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MEMORY, INDIVIDUAL
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ALEIDA ASSMANN

OVER the last decade, memory has been acknowledged as a "leading concept" of cultural studies. Memory research investigates how we live by our memories, how we are haunted by them, how we use and abuse them. This discourse is quickly expanding; the books and essays that have appeared on the subject already fill whole libraries. Memory research carries the potential of a paradigmatically interdisciplinary project; it includes neuronal, medical, and psychological as well as literary, cultural, social, and political studies. The scientific and scholarly discovery of memory reflects and interacts with a "memory boom" in society and politics. A new concern with the past is expressed by a new wave of memoirs, testimonies, films with historical themes, museums, and monuments. This orientation toward the past is a recent phenomenon. It started only in the late 1980s and developed fully in the 1990s. Possible motivations for this new and acute interest in memory and the past are:

- The breakdown of the so-called "grand narratives" at the end of the cold war that had provided frameworks for the interpretation of the past and future orientation and, together with it, the resurgence of frozen memories that had been contained by the larger ideological formations; with the change of political framework, access was finally possible to the sealed archives of the former Communist countries, which provided a new basis for history and memory.
- The postcolonial situation in which humans that have been deprived of their indigenous history and culture are trying to recover their own narratives and memories.

- The post-traumatic situation after the Holocaust and the two World Wars, the accumulated violence, cruelty, and guilt of which is surfacing only gradually and belatedly after a period of psychic paralysis and silence.
- The decline of a generation of witnesses to these traumas whose experiential memory is now being replaced by translating it in externalized and mediated forms.
- The new digital revolution in communication technology that changes the status of information by creating more efficient ways of storing and circulating information without, however, securing its long-term durability.

1   FOUR MEMORY FORMATS

In everyday discourse, we generally refer to two forms of memory: individual and collective. My argument will be that these two categories do not suffice to describe the complex network of memories in which humans participate. Our personal memories include much more than what we, as individuals, have ourselves experienced.

Individuals' personal and collective memories interact. The term collective memory, however, is too vague and conflates important distinctions. The larger and more encompassing memory of which individuals are part of include the family, the neighborhood, the generation, the society, the state, and the culture we live in. These different dimensions of memory, differing in scope and range, overlap and intersect within the individual who incorporates those memories in various ways. Humans acquire these memories not only via lived experience, but also via interacting, communicating, learning, identifying, and appropriating. It is often not easy to determine where one type of memory ends and another begins. The usual dichotomy of "individual" versus "collective" does little justice to the complex amalgam of memories, which I will try to disentangle by distinguishing four levels or "formats of memory": (1) individual memory; (2) social memory; (3) political memory; and (4) cultural memory.

1.1   Individual Memory

Contemporary neurologists and cognitive psychologists have a rather poor view of human memory capacity. According to these scientists, human memory is not

designed for accurate representations of past experiences but is notoriously distorting and unreliable. The German neuroscientist Wolf Singer has defined memories as "data-based inventions" and Daniel Schacter, a psychologist at Harvard, has made a detailed list of what he called "the seven sins of memory" (Schacter 1999). There is also virtue in the vice, however, and Schacter himself emphasizes that the fallibility and notorious unreliability of our memories are perhaps better "conceptualized as by-products of adaptive features of memory than as flaws in system design or blunders made by Mother Nature during evolution" (Schacter, in Tulving 2000, 120).

Whatever our memories may be worth from a scientific point of view or from the point of view of a judge who is interested in a precise testimony, as human beings we have to rely on them, because they are what makes human beings human. The English philosopher John Locke insisted already at the end of the seventeenth century that without this capacity and at least a sense of its reliability, we could not construct a self nor could we communicate with others. Our memories are indispensable because they are the stuff out of which individual experiences, interpersonal relations, the sense of responsibility, and the image of our own identity are made. To be sure, it is always only a small part of our memory that is consciously processed and emplotted in a "story" that we construct as a backbone to our identity (Randall 1995). A large part of our memories, to put it in a Proustian language, "sleeps" within our bodies until it is "awakened" or triggered by some haphazard external stimulus. In such a case, these hitherto wholly somatic memories suddenly rise to the level of consciousness, reclaiming for a moment a sensuous presence, after which they may or may not be symbolically encoded and categorized for further conscious retrieval. There are not only involuntary memories; there are also inaccessible memories. They are "repressed," which means that they are locked up and guarded by taboos or trauma. These memories are too painful or shameful to be recalled to consciousness without external therapeutic help or legal enforcement. For traumatic memories to rise to the surface, a positive social climate of empathy and recognition is necessary.

Psychologists have emphasized the existence and interplay of various memory systems within the human brain (Tulving 2000). There is "procedural" memory that stores body skills and movements that have become habitual, and "semantic" memory that stores the fund of knowledge that is acquired mentally through conscious learning. There is also "episodic" memory that processes autobiographical experiences. The following four general traits characterize episodic memories:

They are perspectival and idiosyncratic. These memories are necessarily bound to a specific stance and thus limited to one perspective, which means that they are neither exchangeable nor transferable. Every living individual occupies a specific place in the world which is not interchangeable. For instance the oldest child in a family has a different vantage point from any other sibling and thus, in addition to a shared fund of memories, owns also a set of exclusive memories.

They are fragmentary. What we recall are, as a rule, cut-out bits and pieces, moments without a before or after. They flash up isolated scenes within a network

of seemingly random associations without order, sequence, or cohesion. These latter qualities are acquired only if memories are tied into a larger narrative that retrospectively provides them with a form and a structure. It is through such retrograde strategies of "emplotment" (White 1992) that individual shards of memory gain a retrievable shape and are complemented with meaning.

Fragmented and random though they may be, episodic memories never exist in complete isolation but are connected to a wider network of other memories and, what is even more important, the memories of others. In such networks of association and communication, memories are continuously socially readapted, be it that they are substantiated and corroborated, or challenged and corrected. Due to their connective and adaptive structure, they can be integrated in larger complexes. It is thus that they not only acquire coherence and consistency, but also create social bonds.

They are transient, changing, and volatile. Some undergo changes in the course of time as one grows older and the living conditions are altered; some fade and are lost altogether. As social structures of relevance and individual value systems change, things that used to be important recede into the background and hitherto unheeded things may call for new retrospective attention. Those memories that are tied into narratives and are often rehearsed are best preserved, but even they are limited in time: they are dissolved with the death of the person who owned and inhabited them.

1.2   Social Memory

Individual memory is the dynamic medium for processing subjective experience and building up a social identity. If these memories are to some extent idiosyncratic, this certainly does not mean that they are exclusively private and solipsistic. According to the French sociologist and memory theoretician Maurice Halbwachs (1925), a completely isolated individual could not establish any memory at all. Memories, he argues, and his argument is corroborated by current psychological research, are built up, developed, and sustained in interaction, i.e. in social exchange with significant others. Following Halbwachs, we may say that our personal memories are generated in a milieu of social proximity, regular interaction, common forms of life, and shared experiences. As these are embodied memories, they are defined by clear temporal limits and extinguished with the death of the person. In the shape of stories and anecdotes transmitted in oral communication, some of the episodic memories can transcend the individual person's lifespan. They are recycled within a period of 80–100 years, which is the period within which the generations of a family—three as a rule, but sometimes up to five—exist simultaneously, forming a community of shared experience, stories, and memories.

The grandchildren still share some memories with their grandparents if they are recycled in the family memory. Even if these memories are anecdotalized and regularly rehearsed or stabilized by letters or photographs, they remain volatile and subject to change and fading away. Within that cycle of oral interaction they, as a rule, do not transcend the temporal range of three generations, a span amounting to at most 100 years.

We share our memories not only with members of our family and circles of friends and neighbors, but also with many of our contemporaries whom we may never have met or seen, for instance with the age-cohort to which we happen to belong. One form of social memory is generational memory, the importance of which was outlined by Karl Mannheim in a famous essay in 1928 and is being rediscovered by contemporary social psychologists (Mannheim 1952; Schuhmann and Scott 1989; Becker 2000). As a group of more or less the same age that has witnessed the same incisive historical events, generations share a common frame of beliefs, values, habits, and attitudes. The members of a generation tend to see themselves as different from preceding and succeeding generations. Within a generation, there is much tacit knowledge that can never be made fully explicit to members of another generation. Age separates in an existential way due to the temporality of experience. Avowed or unavowed, this shared generational memory is an important element in the constitution of personal memories, because "once formed, generational identity cannot change" (Conway 1997, 43). While familial generations are indistinguishable on the social level, social generations acquire a distinct profile through shared experience of incisive events as well as through an ongoing discourse of self-thematization. The invisible frame of shared experiences, hopes, values, and obsessions becomes tangible only when it shifts. Such shifts occur after a period of around thirty years when a new generation enters into offices and takes over public responsibility. The change of generations is paramount for the reconstruction of societal memory, the transformation of norms and values, and the renewal of cultural creativity (Singh, Skerrett, and Hogan 1996, introduction).

The generational timespan is also decisive for the belated processing of personal memories, especially when they are of a traumatic character. An interest in public monuments, films, and other forms of attention and commemoration tends to arise only after a lapse of at least fifteen or more years after the event. A comparative study on Dallas and Memphis has investigated how traumatic experiences were processed in different cities. The results were quite striking. In the city of Dallas in which John F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, no school and no street was named after the president. The same holds true for Memphis, which saw the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968. In this city, not one street or school was named after the leader of the civil rights movement. Each city, however, had schools and streets named after the respective other victim. And both cities have established museums after a period of thirty years, documenting and commemorating the murder that occurred in its streets (Pennebaker and Banasik 1997, 11–13).

With the support of symbolic forms of commemoration, be they material such as monuments and museums, or procedural such as rites of commemoration, the limited temporal range of personal and generational memories can be infinitely extended in time. Then, however, they lose the quality of a generational experience and become a much more generalized form of memory that is opened up to members of succeeding generations. The monument of the Vietnam Memorial Wall (1982) with the names of the fallen soldiers is still very much a monument for social and embodied memories, primarily addressing the generation of the surviving soldiers and the families and friends of those who fell in battle. Being situated, however, as it is, in the vicinity of the Lincoln memorial and the Holocaust museum, it forms one of the "lieux de memoire" of a more inclusive national memory and identity.

1.3   Political Memory

To move from individual and social memory to political and cultural memory is to cross a threshold in time. Individual and social memory is embodied; both formats are grounded in lived experience; they cling to and abide with human beings and their embodied interaction. Political and cultural memory, on the other hand, are mediated; both are founded on the more durable carriers of external symbols and material representations; they rely not only on libraries, museums, and monuments, but also on various modes of education and repeated occasions for collective participation. While social forms of memory are *inter*generational, political and cultural forms of memory are designed as *trans*generational. As we pass the shadow-line from short-term to long-term durability, an embodied, implicit, heterogeneous, and fuzzy bottom-up memory is transformed into an explicit, homogeneous, and institutionalized top-down memory. This shift does not go unnoticed and may become the target of criticism and alienation (Novick 1999). However overlapping and intertwined social and political memory may be, they have become the objects of different academic disciplines. The bottom-up social memory is studied by social psychologists, who are interested in the ways in which historical events are perceived and remembered by individuals within their own lifespan. The top-down political memory is investigated by political scientists, who discuss the role of memory on the level of ideology formation and construction of collective identities that are geared towards political action. Social psychologists look at individuals in specific historical situations and investigate how memories are established and how experience is fabricated in the process of communication; political scientists examine collective units such as institutions, states, and nations and ask how memories are used and abused for political action and the formation of group identities (identity politics).

It must be emphasized here that the step from individual to collective memory does not afford an easy analogy. Institutions and groups do not possess a memory like individuals; there is, of course, no equivalent to the neurological system or the anthropological disposition. Institutions and larger social groups, such as nations, states, the church, or a firm do not "have" a memory; they "make" one for themselves with the aid of memorial signs such as symbols, texts, images, rites, ceremonies, places, and monuments. Together with such a memory, these groups and institutions "construct" an identity. Such a memory is based on selection and exclusion, neatly separating useful from not useful, and relevant from irrelevant memories. Hence a political memory is necessarily a mediated memory. It resides in material media, symbols and practices which have to be engrafted into the hearts and minds of individuals. The extent to which they take hold there depends on the efficiency of political pedagogy on the one hand and the level of patriotic or ethnic fervor on the other. An interest in a (national) political memory, for instance, was rather low in postwar Germany and increased only after reunification in 1989 (Olick 2003). Political memory is stronger in ethnically homogeneous groups and nations (such as Israel) as compared with multicultural nations (such as the United States).

Forms of participation in collective memory differ widely between social and political memory. While social memory is based on lived experience and hence on autobiographical memory, each individual will retain slightly different memories due to his or her specific position and perspective. The memory of the Holocaust, for instance, will vary vastly among survivors depending on whether they endured the torments of the concentration camps, hid in secret places, or managed to escape the perpetrators into exile. For the second and third generation of the survivors, however, as well as for the participants of other nations, this memory will be much more homogeneous as it is reconstructed by historians and represented by public narratives, images, and films. Individual access to collective memory occurs via various channels. They involve mental activities such as cognitive learning (or semantic memory) about the past, imaginative and emotive identification with images, roles, values, and narratives, and various forms of action such as celebrations, processions, and demonstrations. *History* turns into *memory* when it is transformed into forms of shared knowledge and collective identification and participation. In such cases, "history in general" is reconfigured into a particular and emotionally charged version of "our history," absorbing it as part of a collective identity. Collective participation in national memory is enforced in totalitarian states coercively via indoctrination and propaganda, and in democratic states via popular media, public discourse, and "liberal representation" (Williams 1998). In both cases, however, it relies on effective symbols and rites that enhance emotions of empathy and identification.

In order to transform ephemeral social memory into long-term collective memory, it has to be organized and elaborated. Some of the ways of organizing and elaborating collective memory are:

- emplotment of events in an affectively charged and mobilizing narrative;
- sites and monuments that present palpable relics;
- visual and verbal signs as aids of memory;
- commemoration rites that periodically reactivate the memory and enhance collective participation.

In this way, a political memory is stabilized and can be transmitted from generation to generation. Beyond these differences, there are also some similarities between personal and collective memory. Both are limited in scope and perspective. Selection and forgetting are as constitutive of individual as they are of collective memory. To emphasize this point, Nietzsche has introduced a term from optics, speaking of "the horizon" of memory which separates the known from the unknown, the relevant from the irrelevant (Nietzsche 1957 [1872], 64). Another term that he used was "plastic power," by which he meant the capacity to erect such boundary-lines between remembering and forgetting, between the significant and the insignificant, between what is of vital "interest" and what is merely "interesting". Without this filter, Nietzsche argued, there is no creation of identity (he used the term "character") and no possibility of an orientation for future action. Zygmunt Bauman has underscored this streamlining effect in the construction of national memory. He points out that national states "construct joint historical memories and do their best to discredit or suppress such stubborn memories as cannot be squeezed into shared traditions—now redefined in the state-appropriate quasi-legal terms, as 'our common heritage'" (1991, 64). It is this very process of exclusion that may later gives rise to new formations of subnational ethnic countermemories.

As my example for social memory has been generational memory, my example for political memory will be mainly national memory. It is not difficult to define the criteria for selection that have determined the construction of collective memory and identity in the past. Most conspicuous in this respect have been the memory constructions of nation states. Within this frame, only those historical referents were selected which strengthened a positive self-image and supported specific goals for the future. What did not fit into this heroic pattern was passed over and forgotten. For a hegemonic nation, victories are much easier to remember than defeats. Streets and metro-stations in Paris commemorate Napoleonic victories, but none of his defeats. In London, however, in the country of Wellington, there is a station with the name "Waterloo:" an obvious example of the selectivity of national memory. If we move from hegemonic nations to minority nations, however, we find that their memories are not those of winners but of losers, crystallizing around devastating defeats. Experiences of defeat can be erected into seminal cores for collective memory provided that they are emplotted in the martyriological narrative of the tragic hero (Giesen 2004). Defeats are commemorated with great pathos and ceremonial expense by nations who founded

their identity on the consciousness of victims, whose whole aim it is to keep awake the memory of a suffered iniquity in order to mobilize heroic counteraction or to legitimate claims to redress. A conspicuous case in point is that of the Serbs, who have canonized the tragic heroes of the lost battle in the Kosovo against the Ottoman Turks in 1389, commemorating them in their annual religious calendar, singing their praises in extended oral epics, and using them as fuel for renewed ethnic battles (Volkan 1997). The citizens of Quebec commemorate the 1759 defeat of General Montcalm against colonial British rule. "Je me souviens," is written on the license plates of their cars. But also hegemonic nations and states have their reasons to remember assaults and defeats when they wish to consolidate their power by a sense of imminent danger. In this way, the English "remember, remember the 5th of November," the attempted assault on parliament in the Catholic uprising in 1605, and the Texans continue to "remember the Alamo." Another example is the history of Massada, which was incorporated into Israeli national memory in the 1960s (Lewis 1975). The message connected with this memory is: we will never more be victims! It serves as an invigorating heroic memory in a political situation which is under severe external pressure.

Collective national memory, in other words, is receptive to historical moments of triumph and defeat, provided they can be integrated into the semantics of a heroic or martyriological narrative. What cannot be integrated into such a narrative are moments of shame and guilt, which threaten and shatter the construction of a positive self-image. In referring to shame and guilt, we are speaking of traumatic experiences that must not be identified with the memories of the defeated. There are not only victors and vanquished in history; there are also victims of history, like the indigenous inhabitants of various continents, the Africans deported and sold as slaves, the genocide of Armenians on the fringe of the First World War, or the genocide of the Jews on the fringe of the Second World War, not to forget the Gypsies, the homosexuals, and Jehovah Witnesses, or the Ukrainian genocide in the 1930s. In order to distinguish between the collective memory of losers and that of victims, it is necessary to draw attention to an ambiguity in the term victim itself. It may refer to the victims of wars, defined by their active commitment to a positive cause for which they "sacrifice" their lives, as well as to the violence inflicted on a passive and defenseless victim. There is no sacrifice involved in the case of traumatic memory, a fact which distinguishes it from the traditional forms of heroic memory. Up until recently, these memories could not be addressed by the victims, to say nothing of the perpetrators.

While in some cases such as the Holocaust, a collective memory of victims has slowly been established over the last twenty years, acting also as a model for other victims' collective memories, a collective memory of perpetrators it is still an exception. In such cases, pride and shame interfere and prevent the recognition of guilt. This mechanism is lucidly described by Nietzsche in an aphorism (Nietzsche 1988, 5: 86):

> I have done it—says my memory
> I cannot have done it—says my pride and remains adamant
> Memory, finally, gives in.

The memory of perpetrators, therefore, is always under the pressure of "vital forgetfulness" (Dolf Sternberger). While examples of victims' memory abound, examples of perpetrators' memory were, until recently, practically nonexistent. As easy as it is to remember the guilt of others, it is difficult to remember one's own guilt. This only becomes possible under considerable external pressure. In the post-war German society of the 1950s and 1960s, for instance, there was a strong desire for a closure of memory. Others called attention on the one hand to the Germans' limited capacity for remembering, and on the other to the unrestricted memory capacity of their opponents and victims, insisting that it is not up to the successors of the perpetrators to decide when these crimes are to pass into oblivion.

Half a century and more after the outrageous atrocities of the Holocaust and the criminally begun and conducted Second World War, the long-term effects of traumatic historical events are beginning to be acknowledged by both victims and perpetrators and are addressed in the public social arena. Worldwide, there are now new forms of collective memories in the making, which are centered around concepts such as political recognition, therapeutic restitution, and ethic responsibility. This means that we are witnessing a change in the basic grammar of the construction of collective political memory. Honor, be it triumphant or violated, which had dominated the code of national memory over centuries and had defined the criteria for inclusion and repudiation, is no longer the only touchstone for the selection of memories. On the level of national political memory, remembering had been a way to perpetuate the opposition between triumphant victor and resentful vanquished.

In former times this opposition between victors and vanquished could only be overcome by an agreement of mutual forgetting, as was the case in the treaty of the peace of Westphalia in Germany in 1648, where "perpetua oblivio et amnestia" was the formula to end the Thirty Years' War.

This formula, however, has proven futile when dealing with the opposition between victims and perpetrators after a historical trauma. These two groups are no longer tied together by mutual obligations. The formula of mutual forgetting has therefore been changed into a formula of shared remembering. In changing the formula, the terms forgetting and remembering take on a new meaning. Forgetting and forgiving are no longer connected, because there is no human agent or mundane institution that can assume the authority of redemption. Likewise, remembering and revenge are disconnected, because revenge is no longer seen as a form of empowerment of the mutilated self but rather as a form of disempowerment. In the aftermath of traumatic events, therefore, it is not the political imperative of mutual forgetting, but the ethical claim to shared remembering, that is chosen as a viable foundation for mutual relationships in the future. In this context,

the figure of the "moral witness" (Margalit 2002) has entered the stage of history to tell the story of an iniquity where legal persecution is not viable (as in South Africa after apartheid) or remains totally inadequate as in Germany after the Holocaust.

A long-term collective memory of historical trauma does not arise without the cumulative efforts of "memory activists," a political lobby, and economic support. Holocaust museums are now being set up in many places, but where are the museums of the Herero genocide, the Armenian genocide, the Ukrainian genocide, the genocide of the Gypsies, and the attempted extermination of homosexuals? Without the back-up of archives and historical research and without the organization of the respective victims and their successors as a group with a collective identity and a political voice, such a memory is not likely to be formed. The memory of victims is always contested, which means that it has to be established against the pressure of a dominant memory, as is the case, for instance, with the Armenians and the Turks. "A museum devoted to the history of America's wars," writes Susan Sontag, "would be considered as a most unpatriotic endeavor" (Sontag 2003, 94).

1.4   Cultural Memory

On all of its levels, memory is defined by an intricate interaction between remembering and forgetting. Every form of memory that deserves the name, be it individual or collective, is defined by a division between what is remembered and what is forgotten, excluded, rejected, inaccessible, buried. This division is indeed a structural feature of memory itself. It holds true also for the complex architecture of "cultural" memory in a literate society that has devised more or less sophisticated techniques of storing information in external carriers. Cultural memory differs from other forms of memory in that its structure is not bipolar but triadic. It is organized not around the poles of remembering and forgetting, but inserts a third category which is the combination of remembering and forgetting. This third category refers to the cultural function of storing extensive information in libraries, museums, and archives which far exceeds the capacities of human memories. These caches of information, therefore, are neither actively remembered nor totally forgotten, because they remain materially accessible for possible use. One may refer to this intermediary existence between remembering and forgetting as a "status of latency" which in this case arises from the material storage and accessibility of (for the moment) forgotten, unused, and irrelevant information. Within cultural memory, an "active memory" is set up against the background of an archival memory. The active memory refers to what a society consciously selects and maintains as salient and vital items for common orientation and shared

remembering. The content of active cultural memory is preserved by specific practices and institutions against the dominant tendency of decay and general oblivion. The perennial business of culture, according to Zygmunt Bauman, is to translate the transient into the permanent, i.e. to invent techniques of transmitting and storing information, which is deemed vital for the constitution and continuation of a specific group and its identity. Monuments perpetuate historical events; exhibitions and musical or theatrical performances create continuous attention for the canonized works of art.

While these active forms of re-creating and maintaining a cultural memory are generally accessible and reach a wider public, the documents of the cultural archive are accessible only to specialists. This part of materially retrievable and professionally interpretable information does not circulate as shared and common knowledge. It has not passed the filters of social selection nor is it transformed by cultural institutions and the public media into a living memory or public awareness. It is important to note, however, that the borderline between the archival and active memory is permeable in both directions. Things may recede into the background and fade out of common interest and attention; others may be recovered from the periphery and move into the center of social interest and esteem. Thanks to this interaction between the active and the archival dimension, i.e. between remembering and forgetting, cultural memory has an inbuilt capacity for ongoing changes, innovations, transformations, and reconfigurations.

The dangers of political memory are spelled out in what Nietzsche wrote about "monumental history": "it entices the brave to rashness, and the enthusiastic to fanaticism by its tempting comparisons" (Nietzsche 1957 [1872], 16). Whereas political memory is defined by a high degree of homogeneity and compelling appeal, cultural memory is more complex because it includes works of art that retain more ambivalence and allow for more diverse interpretations. While the symbolic signs of political memory are clear-cut and charged with high emotional intensity—such as a graffiti on a wall, a slogan on a license plate, a march or a monument—the symbolic signs of cultural memory have a more variegated and complex structure that allows and calls for continuous reassessments and reinterpretations by individuals. Political memory addresses individuals first and foremost as members of a group; cultural memory relates to members of a group first and foremost as individuals. While political memory draws individuals into a tight collective community centered around one seminal experience, the content of cultural memory privileges individual forms of participation such as reading, writing, learning, scrutinizing, criticizing, and appreciating and draws individuals into a wider historical horizon that is not only transgenerational but also transnational. The structure of neither political nor cultural memory is fixed but permanently challenged and contested. Its very contesting, however, is part of its status as lived and shared knowledge and experience.

2   CONCLUSION

There is no need to convince anybody that there is such a thing as an individual memory. Memory attaches to persons in the singular, but does it attach to them in the plural? When Halbwachs introduced the term "collective memory" into the social sciences in 1925, he met with a skepticism that has not fully disappeared. Strictly speaking, wrote Susan Sontag, there is no such thing as collective memory. She refers to the term as "a spurious notion" and insists: "All memory is individual, unreproducible—it dies with each person. What is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that this is important, and this is the story about how it happened, with the pictures that lock the story in our minds. Ideologies create substantiating archives of images, representative images, which encapsulate common ideas of significance and trigger predictable thoughts, feelings" (Sontag 2003, 85–6).

The distinction between experiential or existential memory on the one hand and mere representations on the other, is important but more tricky than is at first sight obvious. In many cases, we have no definite way of knowing whether something that we remember is an experiential memory or an episode that has been told us by others and was incorporated into our fund of memories. There are obvious boundaries, of course: The second generation that was born after the Second World War and the Holocaust has no immediate connection to these events. And yet, as trauma-psychiatrists teach us, there are also some indirect and distorted forms of transmission of the traumatic experience from one generation to the other. And where we cannot claim any of these links and channels, individuals may yet adopt and absorb historical events as part of their history and identity which, as we realize more and more, is not confined to the limits of one's biography but may extend into various generations of one's family or the more recent and distant past of one's national history. The rather futile debate over the question of whether there is such a thing as a collective memory or not can be overcome by substituting for the term "collective memory" more specific ones such as "social," "political," and "cultural memory." The point in doing so is certainly not to introduce further abstract theoretical constructs, but to investigate empirically with these conceptual tools how memories are generated on the level of individuals and groups, how they are transformed by media and reconstructed retrospectively according to present norms, aims, visions, and projects. The interdisciplinary project of the memory discourse is to understand better the mechanisms and strategies of the way memories are formed by individuals and groups under specific circumstances, and how they are transmitted and transformed in processes of continuous reconstruction. In this context, the transition from the rhizomatic network of socially interconnected individual memories to more compact and generalized symbolic representations of

experience via public media such as books, films, and literature deserve as much attention as the intentional acts of creating a ritual symbolic memory for future generations via memorials, monuments, museums, and rites of commemoration. When elevated to such levels of public attention and obligation, representations of the past can create an appeal for respective groups to absorb them into their self-image not only as historical knowledge but also as a "memory" of the past and incorporate them into one's transbiographical identity.

We must not forget that human beings do not only live in the first person singular, but also in various formats of the first person plural. They are part of different groups whose "We" they adopt together with the respective "social frames" which imply an implicit structure of shared concerns, values, experiences, narratives, and memories. The family, the neighborhood, the peer group, the generation, the nation, the culture are such larger groups to which individuals refer as "We." Each We is constructed through specific discourses that mark certain boundary lines and define respective principles of inclusion and exclusion. To acknowledge the concept of "collective memory," then, is to acknowledge the concept of some "collective identity." There is no question that this concept has been abused in the past and is still conducive to exclusionary and destructive politics. In order to overcome the malignant aspects that this construct is able to generate, it is of little help to deny its reality and efficiency. To contain its problematic potential, it is more efficient to emphasize and maintain the plurality of identities and "memory-systems" within the individual person. They can function as a salutary system of checks and balances to guard against the imperial dominance of one exclusive "collective memory."

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