

With the Past on Our Side: A Narrative Approach to Intergroup Conflicts. Commentary on “Historical Memories and Attitudes towards the Other: A Cross-Generational Study in Croatia” (Susnjic, 2011)

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The study carried out by Susnjic (2011, this edition) shows, in a clear and conclusive way, the close relationship between historical memory and the attitude towards ‘the other’, considered as the enemy from the point of view of a given group identity. Based on the social identity theory as stated by Tajfel (1982), the author aims her study at the biggest conflict that battered Europe after the Second World War: the interethnic wars in former Yugoslavia during the 1990’s. In this conflict the outgroup vilification, together with the glorification of the ingroup—normally represented as the victim—would have led to the physical elimination of the enemy, resulting in several episodes of ‘ethnic cleansing’, and the concurring justification of them made by important sectors of the population.

Working within this theoretical framework, this questionnaire-based study presents a random sample of individuals of different generations, coming from different areas in Croatia—some directly affected by the conflict, and some with no direct contact with it. Consistent with the ingroup bias put forward by the social identity theory, the results obtained show a clear tendency—more significant in those areas affected by the violence—to consider Serbian people as the aggressors. This stance, in turn, positively correlates with a supportive attitude towards the military actions led by the Croatian army during the war, known as ‘Storm’ and ‘Flash’. Further findings involve the controversial Ante Pavelic Independent State of Croatia, born during the Second World War. The data analyzed in this study show that, on the one hand, the younger generations of Croatians have a higher regard for this state; an attitude which positively correlates with their degree of support to the above-mentioned ‘Storm’ and ‘Flash’ military actions. Likewise, there is a negative correlation between their attitude towards this state and that held towards the Partisans fighting during the Second World War, as much as towards the principles of ‘unity’ and ‘fraternity’ promoted in Yugoslavia during Tito’s time.

Undoubtedly, all these results are relevant insofar as they clearly illustrate, within the social identity theory, the extent to which identifying individuals as belonging to a specific group (the ingroup) leads to a positive interpretation of their actions in the past, whilst those actions performed by the outgroup will be negatively regarded, creating an image of ‘evil’ and ‘harm’ attached to them. As shown in this study, the biased interpretation of the past by the ingroup would lie at the core of many

collective conflicts, a paramount example of this being the interethnic conflict in former Yugoslavia. However, it is important to consider that this supportive and justifying attitude towards the ingroup, together with the negative interpretation of 'the other', may not result directly from identifying oneself with a given group. Rather, this would be the result of the 'mediational artefacts' (Cole, 1996) used by the group so as to imagine themselves as a community (Anderson, 1983), and thus interpret their past and recognize their role in history, alongside other collectives. From this point of view, I believe that a more complete approach to the questions raised in the article with regard to the importance of the interpretation of history in shaping the attitude towards 'the other' and, consequently, in a likely reaction towards them, could include, together with the social identity theory, an account of the appropriation and use of these artefacts, such as historical narratives, by the members of the ingroup.

Historical narratives do not only function as vital artefacts to represent the group as the main actor in the story, but are also the convenient tools to design, incite, and justify their actions based on a specific way of constructing the past (Brescó, 2009). A past where the ingroup as well as the outgroup would appear as collective characters with a set of values, purposes and goals attached to them, assuming therefore a different role in the unfolding of the events. From this point of view, we could describe historical narrations as fundamentally rhetorical and narrative artefacts (White, 1978). Thus, we find that the different versions of the past put forward by the groups are the result of strategically foregrounding specific events –while excluding others–, and embedding them¹ into a characteristic narrative plot. This plot usually takes the form of literary genres known to a given culture (Wertsch, 2007); a form which in turn provides a moral content to the narrated events (White, 1986). For instance, the use of the tragedy to narrate the past is very often an effective rhetorical tool that enables the ingroup to adopt the role of the victim with regard to an alleged oppression by the outgroup, characterized as the aggressor. This is used as an argument to claim certain rights, as well as actually justify certain actions which, interpreted from a different point of view, would be morally unacceptable.

We can see thus how the rhetorical dimension, inherent to the very form of historical narrations, turn these into artefacts which direct and legitimize present and future actions. In this sense, embedding such forms in the historical memory of the group would lead its members to experience the drama therein described as something that occurred to them too, insofar as they all make up the "we" subject (Gergen and Gergen, 1984). This includes those members who would not have directly suffered the traumatic events described in the narration. As a result, all the ingroup members would adopt the rhetorical argument, alongside its possible conclusions, as their own. If we take the example mentioned before—the tragic form of narrating the past—the ingroup members would show a reasoning of this sort: "we know this story, and we know its awful outcome, and we also know what must be done in response to it"

¹ See in this respect *the nationalist rhetorical triad* (Levinger and Lytle, 2001)

(Tölölyan, 1989, p. 112). Consistently with this line of argument, it might be the case that extremely tragic outcomes—or at least so depicted—call for extremely tragic responses. These responses would then be taken as a moral duty by the ingroup. So viewed, we could state that, far from excluding the outgroup from one's moral universe—as the rationale of social identity theory seems to point out—the actions taken against it would correspond to the moral conclusions conveyed by certain narratives of the past internalized by the ingroup.

Needless to say, understanding current conflicts involves knowing its historical background. However, there is no such thing as a direct way to learn about the past. The knowledge we can have of it is inevitably mediated by the different historical narrations we have access to. When it comes to conflicts, like those arisen after the fall of the former Yugoslavia, these different versions usually come from the very groups or actors participating in such conflicts, making their interpretation of the past events eminently biased. Nevertheless, such versions can be very helpful to understand how certain ways of plotting the past have served as tools to shape the attitudes of one group towards the other—defining its members as either victims or aggressors—and eventually justify certain actions carried out against the enemy, based on this dichotomic reasoning. In this sense, we could argue that many of these narrations constitute, to a certain extent, the *scripts* by means of which individuals understand the conflict, identify themselves with the main actors involved, and adopt the corresponding offences and vindications as their own (Blanco and Rosa, 1997).

The data obtained by Susnjic (2011, this edition) would reflect the consequences of reading such scripts—beyond the effects derived from the armed conflict. The higher regard that younger generations of Croatians show with respect to the Ante Pavelic Independent State of Croatia—an episode of the past they can only have access to through the stories told by their families or the media—is a clear example of this. Crucially, we could argue that both historical memories and the attitudes towards the other are mediated by certain narrative forms, conceived of as cultural artefacts which, in shaping the past, also provide a line of argument for future actions. Based on this idea, I would like to emphasize the importance of considering artefacts—by means of which groups imagine themselves and their past—as tools to avoid confrontation and predispose to dialogue. Thus, it would be highly advisable to narrate past events with a less biased attitude, instead of conveying an idealised image of “the always righteous ingroup”, resorting to the necessary degree of ambiguity, if we ever want to understand conflicts from the others' points of view. As Paolicchi (2007) states: “Human condition seems to have no way out between the defensive return to one's own certainties which so often produces domination and destruction, and the willingness to work together through and about everyone's differences” (p. 20).

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