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Social Memory in Post-Atrocity Contexts

Introduction

The construction of social memories that are fair to the past and that can also contribute to peaceful futures is a challenge for societies in the aftermath of conflict; they must dismantle silences that occult complicities and culpabilities, while crafting a balanced account that avoids the perpetuation of violence. The 20th century witnessed a series of atrocities that were covered by repression and denial, which can be evidenced in the systematic use of paramilitary squads and in the disappearance of corpses across many Latin American countries. One of the testimonies of a local leader in the region of Chocó describes this situation:

In 1997, the paramilitary arrived, and well, we already know the methods that they used in that period. They killed and threatened people; they dismembered, tortured, and disappeared them. We did not know where they were; we do not know where they really were buried; they threw their bodies to the river, we do not know. They are completely disappeared.

(Interview, April 2012)

The recent so-called memory boom – the rise of interest in memory in academia and other sectors of civil society and among policymakers – manifests a desire to resist the silence promoted by perpetrators of atrocities and the intention of supporting victims’ rights. At the everyday level, these initiatives might rise in order to obtain information on loved ones who had disappeared, to leave their memory as a permanent testimony of the violence that they suffered or serve as a warning and a plea that this kind of atrocity should never happen again. These initiatives

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are based on the assumption that uncovering truths about past atrocities and giving a public voice to victims can strengthen democratic processes that are necessary to promote a transition from authoritarian regimes to nonviolent societies.

Transitional and post-conflict societies have developed different types of politics of memory in order to answer to the challenge of remembering past atrocities (de Brito et al., 2001; Hayner, 2010). These mechanisms have been led ‘from above’ as a result of official politics of memory and ‘from below’ as initiatives of the civilians at the grassroots (McEvoy and McGregor, 2008). Official and non-official mechanisms of social memorialisation as part of the transitional justice process have been the subject of rich debates in the field of memory and transitional studies (Aguilar, 2002; Cairns and Roe, 2003; Chapman, 2009; de Brito et al., 2001; Hamber and Wilson, 2002; Hayner, 2010; Van der Merwe et al., 2009, among others). This literature often argues that a conflict needs to reach some kind of closure before a process of social memorialisation as a means for building peace can take place. These societies are called post-traumatic, post-conflict or post-violent because they have reached an agreement in order to stop the conflict, even though violence may still be present (Brewer, 2010).

Contrary to this scenario, Colombia is a country in conflict with a weak political transition (Laplante and Theidon, 2006; Prieto, 2012; Saffon and Uprimny, 2009) but where debates about how to memorialise the conflict have flourished. On the one hand, the recovery of historical memory has been officially supported as a result of the enactment of transitional justice laws. On the other hand, there have been thousands of local initiatives of memorialisation led by grassroots victims’ associations across the country, which were almost a spontaneous reaction to the violence suffered by the local civil society. Clearly, the study of the Colombian case can contribute to informing the debate on the uses of social memorialisation in transitional justice and in peacebuilding amidst ongoing conflict.

Recent or ongoing conflicts are a contested terrain for the construction of social memory, where multiple versions of the past confront each other under the pressure of different compelling political agendas. Politicians often argue that they fear the consequences of social memory for unstable reconciliation processes, such as in the case of post-genocide Rwanda, where the government removed formal modern national history from all school curricula until at least 2005 (Hodgkin, 2006). Despite the risks of social memorialisation igniting the ashes of violence in post-conflict societies, there is evidence that mechanisms of