

ACCOUNTS OF A GENOCIDE: COLLECTIVE MEMORY AMONG ARMENIANS IN BRAZIL

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ABSTRACT

Established by a great number of immigrants that were attracted by the promise of prosperity at the end of the 19th century, the Armenian community in Brazil has preserved for more than one hundred years a certain level of cohesion and a sense of belonging that make it reasonable to identify the frame of a collective identity. This paper, based on ethnographic research undertaken about this group, intends to analyse the maintenance of such a collective memory and particularly the role played by memory in the process of developing a collective identity. Considering that, more than on history, it is on memory that the image which the collectivities build of themselves is based, this investigation will focus on the strategies of preservation of those records. Memory will be here understood as a selection of a number of events from the past in order to build an account that not only is coherent but it is also oriented toward a certain direction. Thus, I will analyse the memory of the Armenians in Brazil at both its individual and its collective level, carefully taking into consideration the acts performed for that purpose by the institutions of the community.

During the first decades of the 20th century large numbers of immigrants, some of them having Armenian origins, arrived in Brazil fleeing from persecution at the hands of the Ottoman Empire. This group, which settled in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, was extremely heterogeneous in terms of culture, since it consisted of people that came from different areas of the Ottoman Empire, over which they had spread during the five hundred years of Ottoman domination of Armenia. Besides that, seldom had these people preserved a language in common. Instead, each group had adopted and assimilated the predominant language in the area where they were previously settled, whether it was Arabic, Turkish, or, more rarely, Kurdish. Even when the groups could be placed in the same category, i.e. the one of Armenian language speakers, it was frequently the case that they would use different dialects, which could originate a certain number of ethnic identities. In addition to that, often did they not even belong to the same Church, as there was already some confessional plurality among the population. Therefore, despite the fact that there was a clear preponderance of the Armenian Apostolic Church, it could also be found groups that integrated the Armenian

Catholic Church and others that participated of the Armenian Evangelical Church – in any case, it was due to their belonging to the broader assemblage of the. Once banished from their own country, the survivors maintained the memory of this persecution as a leading feature in the construction of their collective identity, since all had shared the road to exile and, as a consequence, the same kind of difficulties.

This paper presents an investigation on the maintenance of Armenian identity in Brazil and tries to comprehend the function of collective memory in the attempt to preserve it. It is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in that community between 2009 and 2011, with its focus on the cities of Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, where most of the Armenians are concentrated. During that period I performed around 50 interviews with Armenians and also carried out a participant observation of both major and ordinary events related to this ethnic group. As this is a qualitative research, there is no intention to exhaust the subject or to elaborate general rules about this collectivity: my goal is to present some important topics related to its identity and to discuss them, hoping to provide elements for a better understanding of this specific diasporic community. This enterprise becomes even more relevant if we consider that very little scientific research was made about the Armenian community in Brazil and that only recently the topic has been investigated¹.

The analysis undertaken here will be divided into three parts. In the first, I explore the relations between individual and collective memory, as well as their mutual influence. In the second, I examine the realms of memory and their influence in the greater effort of maintaining Armenian identity. Finally, in the third part, I try to understand the way in which Armenian memories can be organized in order to achieve individual or collective projects, turning a set of separate events into one cohesive narrative.

Collective memory performs a primary role in the preservation of every group, and this is especially true in the case of diasporic communities who share an origin and, supposedly, a certain trajectory of migration. This should not lead to the conclusion that the group exists only because its members have this path in common: instead of that, as Fredrik Barth proposes, this course is stressed and related to those individuals precisely because the group exists; evoking the memory is nothing more than one of the ways of legitimizing a group that already has a concrete existence.² Stated in another way: it is not the sharing of a certain trajectory or of a certain memory that makes a collection of individuals think of themselves as a group; it is the fact that they think of themselves as a group that leads them to emphasize this history as something relevant.

The memory of the Armenian genocide plays this cohesive role especially

well for it evokes an episode which was not only, in greater or lesser measure, familiar to all but also was extremely traumatic for all the population due to its extent and violence³. Therefore, the memory of the genocide is particularly relevant to collective imagination, even though it is not only on this that Armenian collective memory is constructed and there is also a great emphasis on the less recent history of this people.

Owing to its force, the memory of the genocide is frequently passed from one individual to another, without formally structured institutions, such as churches or schools, which are generally indispensable to the maintenance of less traumatic memories. This is what makes it possible for Armenian descendants in Rio de Janeiro, where there are no such institutions, to preserve their identity related to Armenia. This memory remains outside (and sometimes in spite of) the institutions either because of the absence of those entities or because it relates to very exceptional, familiar events which have no room in the collective imagination. Inevitably, the memory of the genocide is at the core of these accounts.

As most Armenians in Brazil are concentrated in two cities, São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, it is on these locations that the analysis will focus, stressing, nevertheless, the differences between them. It is very important to contrast them since several institutions can be found in São Paulo while in Rio de Janeiro there are no such organizations, a fact that has caused completely different forms of socialization.

INDIVIDUAL MEMORY AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY

Generally speaking, Armenian descendants, regardless of their participation in any institution, preserve a certain memory of the genocide, so very few people up to the third generation of those born in Brazil would be unaware of the reasons why their ancestors emigrated. However, the memories preserved on a private basis are often less structured than the "common field", whose production, according to Pierre Bourdieu, would be delegated to educational institutions.⁴ These private memories are nothing but generic narratives about the individuals that immigrated or about those that vanished on the way. Interestingly, the narratives used to be more detailed the less the individuals remembering them participated in the community's institutions.

The inverse relationship between belonging to institutions and the complexity of the accounts is surprising for only a moment, as it is precisely because of the lack of a more general memory that the individuals attach themselves to particular memories. So, for people that have no access to a coherent and systematised discourse provided by institutions, it is the familiar memories that offer the basis for the maintenance of their identities. For that

reason, among Armenians in Rio de Janeiro, a relatively larger knowledge of familiar histories can be noted than among Armenians in São Paulo, whose knowledge focuses especially on the history of the community as a whole (and, more broadly, of the Armenian nation).

It is true that, as Maurice Halbwachs states, there are no individual memories which are not informed by a collective memory.⁵ Nevertheless, there are situations in which the influence of the collective on the building of the individual memory is stronger than in others. Returning to the contrast between the Armenian collectivities in São Paulo and in Rio de Janeiro, it can be asserted that, when the former reconstructs the course of its ancestors, it performs this action with a more consistent and well-structured background than the latter. This fact produces two distinct effects: on the one hand, it imposes limits upon the creative potential of the individual memory while offering it solid support for the account; on the other, it tends to homogenize the narratives, which refer, with certain nuances, to the same set of events. Without the support offered by the institutional discourse, the narratives of Armenians in Rio de Janeiro show a larger number of forgotten fragments, which either are filled out with involuntary creations or remain as a gap in the individual memory. It is very common, for that reason, for the informers to apologise for their limited knowledge or recommend that other people, who are supposed to know more than they do, should be contacted. This may be noted in the following statement of a lady that lives in Rio de Janeiro: *"I don't know much, because at that time we had little interest in the histories that they used to tell us"* (housewife, 73 years old).

However, far from this being an imperfection in the narrative, the eventual forgetfulness and the reconstruction made possible by it offer, as Michael Pollak⁶ points out, rich material for investigation that is as valuable as what is accurately recalled. For that reason such narratives should not be classified as more or less truthful, but analysed for what they reveal about the process of the making of memory as well as the reasons why people produce those remembrances. Therefore, forgetfulness and silence help us to understand the formation of the memory, as they reveal the stories which the individuals refuse to keep in mind or to tell others, but they also provide means to interpret the meaning that some experiences have on the subject's mind. In other words, identifying these dark areas of the memory makes us interrogate why it is important for the subject to subdue those stories.

On the other hand, the fact that some individual memories are founded on the discourse of the institutions – which are considered as concrete manifestations of the collective – does not mean that individual stories are perfectly homogeneous and defined by the collective's discourse. Not only is the collective memory unequally distributed among the members of the

community – even if it is accessible to all – but it is also appropriated and employed differently in each narrative construction. These characteristics of collective memory provide the appearance of an infinite number of differing reports about the same event, since each individual assimilates the collective memory according to their position in the community and the moments of their individual narrative. So, when recalling a specific familiar series of events, some people will remember certain extracts more accurately and some people will remember others, but generally speaking all will have some knowledge about the familiar history.

It is based on these references provided by common memory and, especially, on the place currently held by the interviewees that they reconstruct their past, which, according to Halbwachs, is itself the definition of the act of recalling. Thus, there is no narrative that refers exclusively to the past: what exists is always a dialogue between present and past, a record informed by the specific experiences of the group as much as by society, experiences which are frequently based on socially produced documents. As Halbwachs asserts, “le souvenir est dans une très large mesure une reconstruction du passé à l'aide de données empruntées au présent, et préparée d'ailleurs par d'autres reconstructions faites à des époques antérieures et d'où l'image d'autrefois est sortie déjà bien altérée”.⁷

Another important feature of the collective memory is that it is not confined to the documentation produced by a group, as might be presumed, although it may use this documentation to preserve itself. The memory is not necessarily coincident with the historical records. In spite of that, written documents can stimulate the act of remembering and activate recollections that otherwise would be lost, also giving direction to the narrative and avoiding, from the informants' perspective, mistakes that might have been made: “*take a look at this book* [the interviewee gets Claire Mouradian's *L'Arménie*]. *Here you will find a lot of information. There is, for example...* [he leafs through the pages of the book and reads aloud an extract]” (retired marine captain, 83 years old, living in Rio de Janeiro). This helps us to comprehend the relevance to the Armenian community of the bibliography produced about Armenia and also to understand the strength of the underlying discourse on the construction of individual memories. It is for that reason that the literature consumed by the community should be observed as carefully as individual reports, provided that the latter category refers constantly to the former.

Actually, written works and institutional memory are only part of the collective memory that people evoke as a basis of their narratives: besides them there are all social situations in which the group origins are remembered and revived, even if they occur in a non-institutional setting.

From that point of view, memory is not only the preservation of certain narratives about the past, but the whole relationship established with it, including specific traditions and customs that are frequently reproduced unconsciously by the subjects. So, an afternoon spent at the Armenian club in São Paulo, for instance, helps to consolidate the concept of *armeniy* (*Armenianness*) and to reinforce collective memory regardless of the verbalization of those topics by anyone present; these notions cannot be dissociated from people's behaviour.

After mass on Sunday afternoons it is commonplace that Armenians socialise at the club, where they meet to eat and talk. On these occasions, they usually ask for *sfihas*, *kibbehs* and other middle-eastern dishes, while important subjects for the community are discussed, such as the organization of some event, the celebration of any victory of the community (in Armenian games, for instance) or the visit of a distinguished Armenian. This is also the arena for political movements in a general sense, not restricted to party politics. People discuss the acts of a certain section of the community and procedures that could be profitable or harmful to the group, especially concerning Armenian institutions.

At another table beside that one are sitting Armenian ladies, who talk about similar topics, though in their "female version". They discuss lunches or dinners that will be organized by the Armenian Ladies' Association or any other body run by them. The distance between men and women does not mean that they discuss secrets since the content of the discussion can be heard perfectly by those near the table. However, the separation is a regular behaviour in the group; it is only when the subject concerns the whole community or when it has to do with an institution in which men and women participate equally that some actual interaction can be found between these two spaces of socialisation. Seldom do non-Armenian wives of Armenian men spend their afternoons at the club, but when they go, they usually stay beside their husbands, in silence, or sit with them at a table set apart.

This symbolic geography makes traditions within the Armenian community evident, showing beliefs about the space (and topics) occupied by men and the space (and topics) occupied by women: although they are not formally apart, provided that everybody occupies the same room, there is a gendered separation of the environment. The distance, in turn, reflects the separation of the institutions themselves, which are also split – with some exceptions – between those attended by men and those attended by women. Finally, women that are not members of this society are excluded from its social environment, just as they are excluded from its institutions. This guarantees the preservation of the habits that help establish Armenians' social identities, since such habits reassert the origins and the traditions of this population,

therefore integrating its collective memory.

In addition to augmenting the preservation of individual memory, permanent contact with the collective memory may also cause a great assimilation of the latter by the former so that the narratives end up merging: "la mémoire individuelle peut, pour confirmer tels de ses souvenirs, pour les préciser, et même pour combler quelques-unes de ses lacunes, s'appuyer sur la mémoire collective, se replacer en elle, se confondre momentanément avec elle."⁸ Indeed, assimilation of collective memories by individual narratives is extremely common and very often occurs unconsciously, leading the informant to describe events that are collectively ascribed to somebody else as though they happened to friends or relatives. This generally takes place because the individual has such a great familiarity with certain narratives that they start to believe this narrative was part of the history told by their own parents or grandparents, when in fact it is possibly something that circulates (or used to circulate) throughout the community.

Audiovisual productions and works of fiction frequently have similar effects, their narratives being assimilated into familiar reminiscences. Because of this it was very common that, asking about familiar events, I would be instructed to read some book or watch some film that "shows exactly what happened". The fact that they are works of fiction and for that reason enjoy a certain creative freedom does not prevent them from becoming a reference for the community.

An informant described the moment in which her parents were forced to leave their house as follow:

They had one night to prepare everything, because on the following morning the Turks would take everyone away, the whole village. So my grandmother – our family had some resources, since my grandfather was a jeweller – my grandmother took some gold coins we had, wrapped each of them in a piece of fabric and during the night sewed them on our clothes, as if they were buttons. So, when they arrived [in Brazil] they had some money. (housewife, 75 years old, living in Rio de Janeiro).

This report, which shows some of the obstacles faced by immigrants and refers to some strategies employed by them to deal with this situation, also describes an extract of Henri Verneuil's film, *Mayrig*, which is greatly appreciated by Armenians and is frequently described as a film that reflects precisely what happened to immigrants. It was, indeed, recommended by the informant herself.

Undoubtedly, since this film is concerned partly with history, it might be presumed that, besides that research has been done to make it more authentic, the plot was inspired by the real actions of the subjects shown.

Therefore, it is probable that some families, while preparing to emigrate, might have actually employed the strategy presented in the film, even if it was certainly not true for all of them. Regardless of the real occurrence of the events in the informant's family, most significant is the fact that the events reported are effectively plausible and that the interviewees do believe they happened to their families, which demonstrates the influence of the collective memory over the individual one.

Not only does Halbwachs' work present quite a few central topics and transform the way memory is understood by social sciences, but it also introduces subjects that would later be further explored, opening a pathway for a whole universe of meditations that would be followed by other social scientists. The author's demonstration, for example, that some places, such as a certain set of rocks or a landscape reached only by leaving the road, are mentally associated with specific remembrances⁹ may be seen as embryonic of what Pierre Nora¹⁰ would define as *realms of memory*. In the same way, when Maurice Halbwachs approaches the capacity of memory for assimilating data obtained later and transposing it onto past records, as if in that moment the individual remembering already had that information,¹¹ he identifies issues that would later lead Bourdieu to explore the notion of *biographical illusion*.¹²

The concept of "biographical illusion" was developed by Bourdieu in order to analyse people's narratives about their life courses, but it can also be used to understand the appropriation of works of fiction, such as the film referred to previously, by some informants. Bourdieu especially develops the notion of a "life project" that would guide the individual's narrative and would give it sense, motivation, making it a coherent report. The individual fills in the narrative with creations that provide meaning and that make the successive stages of their life conceivable. The consistency between Bourdieu's analysis and the appropriation of those works of fiction rests less on the author's central argument than on the reasons why people create their biographical illusions, that is, the process of recreating the past in order to provide sense to the narrative. The reference to works of fiction, as if their extracts had been experienced by the informants during the course of their lives, helps to fill gaps and make the report coherent.

REALMS OF MEMORY

Realms of memory are another central category for the study of memory, in particular for its collective manifestation. Defined by Nora as places and spaces that immediately activate in a certain group a specific remembrance, they are indeed essential for the maintenance of collective memory. Their importance lies in the fact that they are seen as concrete references that are external to the individual and do not depend on the action of group members

in order for the individual to recollect the existence of the group and their membership in it. So, as Nora exemplifies, if, when walking along the street, someone sees a monument for those who were killed in the Second World War, they are immediately affected inasmuch as they share the feelings that motivated the building of the monument and comprehend the symbols inscribed on it. This event results (or is supposed to result) in people perceiving themselves as part of a collective that laments the deaths or that views the dead as martyrs. In the Armenians' case, it is images such as Mount Ararat that are used to rouse nostalgic feelings about origins in the descendants, regardless of whether they have actually been to that area. The image of Mount Ararat operates for them in the same way as the WWII monument operates for a French person that neither served in that war nor had an especially relevant loss in the conflict.

However, the most significant realm of memory for the Armenian population in São Paulo is undoubtedly the monument for the Armenian martyrs, built on Armenia Square in honour of those who were persecuted by the Ottoman Empire. Sculpted in granite and bronze, the monument, which is located nowadays next to the Armenian Catholic Church's building, is in truth a new version of the monument that was erected closer to the underground station on the same square and which, according to members of the Armenian community, was vandalised. The memorial's restoration came about through the community bringing pressure to bear on the municipality from that moment to 2010. The monument is formed of several images: human figures, some of which are life-size; a pyre, where on special occasions a flame is lighted as a symbol of the martyrs; and a great wall made of stone, on which there is an inscription of Khachatur Abovian's "even if they enchain my feet, tie my hands, shut my mouth, my heart will shout for freedom", proudly declaimed by the Armenians

It is at this place that the community gathers in procession every April 24th, when members of the three main Armenian churches arranged around the square – the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Armenian Catholic Church and the Armenian Evangelical Church – meet after their morning religious ceremony in order to remember the victims of the genocide together. The requiem, which normally is celebrated by each of the religious communities in honour of their deceased members, is not uttered by any one of them exclusively; instead, it is reserved for this moment of union with the rest of the Armenian community and is professed by the priests of the three churches. Many members of the Armenian Brothers' Church join the faithful, besides a certain number of Armenians that are not integrated into any of the religious communities but respect the solemnity of the event.

In 2010, April 24th was celebrated with pomp in Armenian Square, for it

was also the date of the inauguration of the restored monument. In addition to the Armenian community, some authorities were present at the event including the city councilman who had proposed the restoration of the monument and a deputy of São Paulo's municipality. A deputy of José Serra, at that time governor of São Paulo, who had confirmed that he would be present was unable to attend due to unforeseen circumstances. Each of these authorities made a brief speech, in which he exalted the importance of the community for the city and for the state of São Paulo.

Nevertheless, the monument is not the only realm of memory in the area: in fact, the whole square in which it is located might be classified under this title – that is why it is named *Armenia Square*. Far from being a square like others, whose names have no relation to the spaces, this square carries an important significance for the Armenian community in São Paulo, since it is located in the core of the area where the first immigrants settled. This explains the fact that the three major churches of the community are situated around it; it was imperative to serve the Armenian population that was dwelling in the adjoining streets and expanding significantly during the first decades of the 20th century. The application of the name that it has nowadays was the result of pressure brought to bear by the collective on the municipal administration, which in 1965 accepted the transformation, recognizing the space as a realm of memory and by doing so re-enforcing its role. The same happened to *Pagé Street*, a place in the town center where a large number of Armenians used to live, which had its name changed to Comendador Afonso Kherlakian street in honour of an important merchant of the area.

There is another important realm of memory at the square: the underground station, whose name, also due to pressure from the community, became *Armenia*. According to registered reports, the change of the station's name, which until 1985 was *Ponte Pequena*, was the result of efforts undertaken by the Armenian National Committee in Brazil (ANC), which is a ramification of the Armenian Cause Foundation, an entity that exists in several countries in order to persuade local governments to recognize the Ottoman atrocities as genocide. According to an informant and member of the ANC who had participated actively in the pressure that led to the change of name:

The Armenia underground station was our work at the time of Franco Montoro [as São Paulo's governor]. It was we who undertook, through the ANC, an action that resulted in the change [of the name] from 'Ponte Pequena underground station' to 'Armenia underground station'. It wasn't for free, we put effort into it. It had another name, we transformed it; we purchased the change. (...) He [Franco Montoro, at that time candidate for São Paulo's government] went to the procession, to the monument. On the way, myself and José Distchekenian (now deceased), who was the ANC's

president, told him: 'listen, three churches, the school, the community are here... This also should – the square is called Armenia but the station is Ponte Pequena? – this should be called Armenia station.' Then he told me, who was also a member of his political party (...): 'as the governor I am going to come here to inaugurate the Armenian underground station'. I said 'so you are going to say it beside the monument of the martyrs, you will say it. So he did. (Lawyer, 73 years old, living in São Paulo)

The report goes on, describing the obstacles faced during the first years of Montoro's administration. Montoro's advisers would not let the claims of the community reach the governor, a situation that changed only after Almino Afonso, who was appointed Montoro's secretary, intervened. The new secretary took the project to the governor: *Almino talked [to the governor] and he said 'I promised, indeed. We are going to do it.' Then it came. Thank God, it came.* In his book, Nubar Kerimian refers to the change of the name of the station as follows: "This was, undoubtedly, one of the most important achievements of the Armenian community in Brazil, and November 12th 1985 will remain as a historical mark of this effective achievement for the whole community".¹³

That episode, which reveals the force and commitment of the Armenian community, plays an important role in the community members' minds, since it might be perceived as evidence that accomplishments can be made when people are really attached to a cause, serving as an example for other members and for other enterprises. In order to demonstrate the relevance of this achievement, the individuals that took part in it make a comparison between the Armenian community, whose population they estimate at around one hundred thousand inhabitants in São Paulo city, to other communities of immigrants, such as Italians and Japanese. On the subject of the existence of a station that carries the name *Armenia*, one informant states:

The Japanese, who are much more numerous than we are, could not change [the name] of "Liberdade station"¹⁴ to "Japanese station". And they are more than one million people here. What are we? Compared to them, we're negligible. But we work. That's what gets action from the authorities, this struggle... (merchant, 66 years old, living in São Paulo).

The struggle for the "Armenian cause", undertaken by the ANC, led it to try to contact politicians and, sometimes, to present for election candidates supported by the community or even some that are members of the ANC. Due to that political mobilization, on September 6th 2005 the community achieved recognition of the genocide of 1915 by the São Paulo Municipal Council, a movement in the opposite direction of the one taken by Brazilian

government, which avoided taking a stand on the subject. Therefore, although Brazil is not one of the 20 or so countries that officially perceive the actions of the Ottoman Empire as a genocide, the municipality already does, which also makes the community proud and is referred to as an example of successful political mobilization.

BIOGRAPHICAL ILLUSIONS AND PROJECTS

The biographical illusion issue may be seen in the Armenian community from a double perspective: on the one hand, from a perspective more anchored in the definition set by Pierre Bourdieu, it refers to individual life courses and the adjustments that are made to them in order to make the memory more coherent and provide some sense or meaning for it.¹⁵ On the other hand, from a perspective that takes Bourdieu's concept more broadly, it may be thought of as a set of strategies employed across the whole community, by individuals, with the objective of defining and reinforcing the features that, according to them, are fundamental to the Armenian community. In this case, the characterization "biographical" would refer to the community's biography and not to individual ones. It is imperative, however, not to view these two perspectives independently; the image that the community forms of itself rests directly on the images its individual members form of themselves, even though it is not limited to them.

The biographical illusion of the Armenian community in Brazil is guided by characterisations of the Armenian people borrowed from periods of their history, from its most remote past to rather recent years. The idea that this community have of an Armenian collectivity is based on such illusion, which emphasizes a certain number of features of that reconstruction of the past. Nevertheless, a great number of biographical illusions might be identified. Each of them helps to construct a different identity and, therefore, a different project of the community.

The first of the main projects of *armenity* is the one based on Christian identity, manifested in the great number of people that participate in activities organized by the community and which, according to these people, have been present since the early ages of Armenian history. The Armenian people's Christian heritage is commonly demonstrated by the Old Testament reference to Mount Ararat as the place where Noah docked his ark after the Great Flood. In addition to this, one of the patriarch's grandsons¹⁶ is said to have settled in the area with his family, giving birth to the Armenian population.

However, this biblical extract only became relevant among the Armenian people after their conversion to Christianity¹⁷; before that event this story was nothing but part of Jewish cosmology, which was not shared by the polytheist groups that lived in the region. The turning point was the conversion of King

Dertad III, who embraced Christianity in 301 and adopted it as the official religion of the kingdom of Armenia, making of it, as the members of the Armenian community in Brazil insist, "the first Christian state on Earth". This narrative provides a cohesive image which overcomes the fragmentation that, in reality, the Armenian community exhibits, since its members are divided among at least four major churches: the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Armenian Catholic Church, the Armenian Evangelical Church and the Armenian Brotherhood Church.

Thus, the self-image constructed by the Armenian community in Brazil is one of a religiously homogeneous group that, during the whole of the Middle Ages and part of Modernity, used a Christian sense of belonging as a way to distinguish itself from surrounding groups and the Empires that dominated it. Indeed, since 1045, when the Byzantines vanquished the Bagratid kingdom in Armenia, the main difference evoked by this people was religious belonging. This was appropriate since not only were the Christians a minority but also all the Armenians were together under the same Church – the Armenian Apostolic Church. Only during the 18th century, when the Armenian Catholic Church was founded, and in the following century, when the Armenian Evangelical Church was established, did the Armenians present a larger religious diversity. Yet, all of these Churches still had "Armenian" as their characterization, stressing their national identity.

The foreign domination of Armenia brought about another characterization of its population: the "resistant" qualification, which lasted throughout its entire history and is constantly reiterated nowadays. This notion, combined with the feeling of victimization, injustice, and ambition in adjacent groups, may be identified as far back as Antiquity, when "taken in assault by Cimmerians and by Assyrians, Urartu became Assyria's vassal, then, after Nineva's destruction (612 B.C.), the Medes Empire's (605-585 B.C.), before disappearing under unknown circumstances".¹⁸ During these periods under foreign domination, a commitment within the collective would have been necessary for the conservation of an identity that could face the hegemonic power; the success of such an enterprise may be attested by the maintenance of the Armenians as an ethnic group, despite almost one thousand years of subjugation.

These characterisations of "resistant" and "victims of injustice", are especially useful in describing the Armenians who survived the persecutions executed by the Ottoman government between 1915 and 1923, as in this statement made by a priest of the Armenian Apostolic Church reveals: *We pray to God for us to survive with our martyrs' legacy in order to go on; because they died, they gave their lives in sacrifice so that we could live as Armenians. So, our lives, which we live now, we owe to them.* Besides making

the specific relation between the community and the past evident, this extract also demonstrates that the use of such characterisations has a prescriptive function, guiding the behaviour of individuals. Thus, even if it relates to a collective biography, it is noticeable that the existence of a project, according to Pierre Bourdieu's definition, orientates the biographical illusion.

In terms of the characteristics highlighted by the Armenians in their personal biographies, it is remarkable in the first place to see the image of a worker population that made its fortune thanks to talent and dedication to duty. Thus, a contrast with the way Brazilians are characterized may be observed: while the Armenians appreciate their work, Brazilians, according to this characterisation, avoid it and search for short-cuts to success.

Still related to the idea of work, the Armenian community in Brazil constructs an image of itself that should be observed and which does not always correspond with the historical course of the community's first members: the Armenians, especially those who live in São Paulo, perceive themselves as a group whose main activity is, historically, the production and sale of shoes, which is related to the work of these people before exile. However, even if this was, as Robert Grün¹⁹ found out, really the occupation of a substantial portion of the first members of the community, research about the families that left Ottoman Armenia reveals that just a few of those which integrated into the Brazilian shoe industry actually practised the same activity before immigration. Therefore, involvement in the shoe industry has been used *a posteriori* as a unifying aspect among the members of the community. It is based on an idea that, even though economically inaccurate, has a strong symbolic value: leather plays an important role in Caucasian economies and many Armenian families work with this product, so those that immigrated brought that culture to Brazil.

Strong ethics and a sense of duty, examples of which can be found in different situations, are also characteristics frequently used by the Armenians to describe themselves. It does not mean that these people omit, as might be expected, acts of disloyalty or dishonesty, but that they frequently boast of not committing them – even if those acts could be in some way justified. An extract from Boghos Boghossian's memories, when he was a little child, illustrates this argument:

I had been employed as a shoemaker's apprentice, but he was dishonest. He ordered us to arrive early at the workshop and go before long to the square where the Kurds sold coal in sacks in order to take one or two pieces from each sack (...). At the end of each month, the shoemaker split the result of the theft among the employees – after he took half of it. When I arrived home and told my mother what had happened, she did not allow that coal to enter the house: –You've stolen? Take it out of here

and throw it away or give it to some beggar and don't you ever go back to that workshop.

Another example that supports this statement is the reference to the Armenians' participation in the Second World War, which was not perceived by them as a conflict concerning the Armenian population:

the Second World War was a mark on human history and also on Armenian history. (...) The military splendour of officials such as Bagramian and Babadjanian among others shall not overshadow the heroism of the anonymous battalions that fought bravely against the Nazi frenzy. The Soviet central power recognized that the Armenian nation behaved more than worthily in the "great patriotic war".²⁰

At any rate, whether considering the collective or individuals separately, the biographical illusion seems to be a specific way of capturing the past and of providing it with a sense of meaning, which is itself a consequence of the manner in which individuals see and intend to be seen by each other. Rather than classifying the characteristics evoked as more or less truthful it is more important to interpret their role in the construction of the subjects' identities, i.e., realize the influence of each characterisation on the individual and a collective biographical project.

Observation of the Armenian community in São Paulo makes it clear that the maintenance of its identity does not depend on regular attendance at physically static institutions such as schools, churches, clubs and so on, although this attendance might tend to encourage identity maintenance. Even if it is true that an individual who attends a church or a school is constantly in contact with a certain institutional discourse, another individual who does not experience this social ambiance is not necessarily deprived of contact with such discourses. This is what makes the preservation of Armenian identity possible even where there are no institutions, like in Rio de Janeiro city.

Certainly, in spaces where those institutions are not present, as well as for people that have access to but do not attend them, it is the family that plays the central role in conservation of the collective identity. Therefore, the family, as an institution of a different kind, also acts for the maintenance of memory, recording and transmitting biographical reports either of its members or of the collective as a whole. In this process, as in any recollection actually, the events are selected, repositioned and articulated according to the context and the information that is accessible to the narrator, thereby constructing a narrative that is coherent and has sense. This narrative, besides feeding into the collective memory, helps to forge the social identity of individuals as it

imbues them with characteristics that are supposedly common to the entire community.

There are other devices that may be useful for restating the collective memory and strengthening the sense of belonging to a specific identity outside of the institutional ambiance. Among these the most obvious is the bibliography of Armenian history and its people. This material is absorbed almost exclusively by the people that already have an Armenian identity to some degree. It has the advantage of being as accessible to individuals that do attend the institutions as to those that do not take part in them. This is also true of fictional works, such as novels and even more so of films, whose plots themselves are sufficient to arouse interest in the spectators. For this reason, these films may even reach those people that have no relation to Armenia.

Finally, the collective memory is built and re-enforced by the realms of memory as well, though for several reasons this differs from the other means enumerated previously. In the first place, the realms of memory, which are in a public place, are accessible to any individual that passes through a certain area, regardless of whether they have any link to Armenia. Secondly, and also because of their public nature, the realms of memory do not require an active position from the viewer; on the contrary, they may “accidentally” be part of people’s routines if they are on their way from home to work. Thirdly, although the realms of memory do not demand an active position to be accessed, they do demand such a position for the decoding of the symbols that are employed: for a worker who daily passes the *Monument for the Armenian Martyrs* the construction will be meaningless unless he has some knowledge about the references to which the monument points – namely the early 20th century’s persecutions.

ENDNOTES

- 1 This gap has been partially filled in the last years thanks to new research developed in the fields of history, geography, economy, among others. Cf., for instance: Heitor Loureiro, “The Voice of the Armenian People: Armenian Press in São Paulo (1940s-1970s)”, *Journal of Armenian Studies*, v. 2, p. 121-134, 2016. Artur Attarian Cardoso Camarero. No relógio 19:15, passados mais de 100 anos em guerra, São Paulo, Faculdade de Filosofia, Letras e Ciências Humanas / Universidade de São Paulo, 2017.
- 2 Fredrik Barth, *Ethnic groups and boundaries: the social organization of culture difference*, Long Grove, Waveland Press, 1969.
- 3 For a further discussion on the role of this memory for an Armenian diasporic community, see also: Martine Hovanessian, *Les liens communautaires: trois générations d’Arméniens*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1992.
- 4 Pierre Bourdieu, *A Economia das Trocas Simbólicas*. São Paulo, Perspectiva, 1974,

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- p. 207.
- 5 Maurice Halbwachs, Maurice, *La mémoire collective*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1997.
- 6 Michael Pollak, Michael. "Mémoire, oubli, silence", in: *Une identité blessée: études de sociologie et d'histoire*, Paris, France, Métailié, 1993.
- 7 Maurice Halbwachs, op. cit., pp. 118-119.
- 8 Idem, pp. 97-8.
- 9 Idem, p. 93.
- 10 Pierre Nora, *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, Paris, Gallimard, 1985.
- 11 Halbwachs, op. Cit., p. 119.
- 12 Pierre Bourdieu, "L'illusion biographique", *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* v. 62-63, 1986, pp. 69-72.
- 13 Nubar Kerimian, *Massacres de Armênios*, São Paulo, Comunidade da Igreja Apostólica Armênia do Brasil, 1998, p. 267.
- 14 "Liberdade" is the name of the neighbourhood that the Japanese community occupies in São Paulo.
- 15 Pierre Bourdieu, "L'illusion biographique", op. cit.
- 16 In the collective memory of the Armenian population in Brazil, this grandson is Gomer, son of Japheth. This does not contradict Movses Khorenats'i, the "father of the Armenian history": according to him, Armenians would be descendants of Hayk, who was son of Torgamah and great grandson of Japheth. Movses Khorenats'i. History of the Armenians. Apud: Levon Abrahamian. Armenian identity in a changing world, Costa Mesa, Mazda Publishers, 2006. p. 37.
- 17 For further information about the relevance of Christian identity among Armenians in Brazil, see: Pedro Bogossian-Porto, "Os primeiros cristãos do mundo: pertencimento religioso e identidade coletiva na diáspora armênia", *Horizontes Antropológicos*, Porto Alegre, 21, n. 43, pp. 157-182, 2015.
- 18 Claire Mouradian, *L'Arménie*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1995, p. 11.
- 19 Roberto Grün, *Negócios e Famílias: Armênios em São Paulo*, São Paulo, Sumaré, 1992.
- 20 Aharon Sapsejian, *História Sucinta e Atualizada da Armênia*, São Paulo, Emblema, 2010.

ՅԵՂԱՍՊԱՆՈՒԹԵԱՆ ՎԿԱՅՈՒԹԻՒՆՆԵՐ.
ՊՐԱԶԻԼԱՀԱՅԵՐՈՒ ՀԱՒԱՔԱԿԱՆ ՑԻՇՈՂՈՒԹԻՒՆԸ
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Ի. դարասկիզբին մեծաթիւ գաղթականներ, ներառեալ հայեր, հաստատուեցան Պրազիլ, փախուստ տալով Օսմանեան Կայսրութեան հալածանքներէն:

Հեղինակը 2009-11 շրջանին դաշտային դիտարկումներու հիմամբ հաաքած իր նիւթերով այստեղ կը ներկայացնէ պրազիլահայերու հաաքական յիշիղութեան երեսակներ՝ Յեղասպանութեան վերաբերեալ: Նոյն ծիրին մէջ, հեղինակը հաաքական այս յիշողութեան երեսոյթի իր վերլուծութիւնը կը կառուցէ:- ա) անհատ-հաաքական յիշողութիւն փոխյարաբերութեան եւ փոխազդեցութեան ելակէտերուն, բ) հաաքական յիշողութեան դերն ու տեղը հայկական ինքնութեան պահպանման քննարկումներուն վրայ, եւ կ'եզրակացնէ թէ ինչպէս կարելի է մշակել հաաքական յիշողութիւնը, որպէսզի անելի սատարէ ինքնութեան պահպանման, կամ որեւէ այլ ծրագրի մը իրականացման: