

Outline

In 1985 David William Cohen (1989, 1994) challenged both historically minded anthropologists and anthropologically minded historians to move from being audience to one another to being audience to the “lively, critical telling, writing and using of history in settings and times outside the control of the crafts and guilds of academic disciplines.” Within this workshop we reiterate this challenge with regard to the geographical and cultural areas commonly designated as Central and Inner Asia. The main goal of the workshop is to explore how collective knowledge of the past is produced outside of the academia and the ways in which such knowledge is engaged in practice.

The region we are concerned with has a long tradition in both oral and written forms of knowledge. We would like to reassess the relations between the oral and the written in the age of mass literacy and mass media and we suggest four ways of approaching the production of history:

(1) Historical discourses and narratives as the product of historically and culturally situated social actors engaged in various forms of “intellectualism”. We use “intellectualism” both in the sense of Gramsci’s hint (1982: 9) that all human beings are intellectuals even if they are not always allowed to act as such, and in the sense of a more reflective involvement with forms of knowledge and their social extensions (Boyer and Lomnitz 2005). A focus on the relation between social actors and knowledge practices allow a grip on individual and collective agency in the creation, circulation, and contestation of historical discourses and narratives on one side and, on the other side, it makes possible the foregrounding of subjective and inter-subjective processes in the production of history in general and of oral history and memoirs in particular. An important aspect in the production of history that we would like to address within this workshop bears upon the ways in which individual visions of the past influence and channel social imagination more broadly and the processes through which such individual visions can be generalized, codified, and turned into collective knowledge.

(2) The social constitution of expertise and authority in the representations and interpretations of the past. In some cases, expertise and authority depend upon old but still effective dichotomies: oral versus textual or textualized authority, the authority of age and experience versus the authority of education. In other cases, popular historical discourses and narratives display fascinating capacities for intellectual bricolage: they dust off old, outdated or forgotten texts, they convene history, archaeology, anthropology and bioscience in their reworking of the past, they confound the “local” and the “global” by relating in unexpected ways local histories, and the identity claims rooted in them, to global historical and cultural models and to global hierarchies of identities and values. In short, they challenge or divert the powers of hegemonic historiographies and empower new ventures in history making.

(3) The way in which historical discourses and narratives shape, but are also constituted by, practice. On one side we encourage analyses of their “public life”, or their relations to rituals, artistic performances, museum exhibitions, memorials, etc. On the other side, we would like to highlight their engagement in mundane interactions: family and work relations, power and property relations, politics etc. In which circumstances, whether public or mundane, do social actors turn to the past? How is the knowledge of past constituted on these occasions? Which narratives are provided or privileged? To what an extent these narratives are shared or contested? How debates on the past are construed?

(4) The constitution of collective knowledge of the past. In recent (2009, 2002) and not so recent works (1991) James Wertsch has underscored the relations between social actors, cultural tools, in his case as in the case of this workshop historical narratives and discourses, and sociocultural settings. From this perspective, collective knowledge of the past is largely conditioned by the fact that social actors share the same “cultural tool kit” (1991). One of the aims of this workshop then is to unbundle this “cultural tool kit”. Wertsch suggests that cultural tools are neither universal and ahistorical, nor independently invented by individuals but socioculturally situated. Side by side with the attempts to unfold the dominating narratives in particular sociocultural settings, we would also like to draw the attention to globally circulating narratives and to their local appropriations in the process of constitution a common knowledge of the past.

References:

Boyer D. and Lomnitz Cl., 2005. Intellectuals and Nationalism: Anthropological Engagements. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 34, 105-120.

Cohen D.W., 1989. Undefining of Oral Tradition. *Ethnohistory* 36(1), 9-18.

Cohen D.W., 1994. *The Combing of History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Gramsci A. 1982. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Wertsch J.V., 1991. *Voices of the Mind: A Sociocultural Approach to Mediated Action*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wertsch J.V., 2002. *Voices of Collective Remembering*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Boyer P. and Wertsch J.V., eds. 2009. *Memory in Mind and Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.