

War, Collective Memory and the Pacifist Alternative

RICHARD JACKSON

Introduction

Tena koutou...

Thanks to Chris and the organisers for the invitation to speak.

Caveats: I am not a historian of WWI; I am however a theorist of war and peace in society.

My aims in this talk are to:

1. To reflect on how collective memories (the stories we tell as a society about our nation's past) are *constructed*, how they *function* (what they do), and how fixed and immutable they are;
2. What are the collective memories of WWI and how are they expressed? Were they inevitable? What were the alternative narratives?
3. How we might re-construct forms of collective memory which allow for a credible pacifism to emerge in our society.

What do I mean by Collective Memory?

Maurice Halbwachs was the first scholar to use the term “collective memory” and his work is considered foundational for the study of societal remembrance.

Collective memory refers to the shared narratives (stories) contained in the histories, literature, memorial practices, artifacts, symbols, traditions, images, art, music and cultural products that function to bind members of a collective group together. These stories are regularly re-told or re-enacted (in shared rituals such as memorial practices – like ANZAC Day services) and passed down to successive generations in order to reinforce a sense of belonging to a group.

In the case of New Zealand's Collective Memory of WWI, they can be seen in history books, films, documentaries, novels, TV shows, statues, monuments, museum exhibits, rituals such as remembrance ceremonies, traditions and practices (such as parades or acknowledging military sacrifice in speeches), annual pilgrimages to ANZAC Cove, symbols like the red poppy, music (like the Last Post), websites, etc.

How are Collective Memories formed and instituted in society?

The past is socially constructed, largely by elites – such as politicians, intellectual elites, cultural elites – who are usually working towards a common purpose of forging a sense of national identity. They often have to compete with other actors and “common histories” to enforce a general single narrative – there is “narrative contestation”, especially over the meaning assigned to historical events. Over time, narratives of the past evolve and change,

usually in response to new events, challenges from other actors, or elite intervention. We can think of 9/11 as an event which has been narrated into American identity narratives; and the ANZAC myth which was promulgated by the Howard government elite in Australia.

Benedict Anderson suggests that nations are an “imagined community” constructed in part through the deliberate formation of Collective Memories which give an often disparate collection of people and groups a common history and set of unifying narratives.

This is possible because as Hayden White reminds us, history is narrative: events which occur consecutively are linked together through emplotment which creates a narrative that implies both causality and purpose or meaning.

These constructed Collective Memories are then materialized in social practices (school teaching, rituals, remembrance ceremonies, etc), everyday speech, symbols (flags, emblems, etc), institutions, and material objects (memorials, statues, museum exhibits, etc).

How do Collective Memories function, especially those linked to remembrance practices? What do they do?

Their premier function is to *construct a sense of collective identity/nation-building* – individual memories are formed within the context of broader Collective Memories and often connected to them, as a way of linking the individual to the collective. In this case, individuals often connect their personal story to family members who fought in WWI, for example. The collective memory of ANZAC soldiers who fought in WWI therefore functions to link the individual to the nation.

War remembrance practices specifically function to rectify the trauma and disruption of violence on narratives of nation and identity, and to re-inscribe unity in the nation after the divisiveness of war.

It has been noted that in many Western countries where secularization has taken place since WWII, that war memorialization functions to construct a form of civil religion to play the role that institutional religion previously played.

What makes Collective Memories ideological? Are they natural or neutral processes?

Collective Memories, and remembrance practices in particular, are never neutral, natural or objective processes. Rather, they are deeply political and function ideologically to construct and enforce a particular kind of social order. This is because:

Constructing collective memory cannot avoid a simultaneous *forgetting* and *silencing* of other narratives, experiences, and perspectives. Typically, in collective memorialization of war and nationhood, for example, the voices of women, the lower classes, persecuted minorities, indigenous people, etc, are excluded. This is what Michel Foucault called knowledge subjugation. The experiences of conscientious objectors in WWI is an example of

this kind of knowledge subjugation, as their experience and viewpoint was unacknowledged or consigned to a footnote in histories, remembrance ceremonies, memorials, etc.

War memorialization in particular, involves the ethical construction of forms of violence, including sanitising violence and normalising war, and establishing what counts as legitimate violence versus illegitimate violence. Again, this process also involves silencing other kinds of violence which are then non-memorialised – such as the violence against women, animals, the enemy, or the violence of structural violence.

Related to this, collective memory construction around war in particular, involves constructing boundaries around identity – such as the boundaries between self and other, friend and enemy, soldier and civilian, and as Judith Butler reminds us, worthy and unworthy victims. More broadly, it constructs a sense of national identity based on war rather than peace or other events/characteristics/etc.

Collective memory processes also entail the inscription of dominant ethical norms. For example, in the construction of Western collective memories around WWI, duty and sacrifice to nation has been elevated over other ethical norms such as care for the Other, nonviolence, duty to humanity, etc.

In the case of war memorializing, and nation-building, these processes also tend to valorize masculine values of courage, heroism, physical strength, etc, as against values of peace, nonviolence, compromise, care, etc.

The collective memory processes associated with war and nation also function to de-politicise political violence and duty to the nation – or more accurately, to assert that political disagreement is not appropriate when it comes to discussing and remembering the nation's involvement in war. This in turn functions to enforce conformity, narrow the space for dissent, and create a particular kind of docile subject.

War memorialization also functions to normalize warism and militarism, the arms trade, war preparedness and the global culture of violence – as against pacifism, disarmament, nonviolence. In many ways, it reinforces the narrative that war is a part of human nature, and all nations must be ready to fight for their survival. In this way, it functions to make militarism a commonsensical viewpoint, and constructs what has been called “the myth of redemptive violence” (the belief that violence can not only be justified in some cases, but can even be “good”). These narratives simultaneously construct their opposites – pacifism and nonviolence – as irrational, unrealistic and nonsensical.

In all these ways then, the processes of constructing Collective Memories, especially those surrounding war and nationhood, are far from neutral, natural or objective. Instead, they are inherently value-laden and deeply ideological. They create a social reality in which militarism and war violence is seen as inevitable and sometimes necessary (and therefore legitimate and morally justified). They take a definite side of the argument against pacifism.

How fixed and immutable are Collective Memories?

War memorialisation practices are historically and geographically contingent – they vary in time (the way we remember war today is different to how we remembered it a hundred years ago); and they vary from place to place (how Canadians remember WWI is different to how we remember it, and how the US and UK remembers it – or how Germany remembers it).

War memorialisation practices are never immutable and fixed, but changeable and fluid. As social construction, they are flexible and open to new interpretations: we don't emphasise duty to empire or sacrifice for Queen any more, for example, and we now include wider forms of memorialization which include women and animals.)

The important point is to remember that change is possible; we can contest dominant forms of collective memory and memorialization, and it is possible that we will one day remember in ways that reinforce peace rather than militarism.

What is wrong with our Collective Memories of WWI specifically?

As already alluded to, our current memorialization of WWI tends to focus on duty and sacrifice – ignoring coercion (ie, conscription) and violence (ie, against deserters and Cos) – and entails an ideologically oriented view of “sacrifice” – they (positively) sacrificed themselves for our freedom/the nation/democracy versus they were sacrificed for empire/greed/venality/vainglory/etc. Related to this, they emphasise masculine values of bravery, heroism, physical strength, etc.

It tends to valorize the military as a positive social institution and promote military values – for example, by firing weapons and air force fly-pasts during ceremonies, parades, medals, etc, and sacralising the military through church-military links, sacred forms of memorialization (the Melbourne war memorial example), etc.

It also tends to white-wash the reasons for the mass slaughter – suppressing the unpleasant truth about the mass slaughter of young men for reasons of maintaining empire and its riches, and their deaths for what are today considered illiberal reasons.

Obscuring the realities of war – the true horrors of war and the bloody nature of mass killing and organized violence. Related to this, there is an obscuring of the real costs of war.

In relation to WWI, there is a failure to take responsibility for the winning powers' actions against Germany which led directly to WWII.

In the case of New Zealand, WWI memorialization asserts a form of national identity based on war experience – instead of a national identity based on peace activism, for example.

De-prioritising and crowding out the collective memorialization of alternative wars the nation has been involved in – for example, WWI memorialization in New Zealand functions to de-prioritise the effects and consequences of the land wars.

As Jock Phillips points out, war memorials in New Zealand do not promote pacifism and nonviolence, but rather were most often made to promote patriotism and prepare future generations for war sacrifice for the empire or nation.

Political elites have shown a great ability to manipulate war memorialization and collective memory for political ends, such as claiming that current overseas engagements fit within the narrative arc of the ANZAC tradition – which is a clear attempt to manipulate public opinion. It also speaks to malleable and fluid nature of these narratives, and the need for narrative contestation.

Were our Collective Memories of WWI inevitable? Were (or are) there alternative narratives?

The post-WWI peace movements, including the League of Nations

The “Never Again” narrative – the Peace Pledge Union and the white poppies, etc.

How might we re-construct our Collective Memories in ways that will allow pacifism to emerge as a credible alternative to militarism/warism?

In this particular instance, we need to recover earlier narratives about WWI (Never again; the war to end all wars), insist on narratives that are closer to historical readings (war for empire, etc), and challenge forms of memorialization and narrativisation that are clearly untruthful or manipulative. We need to engage in critical deconstruction of society’s Collective Memories and war remembrance practices and narratives.

We need to de-subjugate alternative perspectives, experiences and knowledge – such as that of civilian victims, war resisters, global south participants (the thousands of Indian troops who fought with the ANZACs, for example), the enemy soldiers, etc.

We need to challenge the myth of redemptive violence and the negative commonsense view on pacifism and nonviolence. This involves two intellectual moves: (1) pointing out the myths, failures, costs, and harms caused by the use of violence; and (2) pointing out the moral superiority and the practical superiority of pacifism and nonviolence.

The Myths, Failures, Harms and Costs of Military Violence

The short-term versus long-term costs and harms of violence – creating cultures of violence;

The inseparability of means and ends – ethical inconsistency and the *myth* of redemptive violence;

The failure of just war theory;

Violence as the anti-thesis/negation of politics;
 Militarism and the security dilemma – the perpetuation of the conditions which create future wars;

The unpredictable outcomes produced by the use of violence;

The human costs and long-term harms of war;

The financial and opportunity costs of war – the costs of institutionalizing war.

The Moral and Practical Superiority of Pacifism and Nonviolence

Means-ends consistency and the constitution of the peaceful society;

Pacifism and the political ideal;

Maintaining ethical consistency towards the other;

The empirical effectiveness of nonviolent movements, unarmed peacekeeping, nation states without militaries, etc;

The practicality of civilian national defence.

These arguments need to be made by academics and systematic research so that their empirical basis can be proven, by public figures in the media, by activists and peace protesters, and by educationalists so that future generations grow up recognizing that pacifism is a valid and ethically defensible alternative to warism and militarism. We need museums to put on peace displays, and memorials to conscientious objectors and war resisters and peace heroes. We need to work hard to re-conceptualise Collective Memories, the practices of memorialization, public opinion, policy debates, and commonsense.

Conclusion

It was not inevitable that our collective memorialization of WWI should be based on militarism and patriotism and masculinity; it was possible for alternative forms to be adopted, and there were alternative narratives at the time.

It is still possible for change in our collective memorialization, if we contest the dominant narratives and build alternatives.

For a variety of ethical and pragmatic reasons, we ought to be working towards deconstructing the dominant warist narratives and de-subjugating pacifism and nonviolence as an ethical and practical alternative.

Now is a ripe moment for reconsidering collective war memorialization, and for pressing the case for a realistic pacifist alternative. This is because not only do we have the arguments and evidence on our side, but there is a palpable sense of war weariness today and a wider awareness of the costs and limitations of military violence than at any time since WWII, in my view.