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At the Threshold of Memory: Collective Memory between Personal Experience and Political Identity

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Abstract

Collective memory is thought to be something "more" than a conglomeration of personal memories which compose it. Yet, each of us, each individual in every society, remembers from a personal point of view. And if there is memory beyond personal experience through which collective identities are configured, in what "place" might one legitimately situate it? In addressing this question, this article examines the political significance of the distinction between two levels of what are often lumped together under the term of "collective memory": memories that are retained through the direct experience of groups or associations of a limited size and those that are rarely the object of direct experience constituting the events marking the identities of mass societies.

Keywords: collective memory, public memory, political thought, public sphere, symbolic form

The past decades have witnessed an intensive preoccupation with the theme of memory, not only in the immediate sphere of personal life but, above all, as it is broadened to encompass collective experience. The extension of memory to the collective sphere, or to collective remembrance, signifies in its rudimentary sense a focus on shared experience as it is retained and transmitted by a group. We readily recognize such shared experience to be a source of self-awareness in a plural context and, as such, a fundamental principle of social identity and group cohesion.

Beyond this rudimentary sense, however, the concept of collective remembrance exhibits a seemingly infinite complexity

in relation to the level at which it is analyzed. At the primordial level, memory necessarily refers to the original sphere of experience in the intimacy of personal life; in any strict sense of the word, therefore, collectivities never "remember". On another level, when we focus on group experience in which personal life is interwoven, memory appears in a very different perspective in relation to a small group, such as a family or professional association, or to a more extended collectivity, such as the public sphere of national identity and of national commemoration. When seen in terms of such heterogeneity at the different levels of its expression, we may wonder according to what principle it may be identified, or in what "place" it might be located.

Even before entering into the discussion concerning the place of collective memory, the complexity of this problem of situating memory is already apparent on the level of personal identity. An influential current of modern reflection on memory, stemming from the 17th century empiricist philosophy of John Locke, has sought in memory – the experience I have of myself over time – the unique source of personal identity. Personal identity, from this perspective, arises from the possibility for each intelligent being, as Locke wrote in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, "to consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing in different times and places". Therefore, "[...] as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of the person" (Locke 1997, 302). Yet, subsequent reflection on the theme of personal identity has revealed how unsatisfactory this conclusion turns out to be. All remembrance, on a personal or collective level, depends upon a selection from a vast and, indeed, infinitely extendable number of events that might serve as topics of recall. This circumstance led critics of Locke, such as the 18th century philosopher David Hume, to point out that only a small number of events I have experienced in the past are still available to my recollection. If I try to reconstruct in memory all that I did in the recent past, for example, on the same day or in the same week one year ago, my recollections are at best confused and vague. Aside from momentous events that may permanently mark my life, most of the myriad

episodes of personal experience are no longer subject to recall and, in many cases, have faded into oblivion. On the basis of conscious retrieval of past experience, memory would thus seem to be far too weak to constitute the identity of the person. From the standpoint of present awareness therefore, according to the telling phrase of Hume in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, "Memory does not so much produce as discover personal identity"[1] (Hume 1969, 309-310). And, given the fact that our experience of ourselves in the past has so often receded into oblivion, the logical conclusion for Hume was that rather than a tangible entity, the personal identity we discover turns out to be a fictive creation of the imagination.

We need not accept the radicalism of Hume's skeptical conclusion concerning personal identity to appreciate the deep dilemma his philosophy placed in evidence. And if, indeed, in contemporary perspective, we extend the question of identity from the personal to the collective sphere, the problem concerning the "place" of plural remembrance in its relation to group identity reveals a far greater complexity: what status are we to accord not only to past experiences that groups explicitly remember, but to those which are omitted or forgotten? If, in the individual sphere, a chasm separates us from those innumerable events in our lives which we can no longer call to mind, the depth of this chasm in the sphere of plural remembrance may lead us to question any possibility of identifying the place of collective remembrance. Let us pursue this question concerning the "place" of collective memory, focusing at this initial stage on the status of omitted or forgotten aspects of the *personal* past and then work forward from there to encompass the collective sphere.

I.

Our contemporary conceptions of the role of the forgotten past in the constitution of personal identity are generally of two kinds. The first is based on moral considerations and was also formulated in relation to Locke's theories, above all by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz: the mere fact that we no longer remember what we have done does not

dispense us from moral responsibility for our acts. Experiences and acts continue to constitute our moral identity even after we have forgotten them. Leibniz's subtle formulation of this idea is found in his *Nouveaux essais sur l'entendement humain*: "Yes even if I had forgotten all of the past", as he wrote,

> "so that I had forgotten everything, even my name, and even had to relearn to read and to write, even then might I learn of my past life in my earlier state from others, as I would retain, in the same way, my rights, without requiring that I divide myself into two persons to inherit what I bequeath to myself. All of this suffices to maintain moral identity, in which personal identity consists."[2] (Leibniz 1978, 219)

The second response to the question concerning the role of the forgotten past, which became a principal topic of investigation in the 20th century, places particular emphasis on the *latency* of recollections which, although no longer present, continue to influence personal identity. Marcel Proust was particularly attentive to these long forgotten recollections which, at unexpected moments, may make their *involuntary* return. In eloquent terms, Marcel Proust described this "*mémoire involontaire*" in *A la recherche du temps perdu*:

> "We are only what we possess, we only possess what is really present, and so many of our remembrances, of our moods, of our ideas embark on voyages far away from us, and we lose sight of them! We are unable to account for them in that totality making up our being. But they find their secret paths to return within us."[3] (Proust 1954, 488)

Pursuing an analogous assumption, the psychoanalytic theory of unconscious memory has led us to recognize how important forgotten or repressed experiences are in the constitution of identity. And it is the work of the theoretician to retrieve and reelaborate memory that has been repressed in this manner.

Such reflections indicate ways in which memory may be constitutive of identity even where it is virtual and no longer explicitly brought to mind. In each of these fields, the juridico-moral and the psychological, we recognize the limits of individual consciousness, nourished by memory, as a source of personal identity. In each case both the psychologist and the moral philosopher insist on the decisive role of the *other* in permitting us to resuscitate the past. For the intervention of

the *other*, as a witness or a therapist, aims toward the restoration of what has been lost. And this brings us to the decisive point: when virtual experience depends on the capacity of the other to bring it back from oblivion, does this not uncover an implicit "place" of experience, an extra-individual and supra-personal dimension of our being from which, to use Proust's metaphor, recollections "find their secret paths to return within us", permitting us to delineate the hidden contours of personal identity? When in a penetrating essay on Baudelaire Walter Benjamin highlighted the importance Proust's notion of "mémoire involontaire", he was not simply concerned with the return of forgotten personal memories, but above all with the cohesion of "certain contents of the individual past with those of the collective past"[4] (Benjamin 1980, 189). Where group identities are confirmed through personal experience and the memories that nourish them, this collective dimension of experience can never be reduced to a mere assemblage of personal perspectives. For this reason, shared memory is never simply communicated in terms of a personal perspective, but personal memory and personal identity manifest a collective dimension in their very roots.

In our contemporary world, however, it is not only the topic of memory and forgetting which highlights the problematic status of a theory of personal identity founded on experience; of equal importance is the question concerning the sources of identity in a past experience distorted by fantasy and illusion. After all, what guarantee do we have that what we take to be long forgotten recollections are in fact remembrances of past experience instead of mere fantasies? Here we encounter a dilemma which, if it is of clear importance for personal experience, poses a far more complex problem on the level of group memory. For here, in addition to personal psychological or moral considerations, we encounter group motivations which may lead to the manipulation of fanciful wishes or obsessive fears. Above all in relation to vast collectivities in which ideological distortions may directly seek to manipulate remembrance of the past, what is taken to be "memory" may lose all bearing in the factual reality of past experience as such.

When faced with this difficulty, one might well be tempted to concur with the skepticism voiced by Reinhart Koselleck, when questioned about the idea of collective memory:

> "My personal position [...] is strictly against collective memory, given that I have been submitted to the collective memory of the Nazi years during twelve years of my life. Any kind of collective memory displeases me because I know that true memory is independent from the so-called collective memory, and my position in regards to this is that my memory depends on my experience and nothing else. No matter what else people might say, I know my own personal experiences and I will not forgo any of them. I have the right to keep my personal experiences just as I have memorized them, and the events kept in my memory constitute my personal identity." (Fuentes and Sebastián 2006, 113)

In view of Koselleck's own experience as an adolescent in Nazi Germany and as young *Wehrmacht* combatant in the Soviet Union during World War II, his vigorous skepticism concerning the very concept of collective memory is perhaps understandable. But, in spite of Koselleck's reservations, there are reasons that lead us to affirm the existence of collective memory and of the collective identities it nourishes. Indeed, where experience and, with it, remembering and forgetting, is shared by a group, the interpretation of this extra-personal aspect of experience makes it possible for us to ascribe a certain autonomy to collective identities, which cohere in the midst of the singularity and of the innumerable differences of the individuals who compose them.

To locate this extra-personal aspect of experience upon which collective memory draws, we first need to insist upon a more nuanced conception of the *imagination* which memory deploys at the different levels of its articulation. As a creation of the productive imagination, fantasy extends well beyond the recollections of past experience and, in certain situations, is able to work back on them and distort their contents. Here the psychologist is quick to point out the tacit work of fantasy in everyday perception, which may intervene in any attempt to resuscitate past experience. The moral philosopher readily identifies illusions or grandiose wishes which may shape everyday interests and become sources of bias in the perception of the past and intervene in its revivification. Clearly the distinction between memory of the past and fantasy is not

always easy to maintain, as is above all evident on a collective level where political mythologies and their fantastic reelaborations of the past become an integral part of political ideologies. However, the production of fantasy indicates only one of the operations of the faculty of imagination. At the level of the immediate interpretation of experience itself, imagination may be taken in a different and, indeed, more fundamental sense. As has often been noted since Aristotle, acts of remembrance themselves, in their revivification of images, involve an imaginative capacity. I would like to insist on the multiplicity of functions of the imagination, involving not only the retrieval of images from the past but also – what is of more primary significance for our discussion – the fundamental capacity to embody experience in the form of symbols. At the level of the collective communicability of experience, imagination governs the transformation of brute experiential impressions – through language and gesture – into symbolic configurations which may be imparted to groups. Here the work of the imagination is not to be equated with the flights of fantasy, but is an integral moment in the symbolic embodiment of experience through which something like collective awareness becomes possible. Certainly, as the psychoanalyst will point out, symbols are essential components of fantasy and thus of delusion and collective manipulation, but I would like to insist at the same time on their function as the media of embodiment of experience itself without which what we call "factual reality" could not be possible. Here imaginative reconstruction aims to revivify the experience of direct perception, which others can corroborate or refute.

Without necessarily endorsing his overall model of consciousness, we may refer here to Ernst Cassirer's theory of symbolic forms which provides important insight into the general concept of the imagination, above all where he focuses on imagination not only as a source of fantasy, but also a "necessary element of true recollection"[5] (Cassirer 1992, 52). For Ernst Cassirer symbols are necessary preconditions for all experience, beginning with the awareness of space, time and number. Without discussing the particulars of the epistemology he proposes in the short space of the present argument, I will limit

my use of the symbol to the imaginative transposition of experience into a collectively communicable medium, or what I term "symbolically embodied experience".[6] According to this conception, memory is continually in flux between two poles: between immediate personal experience, on one hand, that may well take the form of fleeting images and associations and, on the other hand, symbolically embodied, communicable experience. Memory always gravitates between flowing impressions, on one hand, and, on the other hand, symbolic expressions through which experience may be imparted to others. To situate the "place" of collective memory, we must therefore distinguish between the multitude of perspectives retained by personal recollection of a collectively experienced event and the symbolic embodiment of memory, constituting a collectively identifiable locus for past experience. Collective memory can be reduced neither to one nor to the other of these moments, but gravitates between them as modes of recall of the remembered past. At one extremity lies the singularity of perspective which 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 end, it is possible to limit remembrance so completely to the realm of personal experience that its collective significance is blurred; at the other end, even after all personal living recollection of the event has vanished, its symbolic embodiment in a specific event may be recalled and reenacted to lend significance to later collective experience. Moreover, group experience which is sedimented in collective memory may be endowed with a significance which need not be explicitly acknowledged or even made a topic of clearly defined group awareness; it may well maintain a surreptitious perdurability in acute collective traumas or in long-standing repressed group aspirations and, in such cases, it may be deformed in terms of group fantasies. Here in the sphere of implicit experience, we begin to discern the contours of a collective identity, and of a collective memory that is qualitatively different from all remembrance limited to the personal sphere. Far from emerging in the isolation of fleeting impressions which belong to the

intimacy of the pre-symbolic sphere, collective memory expresses a symbolically interpretable experience that is immediately invested with interpersonal significance.

As we indicated at the beginning of our investigation, the difficulty in identifying the “place” of collective memory stems in important measure from the different levels of its articulation, extending from the intimacy of small groups to the public sphere constituted by vast nations. Often the term “collective memory” indifferently refers to small groups such as families or professional associations and to vast collectivities such as political nations. Maurice Halbwachs' discussion of collective memory in works such as *La mémoire collective* or *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* has underlined the role of smaller groups such as families and school associations in the articulation of collective memory. However, the unique status of collective memory as it functions at the level of vast collectivities requires clearer delineation. Here we run the risk of obscuring the "place" of collective memory where we do not account for differences in its spheres of articulation and, above all, for its *public* scope. Under the heading of “public memory” I understand significant events which members of a society experience and recall. It is the place delineated by broadly diffused reminiscences which, long after living members of a society recall them, may become the object of mass commemoration and of historical representation. The locus of “public memory”, however, must be carefully distinguished both from traditions of mass commemoration and from historical representation which it nourishes.[7]

If, as we have stipulated, memory originally refers to personal experience, which is then interwoven in the collective reminiscences of smaller groups, public memory, in the vast sphere of its articulation, constitutes a fundamental place of mnemonic expression: in its long temporal perdurability it serves as a matrix of symbolic incarnation and transmission which nourishes and sustains the ephemeral existence of both persons and smaller groups. In such cases collective recollection recalls events that have been witnessed and which, as source of political transformations, symbolically configure the public sphere. Certainly this significance is always fragmented and

open to different kinds of appreciation and interpretation. Different groups in a same nation, whether minority or majority groups, will symbolically interpret the same event in different manners and will communicate this interpretation in very different ways.[8] Nonetheless, in each case, 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 bodily gesture that constitutes a meta-personal fount of personal and interpersonal interaction.

II.

By the concept of "public memory" I understand publicly meaningful events which have been experienced by the members of a given society and which are a topic of recollection. In such cases, collective memory recalls events that have been witnessed and which, as sources of political change, often have a paradigmatic influence on the constitution of the public sphere. An eloquent portrayal of this conception of politically meaningful remembrance in the public sphere is found in Immanuel Kant's designation of the French Revolution:

> "[...] This event is too great and too closely interwoven with the interest of Humanity, and its influence on the world in all of its parts is too extensive, that it should not, in whatever favorable circumstances, be recalled to memory (in Erinnerung gebracht) and awaken new quests to repeat attempts of this kind" (Kant 1983, 361).

As great as they may be, however, and as significant as they may prove for the elaboration of public memory and political identities, such historical events are only rarely an object of *direct* experience. It is in virtue of its mostly indirect and diffuse quality that collective memory occupies a distinctive "place" in the public sphere. It is not recalled in the same way as direct remembrance of personal events or those that are experienced by small groups. Public memory, as "experienced", and mediated through the national, religious, or other symbols

that configure collective identification, is not only fragmentary, it is also largely indirect.[9]

I myself lived in the United States during the difficult period of the Vietnam war, but my "experience" of that trying event was essentially limited to a viewing of war films diffused by the media and to conversations I had with war veterans. But even where we are dealing with a soldier who participated directly in the combat, to what extent might we claim that his remembrances, gravitating between the particularity of personal impressions and the viewpoint of his immediate peer group, corresponded to politically significant "experience"? To a certain extent, as in the case of direct testimony relating a publicly significant event, diffuse public memory may depend on the recall of personal experience and, when in such cases it is forgotten, it may, as in Leibniz's example, be re-evoked by the testimony of other witnesses. Yet, in spite of this possibility, there remains an irreducible difference between public memory and all other kinds of memory: actions and events in the public sphere are of such a complexity that their significance can hardly be accounted for on the basis of simple personal recollections of individuals, or even of given groups. Here we arrive at the decisive point, for we apprehend that, in the public sphere, the symbolic sense of events depends less on the direct experience of contemporaries than on the elaboration of events – their configuration as "information" – by the mass media. We thus discover a deeper source of the distinction between remembrance in the public sphere and that of smaller groups such as families or other associations: while memories of a smaller group most often arise from direct perception, or may be related to such perception, publicly significant collective memory derives almost exclusively from diffuse, indirect experience, in which imaginative reconstruction and transfer plays a preponderant role. And it is here that the function of imagination in the crystallization of a symbolically embodied meaning may be appreciated in its full scope. This symbolizing function may, indeed, incorporate in certain circumstances both direct experience and individual and group fantasies; without this function, however, no experience or fantasy could attain to a perdurable *public* significance. On this basis, collective

memory provides content both for political commemoration and for historical representation.

For the members of a political community, the absence of direct perception signals the unique role of imagination in the constitution of public memory, whereby significance is collectively conferred upon reported events. In referring to personal memory and to the recollection of small groups, we noted the role of the other, of the direct witness or therapist, the reconstitution of obliviated experience, and the identification of those aspects of memory which are products of illusion or mere fantasy. In the public sphere, however, where group recollection can rarely rely on direct perception, the regulatory role of the other is far more problematic. Here ideological claims of a national group may easily contest the recollections of the limited number of eye witnesses to an event, especially where the media pass them over in silence. This is why correctives to fantasies and illusions in the public sphere are particularly hard to identify and to apply.

Does this, however, signify that there are no correctives to the rule of collective fantasy and illusion, above all in situations where they are reinforced by the representations of the media? Is there no "other" in the public sphere, who might permit us to distinguish between imaginative reconstruction and the distortions of fantasy? Are not direct experience and eyewitness reports of decisive importance in the public sphere? Of course, even in the public sphere the role of the "other" can be fulfilled by the confrontation of conflicting testimonies and original traces in the hope of attaining a comprehensive representation of events. But the analogy between the public sphere and more limited spheres of personal and collective memory should not be exaggerated. The very complexity and diffuseness of the levels of experience in the public sphere and the fragmentary character of its symbolic configuration, render the status of testimony and report highly problematic. If the public significance of acts and events ultimately depends less on a series of personal or even group recollections than on the way in which recounted events are symbolically configured, then the most important corrective to distortion lies in the *coherence* of the larger web of recounted events from which

remembered experience draws its specifically public scope.[10] In this sense, the role of the "other" in restituting the forgotten or misrepresented past depends on an essentially political intention in which the symbolic function of distortions in the web of recalled events is decoded. This is by no means to contest the claim that massacres which are passed over in silence, and which leave behind only a motley group of mute survivors, are collective symptoms of psychopathological aberrations or legally punishable criminal acts; it is to interpret their significance predominantly in terms of the political symbolism of particular ideologies or of given politico-theological aims as the fundamental source of their public intelligibility. And here the role of the "other" as witness or therapist must be supplemented by the judgment of a political theorist whose methods are adapted to the public sphere.[11]

It has often been emphasized, and justly so, that the originality of the contemporary mass media lies in their capacity to disseminate information in a context of virtual absence of personal contact between communicators and spectators. As Niklas Luhmann has suggested, the novel quality of the mass media lies in the situation of anonymity that they create by technical means (Luhmann 1996, 11). This notion of general anonymity, however, should not obscure the unique symbolic power that, already on the level of language itself, mass information wields. This unique capacity of the contemporary mass media accounts for the profound difficulty that all attempts at political deciphering of information faces – above all in cases where it is not simply a question of interpreting information disseminated by our own media but by those belonging to political collectivities radically different from our own. According to the context of interpretation, words like "freedom fighter", "occupation", "colonization" may deploy a radically divergent, albeit powerful symbolic force. And this underlines the essential paradox that characterizes our contemporary situation: the emergence of a thoroughly mediatized world in which, for the first time in human history, the possibility exists of simultaneously referring to radically different and even contradictory information systems.

This identification of the qualitatively unique place of public memory leads us, in conclusion, to insist on the wholly paradoxical role that collective memory has assumed in the public sphere in our present era. In our contemporary world, despite the immediacy of media coverage, the chasm between personal experience and the public realm has tended to increasingly widen. With the multiplication of political agents in our mass societies, as Alexis de Tocqueville already anticipated in *Democracy in America*,[12] the centers of political action become increasingly diffuse, creating an ever wider chasm between political events and those who seek to recall and explain them. On one hand, public remembrance serves as a primary vehicle for political identification; on the other hand, the events on which remembrance focuses become ever more elusive as concrete contents of representation. It is perhaps this paradox which accounts for the ever growing proliferation of monuments and archives seeking to collect and to preserve traces of public memory. They provide tangible symbolic images to reinforce the precarious ties between personal experience and the public sphere of political action which has become opaque.

This quest has its own inherent dangers. Where memory is assigned a task it cannot hope to fulfill, that of bridging the abyss between personal identity and a mass public, this may lead in extreme forms to a denial of the reality of events which recollection cannot hope to fathom. Where the many-layered complexity of the public sphere is forgotten, fragmented recollections may all too readily be manipulated to promote the illusion that they are direct "experiences", capable of symbolically configuring the coherence of events as a whole. The essential difference between a deliberative or symbolic imagination which permits us to situate and reconstitute the episodes of the past is confused with collective fantasies which radically distort its factual texture. The abyss between memory and political reality is all too readily filled by fictional representation of public identity in the guise of political myths which have become an all too familiar facet of our contemporary political world.

NOTES

[1] "Who can tell me", as Hume eloquently wrote in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, "what were his thoughts and actions on the 1st of January 1715, the 11th of March 1719, and the 3rd of August 1733? [...] Memory does not so much produce as discover personal identity" (Hume 1969, 309-310).
[2] « Et si je venois à oublier toutes les choses passées et serois obligé de me laisser enseigner de nouveau jusqu'à mon nom et jusqu'à lire et écrire, je pourrois tousjours apprendre des autres ma vie passée dans mon precedent estat, comme j'ay gardé mes droits, sans qu'il soit nécessaire de me partager en deux personnes, et de me faire heretier de moy même. Et tout cela suffit pour maintenir l'identité morale qui fait la même personne. » (Leibniz 1978, 219). Unless otherwise stated all translations are my own.
[3] « On n'est que par ce qu'on possède, on ne possède que ce qui vous est réellement présent, et tant de nos souvenirs, de nos humeurs, de nos idées partent faire des voyages loin de nous-même, où nous les perdons de vue! Alors nous ne pouvons plus les faire entrer en ligne de compte dans ce total qui est notre être. Mais ils ont des chemins secrets pour rentrer en nous… » (Proust 1954, 488).
[4] „Wo Erfahrfung im strikten Sinn obwaltet, treten im Gedächtnis gewisse Inhalte der individuellen Vergangenheit mit solchen der kollektiven in Konjunktion." (Benjamin 1980, 189).
[5] Cassirer characterized the imagination in referring to Goethe's notion of "fantasy", which serves not only as a source of fictional images, but also as an indispensable prerequisite for comprehending reality itself; in Goethe's words a "fantasy for the truth of the real" („Phantasie für die Wahrheit des Realen") (Eckermann 1987, 154; Cassirer 1992, 204-6). On this extended role of the imagination see also my article "Why Remember the Historical Past? Reflections on Historical Skepticism in our Times" (Barash 2008, 79-91).
[6] For a more full discussion of the symbolic embodiment of memory see my essay "Analyzing Collective Memory" (Barash 2007, 101-116).
[7] The sphere of public memory seems to me to be obscured when it is conflated with tradition, as in the writings of Pierre Nora. At the beginning of his introduction to the first volume of the multivolume work *Les lieux de mémoire*, « Entre mémoire et histoire », Nora refers to the death of the past, to the « arrachement de ce qui a été vécu dans la chaleur de la tradition » and finishes the paragraph with the sentence: « On ne parle tant de mémoire que parce qu'il n'y en a plus » (Nora 1984). Indeed, as Aleida Assmann has pointed out in evoking the work of contemporary social scientists, one might perhaps more readily draw the opposite conclusion, given the particularly important role collective memory has assumed in our times (Assmann 1999, 15). Since Nora can hardly take literally this assertion that we no longer collectively remember, the exact meaning of such sentences remains unclear, unless by the loss of "memory" he means to signify the disappearance of tradition. This interpretation is supported by Nora's introduction to the third volume of *Les lieux de mémoire* where we learn that "Une tradition, c'est une mémoire

devenue historiquement consciente d'elle-même". Against this monolithic and nostalgic view of collective memory, we are insisting on a much sharper distinction between the fragmentary and fluid character of public memory, through which a variety of conflicting experiences may seek expression, and the codification of memory in the form of tradition or historical representation.

[8] I borrow the concept of "fragmented memory" from the illuminating work of Doron Mendels, *Memory in Jewish, Pagan and Christian Societies of the Graeco-Roman World* (Mendels 2004, 30-47). For a particularly vivid illustration of the fragmented character of collective memory, see the recent debate concerning the status of minority collective memory elicited by the legislation introduced by the French deputy of Guyana, Christiane Taubira, which declared the centuries-long practice of enslavement of black Africans to be a crime against humanity and encouraged the teaching of black and colonial history in the French public schools. When, in an article published in *Le Monde* on October 10th 2008, entitled "Liberté pour l'histoire!", Pierre Nora publicly protested against this legislation for its prescriptions concerning the teaching of history, Christiane Taubira responded with a biting critique (Taubira 2008, 23), not only of Nora's article, but of the multi-volume work he directed, *Les Lieux de mémoire*, which she rebuked for its near silence in regard to centuries of slavery and of French colonial history.

[9] In *La mémoire collective*, Maurice Halbwachs helps us situate this diffuse and symbolic character of the recollections of vast collectivities in his description of it through the apt conception of "borrowed memory", which is most often taken from others' representations and reconstituted as memory by means of the imagination. Halbwachs writes: « Dans le cours de ma vie, le groupe national dont je faisais partie a été le théâtre d'un certain nombre d'événements dont je dis que je me souviens, mais que je n'ai connus que par les journaux ou par les témoignages de ceux qui y furent directement mêlés. Ils occupent une place dans la mémoire de la nation. Mais je n'y ai pas assisté moi-même. Quand je les évoque, je suis obligé de m'en remettre entièrement à la mémoire des autres, qui ne vient pas ici compléter ou fortifier la mienne, mais qui est la source unique de ce que j'en veux répéter. Je ne les connais souvent pas mieux ni autrement que les événements anciens, qui se sont produits avant ma naissance. Je porte avec moi un bagage de souvenirs historiques, que je peux augmenter par la conversation ou par la lecture. Mais c'est là une mémoire empruntée et qui n'est pas la mienne. Dans la pensée nationale, ces événements ont laissé une trace profonde, non seulement parce que les institutions en ont été modifiées, mais parce que la tradition en subsiste très vivante dans telle ou telle région du groupe, parti politique, province, classe professionnelle ou même dans telle ou telle famille et chez certains hommes qui en ont connu personnellement les témoins. Pour moi, ce sont des notions, des symboles ; il se représentent à moi sous une forme plus ou moins populaire ; je peux les imaginer ; il m'est bien impossible d'en souvenir » (Halbwachs 1997, 98-9).

[10] Hannah Arendt stresses the point that the web of interrelated facts ultimately stands beyond the reach of ideological interests that attempt to manipulate them: "That facts are not secure in the hands of power is obvious,

but the point here is that power, by its very nature, can never produce a substitute for the secure stability of factual reality, which, because it is past, has grown into a dimension beyond our reach. Facts assert themselves by being stubborn, and their fragility is oddly combined with great resiliency – the same irreversibility that is the hallmark of all human action" (Arendt 1987, 258-9).

[11] On the basis of this reflection, I have questioned the interpretation of collective memory by Paul Ricoeur (2000) in my article « Qu'est-ce que la mémoire collective ? Réflexions sur l'interprétation de la mémoire chez Paul Ricœur » (Barash 2006, 185-195).

[12] See in this regard the remarkable reflection of Alexis de Tocqueville: « Je suis très convaincu que, chez les nations démocratiques elles-mêmes, le génie, les vices ou les vertus de certains individus retardent ou précipitent le cours naturel de la destinée du peuple ; mais ces sortes de causes fortuites et secondaires sont infiniment plus variées, plus cachées, plus compliquées, moins puissantes, et par conséquent plus difficiles à démêler et à suivre dans des temps d'égalité que dans des siècles d'aristocratie, où il ne s'agit que d'analyser, au milieu des faits généraux, l'action particulière d'un seul homme ou de quelques-uns. L'historien se fatigue bientôt d'un pareil travail ; son esprit se perd au milieu de ce labyrinthe, et, ne pouvant parvenir à apercevoir clairement et à mettre suffisamment en lumière les influences individuelles, il les nie. Il préfère nous parler du naturel des races, de la constitution physique du pays, ou de l'esprit de la civilisation. Cela abrège son travail, et, à moins de frais, satisfait mieux le lecteur » (Tocqueville 1961, 122).

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