

On Memory
An Interdisciplinary Approach



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Chapter 3

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Analyzing Collective Memory

What is collective memory? The attempt to respond to this question, which has been subject to lively debate over the course of the past decades, faces very different and even disparate kinds of response according to the ways in which it is analyzed in the various disciplines of the humanities and in the social and cognitive sciences. In each case the term "collective memory" signifies the transmission of shared experience that has been retained by a group. But even this rudimentary qualification raises difficulties that immediately come to mind: first, memory necessarily refers to the original sphere of personal experience, to the intimacy of personal life; to speak of "collective memory," then, necessarily presupposes a principle of cohesion of singular personal memories within an overarching whole. The definition of this principle is by no means an easy task. Second, when one refers to group experience into which personal life is interwoven, memory takes on a completely different perspective in relation to a small group, such as a family or a professional association, in contrast to a more extended collectivity, such as the public sphere of national commemoration. Often comprehension of the word "memory" is obscured when it is applied indifferently to personal or collective experience, on the one hand, and to small or very large groups, on the other. It is in this light that the question concerning the meaning of "collective memory" and the "place" in which it might be found arises. One is reminded of St. Augustine's famous description of personal memory in quest of its hidden source in book X of the *Confessions*, in which he likened memory to the soul itself ("Hic vero, cum animus sit etiam ipsa memoria") (St. Augustine 1988, vol. II, Bk X, 110–11) and described it as being in a "place which is not a place"

("interiore loco, non loco") (ibid., 100-1). And beyond the personal sphere, this same question of "place," of "locus," is all the more complex in relation to collective memory.

An initial phenomenological attempt to locate collective memory aims to situate it at different levels, according to whether it is shared by smaller or larger groups. At the most elementary level one can speak of the experience of a family, of a school class or of a professional group. Here the description of shared memories may be quite simple: an important event, for example, may characterize the personal reminiscences of each of the members of the group over the course of their lives. Beyond memories retained by small groups, one may refer to memories shared by larger collectivities which recall events that draw on collective practices much older than any of the members of the group and, as such, constitute a fundamental source of the identity of each of its members. One may take as examples political or religious ceremonies, which follow symbolic patterns of behavior. As a sign of patriotism, the members of a group who share the same nationality, upon hearing the national anthem of their country, rise to their feet. The Pesach Seder enjoins each of the participants to reenact in memory the flight from Egypt, by which a mighty hand led the Jewish people to freedom. Similarly, the members of a Christian church celebrate the ritual of the Eucharist in remembering the words of Christ: "This is my body, which is for you, do this in memory of me." In such examples, the identities of smaller groups, whether family or other gatherings, incorporate the memories of larger preexisting groups and draw on symbolic practices that are at the root of all collective experience as such.

In terms of a phenomenological description such as this, the characterization of collective memory, in spite of the variety of levels at which it may be situated, indicates in a preliminary way that the possibility of referring memory beyond the sphere of personal experience arises in the communicative power of *symbols*. It is in deploying potent symbols that flags in the political sphere or wine in religious ritual evoke collectively meaningful reminiscence. Our phenomenological investigation of the locus of collective memory must thus proceed by clarifying the relation between personal memory and the collective forms of remembrance conveyed by means of symbols. This

will be done in two steps: first, by elucidating what is taken to be a phenomenological description of collective memory; second, by arguing in favor of the *primacy* of such analysis, which will be considered in relation to the challenge presented by psychoanalytic, neurocognitive and sociohistorical methods, which to my mind are the predominant methods of approach to the phenomenon of collective memory in the contemporary human, natural and cultural sciences.

1

To present an initial phenomenological elucidation of the relation between personal memory and symbolically elaborated collective remembrance, I draw on an example that seems particularly appropriate for this task: the famous speech of Martin Luther King Jr, "I have a dream."

Martin Luther King delivered this speech on 28 August 1963, during the "March on Washington," which rallied nearly 250,000 participants. The demonstration was called in the name of the civil rights movement, which was protesting against the conditions of political and social inequality to which black Americans were subjected. This event also marked a commemoration: assembled before the Lincoln Memorial, it recalled the centenary of the famous Emancipation Proclamation by which President Abraham Lincoln, in the midst of the American Civil War, proclaimed the liberation of the black slaves. Martin Luther King called attention to this commemoration in his speech, and also reminded his hearers that the promise of equality made by Lincoln had never been kept.

However, the evocative power of Martin Luther King's speech stems not only from the fact that he reminded his hearers of this unkept promise. At another level, the Protestant pastor recalled something else, which stood at the heart of Lincoln's own speech: the idea of equality upon which the American nation, beginning with the Declaration of Independence of 1776, was founded: "We hold these

truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal," as we can read in this document, cited by Lincoln and evoked once again by Martin Luther King. More important still, the founding fathers of the United States did not limit themselves to a purely *political* legitimization of this principle of equality; they also grounded it in what they considered to be a divine sanction. Lincoln did not hesitate to refer to this religious foundation of the principle of equality, and Martin Luther King recalled with singular eloquence its profound eschatological source. Thus, after envisioning the end to racial strife in the American South and the possibility that black and white children might walk peacefully hand in hand, the Protestant pastor evoked the prophetic vision – drawing on the New Testament's Gospel of Saint Luke, which explicitly recalled the Old Testament words of the prophet Isaiah: "The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together" (Luther King 1998, 226).

This example permits the establishment of an important distinction, which is necessary for the elucidation of the phenomenon of collective memory. At one level of analysis, one can elicit the collective memory retained by those who listened to the speech on 28 August 1963. I recall how vividly this discourse moved me as a young schoolboy, as I watched it on television. I remember the tense context in which it was presented in that year, which, less than three months later, would witness the assassination of John F. Kennedy. With this example in mind, a first "locus" of collective memory may be identified: the recollection of shared experience that a group retains. On this day, 28 August 1963, the demonstrators, the schoolboy who viewed it on television and the contemporaries who learned of the event through the other media all remembered it, albeit in different ways and at various points of distance from the event itself. Maurice Halbwachs, in his pioneering works, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* and *La mémoire collective*, defined the phenomenon of collective memory in similar terms, as the experience that a group shares and retains. For Halbwachs, collective memory lasts only as long as the group that remembers the shared experience and disappears as soon as all of its members have passed away. At this point, collective memory gives way to historiography and to its quest for traces of a past that living individuals no longer retain (Halbwachs 1997, 97–142).

When defined in these terms, however, the phenomenon of collective memory still remains at a preliminary level of analysis. It would have been possible, indeed, to listen to the speech without comprehending its significance. One might have failed to pay attention to its words, as many often do while listening to political utterances that are for them a source of infinite boredom. One might in such a case recall ancillary or even trivial phenomena – the beautiful sun that illuminated the August sky, the unusually large number of the police forces called in for the occasion, or the tension that could everywhere be felt on this momentous occasion. To my mind, it is essential to distinguish between the direct recall of an event and another moment with which it is often confused, its *symbolic embodiment*. Symbolic embodiment as a collective phenomenon precedes and distinguishes itself from historical narrative, which seeks to grasp the event following the disappearance of all living memory. In its fluidity and immediacy it also differs from what we commonly refer to as “tradition,” with which it is often confused. If imagination accompanies the activity of remembrance (it would reach beyond the present analysis to examine this point in detail), it is *a fortiori* an essential moment in the symbolic embodiment of collective memory. For this reason, symbolic embodiment may very well arise in the direct experience of the event, forming the core of subsequent recollection: contemporaries who appreciated the theologico-political depth of Martin Luther’s speech initially grasped the importance of the event and the contribution of Martin Luther King, which is today the object of official commemoration on a national scale. This is not to deny the existence of different and even contradictory manners of symbolically embodying an event: southerners hostile to the message of the black pastor or the head of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover, who evinced an implacable hostility toward Martin Luther King and toward his cause, accorded a very different symbolic significance to the event than did his supporters. In this sense, collective memory is, from the very point of its genesis, fragmented memory (Mendels 2004, 30–47). At the same time, it is in each case the symbolic force that permits collective memory to constitute a source of temporal continuity of group identities, which, as it is codified, lends itself to the formation of what we normally call “tradition.”

Here a distinction needs to be drawn that is essential to the discussion. I distinguish between the multitude of perspectives retained by personal memories of a collectively experienced event and the symbolic embodiment of memory, constituting a collectively identifiable locus for past experience. And the point I seek to make is that "collective memory" can be reduced to neither one nor the other of these moments but gravitates between them as modes of recall of the remembered past. At one extremity is found the singularity of perspective that roots all collectively significant experience in the web of personal remembrance; at the other extremity symbolic embodiment raises remembrance beyond personal experience to confer upon it significance and communicability in the collective sphere. At one extremity, it is possible to limit remembrance so completely to the realm of personal experience that its collective significance is blurred (the beautiful sun that illuminated the August sky, the unusually large number of the police forces called in for the occasion, the tension that could everywhere be felt on this momentous occasion); at the other extremity, even after all personal, living recollection of the event has vanished, its symbolic embodiment in a specific event can be recalled and reenacted to lend significance to later collective experience (Martin Luther King declaring: "I have a dream"). It is in the thickness of its many stratifications that symbolic embodiment confers on collective memory a perdurability extending well beyond the lives of those who directly experience a moment in its ongoing and changing articulation. And this perdurability indicates a dimension of symbolic embodiment of language and gesture that constitutes a metapersonal fount of personal and interpersonal interaction.

2

Described in such a manner, the phenomenon of collective memory would seem to lend itself to straightforward analysis. The problematic status of collective memory becomes apparent, however, as soon as the phenomenological description is abandoned and one attempts to account for it through methodologies that locate its source beyond the scope of experience. Three such methodologies, above all, serve to orient current conceptions of collective memory: those inspired by psychoanalysis, by the neurocognitive fields and by the sociohistorical disciplines. Each of these methodologies presents an approach to collective memory that is difficult to reconcile with the others. Which of them, therefore, is most capable of situating the phenomenon of collective memory? Let us briefly examine the claims of each method as a means of bringing our conception of collective memory more clearly into focus.

Much of the recent literature dealing with collective memory has drawn its inspiration from psychological and psychoanalytic research, most directly stemming from the work of Sigmund Freud and his school. According to Freud's well-known theory, all human relations are founded on the dynamics of the individual's early experiences in the nuclear family, in which the mechanisms of repression of unacceptable unconscious wishes, as well as of traumatic experiences, are constitutive of both individual and group relations. All relations are characterized by repressed desires and repressed experiences continuing to operate tacitly and condition everyday behavior in ways not readily brought to awareness that commonly operate in the form of symptoms. And it is in this light that symbolic meaning is analyzed. Symbols are of importance insofar as they can be related to psychic functions, above all in their quality as symptoms of unconscious processes that can be therapeutically treated. Other types of symbols, most notably in the spheres of politics and religion, come into view to the extent that they mirror psychological processes. Hence, for example, in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud established a parallel between the work of dream censorship in the dreams of the sleeping

individual, which through symbolization and related psychic mechanisms hides the unacceptable content of repressed desires expressed in the dream, and the work of the political writer who, through similar tactics, conceals the explicit content of a political message before the watchful eyes of the political censor (Freud 1953, 141-2). Here, as elsewhere in Freud's work, the notion of collective memory as repressed memory is conceived of in terms of a theory of psychological drives and anxieties. Likewise, in later works such as *The Future of an Illusion*, the content of religion comes into view to the extent that it corresponds to a psychological function derived from primal family relations: at once from the infantile belief in the father as an omnipotent protector and from distant recollections of the archaic killing of the primal father, subsequently resurrected as a divinity. For Freud, it is in this sense that "the store of religious ideas includes not only wish fulfillments but important historical recollections" (Freud 1961, 42). Religion for Freud expresses an essentially illusory symptom of repressed wishes. In the theoretical treatment of both political and religious themes, as of conscious experience more generally, symbols come under consideration to the extent that they express unconscious drives, recollections of an archaic past in which they were once enacted and which are subsequently subjected to the mechanisms of sublimation or repression. They are expressed, "remembered," in the form of symptoms revealing present sources of anxiety, tension and illness that the therapist seeks to remedy. As a central part of the dynamics of this process, repressed memories need to be taken beyond their symptomatic expression as repressed experience and consciously worked through. "Remembering, Repeating and Working Through" is indeed the title that Freud gave to his famous paper on this subject, which, in recent years, has aroused particular interest in studies in philosophy and the human sciences (Freud 1958).

The doubts I raise concerning the pertinence of this method for an understanding of the phenomenon of collective memory in no way bring into question the significance of psychoanalysis as a therapeutic method, nor deny the phenomenon of repressed collective experience and the need for a therapeutic working out of past trauma at a collective level. My doubt concerns the capacity of the psychoanalytic method to reveal the full significance of the symbol - what I have

termed the symbolic embodiment of experience in collective memory. Certainly it would be possible to characterize the movement of Martin Luther King in psychological terms, underscoring the traumatic collective experience of centuries of slavery, followed by a century of injustice during which blacks were deprived of elementary civil rights. Subsequent to the changes in legislation, in large part due to the moral persuasiveness of this movement's non-violent tactics, one might continue to underscore the ongoing inequalities that have persisted following the institution of political equality. Or one might signal what certain authors have described as an "abuse" of memory and, in extrapolating from Freud's theory (albeit not always in accord with Freud's intentions), support their arguments on the basis of assumptions drawn from collective psychology. In this vein, following the initial success of the civil rights movement, the principle aim of the black minority might appear to be to convert a situation of past injustice into a new privileged status. Did Martin Luther King himself, in his "I have a dream" speech, not proclaim that the American people had a debt to pay to black citizens and that he had come to Washington to "cash a check"? And once civil rights have been granted, is it not all the more convenient to be able to "place oneself in the position of the victim" ("la prétention à s'installer dans la posture de la victime") in order to legitimate further claims to reparation? As Tzvetan Todorov writes, applying the psychology of family therapy to the political domain: "To have once been a victim gives you the right to complain, to protest and to make demands" ("Avoir été victime vous donne le droit de vous plaindre, de protester, et de réclamer") (Todorov 1995, 56). And in adopting a similar psychological perspective in his recent work, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, Paul Ricoeur, while stressing that he does not want to overstate this point, hardly questions Todorov's claim that the posture of the victim "creates an exorbitant privilege, which places the rest of the world in a situation of being holders of a debt" ("Cette posture engendre un privilège exorbitant, qui met le reste du monde en position de débiteur de créances"). This is why Ricoeur abandoned the idea of a "duty to remember," preferring instead, in accord with his interpretation of the Freudian terminology he adopts, a "working through" of the collective memory of past trauma (Ricoeur 2000, 104–11; Ricoeur 2000a, 1ff).

But, whether we are referring to black Americans or to any other minority group (Todorov and Ricoeur have most immediately in view the posterity of Jewish victims of the Shoah), does this concentration on the psychological dimension of collective memory provide us with the best mode of access to this phenomenon? By strictly applying the analogy of individual psychic processes to collective recollection, do we not risk obscuring the symbolic depth and long durability of those experiences specific to larger collectivities, which emerge into view only in the space between personal reminiscence and symbolic inscription?

Given Ricoeur's earlier work on Freud and on the limitations of the Freudian reference to symbolism largely in the framework of an analysis of symptoms, the paucity of his description of the phenomenon of symbolism is noteworthy. Ricoeur had earlier illustrated that if symbols are indeed, as Freud claimed, the material of symptoms, a too exclusive insistence on their symptomatic character risks obscuring the multiple significations of the symbol. In one sense – regressive – the symbol may be symptomatic of an illness; in another context – progressive – it may give birth to a work of art, a religious doctrine or a new political foundation (Ricoeur 1970, 514–43). And it is rather the importance of this eminently phenomenological insight that the present analysis seeks to underline.

3

It is well known that Freud maintained a lively interest in the somatic sources of psychological processes, even if he limited his clinical work to the psychological explanation of mental phenomena. The cognitive scientist, who relies on the description of neurological functions underlying experience, takes such somatic sources to be the central focus of investigation. Among the theorists in this field, the work of Gerald M. Edelman is particularly important since he focuses directly on the phenomena of personal and collective memory, while providing

cogent philosophical commentary on his method of analysis. His neurophysiological theory has had wide influence on this theme not only in the United States but in Europe, notably among the members of the school of Jean-Pierre Changeux. Edelman's underlying philosophical presuppositions can be summarized by a quote from the book *Quiddities* by Wilfred Quine, which is placed in epigraph at the beginning of Edelman's major work, *The Remembered Present: A Biological Theory of Consciousness* (1987, 8): "Whatever it precisely may be, consciousness is a state of the body, a state of nerves." By this statement Quine, and with him Edelman, do not simply seek to reduce the faculties of consciousness – memory, imagination, perception, reflexion – to bodily functions, but to conceive of mind and body as a unity and thus to "repudiate mind as a second substance, over and above body." What is important here, however, is less the question concerning the substantial composition of this unity than the conclusion Edelman draws from it: the possibility of rigorously explaining it in terms of its natural function. In line with this argument, Edelman asserts that memory and individual consciousness, as well as language and collective modes of understanding – consequently, all that might be placed under the heading of collective memory – are means of natural adaptation of human organisms to their environment. The capacity to remember past events and to communicate them collectively through language are naturally useful, and they favor adaptation in permitting humans to liberate themselves from the constraints of the immediate temporal moment and recall past experience as a basis for deliberating future action. The temporal consciousness with which the development of memory is intrinsically connected constitutes a uniquely human capacity that Edelman terms "higher order consciousness." And he attempts to account for the emergence of this capacity through the biological and neurological laws of natural selection that govern the process of human evolution. In his words:

With higher-order consciousness, the ability to plan a series of actions, more or less free of immediate time constraints, must have enhanced fitness. In hominids, at least, primary consciousness must have had evolutionary efficacy, insofar as it is required for the development of a self-concept and of language (ibid., 248).

This critique of Edelman's attempt to explain the workings of consciousness, and more precisely the phenomenon of collective memory, does not dispute the central place of neurophysiological functions in accounting for memory; what I question is the claim of these methods to scientific validity, and even to philosophical plausibility, when they are extended beyond the purview of empirical science into the domain of speculation. In this vein, the claim to reveal neurophysiological preconditions *necessary* for explaining the physical capacity to represent and to retain images or sounds, as well as for their communication, may well be an empirically grounded conclusion. But the hypothesis that the laws of natural selection or, for that matter, any general laws of nature, might provide *sufficient* grounds to account for personal consciousness, and thus for collective experience and collective memory, is highly speculative, to say the least. Even where speculative propositions are dressed up in scientific language, we are dealing not at the level of empirical science but with metaphysical hypotheses that allow of no scientific proof. Edelman himself has shown willingness to admit the speculative nature of his theories and the fact that they involve materialist presuppositions. And here he oversteps a principle source of his philosophical inspiration, the theory of Quine. Quine, indeed, always refused to account for consciousness, and the phenomena of memory, imagination or perception, in neurophysiological terms. He explicitly adopted Donald Davidson's principle of "anomalous monism," signifying that in considering mind to be an expression of body, he doubted the possibility of accounting for a complex of mental events in physiological or neurological terms (Quine 1987, 132-3). And Davidson himself made a decisive point in this regard in his essay "Mental Events," in *Essays on Actions and Events*, when he emphasized among mental events moral properties that, in his opinion, defy reduction to physical or neurological processes. He acknowledged that

dependence or supervenience [of the mental in regard to the physical] does not entail reducibility through law or definition: if it did we could reduce moral properties to descriptive, and this there is good reason to *believe* cannot be done (Davidson 1980, 214).

In dealing with this distinction between the mental and the physical, I would above all underscore the principle of the *validity* of normative standards in the mental sphere, which no logically coherent theory can reduce to biological function or to natural law. From this perspective, the neurophysiological claim to account for consciousness, and, more specifically, for the phenomenon of memory, discounts what is most fundamental: the premise according to which symbolic structures, the locus of embodiment of collective memory, possess an inherent truth that is valid independently of any consideration of its neurophysiological preconditions. The symbolism of social justice is ultimately convincing by virtue of this intrinsic significance, and any attempt to attribute its development to the invisible hand of natural law necessarily skirts this question of its inherent validity. (The most convincing and systematic discussion of this idea of validity is still to be found, in my opinion, in Husserl's *Logical Investigations*, but it would reach beyond the scope of the present investigation to take up this point in detail.)

4

The sociohistorical approach to collective memory, which has also exercised great contemporary influence in the study of this phenomenon, shares little common ground either with psychoanalysis or with neurocognitive theories. The socio-historical method rejects any attempt to understand collective memory in terms of extrahistorical models, whether psychological or evolutionary. Against such models, the socio-historical method presupposes the radical historicity of human experience and of the modes of collective remembrance of the past. From this perspective, the role of memory changes in relation to its social function. This school of analysis has focused above all on the devaluation of the role of collective memory following the rationalization and urbanization of the predominant sectors of modern society. This development has brought in its wake the decline of rural com-

munities over the past centuries and the disappearance of its oral traditions, which were a primary source of collective memory in the premodern context. Walter Benjamin provided salient insight into this phenomenon in his famous essay "The Storyteller" (Benjamin 1991, 2: 438–65). And in adopting a parallel idea of the historicity of collective memory in his preface to the multivolume work *Les lieux de mémoire*, Pierre Nora has elaborated on this assumption concerning the radical divergence in the function of memory between premodern and modern, between traditional rural and modern rationalized forms of society. It is this premise concerning the radical break with the past inaugurated by modernity that led Nora to underscore the fragility of collective memory in the contemporary context. With the decline of the social function of collective memory, the lines of continuity linking the present to an ongoing, living memory and to the past it retained are severed: "One speaks so much of memory," says Nora, "only because it no longer exists" (Nora 1984, xvii). The disappearance of collective memory, according to Nora, not only corresponds to the decline of its social function due to the urbanization of modern society; urbanization and rationalization also signaled its secularization. Collective memory in traditional society is sustained by the continuity provided by ongoing religious practices, by the rituals and liturgies that are an integral part of traditional life; the rationalization of all conditions of human existence typical of the modern world engenders a radically different approach to the past: in the chasm left by the demise of collective memory and of the religious practices that kept it alive, modernity seeks to resurrect the past through historical-critical methods of analysis that hold such practices at a distance. "Memory," as Nora writes, "situates recollection in the sphere of the sacred [...]. History, as an intellectual and secular operation, elicits analysis and critical discourse" (ibid., xix).

Here, however, we wonder if Nora's assumption that the decline of important sectors of rural society and of oral traditions that were a living source of collective memory can be generalized to such an extent. Collective memory and the symbolic meanings it embodies exhibit a vitality that is in no way restricted to traditional rural environments and, as the speech of Martin Luther King attests, shows an

ongoing capacity to revitalize past religious and political experience in the contemporary world.

If, therefore, I level a general critique against the three orientations elicited here, it is to call for a renewal of the phenomenological approach to collective memory that seeks its locus in the space between personal recollection and symbolic embodiment.

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