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## *Seven types of forgetting*

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### **Abstract**

Much of the debate on cultural memory has been shaped by the view, commonly held if not universal, that remembering and commemorating is usually a virtue and that forgetting is necessarily a failing. But this assumption is not self-evidently true. This article seeks, therefore, to disentangle the different types of acts that cluster together under the single term 'to forget'. I suggest that we can distinguish at least seven types: repressive erasure; prescriptive forgetting; forgetting that is constitutive in the formation of a new identity; structural amnesia; forgetting as annulment; forgetting as planned obsolescence; forgetting as humiliated silence.

### **Key words**

identity; obsolescence; shame

A politician parrying an interviewer might occasionally acknowledge that he or she failed to recall an alleged fact or circumstance, but never – surely – will he/she be heard to utter the words 'I forget'. The reason for this seems self-evident; we generally regard forgetting as a failure. I may say that I 'forget someone' or that I 'forget something' or that I 'forget to do something' or that I 'forget that something has taken place' or that 'I forget how to do something'. All these usages have one feature in common: they imply an obligation on my part to remember something and my failure to discharge that obligation. This implication has cast its shadow over the context of intellectual debate on memory in the shape of the view, commonly held if not universal, that remembering and commemoration is usually a virtue and that forgetting is necessarily a failing.

Yet forgetting is not always a failure, and it is not always, and not always in the same way, something about which we should feel culpable. Forgetting is not a unitary phenomenon. It might be helpful, then, to try to disentangle the different meanings that cluster together under this single term. I suggest that we can distinguish at least seven types.

## 1 REPRESSIVE ERASURE

Forgetting as *repressive erasure* appears in its most brutal form, of course, in the history of totalitarian regimes, where, as in Milan Kundera's often quoted words, 'the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting'. But it long predates totalitarianism. As the *condemnation of memory (damnatio memoriae)*, it was inscribed in Roman criminal and constitutional law as a punishment applied to rulers and other powerful persons who at their death or after a revolution were declared to be 'enemies of the state': images of them were destroyed, statues of them were razed to the ground, and their names were removed from inscriptions, with the explicit purpose of casting all memory of them into oblivion (Meier, 1996). The French Revolution sought to eliminate all remnants of the *ancien régime* in a similar way: monarchical titles and titles of nobility were abolished; the polite forms of address, 'Monsieur', 'Madame' and 'Mademoiselle' were eliminated; the polite distinction between the two forms of the second person, 'vous' (formal) and 'tu' (informal) was supposed to be forgotten; and the names of the historical provinces of France – Burgundy, Provence, and so on – were consigned to oblivion (Bertrand, 1975).

Repressive erasure can be employed to deny the fact of a historical rupture as well as to bring about a historical break. It was the strategy adopted in English parliamentary debates and pamphlet controversies in the 17th century, by Milton, Lilburne, Filmer, Harrington and Hobbes, when they alleged that a set of precedents, principles and maxims were to be found in an ancient constitution, which was asserted to be in some way immune from the king's prerogative action. The plausibility of such claims ran up against one massive obstacle. The Norman Conquest was the one great apparent break in the continuity of English history. The thought that William I might have brought about a systematic importation of new law was incompatible with this belief in an ancient constitution. To acknowledge that there had indeed been a conquest was to admit that the English constitution bore the indelible mark of sovereignty. For if William had truly been king by right of conquest, then the laws and liberties of England forever afterwards depended on that fact. And so, as J.G.A. Pocock has brilliantly shown in *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law* (1957), all the parliamentarians, lawyers and antiquarians joined together in a harmonious chorus, constantly asserting that the establishment of the Normans in England did not constitute a conquest, that William, despite his epithet, was not a conqueror, and that his victory at Hastings brought him no title to change the ancient constitution of England. This is how the English have come to think of themselves as having been a colonizing people but not as having been a colonized people.

Repressive erasure need not always take malign forms, then; it can be encrypted covertly and without apparent violence. Consider, as a further instance, the way in which the spatial disposition of the modern art gallery presents the visitor with nothing less than an iconographic programme and a master historical narrative; by walking through the museum the visitor will be prompted to internalize the values and beliefs written into the architectural script. Entering the Great Hall of the Metropolitan in New York, for example, the visitor stands at the intersection of the museum's principal axes. To the left is the collection of Greek and Roman art; to the right is the Egyptian collection; directly

ahead, at the summit of the grand staircase that continues the axis of the entrance-way, is the collection of European paintings beginning with the High Renaissance. An entire iconographic programme establishes the overriding importance of the western tradition and the implicit injunction to remember it. But the collection of oriental and other types of non-western art, as well as the medieval collection, are invisible from the Great Hall. They are included, yet they are also half edited out. In exhibiting a master narrative, the museum's spatial script is overt in its acts of celebratory remembrance, covert in its acts of editing out and erasure. Here too the struggle of humanity against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting (Duncan and Wallach, 1980).

Or yet again: what was the gesture of the Futurists towards past art and museum cities if not a fantasy of repressive erasure? In their manifesto the Futurists declared the wish to free Italy from its infinite number of museums, which covered the country like an infinite number of cemeteries. This 'museumophobia' was no isolated attack but part of an overall assault on all institutions that transmitted traditional knowledge and values, academies and libraries included. These the Futurists saw as not just preserving the past but as embodying a cult of the past. It was the fascination exerted over the imagination of artists at the opening of the 20th century by technological developments that explains their call for an elimination of the past. But only in part; we need to take into account another, more complex element. The Futurists wanted the bourgeoisie not only to propel forward a wholesale process of technological revolution, but also to identify themselves culturally with that process. But the bourgeoisie's position, as they saw it, was contradictory. On the one hand, they urged ever forward the transformation of the everyday life-world; on the other hand, they refused to commit themselves entirely to the destruction of pre-industrial cultures that this entailed. Because of this contradictory behaviour of the bourgeoisie, the Futurists saw a bifurcation opening up between everyday life and culture. Their sense of this bifurcation was at the core of the Futurists' museumophobia. To the aestheticization of the past, which found its core institution in the museum, they opposed the aestheticization of the everyday – aeroplanes, cars, telephones, railways, weapons of mass destruction (Grasskamp, 1981).

## 2 PRESCRIPTIVE FORGETTING

What might be called prescriptive forgetting is distinct from this. Like erasure, it is precipitated by an act of state, but it differs from erasure because it is believed to be in the interests of all parties to the previous dispute and because it can therefore be acknowledged publicly.

The Ancient Greeks provide us with a prototype of this kind of forgetting. They were acutely aware of the dangers intrinsic to remembering past wrongs because they well knew the endless chains of vendetta revenge to which this so often led. And since the memory of past misdeeds threatened to sow division in the whole community and could lead to civil war, they saw that not only those who were directly threatened by motives of revenge but all those who wanted to live peacefully together in the polis had a stake in not remembering. This thought was famously expressed in 403. In that year, the Athenian democrats, after having suffered defeat at the hands of the

dictatorship, re-entered the city of Athens and proclaimed a general reconciliation. Their decree contained an explicit interdiction: it was forbidden to remember all the crimes and wrongdoing perpetrated during the immediately preceding period of civil strife. This interdict was to apply to all Athenians, to democrats, to oligarchs and to all those who had remained in the city as non-combatants during the period of the dictatorship. Perhaps more remarkable still is the fact that the Athenians erected on the acropolis, in their most important temple, an altar dedicated to Lethe, that is, to forgetting. The installation of this altar meant that the injunction to forget, and the eradication of civil conflict that this was thought to engender, was seen as the very foundation of the life of the polis (Meier, 1996).

Whether at the resolution of civil conflict or after international conflict, the formulation of peace terms has frequently contained an explicit expression of the wish that past actions should not be just forgiven but forgotten. The Treaty of Westphalia, which brought the Thirty Years' War to an end in 1648, contained the injunction that both sides should forgive and forget forever all the violence, injuries and damage that each had inflicted upon the other. After Charles II ascended the English throne in 1660, he declared 'An act of full and general pardon, indemnity and oblivion'. And when Louis XVIII returned to occupy the French throne in 1814, he declared in his constitutional charter that he sought to extinguish from his memory all the evils under which France had suffered during his exile, that all research into utterances of opinion expressed before his restoration was to be forbidden, and that this rule of forgetting was enjoined upon both the law courts and the citizens of France (Frisch, 1979).

Sometimes at the point of transition from conflict to conflict resolution there may be no explicit requirement to forget, but the implicit requirement to do so is nonetheless unmistakable. For example, societies where democracy is regained after a recent undemocratic past, or where democracy is newly born, must establish institutions and make decisions that foster forgetting as much as remembering. Not long after the defeat of Nazism, it became evident that West Germany could not be returned to self-government and civil administration if the purge of Nazis continued to be pursued in a sustained way. So the identification and punishment of active Nazis was a forgotten issue in Germany by the early 1950s, just as the number of convicted persons was kept to a minimum in Austria and France. For what was necessary after 1945, above all, was to restore a minimum level of cohesion to civil society and to re-establish the legitimacy of the state in societies where authority, and the very bases of civil behaviour, had been obliterated by totalitarian government; the overwhelming desire was to forget the recent past (Judt, 1992).

### 3 FORGETTING THAT IS CONSTITUTIVE IN THE FORMATION OF A NEW IDENTITY

The practice of prescriptive forgetting suggests that we should entertain doubts about our deeply held conviction that forgetting involves a loss. This conviction is found in our European and American background, even if it may not be held more widely. But could not forgetting be a gain, as the case of prescriptive forgetting implies, as well as, or

perhaps more than, a loss? This certainly appears to apply to a third type of forgetting, which is constitutive in the formation of a new identity. The emphasis here is not so much on the loss entailed in being unable to retain certain things as rather on the gain that accrues to those who know how to discard memories that serve no practicable purpose in the management of one's current identity and ongoing purposes. Forgetting then becomes part of the process by which newly shared memories are constructed because a new set of memories are frequently accompanied by a set of tacitly shared silences. Many small acts of forgetting that these silences enable over time are not random but patterned: there is, for instance, the forgetting of details of grandparents' lives that are not transmitted to grandchildren whose knowledge about grandparents might in no way conduce to, but rather detract from, the effective implementation of their present intentions; or there is the forgetting of details about previous marriages or sexual partnerships which, if attended to too closely, could even impair a present marriage or partnership; or again there are the details of a life formerly lived within a particular religious or political affiliation that has been superseded by consciously embracing an alternative affiliation. Not to forget might in all these cases provoke too much cognitive dissonance: better to consign some things to a shadow world. So pieces of knowledge that are not passed on come to have a negative significance by allowing other images of identity to come to the fore. They are, so to speak, like pieces of an old jigsaw puzzle that if retained would prevent a new jigsaw puzzle from fitting together properly. What is allowed to be forgotten provides living space for present projects.

The cognatic societies of South East Asia exemplify this. Ethnographic studies of these societies, in Borneo, Bali, the Philippines, rural Java, frequently remark upon the absence of knowledge about ancestors. Knowledge about kinship stretches outwards into degrees of siblingship rather than backwards to predecessors; it is, as it were, horizontal rather than vertical. It is not so much a retention of relatedness as rather a creation of relatedness between those who were previously unrelated. The crucial precipitant of this type of kinship, and the characteristic form of remembering and forgetting attendant upon it, is the high degree of mobility between islands in the South East Asian area. With great demographic mobility it is no longer vital to remember ancestors in the islands left behind, whose identity has become irrelevant in the new island setting, but it becomes crucial instead to create kinship through the formation of new ties. Newcomers to islands are transformed into kin through hospitality, through marriage and through having children. The details of their past diversity, in the islands they have now left, cease to be part of their mental furniture. Forgetting them is unacknowledged, it is probably only gradual and implicit, and no particular attention is drawn to it; but it is necessary nonetheless. Forgetting is here part of an active process of creating a new and shared identity in a new setting (Carsten, 1996).

In much the same sense, no narrative of modernity as a historical project can afford to ignore its subtext of forgetting (Koselleck, 1985). That narrative has two inter-related components, one economic, the other psychological. There is, first, the objective transformation of the social fabric unleashed by the advent of the capitalist world market that tears down feudal and ancestral limitations on a global scale. And there is, second, the subjective transformation of individual life chances, the emancipation

of individuals increasingly released from fixed social status and role hierarchies. These are two gigantic processes of discarding. To the extent that these two interlinked processes are embraced, to that extent certain things must be forgotten because they must be discarded. This long-term forgetting as a process of cultural discarding in the interests of forming a new identity is signalled by two types of semantic evidence, one the emergence of a new type of vocabulary, the other the disappearance of a now obsolete vocabulary. On the one hand, certain substantives, which refer at once to historical movements in the present and to projects for the future, enter the currency: History, Revolution, Liberalism, Socialism, Modernity itself. On the other hand, certain words previously employed by writers in English cease to be used and are no longer easily recognizable: memorous (memorable), memorious (having a good memory), memorist (one who prompts the return of memories), mnemonize (to memorize), mnemonicon (a device to aid the memory) (Casey, 1987: 5–6). Could there be a more explicit indication than that signalled in these two semantic shifts of what is thought desirable and what is thought dispensable?

#### 4 STRUCTURAL AMNESIA

A further type of forgetting, structural amnesia was identified by John Barnes (1947) in his study of genealogies. By this he meant that a person tends to remember only those links in his or her pedigree that are socially important. Thus in the genealogies of the strongly patrilineal British peerage, as in those of the Nuer and Tallensi, the ascending male lines are far more memorable than the associated female lines; the names of ancestors who do not give their names to units within the lineage structure tend to be forgotten. Among the Lamba, on the other hand, the matrilineal line of descent is more important than the patrilineal; accordingly, the ascending female lines could be traced for three to five generations, whereas the ascending male lines could be traced back for only one or two generations. The same general principle of structural amnesia is exemplified by the history of cooking, in the sense that the availability of printing systematically affects what recipes are transmitted and what are forgotten (Goody, 1977). The number of recipes that can be held in written form is unlimited, whereas the number that can be held in the oral memory is limited. Both the standardization and the elaborateness of modern cuisine depends, therefore, on the production of cookbooks and the literacy of cooks. The attraction of regional cooking, on the other hand, is tied to what grandmother did, and the methods of country cuisine are acquired by observation rather than by reading. In these circumstances recipes are systematically forgotten.

#### 5 FORGETTING AS ANNULMENT

If structural amnesia results from a deficit of information, forgetting as annulment flows from a surfeit of information. Nietzsche gave famous expression to the cultural nausea of this surfeit in *The Use and Abuse of History* when he directed his polemic

against historical writing, more particularly against that kind that he called antiquarian historical scholarship, under the weight of whose remembrance the elementary ability to live and act, as he saw it, was crushed and withered. In the excess of this historical consciousness he saw nothing more than 'the repugnant spectacle of a blind lust for collecting, of a restless gathering up of everything that once was' so that 'man envelops himself in an odour of decay' (Nietzsche, 1957). Long before this Rabelais had felt the need for a purge of learning. In 'Gargantua and Pantagruel', he tells us that Gargantua's mind is so clogged up with scholastic foolishness that his teacher Ponocrates comes up with a solution for freeing him. His pupil is to be given hellebore, a new drug of forgetfulness, a quick-working medication; the drug produces a powerful desire to sneeze, as a result of which the patient is immediately relieved of all his useless knowledge and forgets the scholastic follies that had been clogging up his mental faculties (Rabelais, 1951).

A surfeit of this kind is experienced by exceptional individuals who belong to a learned cultural stratum; but forgetting as annulment becomes a qualitatively different phenomenon when its effects are felt over the reach of a whole culture, permeating its governmental machinery and structure of feeling. This development has been brought about in two phases. The first was the great archivalization that was an essential ingredient in the formation of the modern state. We routinely assume now that no state power can possibly exist without its administrative machinery of documents, letters and memoranda; Habsburg Spain was a spectacular pioneer of the modern state in this sense. The overwhelming mass of documentation generated by the Spanish administration in the 16th and 17th centuries, installed in the great state archive in Simancas, was the first and possibly the most voluminous of such storehouses in Europe (Haring, 1963). Later, the administrative core of the British Empire was built around knowledge-producing institutions such as the British Museum, the Royal Geographical Survey, the India Survey, the Royal Society and the Royal Asiatic Society, all of which institutions together formed what was thought of as an imperial archive, a fantasy of knowledge collected in the service of state and empire (Richards, 1993).

The idea of an imperial archive foreshadowed a later historical development, the spread at immense speed throughout the globe of new information technologies in the two decades between the mid-1970s and the mid-1990s. To be sure, large segments of the world's population – in the American inner cities, in French banlieues, in African shanty towns, in deprived rural areas of India – remain cut off from these innovations. But the dominant groups and territories across the globe had become interlinked by the end of the millennium in a new technological system that had begun to form only in the 1970s. Taken together, the great archivalization and the new information technologies, the one centralizing, the other diffusive, have brought about such a cultural surfeit of information that the concept of discarding may come to occupy as central a role in the 21st century as the concept of production did in the 19th century.

To say that something has been stored – in an archive, in a computer – is tantamount to saying that, though it is in principle always retrievable, we can afford to forget it. And this forgetting becomes all the more necessary when the burden imposed on memory, which for Rabelais was an inheritance of scholasticism and for Nietzsche a heritage of



historicism, becomes a problem for society in general. We now live in a society that has access to too much information and in the foreseeable future the problem can only get worse. Genuine skill in conducting one's life may come to reside less and less in knowing how to gather information and more and more in knowing how to discard information. In this situation, the Swiss writer Hugo Loetscher (1984) has suggested his own whimsical variant on Gargantua's sneeze: a huge, world-wide 'extinction-fest' that was to be held on 31 December 1999, in which the forgetting command 'delete' would extinguish all electronically stored data in one great 'act of liberation'.

This need to discard is felt most acutely, of course, in the natural sciences. As long ago as 1963 it was calculated that 75 percent of all citations in the area of physics were taken from writings that were less than 10 years old. Every scientist needs to learn how to forget in this way if his or her research activity is not to be crippled by chronic over-information at the very outset. Indeed, Kuhn's concept of the scientific paradigm is an idea about forgetting. Kuhn sees the development of science as one in which every shift in scientific evolution unburdens scientific memory, where every collapse of a paradigm is always an act of forgetting of great importance for the economy of scientific effort. The paradigm that has been surpassed is one that can be forgotten.

Even if the historical disciplines are not subject to such a drastic process of inbuilt obsolescence, they too have been marked by a paradigm shift and a corresponding cultural forgetting. Fifty years ago historians would often attempt large-scale narratives mapping the course of historical change over long periods, and history was taken to mean politics, the constitution, diplomacy and warfare. Now the lowering of micro-history involves the intensive study of small communities and single events on the model of Emmanuel Le Roy Ladourie's *Montaillou*, and historians seize upon every aspect of human experience, from childhood to old age, from dress to table manners, from smells to laughter, from shopping to barbed wire. The old narratives and the old core stories slowly become effaced. There may be a number of reasons for this, but one at least is a wish to circumvent the problems of overload that flow from the sheer excess of information.

## 6 FORGETTING AS PLANNED OBSOLESCENCE

Yet another type of forgetting flows from the planned obsolescence built into the capitalist system of consumption. Given the limits to the turnover time of material goods, capitalists have turned their attention from the production of goods to the production of services. Most goods, not by accident known as consumer durables – knives and forks, automobiles and washing machines – have a substantial lifetime. Services – going to a rock concert or movie – have a far shorter lifetime. With this shift to the provision of services, the turnover time of capital is accelerated. The evolution of a product from its first design and development to its eventual obsolescence – a time span referred to in marketing as the 'product life cycle' – becomes shorter. Long-term planning becomes less important, the facility to exploit market fashions more crucial. Time control focuses more on consumer desire than on work discipline. Under the

control of industrial working time, people were needed who aspired to the condition of well-oiled machines. Now they are needed to aspire to the condition of omnivorous children.

Consumer objects obey the pressures of increasing velocity. It has been said that the past is a foreign country but now the present is becoming one too. Alexander Kluge has spoken of the attack of the present on the rest of time, since the more the present of consumer capitalism prevails over past and future the less stability or identity it provides for contemporary subjects – which is one reason, of course, why there is such incessant talk of identity. Distinction in a culture of mass consumption is demonstrated by acquiring an item that has just come onto the market before others acquire the same item; small time differences in the act of consumption exhibit social distinctions just as they demonstrate new shades of physical prowess in sport. Insofar as individuals designate themselves as members of a group, what counts is the difference of the group as a whole from what it was a year or a month before. Children no longer need to work as auxiliary factory hands; the child's labour now is to produce the consumption of music while the music industry produces the demand for it. This is, as it were, a new form of music while we work. In this way, the child acquires a training in the meaning of obsolescence: a fascination with the new which, as Andreas Huyssen (1995: 26) has well said, includes the foreknowledge of its own obsolescence in its very moment of appearance. Since the ever increasing acceleration of innovation for the purpose of consumption produces ever larger quantities of soon to be obsolete objects, it necessarily follows that it must generate ever more acts of discarding. Vital to this production of obsolescence, forgetting is an essential ingredient in the operation of the market.

## 7 FORGETTING AS HUMILIATED SILENCE

There is a seventh type of forgetting in which, though an element of political expediency may play a significant role, this is not the primary or defining characteristic. This type of forgetting is certainly not solely, and may in large part be not at all, a matter of overt activity on the part of a state apparatus. It is manifest in a widespread pattern of behaviour in civil society, and it is covert, unmarked and unacknowledged. Its most salient feature is a humiliated silence. Perhaps it is paradoxical to speak of such a condition as evidence for a form of forgetting, because occasions of humiliation are so difficult to forget; it is often easier to forget physical pain than to forget humiliation. Yet few things are more eloquent than a massive silence. And in the collusive silence brought on by a particular kind of collective shame there is detectable both a desire to forget and sometimes the actual effect of forgetting.

Consider, for instance, the destruction of German cities by bombing in the Second World War. This left some 130 cities and towns in ruins; about 600,000 civilians killed; 3.5 million homes destroyed; and 7.5 million homeless at the end of the war. Members of the occupying powers report seeing millions of homeless and utterly lethargic people wandering about amidst the ruins. From the war years there survive a few accounts

in which German citizens wrote of their stunned bewilderment on seeing for the first time the appearance of their ravaged cities. Yet throughout the more than 50 years following the war, the horrors of the air bombardment and its long-term repercussions have not been brought to public attention either in historical investigations or in literary accounts. German historians have not produced an exploratory, still less an exhaustive, study of the subject. With the sole exception of Nossack, and some passages on the aerial bombardment in the writings of Heinrich Böll, no German writer was prepared to write or capable of writing about the progress and repercussions of the gigantic campaign of destruction. A colossal collective experience was followed by half a century of silence. How is this to be explained? Sebald (2003) retells a story that strongly hints at some of the emotions involved. A German teacher told him in the 1990s that as a boy in the immediate post-war years he often saw photographs of the corpses lying in the street after the Hamburg reformation brought out from under the counter of a second-hand bookshop, and that he observed them being examined, surreptitiously, in a way usually reserved for pornography. We are faced here with the silence of humiliation and shame. The conspicuous paucity of observation and comment on the subject of the bombing and its long-term effects amounts, in other words, to the tacit imposition of a taboo. Confronted with a taboo, people can fall silent out of terror or panic or because they can find no appropriate words. We cannot, of course, infer the fact of forgetting from the fact of silence. Nevertheless, some acts of silence may be an attempt to bury things beyond expression and the reach of memory; yet such silencings, while they are a type of repression, can at the same time be a form of survival, and the desire to forget may be an essential ingredient in that process of survival.

It might even be that this desire to forget was most effectively at work in the determination and hectic pace with which the reconstruction of German cities was undertaken after 1945. The ruins that the Germans saw all around them were not just a devastation of their habitat, a mountain of material ruins; at another level they were also ever present signs of all the destruction that the war had left behind in the consciousness of the German people. We should perhaps view the reconstruction of their cities as something over and beyond the achievement of an economic miracle. It meant the literal covering over, the physical effacement, of all these visible signs of emotional destruction. In this sense, the German people after 1945 can be seen to have been engaged not only in replacing one destroyed material fabric with a new one, but as engaged in the wholesale process of covering up their most recent past, the signs of their wounds; their economic miracle, in other words, was a form of forgetting, an effacement of grievous memory traces. The thud and hammer of building accompanied a humiliated silence.

But if any single thing in this historical context demonstrates the power of forgetting as shamed humiliation it is the post-history of the remarkable anonymous war diary, *A Woman in Berlin*. A diary covering the period from 20 April to 22 June 1945, it was written in a Berlin basement while the author sought shelter from air raids, artillery fire, looters and eventually rape. It covers the bombardment, the street fighting, Hitler's suicide on 30 April, the surrender of the last pockets of resistance on 2 May and the occupation of the city by the Russian conquerors. It was published in English translation

in 1954, and translated into Norwegian, Italian, Danish, Japanese, Spanish, French and Finnish; but it was a further five years before the German original found a publisher, and then only in Switzerland. The German readership reacted to the book with neglect, silence or hostility, for it broke the taboo of post-war amnesia. German women were supposed not to talk about the rapes, nor about sexual collaboration for the sake of survival in the post-war period, as if this dishonoured German men who were supposed to have somehow defended them. Only in the late 1980s did a younger generation of German women encourage their mothers and grandmothers to speak of their wartime experiences, and only half a century after it was written did the work become an international phenomenon.

Or consider the Great War and modern memory. The colossal loss of human life gave rise to an orgy of monumentalization; memorials to commemorate the fallen went up all over Europe. But were these sites of memory the places where mourning was taking place, as the title of Jay Winter's (1995) book on the subject implies? The International Labour Organization estimated in 1923 that about 10 million soldiers from the German, Austro-Hungarian, French and English armies walked the streets of their countries. These were some 10 million mutilated men: half or totally blinded, or with gross facial disfigurements, or with a hand or arm or leg missing, hobbling around the streets like ghosts. They were badly cared for. The war wounded went financially unrewarded for their pains in millions of households who rarely received the material assistance they needed from the political states on whose behalf they had fought. The war dead were annually remembered at memorial sites, and, until 1939, in a ritually observed two minutes of silence, people stopped wherever they were in the street, stood still, and reflected on the loss. But 10 million mutilated survivors still haunted the streets of Europe. They were dismembered – not remembered – men; many were subject to chronic depression, frequently succumbed to alcoholism, begged in the street in order to be able to eat, and a considerable number of them ended their days in suicide. All sorts of institutional provisions were put in place to keep those mutilated soldiers out of public sight. Every year, the war dead were ceremonially remembered and the words 'lest we forget' ritually intoned; but these words, uttered in a pitch of ecclesiastical solemnity, referred to those who were now safely dead. The words did not refer to the survivors. The sight of them was discomfiting, even shameful. They were like ghosts haunting the conscience of Europe. The living did not want to remember them; they wanted to forget them.

The different types of forgetting I have just passed in review have different agents as well as different functions and values. The agents of Types 1 and 2 (repressive erasure and prescriptive forgetting) are states, governments or ruling parties, and, in the case of the art museum, the gallery's curators as bearers of western culture or a national or regional institution of it. The agents of Types 3 and 4 (formation of new identity and structural amnesia) are more varied; they may be individuals, couples, families or kin groups. The agents of Type 5 (annulment, as a reaction to information overload) are both individuals and groups of various sizes (for example, families and large corporations) and societies and cultures as a whole. The agents of Type 6 (planned obsolescence) are

the members of an entire system of economic production. The agent of Type 7 (humiliated silence) is not necessarily but most commonly civil society.

This taxonomy makes no claim to comprehensiveness and is offered as an invitation to think of further types; and if I stop at seven, that is in part because of the magic sometimes thought to attach to that number.

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