

Trajectories of resistance and historical reflections

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Abstract

Collective memory, the one-sided and subjective vision the group holds of its own past, plays a central role in defining who we believe we are and what the world is supposed to be. As such, being able to challenge what is said of the past offers the possibility to imagine futures and build identities outside of what is commonly accepted in society, thus providing roots for resistance. This paper proposes to reconstruct the trajectories of two intellectuals and artists interviewed in Brussels to understand what may have led them to question traditional narratives of the past, and in some cases to actively resist them. It concludes that the encounter with several tools, like historical books or the discovery of others' alternative narratives, may foster resistance; they do not only encourage individuals to question specific historical discourses, but participate to the construction of a "meta-memory": a general representation of historical discourses.

Key words: Resistance; Collective memory; Life-course; Trajectories of remembering; Meta-memory

Resistance is not a mode of transformation but a process of reaffirmation. The proper object of resistance is to defend or restore a set of principles whose authority has been undermined.

Pottage, 2013, p. 263

There are many ideas people would easily agree are worth resisting for: freedom, human rights, the rights for all to a decent future, etc. but the duty to truthfully remember history probably would not be one of them. Or, clearly, it would not be very high in the list of our priorities. What is worth fighting for is what is ahead of us, not what once was and will never be again. In such a fast-paced world, one would have to be a fool to give priority to history and memory over information technology and creativity. Yet, what would the present and the future be without the past? When faced with a personal choice, don't you look into

your past to try to find what could be the best solution? When imagining where you will be in 10 years, don't you draw on where you were 10 years ago and what you remember of others' evolution? It is not any different with history (Wertsch, 1997): How can groups such as nations know who they are today and where they are going without looking at their past?

The way we, as groups, remember historical events – which constitute our *collective memory* – changes how we act in the present and plan for the future (Liu & Hilton, 2005). By transforming history into collective myths, we put forward versions of the group that are to our advantage (Wertsch & Batiashvili, 2012). Unfortunately, this is often done at the expenses of others, who can be presented as essentially different (Raudsepp & Wagner, 2012) and with whom conflict may thus, at times, be encouraged (Delori, 2011). And because narratives on history illustrate certain ways of interacting with others (Leveau, 1994), they can also serve as the basis for the exclusion of others seen as historically “alien” to the group (de Saint-Laurent, 2014). By adopting specific narratives about the past of our social groups and, just as importantly, by forgetting other elements (Brockmeier, 2002), we position ourselves towards the present situation (Is it an injustice? The apogee of a centuries-long battle for our rights? The end of a golden age?) and give it meaning and direction. If the past matters, then, it is not so much in itself, but because of what it reveals about us and of our future (Dudai & Carruthers, 2005).

Research on representations of history has, so far, mainly focused on how social groups remember past events. The conclusion has generally been that groups transform and deform history to show themselves in the best light possible (Wertsch & Batiashvili, 2012). It has opposed history and memory on the grounds that one is systematic and objective while the other is the subjective glorification of the group's past (Wertsch & Batiashvili, 2012). But how to understand, then, the processes by which some come to question history and doubt the greatness of the past actions of their group? If many do indeed defend and repeat narratives that serve the interests of their countrymen and their own – a quick look at any country's extreme right party discourses illustrates this – others do become critical. And criticising the nation's past is a way to question the status quo: it has the potential of delegitimising existing relations of power by uncovering the conditions under which they were forged. It is thus, in many ways, a matter of resistance.

This chapter proposes to look at the trajectory of two women who came to resist hegemonic discourses on the past of their group. By going beyond social representations of history, it aims to look at how individual people make sense of the past and, thus, illustrate how alternative understandings of the world may be forged. I will first introduce the concept of *trajectory of remembering*, which I will then use as an analytical tool in the presentation of two case studies: Dominique and Genevieve. The analysis of their trajectories will be used in an attempt to uncover the types of resources one may use to resist hegemonic representations of history. Finally, the effect of such resources on resistance will be discussed.

Trajectories of remembering

In traditional collective memory studies, the ‘collective’ part tends to get the better end of the stick. Indeed, it is often not so much about memory – after all, being French does not mean that I can ‘remember’ the Napoleonic wars – but about social representations (Wagoner, 2015) – as a French person, I share with my fellow citizens certain representations, often historically dubious, of who Napoleon was. Research has thus focused on collective manifestations of representations of the past, as displayed in memorials, school history textbooks, commemorative practices, movies, political discourses, etc. (Beim, 2007). Although this has made the discovery of extremely interesting mechanisms possible – for instance, how historical events tend to be systematically deformed by groups to fit their existing cultural narratives (e.g., de Saint Laurent, 2014; Liu & Hilton, 2005; Wertsch, 2008) – it has also occulted how the person locally produces discourses on the past. And indeed, I do not talk about Napoleon in the same way when I am back home, conversing about current politics with my family, or where I live in a Swiss Canton that was invaded and occupied by Napoleon’s army. And, perhaps more importantly, I would probably not have chosen him as an example if I had not been writing this chapter on the day of the 200th anniversary of the Waterloo battle and just read a newspaper article on the topic.

This is what the cultural psychology of collective memory – *collective remembering* – has tried to take into account when studying discourses on the past. First, it has focused on the tools one may use to remember (Wertsch, 2002) – textbooks, public discourses, memorials, etc. – and made a distinction between the production and the consumption of narratives (Wertsch, 1997). Collective manifestations of the past are not what people actually remember: they are cultural elements produced by the collective (often the state) to put forward a certain understanding of what happened. But when people use, in turn, these narrative, they do not do so passively: remembering history is an action (Wertsch, 2002), a reconstruction made in the specific context of the discourse (Wagoner, 2012). To go back to the example of Napoleon, being exposed to narratives about him in history classes as a child and reading an article about him today does not mean that I blindly repeat these discourses. However, they are resources that I use to talk about the past and advance, or resist, a certain representation of it.

Second, collective remembering studies have focused on another fundamental element of the context within which people remember: interactions with others. As any other human activity, collective remembering is not done in a vacuum, and even less in a social vacuum. Discourses on the past are always addressed to others (Wagoner, 2012), and shape and are shaped in interactions (Hirst & Echterhoff, 2012). That is, talking about history and the way it is done locates people in the social field – as members of a specific group, tenants of a specific worldview, etc. – and is a reply to what has been said by others (de Saint-Laurent, 2014). In that sense, collective remembering is *dialogical*: it is the product of interactions with

present and absent others; the present others with whom I am conversing and the absent others whom I am replying to and whose reactions I am anticipating (Bakhtin, 1986).

Going back to the example of Napoleon, it means that I produce different discourses with my family or with my colleagues at work because these are shaped in my interactions with them. When talking about Napoleon with my family, I am reacting to the comparisons they might make between him and current politicians, as well as prolonging a long public debate about whether he should be remembered as a military genius or a dictator. What I say about him positions me on the political spectrum and towards my own family's political orientations. However, when I talk about Napoleon with my Swiss colleagues, I am responding to a very different debate: the question is not whether he was a good or a bad leader – it is commonly accepted that he was a tyrannical invader – but whether I, as a French person, will attempt to defend him or side with the people he attacked. What I say about him in this context positions me as either a blind patriot and defender of my country (and in some ways as an ungrateful immigrant) or as enlightened enough to see the ills of my country and the goods of the one I live in (and thus as a good immigrant). That is not to say that I hold almost schizophrenic discourses on history: I do not defend Napoleon in one case and bash him in another. But the ways in which I talk about him and defend my opinion will be deeply different because I am addressing a very different audience, with whom I share very different resources and pursue different aims (see de Saint-Laurent & Zittoun, in press, for a full explanation of this model of remembering).

But what, then, explains how two different person, in a similar context, will come to say very different things about history? How come my sister and I – sharing the same culture, broadly the same education and being from the same generation – will tell, in the same conversation, extremely different stories about Napoleon? Because we have, ourselves, our own history. What research on collective memory and on collective remembering has for now largely ignored is that people have a 'history in front of history', what I propose to call a *trajectory of remembering*. To conclude my Napoleon example – and I promise, drop it here – what would probably make my sister and I talk about him in different ways are our own different pasts. While I studied social sciences in the UK, my sister studied law and lived in the US. When I was in a context where Napoleon was considered to be the evil man finally defeated in Waterloo and the one who attempted to destroy local cultural differences, she studied the man at the origin of the first civil code and lived in a country where Napoleon was one of these French exotic things, almost at the same level as baguettes and berets. Thus, when we talk about him today, our discourses are not just forged in the interactions with others and objects – to borrow Grossen's notion of context (Grossen, 2001) – but also by our own past.

Humans live and develop in irreversible time (Valsiner, 1994), creating unique trajectories (Zittoun et al., 2013). These trajectories can account for how people relate to the

world, give meaning to it and adopt or resist meanings proposed by others (Zittoun, 2006, 2012). Indeed, throughout our life, we internalise social and cultural values and systems of meaning and multiply experiences from which we can take a distance and draw generalisations (Zittoun, 2012). In time, we develop *Personal Life Philosophies* (PLP) – personal understanding of the meaning of life that take the form of more or less simple philosophical maxims – and we use them to interpret new experiences (Zittoun et al., 2013). Our past, through the experiences we have, the values and ideas we are introduced to, and the meanings we give to it, shapes how we understand and act in the present. And although this idea is, in the end, quite basic for any clinical psychologist, it is often forgotten in other areas of psychology.

What I propose here is thus to adapt this literature on trajectories and ruptures to collective remembering and to conceptualise the latter as the *developmental* process by which a socially located self, in interaction with a socially located present and imagined audience, uses cultural resources to produce a discourse on the historical past (see de Saint Laurent & Zittoun, in press, for a similar account but of autobiographical memory). By developmental process, I mean that such discourses are characterised by change and transformation across the life span and its study thus requires a lifecourse perspective (Elder, 1998). Studying individual's trajectories, then, implies focusing on moments of transitions and ruptures, on the construction of new meanings they may lead to and on the resulting intransitive (irreversible) qualitative changes that can happen in any period of life (Zittoun, 2012). In other words, this perspective takes as the unit of analysis the interrelation between the discourses of the self and the unfolding course of one's life. It is thus especially interested in how experiences of change lead to the production of new meanings about the world and one's life.

In the following, I propose to apply these concepts to the trajectories of two Belgian women interviewed on their relationship to history. I hope thus to demonstrate 1) that people's past accounts of history can indeed be understood as forming a trajectory; 2) that these trajectories can inform how people remember and understand the past; and thus I intend 3) to draw some insights, in the end, about how such trajectories can inform our understanding of resistance throughout the life course.

Reflecting on history

The data presented here is part of a wider project focusing on personal trajectories of remembering (de Saint-Laurent, in press). It is centred around a theatre play offering a critical-historical perspective on the Israel-Palestine conflict (Rosenstein, 2014). As the play was advertised as offering a critical perspective, it meant that it was likely that the members of the audience had developed at one point or another a critical outlook on history or were at least open to the idea. The semi-open interviews conducted with them aimed at uncovering

how they came to see the play or participate in it, as well as their past encounters with history (in school, at home, during travels, etc.). Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and all were done in French.

Of the nine interviews realised in Belgium and in Switzerland, two were chosen for this chapter: the cases of Dominique and Genevieve. Dominique and Genevieve are both women in their late fifties or early sixties, and both are involved in activities that could be described as ‘resistance’ to the social situation in their country. While one is working for a charity helping local populations in social and cultural difficulties, the other has been involved in political and militant organisations. They were chosen because 1) they are comparable on many aspects (age, gender, background, etc.) and yet illustrate different processes of remembering and using the collective past and 2) they both are involved in “resistance” actions and are thus very good candidates for our purposes.

The data was first analysed with the help of narrative and trajectory analysis (Rosenthal, 1993). The interviews were cut into segments referring to different periods of the participants’ life and then organised in chronological order. This allowed me to focus on the transitions and ruptures in their understandings of history and their relation to it. Each period was analysed with the general model proposed above, which means, concretely, looking at: 1) the content of the discourses reported about history (e.g., what is the story about), 2) the resources that have been used to construct said discourses (e.g., referring to books, using metaphors...), 3) the audiences to whom these discourses are addressed (e.g., traces of voices of others, replies to quoted discourses...) and 4) the transformations and continuities with the previous period (e.g., is the general narrative frame similar? Are the resources different?). However, the tendency to present the past as an explanation for the present (Cameron, Wilson & Ross, 2004) – probably especially strong when talking to a psychologist, whose job is often perceived as one of explaining people’s behaviours as a consequence of their past – needs to be taken into account to avoid over-interpretations.

Because of the important amount of autobiographical data presented, important alterations were made to both cases in order to ensure anonymity. These modifications were done after the full analysis in order not to alter critical elements. These transformations concern names, places, dates, occupations, and when necessary historical events that were changed into equivalent ones for our purposes.

Case 1: Dominique

Dominique is a Belgian woman born in the 1950’s in a family of communist artists. The first part of her life is characterised by the gap she feels between what she is told at home and what is taught to her in the religious school to which her parents sent her for education. This is how she explains it, by referring to an incident that took place when she was eight years old:

D: My Parents always told me that Julien Lahaut, well, you're not Belgian, so Julien Lahaut is a communist who screamed "long live the republic" when... when the King Baudouin was taking the oath. So you know there was Leopold III who collaborated [with the Nazis]... and he never came back, then there was a regency, and when his son came of age... [...] Well, it was a huge mess. It was not just the question of the return of the king; it was that people had the option between [...] a more Socialist or a more Catholic Belgium. [...] So this guy yells "long live the republic" [...] and [later] he got shot down at home. They rang his bell, shot through the door, and they killed him. In 1950. Well... that's what my parents always told me. And one day, at school, we talk... we talk about the king. And I tell this story. And they tell me it's not true. [...] That it's a lie. So I have always learned that the official story had nothing to do with the true story. [...]

C¹: And how did you react when you were a little girl [...]?

D: I learned that I'd better shut up. [...] I didn't belong to the right social class. [...] So pfff, I'd better not be... I would say politely, they would tell me it was wrong, and I would shut my mouth.

In this extract, Dominique shows the gap in understanding history between home and school. At home, her parents would tell her stories that illustrated their convictions, and discuss historical events through these lenses. However, when she tries to talk about this with a different audience, she gets told off and learns to stay quiet. She clearly sides with her parents – they tell the 'true story' she opposes to the 'official' one – but, perhaps, does not master enough, as a child, the resources they use to build this story and thus cannot defend it at school.

As she grows into an adolescent, however, her relation to both her parents and school changes. She says about school:

D: I was pretty happy about how I was taught history, because in my school there were humanists and leftists, and so I was always taught history between economical causes and consequences. [...] So I was always very conscious, well, made conscious, but in a well-argued manner, about the

¹ The author

accumulation of capital [...] so each time I was reading a book about that I was thinking, well yes!

Here, we can note two main changes in this period, as compared to her early childhood. First, there seems to be a change in the type of audience that school represents: it is now a place where you can learn from ‘humanists’, and not a strict Catholic school where she feels she does not belong. Second, she starts being given resources to understand history: although we can assume that her parents – that she defines as very communist – already made her familiar with historical discourses centred around the notion of capital, she adds this time “but in a well-argued manner”. Where her parents’ stories had left her without the resources to defend them, she seems here to be introduced to new tools that help her forge her own opinion. If the last sentence gives us a clue about the type of resources she starts using, these are developed in the following extract about her relations at home, where she talks about her mother:

D: And it’s true that she used to annoy me a lot because for instance, when Stalin died she cried about it. And... well... she didn’t understand a thing about destalinisation. Yes, well, she didn’t read a thing either. But me, I had read, I was twelve and a half, thirteen, and I had read lot of things and I would think: but how can she not know? And how can she... I was shocked by the lack of analysis, [...] of objective support. [...] And for me, the historical critique was part of my survival, maybe. Because I had an extremely violent, extremely anger prone mother. And so it was in my best interest to know very well... that.

Here we can see a shift at home: the family discourses that she used to take for granted are now considered as the ones without ‘objective support’. In the following years, Dominique enrolls in a Trotskyist group because it was ‘against Stalin’ and her parents. She reports that she argued about these issues with her mother, and that she started reading a lot, not only about the roots of communism, but also World War II. From a little girl listening avidly to her parents’ stories about the past, she becomes an adolescent arguing against them with the help of what she learns in school and in books, which seems to be a way to resist her “extremely violent” mother. And in the following years, she takes part in political movements against colonialism and in women rights demonstrations, against her parents’ approval, and develops new friendships in these militant groups. But if she opposes her parents, she interestingly does so while remaining extremely close to their values: she still identifies herself as a communist, but of a different kind. It seems that she found a way to position herself that would not alienate her at home or in school and yet allow her to have her own voice.

Not much seems to change in Dominique's relation to history in the following decades. While the late eighties are marked by the birth of her two sons, she is surprisingly silent about the collapse of the USSR. But when asked, at the end of the interview, which historical event she would love to change most, she replies:

D: I don't know. I don't know, I don't know. [3 seconds]
Because I don't see one event... ok, when the Vietnamese thumbed their nose at the Americans, we could only be happy. [2 seconds] To do what? [3 seconds] That's it.

C: hum...

D: When the Chinese separated themselves from the yoke of... the soviets, but to do a cultural revolution... with the horrors they did. And a society, I would say, more than unequal... I am not talking about misery in... in economical misery. I'm talking about intellectual misery.

She does not seem to propose events she would like to change, but events on which her interpretation changed: from the hope of an international Trotskyist revolution that would show another communism than Stalinism, it turned into despair about yet another communist inspired dictatorship. The difficulty to make sense of this turn of events is made clearer when I ask her about how she thinks current events will be remembered in the future, for instance the Arab Spring (the interview took place in March 2014). She replies:

D: For me there is not one and only one Arab Spring. But for me all these stories about Islam I don't care. [...] The Taliban are not funny, but the Red Guard was not either. [...] I don't know what we will remember of it [4 seconds] these are countries... None of them, although they produce necessary resources, none of them has its own industry. [...] They are consumers of the powerful countries, [...] [like us] who are hands and feet tied to the American older brother.

After this, she goes on about the capitalist system, and concludes that we are all "fully enslaved" to it. What is interesting here is that Dominique's discourse does not change: in the stories she tells about the nineties and onward, she refers to the same audience (especially her mother and her friends in militant groups), uses the same resources (mainly books and newspaper articles) and tells similar stories about class warfare and the opposition between the Americans and others, whether they are soviets, communists, socialists, etc. The world, however, did change: communism ended in a way that did not leave much hope to its partisans in Western Europe, and international politics have seen the arrival of new major players – mainly India, China and Brazil – that make reading the world in terms of USA/Russia opposition look slightly dated. As a result, Dominique seems to take a certain distance from

her past understandings of history – as for instance when she talks about Vietnam – and to take part in less political actions: she reports participating in unionist movements during these years, but no mention is made of political engagements, in stark contrast with what she reports of the previous decades. In today's world, her positioning seems at times problematic; she talks about a few recent incidents where she quite strongly argued against interlocutors in ways quite at odds with the situation.

However, this (relative) lack of change does not need to be interpreted as an inability to adapt to the present. Instead, it can be interpreted as quite functional: forty years on, Dominique is still able to maintain a relationship with her difficult mother and yet to resist her by arguing for a different understanding of the collective past. If the end of communism is not evoked by Dominique as a strong transition in her relation to history, it may then be because it did not change much to her opposition to her mother's favoured communism. If resisting hegemonic representations of history fuelled Dominique's social and political engagement, it seems also to have been a resource to resist difficulties in her own family.

Case 2: Genevieve

Genevieve is a social worker born in the sixties to a Belgian father and a Polish mother. Although her father is fascinated by history, especially World War II, they do not talk much about it at home. Her mother, who left Poland after WWII, only tells stories about pre-war Poland, with one notable exception:

G: And my mother for instance, well... often in these situations people who suffered a lot they don't talk about, about that part of their life, me, when I was a kid, she would talk to me about her house that was like an absolute Eden. Until 39. [...] The only comments that I got when I was a child was if I did not eat, "you will finish your plate", very calmly, not even angry, not even, not even rising her voice, "you will finish your plate because people in the ghetto they ate the grass in between the pavements". Bang. [...] But this is, this a way to... how are we going to call this way to tell a story, for instance, what is this way to tell history, if your mother tells you that when you're a child? [...] And that, at the same time, you are nourished by what the ghetto was because we had books in the library with well, images and all, so I knew very well.

Here, it seems that while Genevieve gets knowledge about the past from books she reads on her own and does not discuss with her parents, such knowledge is made alive by her mother's discourses and is actually necessary to interpret them. In interaction with her mother, and using the books she read as resources to represent the past, Genevieve builds a

story of what happened, or at least an image strong enough to stick with her 40 years later. Very early on, then, she is put in a position where she has to construct her own understanding of the past, between the remarks of her mother – which do not really amount to a story – and what she discovers, alone, in books. In that sense, she is a quite obvious illustration of the model self-other-cultural tool presented above: she constructs a representation of history through the interaction with others and the use of cultural resources.

In the early eighties, however, an experience profoundly changed her relation to history. She moved to Poland, against her mother's advice, and was asked by a Belgian newspaper to interview Polish people who resisted during World War II. As her mother had left her country before the fifties, she had depicted a rather different Poland than what Genevieve found when she arrived, during a period of great repression. And she says:

G: I arrived, so naïve, thinking the Poles are such patriots it will be so easy to interview them on, on resistance during World War II. What I didn't know is that most of them thanks to the great Yalta were sent by Stalin to Siberia for 15 years. [...] It was dangerous to leave them in this new communist country that had such a radiant future, we were not going to keep people of the old regime who were going to mess it up. [...] If I had interviewed them one or two years before, when [...] when the wind of freedom was rising, I think they would have told me many things. But they had just had a lid closed on their faces [...] and Jaruzelski [the soviet controlled Polish president] was there with his tanks. So I was confronted with people who did not want to talk at all, because they were scared, simply. So I had to develop all sorts of strategies to interview them. And that's where I realised that there are really two histories, you see. [...] People would yell at me. [...] "you know that us, we fought for you, and we all ended up behind the iron curtain and that, we were here, and there", and it's true that the Poles were everywhere, in Africa and in the UK, that, that, "this is the payback we got, we ended up behind the iron curtain and in Siberia, so please excuse me but we don't really want to..." And we were never told that in school.

C: Yes...

G: Never never never never never. [2 seconds] And so there were really two readings of history that... that were, were... for me it was the first time that I was really shaken to the core thinking [2 seconds] things are never really black and

white. Things are never told... It's not because I learnt it in school that it is true. It's not because I read it in a book that it is true. And ever since, I, I, I, well my parents used to read a lot [...] and they just died and, and, and I wonder but what am I going to do with all these history books because these are stories that are already not true anymore today because in the meantime researches were done that show [they were wrong].

During her stay in Poland, two "lessons" seem to change Genevieve's relation to history. First, as she says, she discovers that history is multiple and thus a matter of perspective. Interestingly, she does so by interacting with a group to which she, in some ways, belongs, being Polish and identifying as such (she reports being "yelled at" by these interviewees for being Polish and yet not speaking the language, which means that she introduces herself as Polish). Second, she learns something that was never (with much insistence on the never) introduced to her in school, and the intensity of her reaction looks like a response to the level of the betrayal. Interacting with these Polish resistants and discovering their story make her question what she has learnt so far and how simple – "black and white" – it looked. And these doubts seem to remain today, as the end of the excerpt shows.

If this event left Genevieve very sensitive to the perspectival nature of history, her journey does not end there. About ten years later, just after the Scud crisis with Saddam Hussein, she visits Israel, during a period of great tensions. She talks about the religious extremists there and how they have a very specific discourse on history. I ask her what they say:

G: Well, that it's the holy land and, there is no discussion to have. It's, it's always the same story, you see. It's, it's, they are the chosen people, the thingy, and well everything we know, you see. Without, with no possibility to have a dialogue with these people... they are really insane, you know. [...] I was walking with a friend who was 55 at time and who was wearing a shirt with sleeves up to here [*shows her wrists*] and who had just left this button open [*shows her neck*] and she was called a Nazi. Well first the insult has nothing to do with [*laughs*], well, nothing. You just want to tell them "poor dude, just shut up".

This experience seems to put a limit to her openness to the diversity of perspectives on history: if the others refuse dialogue – because they are not accessible to logic – then it is pointless to engage with them. If she can interact with their arguments and the resources they use to build their accounts of the past – she does so just after in the interview – she cannot or will not do so with their perspectives. And this leads her, at times, to a paradox:

although she defends a perspectival understanding of history, she also insists on how “real facts” have shown these extremists were wrong about it, and she uses them to dismiss their perspective.

As a young girl, Genevieve’s relations to history had been mainly centred on the books she would read and the remarks from her mother, full of connotations. A first transition, however, changed her understanding of ‘official’ accounts of the past. Others, and what they had to say about history from their own perspective, thus became a great resource to understand the past. A second transition put a limit to this openness to other’s discourses: those who are not rational and refuse alternatives should not be interacted with. In a way, it is possible to see this second transition as a ‘re-balancing’ of Genevieve’s relation to history. Indeed, although openness and flexibility are often considered as quite desirable psychological qualities – ensuring people’s adaptability – taken to the extreme they also leave people at the mercy of any change in their environment and may threaten their sense of coherence and stability. In the case of Genevieve, it meant accepting discourses that ran contrary to other convictions she had – like the fact that a woman should be allowed to unbutton the uppermost button of her shirt in public. Hence, developing a ‘rule’ to resist some perspective – history should not be discussed with those who are not accessible to logic and reason – may be a way to strike a necessary balance.

Resources for resistance

Through these two cases studies, I have attempted to show how people’s relation to history can be understood as the product of a trajectory marked by ruptures and transitions, the internalisation of social and cultural values, the construction of new meanings, and, in the end, by intransitive qualitative changes. In the first case, that of Dominique, the analysis highlighted how the internalisation of her family’s values created a rupture in school, from which she concluded that she did not fit in there and should therefore remain silent. This meaning was challenged during adolescence, when she was faced with teachers more open to her values and a difficult relation with her family. This second transition led her to develop her own version of her family’s value – allowing her to both resist her mother and socialise in militant groups – through the use of books and various specialised texts. This second understanding is still what she uses today to interpret history. In the second case, that of Genevieve, the analysis showed how she started by using books and pictures to make sense of the discourses of her mother, which were full of historical connotations. However, a strong rupture occurred when she visited Poland as a young adult and was confronted with new discourses about history. This made her question what she had learned before – and what she had not been told – and develop a rather perspectival understanding of history. However, a second rupture occurred a decade later, limiting the discourses she would agree to be open to.

In both cases, personal trajectories shaped how the participants remember and understand the past, which is actively acknowledged in the interviews: both Dominique and Genevieve themselves refer to their past to explain their present understanding of history. Past events do not just influence their relationship to history: through time, experiences create layers of meaning through which the past can be understood. Indeed, meanings do not cancel each other out but, through consecutive ruptures, participate in the construction of a rich system of values and understanding of the world. Contradictions and paradoxes, then, are part of their trajectories and are forged through contradictory and paradoxical experiences. As a result, each person's representation of history is unique, even within a rather homogenous social group – here both participants belong to the same generation and grew up in quite close social classes with leftist values. This is especially clear in the way they react to the play they went to see: Genevieve questions the “missing perspectives” in the story and Dominique talks about her pro-Palestinian activism in her youth and economic questions.

Through these trajectories, Dominique and Genevieve seem to have developed a general understanding of history that they apply to the various events they talk about in the interviews. Indeed, they generalise from experience both how history is built or ought to be built – for instance, when Genevieve ‘discovers’ that history is a matter of perspectives – and general story lines that organise how they talk about subsequent events – for example, when Dominique talks about the Arab Spring and develops a narrative based on economical transformations. I propose to call these generalisations about memory *meta-memory*. This form of memory rests on cultural concepts and cultural narrative templates (as described, for instance, by Wertsch, 2008), which are culturally shared ways to understand the world or to tell a story, but it differs from them since it is built and given value and meaning through personal experiences. It thus has a deeply personal resonance, as do Personal Life Philosophies (Zittoun et al., 2013). For instance, one can learn in school that there is always more than one side to a story (cultural concept) but this is not be the same thing as discovering it through the encounter with another telling an extremely different story about a past one considered to know, like Genevieve did.

What is also notable here is that two types of tools seem to play a central role in the transformation of these women's representations of history. First, books and other textual resources (as they may be presented in school) are recurrent resources. Surprisingly, however, very few references are made to historical movies and novels, when they are usually considered as extremely important resources for collective memory. However, participants may simply choose not to refer to those in the context of the interview. Second, interactions with others and the stories they tell are an important resource too. Interestingly, it seems that the “channel” through which a rupture is brought about is also the one that will be later favoured. Indeed, for instance, Genevieve's first rupture is introduced through the discourses

of others, and it is what she later uses as a resource to build narratives on the past. Dominique, on the other hand, is first unsettled by discourses in school and yet it is through the textual resources introduced by teachers later in her life that she builds her representations of the past. But both tools – others and texts – share a common feature: neither is blindly used, but they are instead a resource with which one interacts and dialogues in order to build an account of the past. For instance, when Dominique reads, as a young teenager, communist manifestos and historical books, she agrees with some (“thinking well yes!”) and yet remains critical in front of others (especially those which overlook economical dimensions, as she explains later in the interview). Remembering and resisting, thus, are deeply oriented towards others and built in the interaction with their voices, whether it is in face-to-face or through books and other media.

Conclusion: Resisting whom, why and how?

In this chapter, I have argued that personal trajectories, through rupture and reorganisations, lead to specific ways of remembering the past and thus, potentially at least, to resistance towards hegemonic or one-sided representations of history. In the cases of Dominique and Genevieve, this was done through the use of textual and dialogical resources that helped them both build unique accounts of the past and criticise “official” narratives. Because it led them to activism and social action, through a critique of how power dynamics were forged, their “trajectories of remembering” are also trajectories of resistance. What the analysis showed, however, is that such resistances were first brought about by personal ruptures that needed to be overcome.

Reflecting further on the two stories discussed here we can conclude that, at a collective level, resistance presents us with three *paradoxes*. It is about resisting changes, yet time is irreversible and this implies that often resistance is about bringing new changes to “restore” what was lost (the paradox of novelty). It is against a power whose legitimacy is seen as undermined, yet it uses (at least initially) “illegitimate” power to defend its cause (the paradox of power). And it is about ethics and rights, yet it also assumes to be defending higher values than others hold and thus ultimately depends on whose perspective you are taking (the paradox of ethics). Thus, if resistance is a collective phenomenon, embedded in social action, it is only at the level of the individual engaged in the act of resistance and in light of his/her personal trajectory that it takes its full meaning. This leads us to the final paradox of resistance, that of otherness: resisting hegemonic representations of the world (here, in the form of the meaning given to its past) involves resisting the discourses of others, yet it is these discourses that shape personal trajectories.

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