

Collective Memory: The Two Cultures*

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What is collective about collective memory? Two different concepts of collective memory compete—one refers to the aggregation of socially framed individual memories and one refers to collective phenomena sui generis—though the difference is rarely articulated in the literature. This article theorizes the differences and relations between individualist and collectivist understandings of collective memory. The former are open to psychological considerations, including neurological and cognitive factors, but neglect technologies of memory other than the brain and the ways in which cognitive and even neurological patterns are constituted in part by genuinely social processes. The latter emphasize the social and cultural patternings of public and personal memory, but neglect the ways in which those processes are constituted in part by psychological dynamics. This article advocates, through the example of traumatic events, a strategy of multidimensional rapprochement between individualist and collectivist approaches.

Collective memory, one might plausibly argue, often plays an important role in politics and society. Such claims are by now commonplace in scholarly as well as political discourses: images of the Vietnam war limit support for American military activities; memories of the Nazi period constrain German foreign and domestic policy; recollections of dictatorship shape the activities of transitional and posttransition regimes from Eastern Europe to Latin America; and Watergate has become the perennial reference point for all subsequent scandals in Washington, to name just a few possible such hypotheses. Indeed, the term collective memory has become a powerful symbol of the many political and social transitions currently underway, though there is also something broadly epochal about our seemingly pervasive interest in memory. New regimes seek ways to “settle” the residues of their predecessors, while established systems face a rise in historical consciousness and increasingly pursue a “politics of regret.”¹

Whatever its sources, the flurry of recent interest in and use of the term collective memory raises an important challenge to scholars interested in the diverse phenomena it apparently indicates. Before, or at very least as part of, offering the kinds of hypotheses mentioned above, we need to be clear about what exactly the term means. I do not mean that we need to “operationalize” collective memory postpositively in order to generate empirically verifiable covering laws. Rather, I mean that we need to inquire into the value

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¹I use this term to refer to an historically specific constellation of ideas about collective justice. It seems that a general willingness to acknowledge historical misdeeds has disseminated throughout the world recently, leading to more and more official and unofficial apologies to both internal and, perhaps even more surprisingly, external victims. An expectation of acknowledgment has become a decisive factor in processes of “transitional justice” as well as in domestic and international politics more generally.

added by the term, to specify what phenomena the term sensitizes us to as well as what kind of a sensitivity this is.²

Some critics have charged that collective memory is a poor substitute for older terms like political tradition or myth. Gedi and Elam (1996:30), for instance, call its use "an act of intrusion . . . forcing itself like a molten rock into an earlier formation . . . unavoidably obliterating fine distinctions." Others worry about the leap implied in adapting a term that refers to an individual-level phenomenon (memory) to the collective level. Fentress and Wickham (1992:1), for instance, are wary of "a concept of collective consciousness curiously disconnected from actual thought processes of any particular person," a concern not entirely unfounded given the term's origins in the Durkheimian tradition. On the other hand, Burke (1989:98) argues that "if we refuse to use such terms, we are in danger of failing to notice the different ways in which the ideas of individuals are influenced by the groups to which they belong."

Our real concern, of course, is not with the term itself, but with the ways in which such a label structures (that is, both enables and constrains) our conceptual and empirical work. What are the advantages and disadvantages of "collective memory" in comparison to other terms, like commemoration, tradition, myth, and so forth? What does it mean to say that the memories of individuals are "influenced" by the groups to which they belong? Are ideas ultimately individual-level or collective-level phenomena, or some combination of the two? Or does the study of social memory demonstrate the uselessness of that sort of distinction?

ORIGINS

Contemporary usages of the term collective memory are largely traceable to Emile Durkheim ([1915] 1961), who wrote extensively in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* about commemorative rituals, and to his student, Maurice Halbwachs, who published a landmark study on *The Social Frameworks of Memory* in 1925.³ Durkheim and his students, of course, have often been criticized for an organicism that neglects difference and conflict. Indeed, Durkheim did write "Society" with a capital S, and collective representations in his work do take on something of a life of their own. Halbwachs was somewhat more careful, employing "groups" in place of Durkheim's "Society," and characterized collective memory as plural, showing how shared memories can be effective markers of social differentiation (Coser 1992; Wood 1994).

Nevertheless, there is, in my reading, an unresolved tension between individualist and collectivist strains running through Halbwachs's work on collective memory, one that depends largely on the different arguments to which he responds. For Halbwachs, who accepted Durkheim's critique of philosophy, studying memory is not a matter of reflecting on properties of the subjective mind, as Bergson ([1896] 1991) emphasized; rather, memory is a matter of how minds work together in society, how their operations are structured by social arrangements: "It is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories" (Halbwachs [1925] 1992:38). Halbwachs argued that it is impossible for individuals to remember in any coherent and persistent fashion outside of their group contexts. His favorite examples include the impossibility of certainty regarding particular childhood memories: it is very difficult,

²This distinction between operational and sensitizing concepts comes from Herbert Blumer (1969:153–82). Blumer saw "operational" concepts as delimiting fixed and measurable phenomena, and "sensitizing" concepts as evolving fields of purview and modes of perceiving general areas of social process.

³Halbwachs's Strasbourg colleague, Marc Bloch (1925, [1939] 1974), also used the term collective memory in 1925, as well as in his later book on feudal society.

at the limit, to say whether what we remember is somehow individual and independent or the result of cues and suggestions given to us by our families.

However, Halbwachs offered these arguments as an analysis of the *social frameworks* of memory, rather than of social memory per se, and elsewhere (1966) talks about the distinctions between individual and collective memory. Halbwachs reminds that it is only individuals who remember, even if they do much of this remembering together. Group memberships provide the materials for memory and prod the individual into recalling particular events and into forgetting others. Groups can even produce memories in individuals of events that they never "experienced" in any direct sense. Halbwachs therefore resisted the more extreme internalist subjectivism of Bergson, as well as the common-sense view of remembering as a purely—perhaps even paradigmatically—individual affair. At the same time, however, he does seem to have preserved the notion of an individual memory, however shaped that memory is by social frameworks and identities.

On the other hand, there is a more radically collectivist moment in Halbwachs as well, largely in his reaction to Freud and in the attempt to distinguish collective memory from history. Freud, providing one of the most important theories of memory in Halbwachs's intellectual universe, had argued that the individual's unconscious acts as a repository for all past experiences. Forgetting, rather than remembering, is what takes work in the form of repression and the substitution of "screen" memories that block access to more disturbing ones. In contrast, Halbwachs argued that memory is in no way a repository of all past experiences. Over time, memories become generalized "imagos," and such imagos require a social context for their preservation. Memories, in this sense, are as much the products of the symbols and narratives available publicly—and of the social means for storing and transmitting them—as they are the possessions of individuals. As such, "there is thus no point in seeking where . . . [memories] are preserved in my brain or in some nook of my mind to which I alone have access: for they are recalled by me externally, and the groups of which I am a part at any given time give me the means to reconstruct them" (Halbwachs [1925] 1992:38).⁴

This is the more authentically Durkheimian moment in Halbwachs's theory of social memory, in which imagos are collective representations *sui generis*. In contrast to his discussion of *The Social Frameworks of Memory*—in which what individuals remember is determined by their group memberships but still takes place in their own minds—in works like *The Legendary Topography of the Holy Land* and elsewhere Halbwachs focused on publicly available commemorative symbols, rituals, and technologies.⁵ This more Durkheimian discussion undergirds Halbwachs's contrast between "history" and "collective memory" not as one between public and private but as one based on the relevance of the past to the present: both history and collective memory are publicly available social facts. Halbwachs thus alternately referred to autobiographical memory, historical memory, history, and collective memory. Autobiographical memory is memory of those events that we ourselves experience (though those experiences are shaped by group memberships), while historical memory is memory that reaches us only through historical records.⁶ History is the remembered past to which we no longer have an "organic" relation—the past that is no longer an important part of our lives—while collective memory is the active past that forms our identities.

⁴This statement can be taken as a powerful suggestion that we need to inquire into those technologies of memory—such as the archive, museum, or library—that are purely social. I will take up this point in detail below.

⁵From our present perspective, of course, notions of public availability are usually much more complex, allowing for differential access and subversive readings. See Johnson, McLennan, Schwarz, and Sutton (1982).

⁶Later research (e.g., Schuman and Corning 1999) points out the different ways to experience contemporary events—such as by participating in them directly or observing them through mass media—and the different ways such experiences enter into memory, individual or collective.

"Collective memory" in Halbwachs thus indicates at least two distinct, and not obviously complementary, sorts of phenomena: socially framed individual memories and collective commemorative representations and mnemonic traces. The problem is that Halbwachs does not present us with an integrated paradigm that identifies the unique structures involved in each of these and shows how they are related—though he does provide some useful suggestions on all of these matters. Halbwachs is in this sense still a "nineteenth century" theorist, one who sees individual- and collective-level problems as problems of different orders. In such a dichotomous worldview, the options are to emphasize one or the other, to present a grand theory of aggregation and translation between the "levels," or to produce a sometimes productive hodgepodge of insights about a particular range of problems. This last, it seems to me, is the road Halbwachs took in his seminal work on collective memory, and it is a solution that, in my reading, has predominated the field since then, though not always in quite such a felicitous manner.

TWO CULTURES

The problem is that these two sorts of phenomena to which the term collective memory can refer (in Halbwachs and in general) seem to be of radically distinct ontological orders and to require different epistemological and methodological strategies. And yet precisely this kind of clarity has been missing from the rather indiscriminate (in the true sense of the word) usage of collective memory.⁷ Collective memory has been used to refer to aggregated individual recollections, to official commemorations, to collective representations, and to disembodied constitutive features of shared identities; it is said to be located in dreamy reminiscence, personal testimony, oral history, tradition, myth, style, language, art, popular culture, and the built world. What is to be gained, and what is to be lost, by calling all of these "collective memory"? Pierre Nora (1992)—one of the most prominent practitioners in the field of social memory studies (Olick and Robbins 1998)—for instance, attempts to identify all of what he calls *lieux de mémoire* (realms of memory) in French society; the result runs to seven volumes—including entries on "Vichy," "Right and Left," "Divisions of Time and Space," "The Land," "Street Names," "Gastronomy," "Bastille Day," "Joan of Arc," and "The French Language," raising the question of what is not a *lieu de mémoire*. The same may be said of collective memory: since social action and social production take place with capacities and materials handed down from the past, collective memory becomes synonymous with pattern-maintenance per se.

Nevertheless, even if we restrict the term collective memory to explicitly commemorative activities and productions—a popular analytical strategy—the problem remains—and remains unarticulated—of choosing between individualistic or collectivistic procedures. This is because two radically different concepts of culture are involved here, one that sees culture as a subjective category of meanings contained in people's minds versus one that sees culture as patterns of publicly available symbols objectified in society. Each of these culture concepts entails different methodological strategies and produces different kinds of knowledge. In order to be as clear as possible about the sensitivities of the term collective memory, we need to understand exactly how these two culture concepts play out. What the hypotheses about the role of memory in politics I began with mean, for instance, depends fundamentally on how we conceptualize the phenomenon, on what kind of a process or thing we think this collective memory is.

In this effort, we have an advantage because just such a discussion has already taken place in debate over the meaning of the term "political culture." Indeed, scholarly work on

⁷There are now several reviews of the collective memory literature. See especially Olick and Robbins (1998), Thelen (1989), Kammen (1995), and Zelizer (1995).

collective memory can be seen as part of the field of political culture research insofar as it is concerned with the cultural constitution of political identities and activities. The term political culture is perhaps most widely known from a line of work on political development begun in the 1950s and 1960s by political scientists Gabriel Almond, Lucien Pye, and Sidney Verba, among others. There the term was used to refer to aggregate patterns of psychological orientations toward political outcomes (Almond and Verba 1963, 1980). In perhaps the most famous work in this tradition, Almond and Verba (1963) hypothesized that a distinct set of subjective orientations—what they called “the civic culture”—is essential for generating and maintaining democratic political institutions.

Political culture theorists in this tradition thus refer to culture in the sense of a nurturant environment rather than in the sense of publicly available ideas and symbols. They therefore develop and employ methods—primarily survey research—to discover and aggregate the hidden sources of social patterns in people’s heads. Political culture analysis in this view is a kind of collective political psychology: individualistic in both its politics and in its ontology, it identifies the black box of human minds as the source of institutional outcomes. Political culture and other phenomena like public opinion are nothing more than the attitudes and opinions of individuals added up into general pictures. To be sure, macro-social and “objective” variables influence those dispositions, but they are by no means to be seen as *sui generis*. Though it poses its behavioral (that is, purely observational) methods as a “scientific” response to political philosophy, there is thus a great deal of ontology implied in interpreting survey data either as an indicator of cultural structures, or indeed as the cultural structure itself.

In recent years, interpretive social scientists, many of them coming out of the Durkheimian tradition, have reinvented the concept of political culture (Baker 1990; Berezin 1994; Brint 1994; Hunt 1984; Somers 1995; Olick and Levy 1997). In contrast both to the political culture work just discussed as well as to various instrumentalist strategies that dismissed cultural dimensions of politics, new political culture analysis defines culture not narrowly as subjective values or attitudes but broadly as the symbolic dimension of all social situations. Culture here is regarded as intersubjective (or even as objective) and as embodied in symbolism and patterns of meaning. Rejecting the association of political culture with collective political psychology, new political culture theory highlights the discursive dimensions of politics, seeing political language, symbolism, and claim-making as constitutive of interests and identities. Political culture, as newly conceived, is thus the symbolic structuring of political discourse, and the analysis of political culture is the attempt to understand the patterns and logics of that discourse. Political culture can therefore be measured only crudely by survey analysis; instead, it must be excavated, observed, and interpreted on its own terms as culture (Olick and Levy 1997). At the very least, there is an ontological hiatus between survey data and political culture, between aggregated opinions and “public opinion.”⁸

COLLECTED VERSUS COLLECTIVE MEMORY

This debate over the concept of political culture—and over the appropriate strategies for studying it—is directly germane to the present question of collective memory: the same two conflicting culture concepts underlie the varieties of work on collective memory as

⁸These issues go back at least as far as Rousseau, who attempted to distinguish between the “will of all” (the unanimity of individual preferences) and the “general will” (the best interests of the collectivity). Durkheim, of course, was powerfully influenced by Rousseau’s communitarianism. In more contemporary discussions, work on public opinion also conceptualizes an ontological distinction between the aggregation of individual opinions and public opinion *per se*. See Blumer (1969:195ff.), Herbst (1993), and Noelle-Neumann (1984).

well, though the practitioners of different kinds of work on collective memory have not joined the fray in this manner. Social memory studies form a nonparadigmatic, transdisciplinary, centerless enterprise, and work in different historical, geographical, and disciplinary contexts proceeds largely independently of work in other such contexts (Olick and Robbins 1998). There has to date been very little in the way of conceptual and methodological discourse on collective memory; although some very useful insights have been developed within the different contexts, this work has—from a systematic, “scientific” point of view—been a rather unproductive hodgepodge. In the remainder of this article, therefore, I will distinguish between two basic concepts of “collective memory” at this fundamental level, neither to argue for one over the other nor to deny their real differences, but as a productive prolegomenon to understanding their relations.

Collected Memory

The first kind of collective memory is that based on individualistic principles: the aggregated individual memories of members of a group.⁹ Surely, work of this sort does not preclude that some transformations may occur when individual memories are aggregated, through the activities either of the people involved or of the social scientists “collecting” or “measuring” their memories. But the fundamental presumption here is that individuals are central: only individuals remember, though they may do so alone or together, and any publicly available commemorative symbols are interpretable only to the degree to which they elicit a reaction in some group of individuals. This ontology of memory does not exclude the possibility that different rememberers are valued differently in the group, that the memories of some command more attention than those of others, but some of the research strategies here function either technically democratically (surveys that assign the same value to every respondent) or even redistributively (such as oral history projects, which often aim at recovering the lost or neglected memories of those who have been disenfranchised).¹⁰

From the point of view of what I would call this “collected” memory approach, notions of collective memory as objective symbols or deep structures that transcend the individual risk slipping into a metaphysics of group mind. There is no doubt, from this perspective, that social frameworks shape what individuals remember, but ultimately it is only individuals who do the remembering. And shared symbols and deep structures are only real insofar as individuals (albeit sometimes organized as members of groups) treat them as such or instantiate them in practice. It does not make sense from an individualist’s point of view to treat commemorative objects, symbols, or structures as having a “life of their own”: only people have lives.

One advantage of the collected memory approach is that it can avoid many of the potential reifications and political biases of approaches that begin with collectivities and their characteristics. First, as already mentioned, accounts of *the* collective memory of any group or society are usually accounts of the memories of some subset of the group, particularly of those with access to the means of cultural production or whose opinions are

⁹The most significant sociological examples of this kind of work come from Howard Schuman and various colleagues, who employ survey research to measure generational effects and knowledge of historical events across different national populations. See Schuman and Scott (1989), Schuman and Rieger (1992), Schuman and Corning (1999), and Schuman, Belli, and Bischooping (1997), as well as the other essays in Pennebaker, Paez, and Rimé (1997). See also Vinitzky-Seroussi (1998), who approaches collective memory through “autobiographical occasions,” high school reunions in particular. Historians Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen (1998) also use survey research as well as depth interviewing to produce an aggregate picture of what I am calling American “collected” memory. The individualist orientation of this work is clear when they quote Carl Becker’s famous essay, “Everyman his Own Historian” (cited in Rosenzweig and Thelen 1998:178).

¹⁰Both survey researchers and oral historians, of course, can partition their samples, and often focus on the differences between elite and popular attitudes (Converse 1964).

more highly valued. One way around this is to resist the temptation to speak of one collective memory in favor of many different kinds of collective memory produced in different places in the society. Scholars have, in this way, proliferated distinctions such as between "official" and "vernacular" memory, public and private memory, historical and folk memory, among others (e.g., Schudson 1992; Bodnar 1992). Nevertheless, merely substituting finer grained collective categories for *the* collective memory does not necessarily eliminate the tendency to reify the new categories, as has often been the case, for instance, in oral history research, which has counterposed the "authenticity" of vernacular memory to the "truth" of historical memory or to the sterility and monochromaticism of official memory. And although this approach may avoid macro-level reifications, moreover, it does so by reifying the individual. (I will discuss this in greater detail below, having already noted the presuppositional democracy of survey methods above.)

Second, collected memory approaches often assume a posture of behaviorist neutrality that makes the object of study hypothetical rather than categorical. In other words, collected memory approaches do not necessarily begin by assuming the existence of a collectivity which has a collective memory (though they often do begin in this way), but instead can use the inquiry to establish whether or not the colloquial collective designation is or is not salient. A good example of this occurred in the 1970s in West Germany (Schweigler 1975). The central motivation of West German foreign policy at that time was to protect the fate of the German nation as an identity under the condition of division. But instead of taking German national identity as a given, as the ineluctable force of nature hypothesized by Romantic nationalist ideology (particularly that of the German tradition, which saw the nation as an organic entity based on the ties of blood and soil), Chancellor Willy Brandt's government commissioned a survey to inquire into the subjective sentiment of national identity: did a significant portion of the population have a strong subjective commitment to the idea of the German nation? Instead of seeing German nationality as a taken-for-granted and permanent characteristic, this approach saw it as the product of a collective (or, more accurately, collected) will. Such a conceptualization marked a decisive shift in the basis of German identity, at least in some quarters.

Treating collective memory—as well as collective identity—in this way thus resists the witting or unwitting adoption of certain ideological categories, particularly those that make demands on the individual (e.g., nationalism). A similar effort, deriving from the Mannheimian tradition in the sociology of knowledge, has redefined generations not as objective periods but as subjectively defined cohorts: a generation exists if and only if a number of birth cohorts share a historical experience that creates a community of perception. In this tradition, Howard Schuman and colleagues (Schuman and Corning 1999; Schuman, Belli, and Bischooping 1997; Schuman and Rieger 1992; Schuman and Scott 1989) have undertaken numerous surveys in different national contexts to measure cohort differences in the perception of particular historical events. How do individuals born in different periods remember and evaluate earlier moments? A great deal of the answer depends on whether or not they experienced the event in question, as well as how old they were when they did so; historical events are more memorable to people still in their formative years. The salience and evaluation of historical memories, this work demonstrates, is thus powerfully shaped by generational effects understood in this way: generations and memories are mutually constitutive, not because of some objective features of social or cultural structure but because of experiential commonalities and resultant similarities in individual memories of historical events. However objectified generational structure may be, individual experience remains its central medium.

Because it locates shared memories in individual minds and sees collective outcomes as aggregated individual processes, moreover, the collected memory approach is formally

open to the investigation of psychological or even neurological factors in social memory outcomes, though its behaviorist approach—manifest in survey methodology or in the oral historian's interest in merely giving play to neglected voices—tends to treat the human mind as something of a black box. In substantive but not formal contrast, cognitive, behavioral, and even physical psychologists have highlighted the roles of both mind and brain in individual and, by extension, social memory processes. Perhaps the greatest advantage of the collected memory approach, then, is that it leaves open the possibility of dialogue among the physical, behavioral, and social sciences. With this formal opening, we have the opportunity to move beyond the apparent mutual irrelevance of neurological and psychological studies of memory on the one hand and sociological and cultural approaches on the other.

Indeed, even the briefest survey of the physical and cognitive psychology of memory—enormous and growing fields in their own rights—demonstrates some provocative points of potential contact. First, even within the most physicalist research paradigms—those investigating the biochemical, cellular, and neurological foundations of remembering—there are obvious points of relevance for sociological and political work on memory. Laboratory studies have shown, for instance, that the ability to recall is cue-dependent (provide the word before or after the word in question on a test of a memorized list of words, and subjects can produce the test word more accurately) as well as state-dependent (recreate the circumstances of original exposure more closely and the subject is able to recall the item more easily and more accurately). “Explicit remembering,” Daniel Schachter (1996:61) has reported, “always depends on the similarity or affinity between encoding and retrieval processes.” Neurophysiologists have hypothesized that this has to do with sympathetic firing of neural networks in areas of the brain where pieces of memory are stored.

Neurological studies, moreover, have demonstrated conclusively that memories are not unitary entities, stored away as coherent units to be called up wholesale at a later date. Neural networks channel bits and pieces called “engrams” to different places in the brain and store them there in different ways. The process of remembering, therefore, does not involve the “reappearance” or “reproduction” of an experience in its original form, but the cobbling together of a “new” memory. People do not perceive every aspect of a situation, they do not store every aspect they perceive, and they do not recall every aspect they store. “A neural network,” Schachter writes, “combines information in the present environment with patterns that have been stored in the past, and the resulting mixture of the two is what the network remembers. . . . When we remember, we complete a pattern with the best match available in memory; we do not shine a spotlight on the stored picture” (1996:71).¹¹

Cognitive psychologists, moreover, have drawn important lessons from these physiological brain studies in their efforts to understand the mind. Because the ability to recall is highly cue- and state-dependent, remembering is obviously highly dependent on a number of contextual factors, factors that are themselves always in flux. Cognitive psychologists, as a result, have opened up their investigations to social variables, though they have not usually brought sociological concepts to bear here. Along these lines, the cognitive psychologist Ulrich Neisser (1982) has criticized laboratory studies of memory for neglecting both formal and substantive impacts of natural settings on remembering. Work in this tradition has thus studied the impact of various social variables like race and class on how particular historical events are remembered by individuals: when people evaluate particular events as more or less “consequential,” they are more or less likely to recall them as decisive moments. When they have created these so-called “flashbulb memories,” they tend to remember more of the details surrounding the experience. Many people, for instance,

¹¹ Similarities between this account and that of phenomenological sociology, which emphasizes the use of typifications and ad hocing strategies, are fairly clear.

recall (though not always accurately) a great number of specific details about their surroundings when they heard that President Kennedy had been assassinated. Social factors like race and class influence the likelihood that any individual will code and store in the associated ways an experience as a flashbulb memory (see also Pillemer 1998).

An individualist approach to memory thus has a great deal of potential for producing insights about social memory outcomes. One problem with much of the psychological work that has been done, however, is that it works within a very strict independent-dependent variable format, in which the ability to recall is the dependent variable. Social contexts thus remain undertheorized. Aggregate outcomes, moreover, are largely irrelevant to the physical or cognitive psychologist, whose job it is to explain individual behavior. And yet, the ways in which individual brains and minds work clearly have an effect on aggregate outcomes. Race and class may affect flashbulb memories, but it is also possible that flashbulb and other kinds of memories shape the salient group identities, as Schuman's work on generations implies. And not only do the psychological processes of powerful individuals—such as political leaders—affect their broadly consequential acts. Common psychological dispositions can shape the way large groups of people react to shared experiences: documented tendencies towards cognitive consistency, for instance, perhaps in part based on neurological and cognitive organization, might constrain certain collective courses of action or the appeal of particular political programs (though we clearly have vast capacities—some psychological, others cultural—for bypassing such constraints), while psychologically based analogical reasoning and typification clearly play a great role in how groups of people interpret new situations in common.

Collective Memory

Nevertheless, the collective—as opposed to collected—memory tradition offers a number of powerful arguments that demonstrate the inadequacy of a purely psychological (individual or aggregated) approach. Three major varieties of argument are relevant here. First, certain patterns of sociation not reducible to individual psychological processes are relevant for those processes, as the “natural setting” approach of Neisser (1982) implicitly allows. This is a version of Halbwachs's “social frameworks” approach: groups provide the definitions, as well as the divisions, by which particular events are subjectively defined as consequential; these definitions trigger different cognitive and neurological processes of storage. Moreover, as many political historians of memory have demonstrated, contemporary circumstances provide the cues for certain images of the past. Quite consistent with the neuro-psychological image of remembering as an active and constructive process rather than as a reproduction, sociologists have demonstrated the ways the past is remade in the present for present purposes (see Olick and Robbins 1998). These more sociological observations are thus quite assimilable to the individualist perspective, though their focus is somewhat different. Other arguments, however, depend on a more radical ontological break between individualist and collectivist perspectives.

A great deal of work, for instance, has argued that symbols and their systems of relations have a degree of autonomy from the subjective perceptions of individuals.¹² Of course, the nature and degree of that autonomy vary greatly depending on the approach. Whether built on a Saussurean distinction between *langue* and *parole*, on Durkheimian

¹²To treat language, and by extension collective memory, as transcendental in this way does not necessarily imply treating it as having crossed into another ontological realm, from phenomenon to noumenon. As Norbert Elias (1991) argues, there is a difference between being transcendent and transcendental. If language is a system with an independent logical reality, it is because we construct it as such. An analogous argument can be found in Berger and Luckmann (1967).

notions of collective conscience, on hermeneutical approaches to the history of ideas, or on vernacular ideas about national character and heritage, however, it is fairly common to assert that collectivities have memories, just like they have identities, and that ideas, styles, genres, and discourses, among other things, are more than the aggregation of individual subjectivities; while discourses are instantiated in individual utterances, such a perspective views it as a trivial truism to say that there are no ideas without thinking individuals. More extreme versions of this approach have certainly produced extravagant metaphors that have often been misunderstood—and sometimes even foolishly intended—such as that texts write authors. But clearly there is something to the argument that ideas and institutions are subject to pressures and take on patterns that cannot be explained by the interests, capacities, or activities of individuals except in the most trivial sense.

It is on the basis of such arguments, mostly implicit, that many scholars and commentators have employed the concept of collective memory.¹³ From this perspective, the collected memory approach to memory misses a great deal of what is going on. Indeed, in this way, one might argue that survey research on social memory excludes much of what is genuinely social about memory. In the first place, there are well-documented aggregation effects that cannot be predicted from individual responses: groups, for instance, tend to act more extremely than individuals. Additionally, there are clearly demonstrable long-term structures to what societies remember or commemorate that are stubbornly impervious to the efforts of individuals to escape them. Powerful institutions clearly value some histories more than others, provide narrative patterns and exemplars of how individuals can and should remember, and stimulate memory in ways and for reasons that have nothing to do with the individual or aggregate neurological records. Without such a collective perspective, we are both unable to provide good explanations of mythology, tradition, heritage, and the like either as forms or in particular, as well as risk reifying the individual. In regard to the latter, collectivist approaches to memory challenge the very idea of an individual memory. It is not just that we remember as members of groups, but that we constitute those groups and their members simultaneously in the act (thus re-member-ing). Robert Bellah and colleagues have therefore referred to “genuine communities as communities of memory” and have highlighted the role of “constitutive narratives.” Individual and collective identity, in this view, are two sides of a coin rather than different phenomena.

There is an additional argument for collective as opposed to collected memory that does not necessarily abut such metaphysical and ontological matters, which I call the technologies of memory argument. Quite simply, there are mnemonic technologies other than the brain. Historians of memory, for instance, have demonstrated the importance of various forms of recording for our mnemonic capacities (Le Goff 1992). These affect both individual rememberers as well as societies. For individuals, being able to write a note or record a message or take a photograph vastly extends the capacity to “remember,” not simply by providing storage space outside of the brain but by stimulating our neurological storage processes in particular ways; in this manner, we have become genuine cyborgs with what several authors have called “prosthetic” memories. And this implies no particular attachment to modern computer technology: medieval orators are legendary for their

¹³It appears as if the collectivist approach is the most common in sociological work using the term collective memory, but that appearance can be deceptive. A residual individualism is sometimes hidden, for instance, by a substantive focus on ideological products, symbols, monuments, etc., which are public goods: the dependent variable, in such studies, is collective, but focusing on such a dependent variable—rather, say, than on individual memories of collective events—does not mean that the independent variable or indeed the overall ontology is collectivist. Many sociologists—particularly Barry Schwartz (1991, 1996), Edward Shils (1981), Eviatar Zerubavel (1996), myself (Olick and Levy 1997; Olick 1999), and others both within and outside of sociology—do employ a genuinely collectivist approach. But we often use the collective nature of the object of analysis to stand in for an argument about the collectivist nature of our approach.

mnemonic capacities, which depended on conceptual devices collectively known as *ars memoriae*, the arts of memory (Yates 1966).

Perhaps the clearest demonstration of the genuinely collective nature of remembering is the degree to which it takes place in and through language, narrative, and dialogue. Language, for instance, is commonly used as the quintessential example of a supra-individual phenomenon (see note 12). And it is not merely that individuals remember in language, coding their experiences as language and recalling them in it. Language itself can be viewed as a memory system. This is the approach taken by the literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1963; 1986) when he emphasized that language is inherently dialogical. By this he meant not only that language takes place in exchange between real people rather than in the minds of isolated individuals, nor only that words thereby respond to their contemporary situation, but that, in his inimitable words, "Each individual utterance is a link in a chain of speech communion. Any utterance, in addition to its own theme, always responds (in the broad sense of the word) in one form or another to others' utterances that precede it" (Bakhtin 1986:93–94). Utterances, according to Bakhtin, thus contain "memory traces" of earlier usages, meaning not that any utterance can be decoded to reveal earlier usages but that the specificity of every term is the product of a long historical development. This development, Bakhtin argues, takes place through genres, each of which "lives in the present, but always remembers its past, its beginning. Genre is a representative of creative memory in the process of literary development" (Bakhtin 1963:121).

At the societal level, moreover, different forms of social organization have clearly depended on different technologies of memory. There is the famous sociological argument about the importance of double-entry bookkeeping for the development of commercial society. Particular forms of record keeping are obviously associated with the possibility of an administrative state. Nineteenth-century European states increased their power and legitimacy vastly by developing new mnemonic forms like the museum, the archive, and indeed professional historiography itself. Returning to the kind of hypotheses with which we began, moreover, there is a powerful argument about the role of the mass media in the development of international norms of justice: Aryeh Neier (1998), for instance, has argued that a decisive moment in the development of principles of political regret was the emergence of war correspondents in the mid-nineteenth century, who were able to present the horrors of modern warfare to their readers at home. Our current concern with memory in political contexts is thus in direct ways a result of technologies of memory outside of the brain.

An Example: Individual and Collective Dimensions of Trauma

The importance of both individualistic and collectivistic culture concepts for our understanding of social memory—both collective and collected—may be clearer if we consider very briefly a central concern in recent public discourse: the problem of trauma. One reason calls for memory have been so morally charged in recent years is the palpable responsibility we feel for—and indeed as—the victims of trauma. And yet there are numerous different ways to understand this vague term. What can we mean when we speak of trauma, and what different implications can it have?

In its earliest usages, of course, trauma referred (and continues to refer) to a physical injury, as in "blunt force trauma." When we use it to refer to psychological matters—to say nothing of social applications—we are thus already operating at a figurative level. In the psychological context, trauma takes on specific implications directly relevant here, namely of "a psychic injury caused by emotional shock the memory of which is repressed and remains unhealed." Psychology has taken this understanding in at least two directions.

First, psychologists have hypothesized that there are emotional events of such disruptive magnitude that they create neurological alterations in the brain: much like an electric shock, an emotional shock disrupts normal brain functions. And second, focusing on the mind's need to tell a coherent narrative, psychoanalysts have understood trauma as a stumbling block in our abilities to do so, leading to a neurotic condition so long as it remains repressed. In both accounts, the residue of "psychic traumata," as William James put it in 1894, creates "thorns in the spirit."

Whether inscribed physically on the brain or cognitively on the mind, of course, such "thorns in the spirit" have profound implications at the personal and aggregate levels. We worry rightly about the so-called "walking dead" in our midst, those who have suffered the blunt traumas of dislocation, dictatorship, torture, and war. On the one hand, we know that these victims are particularly fragile, and we often feel we owe them both protection from easily-provoked and easily-understood fear as well as every help towards healing. In some cases, this involves material and symbolic restitution, compensation, apology, and the like; in others it means merely lending a willing ear, helping them give voice to their experiences and promising not to forget. On the other hand, we know well the dangers that can arise out of un confronted horror and unreconciled experience: personal violence, revenge, perpetuation of hostilities, blood feuds, and sympathy for extreme political solutions. There is currently much debate about which measures are likely to soothe the psychic wounds of history best. Although some call for forgiveness and forgetting, others point out the oxymoronic qualities of that pair: forgiveness requires some kind of acknowledgment of the wrongdoing (Shriver 1995). Of course, there are many different kinds of acknowledgment, ranging from personal and collective exculpation to the genuine "memory work" that many critics drawing on psychoanalytic and ethical models advocate.

The burdens of trauma, of course, do not reside purely at the personal level. As already indicated, suffering individuals can take out their aggressions on those around them, in forms ranging from cynicism to terrorism. A number of psychoanalytically oriented critics, including figures like Alexander and Margaret Mitscherlich (1967) and Theodor Adorno ([1959] 1986), have pointed out the risks of collective—in my terminology more appropriately collected—syndromes from un-worked-through pasts. Adorno worried about the persistence, for instance, not of fascist tendencies against democracy but within democracy, which he believed resulted from a failure of Germans to "work through" their past. Earlier, Adorno and colleagues (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, and Sanford 1950) had accounted for the rise of an "authoritarian personality" partly on the basis of unresolved childhood traumas exacerbated by the structure of the Prussian family. In their famous argument, the Mitscherlichs diagnosed a collective—again, in my terminology collected, though the line is blurred in their work—neurosis deriving from German people's "inability to mourn" the loss of their all-powerful leader. That inability to mourn prevented an honest and therapeutic confrontation with the legacies of their devotion.

Many observers, of course, move easily from such collected diagnoses to genuinely collective diagnoses. In sometimes worrying forms, such efforts operate in terms of facile concepts of national character or of anthropomorphized collectivities in which the collectivity itself has singular desires, needs, and will. But there are better versions of such collective diagnoses, particularly those articulated in terms of collective narratives. If genuine communities are communities of memory that constantly tell and retell their constitutive narratives, as the Bellah quote above asserts, there can be genuinely collective traumas insofar as historical events cannot easily be integrated into coherent and constructive narratives.

Surely this is what we mean when we speak, for instance, of the U.S. Civil War as a trauma for American society, or of the memory of Vietnam as an ongoing problem. In the

case of the former, there were indeed multitudinous individual and, as a result, powerful collected traumas. But the last individuals who personally experienced the event have been gone for quite a while now. While we might speak of the residue of individual traumas, insofar as parents or grandparents imparted to their offspring stories of their experiences, psychological traumas cannot be passed down through the generations like bad genes. In the first place, the fact that the memory of such personally traumatic experiences is externalized and objectified as narrative means it is no longer a purely individual psychological matter. And in the second place, discussing the ongoing nature of the trauma in terms of such transmitted personal narratives does not capture what we really mean—that is, an unassimilable breach in the collective narrative. In regard to Vietnam, then, there certainly are many traumatized individuals walking our streets, suffering from a wide range of neurotic disorders, of which posttraumatic stress is only the best known. But Vietnam was traumatic not just for American individuals (to say nothing of Vietnamese individuals), but for the legitimating narrative that we as individuals produce for us as a collectivity. In this way, for instance, the trauma of Auschwitz will not disappear with the death of the last survivor; nor is it carried only through those—mainly their children—who suffered its personal ripple effects: Auschwitz remains a trauma for the narratives of modernity and morality, among others (Bauman 1989). It clearly makes both ethical and conceptual sense to speak of that trauma as irreducible to individual and aggregated psychology.

CONCLUSIONS

What, then, can we conclude about the value of collective memory as a designator, and about the work done employing it? There are, it seems to me, three possible answers. First, following the advice of Gedi and Elam (1996) quoted at the beginning of this essay, we can abandon the term altogether as a poor replacement for a variety of more specific terms like myth, tradition, commemoration, and so forth. The advantage of such an approach is that it avoids an overly unifying framework that washes over genuine distinctions of kind. But this is its disadvantage as well. For surely there is something—or perhaps many things—that make it compelling to see the diverse forms of historical reference and mnemonic activity as related. Historically, for instance, it is clear that changes in the different forms of mnemonic activity at individual, collected, and collective levels are epochally related. Major alterations in the forms of sociation in the nineteenth century, for instance, included a proliferation of monuments, the invention of new traditions, the spread of popular genealogy, and the development of psychoanalysis and other so-called “sciences of memory” (Hacking 1995). The German word for modernity is, literally, new time (*Neuzeit*), and its development undergirded alterations in collective as well as individual forms of perception and expression (Koselleck 1985). There are numerous other historical examples of such relations (Olick and Robbins 1998). Conceptually, moreover, it follows directly from virtually all of the approaches discussed above that different mnemonic forms, be they political or cognitive, are highly interrelated.

A second possibility would be to use the term to refer only to what I have called genuinely collective memory, that is, to public discourses about the past as wholes or to narratives and images of the past that speak in the name of collectivities. The advantage here is that doing so provides needed conceptual clarity and resists the temptations of the predominant methodological individualism in the social sciences. In some versions of physical and cognitive psychology, that temptation has produced a full-blown sociobiological reductionism, one which implies that sociology—with the possible exception of rational choice approaches—is largely superfluous. Of course, the reason to resist this is not to defend sociology at all costs, but that the position relegates most of history to a

residual category: holding grand evolutionary considerations constant, the neurological processes of memory do not change over time. The disadvantage of reserving collective memory only for social memory seen collectivistically, however, is that doing so answers one reductionism with another. For surely the capacity of human minds is a relevant "variable" in or at least parameter of human history.

The third possible solution, the one I advocate here, is to use collective memory as a sensitizing term for a wide variety of mnemonic processes, practices, and outcomes, neurological, cognitive, personal, aggregated, and collective. A better term for such an approach would be social memory studies. Unlike collective memory studies, social memory studies does not raise confusions about its objects of reference. And unlike another candidate—social studies of memory, which sounds as if the social component is outside of memory, that is, in the study of it—it remains presuppositionally open to a variety of phenomena while pointing out that all remembering is in some sense social, whether it occurs in dreams or in pageants, in reminiscences or in textbooks.

Of course, to try to change an established designation is to waste time tilting at semantic windmills. The real point is to open our thinking about the variety of mnemonic processes, practices, and outcomes and about their interrelations. This is not a call, then, for a grab bag of disconnected concepts and research activities, all equally legitimate. For it is clear that reductionistic strategies, while perhaps useful in the short run, cannot be the last word. We need an enterprise not that allows neurological, cognitive, attitudinal, and cultural work to go on side by side, but that brings these enterprises into dialogue with one another.

In our theoretical work, this means beginning to inquire into the ways in which each of these kinds of mnemonic structures (indeed, that is what they are—ways of organizing remembering) shapes and is shaped by the others and developing theories about their interactions. This is more difficult than it sounds, for one of the lessons of social memory studies is that these are never completely separate processes, even analytically. There is no individual memory without social experience nor is there any collective memory without individuals participating in communal life. Thinking about remembering in this way demands that we overcome our inculcated tendency—as both social scientists and modern social actors—to see individual and society, in the words of Norbert Elias (1978), as separate things, "like pots and pans."

In our empirical work, particularly on questions like that of the role of memory in politics, it means being open to the variety of different forms and meanings of the question. It means remembering both that "memory" occurs in public and in private, at the tops of societies and at the bottoms, as reminiscence and as commemoration, as personal testimonial and as national narrative, and that each of these forms is important; it also means remembering that these differing forms of remembering are not always equally important for each other (for instance the personal experience of leaders, under some conditions, is more important than those of "ordinary" people, but not always), though it also means that they are always relevant to some degree (there is, as we have seen, no personal memory outside of group experience and that does not take some stand on "official" and "unofficial" collective versions). We can no more speak of *the* collective memory than we can speak of a presocial individual memory, even if we include both side by side; an infinity of social and neural networks are constantly in play with each other, meaning that different kinds of structures are always relevant and that their relevance is always changing.

Perhaps most important, it means remembering that our work as scholars plays a role in these questions: like an atomic detector that changes particles in the very act of observing them, the various techniques we use inevitably validate or even constitute certain kinds of memory. Conceptually, the results of a survey of memory are not collective memory; but the knowledge produced does have the potential to become a part of it. Inquiring into the experiences of traumatized individuals may start out as an attempt to discover the role of

memory in action, but it often calls up memories that would not have occurred without the researcher's stimulus and then objectifies them as part of a collective record. That record, in turn, becomes a point of reference for future remembering as well as for future perception, influencing down the road how new experiences will be coded, both neurologically and narratively. The lesson of all the excellent work done in the different fields is that we can no longer get away with these easy distinctions. This is the lesson of memory—particularly of traumatic memory—as well.

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