

Chapter 2

History and Memory

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The notion of historical memory has become a totem of sort: a revered notion for public identity and professional investigation. For scholars, it now governs questions of interpretation, narration, and explanation, perhaps like no other term in the historical discipline. But no one could have quite predicted thirty or forty years ago that a volume about historical writing since 1945 would have to include a chapter on history and memory.

In itself, the scholarly interest in memory is not new. Cumulative intellectual influences at the end of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth made memory a central notion to understanding human behaviour. Among those who were interested in the topic we find psychoanalysts (such as Sigmund Freud), philosophers (such as Henri Bergson), and writers (such as Marcel Proust), who, unlike historians, regarded memory as a faculty of the individual mind; Aby Warburg, the exceptional art historian who used the notion of social memory (*soziales Gedächtnis*) to explain how ancient symbols migrated among different art works, periods, and countries; and sociologists, notably Emile Durkheim and Maurice Halbwachs.¹

The first to have used the concept systematically was Halbwachs, whose contribution in his seminal work *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* published in 1925 was to establish the connection between a social group and collective memory. Halbwachs, a student of Durkheim, argued in a Durkheimian fashion that even the most individual memory is determined by images and categories coming from society and related to a social formation. In a series of studies he argued that every memory is carried by a specific social group limited in space and time.²

¹ Henry Bergson, *Matière et mémoire* (Paris, 1896); trans. as *Matter and Memory* (1908); Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu* (Paris, 1913–27); and Aby Warburg, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Leipzig/Berlin, 1932).

² Maurice Halbwachs, *La topographie légendaire des Évangiles en Terre sainte: Étude de mémoire collective* (Paris, 1941). In English see id., *The Collective Memory* (New York, 1980); and id., *On Collective Memory*, trans. and ed. Lewis Coser (Chicago, 1992).

The affiliations between history and memory originated within a milieu of French scholars, notably Halbwachs and Marc Bloch, that initiated at the first half of the twentieth century the modern study of memory and of mentalities (*histoire des mentalités*). Lucien Febvre and Bloch, the fathers of the Annales School founded in the 1920s, called for a new kind of history that explored, beyond the usual political history of states and kings, the social and economic structures of a society as well as its ‘mental tools’ (*outillage mental*): namely, the system of beliefs and collective representations, myths, and images with which people in the past understood and gave meaning to their world. The history of collective memory—of how societies represent their past—was viewed as one important part of this endeavour. Bloch started to use the term ‘collective memory’ in the mid-1920s; and in 1925 he wrote a favourable review of Halbwachs’s *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*.³

But in the following decades the notion of memory did not play an important role in the historical discipline, even while the latter became more diverse by giving central place to social and economic history. Halbwachs’s ideas went unnoticed in the wider intellectual world. This dramatically changed in the late 1970s and during the 1980s. It was Pierre Nora, a member of a later generation of *Annalistes*, conscious of the school’s traditions and also of its new directions, who again linked history and memory. In 1978 he outlined ideas for a new kind of history in the volume *La nouvelle histoire*.⁴ Then came his magisterial project *Les lieux de mémoire*—seven volumes dedicated to the exploration of French national memory, published between 1984 and 1992, which became the starting point of present-day memory studies.⁵ His text ‘Between History and Memory’ became a manifesto of sorts for the emerging field of study.⁶

What originated within a specific milieu of French scholars in the 1920s became in the 1980s a larger phenomenon. Nora’s project reflected wider professional interest, and the range, number, and sophistication of memory studies became phenomenal. Jacques Le Goff’s *History and Memory* was published in Italian in 1986, in French in 1988, and in English in 1992. Le Goff was a great *Annaliste* of the Middle Ages, and it is again worth noting the link

³ Marc Bloch, ‘Mémoire collective, tradition et coutume: À propos d’un livre récent’, *Revue de synthèse*, 40 (1925), 73–83.

⁴ Pierre Nora, ‘Mémoire collective’, in Jacques Le Goff, Roger Chartier, and Jacques Revel (eds.), *La nouvelle histoire* (Paris, 1978), 398–401.

⁵ There has been an extensive discussion of the project. See Lucette Valensi, ‘Histoire nationale, histoire monumentale: *Les lieux de mémoire* (note critique)’, *Annales HSS* (November–December 1995), 1271–7; and Tai Hue-Tam Ho, ‘Remembered Realms: Pierre Nora and French National Memory’, *American Historical Review*, 106 (2001), 906–22.

⁶ Pierre Nora, ‘Entre Mémoire et Histoire’, in id. (ed.), *Les lieux de mémoire*, vol. 1: *La République* (Paris, 1984), pp. xvii–xlii; trans. as ‘Between Memory and History: *Les lieux de mémoire*, *Representations*, 26 (1989), 7–25. On the memory–history connection from Vico to Nora see Patrick H. Hutton, *History as an Art of Memory* (Hanover, 1993).

between the *Annales* and the topic of memory and history. In Heidelberg at the same time, Jan and Aleida Assmann, working with a group of scholars in the Institute of Egyptology, suggested the terms ‘cultural’ and ‘communicative’ memory, which gained currency first in the German-speaking world and then beyond.⁷

But memory took on a life of its own, with contemporary professional and cultural characteristics. In 1978 the historian Saul Friedländer published *Quand vient le souvenir*, his memoir about the Holocaust. It was one of the first, influential such memoirs, reflecting what would become fundamental relations between Holocaust and memory studies. In 1989 Friedländer founded in Tel Aviv University the journal *History and Memory*, which became the flagship of the emerging field. Memory studies covered in the following years any imaginable historical topic, from the tragic to the mundane, from genocide and war to Mickey Mouse and landscape.⁸ In 1997 it was reasonable to argue that ‘the notion of “memory” has taken its place now as a leading term, recently perhaps *the* leading term, in cultural history’ and history overall.⁹ In recent years, memory studies have become institutionalized as a new field. Engagement on issues of method and approach takes place in a new journal *Memory Studies* published from 2008, and an H-Memory online discussion group founded in 2007. Both provide transdisciplinary venues for new research and critical thinking. New publications, such as a reader and a handbook, have begun to take stock of the field as a whole and to chart its history, problems, and future.¹⁰

What are some of the reasons for the transformation of the notion of memory into a leading historical concept? The answer lies in a combination of trends within the historical discipline as well as in the surrounding culture. Developments within the historical profession come into sharp focus when we consider the recent history of the notion of memory. When Nora conceived his memory project in the late 1970s and early 1980s it reflected a wider disciplinary transformation. Broadly speaking, we can talk of an interpretative shift from ‘society’ to ‘culture’ and ‘memory’: this began in the early 1980s, at first gradually rather than briskly. By the 1990s, however, the notion of ‘society’—as it had been practised by social historians in the twentieth century and particularly after 1945—was swept away by the interpretative onslaught of memory and cultural

⁷ Jan Assmann and Tonio Hölscher (eds.), *Kultur und Gedächtnis* (Frankfurt, 1988); and Assmann, ‘Kollektives Gedächtnis und Kulturelle Identität’, *ibid.*, 9–19; trans as ‘Collective Memory and Cultural Identity’, *New German Critique*, 65 (1995), 125–33.

⁸ Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven, Conn., 1991); Michael Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* (Philadelphia, 1996); and Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York, 1995).

⁹ Alon Confino, ‘Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method’, *American Historical Review*, 105 (1997), 1386–403 at p. 1386.

¹⁰ Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (eds.), *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (Berlin/New York, 2008); and Jeffrey Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Daniel Levy (eds.), *The Collective Memory Reader* (2011, forthcoming).

studies. The notion of society, broadly speaking again, was based on a linear concept of history developing forward along one temporal timeline, and privileging social and economic topics interpreted in terms of their function and structure. The notion of 'culture', in contrast, is based on a multi-temporal concept of history where past and present commingle and coalesce, capturing simultaneously different and opposing narratives, and privileging topics of representation and memory interpreted in terms of experience, negotiation, agency, and shifting relationships.¹¹ This shift put at its centre the historicity of history-writing. It became crucial to the project of historical understanding to emphasize the historian's act of construction and interpretation of the past. And under these circumstances it became necessary to explore how people (including historians) construct their collective representations of the past.

The emergence of the notion of memory in the 1980s has been linked to the influence of related historical approaches and subject matters. Cultural history became a dominant approach among historians, while a diffuse body of work called 'cultural studies', which often focused on issues of identity (including, among others, postcolonialism and gender studies), also gained influence.¹² Especially important were new approaches to the study of nationhood that regarded the nation as a cultural artefact, as a product of invention, social engineering, and construction of the past. Benedict Anderson's influential *Imagined Communities* was published in 1982, and for a long while the link between memory and nationhood defined the field.

But broader cultural trends, related to, yet not dependent on, professional interest in memory, were also at play. First among these was the growing importance of the Holocaust from the 1980s as a signifying event, perhaps *the* signifying event, of modern European history. Public and scholarly debates flared up regularly about the history and memory of the Third Reich and the extermination of the Jews (for example, the Bitburg controversy in 1985 over the visit of President Ronald Reagan to a cemetery that included graves of SS soldiers; the Kurt Waldheim controversy in the mid-1980s about the role of the former Secretary General of the United Nations as a Wehrmacht soldier; and the *Historikerstreit* or Historians' Debate about the uniqueness of the Third Reich and the Holocaust).¹³ The study of the representation of the Holocaust propelled and inspired the scholarship on memory as a whole in terms of approaches,

¹¹ The two historiographical moments, the social and the cultural, were blended, not clearly separated. Accentuating their differences serves only to identify changes and articulate the transformation. Thus, for example, much of this transformation had already been evident in the work of François Furet from the 1970s, who left behind the rigid rendition of social history in favour of history of discourse and power.

¹² Lynn Hunt (ed.), *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley, 1989); and Simon During (ed.), *The Cultural Studies Reader* (New York, 1993).

¹³ Geoffrey Hartman (ed.), *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective* (Bloomington, 1986); and Peter Baldwin (ed.), *Reworking the Past: Hitler, the Holocaust, and the Historians' Debate* (Boston, 1990).

topics, and public attention. Influenced by extensive Holocaust scholarship, notions such as the witness, victim, and survivor became important to the way scholars understand modern history overall.

There is another, more profound link between the rise of memory studies and of Holocaust remembrance. The exploration of memory, I would argue, has been a response of the historical discipline to the rupture of the Holocaust. The scholarly fascination with, and concern about, representation of the past (what we call, in short, ‘memory’) has been determined by the growing awareness of the crisis of representation caused by the extermination of the Jews. The linguistic turn and post-structuralism were in large part intellectual and philosophical responses to the Holocaust, seeking to explain a historical rupture and presenting themselves as also a rupture of sorts in Western philosophy and tradition. In the historical discipline, one response to the Holocaust was the exploration of how societies represent their pasts. And this exploration accentuated problems of historical representations overall.¹⁴

It is important to underline that by focusing on memory, historians reflected, more than they shaped, contemporary engagement with the past that is evident in all levels of society, in popular culture, government initiatives, heritage and tourist industry, family and genealogical history, reparation claims, and repentance declarations. Doing memory work is not simply a scholarly fashion, but a sign of our times, because representations of the past habitually lead to public discussions and debates. One can think, for example, of the controversies about the five-hundredth anniversary of Columbus’s expedition, about the Smithsonian’s exhibition commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the dropping of the atomic bombs, or of the recent challenge posed by Israeli-Palestinians who commemorate the Nakba (the dispossession of Palestinians during the 1948 war) on Israel’s Independence Day.

Much of this interest in memory has been linked to repentance. The great convulsion that was the Second World War is often at the centre of such memories, although it is not the only historical focus. Apologies for the persecution of the Jews were heard from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (1994), the Vatican’s ‘We Remember’ (1994), and the French bishops’ ‘Declaration of Repentance’ (1997). ‘Truth commissions’ were established to investigate past regimes and crimes in democratizing Latin America, Eastern Europe, and South Africa. And the notion of memory has been also a nexus of morality, legal proceedings, and international relations in the creation of the United Nations’ International Criminal Tribunal that made genocide a punishable offence for rulers and their helpers, and which constituted the International Criminal Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) established in May 1993, and for Rwanda (ICTR) established in November 1994. The point is that historians are

¹⁴ Saul Friedländer (ed.), *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the ‘Final Solution’* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992).

not alone in assigning meaning to memory. Everybody does: national truth commissions, governments, the Pope, financial and industrial companies and the list can go on.

There are other, different reasons why at the start of the twenty-first century memory has become a fundamental creed of group and individual identity. We are interested in memory because, as a result of the capitalist economy, history moves forward at such a speed that the past of even twenty years ago seems distant and alien—because the commercialization and commodification of every aspect of our lives produce, with the help of the mass media, an ever-growing number of memories, ‘old’, new, and instant. None of these elements in itself, however, is sufficient to explain the current interest in memory. The year 1990 is probably not any more distant and alien from us than 1935 was in 1955, or than 1905 was in 1925. It is the combination of elements—the experience of the Second World War and the acknowledgment of the Holocaust, the development of human rights, the commercialization of the past, and the transformation of historical methods and theories, among others—that brought about the shift toward memory. Historians have been at one and the same time spectators, chroniclers, and creators of this shift.

The recent upsurge in the study of memory is reflected in scholars’ search for its definition. One scholar proposed the term ‘historical remembrance’ over memory because it emphasizes agency, while another suggested the term ‘mnemonic practices and products’ because it emphasizes a dynamic process.¹⁵ These and other definitions are not wrong, but they are only partially helpful. They single out one element that should at any event *always* be part of historical investigation. Using notions of agency, process, contingency, shifting relations, or negotiations is simply a good way to explore every history, including that of memory. Ultimately, it is not the precise working of the definition that matters, but how the historian uses it to illuminate the past. One of the benefits of memory studies has been its resolute transdisciplinarity, combining history, anthropology, sociology, and other fields. For the historian, a simplicity that allows for diversity seems the best strategy. The study of memory explores how a social group, be it a family, a class, or a nation, constructs a past through a process of invention and appropriation, and what it means to the relationship of power within society. Differently expressed, the historian of memory considers who wants whom to remember what and why, and how memory is produced, received, and rejected.

Of course, social groups cannot remember, for this is only a faculty of the individual. And certainly, people cannot remember events in which they did not

¹⁵ Jeffrey Olick, ‘From Collective Memory to the Sociology of Mnemonic Practices and Products’, in Erl and Nünning (eds.), *Cultural Memory Studies*, 151; Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, Conn., 2006), 3.

take part. Yet you do not need to have stormed the Bastille in order to celebrate 14 July as a symbol of national identity. One's memory, like one's most intimate dreams, originates from the symbols, landscape, and past that are shared by a given society. Since the making and the reception of memories, personal and collective, are embedded in a specific cultural, social, and political context, we can explore how people construct a past in which they did not take part individually, but which they share with other members of their group as a formative sense of cultural knowledge, tradition, and singularity.

Scholars explore vehicles of memory that represent the past such as commemorations, textbooks, holidays, literature, museums, or architecture. *Les lieux de mémoire* explored 'sites of memory' as diverse as state funerals and the Tour de France. The role of different media in making and transmitting memories has been emphasized: in memorials, literature, photography, film, journalism, and the Internet. In this sense, the Assmanns' concept of *kulturelles und kommunikatives Gedächtnis*—cultural and communicative memory—differentiated as it was from Halbwachs's 'collective' memory, enlarged and refined the concept of memory. It viewed communicative memory as interactions of individuals and groups on the everyday level, while it saw cultural memory as knowledge that shapes behaviour and experience through generations in repeated practice that is distanced from the everyday.¹⁶ It made the notion of memory more flexible and thus more suitable for interpreting the diversity of human affairs.

The relation between history and memory has been fundamental to the field. This relation has been discussed by Halbwachs and Nora as forms of historically situated social practice. Their basic argument has been that memory belonged to a premodern society where tradition was strong and memory was a social practice, whereas the discipline of history, emerging in the nineteenth century, belonged to modern society, where tradition declined and relations to the past were cut off. Halbwachs sharply distinguished between history as a scientific rendition of the past and memory as a malleable one. For Nora, history and memory were united before the development of scientific history in the nineteenth century, and have since been split. Consequently, he distinguished between a premodern memory as a social practice, a milieu of memory, and a modern memory as voluntary and deliberate.

This is a neat distinction—too neat. It derives from Halbwachs's nineteenth-century belief in history as a science, and from Nora's nostalgic view of the past. Scholars now view history and memory differently: they are not sharply divided but related; they converge and commingle, although they are not identical.¹⁷

¹⁶ Harald Welzer, *Das kommunikative Gedächtnis: Eine Theorie der Erinnerung* (Munich, 2002).

¹⁷ Amos Funkenstein, 'Collective Memory and Historical Consciousness', *History and Memory*, 1 (1989), 5–26; and Peter Burke, 'History as Social Memory', in Thomas Butler (ed.), *Memory: History, Culture and the Mind* (New York, 1989), 97–113.

Collective memory both differs from, and converges with, history. Memory is a malleable understanding of the past that is different from history because its construction is not bounded by a set of limiting disciplinary rules. Invented pasts are characterized by features that historians attempt to avoid in their studies: anachronism, topocentricity, presentism. Of course, history is also a malleable understanding of the past, but it is governed, with varying degrees of success and problems, by rules of evidence and verification. Historians create narratives about the past with the *intention* of telling truthful stories. The truth of their stories is never stable, for it is socially and culturally constructed, and their stories can never tell the whole truth about the past. But the foundation of all serious historical work is the intent for truth and fairness in the representation of the past. Makers of historical memory are free from this obligation. Yet memory and history also converge, because historians conceive of their stories within the general image of the past shared by society, within a collective historical mentality, and because historians have been the great priests of the nation-state, as well as other groups and identities, thus shaping their memory via history. The historian's task is to reveal the connections between memory and history without obscuring their differences.

The quick and unexpected surge of the notion of memory to interpretative centrality raised doubts about its explanatory value. Some have argued that memory studies are a fad, and that the concern with memory in recent years reflects a facile mode of history that panders to public trends. But the question is not whether memory is fashionable: something can be fashionable, and still be useful. It is, rather, has memory contributed to our historical knowledge? And here the answer is no doubt 'yes'. Memory studies brought to the fore topics and uncovered knowledge that were simply unknown a generation ago.

Several examples will make this clear. For a long time, the study of how Germans and Europeans remembered the Holocaust was informed by a laudable moral urgency that asked, nonetheless, the wrong historical questions. According to this common interpretation, National Socialism was treated after the war with collective silence and widespread amnesia. This view had important consequences for the way historians interpreted the post-war period. We know today that it was an historian's invention, as memory studies demolished this venerated interpretation by changing the central research question from *whether* Germans have come to terms with the past to *what* Germans remembered of the Nazi past, how, and by whom. The result was a re-evaluation of post-war German society where, it turned out, a lively debate on National Socialism in the local and private sphere, as well as in public and political life, took place. Studies of memory unearthed traces of the past in films, novels, political debates, academic circles, and even in practices such as travelling and tourism. It is difficult to

underestimate the significance of these findings to the way we now understand post-war German and European societies.¹⁸

Research on memory provided new insights about the experience of people in the past. A generation ago historians did not regard the notion of victimhood as fundamental to understanding the history of the twentieth century. We now know that national memory of self-victimhood is a common feature around the globe. It was common after the First and Second World Wars, for example, and crucial to the cultural recovery of many a nation, whether victorious or defeated. That the Germans, too, viewed themselves as victims after 1945 recast the post-war memory in a complex light.¹⁹

Several main areas of research have dominated the field. Research on the construction of national memory (and of distinct groups within, and in relation to, the nation) was central, as has been the exploration of the memory of wars (the First World War received quite a lot of attention). Research on the memory of the Second World War, the Third Reich, and the Holocaust is a huge topic unto itself. Distinct national historiographies focus on the memory of seminal events, such as the Civil War for American history, and the 1947–8 partition in India and Pakistan.²⁰ Overall, the best historians of memory are like the ogre who looks for human voices and emotions. They capture the haunted images of the past that hover in a given society, the obsession with certain events, periods, or beliefs, and they attempt to understand how and why they made sense to people in the past.

But the importance of memory studies to the historical profession in the last generation cannot begin and end with new topics and knowledge. These are fundamental, but cannot quite account for the resonance of the notion of memory among historians. For the notion of memory, I would argue, *changed the way historians understand the presence of the past in the life of people in the past* by making it into an essential empirical, analytical, and theoretical tool with which to understand social, political, cultural, even economic phenomena that regularly had been seen as determined by a very different set of factors. This argument demands explanation, and may even seem baffling or outright objectionable, for historians obviously always considered perceptions of the past as important for understanding the past. This is true, but it is only half the truth.

¹⁸ Robert Moeller, *War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Berkeley, 2001).

¹⁹ Pieter Lagrou, *The Legacy of Nazi Occupation: Patriotic Memory and National Recovery in Western Europe, 1945–1965* (Cambridge, 2000); and William Niven (ed.), *Germans as Victims: Remembering the Past in Contemporary Germany* (New York, 2006).

²⁰ David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001); and Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India* (Cambridge, 2001).

We begin by observing that, in itself, there is nothing new in the interest of historians in historical representations of the past. Historians of historical thinking regularly explored how previous intellectuals, theologians, philosophers, writers, and historians understood the past: for example, R. G. Collingwood in his classic collection of essays *The Idea of History* (1946). And historians whose main field of research was not the history of history but of politics, society, economy, and ideas also investigated, decades ago, topics of historical representation. This was often called myth. We can think, for example, of the important work in Southern history by Paul Gaston, *The New South Creed: A Study in Southern Mythmaking* (1970) that explored the writing of several thinkers, during the three decades following 1865, who called for an economic development while adopting the invented cult of the Lost Cause about the moral ethos of the Old South.

The significant differences between these kind of studies forty years ago and present-day studies of memory reflect the changing character of the historical profession. Older studies of historical representation usually focused on the writings of a selected group of (mostly male) thinkers and intellectuals. Present-day studies of memory—influenced by anthropology, sociology, cultural history, cultural studies, history of everyday life, and others—explore representations of the past among all members and organizations of society, from official memory of the state to popular memory.²¹ *There is a difference in the explanatory importance assigned to the representation of the past.* Older studies tended to see it as a development in intellectual history. Its meaning often derived from, and was a reflection of, bigger, more substantial social, political, and economic processes. In line with the dominant social history paradigm of the period, perceptions of the past (that is, culture) were viewed as a ‘natural’ corollary of social and political development and interests. Present-day memory studies, in contrast, view representations of the past (that is, culture), in theory if not always in practice, as shapers of political and social developments. And perceptions of the past are not confined to strictly intellectual milieus, but exist and act everywhere in society.

As a result, in their most innovative rendition, memory studies wish to explore whether, and in what way, the presence of memory is not so much a manifestation of the society around it, but a shaper of politics, society, and culture, and of beliefs and values, as well as of everyday life, institutional settings, and the processes of decision-making. They ask how influential the category of memory was in making social, political, economic, and everyday-life decisions. New directions in memory studies investigate a whole range of topics such as families, consumption, economics, death, nostalgia, and the state as a site of memory.²² They show the influence of memory on topics that forty years ago were considered

²¹ Alice Fahs and Joan Waugh (eds.), *The Memory of the Civil War in American Culture* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2004).

²² Alon Confino and Peter Fritzsche (eds.), *The Work of Memory: New Directions in the Study of German Society and Culture* (Urbana, Ill., 2002).

wholly unrelated: for example, the influence of memory on claims for military pensions after 1918, and on public policy concerning war widows after 1945.

In a sense, an historian who best reflects this transition is the maverick Marxist Eric Hobsbawm. A leading figure of the social history of the 1960s, Hobsbawm accurately perceived that a more analytical approach to the study of the past was needed. In 1972 he published an essay in *Past and Present* that provided the basis for his influential *The Invention of Tradition* published in 1983 with Terence Ranger.²³ The splendid title alone set a whole new agenda in perfect agreement with memory studies (even if Hobsbawm set the relations between tradition, on the one hand, and politics and society, on the other, somewhat mechanistically): how modern societies invent new pasts, which are believed to be immemorial, and the roles of these pasts. The cumulative impact in the 1980s of *The Invention of Tradition*, *Imagined Communities*, *Les lieux de mémoire*, *kulturelles Gedächtnis*, and the Holocaust's new awareness was to place the presence of the past as the defining topic of the historical profession. The 'memory turn' was fully under way.

What emerges from this discussion is the importance of the topic of the presence of the past in present-day historical analysis. Until the 'memory turn' the presence of the past was not considered in the historical discipline to be a topic *essential* for understanding problems in social, political, and economic history. This, to my mind, is the significance of memory to historical thinking and method. By thinking with memory, phenomena previously considered to be sufficiently described and understood, received completely new meanings. Research on memory accorded with the principle of all research that claims to be innovative: it revealed factors previously unobserved. It is probable that, because of trends in contemporary culture, historians assign to memory an inflated role in explaining the past; still, the enduring contribution of memory studies has been to document in wholly new ways the fundamental importance of the presence of the past in human society.

And yet, the benefit of richness cannot hide a sense that the term 'memory' is depreciated by surplus use, while memory studies lack a clear focus and, perhaps, have become predictable. A number of important texts explore memory and historical method, but there has been little in the way of a systematic evaluation of the field's problems, approaches, and objects of study.²⁴ Studies often follow a

²³ Eric Hobsbawm, 'The Social Function of the Past: Some Questions', *Past and Present*, 55 (1972), 3–17.

²⁴ Allan Megill, 'History, Memory, Identity', *History of the Human Sciences*, 11:3 (1998), 37–62; Kerwin Klein, 'On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse', *Representations*, 69 (2000), 127–50; Gabrielle Spiegel, 'Memory and History: Liturgical Time and Historical Time', *History and Theory*, 41 (2002), 149–62; Wulf Kansteiner, 'Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies', *History and Theory*, 41 (2002), 179–97; Alon Confino, *Germany as a Culture of Remembrance: Promises and Limits of Writing History* (Chapel Hill, 2006); and Jeffrey Olick, *The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility* (New York, 2007).

familiar and routine formula, as yet another event, its memory, and appropriation is investigated. The details of the plot are different in each case, but the formula is the same. Memories are described, following the interpretative *Zeitgeist* of the humanities, as ‘contested’, ‘multiple’, and ‘negotiated’. There are frequent calls for an integrated history of remembrance, for considering its multimedial character, or for analyzing the ‘dynamic interplay’ between cultural and social processes. All these are valid, of course, but they also sound trite now. For 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.

Some problems of method thus seem central to memory studies. These are problems that define the field; they cannot be expected to be answered definitively, but should be discussed, refined, and articulated anew. Three such problems can be identified here: the problem of sifting meaning from a memory source, of treating memory as a foundation of historical reality, and of the various levels of memory.

How can meaning be shifted from a memory case: say a film, a novel, or a museum? 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 stir emotions, motivate people to act, be received; in short, it must become a sociocultural mode of action. Why is it that some pasts triumph while others fail? Why do people prefer one image of the past over another? To ascertain meaning, a systematic study of reception is required, as well as of different representations that opposed, contradicted, or rejected the given memory.

If for the historian it is always important to ask how to sift meaning from a given source, it seems especially pertinent in memory studies because everything is a memory case. Memory is everywhere: we construct a sense of the past from the most trivial, everyday-life object (a souvenir of the Sphinx) to the most holy one (the Dome of the Rock). Here lies an interpretative danger: the temptation to construct memory by linking everything to everything else, by interpreting a memory case as circulated in a seamless web of representations, where the agency of historical actors disappear, memory takes a life of its own, and it is not possible any more to write the history of who wants whom to remember what, and why, and whether it was at all received or rejected. When all is connected and memory is everywhere, the result is that no real history of memory can be written. In this historical reconstruction it is not clear what memory is not. In memory studies there is the danger of treating memory as a real foundation of historical reality, similar to the danger of treating culture in the same way in cultural studies.

Differently put, the social embeddedness of memory is lost in many memory studies that focus on representation. When social relations are reduced to ‘identities’ and ‘memories’, then the understanding of society risks being reduced to the presumed intentions of ideas and representations. Instead, a meticulous

analysis of the production and social foundation of memory allows an explanation of the commonalities and differences in the memory of different groups. A model of the genre is Pieter Lagrou's *The Legacy of Nazi Occupation* (2000) that explores three social groups (resistance veterans, displaced populations, and forced labourers) in post-war Belgium, France, and the Netherlands, and how they shared a memory less as members of different nations and more by common war experience.

A way of avoiding the trap of primordial reality is to be conscious of the different levels of memory experienced by individuals and groups. A given memory is better viewed as made of the collective negotiation and exchange between the many memories that exist in society. An individual and a social group is a vessel of many memories, often opposing and frequently contradictory. If we isolate one memory and attempt to understand it unto itself, we explain little. We need to take into account the game of memories at various levels; the juggling of memories by individuals and groups.

Take the case of the commingling of local and national memories. For a long time localness and nationhood were viewed in the historiography as opposing identities, and the question was posed: how did the local become national? A new approach has asked instead how localness and nationhood influenced and shaped each other, as in the case of the *Heimat* (homeland) idea in Germany after the unification in 1871.²⁵ Rather than taking nationhood as the hard and set context within which memory and localness operate, this approach knocked off balance the boundaries among these categories and elucidated their hybrid relations. The aim was to call attention to the way localness and memory have been emplotted in stories of nationalism, and to the danger of reducing the local to the national, and a culture of remembrance to the hegemony of the nation. Common understanding of the relations between the local and the national has viewed the local as, not so much a shaper of nationalism, but a repository of national belonging created elsewhere. But the *Heimat* idea made local identity a constituent of national identity, and localness the symbolic representation of the nation. It became an interchangeable representation of the locality, region, and nation. This game of memories fits much better the messy ways people think of themselves in the world.

An overview of the notion of memory in post-war historical writing cannot limit itself to problems of method, for memory confers in our culture legitimacy, roots, authenticity, and a sense of identity like perhaps no other concept. Historians could not avoid this cultural baggage. How could they? It was only expected that they would also find memory an apt metaphor to describe the ills or redeeming qualities of their discipline. Nora viewed memory as 'life . . . in permanent evolution . . . affective and magical'. There existed once a

²⁵ Alon Confino, *The Nation as a Local Metaphor: Württemberg, Imperial Germany, and National Memory, 1871–1918* (Chapel Hill, 1997).

‘real memory—social and unviolated, exemplified in but also retained as the secret of so-called primitive or archaic societies’. But his distinction between premodern real memory and modern voluntary memory is wrong, for all memory is voluntary, and all is carried by a social practice. But his essay ‘Between History and Memory’ should be read as a poetic elegy by a historian who embraces the past nostalgically.²⁶ Others look at memory as a notion that can either reaffirm or regenerate the discipline in new directions. Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob (the first two former presidents of the American Historical Association) approach memory as a form of knowledge that can rescue history from the postmodernist critics of historical objectivity, while others find in memory a diametrically opposed meaning: namely, as a vehicle for understanding the discipline of history as a personal pursuit, like autobiography.²⁷

The notion of memory has been used as a medium to raise concerns about history, politics, and morality. Nora saw the memory explosion as a reflection of the unravelling of the nation-state. This did not happen. It is more accurate to say that what he had witnessed was the transformation of his particular idea of France into a different nation-state characterized by the ending of the Revolutionary legacy, postcolonialism, Muslim emigration, and the decline of France in the world. Charles Maier astutely asked ‘whether an addiction to [historical] memory can become disabling’ and whether the preoccupation with memory was not a sign of a regrettable escape from transformative politics. Kerwin Klein observed correctly that exploring memory had become a ‘therapeutic alternative to historical discourse’.²⁸ These concerns are important, and they should be emphasized and discussed in a culture that tends to venerate memory, at times thoughtlessly. But they are not inherent in the historical study of, or public engagement with, memory. Thus, for example, some preoccupations with memory lead to political activism and heightened social awareness, such as the Memorial group in Russia (and other former republics of the Soviet Union) dedicated to the history of political persecution and human rights. Ultimately, it all depends on what historians and non-historians do with memory, what their intentions are (political, methodological, and others), and how they use memory to understand their world and the past. The larger point that emerges from this discussion is the capacity of memory to serve as a metaphor to articulate fundamental moral, political, and historical concerns.

Why is it that memory has become such a powerful metaphor among historians to think about their discipline? Because, I believe, it calls for interpretation.

²⁶ Nora, ‘Between History and Memory: *Les lieux de mémoire*’, 8–9.

²⁷ Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York, 1994), 258; and Susan Crane, ‘(Not) Writing History: Rethinking the Intersections of Personal History and Collective Memory with Hans von Aufsäss’, *History and Memory*, 8 (1996), 5–29.

²⁸ Charles Maier, ‘A Surfeit of Memory? Reflections on History, Melancholy and Denial’, *History and Memory*, 5 (1993), 136–51, at p. 141; and Klein, ‘On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse’, 145.

Of course, every historical topic is interpretable. But economic trends in the nineteenth-century British coal industry do not call for interpretation in the same way that Holocaust memory does, or the memory of the American Civil War, or of the Palestinian Nakba. Sources and analysis of memory lay bare the process of construction of the past and therefore the practice of the historian. That is one important reason that the notion of memory expanded the investigation of the past. And here lies the risk of memory as method of inquiry, and also its promise. It calls for interpretation, which can be facile and superficial. To find a meaningful trend in the serial data of coal production in nineteenth-century Britain is much more time-consuming, and involves an extended period of research, collection, and analysis of evidence. But a representation of memory is different. It is as if it does not require an interpretative effort from the historian, and the sources seem to speak for themselves. Of course, no such thing exists. The challenge of the historian is to resist this unbearable lightness of interpretation, and instead to sift meaning from memory via methods and theories, via interrogations of the use of evidence, of narrative, and of sources. Here lies today the potential of memory to set our historical imagination free.

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