

CULTURAL AMNESIA AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Viðar Hreinsson

The Reykjavik Academy, Reykjavík, Iceland

Abstract: A few of the main concepts of cultural memory are investigated in this paper, in order to extend the idea of cultural memory to include the diversity of past cultures and cultural products. It is claimed that understanding of diversity, in a dialogue with the past, enhances cultural understanding for the benefit of sustainable development.

Keywords: Cultural memory, cultural amnesia, cultural diversity, dialogism, sustainable development, reductionism, rationalism

“Cultural memory” is not genuine memory but rather a metaphor derived from the cognitive memory of the individual. It is a wide field of relations between effects of the past and present activities, ranging from the most creative work to objectified commodities as well as ideological manipulation, such as blatant nationalism and the heritage industry. All kinds of Western myths and “heroic” narratives of progress and growth, especially following the scientific and industrial revolutions, have accrued a form of cultural memory, celebrated as a variety *lieux memoire*, technical and political “victories” that reached an ultimacy in Auschwitz and Hiroshima. According to the Finnish philosopher Georg Henrik von Wright, the deadly alliance of science, technology and capital (the three cor-

nerstones of so-called progress) is deterministic and refuses the negative consequences of “scientifically” based human activities (von Wright, 2003: 62, 106, 232-239). Hannah Arendt’s words are even more valid today than they were in 1958, when they were written: “If it should turn out to be true that knowledge (in the modern sense of know-how) and thought have parted company for good, then we would indeed become the helpless slaves, not so much of our machines as of our know-how, thoughtless creatures at the mercy of every gadget which is technically possible, no matter how murderous it is” (Arendt, 1998: 3). The warnings of these great philosophers are worth keeping in mind, as well as the fact that cultural memory is, to a large extent, fabricated selections and interpretations based on reductionist, official ideologies that legitimize power relations in modern society. Consequently, the validity of cultural memory as an analytical concept thus depends on the critical approach. In the following, I will discuss a few main concepts related to cultural memory, then suggest a contextual extension of the field for the sake of diversity and sustainable development, and finally I will discuss three different cases in order to shed light on some aspects of cultural memory or amnesia.

With the exception of Astrid Erll's excellent, broad definition of cultural memory as "the interplay of present and past in socio-cultural contexts" (Erll, 2010: 2), most scholarly definitions seem to build on contrasting the organic and the institutional, focusing on what was lost when traditional cultures ceded to modern rationalism, when sites of memory replaced the organic flow of memory. Rational historicism took over from organic, inherent traditions and conventions, the "real memory" according to Pierre Nora (1989: 8).

Discussing contact with the past, Aleida Assmann states that "cultural memory creates a framework for communication across the abyss of time" and is selective, inevitably forgetting things (A. Assmann, 2010: 97). Furthermore, she divides cultural memory into canon and archives. These two aspects interact, the canon being located in religion, art and history that actively select aspects of the past while archives are passive storages of forgotten references (A. Assmann, 2010: 99-104). It must not be forgotten, however, that cultural memory is also about power, and control or authority over the past. Jón Karl Helgason has, in a new book, analyzed the creation of, and struggles about authority with regard to Icelandic national heroes and poets (Helgason 2013). A picture of the national poet Jónas Hallgrímsson (1807-1845) was recently printed on a 10.000 krónur bank note, as well as a quotation from one of his greatest love poems. In a TV interview, Helgason sarcastically pointed out that the text on the bank note could be read like this: "The heavens part / the high planets, / blade parts back and edge; / 10.000 KRÓNUR / not even eter-/nity can part / souls that are sealed in love." (Hallgrímsson, 1996-8). This underlines the ironic situation that the Central Bank of Iceland has, in its own and peculiar way, claimed authori-

ty over this national poet while at the same time declaring its love for the Icelandic currency, the króna.

Jan Assmann makes a distinction between the informal, non-institutional communicative memory that hardly reaches more than 80 years back in time and the cultural memory that is "based on fixed points in the past. Even in the cultural memory, the past is not preserved as such but is cast in symbols as they are represented in oral myths or in writings, performed in feasts, and as they are continually illuminating a changing present. In the context of cultural memory, the distinction between myth and history vanishes." (J. Assmann, 2010: 113) Cultural memory is highly formalised and institutionalised, serving as a basis for various identities, for individuals as well as communities, such as cultural groups and nations (J. Assmann, 2010: 113-115). Obviously, cultural canons, institutionalised memories and *lieux memoire* (Nora, 1989) must always to some extent reflect reductionist ideologies and power relations of society and culture, and the "truthfulness" of such selective memories is indeed questionable.

The approaches of the three pioneers of cultural memory, Pierre Nora and the Assmanns, are somewhat narrow and leave out various aspects of the past. It is hard to avoid reductionism and inevitable selection from abundant and ever increasing amounts of information. Aleida Assmann discusses "the growing rift between the amount of externalized information and internalizable knowledge", citing Georg Simmel's notion about "this uncontrollable process as "the tragedy of culture"" (A. Assmann, 2010: 104). There is a tension between reductionism and this overflow of information. Related to this tension is a demand for more precise conceptualisation, since cultural memory stud-

ies are practised differently in various disciplines and national academic cultures (Erl, 2010: 2). Erl does indeed acknowledge that this situation, the “wealth of existing concepts”, simply underlines the field as a “transdisciplinary phenomenon” (Erl, 2010: 3), which is fine. Overconceptualisation often results in sterile objectivisation that violates diversity but conceptual diversity is often fruitful and inspiring. Concepts are necessary but they are never the final statement about anything: they must be broken up and deconstructed for reconstruction.

Susan Crane warns against the universality of concepts like *lieux memoire* and emphasises individual experience, noting that “collective memory ultimately is located not in sites but in individuals. All narratives, all sites, all texts remain objects until they are “read” or referred to by individuals thinking historically” (Crane, 1997: 1381 cited after Magnússon, 2005: 190). This emphasis on individual experience in the historian’s work (Magnússon, 2005: 189-191) is, *mutatis mutandis*, necessary in order to recognize diversity, and de-objectify the concepts. Just as sites and texts have to be read in individual and different ways, there is an abundance of individual objects, narratives and documents that demand to be read and interpreted individually without being reduced and subsumed into too narrow concepts.

Recognition of diversity is crucial, not only with regard to cultures and individuals but also of the singularities hidden in archives, manuscript collections, suppressed undercurrents and subcultures, the details, the small patterns, the rhizomes that relativise grand narratives. Archives are an endless source of new findings and inspirations, forgotten, suppressed, neglected material that the cultural historian has to enter into

dialogue with in order to bring to life and turn into a cultural memory. This requires a constant, ongoing reevaluation of the extremely rich storage of documents from the past since our ideas about which documents are of value change -- how and why. Recognising this opens up activities that can relativise canons and power relations, resist subsumption under teleological technocracy that often is wrongly regarded as rationalistic. Ignoring this is deliberate suppression or thoughtless negligence and can be termed “cultural amnesia”.

Individual memory as such is always selective, “in a perpetual interaction between remembering and forgetting” (A. Assmann, 2010: 97). It is biased and constructed, with constantly reshaped narratives depending on a variety of social and cultural contexts. Much of what is regarded as cultural memory reflects simplified, forgetful narratives and images of the past, predicated on linear, teleological paths towards a superior present. The icons and the canons, the institutional, official, national identity-making cultural memories, not the least the *lieux memoire*, are images and stories reduced to single aspects of events and persons often fossilized in monuments, statues and overview histories. This is a more or less deliberate amnesia, suppressing everything that does not fit with official memories or ideologies of dominant powers. Cultural memory is not only an interplay between past and present but also between the rational and the irrational, the organic and the organized, where things are constantly schematized. But it is what escapes the schemes and the scheming that is always most interesting.

Much more varied images and memories of the past need to be evoked, more truthful reflections of the infinite diversities of all times. There is no danger of add-

ing to the conceptual confusion by combining cultural memory studies with various other fields of study. The Estonian semiotician Kalevi Kull has developed ten "Ecosemiotic Principles of Deep-Ecology" which are a rethinking of Arne Næss' thesis on deep ecology. The concise version of the principles is as follows below: it is obvious that they encourage resistance to the manipulative reductivism of modern culture and demand different uses of human knowledge for the cause of diversity:

1. The capacity for language leads to the capacity for violence.
2. With science, one can learn how to leave the world unchanged.
3. Zest for life characterises many animals.
4. The deepest choice humans face is about creating happiness.
5. There is no more fundamental value than diversity.
6. Modern culture has tended to eradicate diversity.
7. Living as mortals in semi-natural biotic communities allows the preservation of diversity.
8. Non-cumulative culture can sustainably provide for continuous zest for life.
9. Violence is unjustified.
10. Teaching this view is justified. (Kull, 2011: 71-72)

Diversity is a crucial value and the principles are equally applicable to cultural and biological diversity. The fifth and sixth principle in full read like this:

"5. Diversity or heterogeneity, is a fundamental value. It is more general than any measurable value. Diversity results from the capacity of living beings to make a difference, to recognise, to distinguish.

6. Although culture is a powerful system for generating diversity, it has, especially during Modernity,

extensively eradicated heterogeneity and increased uniformity. Fewer different forms are used in the action of building and reshaping than were found in what these activities replace. Additionally, the broad application of measurable values results in the proliferation of unification and standardisation with a corresponding reduction in diversity." (Kull, 2011: 71)

It is imperative to celebrate diversity and retrieve the „eradicated heterogeneity“, not the least in the interplay between past and present, in the memorised images of the past as well as in modern culture. Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope is useful here: a combined time-space that reveals aspects of the temporal and spatial categories appearing in texts, a balanced combination that opens up analysis of a variety of forces at work in texts as well as cultural systems (Bakhtin, 1981: 425-426). The various modes of the chronotope reveal different cultural conditions in order to achieve the greatest mimetic fullness in depicting human existence contextualising past lives and cultures, by utilizing the variety of sources, in fruitful dialogues with the past. An aspect related to chronotopic fullness is what Bakhtin calls "historical inversion", when the past is presented at the cost of the future, as an ideal or ideology, as is the case with many of the *lieux memoir*. The past as an ideological reference, an exemplary model, in fact empties the future of meaning by deliberately forgetting much that really matters. The totality of the past can be retrieved in a Bakhtinian dialogue that implies mutual illumination highlighting the diversity.

Cultural memory, as a way of canonising and visualising our fabricated identities, is important with regard to nature and environment, and environmental

memory studies have in fact been gaining ground over the last few years. The global environmental threat is inevitable and it is thus imperative to study various aspects of human conduct towards nature and environment and how it is represented as cultural or environmental memory. Ecocriticism, environmental humanities, cross-disciplinary anthropocene studies, philosophy, anthropology, folklore and literary studies, archaeology; all these fields contribute to retrieving a past that reveals and reevaluates relations between humans and nature, to a large extent rejecting the conventional Cartesian dualism between nature and culture that has resulted in modern reductionist rationalism. The reevaluation requires, among other things, digging in archives - both the conventional ones, and the archives of the ground, the middens that modern archaeologists dig into in order to unfold past ways of living.

Sustainable development is a recent concept, shaped as a response to the environmental threats of Modernity, moulded on the premises of current Western rationalism deriving from the Enlightenment and the scientific revolution. Although a necessary and progressive idea, sustainable development reflects and is conditioned by this rationalism, the same Cartesian fallacy that created the split between the traditional and the rational as analysed by Pierre Nora (1989: 8-14). Consequently, it lacks dimensions and presupposes the fatal domination of nature inherent in conventional rationalism: the subsumption of nature to humans, resulting in a serious loss of cultural balance. The modern mechanistic world view suffers from cultural amnesia, as it has suppressed and forgotten the sense of human belonging to nature.

Is it possible to acquire the necessary dimensionality by inscribing different myths and narratives into

cultural memory by means of investigative dialogues with the past, earlier cultures, earlier ways of thinking? It is necessary to reach behind the culturally conditioned, modern domination of nature, in order to examine whether there are conceptions or insights in traditional, pre-industrial societies that can advance and anchor cultural memory in support of sustainable development. Nature is still an object for our actions, and thus we oppress it, having forgotten the sense of human belonging to nature.

The "heroic" grand narrative of progress has created biased images of the past, and cultural and literary histories have canonized events and works on this teleological path towards the progressive present but at the same time, have contributed to the forgetting of a variety of sources, contexts, realities, diversities. Each time an overview history has been written, of a society or culture, it has to be deconstructed. Perhaps the real value of overview histories is to provide material for iconoclastic reevaluation, because as soon as such histories are written, they objectify and mark fossilized steps towards our glorified present. This requires a constant reconsideration of the extremely rich storage of documents from the past: which documents are of value, how and why?

In what follows, I will briefly look into three very different examples from different cultural expressions and conditions in order to illustrate further the issues raised above, and test whether it is possible to apply some key concepts of cultural memory as well as cultural studies to these cases in order to reevaluate activities of the past and relativise the canon of memories.

One of the most prominent characters in 17th-century Icelandic society was a self-educated farmer, writer, poet, historian and sorcerer named Jón

Guðmundsson, nicknamed „lærði“ or „the Learned“ (1574-1658). He actively upheld the literary traditions that had been evolving in Iceland since the Middle Ages and he was a key figure in developing further the idea of the Icelandic highlands as a mythological or folkloristic space, in a flux between oral and literary culture. Jón is typically regarded as a peculiar fellow, an extremely superstitious eccentric, curious about nature, but also an upright rebel who criticized the authorities in his writings. In his early life, he was a fisherman and a farmer and in 1611 and 1612 he drove down ghosts with, purportedly, the most powerful invocations ever composed in Iceland. After writing a critical account of the brutal slaying of 30 shipwrecked Basque whalers in the fall of 1615 – in defiance of the county magistrate, a rich landowner who led the killings – he was persecuted for a few years but found shelter in another part of the country. In 1627, he was accused of running a school in sorcery and in 1631 he was exiled for having written a booklet describing occult practices. He fled to an island off the northeast coast of Iceland and managed to travel to Copenhagen in 1636. There, he was interrogated by the consistory of the University of Copenhagen, who recommended that his sentence be reconsidered. Nevertheless, back in Iceland, his exile was confirmed in the spring of 1637. He was allowed to live out the rest of his life in eastern Iceland, where he wrote most of his surviving works. In that period he collected and commented on, in his own way, certain ancient lore for his most prominent benefactor, Bishop Brynjólfur Sveinsson, who was the most learned man in the country. In 1644, Jón wrote the first description of Icelandic nature in the vernacular. Although there is a considerable amount of scholarly research into his writings and

fair editions of several of his works, his output has hardly ever been properly analyzed in a broader cultural context.

If a closer look is taken at the bulk of Jón's literary output (some of which is fairly personal, such as his great autobiographical poem “Fjölmóður” (Purple sandpiper), in order to analyse it in detail alongside a variety of other contemporary sources, it is possible to establish a broad and varied account, not only of Jón's life, but also of mental life in the 17th century, an auto-didactic scholar's version of contemporary cosmology and theology, remarkable points of view on the relationship between the church and the worldly powers, contemporary conceptions of nature and its virtues, views of the Icelandic highlands as a mythological space inhabited by outlaws and supernatural beings, the development of the literary and manuscript culture, utilization of natural resources, experiences of changing climate resulting in the disappearance of sea-monsters in 1602, and much more. Such an account presents a story quite distinctive to the linear history of ideas and mentality by evoking cultural memories of a distant past, and contrasting conventional, fossilized monuments and icons.

By analysing Jón the Learned's works on the premises of modern objectivization, i.e. reading them in a modern frame of mind, important qualities of his works are neglected. He is much more than the eccentric, rebellious and superstitious scholar and sorcerer he is remembered as. By digging up various sources from manuscript archives, they can be activated, relieved from the passivity of Aleida Assmann's archives. By conducting an interrogative dialogue with Jón the Learned's life, works and age, a communicative memory can be established, acknowledging diversity

in the past. This is an illuminating dialogue that can affect and even change our own conception of the past as well as the present. It is possible to extract from this work inherent ideas of sustainability that probably can shed light on and relativise our modern conceptions of nature and sustainability. Not least, Jón's conception of nature as a qualitative, active power, comes to the fore instead of the modern objectivization of nature, which has suppressed and thus more or less deliberately forgotten the virtues of natural phenomena.

The second example is closer in time. It is a grand narrative of progress, stench and overfishing. An Icelandic pastor, born in 1861, moved to Siglufjörður in 1888, a tiny village around a trading post that had been established in 1818, and a few farms, with 311 souls in total living in the entire parish at that time. The village consisted of a merchant store, carpenter, blacksmith, a district doctor, a few crofters and sheds to process shark liver oil. The main source of income was fishing, cod and especially shark. The products were brought to the merchant and exchanged for necessary goods instead. Money was hardly ever seen.

The pastor is regarded as the father of the town Siglufjörður, as he was elected to the local board in 1904 and became leader in every step of progress in the following two decades: building a schoolhouse, establishing a water supply, telephone, electricity, town plan, and more. In July 1903, the year before the pastor was elected to the local board, a great adventure had begun. As in a novel, a large and mysterious ship appeared on the horizon in the early summer. It turned out to be Norwegian, preparing to catch herring. It brought carpenters to make piers and platforms, then caught huge amounts of herring with new types of nets and people saw real money for the first time in their lives, as the

first captain who arrived refused to hire people through the trading company and wanted to pay in cash instead. Siglufjörður turned into a Klondike, the herring was called the silver of the ocean. The village boomed, Norwegians established a prosperous herring industry, and domestic entrepreneurs followed. The number of permanent inhabitants grew from 300 to nearly 4000 in 20 years and in the summer, the population went up to 10.000 when fishermen and working-girls arrived. It was a rough life: there was fighting, drinking and sex. The authorities were sensitive about those kinds of stories, they preferred to simply praise progress and prosperity.

There were, however, also flip sides to the coins that poured in. The village was literally drowning in its own shit. When the first local paper began publication in the autumn of 1916, advertising luxury goods in a number of stores, democracy was put on trial and people began to question the authorities. The editor began to write about cleanliness and described a rather unpleasant vision, garbage heaps between the houses and often close to the streets, mixed with excrement. Waste-water was poured out beside houses along with thrown-out food leftovers and tin cans. In the spring, when the ground warmed up, a rotten stench spread all over the village and the air became poisonous. This went on for years and was hardly healthy for the inhabitants. The most prominent spokesmen of progress, such as the pastor, never mentioned these less savoury consequences of the herring boom.

The silver of the ocean turned into a disgustingly rotten stench from the herring to such an extent that people could hardly breath. Every spring, stinking mud ran from where the heaps of rotten herring had been the year before and into the street. The situation bare-

ly improved over the following decades. Modernity had certainly arrived but the back-side of the coin was constantly suppressed.

The pastor died in 1938 and I will not follow this story further, other than mentioning the fact that the herring disappeared in the 1960s, because of overfishing. Now the town has around 1500 inhabitants and it is pretty neat with a wonderful herring museum that has won international prizes -- but there is not much mention of the rotten smell behind the romanticism of the silver of the ocean. The stench is not a part of the heroic narrative of progress.

Why did this society, one that developed so rapidly from subsistence level to primitive industrialization, lose every aspect of the self-sustainability inherent in the pre-modern ways of living? It is understandable that poor people struggling with harsh nature and famines welcomed progress and abandoned old habits and ways of life but as a consequence of increased income and consumption, waste and misuse of resources went hand in hand with the modernization process, which turned into a vicious circle of ever increasing material prosperity and consumption.

Siglufjörður can be regarded as a miniature image of Iceland: extremely fast modernization, growth of undiluted capitalism, and corruption. The heaps of rotten herring symbolize the modern accumulation of capital. There is disruption between the material, economical, technical development on the one side and the social and cultural development on the other. This is also an exaggerated metaphor of western and later global industrialization, urbanization and capitalism, pollution, overconsumption, overuse of resources, unsus-

tainable development. The material development was indeed a response to poor conditions, and there is nothing wrong with improving conditions and quality of life. But the Western World is now far beyond normal sustenance, and near to reaching a dangerous tipping point having lost the inherent sustainability of the past. Material progress was above all based on a vision of a brave new world, and a selective, forgetful memory of the past, guided by the poisonous alliance of business and politics.

As a *lieux memoire*, Siglufjörður is the place of the herring adventure, the colourful and rough life, of prosperity, wealth, progress, but the picture changes if it is diversified: by evoking what is suppressed and forgotten, the rotten smell, violence, exploitation of human and natural resources, we get a different picture. Diverse sources, such as old newspapers and archives, are passive and sleeping but can be activated for the benefit of cultural history, in order to develop a deeper understanding of what really happened and to thus expand the cultural memory and contribute to the concept of cultural sustainability.

The last example is very different, the poetry of the young Estonian poet Kristiina Ehin. In her poems, she evokes memories of the past with a peculiar fullness, material life, folklore and song, old wisdom by interweaving past and present in an unexpected and sharply critical manner. The musical qualities of her poetry resemble old folk-traditions, without romanticizing. Her poetic outlook is holistic, universal time and space, deep memory, evoking a strong feeling of temporality, contrary to the cultural amnesia of our times.

In the brilliant poem “Under the road” (in English translation) she describes in two stanzas what is underneath the road one drives along. The first stanza goes like this:

Under the road
there is a spring
deep within Earth’s crust
the groundwater babbles
Under the road
there is a long-ago sledge path
horse-drawn wagon-wheel ruts
ox-drawn cart-wheel furrows
Under the road
there is a slash-and-burn field
an ancient village
the bed of St John’s bonfire
A sacrificial stone
rolled in to fill the road
Under the road there is a church road
the sound of bridal procession bagpipes
is not very deep at all
Do you hear it?
Under the road there is a wolf’s skeleton
in whose teeth
flashes
a piece of yarn goosegrass red
from the striped skirt of a neighbouring village
Under the road
time sleeps (Ehin, 2011: 18)

The babbling groundwater spring, deep in the Earth, evokes a sense of water as the source of life, and the poet creates images of past life under the modern road: the sledge-path of old times where wagons and carts were drawn, the fields and a village. The sacrificial

stone and the church road with bridal processions give the poem a religious dimension. The wolf’s skeleton brings the world of animals into the picture. The last two lines of this long stanza underline that our culture has been sleeping: „Under the road / time sleeps“. The past is buried under the roads we construct, wherever they are leading. Modern culture’s unsustainable interplay with nature is ironically depicted by immense evocative strength.

The second stanza completes the powerful metaphor of time, where the forgotten aspects have created a chronotopic fullness:

On the road a radio plays to pass the time
Airy clouds drift
over moments
fate
The sun blinds
At night it is pitch-dark and cold

Headlights reach out into the future (Ehin, 2011: 18)

By looking under the surface of the road, along which we drive in an uncertain direction, the earth, time and lives of the past, presented as suppressed memories of past, are activated and given a voice in a dialogue. Ehin’s poem and the two other examples discussed above highlight the necessity of enriching and diversifying the past, the cultural memory, in order to better understand the cultural aspects of sustainability. Awareness of past diversity and what got lost due to amnesic, modern reductionism, enhances understanding of what is at risk to get lost in the present, it thus enhances cultural sustainability.

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