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A Passion for the Possible
Thinking with Paul Ricoeur



PERSPECTIVES IN
CONTINENTAL
PHILOSOPHY

The Place of Remembrance

Reflections on Paul Ricoeur's Theory of Collective Memory

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The theme of collective memory, conceived as a source of social cohesion, has come to assume a unique importance in the heterogeneous context of our contemporary societies. The public function of collective memory, in the form of commemorations or museums, as in the evocation of traumatic memories shared by entire social groups, has become a topic of lively debate in a large number of theoretical areas, ranging from cognitive science to sociology, political theory, history, and other disciplines of social inquiry. It is the singular achievement of the recent work of Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, to take a wide variety of arguments into consideration stemming from each of these fields. In the essay that follows, however, my concern will focus less on the diversity of perspectives in which he examines the theme of memory than on the profound intention arising from the moral philosophy that inspires his concept of memory and informs the work as a whole. On the first page of the introduction to the work, Ricoeur clearly formulates this intention:

I remain troubled by the worrisome spectacle arising from an excess of memory at some points, from lapses into forgetfulness at others, and this without even speaking of the influence of commemorations and of the abuse of memory (*abus de mémoire*)—and of forgetting. The idea of a politics of just memory is in this respect one of my explicit themes of civic concern (*un de mes thèmes civiques avoués*).¹

Ricoeur here expresses a broad ambition: in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, he concerns himself with memory or forgetting not only in relation to

individuals or small groups, but also in relation to the political order, in the fundamental sense of the word. In conceiving the theme of a "just memory" as a genuine "civic concern," he extends his analysis to the political field of national communities and of the different groups that constitute them, organized in terms of the vast political orders that are familiar to us in our contemporary world. At this level of analysis, how should we understand the moral injunction to reestablish a "just memory" through the application to vast political communities of the categories "too much" memory or "too much" forgetting? In what sense is this moral intention appropriate when applied to the domain of politics? In the following paper I will attempt to answer these questions in terms of critical reflection on the work of Ricoeur in *Memory, History, Forgetting*.

I

Beginning in the first part of the book, entitled "On Memory and Reminiscence," Ricoeur emphasizes a fundamental problem that reflection on the political scope of memory must confront: he examines the possibility, in terms of the original experience of memory rooted in the intimate sphere of personal life, of accounting for the "collective memory" of national groups. What principle of social cohesion, indeed, allows us to identify a "collective memory" in this sense, permitting us to ascribe to it an excess of memory or of forgetting?

In order to answer this question concerning the features of such large-scale remembrance, Ricoeur draws upon previous traditions of reflection on the role of memory in the constitution of human identity. In a precise manner he examines the principal philosophical investigations of memory and the fundamental role they have played in modern interpretations both of personal and collective identities. He recalls in this context the significance of Locke's reflection, which, in rejecting metaphysical theories of the substantial soul that had predominated since antiquity, posited as the sole foundation of personal identity the experience that each individual has of him- or herself, as "the same thinking thing in different times and different places."² According to Locke, personal identity extends as far as self-consciousness of past actions and thoughts. Thus, through consciousness of the self that encompasses the different moments of its experience, each person constitutes the unity of his or her own identity; and, on the basis of memory of oneself in the past, one recognizes the sameness of self in different times and places.³ The question of the link between different individuals, however—between the different memories constitutive of different personal identities—did not pose any particular

problem for Locke, who, to weld together collective existence, emphasized the role of economic interaction and the contract established among atomistic individuals in a framework provided by political institutions. For Ricoeur, nonetheless, this perspective of social atomism and political contractualism can hardly account for the complex lines of cohesion that unite vast modern collectivities. And beyond a series of individual identities constituted by personal recollections, he continues the search for an appropriate principle of social cohesion.

While aware of the limits of Lockean empiricism and of Whig liberalism, Ricoeur does not for this reason advocate the opposite tendency, which would deny that, in the act of remembrance, personal experience is the "authentic subject."⁴ Here he directs his critical analysis to the theory of collective memory elaborated by Maurice Halbwachs, above all in his works *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* and *La mémoire collective*. Halbwachs sought to demonstrate that collective memory, far from comprising a series of individual memories, is on the contrary the wellspring of personal memory and individual consciousness. This analysis, as Ricoeur emphasizes, attempts to account for personal consciousness in terms of collective factors, namely the social framework from which it supposedly arises: our social milieu expresses itself in us, even when we are not conscious of its influence, to the point that our most intimate thoughts and recollections depend upon a network of significations that originate in collective life.

In attempting to steer between these alternative accounts of memory, Ricoeur intensifies his quest for a principle of cohesion capable of accounting both for personal experience in its autonomy⁵ and for the extra-personal dimension of communal experience with which it is interwoven. He finds the point of orientation for this search in one of the earliest sources of his philosophical work, the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, above all in the fifth of Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations*, which examines the possibility of comprehending other persons. For Husserl, the condition of possibility of grasping the other lies in an *a priori* appresentation, or in what Husserl terms an *analogical apperception* of the other in terms of the self; and Husserl conceives of this constitution of the other "in me, yet as other" not as a simple perception of a plurality of atomized individuals, but as a possibility of immediate apprehension of others as communal others.⁶ This constitutive act serves as the starting point for a theory of intersubjectivity at the different levels of articulation of the social world, from interpersonal interaction to the "higher intersubjective communities" that designate larger collectivities. Ricoeur is well aware that Husserl did not rely for this analysis on any notion of communal

memory to support his theory of the constitution of communities.⁷ Moreover, since Husserl ultimately grounded his principle of cohesion of collective identity on the presupposition of the transcendental ego, serving as the absolute source of meaningful interaction in the common life-world, the role of collective memory could never be fundamental in his theoretical perspective. For this reason, if Ricoeur adopts the vocabulary of the Husserlian theory of intersubjectivity, he remains skeptical concerning the claims of transcendental idealism, which placed the sovereignty of the cogito at the basis of understanding of the other and of the configuration of intersubjective meaning. Beginning with his first works, Ricoeur's hermeneutic philosophy rejected this idea of the sovereignty of the cogito in all of its forms, while seeking to limit its role in the constitution of the sense of its experience. He refers to this more humble status of the self as the "wounded cogito" or the "broken cogito."⁸ Nonetheless, he maintains the paradigmatic role that Husserl attributed to the analogy between personal consciousness and community, and he employs it to elaborate his conception of social cohesion and collective memory. Hence he writes: "it is by analogy alone, and in relation to the individual consciousness and its memory that one takes collective memory to be a collection of traces left by events which have affected the course of the history of given groups, and in virtue of which we attribute to it the capacity to represent these shared memories during festivals, rites, and public celebrations."⁹ This principle of analogy between individuals and groups comes to expression in the two principle categories of analysis of memory that Ricoeur adopts: on one hand, the moral category of the "debt" and of the "obligation to remember," and on the other hand, that of the "work" of memory, modeled on psychoanalytic therapy.

This consideration leads me to a more precise formulation of my initial question: does this conception of an analogical relation between individual and society permit us to situate the "place" of collective memory? Does recourse to this analogy allow us to identify the principle of social cohesion? We must analyze in this light Ricoeur's constant tendency to draw analogical parallels between collective and personal memory and examine the legitimacy of his ambition to identify, on this basis, the deeper levels of cohesion of collective memory. If Ricoeur refuses to accept the presupposition of transcendental idealism according to which all meaning derives from the constitutive acts of the cogito, does the privilege he continues to accord to the analogical relation between individual and community not lead him to run another risk: that of obscuring those dimensions of collective identity that escape characterization in terms of analogy with personal identity? At this point in my analysis, it is necessary

to examine more closely this notion of collective signification that, as a source of communal identity, might resist any definition in terms of analogical parallels with personal consciousness and personal memory. For this purpose, before returning to an analysis of the work of Ricoeur, I will focus on the significance of collective memory as such and on its claim to ground the tie between different members of a community.

II

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 contradictory kinds of response according to the ways in which it is analyzed in the various disciplines of the humanities and 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 and 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. Secondly, when we refer to group experience with which personal life is interwoven, memory assumes a very different role in the perspective of a small group, such as a family or a professional association, than in that of a more extended collectivity, such as the public sphere of national commemoration. Oftentimes comprehension of the word *memory* is obscured when it is applied indifferently to personal or collective experience, on one hand, and to small or to very large groups, on the other. It is in this light that we raise the question concerning the meaning of "collective memory" and the "place" in which it might be found. We are 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 and described it as being in a "place which is not a place."¹⁰ And beyond the personal sphere, this same question of "place," of "locus," is all the more complex in relation to collective memory.

An initial attempt to locate collective memory, as I conceive of it, must situate it at different levels according to whether it is shared by smaller or larger groups. At the most elementary level we 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, we may refer to memories shared by larger collectivities that 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 their identities. We 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 the Catholic 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, 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 such phenomenological description, 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*.¹¹ It is in deploying potent symbols that flags in political experience, wine in religious ritual, evoke collectively meaningful reminiscence. Our phenomenological investigation of the place of collective memory must thus proceed by clarifying the relation between personal memory and collective forms of remembrance conveyed by means of symbols. To present an initial phenomenological elucidation of the relation between personal memory and symbolically elaborated collective remembrance, let us draw on an example that seems particularly appropriate for this task: the famous speech of Martin Luther King Jr. known as "I Have a Dream."

We recall that Martin Luther King Jr. presented this speech on August 28, 1963, during a March on Washington that rallied nearly 250,000 participants. The demonstration was called in the name of the civil rights movement, which protested against the conditions of political and social inequality to which black Americans were subjected. This event also marked a commemoration: with the marchers assembled before the Lincoln Memorial, it was held during the centenary of the famous Emancipation Proclamation by which President Abraham Lincoln, in the midst of the American Civil War, proclaimed the liberation of slaves in the Confederate states. 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.

The evocative power of King's speech stems, however, 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 most famous speech, the Gettysburg Address: the idea of equality upon which the American nation, beginning with the Declaration of Independence of 1776, had been founded. We can read in this document the words, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal"—words cited by Lincoln and evoked once again by King. More important still, the Founding Fathers did not limit themselves to a purely *political* legitimation of this principle of equality; they grounded it in what they considered to be divine sanction. If Lincoln did not hesitate to refer to this religious foundation of the principle of equality, Martin Luther King Jr. recalled, with singular eloquence, its profound eschatological source. After envisioning an end to racial inequality in America, and the possibility that black and white children might walk peacefully hand in hand, the Protestant pastor evoked 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."¹²

This example permits us to establish an important distinction, which is necessary for the elucidation of the phenomenon of collective memory. At one level of our analysis, we can elicit the collective memory retained by those who listened to the speech on August 28, 1963. As a young schoolboy, I recall how vividly this address moved me as I watched it on television. I remember the tense context in which it was presented in the year 1963 which, less than three months later, would witness the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. With this example in mind, we may identify as a first "place" of collective memory the recollection of shared experience that a group retains. The demonstrators in Washington who witnessed King's speech on this day of August 28, 1963, the schoolboy who viewed it on television, and the contemporaries who learned of the event through the printed media, all remember 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 its members 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.¹³

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 King's 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 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 my present analysis to examine this 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 contribution of Martin Luther King Jr. and the theologico-political depth of his speech initially grasped the importance of the event, 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 at the time, J. Edgar Hoover, who evinced an implacable hostility toward Martin Luther King Jr. and toward his cause, accorded a very different symbolic significance to the event than did King's supporters. In this sense, collective memory is, from the very point of its genesis, fragmented memory.¹⁴ 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 collective memory is codified, lends itself to the formation of what we normally call tradition.

Here we draw a distinction that is essential to our discussion. We 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 that we seek to make is that "collective memory" can neither be reduced to one or the other of these moments, but gravitates between them as modes of recall of the remembered past. At one extremity we find 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 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 can be recalled and reenacted to lend significance to later collective experience ("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, amid profound shifts and discontinuities, indicates a dimension of symbolic embodiment of language and bodily gesture that constitutes a metapersonal fount of personal and interpersonal interaction.

III

If we examine the concept of memory elaborated by Paul Ricoeur in light of the above reflection, it appears to me that the emphasis he places on categories of analysis extrapolated from the sphere of personal experience risks obscuring the phenomenon of collective memory in its full depth. This tendency becomes evident, to my mind, above all when he indifferently applies categories of the "debt" or the "psychological traumatism" to individual and community. Of course, I do not deny the possibility of holding a community responsible for collective acts, nor do I seek to minimize the effect upon larger groups of traumatic experiences; on the contrary, such categories seem to me highly pertinent in dealing with collective experience. And if I readily acknowledge the originality of Ricoeur's analysis in *Memory, History, Forgetting* of the notion of collective moral debt and of collective traumatism, the terms of his analysis lead me to raise the question whether such categories indeed help us to reveal what we designate as "collective memory."

To return to the example of Martin Luther King Jr., it is certainly possible to characterize his movement in psychological terms and to emphasize in this respect the traumatic experiences to which black Americans

were subjected after they were torn from their African homelands and enslaved over a period of centuries in what became the southern United States. Following their liberation they were victims of a century of injustice and discrimination. Changes in American legislation that confirmed their political rights, due in important measure to the nonviolent tactics of the civil rights movement, have far from entirely erased conditions of inequality. In view of the traumatic experiences to which black Americans were subjected, it would indeed be possible to interpret the relation between American society as a whole and black Americans as a situation of indebtedness, given the fact that the promise of equality has still not been fulfilled. King himself, indeed, initially affirmed in "I Have a Dream" that he had come to Washington to "cash a check," and this situation of indebtedness might still be taken quite literally. Conversely, on the basis of efforts already expended on behalf of black Americans that have established their equal rights as citizens, one might be tempted to characterize as an "abuse" of memory the continuing claims of black rights groups whose central aim might be interpreted as an attempt to convert an initial situation of injustice into the new privileged status of the creditor. Is it not then particularly advantageous to "adopt the pose of the victim" (*s'installer dans la posture de la victime*)¹⁵ in order to demand other forms of repayment? As Tzvetan Todorov writes, in applying the psychological categories of family therapy to the political sphere, "To have been a victim gives you the right to complain, to protest, and to make demands."¹⁶ In adopting a similar psychological perspective in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Ricoeur, while indicating that he does not wish to overstate this point, in no way questions Todorov's idea, quoted in this context, that the pose of the victim "creates an exorbitant privilege, which places the rest of the world in the situation of indebtedness to a creditor."¹⁷ And this leads him to abandon the idea of a "duty to remember" (*devoir de mémoire*), for which he substitutes, according to the Freudian terminology he applies to this theme, the "work of memory" (*travail de mémoire*) in relation to past traumatic experience.¹⁸

Nonetheless, by setting aside the symbolic force of Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech, or by reducing it to a psychological manifestation of resentment or anger—even if legitimate resentment or anger—one would seem to level it down to a simple claim advanced by a pressure group. In either case such categories of analysis fail to account for the symbolic force that nourishes collective memory by conferring upon it a meaning that, if it is to be comprehended, must be situated at a metapersonal level of experience. For this reason, the method that attempts to explain collective remembrance through an analogy with the psychic processes of individuals or

with principles drawn from the sphere of personal conduct risks obscuring the symbolic depth and the capacity of long perdurability of experience that is specific to political communities and appears only in the space between personal reminiscence and its symbolic incorporation.

This brings me to the example that most directly concerns Ricoeur and Todorov, the genocides of the twentieth century, above all the Nazi extermination of European Jewish communities during the Second World War. Here too the categories of the debt and of the duty to remember, as well as of the work of memory, do not touch on the essential problem. Beyond the reality of the physical disappearance of these vast communities, it is essential to identify a radical break in continuity of the European world itself, in terms of which any attempt at symbolic expression can only remain silent. What is essential here absolutely escapes the categories of quantification in terms of psychic processes or of individual morality applied to collectivities, in other words, in regard to groups that face each other in the form of "debtors" and "creditors" or of "patients" and "therapists." The true problem concerns less a carrying out of the "work" of memory in order to remedy the excess of memory or of forgetting, than the general awakening of comprehension that this radical break touches the vibrant fiber of a Europe stemming from antiquity, which the genocides of the twentieth century have irrevocably denatured.

In *Memory, History, Forgetting* there is a surprising absence of analysis of the symbol in relation to collective memory, above all given the fact that in his book *Freud and Philosophy*, Ricoeur devotes an important examination to the limits of psychoanalytic interpretation of the symbol. In this work he convincingly argues that while symbols can indeed represent symptoms of neurotic illnesses, an essential part of their meaning may be lost when they are examined exclusively in this light. The symbol may be a sign of regression and a symptom of illness but, according to Ricoeur's terminology, it may also convey a progressive significance, serving as a source of inspiration, as in the case of a work of art, a religious doctrine, or a political foundation.¹⁹

Ricoeur's earlier interpretation stands in closer proximity to what I understand to be symbolic incorporation, since it indicates a plenitude of the symbol that cannot be reduced to simply psychological categories. At a metapersonal level, it is the force of symbolic incorporation that, withstanding its transformations and meanders, accounts for the persistence of collective memory at its profoundest levels.