

Historiography and Memory

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The question of “memory” is certainly not a new one. It is closely associated with the questions of time, imprints, traces, and traditions and constitutes one of the recurrent themes in both philosophical and anthropological thought (Ricoeur 2000). When understood as an individual function, it remains at the heart of psychological and psychoanalytical investigation. In its purely historiographic dimension – or more specifically in its collective or social dimensions – it constitutes a well-used political tool for the promotion of cohesion amongst nations and peoples (Finley 1975). Nevertheless, the connotations linked to this notion today – when it is defined as collective, social or national – have emerged only recently and are associated with the question of individual or shared identities (Lavabre 1994).

The word memory itself has a history and this history varies, depending on intellectual and national contexts. The theoretical traditions in which the concept has evolved also have an impact on what is understood by memory. In Germany, for example no discussion on memory can take place without referring to the work of Jan Assman whereas little is known of him in France where Maurice Halbwachs and later Pierre Nora remain the reference. Finally, the objects of memory themselves vary depending on time and context, i.e., Vichy France, Nazism in Germany, the question of the disappeared in Argentina, etc. “We are not yet accustomed to speaking of a group memory, even as a metaphor”: This observation, which preoccupied Maurice Halbwachs’ thoughts on “collective memory and historical memory,” underlines at the outset the fact that the concept of (collective) memory itself has a history (Halbwachs 1992 [1950]). This is a concept that is both fluid and polysemous. The question of memory remains at the heart of the discussion whatever the subject may be: Chile, Argentina or post-communist Europe, the war in ex-Yugoslavia or South Africa, France and Vichy, Spain and the civil war, colonialism or slavery; it is debated in Germany every time Naziism is evoked or interpreted. “Memory” is being evoked whether the subjects under discussion are genocides, dictatorships and mass prejudices, the tragedies and fractures of twentieth century history, the disappearance or dying out of rural and working-class areas, local heritage, or regional and national identities, or biographies and autobiographies revealing the historical experiences of renowned or anonymous actors of history.

According to Saint-Augustin, memory is, “the past’s present” (Ricoeur 1983). Nevertheless, the shared preconceptions, which preside over usage of the concept, can barely stand up to the complexity and heterogeneity of the phenomena unanimously called “memory.” Remembrances of past experiences, commemorations, archives, and museums, political movements in history or “the invention of tradition” (Hobsbawm and Terence), monuments and historiographies, conflicts of interpretation, and also memory gaps, symptoms, traces of the past, deliberate re-writing of history, and falsifications: “memory” clearly has many different connotations, it may well be a metaphor (Lavabre 2001). What is memory in the contemporary – and apparently shared – sense of the term? What is collective memory? Is it a trace of the past, the continuity of ancient worlds and traditions? Or is it more frequently the still open wounds of past murders, massacres, and social and political fractures? Does it evoke the past, the glorious or the dark legend, the collective narrative, or political manipulations of the past? Is it an effect of the present or an effect of the past? What is the subject of this memory we call “collective”?

A general synthesis would be unwieldy. Today, it appears that three main conceptual approaches to memory co-exist. The first is that of “realms of memory” (*lieux de mémoire*), a term coined by Pierre Nora; the second is that of “the working through of remembering” (*travail de mémoire*), associated with Paul Ricoeur. The third is that of “frameworks of memory” (*cadres de la mémoire*) which emerged from Maurice Halbwachs’ thoughts on the social conditions of the construction and evocation of memory. Although these three approaches co-exist and often overlap, they were nonetheless elaborated at different periods, are anchored in different disciplines, and focus on different objects.

Maurice Halbwachs can be considered a pioneer in the field. Halbwachs was also a traditional sociologist of social structure, of the standards of living and of the causes behind suicide. His work on memory was rediscovered in France and elsewhere, largely following the trend towards interest in memory studies in the 1970s. Pierre Nora understood memory in terms of realms, distinguishing historiography and history from memory. Realms manifest themselves in discussions of the political uses of the past, of traditions and of national identities (Gildea 1994). They have given rise to specific versions in Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands. Paul Ricoeur examined the working through of remembering, a notion derived from psychoanalysis, most thoroughly. Just like grieving, the process of remembering must be undergone by both society and the individual so that the right memory, the long forgotten event and reconciliation both with oneself and with others might be reached. Although this clearly has a normative dimension and stems from philosophical-political thought (Todorov 1995), it is not alien to Henry Rousso’s previous approach to Vichy (Rousso 1987) or Benjamin Stora’s to Algeria. This approach witnessed an increase in influence in the 1990s as a reaction to the emergence of the equally invasive “duty to remember” (*devoir de mémoire*). In many respects, this approach overshadows that of “realms.” On the one hand, it deals with the demands for recognition from various victims’ groups. On the other hand, it can be harnessed to serve a political desire to settle past scores and to find material and symbolic solutions for conflict resolution. The third approach is sociological. It deals with memory as a social phenomenon and concerns the frameworks of memory. Political uses of the past and strategies for remembrance are sometimes based on the

belief of political and social actors that memory can be influenced. Memory refers here both to memories of experiences which have been lived through or transmitted by people who experienced them, or to collective mythologies. The frameworks of memory reflect on the interactions between uses of the past and memories and examine what the shared representations of the past actually are. They therefore attempt to answer one essential question: can memory be shaped? This question is central to much contemporary thinking on memory.

Apart from the works of Maurice Halbwachs (Halbwachs 1925, 1992 [1950]) and Marc Bloch (Bloch 1925) on socialized forms of the presence of the past and transmission – traditions, memories, “notions,” “teachings,” and “symbols,” which constitute “collective memory” – there are very few articles or books in historiography prior to the mid-1970s containing the word “memory.” At the end of the 1970s, Moshe Finley pleaded that the “political uses of the past” which he sees as legitimate objects of study be taken into consideration (Finley 1975). In 1970, Roger Bastide, a French anthropologist inspired by the theories of Maurice Halbwachs, published his important contribution to the theory of collective memory “Mémoire collective et sociologie du bricolage” (“Collective Memory and the Sociology of Patchworking”) (Bastide 1970). His 1965 study of African religions in Brazil, which contains long passages dedicated to “collective memory” and to Maurice Halbwachs’ thesis in particular, is simply entitled *African Religions in Brazil* (Bastide 1965). When Pierre Nora and Jacques Le Goff – who were soon to become the pioneers of a renewal of French historiography in which memory would be the “spearhead” (Nora 1978) – published a collective three-volume work in 1974, *Faire de l’Histoire (Making History)* on new problems, approaches, and objects in historiography, not one chapter was devoted to “memory.” Another example is Philippe Joutard’s book about the legends and traditions of Protestants in southern France published in 1977. It was inspired by British oral history and was attentive to tradition, to the transmission of memory and to the living presence of the past but it focused on “sensitivity to the past,” not on the study of “memory” (Joutard 1977). France is no different from any other country in this respect. Though the “cult of anniversaries” and the obsession with commemoration have become widespread (Johnston 1992), for a long time, the works of Maurice Halbwachs on collective memory were of interest exclusively to philosophers. Even this was largely because of his controversy with Bergson and the radical character of his thesis which affirmed the logical and chronological priority of collective memory over individual memory (Lavabre 1998).

The historiographic study of memory began to emerge in France only towards the end of the 1970s. Two articles by Pierre Nora from 1978 and 1979 mark this rising interest. The first article offered a definition of collective memory: “As a first approximation, collective memory is a remembrance or series of remembrances, conscious or not, of an experience which has been lived through and/or mythified by a living collective identity of which history is a component part.” The distinction between historiography and memory, or between “historical memory” and “collective memory” allows an independent concept of memory to be formulated. This article underlines the strategic use which historians sometimes make of the notion of memory which itself is “vague and ambiguous.” It heralded his next major work on the *Realms of Memory* in which Pierre Nora introduced a new way of doing historiography. This new way considers conflicts of interpretations, the relativity of historiographic knowledge and

the political uses of the past. Pierre Nora's first article on "collective memory" in 1978 more or less provided a definition of the notion of memory for the following twenty years, particularly in France.

The second article, "*Quatre coins de la Mémoire*" ("The Four Corners of Memory") describes the duel between communist and Gaullist remembrance in France from the Liberation to May 1968. The article offers the following definition: "In France, a memory is what justifies the claim to political strength for those in power, it is an instrument of power in the hands of political manipulators and as such constitutes in itself, a tremendous source of power." The concept of memory, which has both national and political connotations, includes all forms of the presence of the past apart from "critical" and resolutely "contemporary" historiography. Historians came to recognize that historiography is both of the past and of representations and uses of the past (Roussou 1987; Confino 2006). How and why did this approach to memory manage to become dominant? Its success is all the more surprising as the proposed analyses centered on political uses of the past, which often depend on a conception of memories that were handed down from the powers that be and barely took into account the socialized production of memories (as in Halbwachs' work), or society's influence on memory.

The 1970s were marked by social, economic, and political change as well as by a certain nostalgia for a way of life that was disappearing. They were marked by a quasi-militant sensitivity towards those who had been dominated in history, by what was called the awakening of a Jewish consciousness, by the end of existing communities and traditional allegiances in Europe, and by the rise of the post-war generations. In the 1980s, the number of publications on memory in the social sciences beyond historiography exploded. This reflects the desire to analyze living memory, recollection, and transmission, to carry out an audit of the past and to lay down the conditions for reconciliation. All of these elements came together to create a new concept of memory outside conventional historiography, a concepts that is marked by a different approach to history. Historians affirmed that it was their vocation to criticize memory at the very moment when society itself became impassioned by its own past. Social and political movements and interests developed a stake in the historiographic debate about memory. Consequently, the exact meaning of "collective memory" has become contested.

Though the first volumes of *Lieux de Mémoire (Realms of Memory)* contained a certain nostalgic celebration of the past, Nora was explicitly opposed to commemorations. This is demonstrated clearly by the radicalization of the notion of "realms of memory" when it is applied not to the obvious symbols of the French Republic or of the nation but to anonymous places such as the "forest" or the "sea front." This gradual move towards a strictly genealogical meaning of "realms of memory" reveals the essence of his idea. However, it was the use of the concept of memory, with its national and political connotations on the one hand and individual memories on the other, which assured the success of Nora's ideas, though this came at the cost of their misinterpretation (Lavabre 2000). Most notably, the legitimization of a (national) identity or even the very idea of (national) identity remain at the heart of the discussions in France, Germany (Francois and Schulze 2001), and wherever else the concept of realms of memory took root. For the question of identities is indeed present in all inquiries about memory, whether the emphasis is placed on the effects of heritage and history, or on

the individual or social functions of selective reference to the past (Strauss 1992). This is also compatible with the suggestion that the increase in interest in memory since the 1980s does not indicate the vitality of memory but, rather, exposes an anxiety about the future and a crisis in national identities as determined by history (Johnston 1992).

The concept of memory was ambiguous at the beginning of the seventies and today it has become worn out by its multiple uses. The various controversies which have troubled historians over the past few years, together with the type of political conflicts where memory becomes an issue such as in Argentina or Poland, have caused the opposition between memory and history to become apparent once more. In cases like this, there are two possibilities. Either memory is considered misleading and militant by the yardstick of scientific historiography that purportedly offers knowledge of the past, or emphasis is laid on the “duty to remember” and the struggle not to forget what historiography cannot give a true account of. This is problematic because the struggle not to forget, by definition, can only occur when events have not yet been forgotten, the insistence on the “duty to remember” suggests that historiographic knowledge is likely to remain unheeded, unless it becomes memory, which includes shared recollections and representations of the past that cannot be rationally controlled. Conversely, the specifically political pre-occupation with reconciliation or the concern that a “common memory” bears witness to the peaceful resolution of past conflicts are most often expressed in contexts where the memories of the experience are sufficiently strong to resist any attempt to synthesize different interpretations of the past.

Current thinking on “the abuses of memory” (Todorov 1995; Ricoeur 2000) or the obsessive fear of the past are reminiscent of the denunciation of the “excessive historical sense which the present is suffering from” in Nietzsche’s second *Untimely Meditations: on the uses and disadvantages of history for life*. Today as before, the thesis according to which too much consciousness of history is harmful to the present suggests that the value of forgetting should not be overlooked. Nietzsche’s demonstration, however, starts with a reminder of the reasons for referring to the past, and hence why we need historiography: “history belongs to the living individual for three reasons: because he is active and ambitious – because he likes to preserve and to venerate – because he suffers and needs relief” (Nietzsche). Nietzsche writes that to the extent that it is possible to distinguish between them, the three forms of historiography – monumental historiography, traditional historiography, and critical historiography – correspond to this triple relation to the past, to these three useful forms of the presence of the past. These senses of historiography and of the ways of using them merit more attention than other reflections on the disadvantages of the abusive presence of the past and the virtues of forgetting. Indeed, in many ways, these senses cover the meanings of “memory” in its contemporary uses.

Monumental historiography, which has great pedagogical value, is a remedy to resignation. It forms a foundation for believing in cohesion and is based on a heroic vision of a civilization throughout time. It brings together things which are unrelated, generalizes them and declares them identical. In this sense, monumental historiography violates the actual reality of the past and can even be a mere mythical fiction. In this case, Nietzsche argues, history, the past itself, suffers.

Traditionalist historiography belongs to the individual who “looks faithfully and lovingly at his/her origins.” Traditional historiography owes a debt of gratitude to its past. It moves its consumers from individual historiography to collective historiography, an identification with a mythical home, family, or town. However, traditional historiography also recognizes all that is ancient and outdated as equally worthy of respect, and discredits all that is new. Once again, history, the past itself, suffers and is in danger of never forming pure fact. Finally, critical historiography judges and condemns, provides “the strength to break and dissolve a fragment of the past in order to ensure survival.” Although critical historiography, “is always merciless and always unjust as it never stems from pure fact”; it undoubtedly serves the “interests of the living” and, for that reason is favored by Nietzsche. But there is nonetheless a risk that the reality of the past be judged by the yardstick of what is true in the present. Critical historiography can then become illusory and obscure identity, for “as we are the fruit of generations past, we are also the fruit of their mistakes, their passions, their errors, and even their crimes.”

Monumental historiography corresponds closely to Halbwachs’ definition of “memory” as a table of similarities between past and present and, conversely, of historiography as a table of differences between past and present. It echoes back to memory as a “totemic” historiography, in the same way that Pierre Nora opposes it to “critical” historiography. Traditionalist historiography corresponds to what is called memory today, particularly when this notion signifies the preservation of patrimony, and of traces of the past, of museums and archives, of the veneration of all things local and of roots. Just like “memory,” traditionalist historiography finds its rationale in individual and collective identities which have been enhanced by the past. Finally, critical historiography is echoed in contemporary controversies on the uses of historiography, either “judgmental” or “understanding,” and indeed the roles historians adopt for themselves, as suppliers of memories or producers of knowledge. To put it briefly, the three forms of historiography identified by Nietzsche describe different uses of the past. All of these are part of what we now call memory. This means memory as distinct from historiography which if it is not pure knowledge, is at least an intellectual process which strives to render the past intelligible and to avoid anachronism, in other words to create a distance between the past and the present (Lavabre 2000). Memory therefore appears ill-adapted to describe most phenomena expressing the presence of the past, and indeed the “memory moment” as Pierre Nora called it has been so overused that there is an actual desire to do without it. However, memory is holding its own. As a concept, it can hold its own against polysemy, the absence of shared definitions and even confusion. Moreover, as a social phenomenon it holds its own against irate criticism. As a certain level of fatigue with this passion for the past has set in, the “historiography—memory” dichotomy, which was dominant in the first years of the phenomenon, has been substituted by the “memory—oblivion,” dichotomy which is no less problematic – albeit in different ways. It is therefore clear that in spite of criticisms, the phenomenon of memory is unavoidable. The concept of memory must therefore be contextualized and historicized.

At this point, the concepts of the “collective” and the “social” should be re-introduced into the discussion and “memory” specified as an object of study in Sociology or Historical Sociology. Halbwachs’ theses and more importantly the criticisms levied at

these by Bloch and Bastide, provide, if not a perfectly coherent theoretical body, at least essential elements for a sociological and dynamic definition of collective and social memory (Lavabre 1998). The contrast between “cultural memory” and “communicative memory” (Assman 2002), often used in Germany, echoes similar preoccupations. It traces the notion of “communicative memory” to Halbwachs where emphasis is placed not on public narratives of the past or on major collective myths, but on communication between individuals, that ensures the transmission of information from the past. Halbwachs’ original statement contains three propositions. Firstly, the past cannot be preserved, but is reshaped from the vantage point of the present. Secondly, because the isolated individual is a fictional being, the past can only be remembered within the social frameworks of memory where conversely, individual memory only attains reality as a constituent part of collective memory. Finally, memory has a social function. From the outset of Halbwachs’ thinking in his early work, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (the Social Frameworks of Memory) these theses justify the notion of “collective memory.” Consequently, the definition of collective memory wavers continually between the idea that stresses the group as such, and the idea that, on the contrary, stresses the individuals who make up the group and embody the collective memory. There is a certain paradox in the fact that contemporary uses of the notion of memory have often only retained Halbwachs’ first idea of collective memory. They thus have only considered the political uses of the past which themselves reveal a political desire to organize representations of the past and nothing else. Bloch however, in his vigorous critique of the “finalism” and “anthropomorphism” of Halbwachs’ first statements, drew attention to the “communication factor between individuals” that constitutes collective memory (Bloch 1925). Bastide notes that even if Halbwachs never managed to separate himself from “the idea of a collective conscience both exterior and superior to individuals,” the texts that make up *On Collective Memory* clearly demonstrate the “interpenetration of consciences” and allow memory to be seen as a “meeting point.” The change of direction that took place within the notion of collective memory resolutely privileging the group’s point of view rejects the idea of collective memory as transcending individual memories. The opposition between the individual and the collective thus becomes a kind of reciprocal influence between groups and the individuals who compose them. Memory is said to be collective not because it is the memory of the group as such, but because the collective, or the social, is the state in which individuals exist. It should be added that any reflection on this interaction must take the multiple loyalties of individuals into account.

This broad outline indicates that beyond the often-highlighted gaps in the “collective memory” theory and beyond Halbwachs’ sometimes-dated observations, *On Collective Memory* is infinitely more valuable than the caricature frequently made of it in fossilized uses of the theory. “Collective memory” is not necessarily expressed in more institutional or political uses of the past. However, the question of the impact of social conditions on the production of shared representations of the past, or public or authorized historiographic narratives, which often give meaning to individual memories, remains pertinent. Moreover, one could argue that it is precisely the question of remembered experiences – and their transmission – which at the end of the day is posed when the question of memory is raised whether this be to demand justice or to express concern for reconciliation.

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