

## Book Review: Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past

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# **Book Review**

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*Eviatar Zerubavel, Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004. ISBN 0226981525, \$25.00 (hbk).*

Ever since I came across Zerubavel's work in 1997, I have been waiting for this book. There is no doubt that *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past* represents a momentous bridge between two different aspects of his opus. Most of the books and articles from the late 1970s and 1980s were devoted to the question of social structure and patterns of time. By the 1990s he remained devoted to the issue of time but broadened his intellectual horizons to include cognitive sociology. After more than a decade he has at last begun to interweave these two areas.

Socialization of time is a complex social process during which not only meaning, but also structure and patterns are assigned to physical time. In fact the physical time is of less importance here. What indeed matters, according to Zerubavel, is a social shape of physical time, especially the fragment that is called 'the past'. The past can never be directly accessible, not only on account of the fact that one cannot experience the time before birth, but also because of the individual need to be equipped with specific mental schemata for time reckoning. The past becomes cognitively recognizable only through gaining an adequate social memory of the past and by its active recollection. Whilst Zerubavel is sensitive to individual memory, he pays little attention to it and focuses entirely on social dimensions of memory. As a member of a particular mnemonic community an individual is constantly subject to mnemonic transitivity, a social practice of socialization, which provides an individual during his or her life with mnemonic tradition. But precisely because of employment of the principle of socially constructed time, members of the cognitive community hardly ever reach a consensus over particular events in the past. Even when a consensus is reached it is a temporary state subject to future revision. Mnemonic synchronization, – the achievement of a coherent/incoherent historical narrative – is of great importance for any community and for that very reason mnemonic battles, over what should be accepted as an authentic past or what should be considered as a fake, rage constantly.

How people in different societies and cultures perceive and socially structure past time is well presented throughout Zerubavel's book through a succession of rich

examples. In everyday life, individuals apply several cognitive mechanisms to assure continuity with the past. Sometimes they refer to the same geographical place, where two perhaps similar, but not identical, events occurred. Another time they may use varied reminders such as souvenirs, photos and home-made videos, mementoes, relics and other memorabilia. I particularly like this part, because basically Zerubavel speaks about cultural objects. He even mentions, although unfortunately not directly, the human body, when he refers to the relics. Imitation and replication are the next favourite cognitive mechanisms for reckoning of time by which the past is reproduced by the generation of iconic representations, just like modern dictators, who are prone to copy great architectural achievements of ancient kings. Historical and discursive analogies also help individuals gain historical continuity. The first is perpetuated by an ability of some symbols to be seen as transhistorical while the second is based on the use of the same signifiers, although employed in different contexts, with the intention of leading to the same significance. How about achieving historical discontinuity? Punctuation of the past, assimilation and differentiation, and last but not least, the division of prehistory and history are the most common mental instruments. The first is sometimes equivalent to historical periodization. The second mechanism, assimilation and differentiation, refers to intra-periodic lumping and splitting of intervals of time. And finally, the division between the prehistoric and historic period has a simple aim: to make a difference between the socially irrelevant and relevant past for the mnemonic community.

Zerubavel's latest book is an excellent study in the social structure of memory, depicted through the socialization of past time. But below the surface there is a pervasive assumption. Zerubavel's previous work is certainly deeply imbued with the concept of socially constructed reality. The same goes for the *Time Maps*, too. Moreover, this should not come as a surprise to anyone, for physical time is surely the most ubiquitous character of physical reality that cannot be directly perceived. Time can be perceived only as a measure of change in the material world. Small wonder, the subject of time is the most absorbing topic for anyone who is a cognitive sociologist and a sociologist of time. The temporal element allows Zerubavel to use the paradigm of socially constructed reality in his work. Chapter three, which is devoted to ancestry and descent, is a good example of Zerubavel's epistemological blindness to reality. Here I got the impression that Zerubavel would try to persuade us that the scientific explanation of evolution of species is nothing more than just another social construction. Even so this final remark should not detract from the interdisciplinary excellence of Zerubavel's work, which makes me believe that he can rightly be classified also as a representative of the third generation of phenomenology in sociology.

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