
Transformations between History and Memory

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Aleida Assmann

Transformations between History and Memory

COLLECTIVE MEMORY—A SPURIOUS NOTION?

THERE IS NO NEED TO CONVINCe ANYBODY THAT THERE IS SUCH A THING as individual memory; memory attaches to persons in the singular. But does it attach to them in the plural? Although the term “collective memory” has gained currency and a whole new discourse has been built around it that fills extended library shelves, there are still inveterate skeptics who tenaciously deny the phrase has any meaning. It is of course easy to create a new term, but how can we be sure the term corresponds to anything in reality? Susan Sontag, for instance, is one of those who questioned and denied the meaning of this term. “Photographs that everyone recognizes,” she wrote in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, “are now a constituent part of what a society chooses to think about, or declares that it has chosen to think about. It calls these ideas ‘memories,’ and that is, over the long run, a fiction. Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as collective memory.” And, she 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, that 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: 85-86).

According to Sontag, a society is able to choose, to think and to speak, but not to remember. It can choose without a will, it can think without the capacity of reason, it can speak without a tongue, but it cannot remember without a memory. With the term “memory,” her license of figurative speech reaches its limit: memory cannot be thought of independently from an organ and organism. As part of the brain and its neurological networks, it is tied to individual lives and dies with each person. This commonsensical argument has its irrefutable evidence. The statement is certainly true, but, we may argue, it is incomplete.

There is little dispute that autobiographical memories are what existentially distinguishes us from each other. Experiential memories are embodied and thus they cannot be transferred from one person to another. In stressing the experiential solipsism of individual memory, however, we disregard two important dimensions of memory: interaction with other individuals and interaction with external signs and symbols. *Autobiographical memories cannot be embodied by another person, but they can be shared with others.* Once they are verbalized in the form of a narrative or represented by a visual image, the individual’s memories become part of an intersubjective symbolic system and are, strictly speaking, no longer a purely exclusive and unalienable property. By encoding them in the common medium of language, they can be exchanged, shared, corroborated, confirmed, corrected, disputed, and even appropriated. In addition to that, it is sometimes notoriously difficult to distinguish what one has experienced oneself from what one has been told and afterward incorporated into one’s own stock of autobiographical memories. Similarly, what we have experienced ourselves and what we have read about or seen in films can be equally difficult to disentangle. Oral narratives, texts, and photographs are important props of autobiographical memory, which explains why the boundary between individual memory and shared material signs (such as texts and images) is not always easy to draw.

Sontag would probably concede all these points, provided that we introduce the distinction between mind and memory. “Mind” refers to the cognitive part of the brain, in which general concepts are built

up, where external knowledge, taken in through texts and images, is assimilated and reconstructed. “There is collective instruction,” Sontag affirms (85). Psychologists offer the distinction between “semantic” and “episodic” memory, which may help us to further elucidate the problem (Tulving, 1972: 382–402). Semantic memory is related to the learning and storing capacity of the mind. It is acquired by collective instruction and the site of continuous learning, acquisition, and retention of both general and specialized knowledge that connects us with others and the surrounding world. Episodic memory, on the other hand, enshrines purely personal incidents as individually experienced; though it can be communicated and exchanged, it cannot be transferred from one individual to another without changing the quality of the experience through external representation.

When Maurice Halbwachs (who is acknowledged today as one of the patrons of memory discourse) introduced the term “collective memory” in 1925, he was already aware of a potential misunderstanding. To preempt lingering doubts he connected the concept of collective memory with another term: “social frame.” According to Halbwachs, the term “collective memory” cannot be understood without referring to the concept of “social frames.” He writes: “No memory is possible outside frameworks used by people living in society to determine and retrieve their recollections” (Halbwachs, 1992: 43). By defining collective memory in terms of social frames, Halbwachs adopted a constructivist perspective, which distances him from collective mythmakers and essentialists (like Herder with his notion of *Volksgeist*). For Halbwachs, collective memory is not a “spurious notion” but an innovating and groundbreaking concept that has the capacity—as has been proved 60 to 70 years later—to open up an entirely new field of research.

In spite of our sound and justified skepticism of collective mystifications and the political abuse of such notions in racist and nationalist discourse, we must not forget that human beings do not live in the first person singular only, but also in various formats of the first person plural. They become part of different groups whose “we” they adopt together with the respective social frames. A social frame is an implicit or explicit structure of shared concerns, values, experiences, narra-

tives. The family, the neighborhood, the peer group, the generation, the nation, the culture are such larger groups that individuals incorporate into their identity by referring to them as “we.” Each “we” is constructed through shared practices and discourses that mark certain boundaries and define the principles of inclusion and exclusion. To be part of a collective group such as the nation one has to share and adopt the group’s history, which exceeds the boundaries of one’s individual life span. The individual participates in the group’s vision of its past by means of cognitive learning and emotional acts of identification and commemoration. This past cannot be “remembered”; it has to be memorized. The collective memory is a crossover between semantic and episodic memory: it has to be acquired via learning, but only through internalization and rites of participation does it create the identity of a “we.” This point was made clearly by Margaret Atwood:

When I lived in the rural Ontario countryside north of Toronto, a local man said, “There’s the barn where we hid the women and children, that time the Fenians invaded.” An individual barn; individual women and children. The man who told me about the barn was born some sixty years after the Fenian attack, but he said *we* not *they*; he was remembering as a personal experience an event at which he had not been present in the flesh, and I believe we have all done that. It is at such points that memory, history, and story all intersect (Atwood, 1997: 7).

What is called collective memory, writes Sontag, is not a remembering but a stipulating: groups indeed define themselves by agreeing upon what they hold to be important, to which story they accord eminence, which anxieties and values they share. According to Sontag, the term collective memory is just another name for ideology. The German historian Reinhart Koselleck shared this opinion. He distinguished between two forms of truth: one subjective, one objective. Subjective truth can be claimed by the individual who owns his specific distinctive and authentic memories. The truth of these memories arises

from the indisputable evidence of unmediated experience. Objective truth, on the other hand, can be claimed by the professional historian who reconstructs past experience in an impartial way. The historian compares sources, weighs arguments and engages in an open-ended discourse of experts who continuously correct each other to come closer and closer to the truth. What lies between these poles of subjective experiential truth and objective scientific truth is referred to by Koselleck as “ideology.”

It is interesting to note that after a period of heavy usage in the 1960s and 1970s, the term “ideology” has dropped from contemporary discourse. As it declined and disappeared, the term collective memory rose to take its place. What happened in the discourses of the 1990s was more than a simple substitution of one term by another. The change of labels was an index of a deeper theoretical transformation. The term ideology is derogatory. It denounces a mental frame as false, fake, manipulated, constructed, insincere and harmful, thereby presupposing an absolute truth that is as clear as it is indisputable. The use of the term ideology is grounded on the rock of a self-assured truth. This rock has been eroded since the 1990s under the influence of multiculturalist and constructivist thinking. We have come to learn that Koselleck’s concepts of subjective or objective truth indeed share many of the qualities that we had assigned to ideology. It is in particular the insight into the irreducible constructedness of both our memories and the work of the historian that has taught us to discard the term ideology as a descriptive term and recognize it as a purely polemical tool.

Individual remembering, as psychologists tell us, does not preserve an original stimulus in a pure and fixed form but is a process of continuous reinscription and reconstruction in an ever-changing present. Historiography, as theoreticians explain, involves rhetorical use of language and, in spite of all claims to impartiality, a specific vantage point, an unacknowledged agenda, a hidden bias. In addition, we have come to accept that we live in a world mediated by representations in the form of texts and images, an acceptance that has had an impact on both individual remembering and the work of the historian. The historian of today has lost the monopoly over defining and present-

ing the past. This does not mean, however, that he has lost his or her authority. The voices of **professional historians** are as important as ever when it comes to judging and correcting evidence, probing the truth of representations, discovering new sources and interpreting them in a new light. They have lost some of their singular luster, though, as they **have to cope with the “memory boom,”** in which activists, politicians, citizens, artists, film producers, media magnets, custodians of museums, and many other experts are engaged in the common enterprise of reconstructing and shaping the past.

This situation is often described in terms of a **postmodern relativism** that is induced by the reign of the media, which restage the past and exploit it according to current popular taste or the interests of specific groups. It is argued that feelings are exploited in the media market at the expense of cognitive functions. To concede memories, individual and collective, a new status and right in the mediated democratic society, is to acknowledge the multiple and diverse impact of the past, and in particular of a traumatic past, on its citizens. The **memory boom reflects a general desire to reclaim the past** as an important part of the present, and to reconsider, to revalue, and to reassess it as part of individual biographies and the way individuals position themselves in a wider historical perspective. **It also provides a repository for group affinities, loyalties, and identity in a postindividualist age.** While the term memory has ousted the term ideology, it has reinforced the term “identity” on an individual and in particular on a collective level. This change of terminology and orientation cannot mean, however, that the functions of criticism, discrimination, and ethical evaluation have become obsolete. On the contrary, it is up to the memory discourse to develop its own stance of critical vigilance and to **develop criteria for probing the quality of memory constructions, distinguishing more “malign” from more “benign” memories**—that is, memories that perpetuate resentment, hatred, and violence from those that have a therapeutic or ethical value.

To counter the criticism of skeptics such as Susan Sontag and Reinhart Koselleck, it must be emphasized that the step from individ-

ual to collective memory does not afford an easy analogy. Institutions and groups do not possess a memory like individuals do; there is, of course, no equivalent to the neurological system. Institutions and larger social groups, such as nations, governments, 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. (A. Assmann, 2006) Such a memory is based on selection and exclusion, neatly separating useful from not useful, and relevant from irrelevant memories. Hence a collective memory is necessarily a mediated memory. It is backed up by material media, symbols, and practices which have to be grafted into the hearts and minds of individuals. The extent to which they take hold there depends on the efficiency of the political pedagogy on the one hand and the level of patriotic or ethnic fervor on the other.

The term collective memory, I would argue, is not necessarily a spurious notion, but it is much too vague to serve as a critical term. It is an umbrella term for different formats of memory that need to be further distinguished, such as family memory, interactive group memory, and social, political, national, and cultural memory. Interactive and social memory are both formats that are embodied, grounded in lived experience that vanish with their carriers. The manifestations of political and cultural memory, on the other hand, are radically different in that they are grounded on the more durable carriers of external symbols and representations. In order to transform ephemeral social memory into long-term collective memory that can be transmitted from generation to generation, it has to be elaborated and organized in various forms, including:

- ▶ **emplotment of events** in an affectively charged and mobilizing narrative;
- ▶ **visual and verbal signs** that serve as aids of memory;
- ▶ **institutions of learning and the dissemination of mass media**;
- ▶ **sites and monuments** that present palpable relics;

- ▶ **commemoration rites** that periodically reactivate the memory and enhance collective participation.

Though grounded on external symbols, a **collective memory can be re-embodied and transmitted from one generation to another**. The cultural memory of a society is based on **institutions such as libraries, museums, archives, monuments, institutions of education and the arts** as well as ceremonies and commemorative dates and practices. While social forms of memory are short-lived because they depend on embodied and interactive communication, political and cultural formats of memory are designed for a long-term use to be transmitted across generations. (Whether they achieve this goal, is of course another matter, depending on the stability and continuity of the political infrastructure.) As we pass the shadow line from **short-term to long-term durability or from an embodied intergenerational to a disembodied and reembodied transgenerational memory**, an implicit, heterogeneous, and fuzzy bottom-up memory is transformed into a much more explicit, homogeneous, and institutionalized top-down memory.

However overlapping and intertwined the formats of social and political memory may be, they have become the focus 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 life span. **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 toward political action. Social psychologists look at individuals in specific historical situations and investigate how memories are established and experience is communicated and contested; 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.

HISTORY AND MEMORY

Until recently there was a widespread conviction that while humans change over time, the past does not. It was considered to be beyond

the touch and control of the living and therefore written in granite. We have witnessed how over the last 20 years or so, this commonsensical truth has been called into question and even reversed. While until fairly recently people were convinced that the past was closed and fixed and the future was open to change, we are now experiencing that the past is constantly changing and the future proves to be heavily determined by the past. The past appears to be no longer written in granite but rather in water; new constructions of it are periodically arising and changing the course of politics and history. It is not safely locked up in history books and stowed away in libraries but continually reclaimed as an important resource for power and identity politics. History is not only what comes long after politics; it has also become the stuff and fuel of politics. This paradigmatic change alerts us to the entangled relationship between history and memory. To better understand this complex relationship, we need to look at it in a longer historical perspective. If we do so, we can discover that the relation between “history”¹ and “memory” has itself a history that has evolved over time, passing through three stages:

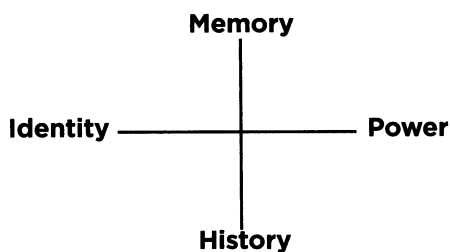
- 1) the identity between history and memory,
- 2) the polarization between history and memory, and
- 3) the interaction between history and memory.

The first or premodern stage is marked by the *identity of history and memory*. Before the foundations of critical historical scholarship were laid in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, history and memory were not clearly distinguished. On the contrary, it was considered the central function of the writing of history to preserve the memory of a dynasty, the church, or a state in order to legitimize such institutions and to ensure their continuity by providing for them an honorable past. Historiography, in this stage, was fully adapted to the demands of the present; it served specific functions for the state or community such as justifying the institutions of the ruling class, legitimizing the authority of traditions, and controlling the future. History was, to use an expression of the English historian J. Plumb, the “handmaid of authority.” The

legitimizing function was intertwined with the memorial function. The battles of heroes and kings were sung by bards and written down by chroniclers in order to rescue them from oblivion and to establish fame and an honorable memory for the noble dead. The memorial function of historiography was never given up throughout Greek and Roman antiquity. Cicero still defined historiography as a weapon against oblivion, a formula that became a topos and was still very popular in the Renaissance.

The intimate link between memory and history shaped the accounts of the past in a specific way. It narrowed the criteria for the selection of people and events to be memorized; only those of highest rank were singled out for a continuation in memory and only those feats and achievements were selected that contributed to the honor and fame of those who were remembered. In addition to this, only such events were selected that supported the opinions and interests of the ruling class. In other words: the identity between history and memory was guaranteed by the reference to a collective identity enforced by a specific power structure that was itself confirmed, legitimated, and perpetuated in the process. The identity between history and memory is grounded in a quadrangular relationship between memory, history, identity, and power.

The second or modern phase is characterized by a polarization between memory and history. This dichotomy was the effect of a long process of intellectual and institutional evolution beginning with Greek historiography. In early modernity, critical historiography sharpened its tools in the struggles for power, pitting the truth of authority against



the new authority of historical truth. When Renaissance humanists (like Lorenzo Valla) deployed their scholarship to **target certain documents as forgeries**, they exposed as the willful constructions that secure the establishment and maintenance of power and shook the foundations of institutions and tradition. A sustained and systematic differentiation between memory and history arose only **when professional historiography was established as a specialized discipline and independent institution in universities of the nineteenth century**. Historiography became a discipline by defining its own standards of truth telling, including specific rules for verification and intersubjective argumentation. By developing an ideal of disinterested objectivity, the old bond between **history** and identity was cut.² This is why Ernest Renan emphasized in a famous speech in 1882 that history **can become a real problem for the collective memory constructions of the nation**:

The act of forgetting—I might almost say historical error—plays a significant role in the creation of a nation, and therefore advances in the field of history are often a threat to the nation. Historical investigation, in fact, often brings to light those cases of violence which occur at the origin of all political formations, even if their consequences were most beneficent. Unity is always effectuated by brutal force; the unification of northern and southern France was brought about by continuous extermination and terror which lasted for almost a century (Renan, 1996: 41-55).

Historians can play contrary roles: they can either support the play of political power or challenge it; they can act as architects or critics of national memory constructions.³

The polarization between history and memory became a firm and long-lasting topos among philosophers, sociologists, and historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Nietzsche contrasted “history” and “life,” with history standing for an endlessly growing storehouse of unusable knowledge and life standing for the vital capac-

ity to forget and thus to restrict the scope of knowledge to the size of a usable past (Nietzsche, 1872). When Maurice Halbwachs described the mechanisms of social memory in the 1920s, he introduced history as a negative foil. He compared historical discourse to an ocean that frames all the partial narratives and memories (Halbwachs, 1991: 72). For him, histor(iograph)y is the universal memory of humanity, while collective memories are embodied by specific groups and therefore always partial and biased. Before these memories can be integrated into the total view of history, they must be severed from their carriers and their social milieus. The transformation of memory into the abstract scheme of history, however, involves the evaporation of live experience and meaning. Sixty years after Halbwachs, the French historian Pierre Nora revived the concept of collective memory and dispelled lingering critical doubts about its theoretical status. He extended Halbwachs' notion of an oral memory shared by a social group to the cultural memory of a nation, which, as a network of symbols, values, rites, and local traditions provides the cohesive cement of a society. Nora sharply contrasted this shared collective memory of *lieux de mémoire* to the scholarly discourse of historiography:

History, memory are by no means synonymous but, as we are becoming more and more aware, opposite terms in every respect. . . . Memory is always a palpable phenomenon, a tie experienced in eternal presence. History, on the other hand, is a representation of the past. . . . Memory sacralizes the past, history which is oriented towards disenchantment, desacralizes it. Memory is owned by a group and it is the cement of this group. . . . History, on the other hand, belonging to everybody and nobody, makes a claim to universality (Nora, 1984-1992: 23-43).

Whereas the pioneers of critical historiography discredited memory as a rival of history, theorists such as Nietzsche, Halbwachs, and Nora rehabilitated memory over against the ideal of objective and abstract histor(iograph)y. They rediscovered and reclaimed the social

Memory	History
—is an embodied form of memory	—is a disembodied form of memory
—stresses differences and exists in the plural	—provides a universal frame and exists in the singular
—is linked to the identity of an individual, a group, or institution	—is disconnected from the identity of individuals, groups, or institutions
—bridges the past, present, and future	—separates the past from present and future
—is highly selective, deploys forgetting	—develops an event and impartial attention
—creates values and meaning, and provides motivation and orientation for action	—searches for truth and tries to suspend values, disconnected from action

Table 1

functions of memory as important and indispensable modes of assessing the past. They all agree, however, in polarizing memory and history along the following lines (see table 1).

The third (let's call it the **postmodern**) stage can be characterized by a **new interest in the interactions between memory and history**. After the long period of polarization, they are now considered as complementary, each one adding something that the other cannot supply. A new awareness of the interactions between history and memory was triggered by the profound political changes of the 1980s and 1990s, when new memories emerged and old ones were seen in a different light. After 1989, with the thawing of frozen memories and the opening of archives, both memory and history took on a new force that carried them into the center of the public arena. Historians were baffled by the enormous impact of living memories that they had hitherto considered to be a negligible entity. A historical caesura always introduces the chance to narrate the past in a different way. Such a moment of

retrospection can become a moment of revelation; then it suddenly becomes obvious that what had been presented and passed as objective history turns out to have been a biased construction of political memory. The experience of a fundamental change of values exposed the contingency of earlier accounts of the past. In such situations both history and memory become self-reflexive; a sense is developed of their constructedness by discovering that memory has a history and that history is itself a form of memory.

History is not only the point of view from which strategies of collective memory are targeted and exploded, but also the realm from which they are described and explained. This particular area of research is a new domain within the field of academic history. In addition to reconstructing events in the past and showing how and why they “happened,” some historians now also reconstruct the symbolic practices with which events of the past were collectively experienced, interpreted, remembered. An important new configuration of memory and history has been developed in a new branch of historiography that can be termed “mnemohistory.” Since the 1980s, historians have become more and more interested in modes of remembering as a form of social and cultural practice. They started to investigate and analyze the symbolic practices of their own contemporary culture, asking questions such as What is known of the past in the present? Which events from the past are selected and how are they represented? Which images have survived? What kind of commemoration acts are devised? In this way, memory became itself the object of historiography.⁴ Mnemohistory is interested in the constructive as well as the distorting effects of memory; it takes into account the ambivalence of the past both as a conscious choice and as an unconscious burden, tracking the voluntary and involuntary paths of memory. While the task of traditional historical scholarship consists in separating memory (the mythical elements) from history (the factual truth), it is the task of mnemohistory to analyze the mythical elements in tradition and discover their hidden agenda (J. Assmann, 1997: 10).

The research of mnemohistory does not exclude a critical stance—especially those studies that focus on current practices of remember-

ing have critically exposed them in analyzing them. Some historical studies even have made an impact on the respective national memory. Henri Rousso's book on the Vichy syndrome, for instance, has immediately impinged on French memory culture to the effect that collaboration is acknowledged today to a much larger extent than it used to be and we now speak of a *mythe de résistance* (Rousso, 1991). Similarly, the book by Jan Gross on Jedwabne has instigated a passionate discourse on memory in Poland (Gross, 2001). In these cases, historians have challenged collective memory practices.

Charles Maier wrote that “memory motivates historical activity; historical research utilizes memory” (Maier, 1993: 143) We may add: memory complements history, history corrects memory. Historical scholarship depends on memory not only for oral testimony and experience, but also for criteria of meaning and relevance; on the other hand, memory depends on historical scholarship for verification, substantiation, and falsification. For this reason, it is important not to conflate the two terms but keep them distinct to be able to analyze their varying forms of mutual interaction.

HISTORY INTO MEMORY

We may think of the interaction between history and memory as represented on an imaginary scale where memory and history coincide on the one end and are polarized on the other, with many variations of mixtures in between. Where history and memory are polarized, the historian assumes an intellectual and ethical function and concentrates on the lacunae of national memory. In focusing on what is forgotten, he or she creates a counter-memory. The critical historical discourse was to challenge and subvert the strategies of political power. Peter Burke has described the critical historian

as the guardian of awkward facts, the skeletons in the cupboard of the social memory. There used to be an official called the “Remembrancer.” The title was actually a euphemism for debt-collector; the official's job was to remind people of what they would have liked to forget. One of

the most important functions of the historians is to be a remembrancer (Burke, 1989: 110).

Let us address the other end of the spectrum and look at instances of a conflation of history and memory. Authoritarian institutions such as the church and totalitarian states aim at a monopoly over truth and the past. Whereas in premodern cultures, there were neither media nor institutions of writing independent of power and authority that could back up independent accounts of the past, the institution of censorship served the function to destroy rival media and carriers of counterhistories that threatened the stability of a uniform view and an authoritarian voice of history. Totalitarianism can therefore be described as an attempt to restore the premodern state monopoly over history under modern circumstances and with modern means. This situation is presented emblematically in George Orwell's novel 1984, which describes the meticulous labor invested by the state in suppressing and changing documents that contradict the unified voice of power in the present.

We should not forget, however, that there are certain contexts in which history and memory are also conflated in democratic nation-states. If we look at the sector of public historical education we can observe a similar self-enforcing relationship between history, memory, identity, and power. In this context, history becomes the stuff of which political memory, identity, and myth is made of. There is a close alliance between the nation-state and the history textbook. The modern nation-state is not only built on the general growth of literacy through mass media and public education. Education is an important factor in the building of the nation-state because it was by learning their history that the heterogeneous members of a population were transformed into a distinct and homogenous collective, conceiving of themselves as "a people" with a collective "autobiography." In all cultures, history textbooks are the vehicles of national memory which have been appropriately termed "weapons of mass-instruction" (the formula comes from Charles Ingrao, mentioned at a conference on "History Textbooks in a Global Perspective" at the University of Chicago in April 2007). By

remembering a shared history, premodern subjects were transformed into modern citizens. “To some considerable extent a nationalist effort is premised on the need to construct a desirable loyalty to and insider’s understanding of one’s country, tradition, faith.” In this political context, the study of history, “far from being a neutral exercise in facts and basic truths”, is “of course the underpinning of memory, both in school and university” (Said, 176). In the realm of school curricula and textbooks, history automatically becomes applied history. It serves as the backbone for the nation-state and supports its values by constructing heroic and mobilizing patriotic narratives.

Forms of participation in collective memory differ widely between informal social memory and the more organized format of political memory. Participation in social memory is always varied because it is based on lived experience and linked to autobiographical memory, which is irreducibly specific in its position, perspective and experiential quality. The memory of the Holocaust, for instance, will vary vastly among survivors depending on the fact whether they endured the torments of the concentration camps, hid in secret places, or managed to escape into exile. For the second and third generation of the survivors, however, as well as for the members of other nations, this memory will become more and more homogeneous as it is reconstructed by historians and accessed through the shared representations of public narratives, images, and films. Those who access collective memory via different channels participate in cognitive learning (or semantic memory) about the past, in imaginative and emotive identification with images, roles, values, in narratives, and various forms of action such as celebrations, processions, and demonstrations. Abstract and generalized “history” turns into re-embodied collective “memory” when it is transformed into forms of shared knowledge and collective participation. In such cases, “history in general” is reconfigured into a particular and emotionally charged version of “our history” and absorbed as part of a collective identity. While collective participation in national memory is enforced in totalitarian states coercively through indoctrination and propaganda, in democratic states it is circulated by way of popular media, public

discourse, and forms of “liberal representation” (Williams 1998). In both cases, however, it relies on effective symbols and rites that enhance emotions of empathy and identification.

MEMORY, MYTH, IDEOLOGY

According to Edward Said, “collective memory is not an inert and passive thing, but a field of activity in which past events are selected, reconstructed, maintained, modified, and endowed with political meaning.” A similar point was made earlier in an influential book edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (1983). In this collection of essays, the authors showed that many traditions of the nineteenth century that paraded as age-old and stemming from times immemorial, had in fact been “invented” rather recently. It is today generally acknowledged that “the invention of traditions” was part of the nineteenth-century project of nation-building, and a considerable part of the project consisted in projecting the self-image and cultural practices of one’s own group into the past. These historians, however, took the argument one step further. By focusing on certain traditions that they identified as “new” and “invented,” they suggested that they were a “fiction” and therefore “false.” The discovery that certain rites and ceremonies such as the introduction of Bastille Day, for instance, could be dated back to 1880 was a way to expose and “unmask” them as instruments of rule by those in power who imposed their will top down on the masses.

There is a methodological problem inherent in this Marxist reading of traditions. By showing that some traditions are a fake, such categories as “true” and “authentic” were affirmed and reinstated *ex negativo*. It was the trust of enlightenment shared by these historians writing on the presuppositions of Marxist and modernization theory that by the very act of exposure, by merely pointing to the inventedness, manufacturedness, and hence to the “falseness” of the tradition, its spell would be broken and automatically dissolved. This recipe of critical dismantling (or deconstruction) did indeed work in certain cases where the demonstration that a document was a “fake” (such as the ancient parchment called “the Constantin donation”) caused a

crisis and triggered the collapse of an institution. The term “fiction” is misleading in the larger context of memory studies. “Fiction” can have different meanings: it can refer to a narrative as a pure invention that is therefore qualified as a lie; it can refer to the lack of a historical or ontological status in fictional characters; and it can refer to the strategies and constituents that go into the making of any symbolic construct. Collective memory, as we have shown, depends on transitions from history into memory that involve the framing of historical events in the shape of affectively charged narratives and mobilizing symbols. If historic dates (such as the storming of the Bastille) are selected to be collectively and transgenerationally remembered, “fiction” in the sense of making, shaping, constructing is always implied in their narrative emplotment or visual encoding. Memory constructs that inform commemorative practices and traditions are therefore not necessarily false because they are constructed—of course they are! The questions to be asked should not only focus on empirical evidence and the substance of the narrative or tradition alone but ought to take the wider context into account: Why and how do memory constructs work? Why do they succeed to mobilize? Why do they find or fail to raise mass support and resonance? As they are necessarily selective, the question is: By which norms and bias are they chosen? What is included and what is excluded from the constructions of collective memory? And what are the political consequences of such choices in the present and for future?

When Said wrote that “the processes of memory are frequently, if not always, manipulated and intervened in for sometimes urgent purposes in the present” (Said, 179), this sentence was intended as a critical statement. From the point of view of collective memory research, however, it is a pure description. Collective national memory is always selective “by manipulating certain bits of the national past, suppressing others, elevating still others in an entirely functional way” (179). As a rule, writes Margaret Atwood from the British-Canadian point of view, “we tend to remember the awful things done to us, and to forget the awful things we did. The Blitz is still remembered; the fire-bombing of Dresden—well, not so much, or not by us. To challenge an accepted version of history—what we’ve decided it’s proper to remember—by

dredging up things that society has decided are better forgotten, can cause cries of anguish and outrage” (Atwood, 1997: 8). Given the close functional relationship between the national narrative and the identity of the nation, Atwood stresses that collective national memory is always designed for a purpose and specific use: “the past belongs to those who claim it, and are willing to explore it, and to infuse it with meaning for those who are alive today. The past belongs to us, because we are the ones who need it” (39).

While in the context of historiography the word “myth” is an index to what is to be exploded and debunked, in memory studies, it acquires a different meaning. Here it may refer to an idea, an event, a person, a narrative that has acquired a symbolic value and is engraved and transmitted in memory. While in the discourse of rational enlightenment, myth is used to distinguish between truth or lie (or authenticity and fiction), in the discourse of memory research it is used to distinguish between the object of historical knowledge on the one hand and collectively remembered events on the other. The idea behind this new and nonderogatory meaning of myth is that not only fictive events create myths but also historical events in their transformation into collective memory. Myth in this sense of “collectively remembered history” is meant as a neutral description. This more recent and scholarly meaning, however, has not yet gained a wider currency. In the politicized public arena it is easily mistaken as “untruth” and can give rise to conflict. In May 2007, for instance, a conference in Berlin on the “Batak Myth” had to be cancelled at the last moment because the Bulgarians protested against their memory being presented as “myth.”⁵

Hobsbawm’s argumentative strategy, which was based on the distinction between “fabricated” and “constructed,” belongs to the framework of “ideology critique” as practiced in the Marxist tradition or the Frankfurt School. In these discursive traditions, ideology was considered as a form of flawed consciousness and wrong values. Ideology was something to be exploded from the point of view of those who (like historians or philosophers) were free of the taint of ideology. Yet already in the 1980s, when Hobsbawm’s book appeared, the rigid

polarization between “us and them” inherent in the term ideology gave way to a more fuzzy and inclusive notion of “consensus,” which no longer excluded but implicated the point of view of the observer. This shift signaled an important mental change that can be summed up as the recognition that there is no viewpoint outside ideology. Ideology is all-pervasive; in the words of Barbara Godwin: “we can only escape from one ideology into another” (Flood, 1996). This new inclusive concept of ideology was step by step divested of its normative baggage. To quote Sacvan Bercovitch:

I mean by ideology the ground and texture of consensus. In its narrowest sense, this may be a consensus of a marginal or maverick group. In the broad sense in which I use the term . . . , ideology is the system of interlinked ideas, symbols, and beliefs by which a culture—any culture—seeks to justify and perpetuate itself; the web of rhetorical, ritual, and assumption through which society coerces, persuades, and coheres. (Bercovitch, 1986: 635).

In Bercovitch’s use, “ideology” has shifted from an exclusive term (criticizing what “they” do) to an inclusive term (describing what “we” do). This move has stimulated new questions. The issue is not only whether a collective memory construct is true or false, but also why it manages to convince. In asking these new questions, another question arises: In changing the meaning of such inherently critical terms as myth and ideology, have memory studies abandoned and betrayed the critical spirit? The answer is: of course not. Critique is also an objective of the memory discourse, but it starts on a different level. It does not start from the premise of authenticity and truth but takes its starting point from the recognition that we cannot think, communicate, and act outside of symbolic cultural frames. It is therefore no longer the constructedness of a collective memory as such but the use to which it is put that has become the basis for investigation, evaluation, and critique.

History can support a “painless exercise in patriotic fervor,” but it can also become “countermemory” (Foucault, 1977). In focusing their attention on forgotten episodes and shameful moments, historians can help to create a more honest and complex self-image of the nation. Over the years, a change in style of history textbooks can be observed, which may be characterized by the move from monumental to self-critical narratives and from isolationist narratives to those that connect to others in a transnational and global perspectives. Criteria are emerging for a critical evaluation of national narratives and political memory. One concerns the question of whether the national narrative is told more in terms of essentialism (myths of origin) or in those of historicism; another has to do with the question whether stress is laid more on identity (sameness) or on change. Textbooks and other representations of the national narrative can be subjected to an analysis of their principles of selectivity: it can be put to the test whether they adhere to exclusive norms or whether they include awkward facts and recognize the voices and experience of minorities.

NOTES

1. The term “history” is used here in the sense of historiography.
2. Historiography, writes Jacques Le Goff, “must aim at objectivity and must be built on a belief in historical truth” (Le Goff, 1986, preface). In spite of his ideal of impartiality and commitment to objectivity, even the professional historian is of course never completely free from loyalties and prejudices. But he differs from others in that “he is aware of this fact, and instead of indulging his prejudices seeks to identify and correct them” (Lewis, 1975: 52).
3. Whether the new tool of “objective” scholarship was actually implemented or not depended largely on the specific historiographic discourse. Antiquarian historiography has embraced it, thereby enlarging the realm of historical curiosity and eroding the concept of a “normative past.” Historians of the national past, on the other hand, were inspired by specific visions of the future for which they selected and constructed a motivating past.

4. The pioneers in this form of historiography were often medievalists, who had already been used to investigating social forms of religious and secular memorialization. See for instance O. G. Oexle (1995).
5. In April 2007, the following news blog could be read on the Internet: "More than a century, time has not washed away the memory of our ancestors' fate. Therefore, according to President Parvanov, every attempt to re-write history or artificially to create prerequisites for tension on delicate historical topics, is not only deeply unacceptable but will also meet the repudiation of the whole Bulgarian society. . . . The president's reaction has come after the Mayor of Batak Petar Paunov announced that the citizens of Batak would not let a conference on 18 May happen. The reason for their decision is the expected presentation of a thesis, which claims that the Batak massacre is a myth, its victims are exaggerated, and Turkish slavery is sham." See Kostadinov (2007).

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