

Connerton, Paul. *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

In the book, *How Societies Remember*, Paul Connerton claims that memory is more cultural and collective than it is individual. The author argues that non-inscribed bodily practices (traditions) convey and sustain recollected knowledge of the past. The commemorative ceremonies and bodily practices create and maintain social memory. Additionally, he states that our experience of the present is largely based on our knowledge of the past (2). In other words, memories affect how we perceive the present.

Connerton divides the book into three chapters to address social memory. His central premise in the first chapter is that memory is more social than individual. He states that we preserve versions of the past by representing it to ourselves in words and images. These memories are localized through groups (37). Recollected knowledge of history is conveyed and sustained by ritual performances with these groups. Social memory is closely related to historical reconstructions because every memory depends on past recollections. Societies are self-interpreting communities (12). The opposite of remembering is forgetting. He ties 'forgetting' to cognitive memory or that which is primarily inscribed. In this book, Connerton illustrates social memory with aspects of the French revolution (7-13). When addressing social memory, Connerton also talks about habitual memory acquired by habit (30).

In chapter two, Connerton talks about commemorative ceremonies. The rhetoric of re-enactment (65) or the bodily performance are the acts of memory transfer. Calendrical repetition, as in repetitive action at certain times of the year, are re-enactments that promote social memory. Rhythm, he says, affects recall. Connerton suggests that "the mind reconstructs its memories under the pressures of society" (51). In treating memory as a cultural rather than an individual

faculty, this book explains how practices of a non-inscribed kind are transmitted in and as traditions. The verbal and non-verbal or bodily re-enactment enhances memory. Re-enactments through ceremonies connect the community with the past (45), providing space for improvisations.

Memories, he says, reside outside the body. It is enacted and felt. So, when memories of culture begin to be transmitted mainly by reproduction of their inscriptions rather than by “live” tellings, improvisation becomes increasingly difficult, and innovation is institutionalized (75).

In chapter three, Connerton discusses bodily practices related to memory. He talks about two types of social practice: incorporating practice and inscribing practice. The transition from an oral to a literate culture describes a transition from incorporating practices to inscribing practices.’ (p. 75). Incorporating practices are messages transmitted during the presence of the messenger (72). Inscribing practice is a way to intentionally transfer information after the action (73). He notes that important events that occurred in the past are often going to be tainted by the memories of those retelling those stories. This means there are multiple collective memories, each variation dependent on the ‘live’ retelling. These improvisations make memory innovative and relevant. Therefore, while social memory and historical reconstruction have a strong relationship, history is not dependent on the memories that groups have created. Factual events are different from the way it remembered.

Commemorative ceremonies, according to Connerton, prove to be commemorative only in so far as they are performative. Performativity cannot be thought of without a concept of habit. Habit is a knowledge and a remembering in the hands and in the body (95). Habits cannot be thought of without a notion of bodily automatisms (5), like swimming or bicycling, where repetitive practice ingrains the action in the body. So much so the body does not perform the

individual steps consciously while performing the bodily action. Habit is muscle memory. One that the body understands and remembers (95).

In conclusion, the author argues that images of the past and recollected knowledge of the past are conveyed and sustained by ritual performances and that performative memory is a physical action. However, we cannot use this knowledge unless we actively retrieve it and practice it. This book concentrates on incorporated practices and provides an account of how memories are transmitted in and as traditions. *Connerton separates habit, cognitive and social memory*. He states that even the 'hermeneutic circle' fails to include habitual memory. The past structures the present through its legacy, but it is the present that selects this legacy, preserving some aspects and forgetting others, and which constantly reformulates our image of this past by repeatedly recounting the story. Connerton suggests that bodily performance within the localized group is crucial for memory.

Connerton's work reminded me of God's way of creating social memory among the Israelites. In Joshua chapter four, God tells Joshua to take the people across the Jordan river. God wanted to reassure Joshua of His presence and to show the Israelites that He was with Joshua just as He was with Moses. This was an individual memory, marking an event between God and Joshua. However, Joshua obeys God's voice and makes it a collective memory when the Israelites follow the Levites carrying the ark of the covenant. When the waters receded as the Levites' feet touched the waters, the people crossed the river on dry land. Twelve stones were taken from the bed of the river and placed on the shores as a reminder of this event. The performed memory of crossing the river and carrying the stones onto dry land was a way to create the 'bodily' remembrance of God's mighty hand. Yahweh makes this memory a commemorative ceremony by commanding the Israelites to talk about or retell the event to

children and foreigners to retrieve the past. These retellings were not merely factual. These retellings were experiential and tainted by personal memories. The multiple collective memories were based on the knowledge of the past. Therefore, while the accounts were closely linked to the historical event, the factual events are different from how it is remembered and retold.

Connerton's work sheds light on understanding how societies remember. It also illuminates how one might approach the sacred texts as the inspired Word of God for the people of God.