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The State and National Holidays: The Question of Seeking Social Legitimacy A Socio-Historical Approach

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***Abstract*—**The modern state is a Western phenomenon that emerged and developed within Western society as it transitioned from a religious order to a secular one, in which human production and activity became central to the organisation of society and the management of human affairs. Nevertheless, the modern, or civil, state has largely reproduced the practices of the religious state, replacing them with practices and rituals characterised by a human and civic dimension. This transformation has been undertaken in pursuit of legitimacy and social acceptance, while also seeking to strengthen collective belonging, consolidate national unity, and construct a new identity. Although this identity bears similarities to religious identity, it differs in its frame of reference. The modern state draws upon a human-centred and civic frame of reference, organised around conceptions of what ought to be and positioning human beings at the centre of the social and political order. National occasions and commemorative celebrations, for instance, contribute to the construction of collective identity by defining society's heroes, establishing representations of its past, and transmitting its historical legacy. These issues constitute the central concerns of the present research paper.

***Keywords*—**The past, collective memory, historical commemoration, national occasions, identity.

Introduction

In his discussion of the political legitimacy of the nation-state, or modern state, Benedict Anderson links this question to the concept of political imagination, which can be understood as an attempt to reproduce certain sources of legitimacy associated with the religious state by replacing religious institutions, practices, and rituals with their civil counterparts, particularly in the organisation of institutions and the performance of symbolic practices,[1] including national holidays and commemorative occasions. These practices serve to secure the state's legitimacy and reinforce the sense of collective belonging. They are common to states across different political and social contexts, in which the past is invariably placed at the service of the present or subordinated to contemporary needs. The past is invoked to reinforce the legitimacy of the present. As Georg Lukács observes, “An increased interest in the present leads to an increased interest in history, as the background to the present, or as the history of the present.”[2] In other words, as a state, a people, and a nation, we are extensions of a past that has contributed significantly to the formation of our present identity. Our recollections of the past frequently correspond to contemporary concerns, particularly when examining Algeria's domestic and international positions. We reconstruct and reproduce historical memories in accordance with present aspirations and expectations. Sven Bernecker and Kourken Michaelian similarly argue that “Memories of the past are produced under these circumstances and from the perspective of the present.”[3] This process consequently contributes to defending the legitimacy of the existing order and justifying its continued existence.

Remembering the past also involves a considerable degree of reverence and respect, surrounding historical events with an aura comparable to that which religion confers upon its rituals and ceremonies, particularly

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religious holidays, through which heavenly and earthly purposes converge. A similar phenomenon can be observed in national commemorations, especially those possessing a strong symbolic dimension, such as the celebration of 18 February as Martyrs' Day, with all the religious, moral, and national meanings associated with the concept of martyrdom. Raymond Raspail argues that “the organisation of a series of national holidays through which people recall memories associated with existing political institutions is a necessity recognised and implemented by all governments.”[4] Such occasions constitute a connecting thread between the people and their history, linking them to their past and collective achievements. In doing so, they strengthen confidence in the present and provide a foundation for imagining the future. The same idea is expressed in the proposition that “The past is reconstructed according to the present, particularly because the past explains the present.”[5] This position is also advanced by Jacques Le Goff, who maintains that the past becomes intelligible through the experience of interpreting and mobilising it to manage and improve the present, particularly because “the past is present through memory and history, even if it appears differently in each.”[6] In other words, all peoples possess a past, but they relate to it through two principal forms of representation: official, documented historical memory and popular or collective memory. The latter does not primarily seek to produce history as a scientific discipline; rather, it aims to celebrate, commemorate, and strengthen collective unity, as illustrated by the commemorative celebration in which we participate today.

One of the fundamental principles guiding historical scholarship is that facts are sacred, whereas opinions are free. Every historical account begins with interpretations and perspectives before becoming an organised representation of the past. History therefore remains an open, mosaic-like text composed of multiple opinions, interpretations, and readings. Consequently, history may be reconsidered whenever new methods, data, and evidence become available. In the words attributed to Louis Hyde, we “wink at history, not the past.”[7] The past consists of events that occurred at a time we did not experience, whereas history comprises the representations and interpretations of those events that have been transmitted to us. Accordingly, during commemorative occasions in particular, we may acknowledge the symbolic significance of the past and elevate its status, because our immediate purpose is celebration rather than historical investigation. Moreover, “understanding time, in Jacques Le Goff's words, essentially means being able to reverse the available data,”[8] while also exercising creativity and expressing collective pride. In other words, we mobilise the past in the present to reinforce our confidence in contemporary realities and encourage us to open new horizons for the future. Jacques Le Goff observes that “The Roman historian is continually a eulogist of past events, as Horace said.”[9] Yet Roman historians are not the only ones who praise the past. Every nation possesses a history and those who celebrate its achievements, particularly during national holidays and symbolic commemorations. History thus becomes a means of mobilising the past to consolidate the present. This leads us to the following central research question: How does the state use national holidays to strengthen its social legitimacy?

Sub-question[1]s

- How do national holidays establish connections between the past and the present?
- How do national holidays reinforce collective belonging and contribute to the reconstruction of national identity?
- How do national holidays strengthen the state's social legitimacy through the commemoration of national sacrifices?

First: National Holidays as Remembrance and Celebration of the Past

History cannot exist without events, just as memory cannot operate without information preserved from the past. Such information, however, can be reactivated and mobilised to address questions arising in the present. This is what Sven Bernecker and Kourken Michaelian emphasise in their definition of memory: “People use the term memory to refer to situations in which information about the past is available for present purposes.”[10] In other words, information about the past is neither inherently lifeless nor obsolete; rather, it can be mobilised in different ways to serve contemporary needs. This is precisely what national occasions, now observed by societies throughout the world, accomplish, despite their historical origins in religious traditions. Bernard Lewis highlights this historical continuity when he observes that “The celebration of historical events through festivals has long been an ancient Middle Eastern custom. In modern times, these became official occasions, whereas in ancient times they were religious festivals and days of fasting.”[11] The state, the nation, and the people all require a solid foundation upon which to build their collective existence, and few foundations are as significant as the past

transmitted and preserved through historical narratives.

History, in this sense, provides peoples with a means of preserving their past and commemorating it through official representations. According to Sven Bernecker and Kourken Michaelian, “Collective remembering is a reconstructive process and is always a creative process of recovering the meaning of a shared past.”[12] Here, meaning refers to the capacity to mobilise a distant past in order to understand and reinforce present political and social circumstances through collective action encouraged by national occasions, or what Pierre Nora describes as “commemorative celebrations.”[13] The purpose of these celebrations is not to put history on trial or investigate it as a detective would. Rather, they are intended to cultivate collective pride and a sense of honour, particularly when they possess a symbolic dimension and commemorate events understood as embodying values that transcend time and place. This can be observed in the commemoration of Martyrs' Day. Jacques Le Goff distinguishes between historical rites and commemorative rites, the latter recreating the sacred and benevolent atmosphere associated with mythical time, or what the Australians call the time of dreams. Such rites reflect the incorporation of the past into political life and revolutionary struggle. This process can create confusion between the two positions that historians may adopt towards the past, making it essential to distinguish between the historian's scientific responsibilities as a professional and their political commitments as a human being and citizen.[14] During commemorative occasions, individuals temporarily move beyond their professional roles and institutional functions to participate as members of a single national community united by a shared and celebrated past.

As historians emphasise, the past is fixed in the sense that events that have already occurred cannot be changed. Nevertheless, we can reinterpret and explain those events when reconstructing their history. We may foreground certain causes while relegating others to the background, establish connections between particular developments, or question relationships previously assumed to exist. These operations contribute to making the past meaningful and rendering historical narratives responsive to the needs of the present. Edward Carr therefore rejects “the common assertion that facts speak for themselves.” He argues that this assertion is mistaken because “facts speak only when the historian calls upon them and decides which facts are to speak, in what order, and in what context.”[15] This is precisely one of the functions performed by national commemorations: they select events considered capable of retaining contemporary relevance and being mobilised to serve collective purposes. Such selection need not be understood as arbitrary subjectivity; rather, it may involve informed interpretation and critical judgement, consistent with the epistemological concerns associated with Paul Ricoeur. For example, when commemorating Martyrs' Day, we are entitled, within the moral and symbolic framework of the occasion, to recall the positive values associated with this national event. Halbwachs distinguishes between historical memory, transmitted through documentary records, and autobiographical memory, which is internal and fundamentally collective because it is sustained within a social group.[16] On this occasion, we remember the martyr who sacrificed their life for our freedom and future, drawing upon the religious, national, artistic, and popular meanings associated with martyrdom. The various values attached to sacrifice can thus be mobilised to reinforce the significance of the commemoration.

The purpose of reviving the past during national occasions extends beyond celebrating the occasion itself. It also involves reaffirming the political and social legitimacy of the nation and transmitting historical experience to younger generations so that they can draw upon it when confronting contemporary challenges. According to Cheno, “the past must be liberated, but it must not be neglected; rather, it should be mobilised in social and national struggles.”[17] Such mobilisation requires more than an official historical perspective. It also depends on the past as expressed in everyday language through stories, narratives, chants, folk songs, and other cultural representations produced and transmitted by society. Every nation has official historians who document, interpret, and communicate historical knowledge in accordance with the principles of historical scholarship. At the same time, every nation possesses popular historians who preserve the past through their own methods and incorporate it into popular culture. These individuals are described as “specialists in memory in non-literate societies, also called memory persons. They are specialists in genealogies, guardians of royal laws, court historians, and custodians of traditions. Georges Balandier called them the memory of society.”[18] Although their activities may lack formal institutional recognition, they contribute significantly to embedding national occasions in collective memory, bringing different social groups closer together and helping to overcome barriers between them.

It can therefore be argued that national occasions serve to recall the past in both its official form, as documented by historians, and its unofficial form, as transmitted across generations through popular narratives and cultural

practices. Their purpose is to draw upon the past in ways that serve contemporary society. Celebration and commemoration are therefore not merely expressions of joy and happiness; they also reinforce belonging, authenticity, and historical continuity by reminding individuals that they share a past shaped by collective experiences and sacrifices. Through this process, national occasions strengthen the sense of belonging to the nation and reinforce the symbolic foundations of collective identity.

Second: National Occasions, Identity, and the Question of Belonging

A nation does not emerge from nothing. Rather, its formation is shaped by the collective sacrifices of society and by the devastating wars fought to defend its right to exist and survive. Such sacrifices remain deeply embedded in collective consciousness and resist oblivion, refusing to be confined to closed historical archives. These wars have helped transform the nation from an aspiration or imagined community into a concrete political and social reality. Consequently, they become enduring symbols that resist disappearance and historical decline. As Louis Hyde observes, “True war stories, according to Louis Hyde, seem as though they will continue forever.”[19] Their continuity is maintained through the documentation of historical events, the commemoration of battles and acts of heroism, the preservation of significant details, the transmission of historical knowledge to younger generations, and the organisation of regular commemorative occasions. These practices function as a torch illuminating the path of the nation in a world moving rapidly towards globalisation. Faced with the homogenising pressures associated with this process, societies are encouraged to preserve their distinctiveness by retelling their histories and continually recalling their collective past. Sven Bernecker and Kourken Michaelian argue that “We are the stories we tell about ourselves,” emphasising that storytelling constitutes one of the principal means through which individuals and communities describe themselves. Narrative practices are therefore essential to identity formation because the accounts we construct about ourselves decisively influence how we understand who we are.[20] Such construction does not entail creating an identity from nothing; rather, it involves reinterpreting and mobilising the past to give meaning and value to the present.

The past constitutes one of the principal sources of identity, while identity represents the shared essence through which individuals recognise themselves as members of a collective entity despite their differences. This shared sense of belonging has a powerful influence on individuals, encouraging them to perceive themselves as members of a single community that has made common sacrifices and confronted shared adversaries. The activation of memory is therefore neither arbitrary nor disconnected from contemporary concerns. Instead, it serves present social and political purposes. Paul Ricoeur expresses this relationship through the formulation “Remembering in order to establish the nation.”[21] Remembering also serves to preserve the nation, reinforce its cohesion, and remind its members of the bonds that unite them, including the sacrifices made by their ancestors in both the distant and recent past. These bonds are strengthened by recalling and commemorating such sacrifices, particularly because “identity is invented through the narration of our life experiences.”[22] These experiences become common points of reference that are transmitted to younger generations in renewed and meaningful forms through national commemorations, whose purpose is to consolidate a shared sense of belonging. Jacques Le Goff observes that “the demand to return to the past can lead to the undertaking of very new projects.”[23] Remembering the past, therefore, does not necessarily entail a return to antiquity, a regression into outdated practices, or an inability to move forward. Rather, it can release latent energies for achievement and transformation, encouraging society to pursue new possibilities and work towards a better future.

National occasions consequently form part of the political programme and broader civilisational project of a nation. They enable society, particularly younger generations who did not experience the revolution, to recognise that they possess a historical legacy worthy of pride and that they bear a responsibility to preserve and live up to it. Jacques Le Goff accordingly argues that “commemoration is part of the revolutionary programme: all the creators of calendars and holidays agreed on the necessity of reinforcing the festival with a commemoration of the revolution.”[24] Such commemorations recall the achievements of the revolution, the difficulties it overcame, and, above all, its contribution to the formation of national identity and the establishment of a shared sense of belonging. Nevertheless, historical narratives should not be accepted uncritically, particularly because historians may be influenced by ideological commitments and represent different intellectual orientations. History must therefore remain open to repeated examination and reinterpretation so that contemporary society does not remain captive to inherited opinions that may no longer serve its needs. Edward Carr argues that “the form that the past ought to take has already been determined in advance by dead historians, chroniclers, and copyists.”[25] To remember the past from a present-oriented perspective, while regarding it as a civilisational and developmental

project and a source of resilience and determination, is to recognise that “when we remember something, we do not merely receive and take in an image from the past; we also search for it—that is, we do something.”[26] In other words, remembering involves an active process through which the past is selected, interpreted, and mobilised to strengthen identity and unity and confront forms of globalisation that may contribute to dividing peoples or intensifying hostility along sectarian, doctrinal, religious, ethnic, and linguistic lines.

Overcoming these differences requires a deliberate process of social construction through which diverse identities and potential contradictions are brought together within a broader framework of national belonging. Shared attachment to the homeland, a common history of sacrifice, and the memory of a national revolution can provide a basis for this collective unity. To preserve the value and meaning of the revolution, it must be periodically and systematically recalled through commemorative practices. As Gambetta wrote in the Journal officiel de la République française on 15 July 1872, “Every nation needs national holidays.”[27] Such occasions help prevent the disappearance of national identity from collective consciousness and preserve the historical processes through which the sense of belonging was formed. By recalling these processes, national commemorations can bring together social differences and transform diversity into a potential source of convergence and harmony. Social stability and prosperity may be strengthened by a shared sense of spiritual and national belonging that transcends divisions and contributes to the formation of collective memory. In The Phenomenology of Spirit, Hegel's philosophical treatment of memory assigns it a significant role in the formation of collective identity, presenting memory as a dynamic principle through which spirit achieves coherence despite the diversity of its expressions throughout historical development.[28] Collective memory is constructed through social processes in which each nation selects and interprets elements of its past in light of present concerns and future aspirations, transforming them into national occasions intended to unite rather than divide society.

An illustrative example is the development of Memorial Day in the United States. According to the account cited here, “after the American Civil War, the Northern states decided to establish a memorial day, which was first observed on 30 May 1868. In 1882, this day was named Memorial Day.”[29] The commemoration emerged in the aftermath of the Civil War and became part of the country's evolving culture of national remembrance. It illustrates how the commemoration of sacrifice can contribute to the consolidation of a national political project and the development of collective identity. Such examples demonstrate the importance of memory in the formation and preservation of national consciousness, particularly because “the principal frame of reference for historical memory remains the nation…”[30] In this sense, national identity rests upon the interrelationship between a shared past, a common present, and a collectively imagined future.

It can therefore be argued that national celebrations and occasions possess a symbolic dimension, whereby sacrifices made in the national interest gradually become ideals, supreme values, and noble principles that guide the nation and maintain its enduring connection with its founding heroes. The nation honours and venerates these heroes by commemorating their memory, while simultaneously striving to uphold their enduring message: freedom, sovereignty, independence, nation-building, and cooperation in the national interest among the various components of society. These components share a common past, one that is honourable and worthy of praise, veneration, and appreciation.

Conclusion

It can be argued that the past is constantly present, both through official historical memory and through unofficial collective memory. These two sources work together to connect the origin of society, represented by its past, with its destination, represented by its present. Consequently, the past and present of any nation cannot be separated. Rather, understanding its present and achieving success within it depend on how its past is employed in contemporary circumstances. Through celebration and commemoration, the past becomes a means of nation-building, strengthening national identity, and fostering a sense of belonging to a single entity whose roots extend deep into history and whose branches reach towards the skies of the present and the future.

This process aims to construct a shared identity among the various components of society, all of which have left their mark on this past. This is particularly significant when discussing Algeria's recent history, the glorious November Revolution, and the universal and comprehensive national dimension upon which it was founded—a unifying dimension that transcends manifestations of division, fragmentation, and disintegration. Moreover, celebrating the past enables us to honour its heroes and symbols, transforming them into icons that transcend time and place, accompanying us in every period and age and helping us achieve progress. They provide us with a renewed sense of national motivation whenever our determination weakens or our energies diminish, reminding

us of who we are, to whom we belong, and what is expected of us.

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Notes

[1] **Footnotes** [1] For further information, see Saeed al-Masri, The Heritage of Superiority between Folklore and the Religious Sphere, Batna Foundation, Egypt, no edition stated, 2019. [2] Georg Lukács, The Historical Novel, translated by Saleh Jawad al-Kadhim, General Cultural Affairs House, Iraq, 2nd ed., 1986, p. [page number not provided]. [3] Sven Bernecker and Kourken Michaelian, The Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy of Memory, translated by Mustafa Samir Abd al-Rahim, Ibn al-Nadim Publishing and Distribution, Algeria, 1st ed., 2023, p. 933. [4] Jacques Le Goff, History and Memory, translated by Jamal Shahid, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Lebanon, 1st ed., 2017, p. 151. [5] Jacques Le Goff, ibid., pp. 48–49. [6] Sven Bernecker and Kourken Michaelian, op. cit., 2023, p. 933. [7] Louis Hyde, The Gift of Forgetting: A Culture of Moving Beyond the Past, translated by Jawhar Abd al-Mawla, Wasm Publications, Egypt, no edition stated, no date stated, p. 90. [8] Jacques Le Goff, op. cit., p. 30. [9] Ibid., p. 41. [10] Sven Bernecker and Kourken Michaelian, op. cit., p. 19. [11] Bernard Lewis, History: Remembering It, Recovering It, and Inventing It, translated by Ahmad al-Abdah, Arab and International Relations Forum, Qatar, 1st ed., 2023, p. 9. [12] Sven Bernecker and Kourken Michaelian, op. cit., p. 998. [13] Paul Ricoeur, Memory, History, Forgetting, translated by George Zenaty, United New Book House, Libya, 1st ed., 2009, p. 149. [14] Jacques Le Goff, op. cit., p. 50. [15] Edward Carr, What Is History?, translated by Riham Abd al-Ma‘bud, Alam al-Adab for Software, Publishing and Distribution, Lebanon, 1st ed., 2018, p. 11. [16] Sven Bernecker and Kourken Michaelian, op. cit., p. 993. [17] Jacques Le Goff, op. cit., p. 50. [18] Ibid., p. 108. [19] Louis Hyde, op. cit., p. 150. [20] Sven Bernecker and Kourken Michaelian, op. cit., p. 499. [21] Paul Ricoeur, op. cit., p. 150. [22] Sven Bernecker and Kourken Michaelian, op. cit., p. 499. [23] Jacques Le Goff, op. cit., p. 38. [24] Ibid., p. 149. [25] Edward Carr, op. cit., p. 14. [26] Paul Ricoeur, op. cit., p. 102. [27] Jacques Le Goff, op. cit., p. 151. [28] Sven Bernecker and Kourken Michaelian, op. cit., p. 477. [29] Jacques Le

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