Political Commemoration

The Inclusion Dynamics of 'Partisan Commemoration'

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Research Briefing
Key Observations and Policy Recommendations

- Politically partisan commemoration is a prolific activity in many societies with a history of ethno-national conflict, used and valued by political actors.
- Politically partisan commemoration appears divisive, but can paradoxically underpin peace by cohering communities ambivalent about the direction of travel during the dislocations of transition or 'unsettlement'.
- Partisan memory can help key groups adapt their ethno-national narratives so that they are congruent with a more peaceful environment.
- Partisan memory provides useful intelligence for the evaluative peacebuilder, by giving insight into narratives of transition within constituencies, useful to understanding how their commitment and inclusion needs to be navigated.
- Partisan memory may still present risks to peace in undermining trust and keeping conflict 'going' at least symbolically. However, it can be counter balanced with more inclusive and critical forms of commemoration.
- Inclusive commemoration can begin first by addressing more historically distant periods of conflict.
- Inclusive commemoration needs to be facilitated at multiple ground-level points.
- Inclusive commemoration needs strong contextualisation applied to understandings of the past A vibrant space for critical history needs to be provided.
- Inclusive commemorations should spotlight different forms of identification obscured by ethno-national identity but also present.
Introduction

This research briefing examines the political commemoration of periods of conflict as an important aspect of political activity that impacts on peacebuilding and the stewardship of political settlements within deeply divided societies. Commemoration is particularly important where the lines of fracture correspond to ethno-national identity. The paper argues that commemoration serves as an internal communal means to manage and maintain ethno-national constituencies during periods of peacebuilding – whether in a peace process or political ‘unsettlement’. The research briefing further examines ways in which often highly partisan forms of commemoration can paradoxically both serve to ease transitions, but also impede more inclusive forms of public memory also necessary to stable political settlement in the future. The means by which greater forms of inclusion may be approached, through developing appropriate forms of engagement with ethno-national commemoration, are explored.

The briefing first sets out the importance of commemoration in deeply divided societies by looking at its prevalence, and its importance in creating useful narratives that underwrite identity. The next section examines the potential utility of political commemoration in pursuing claims of legitimacy during the extended, continuing periods of contestation and transition that mark peace processes and political unsettlements. The paper next moves to examine the role of commemorations in maintaining constituencies by increasing political bonding and close identification; but in so doing partisan commemoration may act to underwrite militancy and militarism, sharpening a symbolic conflict over the meaning of the past in the present. Yet there is another aspect to partisan commemoration. It can pragmatically adapt these partisan forms of ‘hot’ memory, and reframe them to underwrite more peaceful methods or environments. In conclusion, the paper considers how this latter form of pragmatic memory may be reinforced by interventions which facilitate more inclusive and critical public memory, that can at least serve to partially defuse political commemoration as a form cultural conflict.

The Importance of Commemoration in Deeply Divided Societies

Commemoration of salient political events and a history of political violence is prevalent in deeply divided societies. The polemicist David Rieff forcefully argues that the continuous commemoration of traumatic events does nothing to promote catharsis, or empower silenced voices in societies affected by conflict and political violence; instead commemoration pulls and picks at the ‘wounds’ of a society so that they seldom have a chance to heal. As a result, he admonishes states, international organisations, and a cottage industry of NGOs who pursue a path of remembrance as societal healing, as simply making matters worse (Rieff, 2011). Yet this call to replace remembrance with a judicious forgetting somewhat misses the point. Even if we were to subtract from the equation support for ‘pro peace’ commemoration as a form of healing, we are left with an enormous collection of groups, communities, and states, who commemorate periods of violence for wholly intensely partisan reasons. A survey of case studies and more comparative research in ethno-nationally divided societies reveals that public memory work in relation to conflict is quite prolific (Khallil, 2007; Viggiani, 2014; Albrecht and Akar, 2016; Papadakis, 2003). In states which may be termed as ethnocratic or ethnic democracies (Smooha, 1997) ethno-national commemoration of periods of conflict is obviously strong (Lebel, 2013) but even in a state such as Lebanon, which has developed an amnesiac approach to periods of ethnic conflict at an official governmental level, communal commemoration of conflict, directed by political parties, is endemic (Haugbolle, 2010). It seems that in regions in which identity exists as an organising force for political participation and social forms of segmentation, commemoration is highly important and much attended to.

Politically partisan, ethno-nationalist, and often antagonistic, forms of commemoration predominate in a deeply divided society, as case surveys can reveal (Brown and Grant, 2016; Di Llelio and Schwandner-Sievers 2006; Larkin, 2012). In many such societies politics is often ethnically organised; beneath this, social segmentation exists as an organising force at multiple points of everyday life, be it education, residence, religious worship, or cultural and leisure activity. Political and social processes thus work together to create
these partisan forms of memory. More inclusive forms of commemoration and memorialisation do exist in deeply divided societies, but they are distant competitors to the partisan (Balkan Insight, 2017). How much of this politically partisan commemoration accurately reflects the prevailing mood within deeply divided societies may be open to debate, and relatively few studies have attempted to gauge audience understanding of, and empathy with, such commemoration. Yet these commemorations are numerous, and can involve thousands of participants at one end of the scale, or at least display clear local rootedness at the smaller end. Levels of whole hearted support and engagement may vary, but support nevertheless appears significant and authentic. Ethnic entrepreneurs are not simply using commemorative strings to pull at constituencies like puppets.

This engagement with commemoration reflects the critical importance of group narratives in creating histories and fostering a sense of collective identity in ethno-national settings (Ross, 2012; Smith, 2007). Collective memory is particularly important in helping form a collective identity as it forges a shared sense of the past and common purpose by allowing the group to physically come together as the group, by disseminating narratives that attempt to bind and guide, and by underwriting political positions with a sense of powerful, sacral emotion. The narratives within commemorations are organising myths, myths not in the sense of being wholly false or fictitious, but through being simplified guides to political understanding and action (Kaufman, 2001). These narratives, and their accompanying symbolism, become even more potent and politically useful in moments of crisis, and continued ‘unsettlement’ post-conflict. In fact, past crisis itself often forms part of the commemorated narrative; the memory of defeats and scourging traumas are often prevalent and powerful in constructions of ethno-national identity (Mock, 2010). Past historic crises, and present crises in conflict and transition, may thus be readily run together in ways which present the current crisis in narrative continuity with partisan understandings of the past.

**Legitimising Narratives: Commemoration, Peace and Political Unsettlements**

The significance of collective memory, and the commemoration which sustains it, remains even when a deeply divided society proceeds from conflict into a period of peace processing or extended political ‘unsettlement’. The concept of a political unsettlement captures the fact that even at the end of a peace process which delivers institutional restructuring and reform, and a wider dispersal of power, there persist strong and durable elements of transition, of continuous negotiation, and contestation that tests the basis of the ‘settlement’ itself (Bell and Pospisil, 2017). Thus disagreement becomes institutionalised into political structures that leads to what appears a perpetual transition and an ongoing contestation of the nature of the state. Both ongoing peace processes and political settlements exist then in a transitional space of contestation, and in such a space legitimacy matters. As the cases of Northern Ireland and South Africa demonstrates, once the ‘hot’ conflict is over, the meta conflict continues to combust; this is a ‘conflict over what the conflict was about’ (Horowitz, 1991: 2), a ‘conflict about the nature of the conflict’ (Bell, Campbell and Ni Aolain, 2004), and what type of conflict it was (McGarry and O’Leary, 1995: 1). This meta conflict is connected to the legitimisation of past actions, interpretations, and political values.

Partisan political commemorations construct narratives that legitimise past actions or positions and telescope this sense of legitimacy, usefully, into the present. Legitimacy is also accentuated by constructing or imagining genealogies that link current political groups, with celebrated or important political groups of the past. This is most useful. In periods of transition, be it peace process or political unsettlement, legitimacy is valued as it may amplify claims for resources, or serve to expand one’s political constituency beyond a core group of voters. This emphasis on legitimacy is also implicated in the construction or deconstruction of victim hierarchies in commemorations, and the very idea of victimhood itself (Lawther, 2014; Borer, 2003); traumatic victimhood, as an emotive claim of injustice against a group and the rightfulness of their claims, has permeated many forms of commemoration (Khalili, 2007). The increasing turn towards transitional justice and mechanisms to deal with a conflicted past has also opened out a further zone for the meta conflict and the politics of legitimacy to play out in periods of transition and ‘unsettlement’. 
Commemoration as a Microscope to Unsettlement

Commemoration can act as a mechanism helping to drive or at least sharpen these narratives of contestation in a transition or ‘unsettlement’. But in being an act of communication which is simultaneously both public, and primarily internal to a constituency this form of politics produces an important silver lining for the prospective peacebuilder. We can consider commemoration as providing a window for the researcher to better access small scale micro politics. This is important for two reasons. Firstly, ethno-national identity is forged less at the large scale than in the ‘patches, tads and fragments of small scale, local social networks’ (Malesevic, 2010: 188). Ó Dochartaigh has examined these local processes, and mobilisation of communities, using Irish republican areas as a case study (2010), whilst Beck has undertaken similar work in areas of Basque militancy (2009). Their research argues that the very strength of particularistic political narratives comes from the fact that they are deeply embedded in the local: in familiar streets, towns, and family networks. Secondly, Mac Ginty and Richmond argue (2013) that we can only truly understand how peace is bedding down by sourcing the backstage hidden transcripts of the kind that circulate at the local level; the rich political narratives and messaging attached to local commemoration could place a lens over these hard-to-source discourses. In commemorations, narratives of legitimacy, communal relations, and the place of the past in present day politics often circulate; they serve as forums in which political messages about peace processing are promulgated, and validated by invocation of the past. These narratives may be resistant or supportive of peacebuilding policies.

Partisan Commemoration – A Form of Cultural ‘War’ or Adaptation to Peace?

The nature and utility of partisan commemoration in ethno-national societies has been open to interpretation. One analysis emphasises that partisan commemoration essentially comprises a ‘war by other means’. This may take a very direct form, such as when commemoration is used to delegitimise the values, actions and standing of an ethno-national opponent group, whilst promoting the values, action and standing of one’s own group (McDowell and Braniff, 2014). The reasons are simply put: such activity allows a communal group to advance its interests over another by claiming victimhood, or pointing to an injustice that needs righted. Commemoration thus validates political claims making in the present. Commemoration can also be used to assert or demonstrate power and control in a geographic area, be it local neighbourhood or the state itself (McDowell, 2014). ‘Commemoration as conflict’ can also emerge indirectly. Commemorative activity may be seen as antagonistic or provocative if it occurs at an unpropitious time, or outside of ‘familiar’ space, even if it was not intended to be projected at a rival ethno-national group. Taking the case of partisan commemoration in Northern Ireland, when Republican or Loyalist commemorative parades have appeared in shared or neutral space or close to a physical interface between communities, they provoke political controversy and are often cited as souring community relations.

These negative interpretations have accuracy and value, but do not reflect all the important facets of ethno-national commemoration. Other research has brought to light an adaptive role that communal commemoration can play in ethno-national societies exhibiting conflict, peace processing or ‘unsettlement’. Examining ethno-national actors in Northern Ireland, Brown (2007), Brown and Grant (2016) and Viggiani (2014) have demonstrated how commemoration can be used to acclimatisse constituencies to transitional moments, ideological shifts and political changes. Peaceful politics is narrated as a new phase of advancement and contest, not merely a sudden about-face from violence. What might be seen as disjuncture by spoilers, is rearticulated as natural evolution. The past is invoked and venerated to assure the constituency that values and goals remain the same. The martyred dead are remembered for their leadership and commitment, and not simply for military activity. They are transposed to the present to be emulated for that political commitment. Commemorative forms remain strongly ethno-national but militant imagery may soften and assume more historical characteristics. Notions of human rights increase in narratives, were once the eulogising of militant resistance held sway.
This adaptation occurs in other settings. Khalili has examined a shift in Palestinian commemorative form which has accentuated notions of human rights and a civilian victimhood whilst lessening commemoration of armed resistance (Khalili, 2007). A similar process is observable within commemoration amongst the Tamil diaspora (O’Neill, 2015). Turning to Lebanon, Volk has noted that the commemorations organised by ethno-religious groups have sometimes been re-framed to include another ‘out’ group, or evoke an over-arching, inclusive national identity (Volk, 2010).

Studies such as the above have thus highlighted an undercurrent within partisan commemoration, one which partially recalibrates conflict narratives, nuances political messaging yet also works to maintain group cohesion in a changing political scene.

Adaptive shifts can thus see memory:

- Reassure and bind constituents (and possibly deflect the criticism of spoilers) in transitions
- Establishing political continuity for an evolution from past violent resistance to present forms of peaceful advancement. Consequently, politics is a necessary and appropriate evolution away from armed conflict.
- Soften imagery to less charged forms
- Rhetorically signal a new approach to relations with other communities

Partisan commemoration can thus be used to reorder or reframe the goals of political actors away from the more ideological frames of the past even if it is an invocation of that same past. This may seem counterintuitive, or at least very difficult, but in fact reaching for, or constructing, approval from a group’s history may be a necessary condition for success in periods of negotiation and political shifts.

Inclusive Commemoration as Peacebuilding? A Case Study of the ‘Decade of Commemoration’

Inclusive Forms of Engagement

Politically partisan commemoration can thus be adapted to recalibrate narratives of the past in a way which makes them helpful in underpinning peace in the present. Yet it remains partisan, and in societies in which communal symbols and narratives are sensitised or antagonistic, this partisan nature matters.

Partisan memory will often continue to reinforce fixed understandings of identity and boundaries between groups. It prefers a usable, not a complicated past; this means that rather simplified understandings of ‘out groups’ and historical causation or motivation, may be translated into present day political discourse. It may revere violence and militancy in symbolic forms which antagonise ‘out groups’, that spark cultural ‘brushfire’ wars and thus hinder reconciliation projects.

There is a need to mitigate these deleterious effects of partisan memory. Consequently, attention should be given to modes of remembrance that provide for more inclusive spaces, and do this by facilitating the inter-play of differing views, critique, and reflection. Much of the literature and guidelines on peacebuilding interventions that engage with public memory in divided societies emphasise common points; the need to show differing perspectives; the importance of giving proper acknowledgement to different identities; that an important part of commemoration is the process of engaging groups themselves, not just the end product; and that projects should draw on historical evidence and scholarship so that commemorations have a factual basis and may even ‘myth bust’ (Impunity Watch, 2013; Ross, 2013). There are a number of programmes which have sought to facilitate commemoration or at least inform public memory by adopting similar approaches. The cultural organisation Ummar in Lebanon has mounted exhibitions, toured artefacts, held workshops, and organised archives with the intention of interrogating memories of the civil war, contextualising understanding of key events and communal spaces, and providing contemporary historical data from multiple political groups. The Association for Historical Dialogue and Research in Cyprus is building an archive to deepen understanding
of and properly contextualise the history of Greek and Turkish Cypriot inter communal relations, peaceful and violent. The Scholar’s Initiative (which operated in the former Yugoslav states) and the Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (which engages with a number of divided societies) take a more historiographical turn and seek to inform public memory and education through the creation of evidence based, critical histories, incorporating multiple perspectives often co-written by historians from different ethnic backgrounds.

The ‘Decade of Centenaries’ in Northern Ireland

The ‘Decade of Centenaries’, currently underway in Ireland North and South, provides a useful longitudinal example of the sensitivities of commemoration, and how to productively engage with contested histories. The ‘Decade’ encompasses commemoration of the years 1912 to 1923, a period which saw not only many foundational events in modern Irish history, but events which are frequently invoked, commemorated, and instrumentalised in modern party political commemoration and wider public debate about identity, and what constitutes appropriate and legitimate political action (Bryan et al, 2013).

Although the UK, Ireland, and the power sharing government of Northern Ireland have been involved in the ‘Decade’, it is not a centralised programme directed to a single vision. It is instead an accumulation of largely autonomous activity involving public bodies, political groups, local municipalities, community groups from a single ethno-national background, cross community groups, archives, museums, libraries, and indeed many organisations and societies from civic society.

The Community Relations Council (CRC), an ‘arms-length’ body of the Northern Ireland government envisaged potential difficulties in relation to commemoration of this period, which would impact on its responsibility to develop greater co-operation and understanding amongst political, religious and cultural groups. To this end, it has developed an important facilitative, but not directing role, in the ‘Decade’. The CRC’s concern was that commemoration had often been used to harden and ritualise boundaries, instrumentalise memory for narrow political concerns, and squeeze out complicating or dissenting narratives (CRC, 2011). However, their analysis was also that the ‘Decade’ presented an opportunity; one which would allow them to facilitate meaningful and inclusive debate about identity in the present, and create an opening to counter simplifying myths and shine a light on hidden histories that spotlighted other forms of identification and cross-cutting identities. In pursuance of this, the CRC together with the Heritage Lottery Fund devised a series of guidelines which they communicated and discussed widely via toolkits, conferences, and workshops in order to facilitate best commemorative practice. Any group of whatever political or cultural hue could engage with the CRC about these principles, but groups seeking funding for events had to comply with them. That said, these were by no means a narrative strait jacket, and instead acted as both compass bearings and quality control in planning commemorations.

The principles stated that commemorations should:

- Start from the historical facts
- Recognise the implications and consequences of what happened
- Understand that different perceptions and interpretations exist
- and show how events and activities can deepen understanding of the period (CRC, 2013)

There was widespread societal engagement, which continues. The principles were taken up by a range of bodies and not simply groups specifically engaged in cross community endeavours.

Significantly, this included many single identity groups, and municipalities which had majorities from one ethno-national grouping. This reflective and more analytical commemoration encompassed exhibitions, plays, debates, panel sessions and lectures, classes, training events, social events, and tours. It produced a local stimulus of commemorative activity of a stripe which melded with reflective and inclusive approaches. Aspects of a more critical historical method were marbled through many local commemorations. Differing analyses and
viewpoints were counterpoised, internal diversity within particular political communities revealed, and a much richer contextualisation of history given space. This enabled cross cutting themes such as social class and gender to penetrate and complicate ethno-national understandings of history (CRC, 2013). Part of the success of the ‘Decade’ lies in something more implicit – it has enabled critical and reflective examination of key moments in a divided understanding of the past, albeit a century old; but that divided past has itself informed narratives of recent conflict and identity, including the post 1969 ‘Troubles’. The ‘Decade’ may thus be seen as something of a reconnaissance into the foothills of the more difficult terrain of the ‘Troubles’, illuminating possible lines of approach and appropriate methodologies.

Conclusion: Key Points in Engaging Commemoration and Public Memory in Transitions

Looking back on our review of partisan commemoration, and our cases notes on inclusive forms of remembrance and engagement in Northern Ireland, we might distil the following points useful in considering broad policy interventions:

Those forming interventions should be aware that even partisan commemoration has its benefits for peacebuilding. It is used to keep a political constituency together during testing times – it can thus be a tool against splits and spoiling. If interventions seek to discourage partisan commemoration, there may be costs attending the obvious benefits.

Partisan commemoration can partially reshape the narratives devised for its constituency so that they are more congruent with a peace-seeking environment; and it can signal how to engage with communal ‘out’ groups in more productive or reconciliatory ways.

Partisan memory also provides much useful intelligence for the evaluative peacebuilder. Within a proper scheme, it can function as a means to look into narratives circulating at the base during transitions and ‘unsettlements’; it is thus useful as a political barometer to gauge many aspects of policy and intervention.

In a divided society riven by the memory of recent conflict it may be useful to take a more oblique approach to fostering commemorations supportive of peace. Interventions relating to commemoration might more easily engage with earlier histories of conflict between communities first. Establishing norms of historical accuracy, encouraging open discussions, and ensuring that multiple interpretations are given free space may be easier when the events are further from living memory. Having insinuated and trialled a more reflective and critical approach to ethno-national memory, it may then become easier to translate this approach to recent narratives of conflict.

There should be an encouragement of strong contextualisation. Activities might be encouraged which properly consider the root causes of political violence, the nature of the conflict, how the conflict abated or indeed continued and enduring legacies of past conflict. It would also be useful to consider the wider international context in a limited but effective form. An international aspect in historical presentation might help complicate simple understandings within ethno-national contests over the past; the latter may have a confining, and thus stifling, frame of reference.

Similarly, critical reflection should be facilitated in relation both to historical understandings, and more folkloric narratives of the period. This might entail challenging simplified understandings or stereotypes of political communities, movements and actors. It can involve spotlighting inconsistencies, mythologies, errors, or values now out of step with modern custom. This can be a difficult process; commemorative forms which allow for active enquiry would be well suited but can be difficult to design.

Portraying different forms of identification might also feature as an important aspect to be encouraged. History telling and commemoration which makes adequate room for both gender and class are important in this regard (indeed they often strongly intersect) as they can underline cross cutting histories. Similarly, stories of
those who crossed boundaries, or noting events which demonstrated co-operation by political leaders can give a more nuanced, and humane understanding of a difficult past. It would also be important to pick apart simplified understandings of ethnonational movements - and instead show that these are in fact movements in which there exist tensions and divisions around ideology, values, methods, and goals.
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