Conversations about the Communication Media

Introduction

I have shared what participants knew about the dictatorship and how this knowledge seemed to be shaping their opinions and actions. But how did they learn what they knew? How do we identify which sources transmitted the memories that shaped their representations of this past? How do we recognize the realms of memory that codify and symbolize it? Among fears and silences, and in a fragmented and decontextualized mode, the past had made it into the present. How this happened is the question that the following pages seek to answer.

This chapter looks at the roles that a broad spectrum of the communication media was playing in transmitting and reconstructing the events of the dictatorship. It explores the different sources on which participants based their knowledge, the major historical referents, the many voices and images that, over the years, have informed their way of thinking. It discusses the various texts and cultural artifacts that constitute the dictatorship’s “textbook”: television programs, films, popular songs, monuments, and sites that symbolize terror such as the former centers for torture and extermination. I was interested in looking at how the media were providing historical referents, setting up agendas, reinforcing or challenging societal silences, and at how participants interpreted and were affected by particular representations of the dictatorship.

We know that a society’s memories are transmitted, modified, and preserved through talk, that collective remembering is a communication process. It is in this discursive construction and reconstruction of what is remembered or forgotten that the media play important roles in incorporating memory issues into the public sphere.
and shaping the ways that societies remember. There are differences between having a “direct” and a “mediated” experience of events, the latter being the case for the post-dictatorship generation. There are connections between the offering of particular historical accounts and remembering a particular version of the past.

Halbwachs, considered the first serious explorer of the social frameworks of memories, highlighted that the media contribute to the construction and reproduction of collective memories. Writing about individual remembrance as the intersection of collective influences, he noted how people often present, as deeply held convictions, thoughts borrowed from a newspaper or a book without being aware that they are but an echo. Judging from my own experience, I often find that what I remember about the dictatorship incorporates new information that I have acquired over time. This reminds me of the Vietnam War veteran who said that what he remembers of what really happened during the war is mixed with what has been said about the war. We should be alert to this combination of personal experiences of the past with more contemporary knowledge in the many stories that participants heard from their elders and the media.

There are a number of pertinent analyses of the media’s role in the memory construction process. They range from Anderson’s study on the press and the formation of national identity to Dayan and Katz’s research on communities united by media events, defined as those rituals of millions of people simultaneously doing the same thing—for example, watching the broadcast of the Gulf war. Studies on how societies remember their traumatic and violent pasts illustrate how historical accounts offered by the media shape memories and reinforce beliefs, as with students who learned about the Spanish civil war through textbooks and media images. There are also studies about the offering of changing historical versions of the same event—some of them analyzing French and Spanish war films and revealing how different social groups symbolically reconstruct their past. Thus, French films on the Algerian war show how, over the years, the conflict has been represented in different phases—that is, focusing on silence, amnesia, or individual memories. In the United States, there are studies about the Vietnam War reconstructed as docudrama and of how these media images are sources of historical information. Other studies have focused on films about the Holocaust, discussing, for example, debates between historians and media scholars on how Schindler’s List, as a form of historical “writing,” contributes to the transformation of our understanding of history, and how the film shapes memory and national identity.

However, even though this chapter focuses on the media, I should point out that memories are transmitted over time through three main sources that overlap and mix: intergenerational accounts, formal education, and the media, a process well illustrated by Susana:

I’d find out [about the dictatorship] through the television. And I’d then ask questions at home. During anniversaries, the TV tells how all of that was, what