

History and Memory: Construction, Deconstruction and Reconstruction

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For once our societies are in agreement with the social and human sciences, that is, the sciences that have made these societies their subject of study and claim to provide them with a knowledge of themselves that the societies treat with a distant respect without being very sure they really need it: for our societies, as well as for the social and human sciences, memory is on the agenda, it has become a compulsory reference point. Our societies even agree to hear about a 'duty to remember' resembling an ethical and political requirement they could not evade. The preservation and promotion of every trace of the past has become one of the most general and least discussed aspects of every cultural policy. The term 'heritage' has entered the official language and is combined with a large number of adjectives: artistic, ethnological, archaeological, ecological, animal and plant. It is as if, in order to find an excuse and make people forget, societies, which on one hand are clearly ambitious for strong economic growth, progress and adaptation to new technologies, had on the other to compensate by making frequent reference to a past they do not wish to lose, destroy or consign to oblivion, even though they continually turn their back on it.

As far as the human and social sciences are concerned, as book titles bear witness (when we search libraries' computerized catalogues), there is not one that does not refer to memory. Philosophers, psychologists, psychoanalysts and sociologists showed the way; historians and archaeologists, ethnologists and anthropologists, linguists and semioticians, specialists in cognitive science as well as religious studies followed in their footsteps. At the startpoint there was a twofold question. The first part had to do with individual memory and the ambiguous relationship it keeps maintaining between remembering and forgetting, the work of consciousness and the imagination, and the access it affords to the deepest layers of the psyche. The second part, on the other hand, concerned collective memory and the mechanisms that allow it to be built up and transmitted and to influence individual actors. At the

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endpoint historians' strategy followed the opposite route, proceeding from the social construction of living collective memory to the study of the 'sites of memory', which became imbued with the beauty of death. However, if we look closely, two main preoccupations have tended, during the last 20 years, not so much to eliminate the others as to push them into the background. They have, apparently at least, occupied the foreground where the interests and debates of researchers link up with the general public's curiosity and concern.

The first one is a response to the fascination with the progress in computer techniques and materials, whose real and virtual memories, calculated in mega, then giga, then tetrabytes, seemed capable of satisfying two dreams: on one hand the dream of achieving in the machines' memory an encyclopaedic totality of all past and present knowledge, and on the other the dream of being able to interrogate them all at will and ask them many hitherto unthinkable questions without needing to burden our own individual memory with any of this knowledge. To have everything without knowing anything, a well-informed mind freed of all its clutter and able to devote itself entirely to formulating questions, interpreting results and thinking freely, provided of course that one has mastered all the modes of accessing these potentially infinite databanks.

The second preoccupation, however, stems from a question about the Second World War massacres, which spread first to the black books of the various 20th-century totalitarian regimes, then to the violence done by Europe to the societies it exploited for the slave trade even before bringing them under its colonial domination, and also the violence done to all the minorities, particularly religious, to whom Europe on its own territory denied the right to be different. In all these cases, and to the extent that the victims had been civilian populations themselves, and societies that people tried to destroy, the question that was posed was about the impossibility that the societies involved should lay the blame entirely on their political masters and the direct perpetrators (for example, the slave traders in the case of the traffic in black people) for violence they knew about, accepted or allowed to happen. The duty to remember came to confront a determination or desire to forget, which was often justified as the need to move on and let each society make peace with itself through amnesty and silence. And historians were called upon to abandon their vaunted neutrality in order to stop this rejected or repressed past from falling into oblivion, to establish a diagnosis of those massacres that were sometimes taken as far as genocide, identify those responsible and put themselves as experts at the service of justice. History found it was reinvested with a critical function within society. The wars of the first half of the 20th century (and the war memorials), the resistance or national independence movements, the various revolutions or uprisings (successful or failed) had accustomed historians to the reassuring territory of shared memory: they had to learn to pick their way through the infinitely more tricky territory of contested memory.

It is from these two great series of questions that we have to set out today, but distancing ourselves from them and refusing to allow ourselves to be imprisoned by them. For they designate or define only one particular sector of an infinitely more vast and complex whole. They are far from exhausting the debate. To express it even better; they are in danger of being the trees that prevent us seeing the rest of the

wood. The problem we are faced with today must be apprehended in its totality if we want to have a chance of understanding it. Four keywords will serve as tools to open the doors: remembering and forgetting, memory and history. But we soon realize that each of them is multiple and not single, and that each time their singular sends us, on one hand, to a plural and, on the other, to a fifth character which over the last two decades has come to dominate the scene: identity.

We shall start with the relationship between history and memory – a memory that we must not forget has a dual dimension, individual and collective, personal and social. Far from being simple this relationship has always been fraught with ambiguity and tension.

1. From its beginnings history is also dual. By its very name it is associated with an operation that is a search for truth: history means enquiry, Herodotus announced, appealing to the etymological meaning of the word. But at the very moment it came into being in this way, defining itself as enquiry freely carried out by an author, history had spent two or three millennia learning to play another part, as guardian of the official collective memory: a memory that required certain actors in a society or state to identify and select a certain number of facts, of actions by a certain number of people, the description of which, in the form and terms chosen by the leaders (for whom truth matters less than representation), was to be made public for the living (history is written first of all in the present and for the present), and the remembrance passed down to succeeding generations. The programmed preservation of the memory thus carefully selected was then committed to writing, which was itself recorded on various media (stone, metal, clay tablets, wood, papyrus, parchment, paper, and nowadays computers), but also on monuments intended to describe the action (Trajan's column, Augustus's family on the Ara Pacis) or simply commemorate it by symbolizing it (the meaning being explained by a phrase, a dedication, etc.). The written word accommodates the image with which it combines. And so memory, or at least this kind of memory instituted and constructed by the powers that be, exploits a multiplicity of different signs: image, which is seen and creates an effect of reality, and writing, which is a codified symbol and gives access to language, itself another memory. Nevertheless it cannot be reduced to these signs.

2. But once it has been set in motion the work of memorizing keeps proliferating. The state plays its part by taking on writing, as soon as it emerges, and making it the constantly improving instrument of its power: immediately the first stable political entities make their appearance in the Middle and Near East there is a rapid expansion in the archives the administration needs, or thinks it needs, to record the inventory of its stocks and treasure, the list of dues it is owed, collection of these dues, the size of its army and the names of its clerks and the regime's dignitaries. And so the administrators inscribe their action in time and work to make norms and regulations conquer forgetting, which often has an axe to grind, and all forms of usurpation and negligence. However, this does not mean they intend to publish these documents one day, or even make them public, or even use them all themselves: they produce and accumulate them for themselves, in order to be able to refer to them, and more still in order to know and let others know they have them to hand. But other people

in later periods were able to access them and knew how to use them for different purposes. So when Tacitus used the archives of the Roman senate to read official documents, speeches and decisions, which he did not in fact quote verbatim but rewrote in his own style, he began a practice that was to become the prime method of the historian's craft: reading and re-using as sources documents produced by others, generally public and religious institutions, sometimes individuals, families, more limited groups acting privately, with the aim of reading them critically and attempting to distinguish between, on one hand, 'truth' and representation, and on the other, the spoken and the unspoken, what was made explicit and what went unmentioned.

But this official practice quickly faced competition and imitation from a series of private practices that appropriated it. The most obvious and the closest, because it uses the same media and aims to reach the same audiences, is funeral epitaphs, which can be traced through from Greek and Roman antiquity up to present-day cemeteries, that 16th-century invention where, in the 19th century, thanks to grave-stones, the dead got back the names someone had tried to take away from them, the names to which they attempt to draw the attention of the living: a practice that is today being challenged by another one, which is growing fast in our societies, cremation followed by scattering of the ashes, as if the dead trusted in other documents to perpetuate their memory, or had even opted to move on for good and fall into oblivion.

3. The general spread of the written word, both public and private, increased the number of documents preserved, even if many of them, doubtless the majority, were lost: and this poses yet again, but in different terms, the problem of selection, with its deliberate variant (selection by institutions – and sometimes also individuals – who decide whether or not to preserve, and what to keep or destroy) and also its random aspect (certain documents have been preserved and others not). Then historians find they are faced with a twofold problem: first the social and institutional conditions of production of the sources they use, whose purpose is in all cases to create an 'effect of reality', and second the technical aspect of the methods of preservation – the quality of the media: we can think of the exceptional resistance of papyrus in an especially dry climate, which until very recently made Egypt the best-known province to historians of the Roman period), as regards its daily reality – and also their historical aspect (archives deliberately or unintentionally burnt, continuity and discontinuity of political regimes).

But at the same time archaeology intervened over 50 years ago to break the link that connected history to writing and found ways to turn each 'object', provided it was brought to light in accordance with professional rules, into a 'document' that was part of an exhaustive system of possible relations with all the other objects on the same archaeological level as well as the earlier and later levels: it opened up further millennia to history and extended amazingly the field of sources. History no longer begins with Sumer, nor is it identified with the written word: matter has entered the cultural domain, which has had to make way on an equal footing for a 'material culture' that no longer seems the poor relation.

4. All the same, history's work of producing, on the basis of these documents, a memory directed to the general public, taking the form of a narrative and suggesting texts and representations designed to fix the event as it ought to be remembered and, for those that deserve it, commemorated, does not exhaust or cover all the uses of memory. In contrast to this deliberate programmed use there are others that are spontaneous, anonymous, private, unsanctioned, unplanned.

– Spontaneous, anonymous uses: the legend that subverts the official version and constructs a new version of the event, contradicting the first one (thus the Napoleon legend turns a defeat into a victory and identifies the despot with the Revolution which he tried to bring to an end).

– Private uses: kinship or genealogical memory, the traditional job of a society's elders, encountered competition and was marginalized first by parish registers, then by the state, which took away all its legal value but without causing it to disappear, since family memory is also about selecting and putting into perspective a combination of real links and emotional bonds, with memory and forgetting closely associated.

– Private uses again: the huge development, particularly noticeable since the 16th and 17th centuries, of personal diaries, which, even when they are kept private by their author, assume the status of a literary genre studied as such by the specialists;¹ in the 19th century keeping one's 'journal' became an almost compulsory exercise for society girls, who had to decide whether or not to show it to their mothers, or to let their husbands read it (at which point, on marrying, they normally stopped writing it), but this was also true for writers.

– And finally alternative, rebellious uses, adopted by social groups who rejected the official version: revolts and uprisings, trades union and revolutionary movements, nowadays women, various ethnic, linguistic or religious minorities, all those who are left out of the official version.

5. History's claim to be universal (even if this universal is often identified with the viewpoint of and about a specific group) is contested by this proliferation of different histories written from different viewpoints. Some aspire to another universal, others are not only satisfied with being particular but insist that they are, while being increasingly often recognized in law as a right: everyone has the right to their own history, which is never more than one history among others. History is joined by memory, whether spontaneous or constructed, and more often than not reconstructed in the dual mode of victory over imposed silence, of both alterity and alternative, the memory of individuals and groups who contest the historians' 'official' history in its very principle: the choice of a 'dominant' viewpoint that is falsely neutral (since it is also most frequently that of the social elites), or is used to build collective support for a past, a tradition and a living collectivity (such as the nation that relies on eliminating differences), the selection of 'important' issues (which are the problems of those who speak and write at the expense of all those who are excluded and destined to remain walled up in the silence to which they have been condemned).

However, if we talk about history in fragments, we are using a deceptive image. Never has history been so much read, written, defended, contested, criticized,

rewritten and debated by so many actors from such a wide and open range of cultures, religions, nations, genders, majority or minority groups. And never has it seemed to so many people to be the key to their identity: an identity both individual and collective that is finally at peace with itself. But now and probably forever more we have to accept that history as plural and connected, via continual rewriting, to a multiplicity of memories. Thus every historical narrative will be a choice, relative and provisional. So it is no surprise that the first victim of the current position of history is the national history we knew and loved, and not only because European states are in the process of integrating into a much bigger entity. That national history, which is still needed, must and can be rewritten differently. But this obligation creates a situation of inequality between the most advanced old states, who already had an established history that they can easily criticize and rewrite because it has already been written, and all the other societies whose states are far more recent, dating as they do from the last half-century, and who cannot avoid writing their own history, if only to build collective support around their state.

6. This reference to identity, the fifth character in this story, brings us to the point where we pick up the thread that leads from the practice of confession, in its Catholic variant (oral confession to a third party who is responsible for deciding the conditions for forgiveness and opening the way to forgetting) or in its Protestant form, from confession to God, thus in fact to oneself, which precludes any idea of forgetting and can take a written form, to be read publicly after one's death – Heide Wunder – to psychoanalysis. Though it is acceptable for individuals, confession would not do for groups or societies, for whom forgetting can be confused with secrecy and the determination or desire not to know: they have to be made to bring to the surface what is repressed and submit to the curative virtues of memory. The duty to remember, as regards, for example, the Holocaust or Vichy or the violence of French repression in Algeria, is proposed as a collective psychoanalysis designed to cure a society of its past, which it is trying unsuccessfully to forget and which is still present.²

At least this realization has the merit of reminding us that all the oppositions we are tempted to set up between collective and individual memory do not stand up very well to even slightly more probing analysis. In the sense of the word we use today the individual is a social construction, and just as we can write a history of love, friendship, fear or death, as Lucien Febvre suggested, we have to realize that individual memory is also a subject for history: it would be pointless to see it as permanent and invariable. From the individual to the group, the connecting links are many, complex, difficult to identify, but very real.

7. Nowadays memory is everywhere, and with it reference to memory. Which encourages us to wonder about the specific nature of the current situation as it has taken shape over the last two centuries. Several factors seem to have had a decisive role:

– the emergence of history as a scientific discipline comparable to the other sciences, pursued by communities of specialists and organized both nationally and internationally by institutions that define its principles of working and validating results, its problems and concepts;

– the special relationship that has grown up between history and the nation state, whose emergence and spread have transformed the nature of the body politic. This is now defined, at least in theory, less by obedience to a sovereign than by a collective identity implying support for a body of common values whose initial definition is identified and chronologically dated by a founding act – 14 July, the night of 4 August, Independence Day – and therefore precisely, by being written into the past, which includes a clear break guaranteeing the future. So every state needs a history that is placed at the heart of its education system from primary school on, like geography, which is knowledge of the nation's territory. The new states that emerged from the colonial period have experienced this, and the history of Africa 'before Europe' has therefore obtained a place and a legitimacy that had never hitherto been acknowledged. In their turn the post-Communist states are travelling down the same road;

– the ambiguity of the position of historians, torn between the scientific view of their profession and their status as citizens, and not only unable to distance themselves in relation to their own country, but tempted to take up an ideological stance on issues of origins or interpretation of major events that always implies one form or another of 'exception' peculiar to their country's history: the Revolution and the Commune in France, the Glorious Revolution in Britain. In the end historians find it hard to choose between two positions. On the one hand their professional position as legitimate constructors of the collective memory, legitimized by their colleagues and institutions, and as such critics of all other forms of collective memory produced by others, which must therefore be myth or legend. On the other hand, their scientific position which encourages them to extend their criticism to previous constructions by historians, both as they were formulated by their authors and as they have been reappropriated, distorted, reinterpreted by different audiences. So they will today willingly accept the role of the expert who is entrusted with tricky cases (the commission headed by René Rémond and François Bédarida on the Lyon Church's attitude to Touvier and other former collaborators, the enquiry in Switzerland, officially entrusted to Jean-François Berger, into capital deposited in Swiss banks and never returned after the war to the heirs of the Jewish depositors who had disappeared – a job that, in France by contrast, was given by the Caisse des Dépôts et Consignations to a commission chaired by a judge). Historians will even agree, as we saw during the Papon trial, to appear as 'witnesses', which is even more questionable, or subject to caution. But in addition they are encouraged to deconstruct their predecessors' constructions (be they nationalist, revolutionary, conservative, etc.) not only by analysing their errors, but by recontextualizing their work – an operation that they apply to others but avoid applying to themselves.

8. However, recontextualizing their own work would lead historians to problematize the questions they are led to ask. Why is there this interest, which in fact is quite recent, in history conceived as a construction of the national collectivity's memory, an interest that has revolutionized the traditional practices and hypotheses of historiography, which was hitherto seen as a particular section of the history of culture? Why are there these questions about this or that collective crime committed by the previous generation, which the succeeding generation, in the name of the

values of democracy, has to uncover and denounce, in order to free itself, by making it public, from a past that the first of the survivors' concerns was to try to forget? Should we see it as a questioning of the identification – or close alliance – between history and nation state (or that state's political project, whether revolutionary or conservative, liberal or authoritarian)? Or, still more profoundly, the recognition that memory is no longer (and in fact has probably never been) the monopoly of historians, who, since they are involved in the day-to-day life of society, cannot lay claim to that position of distance from its passions which they had made their credo? Or, if we prefer, the recognition that there is no such thing as innocent history, because there is no such thing as innocent memory? The method that historians subject themselves to, being condemned to question their profession and the social position that flows from it, is similar to what Bourdieu suggested for sociology: it is no surprise that those most affected are historians of the contemporary period.

9. Memory and reminiscence: these changes that have taken place over the last two centuries are, however, not the only ones, nor perhaps the main ones. Techniques of conservation, reproduction and transmission have increased, potentially ad infinitum, the very volume and nature of the documents that are produced by a society and are available to be re-used by succeeding generations: after text (printed and nowadays computerized), image (first fixed, then moving) and sound, initially all separate then later together (talking pictures), capable of being transmitted over great distances (television), and now multimedia bringing together text, image and sound, available to everyone and for every use, real and virtual. Today all of us, at least in the most developed societies, have at our disposal a vast and almost unlimited mass of documents on ourselves, our families and relatives, which invites us to live our lives both in the present and in the past, and indeed in many pasts that in fact are not limited to those we have experienced but can be extended, via image and sound, to previous generations: this explains the current fashion for genealogical research, which has become a major activity among retired people in France, nearly all of them amateurs. All the more reason to challenge historians' claim to a monopoly of truth (which micro-historians in fact try to identify and describe as close to lived reality as possible, in its most concrete aspects), and a universalizing conception of history. Added to this there is the cult of objects from the past, which demonstrates a concern to be involved in the passage of time, and a new sensitivity to changes in fashion. We live overloaded with memories, which we ask to reassure us about our present and future, thus in fact about our own death: they are the anti-instance to Proust's madeleine whose taste and fragrance together brought back the past into the present, with the savour and force of life.

10. And so questions about the present lead us to a history of memory, whose stages have been clearly marked out by prehistorians such as André Leroi-Gourhan, anthropologists such as Jack Goody and historians such as Jacques Le Goff, but we should not forget that they overlap quite a lot: between one stage and the next the break is never complete, and the old goes on coexisting with the new, which never entirely wipes it out. And that gives this history a twofold dimension: the first part is diachronic, as is appropriate for every history, but the second is synchronic and

aims to reveal, at each moment, in each individual and each society, the superimposition of these succeeding strata and their interaction.

These different stages are punctuated by the successive inventions that allowed people to fix, reproduce and handle, by externalizing them in relation to human beings, a growing quantity of information. Writing itself, which was the first frontier, printing, then all the techniques of classification and interrogation of data, first on cards, then by machines that led in the 20th century to the invention and succeeding developments of computers. In parallel with these different stages there have been differences in the tasks required of memory, in the ways of ordering the past to satisfy the needs of the present (whether myth, legend, history, autobiographical narrative or not), in the modes of combining, on one hand, oral and written and on the other writing and image. Far from relegating it to a secondary role, we know today that writing has, for thousands of years and until recently, promoted the part played by individual memory by imposing the new rule of rote learning and absorbing the original text word for word. From a social viewpoint writing was long the preserve of a tiny elite of clerks, professionals and members of the ruling classes, and as regards content, it was restricted to a limited range of knowledge that emphasized the relationship between humans and the divinity (religion), time (calendars, genealogies, origins) and space (distances and descriptions of the known world). But it kept on widening its fields of application (from literature to private writing), the range of media used to transcribe it (from stone to paper and nowadays digital media), the sites and methods of preservation. At the same time it became accessible to all, which meant the gradual transition, which can be dated to between the 18th and 19th centuries for some European societies, from limited to general literacy, which has today become the standard aim, even though there is still some way to go before it is achieved.

In the wake of this universalization of literacy the computer revolution now underway arrived to swell, in hitherto unprecedented and potentially limitless proportions, the mass of information committed to memory, but it also implied that this information was externalized in relation to individual memory (which had previously been true only for printed material). This individual memory, as at earlier stages but still more clearly, is being radically refocused as regards content and tasks: at the lowest level it has become the last refuge of forgetting. Which confirms that it is impossible to separate the study of individual from that of collective memory. Especially as this collective memory is in turn torn between several contradictory demands: helping to construct a history that gives the different societies, be they organized around a nation state or not, a meaning and identity, responding to new enquiries and requests from individuals and groups that pull it off in completely different directions, or coping with its own job of internal organization in order to store and preserve information better, regardless of any identifiable or identified use or user.

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And so never have memory's tools been more powerful or more efficient, never have avowed knowledge of and respect for the past been carried so far, never has forget-

ting seemed so impossible (given the plethora of evidence the present is leaving behind), but also never has the relationship between history and memory seemed so uncertain and open. History is a recognized scientific discipline and literary genre, and it maintains its legitimacy and the advantages accruing from its traditional rights. But it has lost, probably at the cost of a few illusions, the monopoly it thought it had over the production and conservation of memory. Memory is for the most part built up and developed independently of and outside history. It has taken back its freedom. And it is tempting and inspiring other partners. Science, with biology especially, which provided it with the heuristic metaphor of programmed reproduction. Literature, as suggested by that question from André Breton in his 1922 *Carnets*: 'and what if memory was just the product of the imagination?' But literature may be a novel, a literary genre that is recent after all, even if it has antecedents in Greek and Roman antiquity, and in China and Japan, that is, in societies which, in towns at least, had universalized the knowledge and use of writing: in any case a genre in which the role of individual memory and its part, via writing, in the construction of social memory is both ambiguous and essential. But literature, as Rafael Argullol reminds us, is also poetry, whose origins are infinitely more distant and which has never broken or denied its intimate, structural relationship with the spoken words: indeed this relationship gives it the task of saying or at least suggesting the unsayable. As testimony there stand, among many others, these three lines from *La Jeune Parque*,³ a poem whose main theme is indeed the birth of individual consciousness – a birth that comes about through the discovery of duality, the presence of the other, in the deepest part of ourselves:

Souvenir, ô bûcher dont le vent d'or m'affronte,
Souffle au masque la pourpre imprégnant le refus
D'être en moi-même en flamme une autre que je fus,

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Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

Notes

1. See Philippe Lejeune, *Je est un autre: l'autobiographie de la littérature aux médias*, Paris, Seuil, 1980.
2. Henry Rousso, *Vichy, un passé qui ne passe pas*, with Eric Conan, Paris, Fayard, 1994.
3. Paul Valéry, *Œuvres complètes*, La Pléiade, vol. 1, Paris, Gallimard, 1957, p. 96.