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Stories Which Transfix Society: A Sociological Analysis of the Cultural Practice of Remembrance Sunday

Hannah Mackenzie

For the sociologist there is rarely any fixed ‘reality’ which can be uncovered. All theoretical or methodological attempts to understand the social world are recognised as just one of many possible interpretations. However a sociological reading of Remembrance Sunday does have the capacity to highlight the misleading features of the common cultural perception of the practice. Offering in contrast, not necessarily a ‘reality’ to replace these views, but simply an alternative and critical perception.

“All the mourning’s veiled the truth. It’s not “lest we forget”, it’s “lest we remember”. That’s what all this is about – the memorials, the Cenotaph, the two minutes’ silence. Because there is no better way of forgetting something than by commemorating it”

(Tom Irwin in *The History Boys*, Bennett, 2006)

Does Remembrance Sunday actually remember the events which produced it and the subsequent dead of war which it commemorates or, as Irwin suggests in *The History Boys*, is it a way of forgetting the moral ambiguities of the past? An initial reading reveals the concept of the ‘nation’ as an unquestioned silence underpinning the ceremony. Further investigation using Halbwach’s theory of collective memory

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reveals the more subtle ways in which, in the context of ‘remembering’, Remembrance Sunday does not constitute ‘remembering’ in a conventional sense. If we analyse the specific construction of remembering within the ceremony in three different ways: as habitually ritualistic rather than cognitive; as isolating rather than interactionist; and as imagined, not truly remembered; we uncover the true way in which it functions regarding collective memory. It alienates two key components of societal remembering from one another; individual lived experience and collective frameworks of memory. In doing this, it closes off the creation of alternative frameworks of memory through social discourses and stagnates remembrance. So, whilst Remembrance Sunday does not actively make us forget its topic of commemoration; neither does it prompt a ‘remembering’ that is useful for society: “The more it hides, the more it gives the illusion of revealing”.¹ Remembrance Sunday is cultural practice which embodies the aspects of modern society which led to its creation. However, its construction reflects them back to society in such a way that they are exempt from discussion.

Both in purpose and in execution, Remembrance Sunday (RS) is concerned with the idea of nationhood. However, at the heart of the commemoration, lies a silent, unquestioned notion: that of the nation itself. Anderson proposes in ‘Imagined Communities’ that: “nationality, or, as one might prefer to put it in view of the word’s multiple significations, nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts of a particular kind”.² He later describes the nation as “an imagined political community”.³ All societies can be considered ‘imagined’ to an extent: every individual within a community will not directly know all other members but their knowledge that they exist and the imagining of their existence is foundational to each member considering him/herself to be part of that community. The ‘nation’ can be considered cultural in this anthropological sense and it is this idea which goes unmentioned and yet underpins RS.

¹ F. Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders* (London, 1988), 108.

² B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London, 2006), 4.

³ *Ibid.*, 6.

Anderson goes on to question “why these particular cultural artefacts have aroused such deep attachments”.⁴ The wearing of poppies, the two minutes silence and the cenotaph of RS demonstrate the extent to which the nation is embedded within modern British society and how it commands such loyalty. All three of these aspects of the ceremony involve a removal of identity and a style of engagement with society which subsumes the individual into the greater whole of the ‘nation’. Whilst the wearing of poppies initially appears to be the choice of individuals to commemorate the dead of war; it is in fact socially coerced in two ways: primarily by the fact that the majority of the public and public figures wear them and also because the usual economic barriers which exist to owning things are removed when all that is sought is an unspecified donation. Though it is not compulsory to wear a poppy; this is an incredibly easily facilitated adherence to a social norm. As a result, wearing one is less the choice of an agent actively engaging with society and more an acquiescence to the whole and disengagement with the self. The two minutes of silence is an even more visceral demonstration of this, where the social coercion is heightened. Furthermore, the cenotaph can be analysed in a similar manner. While a particular emphasis is placed on the individual naming of ordinary soldiers; it is justified to ask if, considering the sheer volume of names, there is any true recognition of individual identity enshrined within our war memorials. These aspects of the ceremony serve to instil a sense of ‘nationhood’ into society, immersing the individual in a communal identity. The British Legion describe RS as a day when “people across the nation pause to reflect on the sacrifices made by our brave Service men and women”. The very use of ‘our’ presupposes a community: in this case, the ‘nation’.

RS also embodies the idea of continuity necessary for the ‘nation’; what Anderson describes as transforming “fatality into continuity”.⁵ For, in the imagining of community, it is not only vital that we conceive of ourselves as part of a present whole, but also as part of a

⁴ Ibid., 4.

⁵ Ibid., 11.

group whose existence continues throughout time. The content of RS, the specified activity of remembering past members of the community, provides a vital link with the past. In fact, those with no real memories of the war dead are literally imagining a past community. Imagining this past in the context of the 'nation' links present individuals' identities to the 'nation' and its future. Your death is not your own, it is that of your 'nation'. If we accept that past lives were lost for us as a member of the 'nation' and commemorate them then we are tacitly accepting that our current lives are silently pledged also on behalf of the 'nation'. Anderson argues that "Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings".⁶ Thus, RS contributes towards the very thing that it results from.

Whilst understanding that RS is infused with and reproduces the conditions from which it arose is interesting, this is not a critique of the 'nation' or of RS for embodying it. Indeed, it is not surprising that RS is underpinned by these deep social foundations. Nor is it surprising that RS perpetuates itself: it is understandable that a relatively naturally evolving cultural practice would embody its own purpose for existence also. What is more intriguing and sociologically pertinent is the way in which RS exists within itself as a cultural text or artefact. As Anderson comments, it is useful to think of communities as distinguished, not "by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined".⁷ It is to this style of remembering and imagining which we now turn.

It is possible to conceive of social remembering in a way which goes "beyond Durkheim's notion of a periodic 'collective effervescence': the intensified force of sentiments and creativity which emerges from great conferences, demonstrations and gatherings".⁸ To understand in more detail the style of remembrance and commemoration it is useful to look at theories of collective memory, most notably expounded by

⁶ Ibid., 7.

⁷ Ibid., 6.

⁸ B. Fowler, *The Obituary as Collective Memory* (New York, 2007), 27.

Maurice Halbwachs, for “it is, of course, individuals who remember, not groups or institutions, but these individuals, being located in a specific group context, draw on that context to remember or recreate the past”.⁹

Halbwachs seeks to understand remembering not just as an individual and personal act but as one intricately connected to our wider existence in society: “It is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognise, and localise their memories...We place ourselves in their perspective and we consider ourselves as being part of the same group or groups as they.” Memories “are recalled to me externally, and the groups of which I am a part at any time give me the means to reconstruct them... it is in this sense that there exists a collective memory; it is to the degree that our individual thought places itself in these frameworks and participates in this memory that it is capable of the act of recollection”.¹⁰ For example, if a person were to recall memories of their wedding day, those memories would obviously be particular to their own personal experience. However the fact that they occurred within society means they are structured by the concepts and customs of that society (at a very basic level the idea of marriage is a social framework through which you recall those events). Furthermore, those recollections themselves are also conducted within society for particular purposes (perhaps to recount to someone for a particular reason or to compare with something in your own reminiscences) and are structured by these frameworks also.

Halbwachs is criticised for attributing too much power to the needs of the present in shaping the past and, with reference to mass remembering of the type typified in RS, “Osiel contends that vis-a-vis the wars and mass atrocities which make up the grand narratives of history, we cannot simply let a ‘hundred interpretative flowers bloom’”.¹¹ However there is still room for movement within

⁹ M. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago, 1992), 22.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹¹ Fowler, *The Obituary as Collective Memory*, 38.

collective remembering. It is not entirely constrained by the needs of the present, nor is it entirely without room for interpretation. In fact, in discussing collective memory of mass atrocities in reference to show trials, Osiel states that “by highlighting official brutality and public complicity, these trials often make people willing to reassess their foundational beliefs and constitutive commitments as few events in political life can do.” He emphasises the opportunities inherent in these styles of remembering “Specifically, they present moments of transformative opportunity in the lives of individuals and societies”.¹² And at the basis of the theory lies the possibility for different interpretations through the prism of collective memory: “Memory is life. It is always carried by groups of living people, and therefore it is in permanent evolution”.¹³ Let us return to the example of marriage. While this is recalled through frameworks, it is also referring to a real lived memory and it is through the lives of individuals with agency that social frameworks can be transformed. The real life experiences of different people are continually changing and subverting the structure of marriage (registry/church/civil partnership etc) in society today. For although “it is only in coming together to repeat and reaffirm the past that a group survives”,¹⁴ it is also in reacting to and engaging with the past that a group evolves.

However, for RS this malleability does not exist. The specific way in which remembering is constructed in this cultural artefact does not allow the space for change which exists in other forms of collective memory. This can be uncovered if we analyse the specific construction of remembering within RS as habitually ritualistic rather than cognitive; as isolating rather than interactionist; and as imagined not truly remembered.

The first aspect of RS which removes the possibility of discourse in

¹² M. Osiel, *Mass Atrocity, Collective Memory and the Law* (New Jersey, 2000), 2.

¹³ P. Nora, ‘Between Memory and History’ in P. Nora (ed.), *Realms of Memory Vol I* (New York, 2003), 14.

¹⁴ Fowler, *The Obituary as Collective Memory*, 11.

collective memory is its ritualistic nature. The enactments of RS, whether the official ceremony on Whitehall in London or more local versions, all observe roughly the same order of service and all contain the crucial elements of the two minutes silence, attendants wearing poppies and the laying of wreaths at war memorials. Inherent in all these acts is their bodily nature and their annual repetition and habituation: “Habit is a knowledge and a remembering in the hands and in the body; and in the cultivation of habit it is our body which ‘understands’”.¹⁵ Connerton argues for the importance of this aspect of memorial style ceremonies, “If the ceremonies are to work for their participants, if they are to be persuasive to them, then those participants must be not simply cognitively competent to execute the performance; they must be habituated to those performances. This habituation is to be found...in the bodily substrate of the performance”.¹⁶ RS encapsulates these aspects within its performance and it is not merely our minds which are coerced to remember but, more importantly, our bodies which remember the cultural act itself, year on year. Ceremonies are already “formalised acts, and tend to be stylised, stereotyped and repetitive. Because they are deliberately stylised, they are not subject to spontaneous variation”.¹⁷ RS goes further, we ourselves enact and uphold RS and our bodies are intrinsic to its continuance. Because of our direct participation in RS (at the very least the vast majority of people will be involved in the two minutes of silence), we are less likely to question or change it in any way. The interaction of our minds with remembering is not even particularly important when we understand the ceremony in this way, because our bodies are coerced into involvement and so the ritual already has the level of cooperation necessary to make us complicit in its enactment. And, once complicit, our capacity to question is severely reduced. Thus, “both commemorative ceremonies and bodily practices therefore contain a measure of insurance against the process of cumulative questioning entailed in all discourse practices”.¹⁸

¹⁵ P. Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge, 1989), 95.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 102.

Similarly, the opportunity for multiple recollections of the past is reduced by the isolating way in which we remember. The most widely observed feature of RS, the two minutes of silence, observed as “a rare moment when the nation can stand together and reflect on the price of freedom” (as described by the Royal British Legion), is one of the greatest obstacles to the discursive and reformative aspects of collective memory. Whilst appearing communal, this ritual is in fact an incredibly solitary form of remembering because everyone must be silent and remember at a single, set time. It depends precisely on not sharing your internal experience with those remembering with you. It is similar in nature, if not in content, with what Berger describes in relation to modern advertising: “In this respect the envied are like bureaucrats; the more impersonal they are, the greater the illusion (for themselves and for others) of their power. The power of the glamorous resides in their supposed happiness: the power of the bureaucrat in his supposed authority”.¹⁹ Each individual’s act of remembering is sustained only by the presumption that everyone else is also remembering. Because of this isolating aspect of RS it wouldn’t matter if no-one actually ‘remembered’ or if everyone just randomly thought of, say, eggs; it would still serve its function because everyone would presume all others to be ‘remembering’ and we would never know otherwise. The communal act of ‘remembrance’ in the two minutes of silence we observe every year is so solitary and dependent on an assumption of its own existence that it removes the possibility of any present day societal interaction with past memories. In removing this interaction of society with the past there is no space for possible changes to collective memory to occur because the collective nature of the ‘remembering’ is one that precludes interaction with frameworks of memory.

The obstacle that RS represents to changes in collective memory is, finally, a result of the fact that it resides much more in imagination than in actual, real, lived memory. Whilst some involved will have real recollections of having lost people in wars, even they are still

¹⁹ J. Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London, 1972), 134.

‘remembering’ and commemorating more an idea than anything else. The “brave Service men and women” whom the Royal British Legion calls us to commemorate are an imagined group of people, in Anderson’s sense of imagined communities, rather than individuals who we know and are asked to remember. As a result we are not reflecting upon our own lived experience on RS but, rather, we are imagining a group of people from, but no longer present in, our society. If we return to the previous example of recollections of marriage through collective memory; the catalyst for changes to the collective framework of memory are the lived experiences of the individuals remembering through these frameworks. If we remove the individual experience from the memory, then we remove the catalyst for change: all that is left are the frameworks, which cannot change because there is nothing interacting with them to bring about any change.

All three of these aspects of RS result in a lack of space for alternative recollections of the past; specifically, of death in war. Benjamin described a need for common frames of reference in remembering events and experiences: “For this reason, soldiers returning from the First World War could not tell stories to communicate the qualities of war, so unimaginable was the nature of the social reality that greeted them. Virtually all were condemned to silence”.²⁰ In past instances there have been no social frames through which individuals can recollect the atrocities of war, and in RS there are no individuals actually, actively being allowed to remember through the sparse frames which have subsequently been constructed.

Rather than being an object of culture, which establishes the possibility of discourses,²¹ RS cuts off the possibility of alternative discourses. Perhaps it is the complex and morally questionable nature of war which causes such a reaction from society: “Memory, as has been pointed out by Foucault, is also a control over those whose

²⁰ Fowler, *The Obituary as Collective Memory*, 30.

²¹ M. Foucault, ‘What is an Author?’ in C. Mukerji & M. Schudson (eds.), *Rethinking Popular Culture* (London, 1991), 457.

practices and knowledges do not fit taken for granted historical assumptions: Memory is...a very important factor in struggle...if one controls people's memory one controls their dynamism...its vital to have possession of this memory, to control it, to administer it, tell it what it must contain".²² If memory is controlled or stifled, then the possibility of raising complex questions about the moral ambiguity of both specific wars and war in general is cut off. Orwell claims: "in these ways organised forgetting creates an indifference to reality, or an ease in negotiating inconvenient facts".²³ This, however, suggests the somewhat questionable idea that there are devious forces at play hiding the truth of the past from us. But the solution can possibly be discovered by looking at Foucault's description of the power that creates subjects. He states: "This form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognise in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects. There are two meanings of the word subject: subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to".²⁴ This still implies power, but perhaps in focusing on the internalisation of identity and existence as a subject we can deploy a more insightful interpretation. For the unquestioned concept of the 'nation' at the heart of RS and also the existence of RS are upheld by individuals within society. These social forces cannot shape our lives if we do not ourselves find meaning in them. Perhaps we are co-conspirators in the continuation of these forces but are unwilling to recognise this reality and so we tell ourselves stories.

It is in Geertz work on the Balinese cockfight that we find the initial reading of a cultural text as societal storytelling: "To regard such forms

²² Fowler, *The Obituary as Collective Memory*, 34.

²³ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁴ M. Foucault, 'Afterword: The Subject and Power' in H. Dreyfus & P. Rabonow (eds.), *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago, 1982), 212.

as “saying something of something,” and saying it to somebody is at least to open up the possibility of analysis which attends to their substance rather than to reductive formulas professing to account for them”.²⁵ In attending to the substance of the cockfight he states: “The cockfight, too, in this colloquial sense, makes nothing happen...The cockfight renders ordinary, everyday experience comprehensible by presenting it in terms of acts and objects which have had their practical consequences removed and been reduced (or if you prefer, raised) to the level of sheer appearances, where their meaning can be more powerfully articulated and more exactly perceived”.²⁶ However, Geertz’s analysis is not without its flaws: the presentation and reflection of lived experience through culture, if it makes nothing happen, does not necessarily allow us “a particular view of their essential nature”.²⁷ Rather, and especially in the case of RS, it obscures their essential nature. It may well be “a Balinese reading of Balinese experience, a story they tell themselves about themselves”,²⁸ as RS may be a story we tell about ourselves, but the style of storytelling is the key.

In the case of RS, the style of storytelling is such that it cannot be questioned. In the field in which the culture is produced, there is no space of possibilities²⁹ in which to question the story being told. As life becomes a cultural story in RS, the habitual, solitary and imagined nature of that story makes it unquestionable; our frameworks of collective memory cannot be transformed. As Benjamin noted, there exist individual accounts of war and a collective memory but the two are alienated from one another and do not interact through RS. This lack of interaction results in stagnation of social responses to the very topic we are supposed to be recollecting each year on RS. In telling a story to itself through a mirror of culture in RS society becomes

²⁵ C. Geertz, ‘Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight’ in C. Mukerji & M. Schudson (eds.), *Rethinking Popular Culture* (London, 1991), 269.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 262.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 263.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 266.

²⁹ P. Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art* (Cambridge, 1996), 236.

transfixed by its own gaze and unable to question the values underpinning the yarn it is spinning.

Connerton argues that “Certainly it is possible to imagine a future in which ceremonies at the cenotaph no longer take place because there is no generation still alive who can pass on the living memory it recalls; we can envisage a day when such commemorations will have become as meaningless as it already now is for us to commemorate the Battle of Waterloo” whereas “The passover and the last supper have for long been remembered without there being any living generation who can, in the above implied sense, remember their original historical context”.³⁰ Yet, this begs further analysis. Part of the reason these religious ceremonies have been maintained lies in the fact that the social sphere which generated and underpins them still exists and allows them to be sustained. Currently, and for the foreseeable future, the concept of the ‘nation’ which generated and underpins Remembrance Sunday will still exist as a social form and, therefore, it will be sustained. Furthermore, the fact that it is habitual, solitary and more imagined than remembered, rules it out as a site for discourse concerning the transformation of collective memory. As an item of culture it is clearly a product of the society which generated it and, intriguingly, embodies within its very self the conditions for its own reproduction.

³⁰ Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, 103.

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