

PLACES, LANDSCAPES AND POLICIES OF MEMORY: A GEOGRAPHIC LECTURE

Jacobo García Álvarez

Departamento de Humanidades: Historia, Geografía y Arte. Universidad Carlos III de Madrid

In the final years of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, we have seen an unprecedented growth of studies and debates dedicated to the question of memory. Since the 1980's, but especially from the 1990's onward, the concept of memory, its multiple dimensions and meanings, uses and abuses, management, social and institutional projection has generated a significant bibliography not only in the most diverse fields of the academic world, but also in media, penetrating the political sphere and mainstream society. Thus, we are presented with a practically global phenomenon in its extension, even though particularly intense in western societies. The manifestations of the phenomenon in the public sphere are ubiquitous: museums of all sorts are built; the old quarters of cities are renovated and rehabilitated; entire localities and landscapes become *museumized*; the concept of heritage gets renewed and expanded to be able to engulf the most diverse material and immaterial environments; means are destined and resources are applied to the policies regarding heritage; associations for the conservation of certain events; period, person or group; laws are ratified and public policies related to memory are applied, «medieval» street fairs take place and theme parks that recreate elements of the past as a form of entertainment are becoming common, at the same time that novels, television series and cinematographic productions become a great success.

The reasons that explain this universal «fever» related to memory, considered by some a little obsessive, are many and not always conclusive. In many countries, the intensity of the debates and practices respond clearly to more or less concrete political objectives. But independent of these factors, some historians and students of culture, like Andeas Huyssen, Hermann Lübbe, Tzvetan Todorov or Edward Said, state that the phenomenon, which is recognizable on a global scale, responds to deeper structural causes than strictly political ones. Between them lies the desire and necessity to protect personal and collective identity, against the global transformations taking place at present, which suffocate, transform and destroy some of the traditional bases of that identity. From this point of view, the contemporary obsession regarding memory has to do, in great part, with a profound change of our sense of time and space, motivated and caused by factors such as technological change, the

information and mass media revolution, the new trends in consumption, work and mobility on a global scale.

The reflections, debates and political developments that have taken place in the recent decades in relation to the concept of memory have illustrated the importance of the relations between memory and the geographic space. In academic and political vocabulary, even in marketing and tourism, significant expressions have surged in this sense: places of memory, spaces of memory, memorial landscapes, itineraries and routes of memory, etc. Even though those expressions have surged, in great part outside the field of geography, the geographers interested in this theme have progressively incorporated this vocabulary and contributed to the analysis of the geographic dimensions of memory. Though small in comparison to other academic fields, the importance of the geographic contributions to the studies related to memory have risen considerably in the last ten years, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world. Both in the work carried out in geography and the work carried out by other disciplines, with respect to the issues related to spatial character, the greater part of the studies about spatial dimensions of memory have focused on exploring the relations between collective memory, places, landscapes and national identities. This point of view or outlook has been, in any case, by chance, given the strong territorial ingredients of nationalisms and the fact that, since the contemporary period, governments and decision makers (in alliance or against religious institutions) have capitalized on the production of an «institutionalized memory» at the service of the construction of respective national identities. The proper concept of place of memory, one of the key notions, if not the principle, in recent studies about collective memory, get launched, as we well know, by an ambitious historiographic project, *Lex Lieux de Mémoire*, dedicated to exploring symbols and central references of French national identity and published under the direction of Pierre Nora, between the years of 1984 and 1992.

But what position did geography and geographers occupy in this work? The issue admits a double response. On one hand, some data invites us to think that geographic dimensions of the work directed by Nora are reduced. In the first place, the number of geographers that contributed to *Les Lieux de Mémoire* was very limited. Furthermore, the explicit and introductory position traditionally assigned to geographic factors in other works about the history of France from the nineteenth century, from an environmentalist point of view, completely disappear in Nora's work. The proper notion of the place of memory exceeds the geographic or topographic idea of place, to embrace more heterogeneous realities, in many cases having little to do with space. According to Nora, the places of memory can be, symbolic (flags, anthems, slogans, etc.) or functional (associations, dictionaries, laws, school manuals) or material (commemorative monuments, museums, archives, historical buildings, landscapes), though all places of memory include ingredients that belong to the three types. But, on the other hand, Nora's work not only recognizes the role of the geographic discipline, and concretely the work carried out by the French geographic school in the construction of national consciousness and the idea of nation, but also, in accordance with the pioneer approaches of Maurcie Halbwachs, pays special interest to the ways by which memory constitutes itself spatially in material and immaterial places. This way, and apart from dedicating specific chapters to works or significant representations of territory and landscape of France, *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, focuses on the analysis of monuments and public stature; emblematic places (*haut lieux*) from a historical, religious or artistic

standpoint; territorial/administrative frontiers and divisions, relevant regional divisions in the popular imagination, urban toponymy and finally, landscapes and representations of the strong connection between society and environment, particularly in the rural world. Even though the majority of the specialists that study these issues and aspects are historians, the geographic interest results essential, as has been recognized by the many geographers that have taken part in the study of spatial dimension of memory.

In geography, the reception of Nora's work has been diverse depending on the various contexts and traditions. To cite only three of the various contexts, the reception has been very limited in Spanish geography, and not without paradox in French geography; some have preferred the concept of *haut lieu* over place of memory. On the contrary, the work directed by Nora has been a reference that has been greatly used in Anglo-Saxon geography, where the issues about the relationship between place, memory and identity have given place to an abundant bibliography the last fifteen years. Known as place of memory, site of memory, realm of memory, the concept has completely taken root in the Anglophone world until the point where it has configured one of the central axes of a proper line of investigation, to which Kenneth Foote and Maoz Azaryahu, in a state of the matter recently published, name «geography of memory» and in which contributions from diverse geographic branches converge.

«The geography of memory —both authors have stated— locates history and its representations in space and landscape. It answers the question, 'where is memory', in terms of places and sites that cast a certain vision of history into a mold of commemorative permanence.» The geography of memory focuses, in great part, on the study of material places where the relation between place and memory is more evident (those like landscapes, monuments, memorials and museums), but also takes into account expressions or ceremonies of memory (like rituals, festivals, civic ceremonies, parades, open air spectacles, pilgrimages, etc.). Against approximations of other disciplines interested in the study of collective memory, it focuses on the spatial, locational and material patterns and dynamics of these commemorative practices,» essential for the constitution of individual and collective identities.

Without undermining the importance of other aspects and spatial contexts with regard to this theme, the third and fourth parts of this article study some relevant case studies focused in Spain and representative of the principle lines of investigation developed over relations between landscape, historical memory and national identity. A sizable part of the geographic studies about the spatial dimension of memory have focused, precisely on exploring what Donald Meinig, during the 1970's would call, in reference to an earlier expression of Jean Gottman, «symbolic landscapes» that form part of the iconography of nationality, those landscapes (the national landscapes) that in the collective imagination represent and identify the national values, the essence of a nation. More extensively, the investigations related to that line have focused on exploring patriotic topographies, which form part of those landscapes, in which battle scenarios, war episodes, etc are considered key elements in that national history; places of birth of heroes, saints or historical figures; sanctuaries and religious centers of importance; territories which had a key role in foundation of the respective states; original historic territories today lost or in the hands of other nations, natural spaces with exceptional value, or simply families or types of landscapes, not necessarily exceptional, that the political

and intellectual elites have interpreted like the birthplace and manifestation of the specific values of a culture.

Nationalisms have shaped or manipulated a great plethora of national landscapes, which in some cases have been institutionalized by political figures and legal specifications (under the shape of natural parks, protected historical complex, etc.) and in others have not materialized into institutional figures, but in images of great social projection.

In a similar line, geographers have investigated in the past years on the transformation of landscape with regard to nationalistic criteria, the erection of emblems, monuments and rituals for nationalistic purpose; the materialization of a nationalistic iconography in the landscape. In this case, we are not against the attribution of nationalistic values to a previous landscape, but faced with the colonization of a pre-existing landscape or the creation of a new landscape with elements with an expressly nationalistic purpose, in accordance with a determined policy of memory. As venues and principle symbols of power, the cities have been, without a doubt, the most prolific scenarios for these types of policies of memory, where the erection of statues and commemorative monuments takes place; the preference for determined styles of architecture, the use of symbolic ornamentation with institutional character, the way of naming streets, plazas and public spaces in general; the design of determined spaces of memory and official celebrations, and at the same time, creating or contributing to reinforce a forgotten city, ignored, «non-places of memory.» The recent geographical studies have shown that both the spatial dimensions of public memory are dynamic and that, over time, some commemorative elements are added while others disappear, at the same time that the same monuments can be reinterpreted and their significance disputed and transformed.

With respect to other social and human disciplines interested in these aspects, the geographic contributions have specifically contributed to, among other things, valuing the importance of scale with respect to places and policies of memory; analysis of how some spaces and places are articulated by narrative strategies directed to display and represent the past in a determined shape; and have helped map these symbolic topographies (the absence of maps is still usual not only in non-geographic studies of these spaces, but also in many geographic works). Other open lines of investigation during the past few years, in some cases originating from the criticism of Nora's work, have tried to investigate areas less explored by the studies of memory.

Some studies, for example, respond to the non-monumental landscapes, to the non-hegemonic ones and to other spatial forms of memory, marginal to national identities. Other than the official landscapes constructed by the leading groups in every moment, these studies have valued, for example, the landscapes of memory of minorities or of the non-leading groups, let it be in terms of race, gender, ethnicity or ideology: places that some authors have named «sites of countermemory» or «sites of antimemory,» and that constitute, the sites connected to the memory of the victims and the defeated, forgotten groups for official memory. In a similar sense, other studies are presenting attention to the «spaces of memory survival,» an expression coined by Stephen Legg, those places that, part of a city or country, conserve traditions, values and forms of life more proper to the past and isolated from the officially controlled spaces. Because, Legg stated, «it is only through combining an analysis of national *lieux de mémoire* with spaces of memory contestation and survival that complete and inclusive conception of the spaces of the nation can be created.» A goal that inevitably,

includes potential critics, political compromises and ethical dilemmas, that Todorov outlines in his brief but incisive essay about the *Abuses of Memory*.

In a period like the present, characterized by the emphasis on memory, which Todorov defines as the «cult of memory,» and even the «hypertrophy of memory» (Huysen), there are many more themes and goals open to geographic investigation. Among them, we can mention the process of construction of heritage for certain landscapes or for commercial or mercantilist interests; the formation of cross-boundary places of memory, even cross-nation; or the difficulties in adjusting the traditional notion of place, proper of humanistic geography, like a stable center, deep with experience and memory, to the landscapes and post-modern spaces, marked by mobility and the increasing importance of the name «non-places.»

For the history of geography and for geographic thought, considering memory can be very productive. To pay attention to how historians of geography have represented the past of discipline, as well as the ways by which geography and geographers have been perceived and received (in some cases even commemorated) from outside of the discipline, both on an academic level and on a popular one, can show us a lot about the social contexts in which geographical knowledge is elaborated. At the same time, it can show us a lot with regard to how and why some figures or schools, even periods, groups and geographic and cultural areas, have been remembered and commemorated, while others were forgotten or disappeared from the historical hegemonies of the discipline. Finally, approaching the history of geography from the prism of memory (understood like a representation of the past with respect to present), can contribute to thinking about its utility to respond to questions and present day challenges, or in Todorov's words: to think about to what extent the history of geography can put the memory of the past at the service of the present.

