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A Synopsis of the book: Armenia Yesterday and Today: “The ashes of the victims beat in our hearts”. On a Theory of Armenian Memorial Culture

Ключевые слова: Armenia, memorial culture, historical memory, genocide studies

The present text as is summary of the book «Armenien gestern und heute – “Die Aschen der Opfer schlagen in unseren Herzen”. Zu einer Theorie der armenischen Memorialkultur (Armenia Yesterday and Today: “The ashes of the victims beat in our hearts”. On a Theory of Armenian Memorial Culture), Leipzig, Eudora-Verlag, 2022. The author describes his theoretical approach and conclusions.

Introduction

This document is a presentation of the research activity which culminated in my publication of a nearly 500-page work on the topic of Armenia. Here, as in the introduction to my book, I describe my approach to my research topic, how I arrived at my choice of topic, and what new and unexpected discoveries I made.

The collapse of the USSR coincided with the end of my studies in Ethnology. At the same time, the catastrophic 1988 Armenian earthquake served as a sudden reminder for many people in the Armenian diaspora, including myself, to consider their own ancestry and heritage. Using Monte Melkonyan’s categorization (1993), I would call myself a «Non-Armenian of Armenian descent». My mother’s father was an Armenian from Tbilisi. During World War I, he was captured as a prisoner of war fighting on the side of Tsarist Russia, which brought him to Germany in

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1916. The interest of my research was not to investigate a certain family path. In the aftermath of the earthquake, I joined a German organization doing relief work, and through this I gained my first access to the country of Armenia. This, together with the earthquake and the downfall of the USSR, is a subjective part of my motivation to choose Armenia as a scientific field of study, but it was not part of the field itself.

On Methodology

Because the Soviet Union's disintegration had been so recent, I visited Armenia for the first time two months before its declaration of independence, which made practically everything seem new and unexpected. In my book, this aspect is discussed specifically in the introductory chapter, where I explain my observations in the first period of energetic shortages, respectively the reaction of the population to the blockade by Turkey and Azerbaijan (Ch. 1).

Since the research process which started during that time it affects the structure and content of the work. The book has a linear structure that also characterizes other scientific works. However, due to the temporal scope of my research, the well-known chapter called «State of Research» regarding my thesis of «Armenian Memory Culture» is missing, for example. More on this below.

Rather, the linear character of the work must be supplemented by way of reading it as a «box of notes» («Zettelkasten» in the parlance of Niklas Luhmann, the German sociologist): «A Zettelkasten is a personal tool for thinking and writing. It has hypertextual features to make a web of thought possible. The difference to other systems is that you create a web of thoughts instead of notes of arbitrary size and form, and emphasize connection, not a collection»¹.

This juxtaposition makes it possible to better display the time-space complex of Armenian culture, as is the case, for example, in the phenomenon of the Armenian cross stone. Moreover, it methodically captures the potential for dispersion given the fact of diaspora: «the medium is not simply the message; rather, the trace of the medium is preserved on the message»². In Walter Benjamin's view, a trace always points away from itself, always points beyond itself, and is thereby transcendent. Similarly, the trace functions as a memory of the past, and becomes a representative of it in the present.

Because of this, the two readings, which can never be separated, will be outlined below.

Content by Linear Reading

In addition to an analysis of the «Velvet Revolution» (2018), the introductory chapter presents the situation at the beginning of my research and traces resulting boundaries between the researcher and the foreigner.

Chapter 2 introduces Armenian history in terms of the relationship between

¹ Introduction to the Zettelkasten Method. <https://zettelkasten.de/introduction/>

² Krämer, S. (1998): Was haben Medien, der Computer und die Realität miteinander zu tun? In: Medien-Computer-Realität. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998. S. 9–26.



internal and external perspectives. The following phenomenon occurs in the cultural contacts of Armenians with Greeks, Parthians, Mongols, Ottomans: the foreign surrounds the self as if within concentric circles and complements it as its opposite. On the other hand, however, the foreign often appears in the center of the smallest circle, and thus in the innermost part of the self. Elements taken over from the outside world do not replace one's own cultural elements, but complement them. The following patterns of action emerge: imitation/assimilation, masking, supplementation, and incorporation. In addition, relationships can be established that are constitutive for the relationship between displayed and hidden culture. This phenomenon is crystallized and unpacked in the history chapter and later.

A case study in the form of a family history (2.1) describes the consequences of the geopolitical situation in Armenia in general and the Karabakh conflict in particular in a shortened form, condensed to three generations. The subsequent chapters of the history section analyze internal and external relations in the conflicts with changing foreign rule, through which the country's own culture develops. This is particularly evident in the introduction of Armenian Christianity and the Armenian script, as well as with the relationship to the rule of the Ottoman Empire, with particular emphasis on the millet system and the Amira class.

The third chapter deals with the memory theorists Maurice Halbwachs, Jan and Aleida Assmann, and Pierre Nora.

Halbwachs gives four frames mainly responsible for the constitution of memory: Space, Time, Experience, Language, which he places in a collective relationship in which corresponding memories always enter into each respective newly appearing situation. A look into space is thus a look into memory.

The relationship between the individual and the collective exists as doubly coded in Halbwachs. On the one hand, the individual is subject to the conditions given by the collective. On the other hand, each collective feeds itself through the individuals constituting it. From this follows an incongruence of collective and individuals, since each individual belongs to numerous groups at the same time in the course of his or her life. This also means that each group always has more than one group or collective memory, since the existence of its members never ends with the boundary of the collective as a whole.

In studying Halbwachs' work, I was most struck by the merit of his concept of «memory image» over Assmann's «memory figure». Halbwachs' memory-image is composed of the components of the interaction of the space-time dimensions and the given conditions of a public historical image. It is within this framework that the memory of individual thought is formed. In contrast to Halbwachs' attribution of «memory image», Assmann understands «memory figures» as «culturally formed, socially binding memory images» (Assmann).

In my opinion, Assmann wishes to establish an externalization of memory outside the individual in his approach to Halbwachs' concept. The difference must be emphasized: Halbwachs speaks of individual memory in social entanglement, whereas in Assmann's work, the memory figure congeals into an externalized entity that is to be juxtaposed with the individual in a socially binding way.



Assmann's characterization of Halbwachs' theory of memory as «presentism» assumes the absolute power of the present over the past, and thus that pure reconstructivity prevails. Assmann, however, misses Halbwachs' intention, which consists in taking a variable look at the social preconditions, their conditions for the single individual. Halbwachs emphasizes the present, since only in it is the past (re)produced. In order to be able to pass on information to the recipients at all, suitable media are required for this purpose, which brings us to a further distinction between the theories of Assmann and Halbwachs. The fixed points introduced by Assmann as a characteristic of cultural memory symbolize fateful events of the past and generate a memory discourse that is defined by culturally coagulated media such as texts, rites and monuments and is supposed to bear fruit by means of institutionalized communication. Although fixed points can establish coherence, the normatively set social cohesion that is to be linked with them ignores the fact that the cohesion itself is at stake with its transfer to media and their use.

A detachment of cultural memory from living carriers produces the consequence that not only is the media emerging from it identified with it, but also an identity is established between medium and message. This identification, however, leads to the aporia (at best: paradox) that the messages (of memory) are or should be binding for its living (individual) bearers, in that the bearers are imagined as detached, released and juxtaposed with respect to memory on the one hand — and on the other hand they must (should) be directly subjected to it, so that there can be a cultural memory at all. The past is reconstructed in the present, but inevitably there are changes to which memory has to respond appropriately. But this again is a conceptual part of memory, as Halbwachs described it. In this sense, however, it is not presentism, as the critics claim. In the present, the past is reconstructively reproduced.

With Assmann's approach, one can describe centralized systems; however, as can be seen in the chapter on the analysis of monuments, this is based on an abbreviated analysis: a central power endowed with corresponding powers determines the character of the content of the medium of memory in order to have a meaningful effect on the individual. However, the opposite is the case!

The fourth chapter is devoted to the Genocide Memorial in Yerevan, its history, structural components, and the ritual that is associated with it on April 24 each year. The bitter dispute over the Armenian Genocide of 1915 and its recognition ostensibly concerns the relationship between Turkey and the Republic of Armenia, but in fact goes back further and involves European history. This is evident from the very history of the term «genocide», which is closely associated with Rafael Lemkin, who invented it in 1944.

What must be taken into consideration with the word «genocide» in particular is its instrumentalization. This is traced by sketching the path of development of this term as well as important parts of the discourse on it. It will be shown how Lemkin moved from an ideal-typical work on the phenomenon of what was later called «genocide» through the definition to the 1948 convention. The convention is not so much the realization of an ideal-typical construction of history as it is a historical political issue. The jurist Kelsen made this point about the term itself: «(T)he new concept of 'genocide' [is] of political rather than legal significance». To put it bluntly, this means that the question of whether the Armenian genocide was a genocide is not a historical question, but a legal one, and even more so a political



one — «genocide» as a category to be grasped legally, which refers to the 1948 Convention, is a political result. The analysis of monument and ritual shows the inversion of the political cult of the dead under Soviet conditions into an indigenous ancestor cult, which, however, only becomes such under the same conditions. By symbolically relating the victim in the funerary circle through its position to the obelisk and degrading it to the representation of an apparent past, it also establishes its own cosmology, which appears as diametrically opposed to the system, since it connects space and time on a level that can be thought of horizontally and incorporates and transcends the Soviet ideology, which is temporally arguably limited in relation to its own history.

Content by «Zettelkasten» — Reading

The title of the book was written at the end of the work and is also explained in the last chapter, thus drawing the content of the book into itself. The opening chapter on the so-called «Velvet Revolution 2018» was written after the conclusion of the work and, read as a hypertext, refers both to what is to come in the book and deductively draws together the entirety of the preceding research process.

Another example illustrating this fabric emerging through time and space is provided by the analysis of two Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) events (Moscow 2009, Baku 2012), which, linearly speaking, are in two different chapters (Moscow –Ch. 3–3.3.4; Baku in Ch. 4–4.5.7).

The memory theorists Halbwachs, Assmann, and Nora discussed in the third chapter are also discussed separately on the basis of case studies that I examined during the research period (Lenin's statue in Yerevan, Komitas, Khatchaturyan and the ESC 2009). Also, central to this chapter is a concern with the relationship between collective memory and its medium of expression. Thus, the ESC 2009 event addresses the complex of memory (theory) and medium. However, read as hypertext, it also refers to the ESC 2012 in chapter four.

If, for example, the third chapter deals with the impact of interpretive sovereignty, the ESC 2012 in Baku can be read as a follow-up example. The temporal-spatial context of the demolition of the Lenin monument in Yerevan (3.3.1) is on a par with that of the ESC 2012 against the background of the conditions of interpretive sovereignty. Both ESC events can be read in the context of art and politics as a medium. In linear terms, in turn, the ESC 2012 is a subchapter of the fourth chapter, which deals with the analysis of the genocide memorial in Yerevan. It is a subchapter of subchapter 4.5 (On the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict) and can also be read as a case study of what Levon Abrahamyan calls the omnivore model (4.5.3). The term «omnivore» refers to the policy and culture of the Azerbaijani regime as such, which is aimed at «swallowing», that is, destroying, the entirety of Armenian culture.

The conclusions in the fifth chapter summarize important aspects on the basis of the key points: «heritage», «norm», and «genocide».



Book Review

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Аннотация

Данный текст является кратким изложением содержания монографии Юргена Гисперта «Армения вчера и сегодня: “Пепел жертв стучится в наши сердца». К теории армянской мемориальной культуры” (на немецком языке). Автор излагает свой теоретический подход и выводы.

Ключевые слова: Армения, мемориальная культура, историческая память, изучение геноцида

