

Bringing the “Responsibility” back in Memory Culture

Comment on the keynote Talk of Konrad Jarausch, by ODANAKA, Naoki
“Politics of Memories and Histories and the Conflicts” (Nishinomiya, 29th Nov. 2015)

Hello all,

I would like to make 3 comments on the keynote talk of Mr. Konrad Jarausch about the so-called “memory culture” in Germany after the WWII.

Let’s start by summarizing his talk: Tracing the history of how German people have treated the WWII, centered on the NAZI, experience since 1945, he measured the distance between the public critical (critical of the NAZI and its historical background) stance and the private apologetic one in 3 periods, i.e. just after the defeat, under the Cold war, and in the post-Wall era. In the first period, most of ordinary people used the victimization narrative in order to connect or to make co-exist the publicly critical attitude and the privately apologetic feeling: A hard task to accomplish. Situation became more complicated when the Cold war began, finding Germany split into two rival and ideologically opposed countries (FRG and GDR). The two started to dispute over the comparability (or not) and the worseness of Nazism on one side and communism/socialism on the other. It is after the Berlin Wall fell that the NAZI experience was de-mythologized, that German people came into consensus over the respect for human rights, and that challenge for international reconciliation (Germany-France, Germany-Poland, for example) took shape.

My 3 comments are:

- 1. To be pointed out about the concept of “memory culture” presented by Mr. Jarausch is that it is composed of plural layers, i.e., it is multi-layered.**
- 2. The personal war experience and the attitude toward war must be connected in a right manner.**
- 3. We still have to talk about the concept of responsibility in the field of memory studies.**

Now let me explain these comments a little more precisely and concretely.

1.

Today we are living in the age of memory, especially of the collective memory, all over the world. Here in East Asia, for example, Japanese actual government, not conservative but reactionary, is trying to refute to the memory of massacre of Nanjing or that of comfort women, which Chinese or Korean governments are claiming to respect. At the same time, these governments are trying to construct (or to re-construct, or to imagine/create) a collective memory over the jurisdiction of such

and such tiny and almost no-man's islands as Takeshima/Dokto in Japan sea or Pinnacle islands in East China sea.

Mr. Jarausch's talk is suggestive for the analysis of the nature, structure, function or else of these memories, because today he classified collective memories in post-war Germany from many points of view: critical public one, private apologetic one, ordinary people's one, intellectuals' one, survivors' one, ex-nazis' one, etc, which have been entangled to make a kind of memory nexus. Mr. Lim Jie-Hyun calls it a "memory regime," I think.

From this fact, we could derive a hypothesis that **a collective memory has many layers**: one whose axis is "private vs. public," one over "critical vs. apologetic," or that around "people vs. elite/intellectuals," etc. Memory thus is a complex and complicated construct, which must be analyzed at plural levels.

It suggests that **there are some relations or links among the above-cited layers**. According to Mr. Jarausch's talk, in post war Germany, the conflict over memory has mainly existed between the private-popular-apologetic memory on the one side and the public-elite/intellectual (including historians)-critical one on the other side. Of course we could find certain historians who defended the NAZI experience in public sphere or a soldier who denounced Hitler, etc., but these are exceptional cases.

Here we have to pose a question: **How are they linked with one another?**

In the German case presented by Mr. Jarausch, for example, we should wonder why the ordinary people have tended in private sphere to be apologetic for the German past, i.e., why the critical stance toward the NAZI or WWII atrocity has been exceptional in the popular private sphere. The reason seems to lie in the fact that there did and do exist certain logical links among plural memory layers, in this case those concerning popular-elite/intellectual, private-public, and apologetic-critical.

Our task is now clear: To analyze each memory culture, to clarify its logical structure, and to find the relation among layers composing it.

2.

Just after the WWII, most members of Japanese Political, Military, and Economic elite who had benefited heavily as the responsible persons from the preparation and execution of war apologetically defended themselves and denied their war responsibility in order to escape from prosecution. A Japanese political scientist Maruyama, Masao, very famous and influential in academia and public opinion for his sharp and critical analysis of Japanese political culture before and under the WWII, found here a "culture of i-responsibility" peculiar to Japan. Today we know that even the top responsible, the emperor Hirohito himself, then sovereign and living god, tried his best to be discharged from the war responsibility.

In Germany, the personal experience under NAZI regime on the one side and the stance on the German responsibility for the war and the atrocity on the other side are connected: Those who had suffered thought that the Germany, including themselves, had done something wrong, and vice versa. Today Mr. Jarausich said that, in post-war Germany, it is those suffered most heavily from the NAZI regime and the war atrocity who “developed a critical attitude towards the German past” and “addressed their own responsibility for the disaster that had befallen their country.”

History of the two countries tells us that **there is a curious connection between the personal experience and the attitude toward the responsibility** over the critical events such as war or repressive regime (NAZI in Germany, military dictatorship in Japan). Those who suffered heavily are generally keen of their own responsibility, with an affinity to the critical memory culture. On the contrary, those who did not suffer so much because of their superior position tend to ignore or to deny their responsibility, with an affinity to the apologetic memory culture. These two tendencies could be regarded as a result of human effort to avoid the cognitive dissonance.

The suffered feels himself guilty and the non-suffered claims his innocence... it seems a kind of paradox, but is logical, for it is said that we have a mental mechanism of avoiding the cognitive dissonance. This mechanism is a kind of positive feedback system.

But I would like to say that this is not just.

Here we have to pose a question: **How could we break down this mechanism of vicious cycle of “suffering → feeling guilty → more suffering → feeling guiltier...” and of “non-suffering → feeling innocent... → non-suffering → feeling more innocent...”?**

Today Mr. Jarausich told that, after the fall of Berlin Wall, we are seeing a general tendency in unified Germany of “the shift to a critical memory culture even in the private realm.” This trend means that the above-cited vicious cycle could be broken down by some way.

Our second task is now clear: to find the reason why such a shift could emerge in Germany and to think about the question of how it could be possible in general.

3.

To my opinion, the private-popular-apologetic memory culture is based on the sentiment that “we ordinary people are not responsible, for we are commanded and forced to do so.” It could be summarized in a phrase “**where there is no free will, there is no responsibility.**”

Is this claim right and sustainable?

More concretely speaking, were ordinary German people under the NAZI regime responsible for the atrocity usually connected to their country under the WWII, even when they could have been persecuted and oppressed if they say NO to the order from their superior? And how about a

Japanese soldier or a Japanese lower cadre of colonial administration who, before and under the WWII, took part in the massacre or the settlement of comfort women brothel by order?

Recently, we did see an almost same scene: After the Berlin Wall fell, some wall guard snipers of ex-GDR were prosecuted and sentenced guilty of murder or injury of those trying to get over the wall. Ordered and forced by the superior ranked officials, they are judged to be responsible for their own deed.

These facts lead us to some fundamental questions: What is the relation between the responsibility, the suffering, and the submission? In the critical situation like war, ordinary people suffer but at the same time could be ordered to engage in some atrocity. Are they responsible then? Could we compare the suffering/submission on the one hand and the guilt on the other in order to judge whether he/she is responsible or not? Is there any link between the deed and the responsibility, and, if so, what kind?

Our third task is now clear: We still need to ask ourselves, when we talk over the collective memory, "what is the responsibility? especially in history?"

We historians have many tasks to carry out in the age when the collective memory are still functioning strongly. This is what I learned from Mr. Jarausich's talk today. Thank you for your attention.