Soviet account. This tendency that was so central that unofficial collective remembering consisted of little other than counter narratives whose driving force was the need to refute official accounts of the past.

This case illustrates several of the points made above about collective remembering. First, it reveals a kind of dynamism, something that is all the more striking given that it existed in a setting where state authorities tried to stamp out resistance and contestation. Second, this dynamism is not something that can be reduced to individual processes. Instead, there was consistency among members of the Estonian mnemonic community in their account of unofficial history, something that points to the shared textual resources that helped constitute this community of resistance. And third, the dynamism involved in the hidden dialogue between official and unofficial history was made possible, indeed, was almost built into, the semiotic resources employed. The Bakhtinian “language system” that was involved included repeated and reproducible elements, but these went far beyond grammatical organization and introduced politically situated voices that invited resistance, rebuttal, and other forms of dialogic encounter.

A final feature of the forms of semiotic mediation involved in this episode of collective remembering is that they operated in a largely unconscious manner. In such instances, individuals often state that they are simply reporting “what really happened”. That is, they assume a form of semiotic mediation that recognizes the relationship between signs and a referential world of events and objects, but overlook the degree to which the textual resources employed are dialogically situated and shaped. The result is that we often fail to recognize the extent to which collective remembering is a fundamentally political process that is shaped by the dialogic textual resources employed. Hidden dialogism is indeed hidden and can lead to rigid and implacable confrontation when two parties both present what they honestly take to be accounts of “what really happened.”

Conclusion

In sum, Bakhtinian ideas about text and dialogism provide important tools for bringing order to the otherwise chaotic and fragmented field of collective memory studies. While the definition of collective remembering may remain unsettled at this point, some appreciation of the range of options can be derived by situating discussions in terms of the contrast between strong and distributed versions of collective remembering.

I have argued that Bakhtin's ideas provide a useful framework for integrating studies across disciplines and for avoiding some of the reductionist, strong versions of collective memory analysis that emerge all too easily, often in implicit form. Building on the notion of semiotic mediation and associated claims about a distributed version of collective remembering, Bakhtin's notion of dialogically organized text was introduced. The fact that the "language system" envisioned by Bakhtin includes the dialogical orientations of generalized collective dialogue as well as standard grammatical elements means that it introduces an essential element of dynamism into collective remembering. It is this element that helps account for the dynamic political dimension of collective remembering and how it might change over time.

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