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*AHR Forum*  
Collective Memory and Cultural History:  
Problems of Method

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ALON CONFINO

THE CONCEPT OF “CULTURE” HAS BECOME FOR HISTORIANS a compass of a sort that governs questions of interpretation, explanation, and method. And the notion of “memory” has taken its place now as a leading term, recently perhaps *the* leading term, in cultural history. Used with various degrees of sophistication, the notion of memory, more practiced than theorized, has been used to denote very different things, which nonetheless share a topical common denominator: the ways in which people construct a sense of the past.<sup>1</sup> It has been used to explore, first, the memory of people who actually experienced a given event, such as the memory of Holocaust survivors.<sup>2</sup> In addition, it has come to denote the representation of the past and the making of it into a shared cultural knowledge by successive generations in “vehicles of memory” such as books, films, museums, commemorations, and others.<sup>3</sup> The richness of memory studies is undeniable. Perhaps collective memory has been so

I should like to thank Edward Ayers, Francesca Fiorani, and Sophia Rosenfeld for their insightful critical advice.

<sup>1</sup> Also in cases where the use of memory has been insignificant in terms of method and theory, the memory perspective itself has proved to be thought provoking. Take, for example, the recent debate on post-Zionism in Israel, where a group of scholars, called “the new historians,” has questioned Zionist historiography’s most cherished assumptions. The scholars have criticized, among others, the myth of the heroic birth of Israel, Zionism’s repression of the Palestinian tragedy, and, more generally, the reduction of historical studies in Israel to an ideological and educational tool of Zionism. These and other claims opened a public debate by scholars and laypersons about the historical meaning of Zionism. At the center of the rethinking of Zionist history has been the term “memory.” As Anita Shapira, a leading historian of Zionism and a critic of the “new historians” observed, “the debate is less about historiography than it is about collective memory.” But the notion of memory has been used either perfunctorily or as a hollow metaphor defining memory as a monolith in expressions like “the collective memory of early statehood” or “Palestinian collective memory.” In terms of method, the debate has centered on the actions, ideology, and motivation of institutions and leading figures, while a social and cultural history of memory’s construction and reception has not been taken, as well as the interrelations among different memories within and between Israeli and Palestinian societies. These topics still await their historians. For a good introduction to the post-Zionist controversy, see *History and Memory* 7 (Spring/Summer 1995): “Special Issue on Israeli Historiography Revisited,” especially Anita Shapira, “Politics and Collective Memory: The Debate over the ‘New Historians’ in Israel,” 9–34; and Ilan Pappé, “Critique and Agenda: The Post-Zionist Scholars in Israel,” 66–90. For a collection of essays about the recent historical disputes in Israel, see Robert Wistrich and David Ohana, eds., *The Shaping of Israeli Identity: Myth, Memory, and Trauma* (London, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> The literature is enormous. See, for example, Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven, Conn., 1991); Ronald Berger, *Constructing a Collective Memory of the Holocaust: A Life History of Two Brothers’ Survival* (Niwot, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> The term “vehicles of memory” is used by Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (New York, 1989). Pierre Nora’s magisterial seven-volume collection *Les lieux de*

useful to think about how people construct pasts because of its open-endedness, because it is applicable to historical situations and human conditions in diverse societies and periods.

But the benefit of richness cannot overcome a sense that the term “memory” is depreciated by surplus use, while memory studies lack a clear focus and have become somewhat predictable. The often-made contention that the past is constructed not as fact but as myth to serve the interest of a particular community may still sound radical to some, but it cannot (and should not) stupefy most historians. The history of memory, in fact, has developed into a fragmented field. It lacks critical reflection on method and theory, as well as a systematic evaluation of the field’s problems, approaches, and objects of study. It is largely defined now in terms of topics of inquiry. Repressed memory. Monuments. Films. Museums. Mickey Mouse. Memory of the American South. Of the Holocaust. The French Revolution. Memory of recent events. Of current events. And instant memory of yesterday’s news.<sup>4</sup> One cannot avoid a sense that the choice of subjects is all too often governed by the fashion of the day. The history of memory defined topically becomes a field with neither a center nor connections among topics. It runs the danger of becoming an assemblage of distinct topics that describe in a predictable way how people construct the past.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, everything is a memory case; memory is everywhere. We construct a

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*mémoire* provides a cornucopia of memory sites: *Les lieux de mémoire*, Vol. 1: *La république*, Vols. 2–4: *La nation*, Vol. 5–7: *Les France* (Paris, 1984–92).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Frederick Crews, *The Memory Wars: Freud’s Legacy in Dispute* (New York, 1995); James Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven, Conn., 1993); Miriam Hansen, “‘Schindler’s List’ Is Not Shoah: The Second Commandment, Popular Modernism, and Public Memory,” *Critical Inquiry* 22 (Winter 1996): 292–312; Diane Barthel, *Historic Preservation: Collective Memory and Historical Identity* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1996); Daniel Sherman, “Objects of Memory: History and Narrative in French War Museums,” *French Historical Studies* 19 (Spring 1995): 49–74; Michael Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* (Philadelphia, 1996); *Southern Cultures* 2 (Fall 1995), special issue on memory and the South; Keith Wilson, ed., *Forging the Collective Memory: Government and International Historians through Two World Wars* (Providence, R.I., 1996).

For recent, current, and instant history of memory, see Barbie Zelizer, *Covering the Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media, and the Shaping of Collective Memory* (Chicago, 1992); Thomas Johnson, *The Rehabilitation of Richard Nixon: The Media’s Effect on Collective Memory* (New York, 1996); Michael Schudson, *Watergate in American Memory: How We Remember, Forget, and Reconstruct the Past* (New York, 1992); Edward Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt, eds., *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past* (New York, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> Lynn Hunt warned several years ago against the danger of defining the new cultural history topically: “Just as social history sometimes moved from one group to another (workers, women, children, ethnic groups, the old, the young) without developing much sense of cohesion and interaction between topics, so too a cultural history defined topically could degenerate into an endless search for new cultural practices to describe, whether carnivals, cat massacres, or impotence trials.” See Hunt, “Introduction,” in *The New Cultural History*, Lynn Hunt, ed. (Berkeley, Calif., 1989), 9. The history of memory faces a similar danger.

I was reminded of memory studies when I recently read Jacques Revel’s critical evaluation of social history: “‘Classical’ social history was mainly conceived as a history of social entities . . . As a result, when one looks through the enormous mass of results accumulated over the past thirty or forty years, one has a certain sense of déjà vu and stagnant categories. From one work to the next, the characters are the same though the cast may vary.” Memory studies could also end up being predictable, as yet another memory is subjected to an analysis of its construction, appropriation, contestation. Jacques Revel, “Microanalysis and the Construction of the Social,” in *Histories: French Constructions of the Past*, Revel and Lynn Hunt, eds. (New York, 1995), 498.

sense of the past from the most mundane, everyday-life objects (postcards), as well as from the most sacred totems (the Christian cross). But, then, not everything is a memory case in the same way. Beyond proposing new topics for memory investigation, we need to question the methods of memory studies, by way of refining our approaches and proposing new connections. This essay is an occasion for critical reflection on memory studies and on the field that defines it: cultural history. It is not necessary to state here the advantages of cultural history, but it is perhaps beneficial to remind ourselves of the risks and problems it includes in terms of evidence and in relating the cultural to the social and the political. There is too often a facile mode of doing cultural history, whereby one picks a historical event or a vehicle of memory, analyzes its representation or how people perceived it over time, and draws conclusions about “memory” (or “collective memory”). Memory is a new field of research, but this is not sufficient to make of it a novelty. As a field of study, memory has a label more than a content; that is, though the label is an attractive one, in itself memory does not offer any true additional explanatory power. Only when linked to historical questions and problems, via methods and theories, can memory be illuminating. The aim of this essay is not to propose an alternative strategy, for there is no one, correct way to “do” memory. It is, rather, to think through how it is effective to think with memory. At the center of the essay is the problem of how the term “memory” can be useful in articulating the connections between the cultural, the social, and the political, between representation and social experience.

I THINK ABOUT THE STUDY OF MEMORY by associating it with two bodies of work: the history of *mentalités* and the work of a European scholar who in the 1920s was among the first to use the concept of collective memory. I mean Aby Warburg, the great art and cultural historian. I do not suggest that we follow on the heels of these works. Not at all. I view them rather as inspiring us to think about the notion of memory, to establish new relations, to suggest new strategies. Certainly, there are other bodies of work that can illuminate the history of memory; but, for the purpose of this essay, I found these two useful in articulating several problems of method that exist in memory studies. I therefore begin this essay by discussing the connections between the history of memory, of *mentalités*, and Warburg, before I analyze questions of method.

The study of memory and the history of *mentalités* appear to share a common purpose and agenda, as well as a sense of fashionableness and crisis. If we replace “*mentalité*” with “memory,” then Jacques Le Goff’s opening paragraph to a 1974 article, “Mentalities: A History of Ambiguities,” could just as well have been the beginning of this essay: “For the historian today, the term mentality is still a novelty and already devalued by excessive use. There is much talk of the history of mentalities, but convincing examples of such history are rare. It represents a new area of research, a trail to be blazed, and yet, at the same time, doubts are raised as to its scientific, conceptual, and epistemological validity. Fashion has seized upon it, and yet it seems already to have gone out of fashion. Should we revive or bury

the history of mentalities?"<sup>6</sup> Familiar music. Similar to the study of memory, the history of *mentalités* was denounced as a "semantic prestidigitation."<sup>7</sup> Like the history of *mentalités*, a great appeal of the history of memory appears to be its vagueness.<sup>8</sup> And both histories have by themselves no additional explanatory value; their value depends on the problems posed and methods used.<sup>9</sup>

But the history of *mentalités* is useful not only in order to outline the dangers faced by the new history of memory. There is also a great advantage in thinking of the history of memory as the history of collective mentality. This way of reasoning resists the topical definition of the field and, conversely, uses memory to explore broader questions about the role of the past in society. The history of memory is useful and interesting not only for thinking about how the past is represented in, say, a single museum but also about, more extensively, the historical mentality of people in the past, about the commingled beliefs, practices, and symbolic representations that make people's perceptions of the past. This kind of history of memory should aim at "reconstructing the patterns of behavior, expressive forms and modes of silence into which worldviews and collective sensibilities are translated. The basic elements of this research are representations and images, myths and values recognized or tolerated by groups or the entire society, and which constitute the content of collective psychologies." These words, which articulate so well an agenda for the history of memory, are Robert Mandrou's analytical description of the history of *mentalités*.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, memory as a study of collective mentality provides a comprehensive view of culture and society that is often missing in the history of memory, whose fragmentary tendency is to focus on distinct memories. The history of mentality distinguished itself from the history of ideas by looking at the common man. This included both examining objects produced by the common man (popular literature, for example) and studying the reception by the common man of objects of high culture (say, Shakespeare). It attempted, in theory if not in practice, to outline the mental horizons of society as a whole, to link both Shakespeare and popular literature within a single cultural world. This is a useful corrective for the history of memory, a field that is inclined, as we shall see, to isolate memories instead of

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Le Goff, "Mentalities: A History of Ambiguities," in *Constructing the Past: Essays in Historical Methodology*, Le Goff and Pierre Nora, eds. (New York, 1984), 166. It was first published as "Les mentalités: Une histoire ambiguë," in *Faire de l'histoire*, Jacques Le Goff and Pierre Nora, eds., vol. 3 (Paris, 1974).

<sup>7</sup> François Furet, "Beyond the *Annales*," *Journal of Modern History* 55 (September 1983): 405.

<sup>8</sup> The French history of *mentalité* was justifiably criticized on grounds that it, first, tended to view every historical problem as a psychological problem and second, reduce categories of mentality to social analysis (of hierarchy, income, occupation), a method that reduced beliefs and values to a social structure established *a priori*. See Carlo Ginzburg, "A proposito della raccolta dei saggi storici di Marc Bloch," *Studi medievali* 3 (1965): 335–53; and Roger Chartier, "Intellectual History or Sociocultural History? The French Trajectories," in *Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives*, Dominick LaCapra and Steven Kaplan, eds. (Ithaca, N.Y., 1982), 13–46, esp. 22–32. For a critical appraisal, see also Patrick Hutton, "The History of Mentalities: The New Map of Cultural History," *History and Theory* 20 (1981): 237–59.

<sup>9</sup> This has been Furet's argument about the study of mentalities. I found Furet's critique of the history of mentality insightful for my thinking about memory. See Furet, "Beyond the *Annales*," 404–07.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Mandrou, "Histoire/L'histoire des mentalités," in *Encyclopaedia universalis* (1971; rpt. edn., Paris, 1985), 9: 366.

placing them in relation to one another and to society as a whole. This approach heightens our awareness of the fact that collective memory is an exploration of a shared identity that unites a social group, be it a family or a nation, whose members nonetheless have different interests and motivations. And of the fact that the crucial issue in the history of memory is not how a past is represented but why it was received or rejected. For every society sets up images of the past. Yet to make a difference in a society, it is not enough for a certain past to be selected. It must steer emotions, motivate people to act, be received; in short, it must become a socio-cultural mode of action. Why is it that some pasts triumph while others fail? Why do people prefer one image of the past over another? The answers to these questions lead us to formulate hypotheses and perhaps draw conclusions about historical mentality. And to articulate such answers, the work of Aby Warburg is insightful.

Aby Warburg (1866–1929) used but never developed systematically the notion of social memory (*soziales Gedächtnis*).<sup>11</sup> His work focused on the transmission of primitive and ancient motifs to later societies, especially their influence and meaning in Renaissance Florence. All human products, argued Warburg, and artistic work in particular, were expressions of human memory transmitted through symbols from ancient times. He came to believe that the key to deciphering art and culture lay in tracing the collective memory of primitive, primeval beliefs and responses that continued to shape our world through shared symbols.

Warburg's ideas of memory are interesting in themselves. More consequential to this essay is his approach to art and cultural history emphasizing the connection between artistic representation and the social world. Warburg's studies explored what is nowadays called the history of mentality or collective memory. Warburg read widely in anthropology and social psychology. Like a historical anthropologist, he observed the Other to gain insights into his own, modern culture; in 1895, he traveled among the Hopi Indians in New Mexico and recorded their rituals and

<sup>11</sup> For Warburg's idea of social memory, see Kurt Forster, "Aby Warburg's History of Art: Collective Memory and the Social Mediation of Images," *Daedalus* (Winter 1976): 169–76; E. H. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography*, 2d edn. (Chicago, 1986), 239–59. Gombrich presents Warburg's fragmented notion of social memory but does not attempt to provide a comprehensive view. For a critical evaluation of Gombrich's book, see Felix Gilbert, "From Art History to the History of Civilization: Aby Warburg," *Journal of Modern History* 44 (1972): 381–91.

Seventy years after Warburg's death, his writings are still unavailable in English. Fortunately, Kurt Forster is now preparing the English edition of Warburg's collected writings (*Gesammelte Schriften* [Leipzig-Berlin, 1932]), to be published in the Getty Research Institute's book series Texts and Documents. For a selection of Warburg's essays and several critical appraisals of his work, see Dieter Wuttke, ed., *Aby Warburg: Ausgewählte Schriften und Würdigungen* (Baden-Baden, 1980). For some evaluations of Warburg's notions of culture and art history, see Silvia Ferretti, *Cassirer, Panofsky, and Warburg: Symbol, Art, and History* (New Haven, Conn., 1989); Yoshihiko Maikuma, *Der Begriff der Kultur bei Warburg, Nietzsche und Burckhardt* (Königstein, 1985); Kurt Forster, "Aby Warburg: His Study of Ritual and Art on Two Continents," *October* 77 (Summer 1996): 6–24. For an attempted feminist, poststructuralist, and psychoanalytic reading of Warburg, see Margaret Iverson, "Retrieving Warburg's Tradition," *Art History* 16 (December 1993): 541–53. On the reception of Warburg's writings, see Michael Diers, "Warburg and the Warburgian Tradition of Cultural History," *New German Critique* 65 (Spring–Summer 1995): 59–74. On his projected picture atlas of memory, which he called *Mnemosyne*, and which included photographs and reproductions of recurring human figures and gestures, see Dorothee Bauerle, *Gespensergeschichten für ganz Erwachsene: Ein Kommentar zu Aby Warburgs Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* (Münster, 1988).

ceremonies.<sup>12</sup> For Warburg, the historian of artistic production must take cognizance of two intertwining factors. One is the “full spectrum of artifacts” (the context, in other words) in a given culture and the ensuing relationship of artifacts both to one another and to their surroundings.<sup>13</sup> The work of art represents the life of the period and its needs; to interpret it, we need “to reconstruct the connection between artistic representations and the social experiences, taste, and mentality of a specific society.”<sup>14</sup> The second is the peculiarity of the individual work of art. Looking at the whole, Warburg attempted to maintain a coherent balance between the way a work of art eventuated in the specific form and quality it did and its connection with the larger culture around it.

This mode of proceeding has enormous potential to the study of memory by reversing a recent trend whereby, as we shall see, a representation of the past (in, say, a museum, a film, or a commemoration) is not placed within the symbolic universe available to the society. The result is studies of memory in symbolic isolation. I would like to view memory as an outcome of the relationship between a distinct representation of the past and the full spectrum of symbolic representations available in a given culture. This view posits the study of memory as the relationship between the whole and its component parts, seeing society as a global entity—social, symbolic, political—where different memories interact. This approach also seeks to reconstruct the meaning of a given collective memory by using an intertwined, double move: placing it within a global historical context and a global symbolic universe, and analyzing the ideas, values, and practices embedded in and symbolized by its particular imagery.

Of special significance is Warburg’s approach to the issue of evidence. He rejected the arbitrary selection of evidence by art historians who believed in the autonomy of aesthetic values, which he judged as pure history of ideas that disconnected the individual work of art from the larger politics and society. He also rejected the selection of evidence by proponents of the formalist approach (characterized by Heinrich Wölfflin’s 1888 *Renaissance and Baroque*), which explained art history in terms of the development and transmission of shapes, lines, colors, and subjects, for this approach interpreted the symbols and meaning of art too narrowly. To carry out his art historical method, Warburg used the concept of response, emphasizing the importance of social mediation of images. The theory of response called for a study of those prevailing customs, tastes, and traditions that connected the historical conditions with the artistic representation. When we interpret a work of art, we cannot assume that images are the transparent expressions of political and social values, for in fact artistic style is a most treacherous key for ascertaining political and social developments. In short, the work of art cannot speak for itself; to decipher its meaning, we must examine intermediaries between the social world and the artistic representation.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Burke, “Aby Warburg as Historical Anthropologist,” in *Aby Warburg: Akten des internationalen Symposiums Hamburg 1990*, Horst Bredekamp, Michael Diers, and Charlotte Schoell-Glass, eds. (Weinheim, 1991), 39–44; Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York, 1995), 209–14; Ron Chernow, *The Warburgs* (New York, 1993), 64–66.

<sup>13</sup> Forster, “Aby Warburg’s History of Art,” 172.

<sup>14</sup> Carlo Ginzburg, “From Aby Warburg to E. H. Gombrich: A Problem of Method,” in *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method* (Baltimore, Md., 1992), 21.

Warburg's approach is useful in warning us against the danger of assuming that the representation of memory *can* speak for itself, without intermediaries. Studies that focus on the representation of memory, while ignoring social practice and transmission, implicitly make an assumption, as we shall see, that the representation is a transparent expression of a historical mentality, of social and political values. In reality, the crucial issue is not what is represented but how this representation has been interpreted and perceived.

In the 1920s, Warburg was not the only one thinking of social memory and the history of mentality. Maurice Halbwachs, the French sociologist, was the first to have used the concept of collective memory systematically. In a series of studies, Halbwachs argued that every memory is carried by a specific social group limited in space and time.<sup>15</sup> His approach was very different from Warburg's. And although Halbwachs' fundamental contribution—establishing the connection between a social group and collective memory—is the starting point for every scholar of memory, Warburg's writings are, I believe, no less suggestive in terms of method. Also active at the same time was, of course, Marc Bloch, who explored in his 1924 classic *Les rois thaumaturges* the “beliefs and fables” around royal healing rites.<sup>16</sup> Bloch and, it appears, also Warburg knew of Halbwachs' work.<sup>17</sup> What kind of an intellectual genealogy existed between a sociologist, a historian, and an art historian who shared the notion of memory and the history of culture is an investigation that still awaits its scholar.

How, exactly, are Warburg and the history of mentality useful to the study of memory? I see three areas of convergence, which have already been alluded to: the connection of the political with the social in the history of memory, the issue of reception and evidence, and the relationship among memories within a given society. I would like to discuss these topics critically by analyzing several excellent studies on memory. In accordance with the principle that one should direct criticism at leading books in the field, I have chosen those books that I found insightful and stimulating. In the short space of this essay, I cannot possibly claim to do justice to these studies; I therefore ask the reader to bear in mind the rather limited nature of my investigation. Still, I believe that the characteristics I shall discuss are representative of the current study of memory.

<sup>15</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *La topographie légendaire des Évangiles en Terre sainte: Étude de mémoire collective* (Paris, 1941); *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (Paris, 1925). In English, see Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, Lewis Coser, ed. and trans. (Chicago, 1992); and *The Collective Memory*, Francis Ditter and Vida Yazdi Ditter, trans. (New York, 1980). On Halbwachs' formulation and use of collective memory, see Patrick Hutton, *History as an Art of Memory* (Hanover, N.H., 1993), chap. 4.

<sup>16</sup> Marc Bloch, *The Royal Touch: Sacred Monarchy and Scrofula in England and France* (London, 1973), 4.

<sup>17</sup> Halbwachs received after World War I a Chair of Pedagogy and Sociology at the University of Strasbourg, where he began a close professional friendship with Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch. When Bloch and Febvre founded the *Annales d'histoire économique et sociales* in 1929, Halbwachs became a member of the editorial board. See Coser, “Introduction,” in Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 5–11. About the relation between Warburg and Halbwachs we know very little. See Jan Assmann, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” *New German Critique* 65 (Spring–Summer 1995): 125.



ONE OF THE SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTIONS OF MEMORY STUDIES has been to explore how the construction of the past, through a process of invention and appropriation, affected the relationship of power within society. The “politics of memory” (at times, “the politics of identity”) has emerged as a leading theme in the growing body of literature about memory. Memory is viewed here as a subjective experience of a social group that essentially sustains a relationship of power. Simply stated, it is who wants whom to remember what, and why.<sup>18</sup> This theme is no doubt illuminating to our understanding of the functions and meanings of collective memory. But it seems to me only partially illuminating, for one consequence of it is the tendency to reduce memory, which is fundamentally a concept of culture, to the political.

The problem with memory defined in terms of politics and political use is that it becomes an illustrative reflection of political development and often is relativized to ideology. In *The Past in French History*, Robert Gildea seeks to “explore the relationship between political culture and collective memory,” and he views French political cultures as “defined around the main axes of political conflict.” Collective memory thus turns out to be the political memory of liberalism, socialism, communism, anarchism, regionalism, Catholicism. Significantly, the political memory described by Gildea is one constructed by party and institutional leaders, among intellectuals, journalists, statesmen, politicians, and publicists. Consequently, when Gildea argues, for example—“The ‘making of the working class’ in France did not take place as a result of industrialisation or urbanisation but as a result of the construction of a collective memory, the myth of the Paris Commune . . . as a class war, a proletarian revolution suppressed with unprecedented violence by the French bourgeoisie”—one is not sure in what ways “collective memory” is different from ideology.<sup>19</sup>

More important, the result of memory being sacrificed to an analysis of politics and political use is, often, to ignore the category of the social. In this case, representations of the past derive from and are mainly used to explain relationships of political nature, but they are considerably silent about the effect of memory on the organization, hierarchization, and arrangements of social and cultural relationships. An illuminating example of this problem is Henry Rousso’s acclaimed book *The Vichy Syndrome*, a study of the memory of Vichy in post-1945 French society.<sup>20</sup> The first and major part of the book, “Evolution of the Syndrome,” is a useful description of the various ways in which the Vichy memory was mobilized for political purposes. Rousso’s narrative follows the “unfinished mourning” after Liberation, the “repression” of the 1950s and 1960s, the turning point of 1968, the films *The Sorrow and the Pity* (*Le chagrin et la pitié*, 1971) and *Shoah* (1985), and, after 1974, the Jewish and gentile “obsession” with Vichy and the Holocaust. This is an important story, historically, politically, and morally, told with verve and clarity.

But whose memory is it? Similar to Gildea’s, this is a memory constructed by

<sup>18</sup> Peter Burke poses this question in his discussion of social amnesia. See Burke, “History as Social Memory,” in *Memory: History, Culture and the Mind*, Thomas Butler, ed. (New York, 1989), 108.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Gildea, *The Past in French History* (New Haven, Conn., 1994), 9–10, 44.

<sup>20</sup> Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944*, Arthur Goldhammer, trans. (Cambridge, Mass., 1991).

politicians and intellectuals: Charles de Gaulle, the Communist Party, *Shoah* filmmaker Claude Lanzmann, members of the Chamber of Deputies, historians, journalists, or André Malraux speaking at the ceremony for Jean Moulin at the Panthéon. *The Vichy Syndrome* shows a very important manifestation of French memory, yet it is a limited one; this is largely a public, often official, and narrowly political memory. The period of repression, 1954–1971, for example, is predictably centered on the figure of de Gaulle. But if in Rousso the Vichy memory appears to have been repressed between 1954 and 1971, it is also because the book explores a memory created from above. It ignores the construction of popular memories of Vichy and their links to the everyday level of experience. In the private spheres of family, friends, workplace, and neighborhood, there may have been very different representations of Vichy. Robert Moeller has convincingly argued recently that German society during the 1950s, in contrast to the widely held opinion of scholars and laypersons, did not forget or repress the Nazi era but actively remembered it—selectively and with an inverted meaning of who the victim really was.<sup>21</sup> It is improbable that the mass of French men and women who collaborated with the Nazis, some out of opportunism, others out of ideology, simply forgot it all. *The Vichy Syndrome* thus fails to give a sense of how the Vichy memory made a difference in people's lives, and how it was enacted on the local and private level. Moreover, while Rousso ignores popular Vichy memories that were produced away from the corridors of political, cultural, and entertainment power, he also fails to explore how the memory constructed by the powerful—say, the Moulin commemoration—was received by the people. (We will return to this topic below.) Consequently, the Vichy memory from above is isolated from larger patterns of historical mentality in French society. As a study of memory from above, *The Vichy Syndrome* cannot be considered, as it aspires to be, a study of collective memory.

By sanctifying the political while underplaying the social, and by sacrificing the cultural to the political, we transform memory into a “natural” corollary of political development and interests.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, we are the poorer in method and theory to analyze crucial memory issues that cannot be reduced to the political: the relations between modernity (and postmodernity) and memory; the obsession with and/or neglect of memory, forgetting, and conservation in modern and premodern societies. Furthermore, one unfortunate side effect of treating memory as a

<sup>21</sup> Robert Moeller, “War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany,” *AHR* 101 (October 1996): 1008–48. The narrative trajectory of Holocaust and World War II memory as one of repression (1950s–60s), awakening (sometime during the 1960s), obsession (the 1970s and after) has an air of predictability. A common argument about Holocaust remembrance in Israel, for example, is that the Adolf Eichmann trial was the watershed between survivors' repression and state indifference before 1961 and growing interest and instrumentalization of the Holocaust later on. But this argument is correct only insofar as we explore the official state level. In everyday life, the Holocaust was everywhere between 1945 and 1961. The fundamental division in Israeli society between those who came from “there” and those who were “here” was often represented in small gestures, as when a survivor's number on the arm drew hisses and furtive glances or when a survivor's behavior was excused with the explanation, “Well, he was *there*.” So far, this aspect has been captured better by writers than by historians. See the novel by David Grossman, *See Under: Love*, Betsy Rosenberg, trans. (New York, 1989), and especially the masterful first story, “Momik.”

<sup>22</sup> My argument is not, in case such a clarification is needed, against every exploration of the political. The study of the political is fundamental because it allows cultural history to link with power and thus avoid being a rendition of the old history of ideas. My critique is of the particular mode of cultural history that reduces power to politics, and the political to top-down, public, and official manifestations.

symptom of politics is the lack of explorations of power in areas that are not politically evident. Consequently, a search for memory traces is made mostly among visible places and familiar names, where memory construction is explicit and its meaning palpably manipulated, while in fact we should look for memory where it is implied rather than said, blurred rather than clear, in the realm of collective mentality. We miss a whole world of human activities that cannot be immediately recognized (and categorized) as political, although they are decisive to the way people construct and contest images of the past. We can think of the family, voluntary association, and workplace but should also include practices such as tourism and consumerism.

Interestingly enough, by sacrificing the cultural to the political, memory studies—and by extension cultural history—has reproduced a model of society that is, in a sense, not dissimilar from that of the social history of the 1960s and 1970s. According to classic social history, cultural cleavages necessarily reflected social differences constructed beforehand; the social structure identified and explained cultural originations that subsequently needed only to be characterized. The underlying assumption was that culture can only be explained by its relation to social structural preconditions, thus changes in the formation of culture are explained by earlier changes in social relation. Cultural history has justifiably demolished the validity of this approach by arguing that culture shapes, as much it is shaped by, the social structure. But if social history reduced the cultural to the social, cultural history often reduces the cultural to the political. Memory cleavages reflect political differences constructed beforehand. Political differences identify and explain memory origination. Memory thus becomes a prisoner of political reductionism and functionalism.

THERE IS ANOTHER SIGNIFICANT CONSEQUENCE to the sacrificing of the cultural to the political, namely that we tend to ignore the issue of reception, that ogre that awaits every cultural historian. Many studies of memory are content to describe the representation of the past without bothering to explore the transmission, diffusion, and, ultimately, the meaning of this representation. The study of reception is not an issue that simply adds to our knowledge. Rather, it is a necessary one to avoid an arbitrary choice and interpretation of evidence.

Let us look again at *The Vichy Syndrome*, which treats the history of transmission at length. The second part of the book, “Transmission of the Syndrome,” focuses on three memory carriers: official commemorations, popular movies, and scholarly works of history. In addition, to gauge “how deep were the roots of the syndrome in French society,” Rousso discusses book sales, movie attendance, and polling results.<sup>23</sup> But there is no comprehensive analysis of the diffusion of Vichy representations or a clear rationale for why one piece of evidence is chosen over another.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, however elaborate the polling results are, and however

<sup>23</sup> Rousso, *Vichy Syndrome*, 272.

<sup>24</sup> Rousso does not provide in his discussion of transmission any new information that was not already discussed in Part 1 about the evolution of the syndrome. We only get more of the same—more films, more books, more commemorations—though it is unclear what are the criteria according to

complete the information about box-office sales of *The Sorrow and the Pity* and book sales of Robert Paxton's *Vichy France*, this superficial evidence cannot capture the meaning of the Vichy memory for French men and women. The evidence presented is anecdotal, and the anecdote is presented as proof of reception. The anecdotal approach appears to be confirmed by Rousso's own evaluation of his method as an attempt to "capture the full diversity of 'collective memory' by recording all its visible signs."<sup>25</sup> "All the visible signs": one wonders how arbitrary is Rousso's Vichy syndrome.<sup>26</sup> Parallel to the visible representations there were perhaps different Vichy syndromes that can be found among silent and less visible sources. For the Vichy syndrome, like other pathologies, was created to hide as much as to reveal. The book's main metaphors—syndrome, neurosis, repression, obsession, pathology—are taken from psychology. But if we think further with the psychological metaphor, we must wonder whether the historian/psychologist should take the patient's (French society) explicit utterances as *a priori* important, indeed almost at face value. Should the historian not be suspicious of the visible, explicit narrative offered by public and official French society about Vichy? My argument is not that Rousso interprets the visible evidence naïvely; on the contrary, he is sensitive to silences, appropriations, lies. It is rather that Rousso interprets *only* the visible evidence: as a result, he interprets the Vichy syndrome within the constraints of public, and to a large extent official, narrative. Should we not assume, instead, that the patient would try to conceal the effects and implication of the trauma, that the visible signs of a trauma are at times the least meaningful?<sup>27</sup>

The real problem is one of method: the decision to explain the meaning of the Vichy memory by separating its construction (Part 1 of the book) from its reception (Part 2). Rousso interprets reception by attempting "not to lose sight of the overall picture" of the syndrome's evolutionary stages established in Part 1 (from unfinished mourning to obsession).<sup>28</sup> The result is an interpretation that is closed within itself—because the reception's "overall picture" has already been predetermined. The discussion of reception thus only shows what we have already learned in Part 1 and in fact has no bearing on the evolution of the syndrome. This method is an interpretative vicious circle in which Rousso reads into the evidence of reception what he has already learned from other sources and what he wants to "prove."<sup>29</sup>

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which a source (say, de Gaulle's memoirs) is used to interpret the construction of the syndrome (Part 1) rather than its reception (Part 2).

<sup>25</sup> Rousso, *Vichy Syndrome*, 219, emphasis added.

<sup>26</sup> The danger of looking for evidence in the most visible places is clear when Rousso explains his choice of method in exploring the depth of the syndrome in French society: "Before 1971 . . . polling . . . [about World War II's issues] was practically non-existent. Since polling data are essential for what I want to do here, I have focused in what follows on the 1970s and 1980s" (Rousso, *Vichy Syndrome*, 272–73). Instead of posing a problem—how French men and women remembered Vichy—and looking for the answer everywhere, Rousso viewed polling data, which as a source should be a *vehicle* to establish an argument, as the essential factor, and looked for the answer where polling data existed. This is a little bit like looking for a lost coin under the lamppost because there is light there.

<sup>27</sup> The status of evidence in the history of memory has been so far ignored, although this is a crucial issue. See the discussion of James Wilkinson, "A Choice of Fictions: Historians, Memory, and Evidence," *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 111 (January 1996): 80–92, who has a favorable view of Rousso's method.

<sup>28</sup> Rousso, *Vichy Syndrome*, 221.

<sup>29</sup> Rousso, *Vichy Syndrome*, 221. Rousso himself is conscious of this problem when he writes of his

When historians attempt to interpret evidence of memory from a representation of the past, the risk of a circular argumentation through “cultural” reading is high. The overall consequence is an arbitrary interpretation: a conception of the meaning of Vichy memory was formed before exploring the reception of the memory. But in truth, we have no way to evaluate, control, and verify the importance of the evidence without a systematic study of reception, and we end up constructing the history of memory from visible signs whose significance is taken for granted. Although neither Rousso nor scholars of memory and cultural history believe that representations of the past can “speak for themselves,” the result of many studies of memory that overlook reception is that representations of the past are used, in effect, as vehicles that explain perceptions of the past without intermediaries.

ONE RESULT OF THE SEPARATE NARRATIVES of evolution and reception, a result certainly unintended by Rousso, is that the evolution of memory stands like a foundational story against which reception is measured. The separate narratives thus assume levels of analysis and explanations: we must first construct the evolution of memory in order to understand its meaning as revealed in reception. But this, of course, is an artificial separation, for the meaning of memory’s evolution commingles with, and is dependent on, the story of its reception.

A similar problem of narrative emerges when we attempt to write the history of memory by separating its construction from its contestation. This is the case of Yael Zerubavel’s *Recovered Roots*, an excellent, thoughtful study of Zionist collective memory.<sup>30</sup> Zerubavel focuses on three major events in ancient and recent Jewish history: the fall of Masada in AD 73, the Bar Kokhba revolt against the Roman Empire in AD 132, and the 1920 battle of Tel Hai, in the Upper Galilee, where eight Zionist settlers died defending a small settlement.

The first parts of the book explore the evolution of these events into fundamental myths that shaped meanings of the past in the Jewish society in Palestine. Although the sources are extremely rich, Jewish society is presented as a monolith.<sup>31</sup> There is no differentiation in culture, society, and politics regarding who are the agents of “Zionist collective memory.” The term itself takes on a life of its own, as it acts, reconstructs, and produces.<sup>32</sup> The result is a cultural history in a social and political void; the construction of memory here is a story bereft of its sociology and its politics.

Only in the last part of the book, “the politics of commemoration,” which explores “the struggle over power and control,” does Zerubavel finally discuss how

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method that it “may at times seem rather circular . . . [and] is intended only as a heuristic tool.” One can identify with this argument. Still, we must be clear about the consequences of writing a history of memory by separating memory’s construction from its reception.

<sup>30</sup> Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition* (Chicago, 1995). Among the growing Israeli discussion of memory, Zerubavel’s study seems the most comprehensive and illuminating.

<sup>31</sup> Zerubavel makes a concerted effort, often very successful, to get to the everyday level of collective memory. Among the sources she uses are jokes, popular songs, public school textbooks, plays, poems, children’s stories, and the experience of trips to Masada and Tel Hai.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots*, 18, 30, 31, 96.

the “different interpretations of those historical events presented competing claims on Israeli collective memory.”<sup>33</sup> But are these competing claims not an integral part of the construction of memory? Why assume, even as a heuristic device, that a “Zionist collective memory” existed, when in fact many memories vied for power within Zionism? The result of analyzing the politics of memory as a separate problem from that of the evolution of memory is the omission of a key problem to understanding the construction of Zionist collective memory: how opposing Zionist groups came to believe, in spite of their political and other differences, that they shared a single, transcending national belonging. In other words, how did Zionists construct from their different interpretations of Jewish history a symbolic common denominator? The solution to these questions, in terms of narrative and method, lies in writing the history of memory’s construction as commingling with that of memory’s contestation, thus emphasizing simultaneously the politics of commemoration *and* how various Zionist groups came to believe they shared a unique national memory, one that overcame symbolically the real differences in Jewish society. The result of the analysis of *Recovered Roots* is a kind of master narrative of an agentless “Zionist collective memory” (described in the first part of the book) against which the different interpretations of Zionist groups are measured (in the second part). The analysis of contestation thus does not influence the story of evolution; it is not so much a part of it as an addition to it. Consequently, the impact of contestation on the construction of memory is reduced, although Zerubavel’s intention in separating them was, I assume, the opposite.

One way to reflect about this problem of narratives—the separation of the construction of memory from either its reception or contestation—is in terms of the relations between text and context. The stories of the construction of Vichy and Zionist memories function in the books much like a necessary context, which describes and analyzes the general conditions within which a particular reality evolves. The foundation story is complex and multifaceted, yet it provides a single context within which, and in relation to which, people make choices about reception and contestation. It constructs one social reality within which reception and contestation must make sense.<sup>34</sup> But what happens when we reject this separation of memory’s construction from its reception and contestation, when we break down the dichotomy of text and context? This is an invitation to reject the historian’s common approach to place and explain the text in relation to a context. The result is, I believe, that we can pursue better the agenda of Rousso and Zerubavel to explore “how members of society remember and interpret [the past] . . . , how the meaning of the past is constructed, and how it is modified over time.”<sup>35</sup> To reject the separation of narratives assumes that historical actors participate in various processes at the same time, that they simultaneously represent, receive, and contest

<sup>33</sup> Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots*, xix.

<sup>34</sup> Let me illuminate this argument with an example. In *The Vichy Syndrome*, the context created in Part 1 (memory from above) conditions the exploration in Part 2 (ignoring popular construction of memories). But why should we assume that people were limited to the memory delineated in Part 1? Instead of exploring how people constructed their own collective memories of Vichy, which at times concurred with and at times opposed the official memory of Vichy, Rousso investigates only how the memory constructed by politicians and intellectuals was received by the public. Thus the Vichy memory from above looks very much like a memory imposed on a public that has no agency.

<sup>35</sup> Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots*, 3.

memory. To accept that none of these processes has primacy and yet to understand the meaning of memory, we need to understand all of them as intertwined—memory as a whole that is bigger than the sum of its parts. This serves as a reminder to realize what is declared more often than practiced, namely the multiplicity of social experiences and representations, in part contradictory and ambiguous, in terms of which people construct the world and their actions.<sup>36</sup>

This argument, in a sense, takes us back to the classic writings of Halbwachs. The fundamental idea of *The Social Formation of Memory* is the “multiplicity of social times,” as Halbwachs analyzes the collective memory of, among others, the family, the religious community, and the social class.<sup>37</sup> He writes: “But these various modes by which memories become associated result from the various ways in which people can become associated. We can understand each memory as it occurs in individual thought only if we locate each within the thought of the corresponding group. We cannot properly understand their relative strength and the ways in which they combine within individual thought unless we connect the individual to the *various groups of which he is simultaneously a member.*”<sup>38</sup>

The multiplicity of memory is useful for two reasons: in terms of method, it enables us to write the history of memory as the commingling of reception, representation, and contestation; in terms of subject matter, it makes it possible to avoid artificial distinctions, even as heuristic devices, and to explore how people were, at one and the same time, say, local and national, Zionist and religious, good parents as well as devoted Catholics and Vichy fascists who sent Jewish children to the camps. Furthermore, the multiplicity of memory is also useful in thinking about the place of a given memory within the society as a whole. It is to this topic, then, that I now turn.

I WOULD LIKE TO USE THE IDIOM OF the whole and its parts to illuminate the relationships among memories within a given society. The history of memory should place the articulation of a particular perception of the past within the context of society as a shared symbolic universe. A given memory is subsumed within a culture that is constituted by common practices and representations. National memory, for example, is constituted by different, often opposing, memories that, in spite of their rivalries, construct common denominators that overcome on the symbolic level real

<sup>36</sup> My thoughts on the relation between text and context owe a debt in some measure to the work of microhistorians who attempted to provide an alternative to the customary use of context as the “background” of the text. See Giovanni Levi, *Inheriting Power: The Story of an Exorcist* (Chicago, 1988); and “I Pericoli del Geertzismo,” *Quaderni storici* (1985): 269–77. And see also Revel, “Microanalysis and the Construction of the Social,” 492–502, esp. 500–01.

<sup>37</sup> Jacques Le Goff discusses Halbwach’s “multiplicity of social time” and its influence on Fernand Braudel in *History and Memory*, Steven Rendall and Elizabeth Claman, trans. (New York, 1992), 135.

<sup>38</sup> Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 53, emphasis added. I attempt to break the text/context dichotomy in my analysis of local and national identities in Germany. Instead of understanding local identity as part of national identity, and localness against the background of nationhood, I view local identity as a constituent of national identity and localness as the symbolic representation of the nation. My basic argument is that Germans imagined nationhood as a form of localness. See Alon Confino, *The Nation as a Local Metaphor: Württemberg, Imperial Germany, and National Memory, 1871–1918* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1997). The present article is a product of my thoughts on memory following the completion of my empirical study.

social and political differences to create an imagined community. We should stress the interaction between a given memory and other memories in the society and take cognizance of society and culture as global entities, where distinct memories interact.

In contrast, a result of much recent research is that we explore memory in isolation. One approach is to look at the various memories within a society without providing a view of society and identity as a whole. Gildea adopts this approach when he traces French collective memories—socialism, Bonapartism, anarchism, regionalism—and concludes that “there is no single French collective memory but parallel and competing collective memories.”<sup>39</sup> This is true, but it is only a partial truth. It is obviously important to avoid essentialism and to reject arguments that impose cultural homogeneity on a heterogeneous society. Conflicts over memory exist. Differences are real. People are sometimes ready to die for their vision of the past, and nations sometimes break because of memory conflicts. But all this only begs the question: how, then, in spite of all these differences and difficulties, do nations hold together? What were the common denominators that bound French men and women across the dividing lines that separated them? Gildea’s study is sensitive to the differences in French political culture but fails to capture representations of nationhood that create a sense of oneness among broad and diverse groups in French society. The picture he presents is of a French collective memory splintered into rival political cultures. But this is a one-dimensional picture. Was there no cultural heritage and tradition (real or invented) that united these people together as “French”? Did they not feel a sense of shared destiny?

One danger in exploring the conflicts over national representations, while avoiding the common denominators, is that the historian may read into the symbolic representations what he or she has already learned by other means. Studies of conflict tend to reproduce on the symbolic level the social and political conflicts that are familiar from previous studies. But many a national memory succeeds to represent, for a broad section of the population, a common destiny that overcomes symbolically real social and political conflicts in order to give the illusion of a community to people who in fact have very different interests. People construct representations of the nation that conceal through symbols real friction in their society. These representations should also be studied.

Another approach is to consider the whole while ignoring its component parts. This is, in part, the case of Zerubavel’s *Recovered Roots*, where a “Zionist collective memory” becomes a historical agent in its own right. When Zerubavel turns to discuss the contestation of memory, she overwhelmingly focuses on recent decades, although the memories of Masada, Bar Kokhba, and Tel Hai were in the making since the first decades of the century. She argues that the *Yishuv* society before independence in 1948 was less contested than “Israeli culture today that includes a greater variety of interpretations of the past.”<sup>40</sup> As a whole, this argument is correct, but “Zionist collective memory” of the early decades seems to be based on a hegemonic notion of hegemony. It was, according to Zerubavel, hardly contested

<sup>39</sup> Gildea, *Past in French History*, 340.

<sup>40</sup> Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots*, 235.



by non-Zionist Jewish memories and only partially contested from within by different Zionist groups. This seems rather improbable.<sup>41</sup>

Assuming for a minute that Zionist memory in the past was indeed hegemonic and largely uncontested, then Zerubavel needs to reevaluate her argument about the centrality of contestation: for “Zionist collective memory” appears to have been uniquely successful in creating a consensus among different gender, political, social, and ethnic groups in the Jewish *Yishuv*. Yet in order to understand this process, we must explore how Zionists constructed a symbolic common denominator out of different ideological beliefs and how, in essence, “Zionist collective memory” meant different things to different people: to members of the Labor Party, to right-wing Revisionists, to religious Zionists, and to left-wing Marxists. In Zerubavel’s narrative, instead, “Zionist collective memory,” as understood by Zionists, assumes a rather hegemonic meaning until the 1960s.

A third approach conceives the relationships among memories as dichotomous. This is the picture that emerges from John Bodnar’s study of the creation of public memory in twentieth-century America as a product of a power struggle between “vernacular and official memory.”<sup>42</sup> Bodnar’s underlying assumptions are exemplified in his definition of these memories. On official memory, he writes:

Official culture relies on “dogmatic formalism” and the restatement of reality in ideal rather than complex or ambiguous terms . . . Cultural leaders [the makers of official memory], usually grounded in institutional and professional structures, envisioned a nation of dutiful and united citizens which undertook only orderly change. These officials saw the past as a device that could help them attain these goals and never tired of using commemoration to restate what they thought the social order and citizen behavior should be . . . By the latter part of the twentieth century public memory remains a product of elite manipulation, symbolic interaction, and contested discourse.<sup>43</sup>

Conversely, vernacular memory is described in the following language:

Defenders of [vernacular] cultures are numerous and intent on protecting values and restating views of reality derived from firsthand experience in small-scale communities rather than the “imagined” communities of a large nation . . . normally vernacular expressions convey what social reality feels like rather than what it should be like. Its very existence threatens the sacred and timeless nature of official expressions . . . [V]ernacular memory was derived from the lived or shared experiences of small groups. Unlike official culture which was grounded in the power of larger, long-lasting institutions.<sup>44</sup>

What a neat binary opposition between authentic vernacular culture and manipulative official one! Bodnar idealizes vernacular memory, which he describes in terms—shared experience, protecting values, small-scale communities—that convey in our culture authenticity and intimacy, while he describes official memory

<sup>41</sup> Of the three myths, only Tel Hai is presented as having a rich history of contestation reaching to the 1930s–1940s. The analysis of the contestation of the Bar Kokhba revolt focuses on the early 1980s, that of Masada on the 1960s and 1970s. Possibly, the paucity of contestation is linked more to the specific cases of Masada and Bar Kokhba than to a general attribute of Zionist’s construction of the past. Other myths may reveal a different picture.

<sup>42</sup> John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, N.J., 1992).

<sup>43</sup> Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 13–14, 245, 20.

<sup>44</sup> Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 14, 247.

in terms—large, impersonal, power hungry—that are associated with alienation, distrust, and ulterior motivation. Although Bodnar discusses ways in which vernacular and official memory could blend, this dichotomy governs his analysis, method, and conclusions. But, in the real world, things are not as neat. Not only is vernacular memory not as saintly and official memory not as brutal, but they constantly commingle.

Moreover, this inadequate dichotomy also governs Bodnar's analysis of the relations between local and national memories. According to Bodnar, "the central question for public memory will continue to be what it always has been: just how effective will vernacular interests be in containing the cultural offensive of authorities?"<sup>45</sup> This, in a sense, is the wrong question because the challenge is not so much to understand how vernacular and official memories opposed each other but how the nation-state came to be a vernacular memory: how did people internalize the nation and make it in a remarkably short time an everyday mental property—a memory as intimate and authentic as the local, ethnic, and family past?<sup>46</sup>

I HAVE PROPOSED IN THIS ESSAY A DOUBLE MOVE: that the history of memory be more rigorous theoretically in articulating the relationship between the social, the political, and the cultural and, at the same time, more anarchical and comprehensive in using the term memory as an explanatory device that links representation and social experience. I have attempted to argue, via the discussion of memory studies, that mine is really a critique of cultural history. A critique of two kinds. There exists in memory studies the danger of reducing culture to politics and ideology, instead of broadening the field from the political to the social and the experiential, to an everyday history of memory. And there exists the danger of reducing culture to some vague notion of memory, whereby memory is separated from other memories in society and from the culture around it. That a given memory exists, that it has a symbolic representation and a political significance is obvious, but in itself it explains little if we do not place this memory within a global network of social transmission and symbolic representations.

Several of my arguments, I am certain, are familiar to some. There is nothing new in pointing out the importance of a history of reception for our understanding of a cultural artifact. And this, indeed, emerges as a lesson we can draw from this essay: with regard to certain renditions of memory and cultural history, these arguments still need to be made. Certain kinds of cultural history seem to forget bodies of knowledge that one would think had already been internalized, thanks to classic social history.

<sup>45</sup> Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 253.

<sup>46</sup> In fact, Bodnar does use the metaphor of the whole and its parts to explain his views on the relationship of memories. Vernacular culture represents a variety of interests that "are grounded in parts of the whole," namely the nation-state. But for Bodnar, "the component parts of the nation-state [are] its families, classes, ethnic groups, and regions [which] attracts loyalty and devotion." The nation-state thus remains an aggregation of sanctified vernacular memories, while official memory remains extraneous to it, a metaphor of "unitary conceptual framework." Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 14, 16.

There are many ways of doing memory, and while my critique raises some problems in current approaches, it simultaneously emphasizes the open-endedness of the notion. The beauty of memory is that it is imprecise enough to be appropriated by unexpected hands, to connect apparently unrelated topics, to explain anew old problems. Among the many roads open for scholars, one, I believe, is especially fruitful in the current state of the field: to write the history of memory. We have to distinguish between memory as a heuristic device and memory as part of the mental equipment of a society, of an age. It is not always clear whether “memory” is used as an imposed methodological tool to analyze how a given society constructed a past (similar to using “class” to understand seventeenth-century Europe) or whether “memory” was indeed a contemporary metaphor to understand the past (like class in twentieth-century Europe). Thus the memory, say, of World War II in a given society cannot be separated from the development after 1945 of the term “memory” itself into a leading concept used by people to understand the past, private and public, personal and national. For if the study of memory focuses creatively on how people construct a past through a process of appropriation and contestation, is the real problem not, perhaps, that people construct the past by using the term “memory” at all?

To write a history of memory, we need to draw the mental horizon of an age. When and why did memory become a habit of mind shared by people to give meaning to the past? One can imagine that it is the kind of historical problem Warburg and Bloch would have been delighted to pose, and perhaps to begin to answer. And so, perhaps the first task of the history of memory is to historicize memory.

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