Jan Assmann's Concept of "Cultural Memory" and the Crisis of Multiculturalism

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ABSTRACT

The paper is devoted to the concept of "cultural memory" by the famous modern German Egyptologist and cultural critic Jan Assmann. The relevance of the problem of cultural and historical continuity during the crisis of the ideals of globalism and multiculturalism is shown by the example of a number of important mechanisms of cultural tradition functioning, which are equally characteristic of both ancient and modern civilizations.

Keywords: culture, memory, worldview, pre-philosophy, mythology, tradition, multiculturalism, Ancient Egypt, Ancient Greece

I. INTRODUCTION

The topic of the crisis of ideas and methodology of multiculturalism has been one of the most acute and relevant for social philosophy, cultural studies, comparative political science and other Humanities for the past decade and a half. The sharp growth of various radical concepts, which in many ways arise as a reaction to many problems and questions that the multiculturalism model has not been able to provide adequate answers to, was a direct consequence of this process. Possible ways to overcome this crisis are currently being put forward by both political scientists and philosophers, as well as cultural scientists. It is among the latter that the concept of "cultural memory" by the famous German Egyptologist, cultural critic and religious scholar Jan Assmann has been increasingly attributed in recent years. Of course, this model is not absolutely the only and exhaustive answer to the crisis, but it shows that a number of features that researchers traditionally refer to the "classical" cultures of antiquity can be successfully attributed to the culture of modern society. And, on the contrary, we can see very well how research techniques and methods typical of modern Humanities, and above all, comparative cultural studies, are effective for studying ancient civilizations.

II. MEMORY AND SOCIETY IN ANCIENT AND MODERN CULTURES

Exactly the same as its predecessor, the French philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945), Jan Assmann believes that memory as a cultural phenomenon is always social conditioning. Memory, as the basis of human history and culture, can never be only individual, but must be collective [1]. The most important element of collective cultural memory in any ancient society is the myth. A myth is always a narrative or a story with a pronounced ideological orientation. It is with the help of myth that ancient man first tries to give answers to the most important philosophical questions (the origin of the world, the origin of man, the nature of good and evil, etc.), but in any ancient society, myth is also an important form of historical memory. According to Assmann, the myth in any ancient culture always performs two functions [3]. The German researcher calls the first of them "justifying". It consists in justifying the events of the present time with the help of a story about the events of the distant past, which resulted in the current state of the world and human society. The second is the "contrasting" function of myth. This means that in all ancient cultures, myths always sharply contrast the past on the one hand, and the present and future on the other. The past in myth is always the "Golden age", the sacred epoch of the creation of the world. But then changes occur in the world and enmity begins, leading to a gap between the gods and man, and, as a result, the evil, death, disease and misfortune appear. To restore this lost harmony, people reproduce the events of the past through various religious rituals, cults, and sacrifices to the gods. The desire of man to return to these lost ideals determines the cyclical nature of the ideas about time in archaic myth: it is always an

attempt to "eternal return" to the past, the sacred time of creation.

This mechanism of mythological consciousness is invariably based on recollection, on reference to the past. Myth, therefore, forms not only an impression of the nature of time, but also a historical conscience, which, like "cultural memory", is based primarily on collective memory. In this aspect, the archaic myth is directly opposite to the philosophical worldview, which is based primarily on individual and personal perception of the world. It is this feature of primitive myth that is very clearly contrasted with the emerging philosophy, for example, the concept of "axial time" of Karl Jaspers [5]. However, despite its close connection with the collective historical consciousness, the phenomenon of "cultural memory" is very closely connected with the formation of spiritual culture not only of a social group, but also of an individual. According to Jan Assmann, both in ancient and modern society, the memory of the past can act as a kind of act of resistance, the expression of a person's inner rejection of the spiritual values that currently exist and are imposed on him from the outside, as well as socio-political attitudes (including religious ones). As applied to ancient civilizations, this is most evident in the "axial time" epoch (900-200 BC), but earlier cases can be found. For example, in the religion of Ancient Egypt of the XIII century BC, a tradition of "personal piety" (in the terminology of J. H. Breasted [4]) appears, which replaces the traditional ideas of "Maat", a righteous world order embodied in a centralized state system headed by a king and based primarily on ideas of social solidarity. However, the Amarna era (XIV century BC) significantly shook these ideas, and they are replaced by a new moral norm, according to which a person is responsible for his actions not to the king or his chief, but directly to God. In the end, this is largely what led Egyptian culture to a deep internal crisis, when, according to Jan Assmann, the traditional cyclical perception of time for mythology changes to a linear, more familiar to modern man.

From our point of view, the above-mentioned cultural phenomenon of remembering as an appeal to the past is extremely important for understanding the crisis of the ideals of multiculturalism. It is the loss of such a memory by a person, and, as a result, a sense of belonging to a particular cultural or ethnic tradition, that is one of the reasons for the resistance to the ideas of multiculturalism and globalism, which inevitably blurs these cultural and historical boundaries. For a person of modern post-industrial society, just as for a person of the "axial time" era, the presence of memories of the past (primarily collective, enclosed in historical

memory) is vital for preserving their spiritual identity.

III. CULTURAL IDENTITY AS A "POLITICAL IMAGINATION"

In the same way as the French ethnographer and cultural critic Claude Levi-Strauss, Jan Assmann interprets identity as, first of all, the result of a person's self-consciousness, his previously unconscious, but at some point in time became a necessary idea of himself and his place in the world. Just like the memory of the past, this self-consciousness can be both individual and collective. The collective self-consciousness is the source of ethnogenesis, but it can never exist outside and without individual, personal self-consciousness. Mechanisms of self- consciousness (both individual and collective) are the basis of cultural identity. This identity in ancient cultures almost always led to the consciousness of an ethnic group or nation of its own characteristics, its own distinctive features that separate it from other social groups. Sometimes this even led to the idea of "uniqueness" or "chosenness" of a particular ethnic group or social group. Thus, the ancient Egyptians, due to geographical and climatic factors, in many ways perceived themselves as a special people inhabiting the fertile lands of the Nile valley and Delta and engaged in agriculture and cattle breeding, in contrast to the "barbarians" who roamed the desert sands and engaged in hunting and gathering. For their designation in the Egyptian language, there was even a stable expression, literally translated as "those who are on the sand". According to Jan Assmann, the result of this cultural identity can be either national identity (if it is based on the mechanisms of "vertical solidarity"), or nationalism (if it based on the mechanisms of "horizontal solidarity" within social groups). The latter, both in ancient and modern cultures, often arises precisely as a result of the fear of losing one's cultural identity, of dissolving into other nations or ethnic groups.

A very interesting observation of a German researcher is that the formation of the concept of cultural identity has always been associated with the concept of "borders". In fact, for example, in the Egyptian language, the words "land" (ta) and "border" (tash) are consonant, and, apparently, are of the same root. The political organization of a state inevitably arises through mechanisms for defining and controlling its own borders. This is equally characteristic of both ancient and modern societies. That is why in the current age of globalism and multiculturalism with its gradual "blurring", the disappearance of borders, the phenomenon of "resistance" as a form of expression and preservation of cultural and political identity is very relevant. The "political imagination" based on

cultural identity already became the basis for a peculiar philosophy of history in the high cultures of antiquity, such as Egypt, Israel, Greece, and Mesopotamia. Here, too, the close connection with the concept of border (both in the direct (physical) and figurative sense) is extremely important. The ethnic community of people and the state that has emerged from it can realize its task and highest value either in preserving its borders (for example, under the aggressive onslaught of hostile nationalities and states), or, on the contrary, in their constant expansion through aggressive military policies and conquests. A striking example of the second type is the idea of a moral justification for war, which emerged in Egyptian ethics and royal ideology during the New Kingdom era (XVI century BC). Here the king, who makes military conquests, is depicted as the guardian of the Maat, the divine and fair order, and the conquered peoples act as its violators, who must either be destroyed or subdued, depriving them of their own borders and statehood. Thus, the Egyptian army's invasion of Nubia, Syria, or Palestine is depicted here not as an act of unprovoked aggression, but as part of the king's duty to maintain the sacred order of the world. It is also a form of realization by an ethnic group (in this case, the Egyptians) of their cultural identity, implemented at the political level.

IV. CULTURAL CONTINUITY AS THE FORMATION OF A TRADITION

From the works of Claude Levi-Strauss, Jan Assmann borrows another methodological technique that is very promising for its application to the realities of modern culture. This is the French researcher's division of all ancient cultures into "hot" and "cold" in terms of their relationship to the problem of historical and cultural continuity [2]. The "cold" culture is very conservative and it always fiercely resists any innovation and external influence, and tries to preserve the same set of its religious, social and political values. On the contrary, "hot" cultures are always open to changes and external relations and borrowing, they are quite flexible in terms of forming their political, social and religious values. However, this does not mean that cultures of this type have a certain set of permanent values and guidelines that are not affected by these influences. After all, if such unchanging values did not exist, all these cultures would have lost their identity long ago, becoming part of some other cultures that managed to exert the strongest influence on them. The most typical ancient culture of the "cold" type Jan Assmann calls Egypt, and the culture of the "hot" type is Greece. One of the important features of the "cold" type of culture is the presence of a strong centralized power. It should be noted that not all ancient civilizations fully meet these criteria. As Jan

Assmann himself notes, in many other ancient cultures (besides Egypt and Greece) there are elements of both "hot" and "cold" culture. As applied to modern societies, it is the cultures in which structural elements of the "cold" type predominate that are the most persistent in their rejection of multicultural and globalist ideology, while the cultures with a predominance of "hot" type elements are the most susceptible to it.

As the most important social element of cultural continuity, Jan Assmann calls the unification of the efforts of political authorities to preserve the collective historical memory in society or the state. The key element here is the notion of justice as a cultural and legal norm. However, the nature of these representations is different in different ancient cultures. Thus, in the "cold" culture of Ancient Egypt, the ideas about justice were expressed in the complex concept of Maat, already mentioned above, embodied in the image of the eponymous goddess of truth and justice. Maat was understood as the true order established by the Sun-God during the creation of the world, a special case of which was considered the earthly state headed by a king. The king, as the main guardian of this order, ensured the preservation of traditional political and ethical norms based on the reproduction of laws established by the gods in the original past. This is how the cultural and political tradition was formed, which was very characteristic of conservatism, rejection of any political, religious and cultural innovations. On the contrary, in Ancient Greece, which the German researcher refers to as a "hot" type of culture, ideas about justice were somewhat different. The Greek goddess Dike, who embodied ideas of justice, appears primarily as punishing justice. The exercise of justice in Greek culture, even from the archaic period, is presented not as a reward for the righteous, but as a punishment for violators of the law [6]. At the same time, the ideas of justice in Greek culture were not so closely connected with the doctrine of the functions and duties of the ruler, which, in turn, led to the absence of a strong centralized power in most Greek polis, on the model of Egypt. That is why the formation of cultural traditions here has always been carried out in various ways, each of which largely depended on the features of the political system of a particular city-state. It was this factor that led to the significant openness of Greek culture to external influences, thanks to which it itself was significantly transformed during the entire period of its existence. But at the same time, the political mechanisms for implementing cultural continuity were much less pronounced here than in Ancient Egypt.

This typology of cultures is still relevant today. In the conditions of transcultural communication of modern post-industrial society, it is the elements of

"cold" culture based on traditional values that are its unchanging core that are the main mechanisms of resistance to globalist trends and the loss of cultural identity. It is important to emphasize that the presence of such elements, which guarantee the existence of a cultural tradition, does not mean that this culture is completely closed to others. A tradition that is embedded in immutable moral, religious, and political values may be partially changed by historical evolution and the influence of external factors, but this inner core always remains unchanged. Conservatism of a cultural tradition does not necessarily mean hostility to everything new: it only serves as a kind of "protective mechanism" for preserving the fundamental values of this culture. It is only when these basic values are threatened with real destruction (whether through forced substitution or through slow but inevitable dilution) that it takes on a pronounced radical orientation.

V. CONCLUSION

At present, when the crisis of the globalist ideology and the ideals of multiculturalism can be considered a fait accompli for a long time, the question of finding alternatives is particularly acute. Jan Assmann's concept of "cultural memory" can serve as such an alternative. Cultural continuity, the need for which solely is acutely felt by many people, societies, and ethnic groups currently acts as a guarantee of basic spiritual values which is both the most important forms of cultural and political identity as a separate person, and social community. Both in ancient times and at the present time, a key role in the translation and preservation of these values is played, first of all, by written culture. It is no accident that in the culture of Ancient Egypt we see a clear representation in the nature and quality of writing of two types of culture: "high" (within which the preservation of political, religious and moral values takes place) and "low" (household, mass). The first is expressed in classical hieroglyphic writing, which is invariably used in official royal and temple inscriptions, and the second is expressed in hieratic writing (later transformed into demotic), which is most often used in drawing up household and economic documents, as well as "school" copies of classical texts. Despite the huge difference in the worldview, the presence of such a set of fundamental spiritual values is vital for both ancient man and modern post-industrial society, and it is no accident that philosophy develops at the very first stages of its existence precisely as a reflection on these basic categories of culture.

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