Revisited Pasts: Memory and Agency in Intractable Conflicts
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Working Paper Series No. 13
August, 2017
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Abstract

This article sketches an analytical framework connecting the literature on conflict transformation with understandings of the role of history and agency in conflicted societies. By focusing on the dissemination of different historical narratives, emphasis falls on endogenous processes and the interaction between inside actors to conflicts. This study moves beyond the many conflict studies with common emphasis on third party actions and their relations to elites in intractable conflicts. As history and its links to identity have been underdeveloped fields of inquiry in conflict theory, this contribution fills a substantial research gap. Moreover, the study advances understandings of agency and its connections to history and conflict. Initially, a theoretical framework is developed, aiming to increase the understanding of interrelations between historical understandings and identity change within intractable conflicts. Based on the theoretical suggestions, a case study of the Israeli debates about New History is presented. The conclusions emphasize the importance of societal criticism within conflicted societies, and the crucial role of agency in that process. This can be embodied in the work of memory agents who during certain times have the ability to challenge master narratives of identity and hence might have influence of the trajectory of conflict.

Keywords: conflict transformation, memory, identity, narrative theory, agency

Introduction

It is more or less commonsensical to argue that understandings of identity and history influence the trajectories of conflicts. Still, this argument, even though frequently claimed, is often theoretically underdeveloped. This study mainly draws up a theoretical framework aimed at answering the question: how do different and shifting historical understandings relate to and possibly influence identities and relationships in conflicts? Thereby, two lacunae within the research on historical narratives in conflict is addressed. Primarily, I set out to increase the understanding of the role of identity and history in the development of conflict, as I specifically explore the transformative potential of alternated understandings of history in conflict settings. Secondly, understandings of agency in relation to historical narratives are advanced. It is often claimed that narrative theory opens up for conceptualizations of agency (Whitebrook, 2001, Suganami, 1999, Somers and Gibson, 1994). However, when it comes to theoretical tools aimed at grasping agential dynamics, theories have often been quite vague. Through a conceptualization of memory agents and their crucial role in the societal interaction during the course of conflicts, this study contributes to increased understanding of agency when it comes to dissemination of narratives of identity.

Initially a theoretical framework is drawn up, in order to increase understandings of the relationship between history, identity, and conflict. Then I move on to discuss the concept of memory agents, and how their actions might influence the development of conflicts. The theoretical framework is then applied to the Israeli case. The case study contributes to increased understandings of historical debates and how they relate to the development of intractable conflicts. The analysis of interactions between memory agents in Israeli societal discussions also serves to heighten the awareness of the crucial role of agency in elaborations on history and identity in conflicted societies.
The conclusions point at the importance of domestic societal criticism in conflicted societies, and the crucial role of agency in that process. In the case of historiography this is embodied in the work of memory agents who during certain times have the ability to challenge master narratives of identity and hence might have influence of the trajectory of conflict.

**What Can We Learn from the Israeli Case?**

The Israeli debates over interpretations of the 1948 war, often called the debates over New History, can be used to shed light on the interconnection between identity and history in understandings of contemporary conflict. These debates regarded how to interpret the Israeli War of Independence in 1948, or as the Palestinians call it, “al-Naqba” (meaning “the catastrophe”). They touched on fundamentals of Israeli identity as well as the genesis of the State of Israel. Those debates, which initially concerned history, later on came to the forefront as media and politicians became involved in intense arguments with acute political content:

The angry reaction by many Israeli intellectuals and the rejection of the new historians’ narrative by wide sections of the Israeli public, especially among veterans of the 1948 war, indicated that these revisions had touched a raw nerve in the Israeli consciousness. In fact, the ongoing heated debate was not just an academic controversy. It was a cultural struggle over identities and self-perceptions, with deep political overtones. One keen observer noted that “the sharp opposition and deep concerns these researchers have aroused [...] resulted from a perception that they endanger the boundaries of the current [Israeli] identity and are seen as a threat to Israelis’ self-image. (Bar-On, 2006:155)

In the Israeli context, previously dominant understandings of history were challenged by a vocal collective of actors - the New Historians. The subsequent debate about history was strongly related to current identities of the parties to conflict. It will also be evident that interactions among and between memory agents in the Israeli debates had the power to influence societal institutions with strong connections to the construction of collective identity in Israeli society. Thus, the outcome of their interaction had potential impact on national identification, which is a core component of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Research on Israeli collective memory is thriving. For a long time, researchers have increased understanding of rites connected to the establishment of the nation (C.f. Zerubavel 1995), the changing memory of the Holocaust (C.f. Feldman 2008, Tossavainen 2006), and commemorations of soldiers fallen in Israel’s wars (C.f. Ben-Amos 2002, Lomsky-Feder 2004). Recently researchers have also focused on collective forgetting, or amnesia, in the Israeli context (C.f. Ram 2009). Several works (Ben-Josef Hirsch 2007, Feldt 2005, Ghazi-Bouillon 2009, Levy 1999, C.f. Nimni 2003b, Rotberg 2006,(Blomeley, 2005) Shapira and Penslar 2003, Silberstein 1991, Silberstein 1999) have contributed to the understanding of the debate focused on in this study. Even though comprehensive studies on the topic of this study has been conducted, the relationship between the debates and the then ongoing peace process, is seldom addressed, neither has it been directly linked to conflict theory nor to theoretical conceptions of social change. This study thus bring new theoretical light to the debates, as they are firmly linked to the peace process during the 1990s.

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1 Benny Morris wrote an article in the Jewish bimonthly publication *Tikkun* in 1987, where he described his and his colleagues’ work and characterized their writings as “new historiography”. That description prevailed and has since become the most common way to collectively describe these historians (New Historians) and their works (New History).
Understandings of agency when it comes to debates about history are also derived from the Israeli case.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been extremely resistant to attempts to resolution. Despite numerous efforts to try to reconcile the conflict parties, peace is still elusive. There are of course other cases of intractable conflict that could have been analyzed in this study. However, the fact that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have been difficult to resolve, combined with the breakthrough in negotiations during the 1990s which temporally coincided with intrasocietal discussions about historical interpretation, makes it a suitable case when it comes to advance theory regarding interconnections between history, conflict and narrative. The fact that the Israeli case also exhibited quite strong fluctuation over a short period of time, makes it well suited as this study has a strong focus on change and continuity in conflictual development. Hopefully, findings from this study can be used when probing other cases of intractable conflict, where understandings of history and identity are questioned and discussed in intra-societal forums.

Conflict Transformation: Redirecting Focus to Endogenous Processes

The body of work on conflict transformation is rich in its descriptions of processual change as well as in its emphasis on all layers of society, from grassroots to elites, when it comes to necessary agents involved in the endeavor of changing conflict. Some weaknesses are discernible however. Even though numerous works within the tradition point to the importance of grassroots levels in the conflict transformation process, endogenous processes taking place at the local level, such as internal dialogues over critical issues within conflicted societies, are seldom addressed (Saunders, 2003:92). It is an undisputed fact that one of the most difficult tasks when dealing with intractable conflicts is to achieve change in the conflicting parties’ understandings of their own identity as well as the identities of other parties to the conflict (Azar, 1991). This might be understood as a part of actor transformation (Miall et al., 1999:157, Väyrynen, 1991:4) or changes in the conflict component of identity (Kriesberg, 2003:317, Jamal, 2000:37). This can involve intra-societal disputes, and might result in changed views on collective identity. This activity often occurs in societal debates, and might not even be overtly conflict-related, as it often takes place out of view (Miall et al., 1999:157). Some researchers underline the need for such processes, but the issue is often ignored with reference to the fact that “intractable conflicts involving threatened identities are not likely to be readily changed from within” (Northrup, 1989:76). Instead of focusing on endogenous processes at the intra-societal level, researchers tend to focus on third party facilitation, such as mediation (Kriesberg, 2001, Bush and Folger, 1994, Bush and Folger, 2005), action-learning (Garcia, 2006), training (Diamond, 1997), sustained dialogue (Saunders, 2003, Schwartz, 1989), or problem-solving workshops (Kelman, 1991, Kelman, 1979), in order to create empathy and understanding between groups. Those are all commendable efforts. However, relatively little has been written on the role of endogenous processes in those societies (Francis, 2002:27, my emphasis), in contrast to the multitude of studies mainly scrutinizing third parties and their relations to elites.

If changes in identity bring about more positive views of the other within intractable conflicts, the potential of non-violent relations might increase (Northrup, 1989:78). Identity changes within conflicts hence “have the potential and responsibility to influence relationships, sub-systems, systems, policies, institutions and transformative processes” (Spies, 2006:51). In order for change to occur when it comes to intractable conflicts, it is crucial that conflicting parties revise their identities in the direction of more sympathetic, or even empathetic, feelings toward the other party (Slocum-Bradley, 2008:20, Kriesberg, 2007:190-191). Persons within conflict settings always hold a set of understandings about themselves and other parties to the conflict, which are linked to and affect relationships in the conflict (Mitchell, 2005:8). Those conceptions are difficult to alter, and some critics even consider the thought of achieving this kind of change “wildly optimistic” (Mitchell,
2002:9). However, if achieved, there might be great potential when it comes to paving way for transformation of relationships in conflict. This type of change may lead to more positive relations in conflict, rather than only suggesting peripheral, short-term settlements (Northrup, 1989:78, Kriesberg, 2007:187-188).

**Identity, History, Conflict**

When discussing identity in relation to the development of intractable conflicts it is useful to employ the concept of core construct (Northrup, 1989:64, Sahadevan, 1997:64). Core constructs are defined as those by which individuals maintain their main sense of identity and existence (Kelly 1955:482). In conflict-ridden societies such as Israel-Palestine, Cyprus and Sri Lanka, identities which are perceived as most core to the self often coincide with the master narratives of nation or ethnic group which one affiliates. Because those groups often are perceived as being under constant threat, the identity dynamics in those conflicts come to have quite unique features.

Core constructs in settings of intractable conflict share three main characteristics, related to the relationality and boundedness of identity/difference. They address self-images and their preoccupation with insecurity, images of the other and relations to difference, and finally how the relationship between the self and other is constituted through the construction of boundaries between the collectives. When certain aspects of identity are seen as a core construct to a person, it is important for his/her sense of security (Northrup, 1989:68). Some of the researchers that stress the constructedness of understandings of security also emphasize the theoretical links between identity and security (Cf. McSweeney, 1999, Weldes et al., 1999a, Campbell, 1992, Kinnvall, 2004, Huysmans, 1998, Krause and Williams, 1997, Albert et al., 2001). All communities tend to focus on different aspects of security, but for societies involved in intractable conflicts, where the situation is characterized by continuous and prolonged threats to life, the state and the well-being of community-members, the security orientation is particularly salient (Smoke, 1984, Bar-Tal, 2000:87, 1974, Klare and Thomas, 1991). Shared beliefs in conflicted societies constantly reproduce images of the insecure self. Insecurity and feelings of danger are important elements in all identity-establishing processes (Cf. Campbell 1992, Neumann 1999, Stern 2001, Weldes et al. 1999b). However, as mentioned above, they tend to be more obvious and explicit in societies involved in intractable conflicts. This is due to the fact that those societies have long been involved in violent situations through which different security practices have been inscribed in the narratives of the groups involved. Insecurity is hence inherently linked to the self.

It is insufficient only to discuss the self when aiming to understand processes of identity construction. Any identity of either individuals, local communities, nations, or states is always “established in relation to a series of differences that have become socially recognized” (Connolly, 1991:64). Identity and difference are always entangled, and their relationship can be understood as being at the very locus of conflict (Jabri, 1996:131, Buckley-Zistel, 2008:31). The discussion of identity and its relations to difference contributes with valuable insight on the emergence and ending of conflicts and therefore merits close attention (Buckley-Zistel, 2008:32). It has been argued that the clearest link between identity and conflict is the act of locating “the evil” in the actions of the other, who is then understood as inferior and villainous, especially in relation to the “good” character of the self. This process entails identifying the own group as a victim and identifying the other with stable traits with negative connotations, such as hypocrisy, intolerance, negligence, arrogance, greediness, extremism and so forth (Slocum-Bradley, 2008:12, Moghaddam, 2006). Hence, the most striking feature of understandings of difference in settings of intractable conflict, is common understandings of it in terms of threat. Through various cultural processes difference can be transformed into otherness and when that occurs, a source of insecurity becomes established. Otherness is then understood as standing in a
double relationship to notions of identity; it both threatens and constitutes it (Weldes et al., 1999b:11).

One of the most typical characteristics of identity construction in general, and of the construction of national identity in particular, is thus that it is inherently boundary-producing (Calhoun, 1995:197, Neumann, 1999:4). The processes of boundary-production are especially visible in societies involved in intractable conflicts. Those boundaries often appear stable to observers, because understandings of identities often become static, appearing as if not prone to change at all. However, the constructed nature of identity, difference and boundaries separating them implies that identities are never static, but are ever understood as negotiable and context-dependent (Hylland-Eriksen, 1993:42).

One way of describing the psychological processes resulting in seemingly stable boundaries, is to use the term stabilization. This is a process of crystallizing or hardening the construction of the self and the other, putting “secure” distance between the self and the threatening other in conflict (Northrup, 1989:71). When studying practices of commemoration in groups involved in intractable conflicts, it is clear they tend to reflect core constructs of groups involved. They tend to be security-oriented, as they revolve around the group’s historical traumas and glories, trying to find ways through which future traumas can be avoided (Volkan, 1997:48). In societies involved in intractable conflicts, the ordering of mainstream historiography is often closely knit to the society’s narratives of conflict and to the stabilized boundaries between opponents in conflict. These exclusionary narratives help uphold the stability of boundaries between identity/difference and serve to justify violent politics of exclusion. Narratives of collective memory in intractable conflicts often tell us a tale of difference as enemy, threatening the self (Buckley-Zistel, 2008:33). Just as the insecure self is inscribed in the history of collectives involved in intractable conflicts, so is thus the image of difference as threat. When historical images of the self as employing aggressive strategies to defend its state of insecurity are introduced, narratives of the other as strong and sometimes dehumanized are often present, having as its only goal to destroy the insecure collective self. Thus, difference - here embodied in the character of the other as a threat to the insecure self - is inscribed into the collective memory of parties involved in intractable conflict. The other is held at distance, perceived as continuously threatening and aggressive throughout time. There are numerous examples of societies involved in protracted conflicts, where changes in narratives of historiography and identity provoked intense debates. Those cases include for example Ireland, Cyprus, India and Sri Lanka (C.f. Boyce and O'Day, 1996, C.f. Strathern, 2004, Papadakis, 2003, Papadakis, 2008a, Banerjee, 1997, Ryan, 1996, McBride, 2001).

Conceptions of history are crucial in the process of shaping ideas and emotions underlying actions of individuals in national groups (Wertsch, 1997:6). The official histories of nation-states provide citizens with a sense of group identity and legitimate a people in their own eyes (Tulviste and Wertsch, 1995). History can hence be viewed as a centerpiece of identity (Cohen, 1999:28). This implies that historiography might be an important site of contestation when struggling over national identity (Levy, 1999:51). Whoever controls the “proper” interpretation of the past has the power to shape the present, and possibly also aspirations for the future. Commemoration and identity are seen are understood as linked together by placing the perceived homogeneity of the collective in both past, present and future (Papadakis, 2003:253, Zerubavel, 1995, chapter one, Ricœur, 1984:241).

This section has showed that commemorative narratives in intractable conflicts reflect core constructs of the groups involved, and often mirror the dimensions of the insecure self, difference as threat and stable boundaries, bringing the relationship between a group and its perceived other in conflict to the fore. However, as the main aim of this study is to conceptualize how change in

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2 Northrup uses the term rigidification to characterize this phenomenon.
understandings of history might influence trajectories of conflicts, I now move to the subject of change and how that should be conceptualized in relation to the topic of this study.

**Assessing Change: Narrative as a Binding Concept**

As this study takes interest in debates over history and their relation to the development of contemporary conflicts, there is a need to find theoretical entry points that can connect the realms of conflict, history, and identity. A central connecting-point is that we construct narrative identities, both at the level of collective history and at the level of individual life (Ricœur, 1984:241). In this way, narratives can be understood as guardians, or keepers, of time (Wood, 1991:9). Different experiences that might be shattered and contradictory are placed into narratives with beginnings, midpoints and endings. Hence, heterogeneous experiences and conflicting views are ordered in the telling of one seemingly coherent narrative. Narrative thus functions as a connective device between the realms of temporality, identity and history.

All the narratives of a society can be understood as its narrative constellation (Somers, 1994). Within a narrative constellation, different stories are told, stories about history and memory, stories about conflict, and stories about relations to others. The narrative constellation can be understood as a broad repertoire that offers possible identities to the national collective, whose members in turn choose which identities to adopt and/or reject depending on individual properties as well as societal context. The dominant narratives in a narrative constellation are understood as its master narratives. On the margins of narrative constellations reside narratives that challenge their conventional wisdom. Those are called counter-narratives. Those “[…] disturb those ideological maneuvers through which “imagined communities” are given essentialist identities.” (Bhabha, 1990:300) Counter-narratives hence challenge the conventional wisdom of societies (Andrews, 2004, Zerubavel, 1995). The master commemorative narratives of a collective are understood as its broader view of history, which is socially constructed and provides group members with a general notion of their shared past. The counter-commemorative narratives, in turn, are narratives regarding the nation’s history which reside on the margins of the collective memory. They are seldom related publicly and are often rejected by both the larger public and/or official institutions (Zerubavel, 1995:6-7). Counter narratives can often be read under the surface of master narratives, and are always in tension with dominant stories, neither fully in opposition nor untouched. Counter narratives expose the power of master narratives; their inherent power is also evident as they point to the construction of the dominant story by suggesting other ways in which it could be told (Andrews, 2004:3).

If heroic and/or victimizing stories of the in-group are told, as well as demonizing stories of the out-group, those categories irrevocably carry on into the present, resulting in stable borders between relevant and irrelevant stories, as well as relevant and irrelevant collectives. If counter narratives are let in which describe the history of self and other in a novel way, they might possibly erode the apparent stability of borders. If narratives which display permeable boundaries between groups win ground, acute feelings of insecurity can be experienced on many levels. It might bring about fear of the other as well as fear of the consequences if it is claimed that one’s own collective has committed morally doubtful acts, together with feelings of threat, due to the fact that a core construct of one’s group is challenged, resulting in acute feelings of insecurity. Now, the former enemy and perpetrator might be understood as a victim, whereas the collective self who traditionally has ascribed historical victimhood all of a sudden is understood as a perpetrator. This implies a fundamental shift in the view of self and other that is extremely challenging. This challenge might be understood as threatening because the content of the new narratives is understood as a threat to the stable boundaries of the core construct.

In order to study elaborations on memory and their societal consequences, attention must be paid to the carriers of memory, so that studies do not end up describing free-floating representations
of the past that might or might not have relevance for politics (Müller, 2002:3). In this study those carriers are embodied in memory agents and official memory institutions. Memory agents are the actors who through commemorative narratives have the potential to affect identifications. Their narratives can in turn be inscribed into institutions, which continue to communicate certain views of the past or contribute to their alteration. The view put forward here is thus a “modified form of structurationalism” (Suganami, 1999:379), where narrative is seen as a crucial mediating factor in the complex relational web between agents and structures. Those concepts and their relevance for the process of conflict transformation are developed in the following two sections.

**Challenging Master Narratives: Introducing Memory Agents**

The agent is understood as central in the construction and forwarding of narratives and counter narratives. The persons promoting counter narratives as well as master narratives propagate different versions of reality and hence contribute to understandings of conflict. This study sees actors as crucial when it comes to transforming identities in intractable conflicts over time. Action is then understood in terms of narration. Narrators of history are in this context understood as memory agents, who have similarities with what Mitchell in conflict settings calls change agents (2006:29). They can affect identifications as they have the possibility to present the public with different identifications, and hence own the potential of influencing the course of conflict. However, it is key that they succeed in communicating their narratives into official memory institutions, which in turn are very influential in communicating memories to the public.

Commemorative narratives have the possibility to influence the identification of those who are presented with them. This facilitates an understanding of the debates between different memory agents as indirect struggles for power over identification (C.f. Connolly, 1991, Dyrberg, 1997). The narrative elaboration that is the outcome of their social interaction might have implications for identities and relationships in conflict. The fate of commemorative narratives depends on the capacity of its “social bearers”, here considered memory agents, to communicate and sustain them (Ram, 2009:367). The social interaction among agents has repercussions on the narrative constellation, which in turn contributes to broader identifications in society.

Memory agents propagating narratives of commemoration, do so in different forums. One important channel where images of nationality are communicated to the public is of course mass media. When mass media express views on history and identity on editorial pages where specific views held by the newspaper publisher are printed, it is understood as broadcasting views held by certain memory agents. Moreover, mass media have another important function: an arena where different views meet and are presented to the public. Mass media then assume the role of a public marketplace (Petersson, 2006:43, Nygren, 2001, Weibull, 2000) where different memory agents can communicate their views. There, different narratives of the nation's history are displayed, and thus it might be possible to discern which narratives are more dominant at a given moment in time.

When memory agents are linked to master and counter narratives, two different categories are discerned. Those aiming to preserve continuity in understandings of history as well as of societal boundaries are understood as gatekeepers, whereas those promoting social change through counter narratives are understood as challengers. The terminology might suggest that the two categories are mutually exclusive. However, I propose sensitized categories that point toward endpoints in a continuum. In their “purest” form, gatekeepers may hence reason along the lines suggested above, just as adamant challengers often tell stories about the past and present along the lines just suggested. However, empirical analyses makes clear that various memory agents and their respective narratives are not clear-cut.

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3 Further elaborated below
Commemorative narratives require and always reflect the memory agent’s perspective; it is never voiceless. Through narrative it can be discerned how narrators view themselves, both in relation to others and in specific situations (Patterson and Monroe, 1998:316). The memory agents refer to actions in the past in order to make the present and the future intelligible, which is also the case on the macro level, where as mentioned before collectives describe common pasts as well as destinies, suggesting that they have a collective identity that should be recognized by others (Patterson and Monroe, 1998:316). Even though storytelling can be an act of an individual, the creation of narratives concerning collective or national identities is never an act that can be carried out in isolation. Actions as set out in narratives of collective identity hence have to appeal to an audience in order to have any real consequences. Thus what a collective can do in concert, and can become, is determined by the reactions of the audiences to which the stories are addressed (Ringmar, 1996:79). The interplay between memory agents and their potential influence on official memory institutions has repercussions on the narrative constellations of societies. That dynamic is discussed in the following section.

Challenging Master Narratives: Introducing Official Memory Institutions

The commemorative narratives of a nation are transmitted to the public in different ways. Children and students are taught the national history in school books, which communicate a sense of belonging and relevant categories of self and other at an early stage in life (Bar-Tal, 1988, Bar-Tal and Teichman, 2005:157). Another important form of commemoration takes place during national holidays commemorating past actions of the collective. Here past glories and victories are celebrated, and humiliations and traumas are remembered. School education together with state supported national holidays serve an important function when it comes to communicating commemorative narratives to the individuals of national collectives. Together they point out events to remember and events to forget, shaping an image of the nation as historically homogenous and continuous. They continuously communicate the official view of history to the public, with inherent power to affect collective identifications (Papadakis, 2003:254).

In the literature on collective memory and its relations to identity formation, states are often mentioned as contributing to social cohesion through the communicating of official views of history to the public. The use of history curricula to foster national sentiment, for example, is a well-known practice in all modern countries (Al-Haj, 2005, Nash et al., 1998), and might be especially salient in societies involved in intractable conflicts (Bar-Tal, 1988). In many societies, especially those suffering from long-standing conflict, official history emphasizes the suffering of the nation and also helps to legitimate its future goals (Papadakis, 2008b:128). Hence, certain views of history are mediated to the public through different channels. Differing terminologies are used when describing this official memory communication to the public. Mehlinger and Apple talk about school books used in history education as a modern version of village storytellers, since they convey to children and adolescents what adults believe they should know about their own society and others (Mehlinger, 1985, Apple, 1993). Podeh (2000), and Al-Haj (2005), in turn call channels communicating history to the public memory agents. I find the latter terminology misleading as those channels have no will of their own, but are dependent on decisions taken by political actors. This study instead suggests that channels communicating official memory, or state memory (Tulviste and Wertsch, 1995:312), should be understood as official memory institutions4. They are dependent on memory agents and their political

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decisions, according to which they communicate certain views of history to the public. Not only school books are understood as official memory institutions, but also history curriculums, commemorative rituals sponsored by the state, and education about conflict history undertaken in the military.

**Boundary Openings and Closures**

Reconstruction of identity is an ongoing process. However, when new narratives arise, overtly challenging societies’ master narratives, possibilities for transformation unfold. Those moments often occur during peace processes when the ongoing conflict is momentarily on hold and new narratives of peace come to the fore (Buckley-Zistel, 2008:58). This might be described as “the odd time in-between” (Arendt, 1968:14), where dominant traditions are broken and a gap appears in which action and change might occur. During those times, the birth of new narratives as individuals and groups tell new stories about themselves are often witnessed.

Moments when counter-narratives are introduced might evoke strong reactions among the inhabitants of a society. “New” histories might be met with suspicion and antipathy, whereas others welcome the possibilities brought about by the new formulations of history. Most often differing factions in society react in different ways depending on their own identifications, hopes and fears. The narrators alone do not have the power to decide which narrative is to become dominant in society. The inhabitants of that society are a constant part of the process because they have to accept the narratives in order for them to become master narratives of that society (C.f. Buzan et al., 1998:28-31).

As the general conception of identities is that they are malleable and thus might be altered, the introduction of new identities through counter narratives might under certain circumstances lead to identity change. Memory agents might identify strongly with a peace movement, the international community of intellectuals or activists, or other identities that do not rely on a strong identification aligned with the master narratives of national identity. The crucial question is if and how the memory agents promoting counter commemorative narratives can succeed in communicating those narratives, so that they are not understood as threatening. If narratives are let into societal memory institutions, it is thought of as bringing boundary openings. This partly results from circumstances facilitating the introduction of counter narratives and could hence contribute to synthesizing a new identification (Bloom, 1990:40).

The transformation of the image of the collective self involves painful concessions. If counter narratives presenting permeable boundaries between identity groups are let in, the locus of master narratives are confronted, touching on traumas as well as amnesias. Thus “new” images of the self, breaking with the insecure self-images of the master narratives, are presented and one has to confront the other’s picture of the self, inasmuch as the other’s narrative is given recognition. As mentioned earlier, this opens up for the possibility of viewing both the self and the other in more pluralistic terms, making a transformation of identity possible:

“The way we have seen ourselves, thought of ourselves, and represented ourselves is challenged through excavating our past in the light of the ‘enemy’. […] Once conscious we might consider our prejudices and prejudgments as inappropriate and unsuitable and discard some of our assumptions or positions, habits or routines. In doing so, in discarding features that were intrinsic to our identity, we change.” (Buckley-Zistel, 2008:44)

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5 This discussion is inspired by the Copenhagen school of security and its view on successful securitization as a process dependent on the acceptance by the audience.
Sometimes the introduction of boundary-destabilizing narratives is inhibited, which might lead to boundary closures. Individuals who might act in concert with fellow members of the collective are then provoked to “secure” the master narratives (Bloom, 1990:40). This maneuver fortifies the master narratives so that the core construct of the collective can remain intact. Here the concessions are considered too painful or outright illegitimate, and the “new” identification is discarded altogether.

Reactions to counter narratives might hence differ. They can produce boundary transformation through initial boundary openings, or the upholding of the status quo through boundary closures. The dynamic of identification thus makes us understand conditions for action in a collective sharing the same core construct (Bloom, 1990:53). The discussion above indicates how the struggle over commemorative narratives might have implications on identities in conflicts. This might obviously work in two ways. When the counter narratives promoting permeable boundaries win ground, the conflict might be on a constructive path, whereas when gatekeepers succeed in promoting their narratives, the conflict might again take a destructive turn.

Having worked through theoretical connections between history, identity and narrative, and the potential impact by memory agents when it comes to identities in conflict, I now turn to discuss the Israeli case.

**Israeli Master Commemorative Narratives: Stable boundaries**

When reviewing the literature on dominant themes in the Israeli narratives regarding the foundation of the state in 1948, three themes seem especially dominant. (1) The idea of “the few against the many” of the Israeli David defeating an Arab Goliath, breeding a picture of the Jewish collective as invincible as well as innocent (C.f. Almog 2000:233, Sela 2005:211). This connects to the idea that the Jewish people in Palestine faced the same conditions in Israel around 1948 as they did in Europe on the eve of the Holocaust. (Friling 2003:26) This has enhanced the picture of Israel as vulnerable and in constant need of strong defensive measures. (2) The notion of “a voluntary flight of the Palestinians from Palestine”, placing the blame for the Palestinian “refugee problem” solely on the Palestinian elite and public (C.f. Aggestam 2004:134-135, Bar-On 2006, Silberstein 1999:156-157). (3) Arab unwillingness to negotiate for peace after the war of 1948. The understanding has been that Israel approached the Arab governments to reach a peace agreement. However, the Arabs turned down the proposal, and sought revenge in order to wipe out the shame of their defeat. (C.f. Sela 2005:212, Silberstein 1999:97, Tessler 2006:178-180).

Those three themes taken together present a picture of the foundation of the State of Israel as a righteous struggle by a defensive and weak Jewish collective against a strong enemy, on lands that were largely unpopulated due to voluntary exile. The continuation of the conflict has accordingly been explained as a result of Arab reluctance to negotiate for peace. The continuous militancy of the Jewish state was formulated according to the principle of “no alternative” (“ein breira”), meaning that in order to survive in the face of Arab aggression and unwillingness to reach a peace agreement, Israel had no alternative than to become highly militarized so as to avoid the tragedy of another exile. Thus, the historical weakness of the Jewish collective and moral legitimacy of the Jewish cause in the face of Arab aggression served as a strong legitimating argument in the master commemorative narratives. With this follows the belief that Israel’s only option is military, as social-political options are not sufficient to assure national security (Idalovic 2004:624). The solution to Israel’s historically motivated security predicament has thus been to construct a highly militarized Jewish state (Aggestam 1999:57).

The Israeli master commemorative narratives draw stark distinctions between self and other. The Israeli Jewish self is often described as utterly insecure, contrasted to the threatening aggressiveness of the Palestinian collective. Thus, boundaries between the conflicting groups have
been described as stable, with mostly positive traits on one side and negative on the other. Ethnic boundaries are seldom crossed in the master commemorative narratives of the Israeli war of 1948. The Jewish collective is described as morally superior, whereas the Palestinian counterpart is inferior culturally and morally (Kimmerling, 1983). The Jews are also understood as victims of historical consequences, whereas the other, when visible, is mostly described as an aggressor. Thus, the two entities are kept apart, and the Jewish collective is seen as needing to engage in hard work in order to secure the collective from the doings of its counterpart.

The Israeli master commemorative narratives have become inscribed into various official memory institutions. Israel’s education policy since the establishment of State Education Law in 1953 has been true to the master commemorative narratives. This law established that Israeli curricula should teach “the values of Jewish culture”, “love for the homeland” and “loyalty to the Jewish state”. This law was immensely important to the Israeli system, so important that David Ben-Gurion referred to it as one of the country’s two “supreme laws”, the other being the right of return (Hazony 2000b:1). Except from educational policy, the master commemorative narratives were also institutionalized through various state supported holidays, during which Israeli citizens have a day off from work to celebrate important historical events. Israeli society has become immersed in collective rites of commemoration that have been made part of the national calendar (Weiss 1997:92). In this way the master commemorative narratives have been upheld not only by the stories told amongst the members of the collective, but also by the communication of the master commemorative narratives through important official channels, starting off already in kindergarten (Bar-Tal and Teichman 2005, Firer 2009).

The Israeli master commemorative narrative was clearly dominated by understandings of stable boundaries between the conflict’s opponents. However, since the very inception of the Zionist movement, an anti-narrative has existed on the margins of the narrative constellation (Segev 2001:46, Shapira 1999:23). The ideas were marginal in Israeli politics and culture; however, as we shall see in the later sections, the advent of the New Historians’ narratives changed all that (Shapira 1999:26).

**Israeli Counter Commemorative Narratives: Permeable Boundaries**

Around 1987, a series of critical historical accounts questioning the Israeli master commemorative narratives were published. The first author to do so was Simcha Flapan, a left-wing veteran of the Mapam-party, who in his book *The Birth of Israel: Myth and Reality* (1987), questioned the very foundations of earlier interpretations of the war. Following the publication of Flapan’s book, a number of other works were published, inspired by his worldviews and fuelled by material in the newly released archives, which came to receive extensive attention. One of the most controversial of those books was Benny Morris’ *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1949* (1987), which became widely debated. Morris’ analysis shattered the understandings of the Jewish collective during the war as being inferior in numbers, as well as describing them as committing mass expulsions, even though not according to any major strategic plan, of Palestinian inhabitants of what was to become Israeli land. Two other scholars who followed this trend were Avi Shlaim and Ilan Pappé. Shlaim’s book, *Collusion Across the Jordan* (1988), also shatters the idea of voluntary flight of the Palestinians, and describes a flight forced by Israeli expulsions, due to secret plans with the leadership of Jordan, so that the two states would be able to share the East and West Banks of the Jordan River. Pappé’s first book on the topic also regarded the 1948 war and is called *The Making of the Arab-Israeli Conflict: 1947-1951* (1993). Pappé also set out to address the “myths” constructed within the master commemorative narratives, and he accordingly addressed the topic of forceful expulsions conducted by the Israeli Defense Forces on the former Palestinian inhabitants of the

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6 A left-wing marxist party, which ceased to exist in 1997.
state, in line with Morris and Shlaim making the Israeli Jewish collective responsible for the creation of the situation of the Palestinian refugees. Those were the works serving as inspiration for further scholars, questioning what had become known as historical truths in Israeli society. Several researchers addressed the alleged “David vs. Goliath-myth”, and undermined the view of the Jewish collective as a weak, defensive David, fighting a strong, vindictive and aggressive Arab world portrayed as Goliath (Silberstein 1999:99). The military strength of the Israeli army at the time was estimated by the New Historians to be much greater than claimed earlier. The army is also said to have been better equipped with weapons, which previously had been denied (Morris 1990:33). The role of the Israeli forces as being not only defensive combatants but also expelling large numbers of Palestinians as well as committing war crimes such as massacres (Pappé 2003:115), also formed a decisive break with the self-image described in the master commemorative narratives. This questioned the morality of the Jewish collective, who according to Morris and Shlaim was far more strategic in their takeover of land and the related expulsion of Palestinians. In the works of the New Historians, sustaining themes in the master narratives are shattered and the status of the self as morally just is questioned. The myths of “David vs. Goliath” as well as the establishment of “A land without people for a people without land” are overthrown. The morality of one’s own collective is scrutinized and the result is that one’s own collective at times has been strong, offensive and quite ruthless in its actions toward the adversary in conflict. The constant historical insecurity of the self as described in the master commemorative narratives is thus questioned. In contrast to the view of self as pure, innocent and morally just in the master commemorative narratives, the counter narratives present a picture in which the Israeli state was “born in sin” (Morris 1990:8).

In the counter commemorative narratives, the opponents in conflict are described in different terms than before (Blomeley, 2005:130). There is no denial of the victimhood created by the Holocaust. Other qualities of the self are emphasized, however. Thus, the self, apart from being a victim, is described as a perpetrator in another historical context. In this way the self is described in a more complex manner in the narratives of New History. When it comes to views of the other, that collective is also described as more versatile. Not all Arabs are described in the same fashion, but are rather understood as pluralistic, as some are seen as immoral whereas some, like the Palestinians during the expulsions of the 1948 war, are described as vulnerable victims of Jewish expulsions and elite negotiators of Israel and Transjordan, negotiating behind their back. Views of the Palestinian collective are thus shifted, as the Palestinians no longer solely are understood as perpetrators (Campos, 2007:53). In this account, they are the victims of the war of 1948. As the narratives describe Israeli attempts to block the return of Palestinian refugees as well as war crimes committed by the Israeli party, the whole discussion regarding Arab reluctance to negotiate for peace appears in another light. Boundaries between groups are thus described as permeable as the contrasts between them are blurred. The self comes to resemble former images of the other as it is understood as a perpetrator, whereas the other starts to resemble the self, as its victimhood is made visible. The boundary between identity and difference thus becomes more permeable, as morality and victimhood are ascribed to both groups, even though under different historical circumstances. In the following, the Israeli debates about New History will be examined in terms of boundary shifts.

**Boundary Openings in the Israeli History Debates**

Israel experienced a change in general political climate during the 1980s and 1990s, which was a factor favoring new interpretations of traditional narratives (Shlaim 1999:290). At this time, Israel experienced a whole range of cultural and ideological “earthquakes“ as general notions of national politics, economy, conflict, and culture were questioned from conservative as well as politically more radical factions (Segev 2001:133). The rapid changes led an increasing number of Israelis to view Zionism as outdated. In turn, this led some Zionist leaders to adopt a highly defensive posture
Those trends led to a decline of Zionist ideology, as the rapidly changing cultural, economic, and social landscapes together with altered political conditions led a growing number of Israelis to regard Zionism as obsolete in the new, globalized and pluralized Israel (Idalovichi 2004:622, Silberstein 1999:95). Thus, the master narratives of Israel nationalism were challenged as traditional national narratives were targeted from various directions. The Israeli history debates by and large coincided with this cultural and ideological turmoil.

When New History was introduced, the public had therefore already been exposed to the theme of permeable boundaries through other counter narratives which were central in the narrative constellation at this point in time. Thus, there was a greater chance that the counter narratives of New History would resonate with the public, as the Israeli narrative constellation in general experienced a shift toward more permeable boundaries. Even though the claims of the New Historians were quite controversial, they became quite influential for a brief period of time.

Different categories of actors served as challengers in the Israeli history debates. Examples of those are primarily the New Historians themselves, such as Benny Morris, Ilan Pappé, Avi Shlaim, Tom Segev and others, who through their academic work inspired politicians, civil servants, as well as people in the cultural sector. Secondary interpreters of the narratives of New History then tried to inscribe them into important official memory institutions. Those actors were mainly historians writing educational textbooks such as Eyal Naveh and Keziya Tabibian (Podeh, 2002), as well as television producers partaking in the making of Tekuma, a publicly broadcasted documentary series challenging traditional views of the war of 1948 (Pappé, 1998). Politicians also played an important part as they challenged the master commemorative narratives in the public realm, especially regarding education. Here, education minister Yossi Sarid and civil servants on the education board such as Moshe Zimmerman, played important parts as their opinions regarding important policy issues clearly influenced the writing of new history textbooks as well as the composition of a new history curriculum (Naveh, 2006). The counter narratives even trickled into the peace process, where head negotiators such as Yossi Beilin and Daniel Levy served as important challengers, claiming to have been influenced by the writings of New History leading to the first ever negotiations on the topic of Palestinian refugees in 2000 and 2001 (Ben Yosef-Hirsch 2007).

One way to understand the initial success of narratives of New History, is that other narratives that were important during the same time-span supported and rendered legitimacy to the ideas. During the 1980s, counter narratives of Zionism and narratives promoted by the peace movement, indicated more permeable boundaries between national groups than before. As they were gaining acceptance, the chance was greater that the narratives of New History would resonate with the broader public. Subsequently, counter commemorative narratives were inscribed into Israeli memory institutions, starting out in the early 1990s and went on to the end of the 1990s. Curricula were changed, new text books in History were being written and there was also changes in description of history in state sponsored television. The counter commemorative narratives then became more forceful competitors to the master narratives as were communicated directly to the public through official memory institutions.

**Boundary Closures in the Israeli History Debates**

It is clear that even though New History experienced substantial initial success during early and mid-nineties, the turbulent time period in the mid- and late 1990s resulted in an upheaval of master narratives of Zionism and conflict. New actors who would try to exert influence to remove New History from official memory institutions hence came to power.

When it comes to gatekeepers criticizing and working against the counter narratives of New History, several individuals and collectives were involved. Academics faithful to the master commemorative narratives of Zionism were initially the main actors addressing the arguments of
New History in academic and public forums. The gatekeepers were active from the start, with academics trying to delegitimize the arguments of New History (C.f. Megged, 1994, Karsh, 1997, Teveth, 1989). They were later joined by politicians who expressed concerns that the New Historians’ worldviews would harm the legitimacy of the state (Ram, 2003). Various organizations, such as “Professors for a Strong Israel”, were also formed, targeting the provocative ideas of New History (Ghazi-Bouillon, 2009, Naveh, 2006). Strong politicians from the right, such as Ariel Sharon and Education Minister Limor Livnat also played vital parts as their gatekeeping activities on the elite level of politics subsequently removed New History from the vital official memory institution of education.

The late 1990s saw some efforts at peace by Israeli Labor leader Ehud Barak, but after his failure to reach an agreement with the Palestinians in Camp David 2000 and in Taba 2001, many regarded the peace process as terminated. New actors were brought into politics due to new political conditions as the Likud party again won the general elections. When it comes to narratives of Zionism, this period hence saw increased support for Neo-Zionist ideas, which was especially evident at the time of the election of the well-known hard-liner Ariel Sharon in 2001. The second Intifada coincided in time with the attack on the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001. The Israeli right could then use the threat of global terrorism as fuel in their political rhetoric against Palestinian violence during the 2nd Intifada. During the later stage of debate, several interest groups with varying degrees of organization were formed in Israeli society. Their common aim was to criticize Israeli New History and to prevent those narratives from being inscribed into Israeli official memory institutions. As a result of the social interaction in the later stages of debate, the initial partial acceptance of the ideas in the counter narratives of the New History declined.

Now a backlash was evident, in which the balance between the former master narratives and the counter narratives of New History almost returned to status quo ante. Influential politicians such as Ariel Sharon and Limor Livnat, as well as interest groups such as Ariel Center for Policy Research, the Shalem Center and Women in Green, supported the master narratives of commemoration, which again resulted in teaching at universities and schools alongside the master commemorative narratives of Zionism (Ghazi-Bouillon, 2009). The cultural scene was also affected because influential memory agents made an effort to criticize and delegitimize cultural products created outside of the frame of the master commemorative narratives. Now different gatekeepers worked together to uproot the counter narratives of New History, and eventually turned out to be quite successful in that endeavor. When dispersed to the public scene through media, and later on also to education policy, the gatekeepers fiercely guarded the boundaries of the master narratives. The counter narratives of New History hence disappeared from the Israeli official scene by the early 2000s, coinciding with the eruption of the second Intifada. However, Israeli New History lives on, albeit once more on the margins of Israeli society.

Conclusion

Through the investigation into understandings of identities in conflicted societies and their linkage to commemorative narratives, this study has addressed the linkage between intractable conflicts and understandings of history. Commemorative narratives have been theoretically linked to important narratives of identity and conflict in the present. Hence the crucial role of construction and reconstruction of historical understandings in conflicts have been highlighted. It has also been clear that different and shifting understandings of history during certain circumstances might have influence on the development of conflict.

This article has forwarded understandings of the crucial role of endogenous processes involving memory agents in the development intractable conflicts. Memory agents have the potential to question governing assumptions of identities and relationships in conflict. In the Israeli case
historians, politicians and civil servants working with education policy had the potential to influence identities in conflict through the introduction of boundary-destabilizing narratives. In turn, that might have repercussions on the conflict dynamic. The identification of memory agents as having influence on power relations in society is also crucial. The act of challenging master narratives of history and conflict - through the telling of counter narratives - may influence official memory institutions, which can result in transformed relationships in conflict. The act of gatekeeping is also an important component here, as promoters of master narratives try to exert influence to safeguard the master narratives and hence attempt to maintain continuity within the social system. This study also contributed to a deeper understanding regarding the processes of boundary openings and boundary closures. Boundary openings are achieved when boundary-destabilizing counter narratives take root and subsequently become inscribed into official memory institutions. This can be brought about by the act of challenging mentioned above, which in turn spurs change in the narrative constellation that may bring transformed conflictual relations.

When other narratives containing destabilized boundaries were winning ground, narratives of New History also started to take root. The narrative constellation at that time can be understood as a facilitating circumstance for narratives of permeable boundaries, as it might have contributed to readiness to accept novel narratives among the public. Later on, when the peace process stagnated and violence was on the rise, the gatekeepers were successful in their attempts and successfully removed many of the narratives of New History from institutions. The discussion showed that several circumstances worked inhibitingly when it came to further spread of the narratives of New History. The gatekeepers aimed at boundary closures through delegitimation and later on managed to remove the counter narratives from the official sphere, and seemed to be most successful in that endeavor during times of increased violence and threats to physical security. However, given the processual approach here, the counter narratives still exist in the margins of Israeli society. Given facilitating circumstances and agents willing to promote narratives of permeable boundaries, they might hence again take root.

It is hence imperative for researchers and practitioners alike to pay attention to memory agents with the potential power to politically crucial official memory institutions in conflicted societies. Indeed, if peace processes continue and there is no change in official memory institutions, there might be little support among the public for peace efforts, as the boundaries between the collective self and the opponent in conflict are continuously perceived as stable. This can only bring about momentary changes in relations, as boundary-destabilizing narratives must be allowed to permeate societies in order for the intractable state of conflict to be transformed into a more tractable one, where destructive relations are replaced by more constructive ones. It is thus key to pay attention to challengers and their boundary-destabilizing counter narratives in conflict-ridden societies, as over time they might form the most important domestic challenge to core constructs of groups involved in conflict.
References


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