



Memory and American History

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Memory and American History

David Thelen

The challenge of history is to recover the past and introduce it to the present. It is the same challenge that confronts memory. The starting place for this special issue is the conviction that topics and methods surrounding the workings of memory open fresh approaches to problems that have troubled our craft in the 1980s.

In contrast to our special issue, "The Constitution and American Life," whose topic we imposed and whose contents we solicited, this special issue took shape around articles that came to the *Journal* in the ordinary rhythms of scholarship in American history. It was only after we had accepted four articles on the topic that we identified a theme that ran through them and through several others we anticipated accepting in the future. Perhaps the best evidence that memory is emerging as a focal point for many developments in American history is that six authors independently conceived topics and approaches that converge on the theme of memory and dozens of referees, board members, and editors independently applauded.

The historical study of memory opens exciting opportunities to ask fresh questions of our conventional sources and topics and to create points for fresh synthesis since the study of memory can link topics we have come to regard as specialized and distinct. Those questions grow so naturally out of everyday experiences that they point us toward bridges between our craft and wider audiences who have found professional history remote and inaccessible.

Since the memory of past experiences is so profoundly intertwined with the basic identities of individuals, groups, and cultures, the study of memory exists in different forms along a spectrum of experience, from the personal, individual, and private to the collective, cultural, and public. At one end of the spectrum are psychological issues of individual motivation and perception in the creation of memories. At the other end are linguistic or anthropological issues of how cultures establish traditions and myths from the past to guide the conduct of their members in the present. While history touches both ends of the spectrum, its concerns fall most comfortably on points between those ends. The territory between individual motivation and impersonal myth is natural for historians because its obvious units of

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study are the particular people and groups that have long been familiar objects of historical research. Since the explanation of change over time practically defines history, historians bring obvious tools to build from the point on the spectrum defined by psychologists' conclusion that people construct memories in response to changing circumstances.

Even more intriguing than the fresh perspectives that the study of memory can throw on particular topics are the new ways that study can connect separate points on the spectrum. By directing the same questions to different topics, the study of memory opens fascinating possibilities for synthesis. The same questions about the construction of memory can illuminate how individuals, ethnic groups, political parties, and cultures shape and reshape their identities—as known to themselves and to others. Those questions can explore how they establish their core identities, how much and what kind of variation they permit around that core, and what they rule out as unacceptable. The similarities and differences in the ways individuals and groups construct memories open new possibilities for exploring how individuals connect with larger-scale historical processes.

By reconnecting history with its origins in the narrative form of everyday communication, attention to memory transcends specialization by speaking the language of face-to-face association and firsthand experience. The construction and narration of a memory comes from the oral and epic traditions of storytelling, the same traditions that gave birth to the chronicle and then to history. "The storyteller," wrote Walter Benjamin, "takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale." Storyteller and audience are partners in creating the memory to be told. In the course of everyday talk narrators fix their listeners very clearly in mind as they decide which elements to recollect, how to organize and interpret those elements, and how to make the memory public. "The events come out of the marrow of day-to-day living; traces of them are stored in the mind, and they return to life as they are elaborated when speaking to others or when thinking to oneself," observed Samuel Schragar. Schragar shrewdly speculated that "our own immersion in this talk as an ordinary activity is surely part of the reason it has proved so resistant to specification, so hard to pin down as a subject for study."¹ Scholars may indeed not recognize fresh scholarly approaches in the study of everyday talk precisely because it is so familiar and common, but promoters in 1988 founded a popular magazine, expecting that it would appeal to millions of American subscribers, and titled it *Memories*.

The study of how people construct and narrate memories may encourage a greater sensitivity in historians to wider audiences who might listen to (and help shape) the narratives we want to construct and tell. Appreciation for the crucial participation of listener, interviewer, or audience in the creation of a recollection represents

¹ Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (1955; reprint, New York, 1968), 87; Samuel Schragar, "What Is Social in Oral History?" *International Journal of Oral History*, 4 (June 1983), 77.

a major contribution by oral historians to the historical study of memory. "Interviews are conversations," Ronald J. Grele reminds us. "The rhetorical necessity of the moment, the fancy of the memorist, the imaginations of both interviewer and interviewee will often determine what is and what is not discussed at any given moment, or the connections made between one event and another." Small wonder, then, that three articles in this special issue on memory draw heavily from oral history. At a time when many historians believe that the narrative offers the most promising structure for solving interconnected problems of specialization and interpretation, the study of memory may provide the most promising entrance to the possibilities in narrative.²

The fresh possibilities in the historical study of memory begin with two starting points, deeply embedded in historians' narrative traditions, that are now being hailed as major discoveries in other disciplines. The first is that memory, private and individual as much as collective and cultural, is constructed, not reproduced. The second is that this construction is not made in isolation but in conversations with others that occur in the contexts of community, broader politics, and social dynamics. Before we can explore further implications for historians in these starting points, we need to look at their origin in recent scholarship in other fields that has forced a reconsideration of traditional assumptions about the workings of memory.

Historians have traditionally been concerned above all with the accuracy of a memory, with how correctly it describes what actually occurred at some point in the past. We compare different accounts of the same event and evaluate which is most accurate. Remembering, we tend to think, is a process by which people search some kind of storage system in their minds—a filing cabinet or computer "memory," perhaps—to see whether they can retrieve some objective record of a fact or experience they had learned or observed at some earlier point. We expect the accuracy of a memory to be shaped by the observer's physical proximity in time and space to the event. Memories fade over time. Over the century since the modern science of memory began by studying how accurately, quickly, and durably subjects could remember nonsense syllables, experimental psychologists have searched for the mechanisms by which people store and retrieve what they have learned and the locations in the brain where the memories are stored. When memory was believed to be an objective representation of a piece of information (like the text of the Fourteenth Amendment) or an experience (like a conversation), the central issues for historians and psychologists alike did indeed pivot around how people stored and retrieved that objective representation. Any divergence between a person's recollection and the objective reality the recollection sought to describe reflected some physical, mental, or psychological disability in a person's storage and retrieval capacities.

² Ronald J. Grele, "On Using Oral History Collections: An Introduction," *Journal of American History*, 74 (Sept. 1987), 570–78, esp. 570, 571. For an example of the call for narrative, see Thomas Bender, "Wholes and Parts: The Need for Synthesis in American History," *ibid.*, 73 (June 1986), 120–36.

During the 1980s a dramatic reconception of memory seems to be arising from the confluence of two different lines of inquiry. The origins of this new approach reach back to Frederick C. Bartlett's classic, *Remembering* (1932). After asking subjects to remember and retell a complex tale several times over several months, Bartlett observed that it was "common to find the preliminary check, the struggle to get somewhere, the varying play of doubt, hesitation, satisfaction and the like, and the eventual building up of the complete story accompanied by the more and more confident advance in a certain direction." From this he concluded that "remembering appears to be far more decisively an affair of construction rather than one of mere reproduction." In each construction of a memory, people reshape, omit, distort, combine, and reorganize details from the past in an active and subjective way. They mix pieces from the present with elements from different periods in the past. "If we change the way we think about the world," explained Jean Piaget and B. Inhelder in 1973, "we automatically update memories to reflect our new understanding."³

While psychologists concluded that memory was a process of creative construction, biologists discovered that the brain had no central storage facility to hold bits of information. The fundamental unit for memory, they speculated, was a system of neurons or circuits or loops that enable people to associate things endlessly with other things. Each localized loop or neuron changes through its association with others in what appears to be a new pattern each time. Instead of envisioning the physiology of memory as a hierarchical system driven by a central command unit, some writers believe that the coordination among localized and specialized loops that creates memory is more akin to the way skilled players on a team cooperate to create a single play. Each player has a position, but each also has flexibility and judgment to meet new circumstances as a play unfolds.

Memory begins when something in the present stimulates an association. The association might be recognition of the circumstances or context of the thing in the present. Or it might be recall of an image or smell or emotion. In trying to remember a high school friend's name, for example, we often begin with associations: What did she look like? Who were her friends? How did I feel when I met her? What was the first letter in her last name? What did her name sound like? Each association then triggers another in a chain until the person concludes that he or she has "remembered" enough for the situation. People can quit remembering at any point or can turn to expert help—psychoanalysis, hypnosis, or truth drugs, for example—if they want to push the associations further or deeper than they can on their own. The uncontrolled nature of many associations explains why people interrupt their associations with exclamations like "I forgot my point" or "I can't remember why I came into this room." It also explains why those powerful memory narratives, our dreams, often recruit for a single story actors who came from different

³ Frederick C. Bartlett, *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology* (1932; reprint, Cambridge, Eng., 1961), 205, 209; for Jean Piaget and B. Inhelder's statement, see Edmund Blair Bolles, *Remembering and Forgetting: An Inquiry into the Nature of Memory* (New York, 1988), 17.

periods in our lives and never met each other in the real past. While it will be many years before the precise nature of these loops or circuits is mapped for human memory (as they have now been for “memory” in sea snails), biologists now support the recent subjectivist thrust in psychology that envisions each memory as an active and new construction made from many tiny associations, not a passive process of storing and retrieving full-blown objective representations of past experiences.⁴

The starting place for the construction of an individual recollection is a present need or circumstance. When historians begin an evaluation of a narrative by wondering about a person’s motives or biases or mood or audience at the particular time and place when the person constructed the memory—rather than, say, proximity to the event being recalled—we focus on what psychologists now consider the crucial point. Likewise, people often begin their recollections with reminders like slides from a family vacation or notes taken at the moment one wants to recall. John Dean constructed his remarkable Watergate narrative from newspaper accounts that reminded him of public events that reminded him, in turn, of his actions and conversations on that particular day. Since an individual’s starting points change as the person grows and changes, people reshape their recollections of the past to fit their present needs (as in recalling inaccurately that they had not spanked their children after it became unfashionable to spank children) and select from the present material that supports deeply held interpretations from the past (as in finding evidence in the newspaper to support long-standing political biases). People are often surprised when they first learn that friends plan to get a divorce, but then they reconstruct their associations with the couple and create a new pattern in which the divorce seems a more logical outcome of what they remembered. Since the reality is that an individual’s needs and perceptions do change even as he or she remains the same person, people sometimes construct their personal life histories as a record of stability, continuity, and consistency (as when they feel warmly toward some past association) and sometimes as a record of change (as when they feel proud about losing weight or getting better grades or jobs). In order to simplify their associations, people conflate details from similar experiences into a generalized recollection that can stand for a class of experiences. People can recall the structure of a foreign language for fifty years, but they quickly forget vocabulary words, the gender for nouns, and other details. In a probing evaluation of John Dean’s vivid memory of his conversations with Richard M. Nixon, Ulric Neisser shows that Dean incorrectly recalled most of the details and even the gist of the conversations but that he was exactly correct about the basic fact that Nixon and his top aides were engaged in an elaborate cover-up to conceal their involvement in the Watergate break-in.⁵

⁴ The most helpful layman’s introduction to the major landmarks in the psychology and physiology of memory is Bolles, *Remembering and Forgetting*. Several psychological perspectives that emerge from the same new approach to memory are introduced in Ulric Neisser and Eugene Winograd, eds., *Remembering Reconsidered: Ecological and Traditional Approaches to the Study of Memory* (Cambridge, Eng., 1988).

⁵ Michael Ross and Michael Conway, “Remembering One’s Own Past: The Construction of Personal Histories,” in *Handbook of Motivation and Cognition: Foundations of Social Behavior*, ed. Richard M. Sorrentino and E. Tory Higgins (New York, 1986), 122–44; Michael Ross et al., “Reciprocal Relation between Attitudes and Behavior Recall:

A dramatic example of how people create memories is provided in this issue by Robert McGlone. John Brown's children, McGlone shows, continually distorted what they had done (and not done) at Harpers Ferry in 1859 as they reshaped their memories to create a family identity for themselves in the decades that followed their father's "treasonous" raid to free the slaves. Instead of viewing their efforts as dishonest or immoral lies or the products of defective recall, McGlone suggests that the Browns' reconstructions reflect typical processes by which people construct and reconstruct memories.

The ways that individuals shape, omit, distort, recall, and reorganize their memories—as the case of the Brown family illustrates—grow at least as much from interactions with others as from solitary construction. In his pathbreaking exploration of *The Collective Memory* (1925), Maurice Halbwachs maintained that individuals required the testimony and evidence of other people to validate their interpretations of their own experiences, to provide independent confirmation (or refutation) of the content of their memories and thus confidence in their accuracy. Confirmation of a person's recollection by a second—and independent—eyewitness or source is the standard technique used to establish accuracy by journalists, lawyers and historians. When people look to others to assist them in deciding whether their associations have yielded an accurate narrative of an event or experience, they acknowledge the need for a check on the subjective process by which they create a recollection.

For our purposes the social dimensions of memory are more important than the need to verify accuracy. People depend on others to help them decide which experiences to forget and which to remember and what interpretation to place on an experience. People develop a shared identity by identifying, exploring, and agreeing on memories. The cautious and mutual discovery by two people of shared memories "is in and of itself the very elixir of friend-making," observed Fred Davis. New spouses form an identity for their own new family, wrote Halbwachs, through "a great mutual effort full of surprises, difficulty, conflict, and sacrifice" by which they identify which memories from their earlier separate families they want to make defining features of their own new identity. People seek to freeze or preserve memories by taking pictures that remind them of shared moments or people from the past. In discussing which pictures to frame or place in albums, people literally decide what image of their pasts they want to show others (including historians, if we would use such sources). In the course of taking a picture or creating an album they decide what they want to remember and how they want to remember it.⁶

Committing People to Newly Formed Attitudes." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 45 (Aug. 1983), 257–67; Harry P. Bahrick "Semantic Memory Content in Permastore: Fifty Years of Memory for Spanish Learned in School," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 113 (March 1984), 1–26; Ulric Neisser, "John Dean's Memory: A Case Study," *Cognition*, 9 (Feb. 1981), 1–21.

⁶ Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, trans. Francis J. Ditter, Jr., and Vida Yazdi Ditter (1950; reprint, New York, 1980), 22–49, esp. 121; Nathan Wachtel, "Memory and History: Introduction," *History and Anthropology*, 2 (Oct. 1986), 207–21; Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (New York, 1979),

The ways that people depend on others to shape their recollections thus create an apparent paradox. People refashion the past to please the people with whom they discuss and interpret it, but they also depend on the accuracy of accounts by others to gain confidence in the accuracy of their own memories.⁷ That paradox may explain why people reshape their memories even as they often insist that their memories are vivid, unchanging, and accurate. In the recollections of the discovery of the Watergate tapes published in this issue, Alexander Butterfield and Scott Armstrong graphically illustrate how people cherish the sense of a vivid and unchanging recollection even as they reshape the content of their recollections. The ways that Butterfield, for example, reconstructed his account of the past in response to new audiences are similar to the ways historians reconstruct their accounts of the past to address new audiences while insisting that the new account is a more accurate depiction of the past. Like people in ordinary conversation, historians move backward and forward between the present and past as they create their accounts of the past. My conversations with Butterfield illustrate how the give-and-take between two particular people influences what parts of a memory get repeated by rote, what parts get reopened for fresh consideration, and what parts get reshaped. What is important is that the memory be authentic for the person at the moment of construction, not that it be an accurate depiction of a past moment.

The historical study of memory would be the study of how families, larger gatherings of people, and formal organizations selected and interpreted identifying memories to serve changing needs. It would explore how people together searched for common memories to meet present needs, how they first recognized such a memory and then agreed, disagreed, or negotiated over its meaning, and finally how they preserved and absorbed that meaning into their ongoing concerns.

Since collective memories are constructed and modified by individuals who must be able to recognize their own pasts in the group's shared memory, the historical study of memory can provide fresh perspectives on how individuals and smaller groups shaped and were shaped by larger groups and processes. What in their circumstances led them to seek out others with whom to share memories? What did individuals emphasize, reinterpret, and abandon from their own memories in order to create a shared identity with others? People whose ancestors brought very local and specific memories of lives in County Cork, Tuscany, a Yoruban village, or a Kentucky hollow to their new circumstances in, say, Chicago, soon discovered as they found others with whom to share their lives that their families' defining memories

43; David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge, Eng., 1985), esp. 196–197. On eyewitnesses, the pioneering exploration is Elizabeth F. Loftus, *Eyewitness Testimony* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979). On the importance of pictures as people grow older, see Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self* (Cambridge, Eng., 1981), 67–68, 112.

⁷ E. Tory Higgins and William S. Roles, "‘Saying Is Believing’: Effects of Message Modification on Memory and Liking for the Person Described," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 14 (July 1978), 363–78.

had actually been “Irish,” “Italian,” “African,” or “Appalachian.” Tamara K. Hareven has suggested that many immigrants and their descendants were driven by assimilationist pressures within the United States to make a more self-conscious search for “roots” and shared experiences after their particular groups ceased to be replenished with new migrants. In order to construct and participate in that larger memory, however, they had to abandon or reinterpret elements of their own pasts. The experience of enslavement in an English-speaking environment, Sterling Stuckey has explained, led African Americans to search among their varied religious, tribal, and linguistic memories for common sources from which to construct a shared English-speaking slave culture.⁸

As intriguing as the ways people negotiated a larger collective identity out of many smaller pieces are the ways they reached back to some very remote past to recover a feeling or memory to meet present needs. What led people who no longer practiced languages or customs from their families’ places of origin to decide that they wanted their children to learn Gaelic or Hebrew outside the home? How did they build group identities in the United States around struggles for an Irish free state, a Zionist homeland, abolition of apartheid in South Africa, or Serbian or Armenian independence? Under what immediate circumstances did evangelicals suddenly reject parts of their secular lives and instead draw on or even invent memories of past, and presumably more fundamental, religious practice or enthusiasm as newfound guides to belief and conduct? What connections between present and past, between private memory and public identity, inspired individuals and groups to campaign to “preserve” environment or neighborhood or culture or architectural landmark? What remembered pasts were they trying to preserve, and why?

Since politicians must by trade find memories that still have private resonance for large numbers of voters, politics opens many ways for exploring how individuals connected (or failed to connect) their private memories with the defining memories of larger groups and associations. In the decades after the Civil War, politicians urged voters to “vote the way your father shot.” The Democratic party gained a generation’s hold over voters by linking its present appeal to people’s private memories of the Great Depression and Franklin D. Roosevelt (and Herbert Hoover). When those memories ceased to be defining experiences in the private recollections of many voters, the Democrats seemed to lose public purpose and vision. Since appeals to memories have long saturated political discourse, voters have learned to tell when politicians are making routine, calculated, and rhetorical uses of memory and when they are describing memory in the same vivid, personal, defining ways that voters use it to meet their present needs. A spectacular example of that difference occurred during the vice-presidential debate of 1988 when Dan Quayle sought votes from people with positive memories of John F. Kennedy by suggesting that he and

⁸ Tamara K. Hareven, “The Search for Generational Memory: Tribal Rites in Industrial Society,” *Daedalus*, 137 (Fall 1978), 137, 147–49; Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York, 1987), 3–97.

Kennedy had shared experiences (and generations). Lloyd Bentsen answered Quayle's familiar kind of rehearsed appeal by a vivid and authentic memory rooted in firsthand experience: "I served with Jack Kennedy. I knew Jack Kennedy. Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine. Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy."⁹ Watchers (and pundits) gasped. They knew the difference between a memory that a person constructed on the spot out of a vivid experience and in response to an immediate present need and a rehearsed appeal that floated lazily out in hopes that listeners somewhere might somehow connect it with their own personal memories.

Since people seem to use common patterns in constructing memories in response to change, social history opens promising fields for the study of memory. Perhaps the most familiar theme of social history is that people have resisted rapid, alien, and imposed change by creating memories of a past that was unchanging, incorruptible, and harmonious. They mobilize those memories to resist change. In exploring how Malaysian peasants resisted economic changes in their communities, James C. Scott argues that villagers "collectively created a *remembered village* and a *remembered economy* that served as an effective ideological backdrop against which to deplore the present." "Their memory," wrote Scott, "focuses precisely on those beneficial aspects of tenure and labor relations that have been eroded or swept away over the last ten years. That they do not dwell upon other, less favorable, features of the old order is hardly surprising, for those features do not contribute to the argument they wish to make today."¹⁰ In this issue John Bodnar shows how the same process took place in more familiar settings. On the basis of interviews with former Studebaker employees in South Bend, Indiana, many years after they lost their jobs in the plant's 1963 closing, Bodnar shows how individuals constructed a chronology in which a stable past defined by a friendly workplace gave way to a contentious time of change and conflict that ended in the plant's closing.

When the central issue about these recollections becomes their construction, not their accuracy, old issues become moot and new ones become urgent. When Herbert Gutman and many of his followers interpreted workers' struggles as attempts to preserve warmly remembered and stable traditions in the face of change, they were often criticized for inaccurate and romantic characterizations of the past. In a study of memory the important question is not how accurately a recollection fitted some piece of a past reality, but why historical actors constructed their memories in a particular way at a particular time. To hunt for the moment when life (or work) was "traditional" is pointless, as folklorist Dell Hymes has observed, because all peoples "traditionalize" some aspects of their experience to meet social needs in the present. Instead of dismissing the construction of imagined pasts as romantic, escapist, inaccurate, or neurotic, we should try to understand why it is so common. Why did people in the relatively prosperous 1970s recall the 1930s, not as a time of misery and struggle, but as a time when people had been closer to each other, warmer and

⁹ Quoted by David Broder, *Columbia* [Missouri] *Tribune*, Oct. 6, 1988, p.1.

¹⁰ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, 1985), 178-79; Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, 40-41.

more caring, more "like a family" to each other? Why did they "traditionalize" familylike warmth when they recalled their pasts for oral historians or when they watched television programs like "The Waltons"? Why did they "forget" the public combat and private misery? Why did some southern whites energize their resistance to Reconstruction with memories of a "Lost Cause"?¹¹

Since people's memories provide security, authority, legitimacy, and finally identity in the present, struggles over the possession and interpretation of memories are deep, frequent, and bitter. Powerful creators and imposers of historical change, like George Orwell's Big Brother, fear that they will fail to win popular approval for their changes so long as people combine their private memories of a warm and unchanged past with the local customs and folkways of community, workplace, and religion. Big Brother could triumph only when he persuaded people that they could no longer trust the authenticity of their memories as a yardstick against which to evaluate his assertions. "The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting," wrote Milan Kundera of the attempts by many Czechoslovakians to preserve their culture in the face of a Soviet drive to obliterate memories and compel the silence, if not the loyalty, of those whose land they occupied.¹² David Blight illustrates the wisdom of Kundera's maxim in his article for this issue. Blight shows how Frederick Douglass fought for thirty years to keep alive among northern whites the memory of the Civil War as an emancipatory struggle. That memory, Douglass believed, was the freedmen's best weapon for resisting southern white schemes to establish more oppressive race relations.

Faced with people's tendency to widen and deepen their positive associations with remembered realities when confronted by imposed change, leaders have invented traditions and myths whose repetition will, they hope, at least weaken the confidence of tradition-minded peoples in their memories. "It is the contrast between the constant change and innovation of the modern world and the attempt to structure at least some parts of social life within it as unchanging and invariant, that makes the 'invention of tradition' so interesting for historians of the past two centuries," wrote Eric Hobsbawm in a pathbreaking introduction to the problem. In the late 1940s the promoters and advertisers for the new medium of television confronted the strong likelihood that they would be unable to sell their sponsors' products, argues George Lipsitz, because many potential buyers had emerged from the depression and war with deep collective memories of ethnic and working-class experiences that were alien to an individualistic ethic of consumption. The promoters' solution was to create situation comedies like "The Honeymooners," "Amos N' Andy," "Life of Riley," "Mama," "Hey Jeannie," "Life with Luigi," and "The

¹¹ Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working Class and Social History* (New York, 1977), esp. 3-117; Dell Hymes, "Folklore's Nature and the Sun's Myth," *Journal of American Folklore*, 88 (Oct.-Dec. 1975), 353-54; Studs Terkel, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York, 1970), 41, 100; Jacquelyn D. Hall, "Politics and Poetics: Writing the History of Southern Workers," paper delivered at the conference "(Re-) Writing American Literary History," University of Frankfurt, West Germany, June, 1988 (in David Thelen's possession).

¹² Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (New York, 1981), 3.

Goldbergs” in which characters with working-class and ethnic backgrounds resolved the problems of work and family life by buying happiness in the form of consumer goods and not by waging collective battles against powerful interests in their lives.¹³

The struggle for possession and interpretation of memory is rooted in the conflict and interplay among social, political, and cultural interests and values in the present. The actors appeal for popular support by claiming the sanction of the past. People test such public appeals against their personal and private memories. As they depend on others both to test the accuracy of their memories and to support their recollections, however distorted, they form and re-form conclusions, connecting and disconnecting public appeals in ever-changing ways to their private memories. If the line between the personal and the political is as indistinct as many scholars argue, these everyday conversations about “private” memory are at least tinged with political meaning and can lead to participation. From actors’ conflicts and negotiations over memory are born traditions, legends, myths, rituals, and more formalized cultural expressions of collective memory. Hoping to win popular approval for their plans for massive economic development of the continent, Richard Slotkin argues, American developers invented the myth of the frontier as the source for American exceptionalism and hoped that myth would tap popular memories and experiences. A focus on memory would lead us to treat myths, not as disembodied values, but as creations of people with real needs. Earlier historians’ discoveries of American myths of the virgin land, the agrarian past, the machine and the garden, the self-made man, and, above all, the myth of progress itself might be reinterpreted as a product of the struggle over memory. And the myths might be revisited to discover how people reshaped — and ignored — them so they would better connect (or fail to connect) with their private memories.¹⁴

Popular negotiations over memory were more like an endless conversation than a simple vote on a proposition. Each construction of a new memory, like that of a myth, grew from earlier associations and conversations. Different elements got repressed, forgotten, and reshaped only to reemerge later in the conversation in a new form. The difficulty of accepting military and political defeat in Vietnam has led many Americans, as Michael Frisch has argued, to deny that experience or any lessons that might be applied to policy toward other Third World countries.¹⁵ And yet, as Sigmund Freud pointed out some time back, it is very hard to keep even the most painful memory from coming back in some new form. So often did Oliver North refer to Vietnam in his summer 1987 testimony in support of his Iran-Contra deal that he sounded more interested in defending the Vietnam policy of 1967 than the Nicaraguan policy of 1987.

¹³ Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger (Cambridge, Eng., 1984), 1; George Lipsitz, “The Meaning of Memory: Family, Class, and Ethnicity in Early Network Television Programs,” *Cultural Anthropology*, 1 (Nov. 1986), 355–87.

¹⁴ Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800–1890* (New York, 1985), chs. 2 and 3, esp. pp. 33–45.

¹⁵ Michael Frisch, “The Memory of History,” in *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public*, ed. Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier, and Roy Rosenzweig (Philadelphia, 1986), 5–17.

The creation of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial may exemplify the most common resolution of the tension between participants' private memories of an event and elites' preferences for turning the past into myths that promote uniformity and stability. Supporters and opponents of the war remembered it as a political or military folly, depending on viewpoint, that had embarrassed the United States in the world and sapped its political will at home. To the men and women who fought the war, the ones whose sacrifice was to be remembered, however, there was no single "war in Vietnam." There were, rather, thousands of different experiences and memories that veterans felt no one wanted to hear when they returned home. Maya Lin designed a memorial that brilliantly allowed those with large political agendas and those with intimate private memories to come together. She envisioned a simple wall on which would be carved the names of those Americans who had died in Vietnam. To those with policy agendas the sheer number of names was an overwhelming reminder of folly. To veterans the names triggered a different scale and kind of memory. "If I can touch the name of my friends who died," wrote a former infantryman, "maybe I will finally have time to react. Maybe I will end up swearing, maybe crying, maybe smiling, remembering a funny incident. Whatever it is, I will have time and the focal point to do it now. There just wasn't the emotional time in Nam to know what happened."¹⁶ The tension between invented traditions and private memories may finally resolve into one of scale. Big memorials may legitimate elites' conduct in their own eyes, but they also provide space for people to nurture the intimate memories of the most searing experiences in their individual lives.

The debate over whether and how to remember Vietnam overlaps and parallels the debate about "American Memory." What do—and should—Americans remember from the nation's past as the defining experiences that shape our present? We are indebted to conservatives, as Michael Frisch shows in this issue, for raising the question of how and why Americans "remember" so few so-called landmarks of western and American civilization. It is less clear that conservatives are correct in believing that the cause of this "forgetting" is the democratization of culture and curriculum in the 1960s and the alleged accompanying consequences of undisciplined thinking at the expense of rigorous memorization and of "fringe" subjects like black literature or women's studies at the expense of presumed core topics. Frisch cites his own polls to demonstrate that the alleged changes of the 1960s have not much influenced the content of "American Memory" at all.

The debate over "American Memory" returns us to two central concerns in creating this special issue. While most discussion has centered on what content students should be required to learn, there is at least as important a question about how to teach about memory itself. What names and facts should students be required to memorize and then retrieve as signposts for the rest of their lives? That approach to memory nicely fit the view that memories were objective representa-

¹⁶ Jan C. Scruggs and Joel L. Swerdlow, *To Heal a Nation: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (New York, 1985), 70–71, 75, 99, esp. 126

tions, passively stored, but it simply does not fit the view of memory as a subjective process of active construction. If we wanted a history curriculum that taught people how to use memories, we would focus on how memories are constructed. We would help students to learn how to get honest and accurate feedback for their own constructions even as they followed their natural wishes to find support for their conclusions. We would encourage them to learn how to challenge, adapt, and construct memories instead of accepting interpretations that others seek to impose on them, how to test appeals to the past instead of accepting them on faith and authority. We would explore the social and communal contexts in which memories are created, reshaped, and forgotten. We would illustrate how their memories can lead as naturally to progressive constructions and ideologies as to conservative ones.

The debate over "American Memory" is finally about audiences for American history. Frisch found that the remembered signposts of the past in the 1980s are pretty much what they would have been in the 1950s. The Right's fears of a radical transformation of popular historical consciousness are apparently unfounded. While we need to explore why, we also need to explore how his finding fits with an equally intriguing development. Frisch, like many others, is understandably troubled by the gap between the content that amateur audiences associate with "American History" and the content that is presently taught in most graduate departments of history. There is undoubtedly a chasm between popular and professional approaches to the past, as David Lowenthal suggests in this issue, that will be very hard to bridge. Why, for example, has the new social history had so little impact on popular memories? How can we connect our craft with the wider audiences that clearly like history when the memories of those audiences are so different from the memories of professional historians?

We hope that this special issue will point to an approach that underscores similarities in the ways people construct and reconstruct memories of the past regardless of the ways they earn their incomes.