

Spatializing memory

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At first glance, it seems to be not so easy to combine the temporal term “memory” with the spatial term “periphery” in a logical way. It’s hard to think of fringes or margins in the temporal dimension, on the one hand, and think of a (not metaphorical) spatial form of recurrence to the past, on the other. But this spatialization of memory offers interesting new perspectives on our relationship to the past. I want to discuss five of them.

(1) The opposite of periphery is the center or the core. So asking for the periphery of one single memory means also to ask for the core of that memory. That could be answered with the most relevant contents, the core contents, those which are most important for the functioning of that unit of memory. If the core function is the stabilizing of identity, the heart of memory is the image of one’s self, both the own one and that produced by others. The periphery could then be designated to the least relevant elements for the core of that function. The difference between center and periphery is then constituted by the difference in the criteria of selection.

(2) Asking for the periphery means also asking for the borders, the fringes, the margins of a given memory. That means also to ask for the unit of memory itself. It seems to be easy in the case of an individual memory. But even an individual memory contains a lot of social matters and, as Halbwachs (1992) has shown, a lot of social frames. It uses a multiplicity of media technologies in order to reconstruct past events. Is the diary, the blog, the social media account part of the individual memory or not? Is the past stored in the body (Connerton, 1989) part of that unit, when most of it is not accessible by explicit reflection? And what is the unit of a social memory, say of a group or an organization? In my view, there are a lot of connections, overlappings, translations, associations, interferences, interpenetrations between memories. So James’ (1890) metaphor of the fringes seems to be a good way of describing those transitions and intersections between different memories. There are no clear-cut boundaries between memories. Even the periphery is some way or another connected to the core, maybe to more than one core.

(3) Reintroducing the temporal dimension in the spatially metaphorized memory opens up the way for a dynamic conception of periphery. Peripherality is not a status given forever, only for a present state of affairs. It is subject to change in every new situation, when relevances shift, when other things become important and move

toward the center. In the course of a crisis the peripheral could even become the new center. So the seemingly high stability that space and its metaphorizations offer is only temporary.

(4) Describing memory in spatial terms suggests also the analogy of a storage room or repository, where the contents are deposited and retrieved. But it is important to stress two points here: Firstly, memory is an operation, one that always works in the present. It is a way of processing information and providing the results for present operations. The past is never just retrieved as is; it is processed in recollection. So presented past is selected, formed and constructed on the conditions of a present context and actual anticipations of the future. Secondly, we do not have access to past events, only remnants, processed data are memorized.

(5) Every form of communication seems to be an externalization into a spatial form. The sound waves move away from the speaker; writing is the arrangement of a sequence of signs in a normally two-dimensional space; painting uses lines and colors on a canvas; and so on. These externalizations could become the base for social memories, depending on the duration of the materiality of the medium. Sociality of memories depends largely on media spaces and media temporality in terms of duration and use. Then, the spatial order of social memories, both inside and outside, is triggered by media.

Spatializing memories as periphery (and core) gives rise to a bunch of questions that lead right to the center of theories of memory. As we still have no comprehensive theory of (social) memories, maybe those questions help to pave the way toward such a theory.

REFERENCES

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