

HISTORY

Does the West Bank belong to the Arabs or the Jews? Why are racists so obsessed with origins? Is a seventh cousin still a cousin? As Eviatar Zerubavel demonstrates in *Time Maps*, we cannot answer burning questions such as these without a deeper understanding of how we envision the past. In a pioneering attempt to map the structure of our collective memory, Zerubavel considers the cognitive patterns we use to organize the past in our minds and the mental strategies that help us string together unrelated events into coherent and meaningful narratives, as well as the social grammar of conflicting interpretations of history. Breaking new ground and challenging conventional wisdom, *Time Maps* is a must read for anyone interested in how the history of our world takes shape in our memory.

"This is a major contribution to the study of the social shape of memory."

Eric Hobsbawm, BBC History Magazine

"In this lucid and highly original work, Eviatar Zerubavel shows how complex and dynamic it is for us to remember the past. Drawing on startling examples from scientific trees of life, religious holidays, wedding anniversaries, and ethnic dress, *Time Maps* uncovers fresh and important insights about the social shape of memory. To construct a past for Zerubavel himself, I would place him in the honorable lineage of Georg Simmel. This is a brilliant and welcome book for anyone interested in understanding how memory works."

Arlie Hochschild, University of California, Berkeley

"*Time Maps* extends beyond all of the old clichés about linear, circular, and spiral patterns of historical process and provides us with models of the actual legends used to map history. It is a brilliant and elegant exercise in model building that provides new insights into some of the old questions about philosophy of history, historical narrative, and what is called straight history."

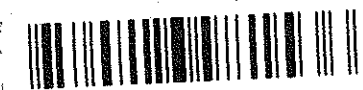
Hayden White, University of California, Santa Cruz

"Over the years, Eviatar Zerubavel's way of looking at the social world has been tuned like a fine instrument. *Time Maps* is him at his best, examining how we humans organize our pasts into coherent narratives. It is a wise and important work."

Kai Erikson, Yale University

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Mindscapes: An Invitation to Cognitive Sociology, and Meaning of the Week, and The Fine Line:



9780226981536
22 111 \$18.00
TIME MAPS/ZERUBAVEL
'04/17/08



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The University of Chicago Press
www.press.uchicago.edu

Cover image: Spiral Calendar, Harnett + Hanzon / Artville © 2003

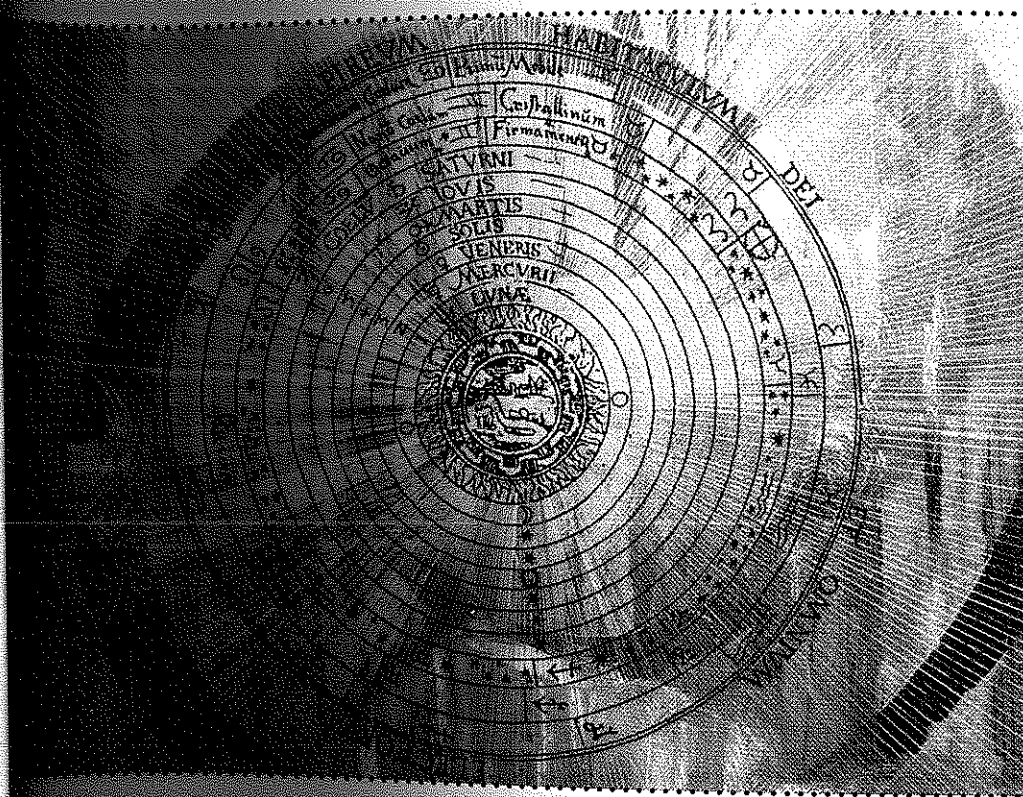
Time Maps

Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past
Eviatar Zerubavel

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Each of these general visions of change represents a particular mnemonic tradition often associated with a specific community. As part of their professional socialization, different generations of biologists, for example, come to envision the past as members of altogether different mnemonic communities. While gradualism was the predominant manner of narrating the history of life for more than a century after Darwin, punctuated equilibrium theory has been the commonly accepted way of doing it for the past twenty-five years.

As we shall see in the next two chapters, “legato” narratives are naturally quite indispensable to any effort to establish historical continuity. However, as we shall see in the last two chapters, “staccato” narratives are inevitably at the heart of any attempt to introduce some historical *discontinuity*. As we try to organize the past in our minds, we clearly seem to need, and in fact frequently use, both.

Historical Continuity

2

Not every historical narrative necessarily presupposes change. Essentially projecting a general sense that there is “nothing new under the sun,” many, in fact, regard the present as a *continuation* of the past.¹ Thus, instead of one actually replacing the other,² the two are viewed as parts of an integrated whole.

Despite the conventional grammatical distinction between the past and present tenses, *the past and the present are not entirely separate entities*. The notion that we could actually identify a point prior to which everything is “then” and subsequent to which everything is “now” is an illusion. So is the idea that we can somehow determine unequivocally how many years must pass before we can actually feature something in a history textbook or a “historical” museum.

The ways in which we organize our diet, interpersonal etiquette, and personal hygiene are essentially habitual patterns continually *perpetuated* as part of a social *tradition*.³ In a similar vein, we still use words that were around in the fourteenth century, and our scientists typically frame their current investigational agendas in terms of formal expectations (hypotheses) that are based on past research. As so clearly manifested in the ubiquitous role of precedent in common law, the present is largely a *cumulative*, multilayered collage of past residues continually deposited through the cultural equivalent of the geological process of sedimentation.⁴

Social relations, too, are historically embedded, as demonstrated by the great difficulty so many Romeo Montagues and Juliet Capulets seem to have in extricating their current (not to mention potential) ties from

the ever-present grip of their ancestral pasts, thereby substantiating Karl Marx's observation that "the tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living."⁵ As German president Roman Herzog reminded Poles on the fiftieth anniversary of the 1944 Warsaw uprising against the Nazi occupation, "only history divides us now."⁶ Yet such divisions are not so easy to erase. As one Irish-American commentator shrewdly observed after being chastised by her mother for planning to stay at a hotel named after Oliver Cromwell, who is still loathed by Irish nationalists, "in Irish time, 1651 and 1981 were only moments apart!"⁷ And as the director of the Oñate Monument and Visitors Center pleaded when Native American militants attempted to saw off the foot of a bronze statue of Juan de Oñate, the brutal Spanish conquistador who cut off the feet of those who resisted his conquest of New Mexico in 1599: "Give me a break—it was 400 years ago. It's OK to hold a grudge, but for 400 years?"⁸

Given all this, ignoring the historical background of present situations is somewhat analogous to living in a two-dimensional Flatland.⁹ Regarding such situations as if they have no past is like a physician failing to ask a patient about diseases that run in her family. It basically puts one in the situation of a child who is just starting to read newspapers and is still unfamiliar with the tacit historical background of the stories he reads, so it is virtually impossible for him to understand them fully. Such quasi-amnesic dissociation of current events from their historical contexts is therefore tantamount to chopping up a film into seemingly disconnected stills.

As exemplified by ex-convicts' difficulties in finding a job after serving their prison sentence and the fact that former nuns often wear particularly provocative clothes and makeup to avoid being perceived as "sweet" and naïve,¹⁰ the past is also considered an integral part of present identities. That explains the identity crises we often experience as a result of dramatic changes that quite literally tear us from our past, as when we emigrate, undergo a hysterectomy, or lose a spouse.

Yet the continuity between the past and the present is also disrupted nowadays by the tremendous acceleration of social and technological change¹¹ and the rise of a distinctly modern economy based on disposability and planned obsolescence.¹² That, however, has triggered an unmistakably *conservative* urge to preserve such continuity (and a corresponding strong aversion to any change that might threaten our identity), as mani-

festated in various traditionalist efforts (such as by the Amish) to conserve the old ways of life as well as in high-school yearbooks, oldies radio stations, and numerous other expressions of nostalgia.¹³

Predictably, we feel particularly nostalgic about those parts of our past that seem most hopelessly irrecoverable. (As I leaf through a collection of mementos from the 1950s,¹⁴ it is old matchboxes, chewing-gum wrappers, and magazine covers that most evocatively touch the child in me.) We likewise experience nostalgia during periods of dramatic change. It is upon leaving home to go to college that we often become sentimentally reattached to our childhood belongings, and upon retiring that we suddenly long for our lost youth.¹⁵

As demonstrated by the wave of nostalgia that swept the United States in the late 1970s as people began to grasp the full scope of the tremendous social changes that had taken place around them since the 1960s,¹⁶ that sentimental reaction applies to groups as well as individuals. Yearning for yesterday is particularly pronounced when a group experiences a sharp political, cultural, or economic downturn, as exemplified by the sentimental longings of nineteenth-century Arab historians witnessing the beginnings of Europe's colonial expansion and the decline of the Ottoman Empire to the past glories of medieval, Muslim Spain.¹⁷

As an attempt to reconnect with older layers of oneself and thereby gain access to some long-gone past, nostalgia inevitably raises the philosophical question of how identities can indeed *persist* in the face of constant change. We certainly cannot accept such persistence as a given. After all, not a single cell in my body was there forty years ago and not a single current member of "the French nation" was alive during the French Revolution. Yet despite the fact that Geoffrey Chaucer would most probably have difficulty following a conversation among American teenagers today, we nevertheless do regard "the English language" as an entity that has persisted continually throughout the past six centuries. By the same token, we regard Italy's national soccer team (the *Azzurri*) and Harvard University's psychology department as essentially *uninterrupted* entities, although their memberships obviously keep shifting.¹⁸

Yet how do we actually overcome the fact that the fourteenth- and twenty-first-century versions of what we consider "the same" language or social group are not really contiguous? How do we actually manage to establish *historical continuity* between virtually *noncontiguous* points

in time, thereby essentially transforming an assemblage of utterly disconnected “successive perceptions”¹⁹ into a seemingly coherent, *constant* identity?

As we shall see, such seemingly self-evident constancy is only a figment of our minds.²⁰ As David Hume so rightly pointed out, it is not really a quality of objects but of the way we perceive those objects.²¹ Continuous identities are thus products of the *mental* integration of otherwise disconnected points in time into a seemingly single historical whole. More specifically, it is our memory that makes such mental integration possible, thereby allowing us to establish the distinctly mnemonic illusion of continuity.²² As victims of Alzheimer’s disease and other forms of memory loss make so painfully clear, maintaining a continuous identity is virtually impossible without the essentially “adhesive” act of memory.

The various mnemonic strategies we use to help us create the illusion of historical continuity typically involve some mental *bridging*. A prototypical facilitator of integrating noncontiguous spaces,²³ the bridge is a perfect metaphor for the mnemonic effort to integrate temporally noncontiguous manifestations of what we nevertheless consider “the same” entity (person, organization, nation). And in the same manner that we try to “bridge” the historical gap between the present and the future through the use of conventional “adhesive” farewell clichés such as “I’ll see you later” (or its many cross-cultural functional cousins, such as the Italian *arrivederci* and the German *auf wiedersehen*),²⁴ we also use various mental bridging techniques to produce the “connecting historical tissue”²⁵ that helps us fill any historical gaps between the past and the present.

These techniques typically involve some mental editing to produce an illusory *quasi-contiguity* that can help offset the actual temporal gaps between noncontiguous points in history. Like the pasting we do in word processing, such editing resembles cinematic montage, in which a series of altogether separate shots are essentially pasted together to form a single, seemingly seamless film.²⁶ As we can see in figure 11, such *mnemonic pasting* helps us mentally transform series of noncontiguous points in time into seemingly unbroken historical continua.

Same Place

Despite the fact that mnemonic bridging is basically a mental act, we often try to ground it in some tangible reality. Indeed, one of the most effective

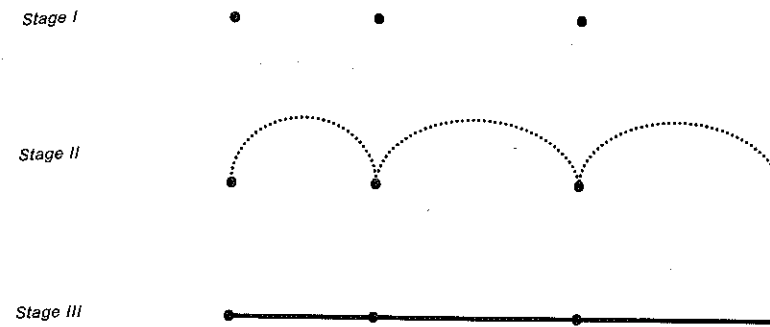


Figure 11 Mnemonic Pasting

ways of bridging the gap between noncontiguous points in history is by establishing a connection that allows them to almost literally touch one another.

Constancy of place is a formidable basis for establishing a strong sense of sameness. Even as we ourselves undergo dramatic changes both individually and collectively, our physical surroundings usually remain relatively stable. As a result, they constitute a reliable locus of memories and often serve as major foci of personal as well as group nostalgia.²⁷ In providing us with some sense of *permanence*, they help promote the highly reassuring conservative illusion that nothing fundamental has really changed.

That explains why, at their national convention in Los Angeles in 2000, Democrats kept reminding Americans that it was *at that same place* that they had nominated John Kennedy as their ultimately victorious presidential candidate forty years earlier. It also underscores efforts to literally *preserve* the past in historic buildings and neighborhoods.²⁸ Whether in Stockholm, Granada, or Montreal, the “impulse to preserve” the past is “a reaction against the increasing evanescence of things and the speed with which we pass them by.”²⁹

Such obvious concern about historical continuity is also the reason why, after conquering Córdoba in 1236, King Ferdinand III of Castile did not destroy the gorgeous mosque that for 450 years had epitomized the splendor of Moorish architecture. Instead, he converted it to a cathedral (which, nevertheless, is still known eight centuries later as the Mezquita), thereby integrating Spain’s Muslim past and Christian present in a most visually compelling manner. An equally evocative spectacle awaits anyone who

enters Hagia Sophia, the great church that was built by Emperor Justinian in 537 and converted by Sultan Mehmet II in 1453 to a mosque and again by President Kemal Atatürk five centuries later to a state museum. The visual fusion of Istanbul's Byzantine and Ottoman pasts with its modern Turkish present in the same building is a spectacular sight, not to mention a most remarkable instance of mnemonic engineering.

Constancy of place also allows us to virtually "see" the people who once occupied the space we now do.³⁰ As we look into the eerily empty kitchen of a fully preserved house in Pompeii, we can quite vividly visualize a family working there at the very moment Mount Vesuvius erupted nineteen centuries ago, enabling us to actually identify with those people. Walking down the streets of an old city, we can "make contact with previous generations" by literally walking in their footsteps and looking at the "vistas that greeted their eyes."³¹ (Standing outside Marco Polo's house in Venice and looking at what he could see from his window 750 years ago, I could actually feel the overwhelming sense of claustrophobia that must have stricken the man most responsible for expanding medieval Europe's geographical horizons.) Such identification is often exploited by authors of "then and now" mental time-travel books who superimpose transparent overlays of imaginary scenes from antiquity onto actual photographs of historical ruins in their present-day surroundings.³² It also explains the great touristic appeal of old inns where George Washington allegedly spent a night more than two centuries ago.

Indeed, place plays a major role in identity rhetoric. For example, whether it involves devout Muslims going to Mecca on their hajj, patriotic Americans coming to Philadelphia to see the Liberty Bell, or romantic couples revisiting the site of their first date, *pilgrimage* is specifically designed to bring mnemonic communities into closer "contact" with their collective past. This mnemonically evocative aspect of place likewise underscores the role of *ruins* in solidifying such ties.³³ Thus, during the Russian bombing of their region in 1999, Chechens felt highly protective about the old stone towers that for many centuries helped "connect" them to their ancestors.³⁴ This evocative aspect of place also explains the tremendous significance of the archaeological excavations at Masada for modern Israeli nationalism.³⁵ Having its young soldiers take their oath on that mountaintop has certainly helped Israel claim the legacy of the ancient Jewish warriors who died there nineteen centuries ago.³⁶ Similar concerns about historical continuity led the shah of Iran in 1971 to stage the public commemoration of the 2,500th

anniversary of the foundation of the Persian Empire among the ruins of the ancient city of Persepolis.³⁷

The relation between place and identity has unmistakably essentialist overtones. Thus, to early Egyptian nationalists, ancient and modern Egyptians "were *inevitably* subject to identical . . . influences,"³⁸ having both lived in the Nile Valley. A highly romanticized "natural" link between geography and nationhood likewise underscores the special significance of Zion to the modern political movement that basically derives its entire public identity from its name. For Zionism, Palestine's physical landscape literally bridges the 1,800-year historical gap separating its ancient and modern inhabitants.³⁹ That is why modern ultranationalist Jewish settlers on the West Bank ("Judaea and Samaria") are so strongly attached to their settlements. As one settler in the old city of Hebron explains,

You feel here such a deep *connection*. On this mountain stood the palace of King David. Here, *right here*, God promised Abraham the Land of Israel. . . . Just imagine to yourself that *I go to sleep at the very place where Abraham used to get up every morning!* . . . What Jew wouldn't want to *live near Abraham?*⁴⁰

Relics and Memorabilia

Yet mnemonic "connectedness" need not depend on constancy of place. After all, even strictly physical mnemonic bridges can be detached from actual places, as exemplified by souvenirs, mementos, and other *memorabilia*. Despite the fact that they are not tied to a specific location, the actual material essence of such portable *relics* helps provide some physical continuity, which is why they are indeed used almost exclusively, as their etymology suggests, for storing memories. Like stuffed animals, security blankets, and other "transitional objects" used by infants as highly effective existential bridges,⁴¹ relics basically allow us to live in the present while at the same time literally "cling" to the past.

Furthermore, the fact that they are not tied to a particular location certainly allows much more flexibility in the way we use such "reminders." Unlike old neighborhoods, for example, the portable nature of relics means that they can help us recall past events without our having to be physically present at the place where they actually occurred. (Lying in a hammock that is now hanging in my backyard in New Jersey instantly evokes vivid memories of cuddling my son in the same hammock fifteen years ago in my old backyard on Long Island.) Like a faraway lover's letter or lock of hair, such

objects allow us mnemonic access even to persons and places that are no longer physically accessible—hence the tremendous importance of Torah scrolls to Jewish communities in exile throughout history, and the special significance of home-related memorabilia as *tangible* links between past and present selves when we go to college.⁴²

Given the role of memorabilia as a mnemonic bridge, we often refuse to throw out old clothes and hold on to otherwise worthless presents we received from people who once occupied a special place in our lives. As we keep moving through life from one place to another, the various mementos we carry with us make it, somehow, much easier to maintain the continuity between our past and present selves. Because they can no longer cling to their past personal belongings, the psychological recovery of war refugees as well as earthquake, flood, and hurricane survivors is particularly difficult.⁴³

Like ruins and historic buildings, relics and memorabilia offer us a remarkably vivid, quasi-tangible contact with the past. I recall the exhilarating experiences of looking at one of the original copies of the 1455 Gutenberg Bible at the British Museum and standing, at the Topkapi Saray Museum in Istanbul, in front of a sandal reputedly worn by Mohammed fourteen centuries ago! (Displaying to his followers from the top of a mosque in Kandahar an old cloak allegedly worn by the Prophet in fact helped Mullah Omar launch the Taliban's highly traditionalistic Islamic revolution in Afghanistan in 1996.)⁴⁴ Our appreciation of such "tangible" contacts with the past explains our tremendous fascination with the Scala Santa (a Roman staircase reputedly made from the actual steps that Jesus climbed when he was brought before Pontius Pilate) and the Shroud of Turin⁴⁵—not to mention the legendary Holy Grail. It also explains why we keep scrapbooks and the significant role of museums in promoting nationalism.⁴⁶

It is precisely their evocative function that makes relics such as the American flag that was in Abraham Lincoln's theater box the night he was assassinated⁴⁷ so valuable. Why else, after all, would anyone be willing to pay so much for a 1957 Cadillac or a half-broken manual typewriter? Only their role in providing some sentimental connection to the past makes such *antiques* so precious to us.⁴⁸

As anyone who has ever been asked to pose for a picture or sign a guest book very well knows, we are more than just passive consumers of memorabilia. As exemplified by the plaques, medals, award certificates, and other purely commemorative objects we produce, we often actively

design such future sites of memory well in advance! Like school yearbooks (for which class pictures are nowadays sometimes taken before the actual school year begins), the tremendous value of such "pre-ruins"⁴⁹ lies in their being highly evocative and thus able to constitute quasi-tangible bridges to future pasts.

Imitation and Replication

Along with trying to approximate actual physical contact between the past and the present, we also try to generate various iconic representations⁵⁰ of the past that would at least *resemble* it. Consider, for example, the replicas of King Nebuchadnezzar's monumental buildings in Babylon constructed by Iraqi president Saddam Hussein almost 2,600 years later.⁵¹ Consider also, in this regard, nineteenth-century experiments with neoclassicism,⁵² and various attempts by U.S. colleges to project an "old" look through the use of neo-Gothic architecture.

The physical resemblance between the images we try to capture in statues and portraits and the actual persons they are designed to later invoke represents similar attempts to somehow compensate for the lack of actual physical contact between the past and the present. Such *iconic connectedness* is even more spectacularly evident in the remarkably vivid images of those persons that we try to capture in photographs, let alone on video or film.⁵³

Our attempts to *imitate* the past and thereby "reproduce" it are also expressed through our appearance and behavior. Indeed, much of what we call "tradition" consists of various ritualized efforts to become more fully integrated into our collective past through imitation. The remarkable preservation of many archaic behavior patterns is evident in religious ritual, courtroom etiquette, parliamentary procedure, military drills, folk dances, and ethnic cuisine. It also accounts for the unmistakably traditionalistic ceremonial garments of kings, popes, graduating classes, and national soccer teams.

Even more spectacular in this regard are historical *revivals* such as the restoration of the ancient Roman salute by the Fascists in Italy, the resurgence of Hebrew as an everyday language in modern Israel, and various "invented traditions."⁵⁴ By generating new traditions that nevertheless seem old (such as Kwanzaa, a pseudo-African festival essentially invented in California in the 1960s),⁵⁵ such revivals are designed to create the illusion of historical continuity since time immemorial. As exemplified by

the invention of the Highland "tradition" in Scotland two centuries ago⁵⁶ or the relatively recent adoption of traditional African names and garb by American black nationalists, however, such continuity is a mere figment of our minds.

Imitating entails repetition,⁵⁷ thereby helping to create an illusion of actual *replication*. By wearing clothes resembling those worn by our ancestors and eating the "same" food they once ate, we try to symbolically relive their lives. Such simulative attempts to "relive" the past are particularly evident in ritual pageants involving actual *reenactment*, such as the 1995 event that literally "retraced the steps" of the 1965 civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery (this time, however, featuring the repentant former Alabama governor George Wallace singing "We Shall Overcome").⁵⁸ The common use of period costume on such occasions helps maintain the illusory conflation of the present and the past. Such *quasi-synchronicity* is further enhanced through constancy of place, as in Colonial Williamsburg and other "living history" museums, where quasi-authentic guides use the present tense when talking with visitors about the eighteenth century! It can nowadays also be produced digitally, as demonstrated by Natalie Cole in her stunning 1991 recording of "Unforgettable." In it she sings "along with" her father, Nat King Cole, who had already been dead for a quarter of a century.⁵⁹

"Same" Time

Historical reenactments often take place at Christmas, Thanksgiving,⁶⁰ and other holidays. (Having grown up in Israel, I have vivid childhood memories of "coming out of Egypt with all my belongings" on Passover and "bringing my first fruits to the ancient Temple in Jerusalem" on Shavu'ot.) Indeed, *periodic fusion with the past* is the very essence of annual (birthdays, holidays) and other (silver weddings, high-school reunions, bicentennials) *anniversaries*.⁶¹ And this fusion is even more evocative when synchrony is combined with constancy of place, as in the annual "replay" in Nazi Germany of the 1923 Munich Beer Hall Putsch at the same place as well as on the "same" day (9 November),⁶² or the peace rallies held every year in Israel on 4 November at the site of the 1995 assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.⁶³

Solidifying such periodic fusion with the past through the establishment of an *annual cycle of commemorative holidays* is one of the main

functions of the calendar.⁶⁴ (In helping ensure that we periodically "revisit" our collective past, the calendar also plays a major role in our mnemonic socialization. For instance, long before Americans are formally introduced in school to the English colonization of their country, they learn through their annual observance of Thanksgiving about the seventeenth-century Pilgrims who settled New England.)⁶⁵ And despite the difficulty of compressing thousands of years of history into a 365-day holiday cycle, we nevertheless try to combine our linear and circular visions of time in an effort to somehow "synchronize" our annual holidays with the historical events whose memory they are designed to evoke. Thus, when Jews bless God on Hanukkah for the miracles he performed "*in those days at this time*," they are simultaneously associating that holiday with a particular time in history (the Maccabean Revolt of 165 BC) as well as a particular time of year (the end of the month of Kislev).⁶⁶ Such symbolic *synchrony of "now" and "then"* reflects our conservative urge to do away with the very distinction between them.

Most "holy days" are symbolically associated, and therefore also calendrically "synchronized," with certain *days* in a group's history: Malta's Victory Day, with the lifting of a four-month Ottoman siege on 8 September 1565; New Zealand's Waitangi Day, with the signing of the celebrated treaty between the islands' Maori and British populations on 6 February 1840; Colombia's Battle of Boyacá Day, with Simón Bolívar's victory over Spain on 7 August 1819; and so on. Yet even such remarkable effort to literally *synchronize calendrical and historical time* certainly pales compared to the church's unparalleled sociomnemonic accomplishment of featuring the three calendar months from Ash Wednesday to Pentecost as a perfect calendrical replica of three specific historical months in the year AD 30!⁶⁷

As one might expect, synchrony of this sort has unmistakably essentialist connotations given the exceptionally evocative *seasonal identity* of the historical "then" and the calendrical "now." Whereas eating the "same" unleavened bread on Passover helps present-day Jews identify with the ancient Israelites who allegedly came out of Egypt three thousand years ago, the fact that it takes place at the same time of year as the Exodus is specifically designed to make the link between them seem more "natural."

There is absolutely nothing natural, however, about annual anniversaries. Essentially using 260- and 210-day holiday cycles,⁶⁸ neither Guatemalans nor Indonesians, for example, evidently tie their traditional notions of the "same" time to the seasons. Various memorial services held on 11

December 2001 to mark the three-month “anniversary” of the 11 September attack on the World Trade Center likewise remind us that only social convention ties birthdays and other holidays to the annual revolution of the earth around the sun.⁶⁹

Highly cognizant of the mnemonic role of anniversaries, we often schedule special events for particular dates that are already imbued with historical significance. It was by no means a merely random coincidence (but, rather, a deliberate *calendrical coincidence*) that Mexico’s 1917 constitution, for example, was promulgated on the “same” day as its 1857 precursor (5 February), or that the upper house of Denmark’s parliament was abolished in 1953 on the “same” day marking the end of the absolute monarchy there 104 years earlier (5 June). Similar sociomnemonic sensitivities must have played a major role in Saddam Hussein’s decision to assume the presidency of Iraq on the eleventh anniversary of the 17 July coup that brought his Ba’ath Party to power in 1968, as well as in Hungary’s decision in 1989 to proclaim its post-Communist republic on the anniversary (23 October) of its historic anti-Soviet uprising in 1956. And when Timothy McVeigh bombed the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City on 19 April 1995, his attack was designed to mark the second anniversary of the destruction by government agents of the Branch Davidian cult compound in Waco, Texas, which he evidently wished to avenge.

Historical Analogy

The aforementioned cases of Denmark, Hungary, and Mexico also underscore our tendency to view the past as somehow “similar” to the present, thus linking them through *analogy*.⁷⁰ That happens, for example, when we unwittingly “reproduce” early patterns of relating to our parents in the way we now relate to authority figures or choose our sexual partners. It is often also done quite consciously. The famous affair between Camilla Parker Bowles and Britain’s Prince Charles was in fact initiated by her telling him that her great-grandmother and his great-great-grandfather had been lovers!⁷¹

The tendency to invoke the past analogically, then, characterizes more than just lawyers in search of judicial precedents.⁷² The totally unanticipated destruction of the World Trade Center, for example, was immediately compared by many to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor sixty years earlier, just as the political situation in Bulgaria in 1945 was described

at the time as a Bulgarian “version” of the situation in Russia in 1917,⁷³ and as Yitzhak Rabin and Ehud Barak were compared by critics of their conciliatory approach toward the Palestinians to France’s Marshal Henri Pétain, another “former military hero who as a political leader later betrayed his country.” (Barak was also compared by ultranationalist Israeli rabbis to the spies who were sent by Moses to reconnoiter Palestine, only to be intimidated by its native population.)⁷⁴ And in the same way that John F. Kennedy’s decision to increase U.S. military aid to South Vietnam was inspired by the successes of “analogous” campaigns against Communist insurgencies in Malaya and the Philippines,⁷⁵ it was the humiliating memory of “the ignominy of Muslims being driven out of Europe by Christian armies in the 15th century”⁷⁶ that so evocatively affected arch terrorist Ayman al-Zawahiri’s view of Islam’s present relations with the West. Such pronouncedly anachronistic mental fusions of past and present also explain the tremendous significance of the Exodus to both English Puritans in the 1640s and American colonists in the 1770s.⁷⁷

Like generals preparing for the last war, we often draw on analogous (“similar,” “parallel”) situations from the past when facing current ones. Incorporating the “lessons” of the 1815 Congress of Vienna was an integral part of drafting the 1919 Treaty of Versailles.⁷⁸ Mobilizing memories in this manner usually involves efforts to avoid past mistakes, such as behavior for which others have already been penalized.⁷⁹ Indeed, we often use past traumas as a scare tactic, as exemplified by the strategic manipulation by the U.S. government of the memory of the 1918 influenza epidemic to promote mass immunization during the 1976 swine flu scare,⁸⁰ and of the 1936 Berlin Olympics by advocates of boycotting the 1980 Moscow Olympics following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (as well as by opponents of Beijing’s bid to host the 2008 Games),⁸¹ not to mention the post-Holocaust “Never again” rhetoric of the Jewish Defense League.

Worries about “repeating” past mistakes were also evident in America’s fear of repeating in Vietnam the “loss” of China to the Communists in 1949⁸² as well as in its efforts to avoid in 1945 the “same” mistakes made with regard to Germany at the end of World War I.⁸³ And when Congress gave the president its almost unanimous support after the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Senator (and Vietnam veteran) John McCain explicitly cautioned against “repeating” the mistakes made after the 1964 North Vietnamese attacks in the Gulf of Tonkin, which helped drag the United States into a long, unwinnable war.⁸⁴ The wish to avoid a

“repeat” of the Cultural Revolution and the Ruby Ridge and Waco debacles also affected the way Deng Xiaoping and U.S. law enforcement officials handled the 1989 student demonstrations in Tiananmen Square⁸⁵ and the 1996 standoff with the antigovernment extremists Freemen of Montana, respectively.⁸⁶

Consider also the infamous British and French attempt to appease and thereby “contain” Adolf Hitler by practically sacrificing Czechoslovakia at Munich in 1938. The memory of the tragic consequences of that inglorious event was already invoked in 1945 when the United States was cautioned by Iran not to let the Soviet Union do in Azerbaijan what Germany had done to Czechoslovakia in 1939.⁸⁷ Five years later, when North Korea invaded South Korea, it likewise played a major role in U.S. president Harry Truman’s decision to help the South⁸⁸ as well as in the ensuing development of the “domino theory” that helped shape U.S. foreign policy in the 1950s and 1960s.⁸⁹ The “lesson” of Munich also played a significant role in Britain’s decision to attack Egypt when Gamal Abdul Nasser seized the Suez Canal in 1956,⁹⁰ and explicit comparisons of Yassir Arafat and Slobodan Milošević to Hitler were still used in 1982 and 1999 to justify the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the bombing of Serbia by NATO. Warning the world not to “repeat” its regrettable capitulation to the German dictator by sacrificing Kuwait also helped U.S. president George Bush mobilize international support for the Gulf War.⁹¹

Like any other symbol, historical analogies clearly transcend their historical specificity. When drawing such analogies we therefore do not feel constrained by the considerable temporal distance often separating past signifiers from their corresponding present signifieds. Their evocative power is much greater, however, when the cultural affinity between the two helps offset such distance, as exemplified by the use of the Persian army defeated by Alexander the Great in 333 BC to allegorically represent in a 1529 painting the Ottoman troops laying siege to Vienna that year;⁹² the symbolic identification of Peruvian president Alejandro Toledo with the fifteenth-century Inca emperor Pacachuteq;⁹³ or the Nazi portrayal of the Roman wars against Carthage as a racial conflict between Aryans and Semites!⁹⁴ Just as evocative in this regard were Sergei Eisenstein’s famous 1938 cinematic tribute to Prince Alexander Nevsky, who in 1242 thwarted a German invasion of Russia; the depiction of Jewish troops preparing to confront the German army about to enter Palestine in 1942 as a “new edition” of the defenders of Masada;⁹⁵ and the popular portrayal of Arafat

and Osama bin Laden as modern versions of Saladin, the highly revered architect of Islam’s historic victory over the Crusaders in 1187.⁹⁶

The celebrated victory of this twelfth-century Mesopotamian warrior was similarly featured by Saddam Hussein right before the Gulf War as pre-figuratively suggestive of the outcome of (and therefore also a very useful model for) his own impending battle against the latter-day invading infidels from the West. An exceptionally shrewd manipulator of such cultural and geographical “parallels,” he had portrayed himself a few years earlier and during the Iran-Iraq War as a present-day incarnation of Sa’d ibn-abi-Waqqas, the Arab general who defeated the Persians at Qadisiya in 637, and even issued colorful postage stamps anachronistically commemorating “Saddam’s Battle of Qadisiya.”⁹⁷ Calling for a new Arab war against Israel, he then proceeded to link himself analogically to Nebuchadnezzar II, the celebrated Babylonian (and, as such, “Iraqi”) king who managed to conquer Jerusalem and destroy the ancient Israelites’ First Temple in 586 BC.

Throughout their 1996 standoff with the Freemen of Montana, U.S. law enforcement agents were explicitly trying to avoid “another Waco.”⁹⁸ By the same token, when Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon worried that the United States might be willing to compromise Israel’s security to buy Arab support for its war against terror, he made it unequivocally clear that the “will not be Czechoslovakia.”⁹⁹ In a somewhat similar vein, when President Lyndon Johnson wanted to avoid public criticism by General William Westmoreland during the Vietnam War, he invoked a “parallel” incident from the Korean War involving Truman and General Douglas MacArthur and explicitly warned him not to “pull a MacArthur on me.”¹⁰⁰ On the eve of the Battle of Khe Sanh, invoking the historic French defeat at Dien Bien Phu fourteen years earlier, he likewise warned that he did not want “any damn Dinbinphoo.”¹⁰¹

As demonstrated by the above—and by the use of *Purim*, the name of a traditional commemoration of the alleged deliverance of Persian Jewry from a massacre plotted twenty-four centuries ago, to denote any “such” event involving Jewish communities throughout history¹⁰²—the events to which we make historical analogies are basically regarded as transhistorical, generic symbols. Based on a perceived similarity between “parallel” situations, such analogies thus clearly presuppose some mnemonic typification. That explains how American colonists could view their bondage to England as “a second Egypt”¹⁰³ and how the U.S. interventions in Vietnam and the Dominican Republic were actually designed to prevent “another”

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Korea or Cuba.¹⁰⁴ It also explains the wish to avoid any more “Munichs” or “Vietnams.”¹⁰⁵

Discursive Continuity

Like holidays and other anniversaries, historical analogies underscore the fact that our “ties” to the past are not always physical or even iconic but quite often purely symbolic. That is certainly true of the ties between noncontemporary namesakes. The tremendous mnemonic significance of names as discursive tokens of “sameness” helps explain, for example, why the rebels in Chiapas would choose to adopt the name *Zapatistas* more than seventy years after the actual death of the revered hero of the Mexican Revolution, Emiliano Zapata.¹⁰⁶ This wish to establish such seemingly direct “links” to the past likewise led post-Communist Mongolian nationalists to name a new vodka after their thirteenth-century national hero, Genghis Khan.¹⁰⁷

A somewhat similar discursive form of bridging the historical gap between the past and the present is the subtle use of *consecutive ordinal numbers* to imply temporal contiguity. The so-called Third Reich, for example, was thus featured by the Nazis as a *direct* successor to the “second” (1871–1918) German empire, thereby tacitly glossing over the pronouncedly non-imperial fifteen-year period actually separating them (not unlike the forty-four-year period from 1804 to 1848 separating France’s so-called First Republic from the Second). The name *Menelik II* was similarly designed to help Ethiopians spin a mental thread “linking” their late nineteenth-century emperor to the legendary founder of their kingdom despite the fact that 2,800 years separated their reigns (just like the name linking twentieth-century Bulgarian czar Boris III to his tenth-century namesake, Boris II). Building their dream “Third Temple” in Jerusalem would likewise help Jewish ultranationalists dim the memory of the nineteenth-century nationalist “void” that began with the Roman destruction of the Second Temple in AD 70.

Another discursive form of “bridging” historical gaps is the use of a *single continuous timeline* for chronological dating.¹⁰⁸ In marked contrast to episodic “eras” tied to the inevitably discrete reign of a specific monarch, for example,¹⁰⁹ the standard Jewish, Christian, and Muslim eras feature continuous timelines that can actually “link” any given points in history! Like poems that forgo conventional spaces between words or books that end with thirty-six-page passages virtually uninterrupted by even a single

comma,¹¹⁰ such timelines embody an unequivocal commitment to continuity. Such commitment has been at the heart of the feminist critique of the conventional segmentation of women’s lives into the supposedly discontinuous biographical phases associated with the social titles *Miss* and *Mrs.*, leading, indeed, to the introduction of the single (and thus essentially “continuous”) title *Ms.*¹¹¹ It has likewise inspired nationalist attempts to challenge the conventional periodization of Egyptian history in accordance with its various conquests by foreigners. By essentially “Egyptianizing” its Nubian, Persian, Roman, Arab, and Mongol conquerors and presenting the (Macedonian) Ptolemys and (Turkish) Mamluks as full-fledged Egyptian monarchs, Egypt was thus portrayed as having basically remained “the same” throughout its five-thousand-year history.¹¹²

As one might expect, this portrayal also greatly resembles the way individuals normally produce a *continuous biography*, which, as job interviews, high-school reunions, and other “autobiographical occasions”¹¹³ can attest, is a considerable discursive accomplishment that cannot ever be taken as a given.¹¹⁴ The reason it takes such an effort to revise an old résumé is not only because so much has happened in our life since the last revision but also because of our obvious need to keep “updating” our past so as to make it congruous with our often-changing present self-image. Whether they are made by the overweight, prematurely aging alcoholic who was once considered the most popular girl in her class or by the former prankster who is now a prominent judge, any attempts to discursively “align” our past and present underscore our overall wish to present to the world an essentially *continuous self*. It is the social unacceptability of any major biographical incongruities between past and present identities that makes blackmailing such a lucrative business.¹¹⁵

The discursive production of a continuous biography consists of playing up those elements of our past that are consistent with (or can somehow be construed as prefiguring) our present identity while downplaying those that are incongruous with it. That process entails invoking the classic Aristotelean distinction between the “essential” aspects of an object that we believe constitute its “true” identity and those we conventionally consider merely “accidental.” Whereas my driver’s license and social security number are specifically designed to confirm that I am still “the same” person even if I lose 56 percent of my body weight through bariatric surgery,¹¹⁶ which socks I am wearing today or how much milk I take with my coffee are not considered part of my “essence.”¹¹⁷ (By the same token, unless the

actual piece on which its official Vehicle Identification Number is engraved has been removed, a car whose engine and four doors have all been replaced is still considered to be “the same” car.)¹¹⁸ In fact, as exemplified by self-accounts of past marriages or periods of clinical depression, in order to downplay biographical incongruities between past and present selves, we sometimes dismiss even lengthy stretches of action (philandering) or inaction (“vegetating”) as somehow uncharacteristic of who we “actually” are.¹¹⁹ In order to produce a seemingly continuous female biography, a male-to-female transsexual may thus present her entire childhood as a somewhat inconsequential “phase” when she was “not really herself.”¹²⁰ Indeed, as expressed by the conventional Zionist portrayal of the modern Jewish immigration to Israel as a “Return” to an ancient homeland, even eighteen or twenty-five centuries can sometimes be “bracketed off” as a mere interruption of an essentially continuous national project.¹²¹

Ancestry and Descent

3

In addition to the various “bridging” techniques discussed in chapter 2, we also maintain the link between the past and the present through interpersonal contact, with the bridge “connecting” them being embodied by actual people. Such contact is at the heart of fictional encounters between children and celebrated figures from their nation’s past,¹ though it is even more effective when it involves real-life encounters with older members of our communities. Furthermore, it is through the “demographic metabolism” allowed by such human bridges that seemingly continuous collective entities such as cities and families are actually *regenerated*.² And it is the vision of passing the proverbial torch across those bridges that leads many organizations to use their past members (such as college alumni) to recruit future ones.

As demonstrated by the tremendous public concern displayed throughout President Clinton’s 1999 impeachment trial about what the Founding Fathers actually meant when they drafted the U.S. Constitution more than two centuries earlier,³ our predecessors clearly occupy an extremely important place in our consciousness long after they die.⁴ Indeed, as exemplified by their ubiquitous iconic presence on public monuments and paper money (not to mention the Maori tradition of actually enlisting dead ancestors’ support before going to war), they often achieve symbolic immortality.⁵ Seemingly looking out at them from the colorful murals of their working-class neighborhoods,⁶ the ancient Celtic hero Cú Chulainn and the leaders of the 1916 Easter Rebellion have a remarkably “live” presence for the children of Belfast, as did King Solomon, the Hasmoneans, Rashi,

Historical Discontinuity

4

We have thus far examined some of the ways in which we try to generate the mnemonic experience of historical continuity. Yet such attempts are quite commonly offset by diametrically opposite efforts to create the experience of historical *discontinuity*. And whereas the kind of mnemonic "editing" presupposed by the former is geared to deliberately overlook actual temporal gaps between noncontiguous points in history, the one involved in the latter is specifically designed to help transform actual historical continua into series of seemingly unattached, freestanding blocks of time. As we can see from contrasting figures 17 and 11, instead of mnemonic "pasting," historical discontinuity thus involves some mnemonic "cutting," since rather than try to project a semblance of gaplessness, the goal is to promote a vision of actual historical gaps.¹

Instead of envisioning history as an uninterrupted chain of essentially contiguous occurrences flowing into one another like the successive musical notes that form legato phrases, we are now dealing with a mnemonic vision featuring actual ruptures between one chunk of history and the next, resembling the musical pauses between the successive notes that form staccato phrases. The contrast between these two diametrically opposite sociomnemonic visions of the past is quite evident in paleontology and geology, where gradualist narratives featuring graded chains of intermediate organic forms evolving from one another almost imperceptibly are contrasted with *episodic* ones featuring supposedly *discrete* historical "eras" ("epochs," "ages") separated from one another by pronouncedly sharp *breaks*.

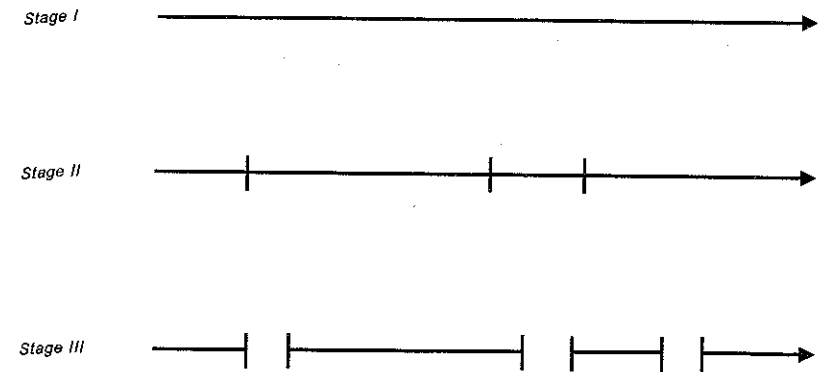


Figure 17 Mnemonic Cutting

As we have seen in chapters 2 and 3, legato narratives are essential for projecting a sense of historical continuity. As we shall now see, staccato narratives are equally indispensable to any efforts to generate a sense of historical *discontinuity*.

The Social Punctuation of the Past

As one might expect, constructing such a pronouncedly discontinuous vision of the past involves producing the mnemonic equivalent of orthographic spacing or musical phrasing. In order to fully understand this process, we must therefore identify the structural and functional mnemonic equivalents of commas, spaces between words, pauses, and rests. Such punctuation devices are at the heart of the sociomnemonic process commonly known as *periodization*.

The purportedly distinct "periods" explicitly articulated through this process are typically delineated by historical events collectively remembered as major *watersheds* in the lives of specific mnemonic communities. As graduating from college or getting married is for individuals, such events help carve out significant "chapters"² in the lives of those communities by essentially marking when they begin and end. Thus, for many Hutu during the 1980s, the 1972 killing of tens of thousands of their people in Burundi was a cataclysmic event that practically separated the "premasacre years" from everything that happened since.³ In a somewhat similar vein, for many Britons the death of Queen Victoria in 1901 marks the dawn

of the modern age.⁴ In fact, many nations formally incorporate such events into their collective memories by designing special holidays to commemorate them. The French evacuation of the Bizerte naval base on 15 October 1963, which is annually commemorated on Tunisia's Evacuation Day, and the nationalization of Iran's oil industry on 20 March 1951, which it commemorates annually on Oil Nationalization Day, are classic examples of such historic "turning points."

Some of these "historic" moments, however, come to be defined as significant watersheds only retrospectively. Events we now regard as marking "defining moments" may not have even attracted much public attention when they actually occurred. For example, when one considers the shootout between South African troops and some South West African rebels at Omgulumbashe on 26 August 1966, or what began as a simple student demonstration against the establishment of Urdu as the official language of the predominantly Bengali-speaking province of East Pakistan on 21 February 1952, one realizes that only in retrospect did the events presently commemorated on Namibia's Heroes' Day and Bangladesh's National Mourning Day come to be seen as such pivotal watersheds. By the same token, only with historical hindsight can one recast a failed guerrilla attack which took place on 26 July 1953 as the beginning of what would come to be known years later as the Cuban Revolution!⁵

Such events are generally regarded as "benchmark episodes"⁶ that mark the transition from one supposedly distinct chapter in a mnemonic community's history to the next because, like the days on which we got our driver's license or lost our virginity, they are collectively perceived as having involved significant identity transformations.⁷ The official change of Dahomey's colonial name to Benin on 30 November 1975, which is annually commemorated on National Day, is a classic example of such a transformative event. So are the proclamation of Poland's first constitution on 3 May 1791 and the overthrow of the monarchy in Libya on 1 September 1969, which are annually commemorated on Constitution Day and Revolution Day, respectively.

A major event that is often collectively remembered as a significant historical watershed is a nation's political "birth" following a merger of several smaller units (as in Switzerland in 1291 or the United Arab Emirates in 1971) or, as is more often the case, a national struggle for independence. Indeed, of the 191 countries whose national calendars I have examined, 139 celebrate a national "birthday" commemorating the historic moment when

they became formally independent, and some (Algeria, Uruguay, Mozambique, Eritrea) also commemorate the day on which their national struggle for liberation was actually launched. Six of Angola's seven national holidays specifically designated to commemorate major historical events (Armed Struggle Day, Pioneers' Day, Armed Forces Day, Independence Day, Victory Day, and Heroes' Day), in fact, actually revolve around its struggle for independence from Portugal between 1961 and 1975. Multiple annual commemorations of the "births" of Panama (six), Ecuador (five), and Haiti (five) likewise underscore the significant role of nations' political birth as a historical watershed.

It is specifically as a form of classification that periodizing helps articulate distinct identities, and the way men and women respectively use career moves and births of children as autobiographical benchmarks, for example,⁸ certainly underscores the fundamentally different manner in which they normally organize their identities. Temporal discontinuity is a form of mental discontinuity,⁹ and the way we cut up the past is thus a manifestation of the way we cut up mental space in general. In the same way that "holy days" help concretize the moral distinction between the sacred and the profane¹⁰ and weekends help give substance to the cultural contrast between the public and private domains, the temporal breaks we envision between supposedly distinct historical "periods" help articulate mental discontinuities between supposedly distinct cultural, political, and moral identities. The conventional Zionist distinction between the Jews who lived in Palestine before 1882 ("the old *yishuv*") and those who emigrated there since then ("the new *yishuv*") is thus clearly more than just chronological, as it actually helps articulate the cultural and political contrast between the traditional-religious and secular-national worlds.¹¹ And in the same way that the Exodus marks the fundamental moral discontinuity between idolatry and monotheism,¹² the temporal break we envision between "pre-Columbian" and post-1492 America helps flesh out the major cultural contrast between "indigenous" and "European."¹³

Assimilation and Differentiation

As we classify things, thereby arranging them in seemingly distinct mental clusters, we normally allow the perceived similarity among the various elements constituting each cluster to outweigh any differences between them. As a result, we come to regard those elements as somewhat

interchangeable variants of an essentially homogeneous mental entity. At the same time, in order to enhance our perception of different clusters as distinct from each other, we also tend to inflate the perceived mental distance between them.¹⁴

Like any other form of classification, periodizing thus presupposes a pronouncedly nonmetrical, *topological* approach¹⁵ that highlights relations between entities while basically ignoring their internal makeup. That entails a somewhat plastic experience of temporal distances that involves mnemonically compressing those *within* any given conventional "period" while inflating those *between* periods. As we can see, although utterly irrelevant metrically, the difference between *intra-* and *inter-* is critical when approaching reality topologically.

The first of these twin mnemonic processes, *historical assimilation*, involves assigning each of those conventional blocks of history a single common label such as "Neolithic" (farming), "eighteenth-century" (literature), or "Ming" (art). As a result of the sociomnemonic habit of downplaying intraperiodic variance to the point where we regard each such "period" as practically homogeneous, we also attribute to it a single, essentially uniform identity. We may thus come to conventionally associate the entire 1,800-year "Exile" chapter in Jewish history with persecution¹⁶ and collectively remember more than five centuries of European history as "dark."

As we can see in figure 18, such schematic visions of history also result in a mnemonic compression of temporal distances within any conventional "period." We may thus come to perceive "Renaissance" artists like Donatello (whose early work dates to the 1410s) and Titian (who was still painting in the 1560s) as contemporaries, and forget that "medieval" luminaries such as Saint Benedict (480–547) and Chaucer (1340–1400) actually lived more than eight centuries apart from each other. Along similar lines, as we crudely identify anything that existed in the Western Hemisphere before the arrival of Europeans as "pre-Columbian,"¹⁷ we tend to conflate the Olmec and Aztec civilizations of Mesoamerica (or their Chavín and Inca counterparts in the Andes), which actually flourished two thousand years apart from each other, often forgetting that they were in fact as historically remote from each other as present-day Italians are from the ancient Romans. Lumping together nearly three thousand years of pre-Ptolemaic northeast African history in the single unit conventionally remembered as "ancient Egypt" likewise implies forgetting that, like Chaucer and the Aztecs, the last pharaohs of the Thirtieth Dynasty were actually a couple

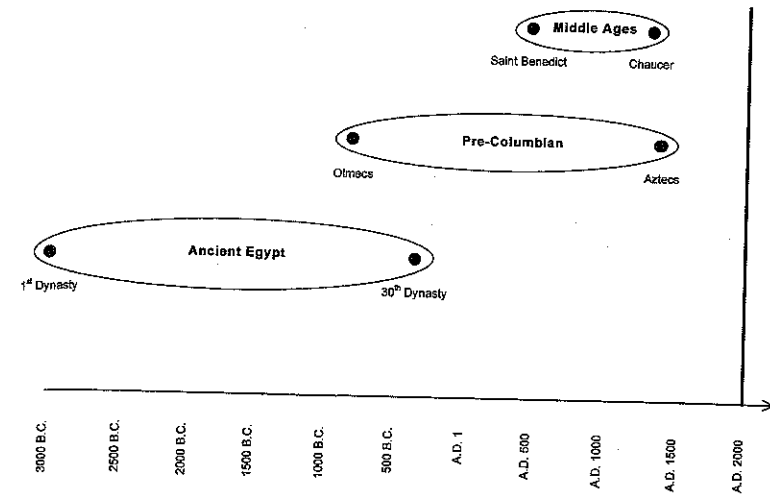


Figure 18 Historical Assimilation

of centuries closer to *us* than they were to those who founded Egypt's First Dynasty!

Yet like any other form of classification, periodizing the past involves not just *intraproductic lumping* but also *interperiodic splitting*. Not only do we attribute to an entire historical "period" a single, uniform identity, we also attribute separate identities to what we consider "separate" periods, as exemplified by the Zionist portrayal of the "Exile" period in Jewish history as essentially antithetical to the periods immediately preceding and following it.¹⁸ Historical assimilation is thus typically complemented by the diametrically opposite sociomnemonic process of *historical differentiation*.

"Periodizing" the past basically involves a mnemonic transformation of actual historical continua into seemingly discrete mental chunks such as "the Renaissance" or "the Enlightenment." Indeed, it is our ability to envision the historical equivalents of the blank spaces we conventionally leave between the different chapters of a book or at the beginning of a new paragraph¹⁹ that enhances the perceived separateness of such "periods" and gives the aforementioned watershed metaphor such resonance. Like the actual river separating March from April in Saul Steinberg's cartoons,²⁰ it is the imaginary stretches of historical void separating 1979 from 1980,



Figure 19 A Topological History of the Western Hemisphere

for example, that promote our memory of “the ’70s” and “the ’80s” as such distinct historical entities. As we can see in figure 19, it is our mental vision of the quasi-geological fault separating 1491 from 1493 that likewise helps us remember the “pre-Columbian” and “American” chapters of the history of the Western Hemisphere as distinct “eras.”²¹

Such perceived gaps clearly affect the temporal distances we envision separating different historical “periods” from one another. In order to promote the sociomnemonic vision of two contiguous yet conventionally “different” chunks of history as actually discrete, we tend to inflate the imaginary divides supposedly separating them from each other.²² As a result, crossing such “historical Rubicons” transforms metrically small steps in physical time into topologically giant leaps²³ in social time—in the same way that we are instantaneously transformed from “minors” into “adults” when we turn eighteen and that someone who has had only one sexual experience is perceived as somehow “closer” to one who has had thirty-seven such experiences than to a virgin.²⁴ In order to help maintain the illusion of wide historical gaps actually separating “different” periods from one another, we thus mnemonically inflate the distance between everything that happened prior to the particular “watersheds” marking their boundaries and everything that has happened since. As a result, we come to perceive the distance from 1491 to 1493 as considerably longer than the metrically identical distance separating 1491 from 1489. After all, as we can see in figure 19, whereas 1489 and 1491 are both part of one “era,” 1491 and 1493 are conventionally perceived as straddling a wide historical Rubicon separating that “era” from the following one.²⁵

As if to actually reify the distance between them, we also literally place different historical “periods” in different chapters (or even in different sections) of history textbooks as well as separate wings of museums, thereby helping give substance to the imaginary divides separating them from one another. Such spatial segregation certainly helps perceive those purely conventional figments of our mind as distinct, altogether separate “eras.”

History and Prehistory

The attribution of separate identities to contiguous yet conventionally separate historical “periods” is often manifested in the way we perceive them as being in opposition to each other, as exemplified by the way many Americans seem to view the past and present chunks of history that respectively ended and began on 11 September 2001. Nowhere are such perceived contrasts more profound than when we quite self-consciously try to establish what we hope will come to be remembered as the *beginning* of a new “era,” a highly ambitious sociomnemonic act that epitomizes the process of historical periodization.

Explicitly playing up (often to the point of exaggeration) the perceived contrast between two contiguous yet conventionally separate historical “periods,” establishing a new beginning usually presupposes the death of some prior entity. When George W. Bush announced at the 2000 Republican Convention that “it is a time for new beginnings,”²⁶ he also was implying the anticipated death of the Clinton-Gore “era.” By the same token, when President Gamal Abdul Nasser told fellow Egyptians in 1956 that on the day after the British evacuation of the Suez Canal they would awaken to “a bright new era,”²⁷ he was also announcing the impending death of imperialism.

Given all this, establishing a “new beginning” often involves destroying every possible link to anything that preceded it. Indeed, as exemplified by the actual scope of the French and Russian Revolutions, social revolutionaries often try to virtually obliterate the existing social order before proceeding to establish a new one in its place. It was his apparent wish to dramatize the imaginary gap separating the young Turkish society from its recent (and therefore potentially still dangerously “contagious”) Ottoman past that led Atatürk in the 1920s to move the official seat of government from Istanbul to Ankara, formally abolish the Mohammedan calendar and traditional Arabic script, outlaw the use of the fez and the veil, and practically purge the Turkish language of any Persian influence.²⁸

Consider also the ritual haircut that marks the transition from civilian to military life, or the formal renaming of religious converts, slaves, and nuns. Such *rites of separation*²⁹ are specifically designed to dramatize the symbolic *transformations of identity* involved in establishing new beginnings, essentially implying that it is indeed quite possible to “turn over a new leaf” and be somehow “reborn.” This possibility is often manifested

in explicit allusions to “revitalization” and rejuvenation,³⁰ not to mention actual efforts to socially engineer a new type of person who would embody the dramatic historical break between the old and new “eras,” as in the highly ambitious Zionist attempt to replace the old “exilic” Jew by the young Israeli *sabra*.³¹

In order to effectively project a sense of historical discontinuity, one also needs to destroy the mental “bridges” we discussed earlier. Indeed, establishing new beginnings involves various sociomnemonic practices that are the exact opposite of the ones we use to promote a sense of continuity. It was the special mnemonic significance of place, for example, that led the Assyrians to systematically uproot vanquished populations from their lands, and the evocative role of ruins that led the Spaniards to virtually raze the Aztec city of Tenochtitlán—as the Romans did to Carthage after the Third Punic War—before proceeding to build Mexico City on the very same site.

By the same token, it is the mnemonic significance of relics and anniversaries that leads victorious armies and new regimes to destroy historical monuments and remove certain holidays from the calendar. Thus, Hungarians no longer commemorate their liberation by the Soviet army in 1945, and South Africa no longer feels compelled to pay annual homage to Paul Kruger.³² It was unmistakably sociomnemonic considerations such as these that also made Romanians tear the socialist emblem out of their national flag in 1989. They have likewise led new regimes to quite self-consciously change their countries’ national anthems³³ and rename streets³⁴ and cities (such as from “Petrograd” to “Leningrad” and back to “Saint Petersburg”), as well as entire countries (such as from “British Honduras” to “Belize”).

In marking significant historical breaks, “watersheds” often serve as extremely effective *chronological anchors*, which is why throughout 1980 some U.S. television networks would pointedly end their evening news by counting the number of days that had passed since the takeover of the American embassy in Tehran.³⁵ As Mark Twain described the sociomnemonic role of the American Civil War in the South,

[T]he war is what A.D. is elsewhere: *they date from it*. All day long you hear things “placed” as having happened since the waw, or du’in’ the waw, or befo’ the waw, or right aftah the waw, or ‘bout two yeahs or five yeahs or ten yeahs befo’ the waw or aftah the waw.³⁶

Even more spectacular in this regard is the sociomnemonic role of the birth of Jesus circa 4 BC and the flight of Mohammed from Mecca to Medina (the *hegira*) in AD 622 as the “pivotal” foundations of conventional chronological dating frameworks,³⁷ the “hinge[s] on which the door of history swings.”³⁸ As quite effectively illustrated by the dramatic break we seem to envision between the periods we respectively designate by the letters “BC” and “AD,” it is as if history indeed began on the first year of our standard chronological era!³⁹

The common image of such events as *historical points of departure* is quite evident from their association with the exceptionally grandiose sociomnemonic practice of explicitly *resetting a mnemonic community’s “historical chronometer” at zero*.⁴⁰ Consider, for example, Cambodian dictator Pol Pot’s megalomaniac decision to designate 1975, the year in which he came to power, as “Year Zero,” or the concept of “Zero Hour” (*Stunde Null*) used by some Germans in 1945 in an effort to project an altogether new political identity based on a clean break with their nation’s irrevocably tainted recent Nazi past.⁴¹ Along similar lines, 1916, the year of the Easter uprising against Britain, is sometimes viewed as “the year one in Irish history.”⁴² Even more spectacular was the attempt made by France in the 1790s to formally replace the conventional Christian Era with a pronouncedly French “Republican Era” that began with the foundation of the First French Republic on 22 September 1792,⁴³ a remarkable sociomnemonic experiment repeated in the 1920s by the Fascists, who likewise introduced throughout Italy a new standard chronological era that began with their historic March on Rome in October 1922.⁴⁴

Resetting “historical chronometers” at zero typically also involves emphasizing *primacy*, as when the first weekday following the historic 1979 referendum affirming the foundation of Iran’s Islamic Republic was explicitly proclaimed by the country’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini, “the *first day of a government of God*.”⁴⁵ Consider also in this regard the conventional Zionist depiction of the eastern European Jews who came to Palestine in 1882 as Israel’s “first” immigrants (*ha-aliyah ha-rishonah*), further reinforced by their standard portrayal as the country’s “Founding Fathers” or “Pioneers.” Indeed, they themselves were quite self-conscious about their future historical image, even naming two of their first settlements Rishon Le-tziyyon (“first to Zion”) and Rosh Pinnah (“cornerstone”).

Needless to say, remembering the Jews who came to Palestine in 1882 as that country’s “first” settlers also implies a *mnemonic obliteration* of every

Jew who had ever emigrated there before that—not to mention all those who had never even left the country during the eighteen centuries conventionally portrayed in Zionist historiography as the “Exile” period, when all Jews were supposedly living outside their homeland.⁴⁶ Furthermore, this depiction implicitly entails suppressing the memory of all the non-Jews who were living there when those Jewish immigrants arrived, thereby helping project an unmistakably Eurocentric view of pre-1882 Palestine as a virtually empty, desolate⁴⁷ place waiting to be settled by those “pioneers.”

Indeed, such *mnemonic myopia*⁴⁸ is quite common in colonial discourse involving “settlement.” Thus, despite the fact that the ancient sagas explicitly noted that when the first Norwegians arrived in Iceland in the ninth century they found that Irish monks had already preceded them, their commitment to the island’s pronouncedly Scandinavian identity nevertheless led them to essentially disregard such pre-Scandinavian Celtic presence and thereby present those Norsemen as its “first” settlers!⁴⁹ By the same token, despite the fact that the first British settlement in Australia was established at least forty thousand years after the island had already been “aboriginally” settled, the national Australian holiday commemorating its establishment in 1788 is nevertheless called Foundation Day.

Mnemonic obliteration of entire populations is also quite common in discovery narratives. When the *New York Times* offers its readers a brief historical profile of Mozambique that begins in 1500 with the arrival of the Portuguese, it implicitly portrays that country as virtually empty at the time of its “discovery,” thereby essentially relegating its entire pre-European past to official oblivion.⁵⁰ And when we say that Columbus “discovered” America, we are basically implying that no one was there before him, thus implicitly suppressing the memory of the millions of Native Americans who were actually living there at the time of his arrival.

As demonstrated by the way we conventionally label anything that existed in America prior to Columbus’s arrival as “pre-Columbian,”⁵¹ 1492 marks a fundamental break between America’s actual “history” and what we apparently consider its mere *prehistory*. (Along somewhat similar lines, in the unmistakably Christocentric folk historiography of Ireland, anything predating Saint Patrick’s celebrated arrival circa 432 is basically dismissed as “pagan prehistory.”)⁵² As provocatively implied by the title of Noam Chomsky’s scathing 1993 critique of European imperialism, *Year 501*,⁵³ the cultural entity we call “America” is commonly perceived as having been

“born” on 12 October 1492. Anything that happened throughout the Western Hemisphere prior to that date can therefore only be part of some “pre-America.”

Essentially regarded as a mere prologue to its actual history, much of America’s “prehistory” is thus *forgotten*. Consequently, the Norse voyages to Greenland, Newfoundland, and possibly also Labrador and Nova Scotia in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries are not considered part of the standard narrative of its “discovery.”⁵⁴ Although most of us are quite aware of those early crossings of the Atlantic five centuries before Columbus, we still regard his celebrated landfall in the Bahamas as the formal beginning of America’s history. And if America was indeed only “born” on 12 October 1492, nothing that had happened there prior to that date can actually be considered part of “American history.”

As exemplified by the traditional image of the creation of the world *ex nihilo*, we tend to envision beginnings as preceded by actual void. Thus, in order to dramatize the historical break between Jews’ former life in exile and “new beginnings” in their homeland, native-born *sabras* were sometimes portrayed in early Israeli literature as orphans.⁵⁵ For the same reason, practically disregarding their early years in “exile,” the Zionist narrative often also presented immigrants’ lives as starting only upon their arrival in Palestine!⁵⁶ The very existence of such *prehistorical void* helps remind us that establishing historical “beginnings” always presupposes an element of *amnesia*. Thus, as Americans come to remember the colonization of New England in 1620 as the beginning of the European settlement of the United States, for example, they implicitly also come to forget the colonization of Virginia in 1607, not to mention the Spanish colonization of Florida in the 1560s and New Mexico in the 1590s.⁵⁷ As one of Zionism’s leading visionaries put it quite bluntly,

[W]e cultivate oblivion and are proud of our short memory. . . . And the depth of our insurrection we measure by our talent to forget. . . . The more rootless we see ourselves, the more we believe that we are more free, more sublime. . . . It is roots that delay our upward growth.⁵⁸

As we can see in figure 20, establishing any beginning presupposes an implicit agreement to disregard anything that predates it as somehow “irrelevant” and therefore immemorable. Such seemingly innocuous yet unmistakably brutal *mnemonic decapitation*⁵⁹ is designed to help promote

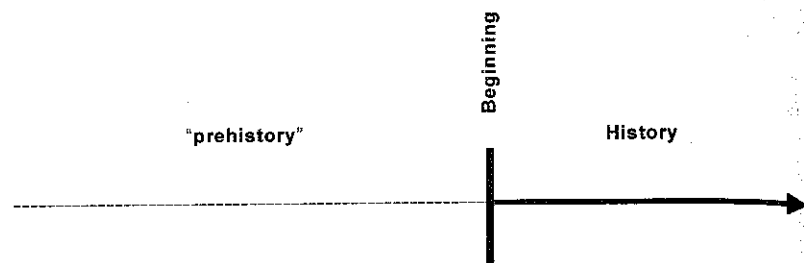


Figure 20 Mnemonic Decapitation

the fundamental discontinuity between what we consider history and what we regard as prehistory and thereby tend to forget because it is conventionally considered irrelevant.⁶⁰

The expectation that we can actually disregard anything predating a certain point in time is evident in laws that absolve businesses from any debts they may have had prior to declaring bankruptcy. It is also evident in statutes of limitations, the ultimate manifestation of the notion that it is indeed possible to formally put certain parts of the past “behind us.”⁶¹

When trying to put things “behind us,” we do not necessarily deny that whatever predates a certain historical point of departure actually happened. Yet by establishing certain “phenomenological brackets” we somehow relegate these events to social irrelevance. The tacit distinction between history and “prehistory” implies that, like a preface of a book or “introductory” remarks in lectures, it basically lies outside the official historical narrative and, as such, is normatively excluded from what we are expected to remember. Statutes of limitations imply that even what we all agree actually happened can nevertheless be formally banished to some “prehistorical” past that for all practical purposes is considered irrelevant and therefore officially forgotten. Thus, as students transfer from one college to another, for example, they can in fact expect their new school to formally “forget” their old grades when calculating their cumulative grade point average.

Consider also the quest of many Germans today for “normalcy unburdened by history,”⁶² or Montenegrin president Milo Djukanovic’s recent appeal to Croats to put Yugoslavia’s 1991 war against Croatia “behind them.”⁶³ Such eagerness to basically “clip” the past so as to quite conveniently be able to start mnemonically “afresh” was also displayed by former Khmer Rouge leader Khieu Samphan, who in 1998 asked Cambodians to essentially “forget the past” and “let bygones be bygones.”⁶⁴ (His effort to practically wipe

out the memory of the massacre of more than one million Cambodians only twenty years earlier was officially endorsed by Prime Minister Hun Sen, who urged his countrymen to “dig a hole and bury the past and look ahead to the twenty-first century with a *clean slate*.”⁶⁵ Similar calls to “turn over a new leaf” and put certain things “to rest” by essentially obliterating their memory are also made by advocates of ex-convicts’ right to start “a new life” untainted by their criminal past. Applying the sociomnemonic logic underlying the norms of declaring bankruptcy, many of those who in 1998 opposed the execution of Karla Faye Tucker in fact claimed that as a born-again Christian she should not be held accountable for a murder she had committed prior to her spiritual “rebirth”!

The Social Construction of Historical Discontinuity

Yet as we are occasionally reminded by poems and books that begin, quite provocatively, in the middle of a sentence,⁶⁶ historical discontinuity should in no way be regarded as a given. Like cropping photographs, carving conventional “periods” out of their historical surroundings is an artificial act and, as such, far from inevitable. Thus, although most Israelis, for example, consider the foundation of their state in 1948 a virtually indisputable “watershed” (indeed, a popular account of the events of that year is even subtitled *Between the Eras*),⁶⁷ it is actually a nonevent for Israel’s largely apolitical ultraorthodox community. (Challenging the Zionist wish to detach modern Israeli history from its immediate past, some Israeli historians likewise question the conventional distinction between the “old” pre-1882 and “new” Jewish communities in Palestine.)⁶⁸ By the same token—as we are quite effectively reminded by the sarcastic remark that “one wonders how the Nez Percé and Navajos survived the boredom of long centuries waiting for invaders from the East to show up”⁶⁹—nor, for that matter, is 1492 actually perceived as a historical point of “departure” by Native Americans, whose ancestors had been living in America for thousands of years before it was finally “discovered” by Europe.⁷⁰

Indeed, the perceived reality of the seemingly discrete segments into which we conventionally carve the past is a product of the historical gaps we collectively envision separating them from one another. Yet such cleavages, so obvious to anybody who has been mnemonically socialized into a particular tradition of “periodizing” the past, are virtually invisible to anyone else! After all, in the real world, there are no actual gaps separating the impres-

sionist and cubist “periods” in Western art (which actually overlapped with each other)⁷¹ or France’s “Fourth Republic” and “Fifth Republic” (which ended and began, respectively, on the same day) from one another.⁷² Cutting up the past into supposedly discrete “periods” is basically a mental act and, as we shall now see, it is usually done with an unmistakably social scalpel.⁷³

Much of the construction of historical discontinuity is, in fact, tacitly accomplished through language. Whereas attaching a single label (“medieval”) to more than ten centuries of European history helps us perceive them as a relatively homogeneous block of time, assigning each conventional “period” a different label helps us split them apart in our mind as different and therefore also *separate* chunks of history. In the same way that it helps us mentally separate “childhood” from “adolescence” and “winter” from “spring,”⁷⁴ language thus also enhances our vision of actual historical gaps separating “Mesolithic” from “Neolithic” tools and “Renaissance” from “baroque” music. In a similar vein, distinguishing “archaic folk” from “early moderns” highlights the historical divide supposedly separating East Asia’s Lower and Middle Paleolithic hominid populations from each other, thereby implicitly helping discredit the multiregionalist view of the latter as the former’s descendants.⁷⁵

Historical “periods” are basically products of our mind,⁷⁶ so it is very important not to essentialize our unmistakably conventional systems of periodization. After all, even the Middle Ages and the Renaissance were only identified as distinct “periods” in 1688 and 1855, respectively.⁷⁷ Nor, for that matter, was it all that common to view an entire century as a distinct historical unit prior to the 1600s,⁷⁸ and even our vision of the decade as a freestanding chunk of history actually dates only to 1931.⁷⁹ Indeed, had we normally been counting (and thereby also reckoning the time) in base 9 instead of 10, we would have probably generated *fin-de-siècle* and *millenarian frenzy* around the years 1944 (the end of the twenty-fourth 81-year “century”) and 1458 (the end of the second 729-year “millennium”).⁸⁰

There are many alternative ways to cut up the past, none of which are more natural and hence more valid than others.⁸¹ Any system of periodization is thus inevitably social, since our ability to envision the historical watersheds separating one conventional “period” from another is basically a product of being socialized into specific *traditions* of carving the past. In other words, we need to be mnemonically *socialized* to regard certain historical events as significant “turning points.” We thus need to *learn*,

for example, to remember “the Reformation” as a process that began with Martin Luther in 1517 (rather than, say, with John Wyclif in the 1370s), and to internalize the distinctly Western mnemonic vision of “the Roman Empire” as a political entity that came to an end in 476 despite the fact that it actually lasted for another 977 years in Byzantium! As jazz fans, we likewise learn to remember João Gilberto and Antonio Carlos Jobim as having actually “pioneered” the bossa nova revolution in 1958 and thereby also implicitly relegate a classic yet highly underrated 1953 recording by Laurindo Almeida and Bud Shank to the dubious status of a mere “fore-runner.”

Indeed, with the possible exception of the Big Bang, at what point any given stretch of history actually “begins” is never quite self-evident, and there is always more than just a single point that might possibly constitute the formal beginning of a particular historical narrative. After all, even people recounting an event they have just witnessed together (let alone the history of their relationship) often disagree on where their account should begin. In fact, as the pro-life movement keeps reminding us, even the conventional status of birth as an “obvious” biographical point of departure is contestable.⁸²

Nor, for that matter, is it all that clear where the story of “human” evolution ought to begin. “Men,” after all, “have birthdays, but man does not.”⁸³ And since even the seemingly dramatic evolutionary splits between mollusks and vertebrates or reptiles and mammals were probably not as momentous as we might imagine,⁸⁴ would it even be possible to identify the point of transition from manlike apes to apelike men? Should we try, for example, to identify the precise historical moment that marks the branching point of the pongid and hominid lines? Should we perhaps instead try to identify the first hominid species that produced tools? That cooked its food? That acquired an erect posture? That developed language? That produced art?⁸⁵

Consider also the way we mentally organize past military conflicts in conventional units of “war.” The so-called Peloponnesian War, for example, may have actually been a conventionally lumped series of several entirely separate conflicts. At the same time, however, one could also argue that it was in fact only a conventionally split part of a much longer conflict between Athens and Sparta, and that the state of nonbelligerency that preceded what we conventionally regard as its “outbreak” in 431 BC was indeed just some brief temporary truce within that conflict.⁸⁶ Like the

difference between “vacation” and “days off” or “menstruating” and mere “spotting,”⁸⁷ the only difference between a merely “temporary” truce and a full-fledged “lasting” peace is the different blocks of time within which they are sociomentally nested.

Along somewhat similar lines, not all Israelis today accept the official national memory of the Arab-Israeli conflict (as manifested, for example, in formal decoration of war veterans by the State) as consisting of five distinct “wars,” namely the 1948–49 War of Independence, the 1956 Sinai Campaign, the 1967 Six Day War, the 1973 Yom Kippur War, and the 1982 Lebanon War. As we can see in figure 21, *historical splitters*,⁸⁸ for example, also add to this list the 1929 Arab riots, the 1936–39 Arab Revolt, the long series of border incidents and Israeli reprisals from 1953 to 1956, the 1967–70 so-called War of Attrition (during which the total number of Israeli casualties almost exceeded that of the Six Day War),⁸⁹ the 1987–93 First Intifada, and the still-ongoing al-Aqsa Intifada. *Historical lumpers*, on the other hand, basically envision a single, essentially continuous Arab-Jewish conflict that has been going on at least since the end of World War I. As Prime Minister Ariel Sharon put it as late as 2001, “the War of Independence is not over yet. 1948 was only one chapter.”⁹⁰

Like Winston Churchill’s famous epistemic dilemma concerning whether Britain’s 1942 victory over the German army in North Africa was just “the end of the beginning” or perhaps “the beginning of the end” of World War II, such taxonomic disputes between lumpers and splitters cannot ever be decisively resolved any more than they can be in zoology. Yet choosing between such competing mnemonic visions is by no means trivial. Killing civilians, for example, has very different moral implications, depending on whether it takes place “during” or “after” a war.

Much of all this depends, of course, on where we locate the “outbreak” of wars. As reflected in the title of a book such as *The Ten Thousand Day War: Vietnam, 1945–1975*,⁹¹ although most of us remember the Vietnam War as having started only in the 1960s, one might also recall a much longer conflict that actually began with the declaration of Vietnam’s independence in 1945 without mentally splitting its French and American phases as we normally do.⁹² By the same token, although for most Europeans World War II began right after the German invasion of Poland in 1939, for many Americans it only started with the attack on Pearl Harbor two years later, whereas Japanese liberals seem to recall a “Fifteen-Year War” that began with the Japanese occupation of Manchuria in 1931.⁹³ Indeed, one might

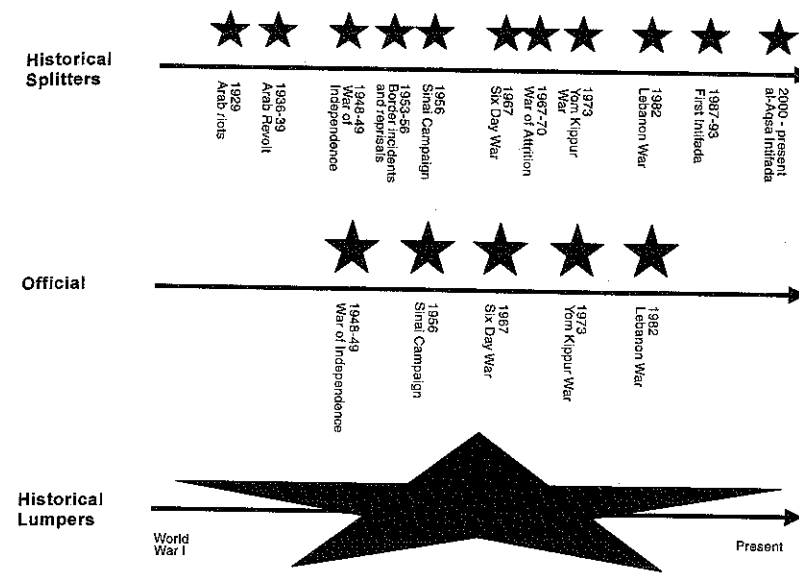


Figure 21 Israel's Mnemonic Visions of the Arab-Israeli Conflict

even lump “World War I” and “World War II” together in one’s memory as merely two phases of a single conflict which lasted from 1914 to 1945. As one German officer wrote after the French surrender in 1940, “the great battle in France is now ended. It lasted twenty-six years!”⁹⁴

Making such mnemonic choices certainly affects the way we normally attribute the actual responsibility for those conflicts. Whether we begin the narrative of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam in 1965 or in 1961, for example, clearly determines whether it is the Johnson or Kennedy administration that we ultimately hold accountable for it. The same applies, of course, to whether we date the actual outbreak of the Second Intifada from Sharon’s provocative visit to the Temple Mount on 28 September 2000 or from the violent Palestinian riots protesting his visit the following day.⁹⁵

Such seemingly trivial historiographic differences of opinion often lead to rather heated mnemonic battles somewhat resembling angry disputes between children (“she started it, Mom”) over the onset of fights. Americans, for example, get extremely annoyed by the rather pervasive Japanese portrayal of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as essentially *unprovoked* attacks.⁹⁶ At the same time, however, they usually begin the narrative of the Gulf War with the seemingly unprovoked Iraqi invasion

of Kuwait in 1990, in marked contrast with the standard Iraqi narrative, which goes back almost a century to the time when Kuwait was still an integral part of Iraq!

In a somewhat similar vein, in sharp contrast to Al-Qaeda leaders, who date the actual outbreak of their current war against the United States from the U.S. cruise missile attacks on their camps in Afghanistan in August 1998⁹⁷ (thereby quite conveniently ignoring their prior attacks on two American embassies in Africa two weeks earlier), the United States usually opens the narrative three years later with the infamous 11 September attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. In fact, that is precisely why it persistently portrays its 2001 campaign in Afghanistan—which U.S. television networks featured under the heading “America Strikes Back”—as pronouncedly “retaliatory.” As both Palestinians and Israelis have demonstrated again and again throughout the Second Intifada, by presenting one’s acts as a *response* (“revenge,” “reprisal”), one essentially puts the blame for starting the cycle of violence on the other side.

Consider also the inevitably unsolvable dilemma inherently involved in any serious effort to offer a fair historical account of the current conflict between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo. Should such a narrative open, for example, with the Serbian atrocities against Kosovo’s Albanians in 1999, or should one maybe try to put those in some “deeper” historical context? And if the latter course is chosen, should the story then begin with Yugoslav president Tito’s decision to grant the province autonomy in 1974? With the Serbian takeover of Kosovo in 1912? Should one perhaps go back to the 1683–99 war between Turkey and Austria that led to “the Great Migration” of hundreds of thousands of Serbs from the province in 1690, thereby helping Albanians ultimately become the largest ethnic community there?⁹⁸

As one would expect, Albanians usually begin this narrative sometime between 1690 and 1912, specifically noting that when Serbia conquered Kosovo in 1912 it was essentially an Albanian province. Serbs, on the other hand, prefer either some earlier historical point of “departure” (specifically noting, for example, that prior to “the Great Migration” Kosovo’s population was predominantly Serbian) or a much later one that postdates their reconquest of the province in 1912! Though each side in this conflict clearly tends to regard its own narrative as the only correct one, offering a fair historical account may very well require some willingness to actually consider multiple narratives with *multiple beginnings*.

In the Beginnings

5

The special mnemonic status of beginnings is quite evident from the disproportionately high representation, in our general memories from college, of the first few weeks of our freshman year.¹ It also explains the significant role of “origin myths” in defining social communities as well as in solidifying the legitimacy of political regimes.

Origins help articulate identities, and where communities locate their beginnings tells us quite a lot about how they perceive themselves. The frescoes at the Panthéon in Paris featuring the baptism of the Frankish king Clovis following his victory over the Alamanni at the Battle of Tolbiac in 496, for example, are specifically designed to represent the birth of an unmistakably Christian France. The official commemoration of the birth of Mohammed as a national holiday likewise underscores Jordan’s and Somalia’s identity as distinctly Muslim nation-states.

Indeed, of the 191 countries whose national calendars I have examined, 176 officially celebrate one or more national holidays specifically designed to commemorate their spiritual “origins.” Thus, on ten of the eleven days designated on their national calendar as commemorative holidays (Feast of the Immaculate Conception, Christmas, Feast of the Epiphany, Easter Monday, Ascension Day, Corpus Christi, Whit Monday, Saint Stephen’s Day, Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and All Saints’ Day), Austrians officially commemorate their distinctly Christian origins. The situation is quite similar in India (fourteen of its seventeen national commemorative holidays are specifically designed to celebrate its Hindu, Buddhist, Jainist, Christian, Muslim, and Sikh “roots”), Ethiopia (nine of

24. Gary A. Rendsburg, "Archeological Fairness," *New York Times*, 11 October 1996, sec. A, p. 38. Emphasis added.
25. Lyn Spillman, "When Do Collective Memories Last? Founding Moments in the United States and Australia," *Social Science History* 22 (1998): 463.
26. David Remnick, "The Outsider," *The New Yorker*, 25 May 1998, pp. 86-88. Emphasis added.
27. Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Harvest Books, 1936), pp. 12, 33.

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