



Museums, Memory and the Shaping of Identity

A conversation with Professor Eviatar Zerubavel (Rutgers University)

by Mauro Spicci

EVIATAR ZERUBAVEL is Board of Governors Professor of Sociology at Rutgers University. His main areas of interest are cognitive sociology and the sociology of time. His publications include *Patterns of Time in Hospital Life: A Sociological Perspective* (University of Chicago Press, 1979); *Hidden Rhythms: Schedules and Calendars in Social Life* (University of Chicago Press, 1981); *The Seven-Day Circle: The History and Meaning of the Week* (Free Press, 1985); *The Fine Line: Making Distinctions in Everyday Life* (Free Press, 1991); *Terra Cognita: The Mental Discovery of America* (Rutgers University Press, 1992); *Social Mindscapes: An Invitation to Cognitive Sociology* (Harvard University Press, 1997); *The Clockwork Muse: A Practical Guide to Writing Theses, Dissertations, and Books* (Harvard University Press, 1999); *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past* (University of Chicago Press, 2003); and *The Elephant in the Room: Silence and Denial in Everyday Life* (Oxford University Press, 2006). Professor Zerubavel served from 1992 to 2001 and again from 2006 to 2009 as director of the Rutgers sociology graduate program. In 2000-01 he served as Chair of the Culture Section of the American Sociological Association. In 2003 he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. He teaches graduate courses in cognitive sociology, time and memory, and sociological theory.

Which is the mnemonic role of museums in the contemporary age? And how do museums shape our conception of the past? The famous sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel helps us understand the relationship between memory, museums and the construction of individual and national identities.

M. Spicci: In the first part of your book *Time Maps* you point out that memory is not casual. Rather it is the process by which we transform unstructured past events into coherent historical narrations. Can you explain why this process helps us give meaning to past and present events?



E. Zerubavel: I actually think that past events are not very likely to have much meaning if they are not put in some narratives. Each event by itself has to be understood within a particular context, and that context is the narrative. If something happened in the year 1217, for example, and I manage to somehow make a sort of mental connection between that event and what happened let's say in the year 1526, then I am creating a narrative: the meaning of that event is going to be within the context of that narrative. If I connect it to another event, then it is going to be part of a very different narrative and therefore will have a very different meaning.

M. Spicci: Which is the relationship between memory and identity from a sociological point of view?

E. Zerubavel: From a sociological point of view we have to realize that remembering takes place not only in the minds of individuals, but also in the minds of social actors. When I remember something, I remember it not only as an individual, but also as a member of a particular mnemonic community. So I have multiple memories in accordance with my participation in multiple mnemonic communities. For example: I am a sociologist and I am Jewish. Jews and sociologists are two very distinct mnemonic communities: how I am going to interpret certain events, for example the Holocaust, is to be shaped very differently by my membership in the community of Jews or by membership in the community of sociologists.

M. Spicci: In *Time Maps* you make large use of cognitive metaphors (such as "mnemonic landscapes", "hills", etc.) to clarify important structural issues of your analysis. Do you think that such metaphors play an active role in shaping our memory?

E. Zerubavel: It is not so much about shaping our memory, but about processing the way in which we shape our memories. I am using these metaphors in order to highlight certain patterns: I am talking about hills and valleys with reference to particular parts of the past that stand out of the landscape and others that are more subdued. It gives me a sense of which memories are socially marked and which ones are unmarked and therefore ignored. When I give the example of the commemogram, which is the way that I look at how national memory is constructed, what interests me is that there are going to be certain parts that are more emphasized and others that are underemphasized. Using a metaphor such as a hill in a valley allows me to do that effectively.

M. Spicci: When in *Time Maps* you speak about "origins" you mention museums. Professor Zerubavel, which is the relationship between museums, memory and the shaping of the past?

S E. Zerubavel: Museums are one of the institutional forms in which communities shape their collective memory. When a child goes to a museum, the museum is very important in shaping his or her idea of what is to be remembered. When I go to the Metropolitan



Museum in New York and see that so much emphasis is put on Impressionism, I learn – and I am talking not as an adult, but as a 8-year-old child, who is supposed to visit the museum for the first time – that Impressionism is a very important part of my history as a member of Western civilization. The same thing I would say about when history begins. The distinction that we make between history and prehistory is of course a social distinction: when historians talk about prehistory as everything that precedes writing, that's because they privilege writing.

M. Spicci: In your book you mention also the history of Pre-Columbian civilizations. What is peculiar about the way in which it is shaped?

E. Zerubavel: This is a very good example because it clarifies my point: our very concept of “Pre-Columbian” allows us to lump together everything that happened in the Americas prior to 1492 in a kind of undifferentiated way. This means that we are less able to perceive the actual differences between Olmec and Aztec artifacts: as Pre-Columbian civilizations, they are usually lumped together, even though the Olmecs and the Aztecs lived two thousand years apart from each other!

M. Spicci: Do you think that museums play a passive or an active role in building our memory?

E. Zerubavel: I think they play a very active but subtle role. An earlier book of mine, *Social Mindscapes*, is about what I call sociomental control, which operates particularly effectively and subtly in museums. When you go to a museum, you know that what you see is just a representation of the past. But it takes a certain sociological perspective to realize that what is being represented there is part of a certain narrative, and not just “the past.” I think that when you look at museums it is important to consider not only what is represented, but also what is not represented. I argue very strongly that the sociology of forgetting is an important and integral part of the sociology of memory. When remembering the past, the question is also: what is it that you do not remember? I have just completed my new book *Ancestors and Relatives* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2011), where I am making the same argument about which of our ancestors we remember. Museums partly shape that: in every museum of national history, there are always certain national ancestors that are going to be exhibited, and others that tend to be forgotten.

M. Spicci: Can you make reference to specific examples of similar museums?

E. Zerubavel: When I go to a historical or archeological museum that tells me about human ancestry, I am likely to see specimens of various hominids that preceded *Homo Sapiens*. I am not going to see chimpanzees or orangutans. In a way this immediately hurts my ability to relate to apes as my cousins. I will give you an example of a museum I just saw last year -- the Creation Museumⁱ in Kentucky. It actually shows how creationists



present history: there you can see an exhibit about the garden of Eden, where you can see Adam and Eve surrounded by dinosaurs. Creationists argue that dinosaurs coexisted with human beings. If a six-year-old kid is going to see such an exhibit, he is going to be impressed by the fact that he could see human beings and dinosaurs together.

M. Spicci: Which relationship can you see today between museums and national identities?

E. Zerubavel: This is again one of the things that I am getting very much into in *Ancestors and Relatives*. The question of course is whether you take an essentialist view of the nation or a constructionist one. I will give you an example: the case of second-generation immigrants (i.e. children of immigrants). Let's take for example Italian immigrants to the United States: their children are really going to learn in schools and to see in museums the founding fathers not of the Italian nation, but of the American nation, despite the fact that a second-generation Italian immigrant might be able to see himself or herself as originating from both cultures. Museums are very important in shaping whether you have a monocultural or a multicultural vision of your national identity.

Mauro Spicci received the PhD in English Studies in January, 2008. From 2004 to 2008 he worked as Lecturer in History of British Drama at the Università degli Studi di Milano, where he also worked as lecturer in translation studies at the faculty of Political Science and as lecturer in English culture at the faculty of Mediazione Linguistica e Culturale. He took part to several national and international conferences. He has published several articles on body metaphors in Shakespeare's plays, the relations between medicine, drama and literature in early modern England, the link between medical anatomy and Elizabethan allegorical poetry, bodily fragmentation in contemporary drama, and the iconography of Shakespearean characters/actors. His monographic work entitled *The Purple Island (1633) di Phineas Fletcher: un'anatomia. Corpo e ibridazioni discorsive nell'Inghilterra elisabettiana* was published by Ed.It in 2009.

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ⁱ For further information click on: <<http://creationmuseum.org/>> (March 2011)