Introduction

I will begin by formulating a series of questions that defines the problem of the nature of political emotions. I will then analyse the common point of all these questions. And this will lead me to a succinct historical review that goes back to the first identifiable thinkers who have elaborated useful distinctions and concepts and who, doing so, began to highlight what is at stake in the question of the making of political emotions. I will finally suggest that these moments could be synthetically encapsulated in the notion of political unconscious.

So, first, let me mention some strategic questions.

Some questions about the relationship between political emotions and narratives

Is there anything that links politics with emotions? This ontological question can then be continued by more pragmatical questions, such as: How can one compose, constitute, or shape a political emotion? And — this is where narratives come into play —: does *narratives* assume a role in such a shaping? If yes, what kind of role is it? Does the fact that we can be moved by stories, whatever they are, true or fictional, has anything to see with the shaping of emotions in politics? For instance, and more precisely, what is the role of narratives in the emotions that build up nations?

As one can easily see, there are some recurrent concepts in these various questions. Indeed, they are chiefly interrogating the relationship between three main concepts: *affect* (or emotion, or even possibly passion), *narrative* (or story, or even possibly discourse), and *politics* (including the political institutions that derives from it, including nations).

Discourses in democratic regimes

At least in democratic regimes, elections constitute a moment at which many discourses are pronounced by the candidates who incarnate the various political tendencies that would express themselves at this occasion. These discourses generally tend to trigger emotions in those who listen to them – positive and adherent emotions, the candidates generally wish –, sometimes with success, sometimes with only limited success, and sometimes, also, they end up triggering repulsive emotions instead.

These discourses are not dealing with politics in an academic sense. Rather, they are dealing with employment, with salaries, with insecurity, with taxes, with public services, and so on. More often than not, they also allude to the history of the nation (the main political institution that renders the confrontation of various discourses possible).

In 2022, a presidential election took place in France. During the campaign, some candidates were invoking the good old times in France, the « douce France de mon enfance », as a well known singer did put it, and they would then speak about the danger of Europe who tend to dislocate that good old France; others were also evoking Europe, but this time it was to underline the stability and security that it can offer. Some were worrying, others were wishing; some were afraid, others were confident; some were expecting better times with economy, others were announcing hard (and hot) times with climate, and so on. And all these feelings were expressed in their discourses, wrapped in narratives.

They were all pronouncing discourses in which narratives were supposed to explain the reasons of the choices they were trying to convince people to embrace. What is then so powerful in these narratives that makes candidates use them, whatever the opinion they are defending can be?

Let me begin to investigate this question by some brief historical return to those who first tried to elaborate a conceptual framework to investigate what is at stake there. These questions have been first discussed in historical contexts in which a national community was at risk to get desegregated, often as a consequence of the aggregation of another national community.

What is a nation? by Ernest Renan, 1882

It is in that sort of context that the french philosopher and historian Ernest Renan has written a text that he entitled *What is a nation?* The text is the published version of a conference that has been given by Renan in 1882, in La Sorbonne, in Paris[1]. It presents itself as a conceptual reflexion on the notion of nation. Renan examines a few possible answers to the question, as we will see.

We are eleven years after the victory of the Prussian army over the French troops of the

Second Empire. Germany has reinforced its state's fondations during that war against France and, as the winner, has annexed two french departments: Alsace and Lorraine. So, the question that lies behind Renan's reflexion is: what is it that makes these territories french or german? More generally: what is the criterium that makes a part of a nation sticks to the other parts of the same nation? Renan does not mention explicitly this historical context. But it is, nevertheless, all too present in the background of its discourse and it is immediately understandable for its audience.

Renan is a very systematic scholar. He would examine all the possible answers he had in mind. Is it the race of the inhabitants, that builds the nation, he'll asks. And he would answer no, giving examples showing that a nation is not defined by a race. Is it, then, the language spoken by the inhabitants? And its analysis leads again to a no (some countries, Switzerland for instance, constitute nations in the modern sense, even though one can find a plurality of languages spoken in the community that they constitute). Would it be the religion, then? Again, his response is: no (many countries hosts inhabitants of various religions). Finally, would it be geography (mountains, rivers and see borders)? And once again Renan's response is no (the roman empire extended over many geographic barriers, for instance). He would conclude as follow:

I shall sum up all I've just said. Man is a slave neither of his race nor of his language, nor of his religion, nor of the course of rivers, nor of the shape of mountains.

So, what is it that makes the unity of a nation? What is the ingredient that builds the nation? Eliminating item after item all the possibilities, Renan would finally conclude that a nation is made of two things:

One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is the current consent, the desire to live together, the will to continue to assert the heritage that we have received undivided. […] A nation is therefore a great solidarity, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that we have made and those that we are still ready to make. […] A great aggregation of men, sane in mind and warm in heart, creates a moral conscience which is called a nation.

What is striking in this determination of the nature of nation is that the answer

encompasses all the dimensions of time: future, past, and present. Moreover, it puts the notion of « affect » at its very core: memories, feelings and desires which culminates in « heart and mind » that creates a moral conscience: this is what makes the nation.

The notion of narrative

The notions that were identified by Renan — memories looking to the past, feelings reacting to the present, and desires looking to the future — would be later discussed by scholars who would try to think them together with the help of the notion of « narrative ». Indeed, one of the striking properties of a narrative is its flexibility toward future, past and present. Narratives can turn to any of this dimension of time without stoping being a narrative.

The narratives on which a nation is based, i.e., the stories that explains where the nation comes from, the perils that it has faced in the past, the success it has finally encountered, the mistakes it has made, why it is in the state that can be presently observed and what it can become, constitute arguably the basic element of any nation. In fact, any group which can claim to have an existence, whether it is a nation, or a smaller group included in the nation, have a story of this kind that can be narrated. A story which defines the shape of its way of being and which is often call its identity, Renan would argue.

Thus, a careful reading of Renan already identified the central connection of affects, narratives, and politics. The ontology of a nation is the ontology of these political emotions sustained by narratives.

Relevance of the notion today

This link between the identity of a nation and the narratives that express it has turned to be a very important issue today, at a time at which we can see nationalism coming back as a backlash of the dissolution of the nationalities that has begun to be induced by globalization.

In such a context, the following question arises: does the concept of nation still have a future or is it a notion that is doomed to become obsolete, sooner or later? Thus, trying to conceptualize the notion of nation and to remind the steps through which it has been approached in the past is also a way to address this question.

Renan, a kind of star in the « fin de siècle » french academic system, however, was not proposing a neutral analysis. Quite the contrary: he stressed the importance of historical narratives among the members of a nation through an apparently conceptual analysis. But it is in order to better legitimate a form of nationalism that was widely shared by its audience.

For the American scholar Jill Lepore, Professor of history at Harvard University, a certain kind of national history, which can hardly be distinguished from myth, should be considered as what she calls « a symptom » of nationalism[2]. The simple fact of calling it a « symptom » indicates that the view on nationalism has turned to be critical.

According to Lepore, history has a « pharmakon » structure: it is necessary to build a nation (on that point she agrees with Renan), but it can also be dangerous because it can easily turn to be mythical. Narratives is what can trigger the affects that make a nation, but they can be also a poison if one do not distinguish myth and history, as nationalists are usually doing.

The power of narratives is of such a kind that when social media appeared, that makes narratives easier to circulate, a phenomenon did grow up coincidentally: the phenomenon of fake news. The fact that fake news does exists is a kind of proof of the power of narratives. It shows that, whether they are true or false, narratives can shape affects. In other terms, narratives are emotion building tools, and emotions, in turn, are political actions building tools. This is the reason why a narrative is a tool for manipulation and indoctrination as well as a tool to get in touch with the reality of a nation.

Thus, what is characteristic in the analysis proposed by Renan is that he is mixing what could be called a « national sentiment » and « historical facts ». He would write, for instance: « oblivion, and even historical error, are an essential factor in the creation of a nation ».

In other terms, the history he is speaking about is more a « *roman national* », a mixed structure which is intermediate between facts and fables, than the history in the sense of historians. It is constituted by a series of historically attested facts, but these facts have been ingeniously organized in such a way that they form a narrative that has a mythical structure in the sense that they can trigger political emotions. Thus, it seems that Renan has

missed an important distinction, a distinction that, in fact, goes beyond the scope of his analysis.

Maurice Halbwachs and the collective memory

To make this distinction, Renan would have need to address the question directly through the entry of the notion of memory, not through the entry of the notion of nation.

That is exactly what Maurice Halbwachs would do, forty-three years later, in 1925, in the first book which poses the question of the nature of collective memory: *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* — the social frameworks of memory – and again, twenty five years later, in 1950, in his last book, published five years after its death: *La mémoire collective*[3]. There, he would propose a crucial distinction between memory and history which goes deeper through the problem than the distinction between myths and history. The distinction between memory and history is generally presented as seminal for the research field that appeared about two decades ago under the name « memory studies ».

Halbwachs belongs to the Durkheim's school, but he also used to be a student of Bergson. This means that he has been influenced by the two radically opposed schools of philosophy of the time. Halbwachs made a fascinating mix of the subjectivism of Bergson and of the objectivism of Durkheim that culminates in its thesis on collective memory. As Ricœur would later put it:

The chapter 2 [of *Collective memory*], entitled « Individual memory and collective memory », is written from the beginning to the end at the first person and in an almost autobiographical style. The text basically says this: to remember, we need others.

Halbwachs was named professor of sociology in Strasbourg in 1919, then in La Sorbonne in 1937 and he was ultimately elected in the Collège de France in 1944, on a chair of « Collective Psychology » where he did not had time to make even its inaugural lecture since he was deported as the father of a resistant to Buchenwald where he died in 1945.

Memory and history

As soon as one turns attention to historical facts, the memory of a group can be different from what historians could tell about the sequence of events to which this memory refers, Halbwachs would notice. Accordingly, memory is a social fact which makes sense only in a given social group, while history is a sequence of events that have actually happened. Meditating on this difference, Halbwachs would elaborate a distinction between history and memory.

Both are referring to the past. But they are not functioning the same way. The past, as it is present in memory, is full of interests. It is mixed with passions and emotions in such a way that one cannot distinguish what comes from the events from what comes from the emotions that illuminate the reminiscences of it. The « lived » memory is thus opposed to the « objective » history.

One of the functions of memory is to participate to identity formation, a fonction which used to be attributed to the partly mythical aspect of the history, according to Renan, as we have seen. For Halbwachs, history deals strictly with the past while memory deals also with the needs and interests of the group and thus proceeds in a selective and reconstructive manner. The events that are remembered are those that correspond to the interests of the group.

Memory thus provides an accentuated version of the past, a version in which some events have been highlighted while others have been kept in shadows. This is what leads Halbwachs to write:

A remembrance is in very large measure a reconstruction of the past achieved with data borrowed from the present, a reconstruction prepared, furthermore, by reconstructions of earlier periods in which past images had already been altered.

In other terms, memory is a given point of view on history. Astrid Errl did notice that this constitute a kind of anticipation of what will be later called « the social construction of reality » by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in a famous book published in 1966[4].

The relevance of the distinction between memory and history

Before Halbwachs and his analysis (and even after, in fact), it was all too common to treat memory as if it was history or myth or a mixture of both. In public debates, in all these exchanges that make the concrete of politics, both are generally not distinguished. And it is even a hallmark of the memory that it does not feel any reason to maintain such a distinction. Memory does not consider itself as a point of view on history, but rather it does consider itself as truth.

Thus, the distinction between history and memory helps shedding light on what is at stake in what has been called « memory activism » by Carol Gluck[5]. A memory activist is someone who claims that there is a necessity to reshape memory by enlightening some events that has been too much forgotten, in its view. History is then considered as a field of events in which some are unfairly obscured while others are, not less unfairly, enlightened. The distinction between memory and history is thus implicitly present in memory activism, although it is not always conceptualized as such.

Halbwachs, with this distinction, points to the existence of interests that induces differences in the way various persons remember what has happened in the past. Proust, in *Le temps retrouvé*[6], already noticed this feature of memory at an individual level:

Even with equal memory, two people would not remember the same things from the same events. One will have paid little attention to a fact for which the other will remain deeply remorseful, and, on the other hand, he will have remembered as sympathetic a sign or a word that the other will have done without almost thinking about it.

This difference is true also for communities, Halbwachs would claim:

It is always individuals who remember, but each time as members of a group. Of this mass of common memories, which are connected to each other, the same events will not appear with the same intensity to each group.

The same things are not remembered by all communities, although it refers to the same piece of the past. Halbwachs went on so far as to speak about « the original society that each individual somehow forms with himself »[7] (in *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*).

Paul Ricœur and the rethinking of the difference between history and memory

Paul Ricoeur, in its last real book (he will then publish collections of lectures he gave here and there), published in 2000, *L'histoire, la mémoire, l'oubli*[8], went back to the distinction proposed by Halbwachs in the context of its analysis of collective memory.

By the way, the book *Memory, history, forgetting* is the point at which a connection can be made with the presidential elections in France since it has been won by someone who used to be, for a while, the assistant of Paul Ricœur and who is acknowledged for that at the very beginning of the book.

In this book, Ricœur would reformulate and rethink the opposition between history and memory. As a phenomenologist, he would propose to see this distinction as an example of the opposition between a positivist notion of history based on objective facts, on the one hand, and lived experience, that can be phenomenologically described, based on subjectivity of affects, on the other hand.

Accordingly, Ricœur would explain, one of the central problems of political philosophy is to understand how discourses become emotions and how they originate in emotions. In other terms, how they come from emotion and how they return to emotion. Ricoeur underlines what Husserl and Heidegger introduced in the debate by their radically new approach of time which is not without consequences on the way one can conceive history and memory.

And he would finally explain that opposing memory to history is certainly a precious beginning, but that it is, nevertheless, not intellectually satisfying. He would write:

The two preceding series of discussions suggest the same negative conclusion: Neither the sociology of collective memory nor the phenomenology of individual memory are successful in deriving from the position that they respectively hold the apparent equal legitimacy of two opposing thesis: the cohesion of consciousness of the ego, on the one hand, and the capacity, of collective entities to preserve and recall the common memories, on the other hand.

Thus, he would conclude, in a very ricœurian way (but when you are Ricœur, can you

escape to be ricœurian?), with a proposition that intends to conciliate the two notions of history and memory. Such a move is now quite well known in french politics, possibly as a consequence of having as president someone who used to be an assisatnt of Ricœur, and it is sometimes even mocked as « *la politique du en même temps* », the politics of the « *at the same time* ». So here, Ricœur would have asked: what kind of concept could one propose that would account, *at the same time*, for memory and for history?

At this point, Ricœur would turn to the phenomenologist Alfred Schütz, a former student of Husserl, who developed a phenomenological sociology[9]. He would claim that this phenomenology does not separate individual and collective memory anymore, but rather it proposes to see a continuous range of attribution with a proximal pole (the personal pole) and a distant pole (the others or anonymous pole), and with, in the middle of the two, the relatives. Ricœur writes:

The originality of this phenomenology of shared memory [the one Schütz] lies mainly in the degrees of personalization and of anonymity between the poles of an authentic « I » and that of the « we », up to the « them others ».

Ricœur's did thus substitute the opposition between memory and history, which organizes Halbwachs' thought, with a different one, namely the opposition of personalized and anonymous memory. The move from one to the next is claimed to overcome the opposition that has been proposed by Halbwachs.

I'm not completely convinced that we obtain more intelligibility on the nature of the link between narratives, affects and politics when, instead of opposing memory to history, one prefers to oppose personalized to anonymous memory.

But Ricœur's analysis, nevertheless, has the merit of identifying clearly the most conceptually important section of Halbwachs' work: the chapter two of *Collective memory* is indeed an essential moment in its reasoning. As Ricœur mentioned, it is largely written in the first person. It is also largely based on a commentary on Stendhal's autobiographical writings with which Halbwachs shows that memory begins to acquire a sense only when it comes to be intertwined with contents that is shared by others[10].

The most relevant point in the analysis of Ricœur, however, is that it shows that the concept of narrative has the particularity of being adaptable to both history and memory now redefined as personalized and anonymous memory, according to the analysis I just summed up. Narratives give access to both of them with no apparent difference in the form it takes, even though in so doing it gives access to the two different poles that organize history.

Conclusion

So if we look at the way through which the conception of the relationship between the three notions of affects, narratives an politics has been conceptualized all along the history of idea I just have recapitulated, we can identify three moments that one could call (1) the Renan's moment, in which narratives are identified as being a part of the core notion of what makes a nation through the affects of belongings that they are prone to generate. Then, we can identify (2) the Halbwachs' moment at which a distinction was made between history and memory. And finally (3) the Ricœur's moment, which tries to define a position that would respect but also pretend to go beyond the distinction previously made by Halbwachs.

But what is common for these three thinkers is that what they have identified – whether they call it national affects, memory distinguished from history, or the *en même temps* analysis that is supposed to overcome the limits inherent to each of these concepts – always escapes the conscious vigilance of the actors. In other terms, whatever the process can be, it is, at least partly, unconscious.

Looking back at that piece of history of ideas, it can thus be useful to recall the notion of political unconscious that has been proposed by Frederic Jameson in a book published in 1981 which complete title is *The political unconscious, narrative as a socially symbolic act*[11]. The political unconscious, which, as any unconscious, is not directly accessible (hence the various theories it arouses), can harbor any of the conceptualization that has been proposed by the three authors I briefly reviewed.

Whatever version we retain, there is a common point that unite them: they are all assuming that a reminiscence of facts intertwined with affects, the structure of which is shaped by narratives, plays an essential role in politics. In other terms, the political unconscious, by contrast to the lacanian unconscious, is not structured like a language, but rather it is

structured like a narrative.

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Endnotes

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