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Memory Unbound: The Holocaust and the Formation of Cosmopolitan Memory, by Daniel Levy & Natan Sznaider

Main Idea. Sociologists Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider use the term cosmopolitan memory to refer to collective memory on a global(ized) scale. This term is needed because often collective memory is analyzed only concerning a nation or an ethnos. The authors criticize this practice as “methodological nationalism” as it ignores the parallels in the formation of national collective memory and globalized collective memory. National memory (and the imagined community of a nation) was invented during the First Modernity (transition from agricultural to industrial society and after, [from Wikipedia](#)) and provided representations that could give people a sense of belonging or identity. In this process, local cultures were changed and transformed by the national culture. They argue now in the Second Modernity (transformation of industrial society into an information society) cosmopolitan memory is the result of the same processes where national memories are being transformed by transnational ones. What sets the transitions in the First and Second Modernity apart is that in the former, heroic myths were used to set oneself apart from others and narratives were about “acting perpetrators”. In the latter, self-critical awareness of the national past is commonplace and injustices committed by a nation are the focus. They call this the narrative of the “non-acting” victim—the history and memories of the “Other” are being recognized. This also leads to a loss of distinction between the history of the perpetrator and that of the victim. As a result, a shared past remains. The main example the authors give for this development is the Holocaust. Over time, (and because most people who experienced it are now dead) it became less about remembering the atrocities and more about each group dealing with their legacy and recognizing each other’s coping process.

Terms. • transnational memory • cosmopolitan memory • watershed in European history • globalization
• imagined community • traditional and exemplary narratives • the “Other” • First and Second Modernity

Select Quotes.

- “[S]hared memories of the Holocaust [...] provide the foundations for a new cosmopolitan memory, a memory transcending ethnic and national boundaries.” (p. 465; pdf 479)
- “To say that nations are the only possible containers of true history is a breathtakingly unhistorical assertion.” (p. 466; pdf 480)
- “Rather than privileging one form of memory over the other, it seems more fruitful to identify the different historical and sociological conditions of memory cultures.” (p. 466; pdf 480)
- “The concept of “cosmopolitan memory” corresponds to the globalized horizon of experiences in Second Modernity.” (p. 467; pdf 481)

Questions.

1. Regarding your sense of belonging, do you feel like you belong exclusively to your nation or something more transnational?
2. Thinking about your country, do you think people have a self-critical awareness of its past or are heroic narratives the norm?
3. In your culture (or one you are familiar with), which group is the “Other” (or victim) that is or should be recognized?