

Memory and the History of Mentalities

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Between memory and the history of mentalities there are intellectual and methodological affiliations, though not straight connections. These affiliations began within a milieu of French scholars, notably Maurice Halbwachs and Marc Bloch, that originated at the first half of the twentieth century the modern study of memory and of mentalities. Affiliations continued to be present in the second half of the century in the work of Pierre Nora, who was a member of a succeeding French historical generation. While his magisterial project *Les lieux de mémoire* signaled the beginning of present-day memory studies, the links between memory and mentalities have been since mostly overlooked, as memory studies has been influenced by other trends in the humanities.

Today the link between memory and mentalities may serve as a call for the scholar to expand the interpretative, explanatory, and narrative potential of the notion of memory, while at the same time to exercise methodological rigor. Thinking of memory in association with mentalities may be useful in order to raise new questions, to make new connections, and to be aware of the interpretative problems and potentials in exploring the notion of memory.

The link between memory and the history of mentalities was evident from the beginning of modern memory studies. The French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs was the first to have used the concept of collective memory systematically in a seminal work, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, published in 1925. Halbwachs's fundamental contribution was to establish the connection between a social group and collective memory, and he argued that every memory is carried by a specific social group limited in space and time (see also Marcel and Mucchielli, this volume). After the First World War he received a Chair of Pedagogy and Sociology at the University of Strasbourg, where he met the celebrated historians Lucien Febvre and especially Marc Bloch, the fathers of the *Annales* school. They expressed vivid interest in Halbwachs's ideas, and a close professional friendship developed. When they founded in 1929 the journal *Annales d'histoire économique et sociales* Halbwachs became a member of the editorial board.

Febvre and Bloch 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 emotions with which people

in the past understood and gave meaning to their world. This history of mentalities (*histoire des mentalités*) provided a whole new approach to the study of the past, as it took seriously the history of collective representations, myths, and images. The history of collective memory—of how societies remember their past, how they represent it and lie about it—was viewed as one important part of this endeavor. Bloch published in 1924 his classic *Les Rois thaumaturges* about the “beliefs and fables” around Medieval royal healing rites, in which he used terms such as “collective ideas” and “collective representations.” In the mid-1920s he started to use the term “collective memory.” In 1925 he wrote a favorable review of Halbwachs’s *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*.

The history of mentalities never possessed a clear and comprehensive body of theoretical work, and was more practiced than theorized, also by Bloch and Febvre. It was often justifiably criticized, which is beyond the scope of this entry. The same is true for the term *histoire des sensibilités*, or history of sensibilities, an offshoot of history of mentalities, coined later by Lucien Febvre to describe the study of collective psychology and reconstitution of emotions and habits of mind. What links memory and the history of mentalities therefore was not a set of clear-cut theoretical rules. Rather, it was the combination of path-breaking work, simultaneously conceived by scholars who made up an intellectual milieu, to study human society by exploring collective representations and beliefs of people in the past by using historical and sociological tools.

Pierre Nora was a member of a later generation of Annalistes, conscious of the school’s traditions and also of its new directions. In 1974 he edited together with Jacques Le Goff *Faire de l’histoire*, a manifesto about a new kind of history that nonetheless took as its starting point the Annales. In a volume of similar intent published in 1978, this time explicitly called *La nouvelle histoire*, he wrote the entry on memory. He was explicit about the association between memory and mentality, and began his entry in the following words: “To talk today of collective memory raises the same genre of difficulties and mobilizes basically the same stakes that the word ‘mentalités’ raised thirty years ago” (“Mémoire collective” 398). By that time, the Annales as a school of historical study lost its cohesiveness and domination. But Nora’s interest in memory continued in a sense a certain affiliation between memory and mentality that had always been present within the Annales and French historical thought: Thus the study of collective representations was transformed by Nora to the study of collective representations of the past, of memory.

From Halbwachs to Bloch and Febvre and up to Nora, the history of memory was linked with the history of mentalities within a shared French scholarly and intellectual milieu. But the new history of memory in the last

generation, while keeping a seminal place for Nora's project, has had a distinctly different character that is not centered in France. Memory studies have been transnational and international in their scope, interests, origins, and historiographical foundation. They have been influenced by the growing interest in the Holocaust; by new approaches to nationhood and to the ways nations construct their pasts; and by a diffused body of work called cultural studies, which often centered on issues of identity (including, among others, postcolonialism and gender studies).

In this context, the link between memory and history of mentalities became less important and visible, and was indeed forgotten. The common way scholars now describe the evolution of memory studies is to begin with Halbwachs, jump some fifty years straight to Nora, and then, depending on the interpretative taste and topic, to place their study within a relevant historiography on, say, national memory or the Holocaust. This recent historiographical evolution overlooks then an important part in the history of memory. In the meantime, memory studies itself was at one and the same time a central topic of scholarly exploration as well as in the midst of what seemed like a theoretical crisis. In this interpretative context it was suggested to think of memory anew by associating it with the history of mentalities (Confino, "Collective Memory").

By the mid-1990s the notion of "memory" had taken its place as a leading term, perhaps *the* leading term, in cultural history. Used with various degrees of sophistication, the notion of memory, more practiced than theorized, has been used to denote very different things which nonetheless share a topical common denominator: the ways in which people construct a sense of the past. As such, it has contributed tremendously to our historical knowledge. Memory studies uncovered new knowledge about the past, and brought to the fore topics that were simply not known a generation ago. One example will suffice here. Memory studies demolished the venerated view that Germans after 1945 were silent over the war and the extermination of the Jews. We know today that this view was a historians' invention. Instead, there existed in West Germany (where, in contrast to East Germany, there was an open public sphere) a lively debate on National Socialism in the local and private spheres, as well as in public and political life. It is difficult to underestimate the significance of this finding to the way we now understand postwar West German society.

But the benefit of richness cannot hide a sense that the term "memory" is depreciated by surplus use, while memory studies lacks a clear focus and, perhaps, has become predictable. It has a number of critical articles on method and theory, but not a systematic evaluation of the field's problems, approaches, and objects of study. It often follows a familiar and routine formula, as yet another event, its memory, and appro-

priation is investigated. Memories are described, following the interpretative zeitgeist of the humanities, as “contested,” “multiple,” and “negotiated.” It is correct, of course, but it also sounds trite by now. The details of the plot are different in each case, but the formula is the same. We know that a study of memory undertakes to explore how people imagine the past, not how the past actually happened, though this in itself is not a new undertaking. Thus the often-made contention that the past is constructed not as fact but as a cultural artifact to serve the interest of a particular community may still be considered by some a *dernier cri*, but one cannot possibly present it anymore *pour épater les historiens*.

In this context, thinking about the lost connection between memory and the history of mentalities provides an imaginative way to think of memory as a notion of historical method and explanation. The study of memory and the history of mentalities appear to share a common purpose and agenda, as well as a sense of fashionableness and crisis. Jacques Le Goff described the history of mentalities as “a novelty and already devalued by excessive use [...]. It represents a new area of research, a trail to be blazed, and yet, at the same time, doubts are raised as to its scientific, conceptual, and epistemological validity. Fashion has seized upon it, and yet it seems already to have gone out of fashion. Should we revive or bury the history of mentalities?” (166). It sounds like a description of the current state of the history of memory. Similar to the study of memory, the history of mentalities was denounced as an empty rhetoric. Like the history of mentalities, a great appeal of the history of memory appears to be its vagueness. And both histories have by themselves no additional explanatory value; their value depends on the problems posed and methods used.

But the history of mentality is useful not only in order to outline the dangers faced by the new history of memory. There is a great advantage in thinking of the history of memory as the history of collective mentality. This way of reasoning resists the topical definition of the field and, conversely, uses memory to explore broader questions about the role of the past in society. The history of memory is useful and interesting to show not only how the past is represented in, say, a single museum but about the historical mentality of people in the past, about the commingled beliefs, practices, and symbolic representations that make people’s perceptions of the past. This kind of history of memory is part of the history of mentalities as described by Robert Mandrou: It aims at “reconstructing the patterns of behavior, expressive forms and modes of silence into which worldviews and collective sensibilities are translated. The basic elements of this research are representations and images, myths and values recognized or tolerated by groups or the entire society, and which constitute the content of collective psychologies.”

Memory as a study of collective mentality provides a comprehensive view of culture and society that is so often missing in the history of memory whose fragmentary tendency is to focus on distinct memories. The history of mentality attempted, in theory if not in practice, to outline the mental horizons of society as a whole, to link elite and popular culture, state indoctrination and habits of mind, within a single cultural world. This is a useful corrective for the history of memory, a field that is inclined to isolate memories instead of placing them in relations to one another and to society as a whole.

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

Thinking of memory in association with the history of mentalities invites the scholar to give memory a certain anarchic quality that will take it beyond the sphere of ideas, ideology, and state and public representations, and into the ways people acted, shaped, internalized, and changed images of the past. An anarchic quality that locates memory not only in monuments and museums, but also in the ways people make it part of how and why they act in the world. This kind of history sees its task not simply to explore how people remember the past after the fact, but how memory structures behavior and thoughts.

Differently put, it means to place memory within a broader history that takes cognizance of the coexisting diversity of social times. This argument, in a sense, takes us back to Halbwachs's classic *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, whose fundamental idea was of the "multiplicity of social times." The various ways by which memories become linked is a consequence of the various ways in which people are associated to given groups, be they religious, family, professional, local, or national. Different registers of memory determine the relative importance of a memory for the individual and for the group. This approach to memory views it as one cultural practice put in relations with other practices that together make up a mental horizon of society.

For close to a century now, the notions of mentality and then memory have fascinated scholars. What has been the source of this powerful attraction for two concepts that were after all so ambiguous, even tricky? The answer lies in their two shared basic characteristics. The first is to have dramatically expanded the territory of historical investigation and imagination in a way that called into question some cherished assumptions about historical reconstruction of the past. This, more than anything else, links the two notions. Mentalities had this effect on political history in the previous century and memory had this effect on social history in the last generation.

This comes 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.” It began in the early 1980s as a gradual yet not brisk shift. By the 1990s, however, the notion of “society”—as it had been practiced by social historians along the twentieth century and particularly after 1945—was swept away by the interpretative onslaught of memory and cultural studies. The notion of society, broadly speaking, was based on a linear concept of history developing forward along one temporal timeline and privileging social and economical 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 relationship. This shift put at the center the historicity of history writing. It became central 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 inevitable to explore how people (including historians) construct their collective representations of the past.

The second and closely related characteristic is that mentality and memory call for interpretation. 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. Sources and analysis of memory and mentality lay bare the process of construction of the past and therefore the practice of the historian. That is one important reason that the notions of memory and mentality expanded the investigation of the past, and were paradigmatic to major interpretative shifts in historical studies. While expanding the territory of historical investigation, they at the same time made this territory less defined and the methods of historical analysis less precise. But this is

not necessarily negative: Well-defined disciplinary borders are important but can also be limiting. Expanding the historian's territory resulted in broadening the tools, subject matters, and questions of historical analysis. And it also shaped, in the last generation or so, a period when historians write with less certitude than previous generations, and with more self reflection and experimentation, about reconstructing the past.

And here—in the unbearable lightness of interpretation—lies the risk of memory and mentality as methods of inquiry, and also the promise of their relations. They call 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. It is rather 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 and the history of mentalities to set our historical imagination free, as they have done for a century.

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