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Over the past decades, the phenomenon of collective memory has exercised a growing influence as an intellectual and a public concern. To account for the contemporary preoccupation with this phenomenon, this article centers on the emergence of the discourse of “collective memory” in the years after the First World War. According to its central argument, the discourse of “collective memory” was called forth by the decline of more traditional assumptions concerning the sources of sociopolitical cohesion in the wake of the ever more radical experience, over the course of the 20th century, of dislocation and discontinuity in the conditions of human socio-political existence. This reorientation of the framework of analysis of sociopolitical cohesion calls for the corresponding elaboration of a philosophy of finite group perspectives involving - as illustrated by the writings of Maurice Halbwachs and of Marcel Proust - the careful demarcation of the horizon of collective memory shared by living generations from the historical past that lies beyond its pale. Keywords: Collective Memory, historicism, organic memory, Proust, Halbwachs, human finitude.

Memória Colectiva e Tempo Histórico

Nas últimas décadas, o fenómeno da memória colectiva tem exercido uma influência crescente enquanto preocupação pública e intelectual. Com vista a enquadrar a preocupação contemporânea com esse fenómeno, este artigo centra-se na emergência do discurso da “memória colectiva” nos anos a seguir à Primeira Guerra Mundial. De acordo com a tese central do artigo, o discurso da “memória colectiva” foi provocado pelo declínio de interpretações mais tradicionais relativamente às origens da coesão sociopolítica no contexto uma experiência cada vez mais radical, ao longo do séc. XX, de deslocalização e descontinuidade nas condições de existência sociopolítica. Esta reorientação do quadro de análise da coesão sociopolítica apela à elaboração de uma filosofia de perspectivas de grupos finitos, incluindo - tal como ilustram os escritos de Maurice Halbwachs e de Marcel Proust - a demarcação cuidadosa entre o horizonte de memória colectiva partilhado por gerações vivas e o passado histórico que o extravasa. Palavras-chave: Memória colectiva, historicismo, memória orgânica, Proust, Halbwachs, finitude humana.

Collective Memory and Historical Time

Jeffrey Andrew Barash*

In the pages that follow I will interpret the theme of time as it pertains to the domains of memory and of history with the aim of elucidating the seemingly nebulous concept of collective memory. Since memory in a general sense, as it encompasses the past retained in present awareness, necessarily engages an awareness of time, I propose to orient my elucidation by examining the temporal scope of collective memory and to demarcate it in relation to the temporal horizon of the historical past.

A preliminary examination of the concept of “collective memory” reveals the somewhat paradoxical fact that, as a theoretical preoccupation, it is of recent vintage, whereas as a practice it is as old as the oral traditions that were transmitted from generation to generation long before written literary traditions codified them and gave them a fixed form. This recent origin of the concept of collective memory places it in a singular light. Theoretical preoccupation with this concept, indeed, concerns not only memory’s role as a human faculty interrelated with imagination or perception, willing or thinking, but it underscores a specific capacity to retain and transmit among groups a remembrance of time past, which is necessary both for assuring group continuity with the past and for attesting discontinuities which distinguish the past from the present. This idea of the specific capacity of memory as a source of group continuity over time, above all over the long sweep of the historical past, has deep roots in modern sources that are of es-

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sential importance for understanding the specific function of collective memory in its 20th century sense. I will take as my starting point the genesis of this modern concept of the synthetic role of memory in forging group continuity in order to identify a constellation of assumptions that accompanied its emergence that are essential to an elucidation of the contemporary concept of collective memory and of its temporal scope in relation to the historical past.

I

The modern conception of group remembrance as the organ of historical continuity coincided with the emergence in Europe of epoch-making insight concerning historical disruption and change following the French Revolution and the demise of the socio-political order of the Ancien Régime. This novel insight identified an essential *historicity* of truth, which presents itself in different historical perspectives according to the particular contexts in which it is embraced. At the moment of the modern genesis of this insight into historical discontinuity, *memory* was designated as the source of cohesion of the diverse expressions of truth over time. The scope of memory reached back to encompass not only the recollections of living generations, but the historical past as a unified whole. The philosophy of Hegel, whose *Phenomenology of the Spirit* first appeared in 1807, played a paradigmatic role in defining the relation between the realm of shared experience of living generations and the remembrance they retain of the historical past. If the term “collective memory” was foreign to Hegel’s vocabulary, his concept of “Spirit” encompassed at once the present and remembrance of the past extending to its farthest reaches, as retained by living collectivities. This conception forged the initial form of discourse through which the idea of memory as the source of collective continuity came to expression. Prior to Hegel, the 18th century had witnessed the emergence of a novel focus on diversity in the manifestations of the “spirit” of peoples as the source of radically different interpretations of truth over the course of history. Montesquieu’s notion of the *esprit des lois*, Voltaire’s references to the “spirit of an epoch”, or Herder’s *Volksgeist* are notable

examples of novel conceptions of spiritual collectivities elaborated in the years prior to the French Revolution. Following the demise of the Ancien Régime in France and the period of radical upheaval in Europe, Hegel's reflection focused on the possibility, in view of the diversity of peoples and of the truths they acknowledge in different historical epochs, of establishing a principle of continuity, a *Zusammenhang*, underlying this diversity and conferring unity on history as a whole. In this framework, Hegel introduced the epoch-making assumption according to which this unity is achieved by virtue of the self-understanding of the Spirit, maintained through recollection of its past experience. According to this interpretation, remembrance, *Erinnerung* – which in German signifies at once “recollection” and “interiorization” – is the medium assuring the ongoing retrieval of past experience (*Erfahrung*) in the diversity of its moments – its *Aufhebung* – through which it is at once made present and surpassed in the Spirit's forward movement. As Hegel wrote in the concluding paragraphs of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*:

“In turning toward itself, [the Spirit] sinks into the night of self-consciousness, but its existence which has disappeared is retained in it; and this existence that has been maintained – the previous existence which has been born anew in knowledge - is the new existence, a new world and configuration of the Spirit. In this night it must begin anew in the freshness of its immediacy and draw its own meaning out of this configuration, as if everything previous had been lost to it, and as if the experience of the spiritual configurations of the past had taught it nothing; and, nonetheless, reminiscence preserves them. It is the inner and indeed the higher substantial form.”¹

1 „In seinem Insichgehen ist er in der Nacht seines Selbstbewusstseins versunken, sein verschwundenes Dasein aber ist in ihr aufbewahrt; und dies aufgehobene Dasein – das vorige, aber aus dem Wissen neugeborene – ist das neue Dasein, eine neue Welt und Geistesgestalt. In ihr hat er ebenso unbefangen von vorn bei ihrer Unmittelbarkeit anzufangen und sich von ihr auf wieder grosszuziehen, als ob alles Vorhergehende für ihn verloren wäre und er aus der Erfahrung der früheren Geister nichts gelernt hätte. Aber die Er-Innerung hat sie aufbewahrt und ist das Innere und die in der Tat höhere Form der Substanz.“ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes. Werkausgabe*, vol. 3 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), p. 590. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

Hegel's early philosophy of history is inspired by this interpretation of memory in the movement of the Spirit. Each moment of elaboration of the Spirit, in its partial way of understanding and of grasping truth, is limited. In the diversity of its perspectives, the historical finitude of each moment comes to expression. Yet the Spirit overcomes this finitude in its forward movement. By virtue of reminiscence of past experience in the diversity of its expressions, the Spirit is able to retain and overstep the limited perspectives offered by the past.

Hegel's philosophy permits us to highlight a particular relation between present memory shared by vast collectivities and past historical experience, in which memory maintains the cohesion of the whole. In underlining the paradigmatic role of this theoretical model, the question of the direct influence of Hegel's thought is secondary; this idea of memory as the organ of historical cohesion came to the fore in many forms of historical reflection throughout the 19th century, even after the total vision posited by his philosophy of history had lost its persuasive force. We may consider in this light the great 19th century historian Ernest Renan, an admirer of Hegel, who considered that Hegel had brought the philosophy of history to its profoundest level of expression.² In a manner analogous to Hegel, but in a later and different context, Renan, in the famous essay *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?*, conceived of memory as a source of the historical continuity of nations. In this essay, originally delivered as a speech at the Sorbonne in 1882, Renan raised the question concerning the principle of unity and of continuity underlying the national identity of peoples and he concluded that neither a common language, nor racial homogeneity could account for it, but that it must be sought in a "rich legacy of remembrances" (un riche legs de souvenirs) and in the will to "continue to live together".³ In the interest of national unity, of course, Renan also underlined what he took to be the importance for a nation to be able to forget sources of conflict that divided it in the past.

² Ernest Renan, *L'avenir de la science. Pensées de 1848* (Paris: Calmann/Lévy, 1905), p. 172-173.

³ Ernest Renan, *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation? et autres essais politiques* (Paris: Agora, 1992), p. 54.

In a German context of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the thought of Wilhelm Dilthey provides another example of this paradigmatic role of memory as the guarantor of historical cohesion. Dilthey examined this theme in great detail in his seminal work *The Construction of the Historical World in the Human Sciences* (*Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften*). After renouncing Hegel's metaphysical claim to have identified the absolute meaning of history in its totality, Dilthey attributed to memory, *Erinnerung*, the capacity to forge lines of cohesion underlying different national perspectives and divergent epochs of history. "Life is historical" (Geschichtlich ist das Leben), as Dilthey wrote,

"to the extent that it is grasped in its temporal progression and in the effective cohesion that arises from it. This is possible thanks to the reconfiguration of its course in memory, which does not reproduce singularity, but reconfigures cohesion itself in its stages. What memory accomplishes in the comprehension of the course of life itself is effectuated in history through the grasp of vital expressions that objective spirit encompasses, linking together this production and progression. That is history."⁴

Finally, in a contemporary Italian context, Benedetto Croce adopted a similar assumption concerning the capacity of memory in the collective sphere to bring to expression the unity of historical epochs and nations amid their diversity. Croce, too, understood memory to be a principle of historical cohesion and comprehension. Just as the individual is capable of remembering the factual reality of the personal past and of distinguishing it from the products of fantasy, so memory

4 „Sofern es in seinem Fortrücken in der Zeit und dem so entstehenden Wirkungszusammenhang aufgefasst wird. Die Möglichkeit hiervon liegt in der Nachbildung dieses Verlaufes in einer Erinnerung, welche nicht das Einzelne reproduziert, sondern den Zusammenhang selbst, seine Stadien nachbildet. Was in der Auffassung des Lebensverlaufes selber die Erinnerung leistet, wird in der Geschichte vermittelt der Lebensäußerungen, die der objektive Geist umfasst, durch die Verknüpfung nach diesem Fortrücken und Erwirken herbeigeführt. Das ist Geschichte“. Dilthey, *Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften* (1910) (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1973), p. 261.

raised to the collective level, as Croce wrote in his work *Aesthetic as a Science of Expression* (1902), draws on a reservoir of human experience which has been confirmed on the basis of credible evidence. History may in this sense be identified with memory since history is what “the individual and humanity remember of their past”.⁵ Historical knowledge retained in memory has its own kind of certitude which, to his mind, is different from that of the natural sciences. While truth in the natural sciences is attested by “analysis and demonstration”, the certitude of history depends in his words on “memory and authority.” In the final analysis, if we attempt to account for the proof we have concerning the veracity of the historical past, humanity according to Croce may answer: it is true “because I remember it”.⁶

Ernest Renan, Wilhelm Dilthey, Benedetto Croce: as different from each other as they might have been, their respective ideas of memory in relation to history shared a marked affinity. Memory for each of these authors extends beyond personal experience and that shared by living groups to encompass the historical past which reaches as far back as written accounts and remaining traces. By virtue of memory, humanity conserves the past, as a spiritual bequest, in the diversity of its national or cultural expressions. The memory of collectivities is in this way the organ of historical continuity which traverses generations and centuries. All three of these thinkers shared with Hegel an essentially spiritual or idealist conception of memory, even after they rejected the all-encompassing breadth of his metaphysical claim to comprehend its total meaning. Memory at all of its levels of articulation is essentially identified with a conscious will to recollect, more than with an implicit or unconscious trace of the past which acts within us without our explicit knowledge.

This implicit or unconscious dimension of memory shared by collectivities became an important theme of reflection in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, above all in accord with theoretical models derived from the natural scientific orientations of biology or physiology. The

⁵ Benedetto Croce, *Aesthetic as a Science of Expression and General Linguistic*, trans. D. Ainslie (London: Macmillan, 1929), p. 28-30.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

late 19th century was the great period of speculation concerning what was labeled “organic memory”. This was an unconscious memory believed to be the source of traits and predispositions transmitted from generation to generation which, by virtue of specific group characteristics or racial types, supposedly conferred continuity on the epochs of history. In the German-speaking world, Ewald Hering in the essay “Memory as a General Function of Organized Matter” (1870) and also Richard Semon, in a treatise entitled *The Mneme as a Principle of Conservation in the Transformation of Organic Processes* (1904), elaborated similar theories of memory conceived as a transmissible biological source of group dispositions and behavior. This principle of conservation amid organic transformation concerned not only humans, but all organic forms of life. In England, the publication of Hering’s theories of memory had a large impact, as is illustrated by the success of Samuel Butler’s popularized version of his theories. Aside from his many novels, Samuel Butler wrote the popular work *Unconscious Memory* (1880), inspired by Hering’s orientation.

In the final decades of the 19th century, Friedrich Nietzsche became increasingly receptive to contemporary theories of the somatic basis of memory. In earlier years, above all in the second of his *Untimely Meditations*, Nietzsche had elaborated his famous attack on the central role the modern world accorded to collective remembrance of the past which, in the form of historical reflection, served to orient modern thought as a whole. This critique was primarily directed against the specific presupposition concerning the significance of historical continuity anchored in conscious recollection which had been the legacy above all of Hegelian idealism. Following the critique of the modern veneration of historical memory and of unquestioned presuppositions concerning the significance of the historical past, Nietzsche shifted the focus of his thoughts about memory and history in later works. In this later period he proposed a theory of organic memory common to all living beings to account for the subtle continuities in existence which, amid apparent breaks and shifts, are transmitted over the course of history. In company with contemporary biologists

such as Wilhelm Roux, with whose works he was familiar, or Ewald Hering, he speculated in numerous later writings and fragments that all organisms are endowed with “memory” and that human societies, in particular, depend on biologically inherited memory traces which account for their organization and development.⁷ Parallel to an influential current of contemporary intellectuals in Europe, Nietzsche began to speculate about the role of what he took to be an “organic memory” shared among human groups⁸. According to his interpretation, organic memory comes to expression in basic group dispositions and habits which, through a process of adaptation and selection over long periods of time, are incorporated into their biological structure and are subsequently transmitted to future generations. In Nietzsche’s perspective, which re-worked contemporary biological theories in light of his specific philosophical orientation, organic memory is not a fixed property, but changes as groups adapt to new circumstances calling for novel forms of social organization. From this standpoint habitual attitudes, after generations of social practice, are inscribed in memory as bodily dispositions which favor adaptation not only to the natural, but also to the social environment. As they are gradually selected, they configure as “organic memory” the biological structure of human groups. This channeling of group attitudes and activity in accordance with long-term habits and dispositions that social regulations and constraints impose is the principal source of the historical movement of

7 To cite one example: “I presuppose that in all that is organic there is memory and a kind of spirit: the apparatus is so fine that it would not seem to exist.” („Ich setze Gedächtnis und eine Art Geist bei allem Organischen voraus: der Apparat ist so fein, dass er für uns nicht zu existieren scheint“). Friedrich Nietzsche, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Colli/Montenari, vol. 7, 2, *Nachgelassene Fragmente. Frühjahr – Herbst 1884*, 25, p. 403. On this point see the illuminating analysis of Gregory Moore, *Nietzsche, Biology, and Metaphor* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press, 2002).

8 Nietzsche was familiar with Francis Galton’s theories of inherited characteristics and, for example, cites his work *Hereditary Genius. Its Laws and Consequences* in a letter sent to August Strindberg on December 7th 1888; Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke*, vol. 4, *Aus dem Nachlass der Achzigerjahre. Briefe (1861-89)*, ed. Karl Schlechta (Frankfurt am Main/Berlin/Vienna: Ullstein 1979), p. 929. Gregory Moore has pointed out similarities between Nietzsche’s conception of organic memory and those propounded by contemporaries like Ewald Hering, *Über das Gedächtnis als eine allgemeine Funktion der organischen Materie* (1870), Ernst Haeckel, beginning with his *Theorie der Zellseele* (1866), or Samuel Butler in his work *Unconscious Memory* (1880); see Gregory Moore, *Nietzsche, Biology, and Metaphor*, p. 34-42.

human civilizations. As he concisely formulated this viewpoint in the late work *Beyond Good and Evil*:

“It is in no way possible that a person should *not* incorporate the traits and the past life of his or her parents, however much appearances may indicate otherwise. This is the problem of race.”⁹

Nietzsche’s later writings express a notable assumption which, in a general way, characterize 19th century theories of organic memory as the source of historical cohesion. After criticizing Hegelian idealism and the idea of historical continuity anchored in conscious recollection of the past, he displaced the source of historical cohesion to the unconscious level of socially molded organic memory that linked together the long epochs of human history. However sharply he rejected the orientation inaugurated by Hegel; however clearly his method contrasted with subsequent historicist models that had appropriated and refashioned Hegel’s idealist assumptions, Nietzsche’s later thought adopted on a fully different basis an analogous presupposition concerning the long-term continuity of history as a process. In inverting the speculative premises that inspired the Hegelian idealist legacy, Nietzsche assumed that *memory* in the collective sphere, through natural evolution and the mechanisms of social selection, bridges the gap between heterogeneous historical epochs. Like Hegel and the proponents of historicism, but on a radically different basis, Nietzsche thus postulated that “remembrance” in the collective sphere provides a principal of cohesion spanning the epochs of human history.

II

Following the profound dislocation and discontinuity that the First World War brought to European social and political life a century ago, radi-

9 „Es ist gar nicht möglich, dass ein Mensch *nicht* die Eigenschaften und Vorleben seiner Eltern und Altvordern im Leib habe: was auch Augenschein dagegen sagen mag. Dies ist das Problem der Rasse.“ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse, Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli andazzino Montinari, vol. 6, 2, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse, Zur Genealogie der Moral, 1886-1887* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1968), § 264, p. 228-229.

cal doubts were raised from many quarters concerning assumptions of the spontaneous continuity of history as a processes, comprehending the disparate moments of the past and molding them into a unity. Here the Hegelian and idealist heritage above all was submitted to sharp attack. Heidegger's *Being and Time* (*Sein und Zeit*), which provided a paradigmatic expression of this doubt, had little to say about memory, for its principal theme centered on what he designated as forgetfulness of the finitude of human being in the traditional quest for theoretical foundations of truth. The Western tradition, which had taken truth to be a fixed attribute, or the result of a cumulative process, had forgotten the finitude of human existence that is thrown into a world, absorbed in its present everyday preoccupations, and obliged to choose a mode of being in the face of future death. For Heidegger, not only traditional metaphysics since Plato and Aristotle, which assumed that truth resides in what is eternal and self-same, but also the quest for spontaneous, trans-historical forms of continuity rising beyond historical flux, were so many stratagems for avoiding and dissimulating existential finitude and the certitude of future death. Not absorption in history as an unfolding process in the sense of Hegel or Dilthey, but only resolute choices in view of the finite future could reveal what is authentically meaningful in the past and worthy of repetition.

In Heidegger's work immediately following *Being and Time*, notably in his 1928 Freiburg course lectures *Metaphysical Foundations of Logic from Leibniz Onward* (*Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Logik im Ausgang vom Leibniz*) and in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* (*Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, 1929), he related the theme of human finitude to that of memory. He thereby assigned to reminiscence in its fundamental sense (Wiedererinnerung)¹⁰ the metaphysical task of

10 Since Schleiermacher's epoch-making translation of Plato in the first years of the 19th century, *Wiedererinnerung* as a philosophical term was identified with the Platonic notion of anamnesis. Hegel adopted this translation in his discussion of Plato in his *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*. In *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* Heidegger wrote: "The finitude of *Dasein* – the comprehension of Being – lies in forgetfulness. This forgetfulness is nothing accidental and temporary but is constantly and necessarily renewed. All construction relevant to fundamental ontology, construction which strives toward the disclosure of the internal possibility of the comprehension of Being, must in its act of projection wrest from forgetfulness that which it thus apprehends. The basic, fundamental-ontological act of the metaphysics of *Dasein* is, therefore, a remembering (Wiedererinnerung)"; Martin Heidegger, *Kant and*

recalling the finite ground of existence which the Western tradition, in the manifold forms of its quest for permanence and for stable criteria of truth, had continually neglected. The task of reminiscence in this finite perspective was not to retrieve, but above all to break with tradition, engaging the resolute critique initiated in *Being and Time* of all presuppositions concerning self-sustaining historical continuity and the presumption that meaning in history was to be sought in its objective cohesion as an overarching process.¹¹ Indeed, the only trans-historical unity that Heidegger identified in this early period of his work was that of the forgetfulness of Being itself, which provided a hidden continuity linking together the epochs of history.

The importance of Heidegger's critique lies in his insistence on the fundamental role of human *finitude* for an investigation of memory and of historical continuity. In language that recalls that of Heidegger's existential analytics, Hans-Georg Gadamer, in the first pages of his work *Truth and Method (Wahrheit und Methode)*, underlined the conviction according to which,

“It is time to recognize that the phenomenon of memory (des Gedächtnisses) [...] is an essential moment of the finite-historical being of humanity.”¹²

In the later sections of this work, Gadamer highlighted what he took to be the central role of Heidegger's philosophy, beyond Hegel and Dilthey, in uncovering the finite ground of human historical understanding.¹³ In his critical analysis of Hegel and of Dilthey, Heidegger, as Gadamer asserted, emphasized the fundamental finitude of human existence that to his mind they had overlooked.

the Problem of Metaphysics, trans. James Churchill (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962), p. 241-42; Martin Heidegger, *Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Logik im Ausgang vom Leibniz* (1928), *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 26 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1978), p. 186.

11 On this theme see my essay “Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Memory,” *Studia Phenomenologica* 8 (2008), p. 401-409.

12 „Es wäre Zeit, das Phänomen des Gedächtnisses [...] als einen Wesenszug des endlich-geschichtlichen Seins des Menschen zu erkennen.“ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1975), p. 13.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 240-250.

Gadamer's comment raises a salient point that reaches to the heart of the problem of the temporal dimension of collective memory in relation to the historical past. Indeed, even if we concede Gadamer's point, the question remains concerning the adequacy of Heidegger's philosophy for an understanding of human finitude as such. Reinhart Koselleck evoked this question in his public debate with Gadamer in 1987 in Heidelberg, published under the title *Hermeneutik und Historik*. In the course of this debate, Koselleck took Heidegger's philosophy to task for what he characterized as its inability to account for the principle of cohesion of human co-existence in a social realm that is continually transformed over the course of time. "The times of history", as he wrote, in reference to Heidegger,

"are not identical and they are also not derivable from the existential modalities that have been developed in regard to human beings as 'Dasein'. Right from the start, the times of history are constituted in an inter-human manner; it is always a matter of simultaneity of the unsimultaneous, of delineations of difference, that contain their own finitude, and cannot be referred back to an 'Existenz'".¹⁴

It is not fortuitous that here, as elsewhere in his writings, Koselleck restricted his analysis to the field of history and refrained from any reference to collective memory as a source of group cohesion in a world of social co-existence. In other statements, indeed, Koselleck voiced skepticism concerning the significance of the very concept of collective memory and refused to attribute to it any theoretical role. This critical attitude was aroused by his suspicion concerning manipulated

¹⁴ „Die Zeiten der Geschichte sind nicht identisch und auch nicht ableitbar aus den existentiellen Modalitäten, die an dem Menschen als ‚Dasein‘ entwickelt worden sind. Die Zeiten der Geschichte sind von vornherein zwischenmenschlich konstituiert, es handelt sich immer um Gleichzeitigkeiten des Ungleichzeitigen, um Differenzbestimmungen, die ihre eigene Endlichkeit enthalten, die nicht auf eine ‚Existenz‘ zurückführbar ist;“ Reinhart Koselleck, „Hermeneutik und Historik“, *Zeitschichten. Studien zur Historik. Mit einem Beitrag von Hans-Georg Gadamer* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000), p. 101. This text was originally published in 1987 as a separate work alongside Gadamer's contribution to the debate; cf. *Hermeneutik und Historik* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1987).

forms of remembrance where ideological distortions of the past are severed from their bearings in factual reality.¹⁵ 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 reservations are perhaps understandable. But, in spite of Koselleck's skepticism, there are reasons that lead me to affirm the theoretical role of the concept of collective memory as it nourishes collective identities.

According to my interpretation, the phenomenon of collective memory, more directly than the long sweep of history, brings to visibility a dimension of human temporal finitude that cannot be encompassed in the narrow confines of Heidegger's existential analytics. It is a finitude that does not concern, first and foremost, the *singular* finitude of mortal beings, which is only one among different modes of finitude. On another level, we can identify a finitude intrinsic to *group* existence and to group perspectives that is not a collective elaboration of the singularity of being-toward-death in Heidegger's sense.

In attempting to situate the finite temporal sphere of collective memory, whether in terms of recollections shared by small groups such as families or other associations or those drawn upon by vast collectivities, we must acknowledge that remembrance is always undertaken in the original sphere of the self; in the strict sense of the term, *groups* do not remember, any more than they have an independent substantial being. And yet, we also recognize that the personal sphere is not limited to the contents of individual experience. Indeed, the very possibility of communicating with others and of conversing with oneself presupposes the existence of a social context that individuals do not create; an interwoven web of significations that, since earliest child-

15 As Koselleck wrote: "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." Reinhart Koselleck, "Conceptual History, Memory, and Identity: An Interview with Reinhart Koselleck," *Contributions* vol. 2, number 1, (March 2006), p. 113.

hood, individuals appropriate and share with others through language, gestures, and styles.

Here we may draw on the insights of Maurice Halbwachs in his pioneering work on collective memory. Halbwachs was the first theorist in the 20th century to elaborate a concept of collective memory in according a fundamental role to *living* memory, not only as it is retained by individuals but, above all, as it is shared by given groups in specific social frameworks (*cadres sociaux*). Halbwachs' insistence on the role of memory that is retained by living generations in its distinction from the historical past adumbrated a notion of collective finitude which is articulated at different levels of interpretation, both in terms of smaller groups and of larger collectivities. Beyond the shared memories of groups whose members are personally familiar with each other, Halbwachs recognized that mass associations, such as vast nations, provide few occasions for direct contact among their members. Their shared remembrance is almost always indirectly acquired from the words of others; it is in Halbwachs' words a "borrowed" memory.¹⁶ For this reason, Halbwachs' concept of collective memory attributed a particular importance to smaller intermediary groups, both as a source of shared experience and of the transformations which directly orient the lives of their members. Each individual is in this sense "submerged" ("plongé"), simultaneously or successively, in many different groups.¹⁷ Each individual, through participation in different groups and through the interweaving of different spheres of memory that this participation creates, establishes lines of continuity between past and present which, by virtue of the unity of temporal context and milieu, lends a measure of stability to individual identities in the midst of each of the groups in which he or she participates. The fundamental change in temporal horizon occurs, as Halbwachs clearly understood, where living generations disappear, and with them all contact with ways of being, with gestures and attitudes that, in conveying a past that younger generations could

16 Maurice Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1997), p. 98-99.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 189-192.

not have known directly, reveal *shifts* in temporal context that otherwise remain unperceived. Since these passing, but still existing modes of being reveal themselves to direct experience and memory, they bring us into contact with the concrete manifestations of a recent past that is on the verge of disappearing. Halbwachs' theory thus sets in relief the conditions of a group finitude which, following the disappearance of living generations, leads to the evanescence of their concrete temporal *context*, which is no longer accessible to living memory. This introduces a profound and irremediable discontinuity that collective memory cannot overcome. It leads him to draw a radical distinction between collective memory and the historical past. Once it is lost to the memory of living generations, only the work of historical deciphering can indirectly reconstruct, in piecemeal fashion, the lost setting of the past.¹⁸

In his exploration of the concept of collective memory, Halbwachs dealt predominantly with smaller groups, such as families and other associations in their interwoven social frameworks. In the context of contemporary mass societies in our increasingly globalized world, however, all such smaller groups presuppose the existence of a public realm in the context of mass social existence. The concept of collective memory,

18 Halbwachs writes in this vein: "If the necessary condition for memory is the remembering subject, who, whether as individual or group, feels that it remembers in a continuous movement, how could history be a memory, since there is a dissolution of continuity between the society that reads a history and the witnessing groups or agents who, at another time, participated in it?"; *Ibid.*, p. 130-131. Halbwachs' distinction has been sharply contested in recent years, for example in the influential essay by Peter Burke, "History as Social Memory". In affirming Burke's position, Aleida and Jan Assmann have asserted that not only living memory and the historical past, but the whole of a cultural heritage that is collectively retained and serves to define group identities comprises collective memory in the broad sense they accord to it. From their standpoint, collective memory assumes two different forms, first as "communicative memory" shared by living generations over a period roughly spanning eighty to one hundred years, which more or less corresponds to Halbwachs' conception of collective memory; second, as "cultural memory", encompassing not only the historical past but legends, rites, myths, literary creations, and all manner of fictive narratives that the past has bequeathed. In spite of the great interest of their attempts at conceptual clarification of the concept of collective memory, I am defending the position that the conflation of collective memory and the realm of history, which assumes the commensurability of memory and history, risks obscuring the finite reach of collective memory and thus unwittingly falls back on assumptions inherited from Hegel. See Peter Burke, "History as Social Memory," *Memory*, ed. Thomas Butler (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p. 98-99; Aleida and Jan Assmann, "Schrift, Tradition und Kultur," Wolfgang Raible, ed., *Zwischen Festtag und Alltag. Zehn Beiträge zu Thema 'Mündlichkeit und Schriftlichkeit'* (Tübingen: Narr, 1988), p. 28-29; Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (Munich: Beck, 1997), p. 42-56.

as I conceive of it, pertains most fundamentally to this large-scale social existence. It is here that we are obliged to elaborate this concept beyond Halbwachs' theoretical framework and to reformulate it in two essential ways.

The first revision of the concept of collective memory I propose concerns the interpretation of the *symbolic* realm through which remembered experience that is shared by vast groups can be grasped and communicated. Symbols are complex phenomena and the idea of public communicability of collective memory among vast groups requires a precise interpretation of the symbol. At one level, symbols may be defined in a narrow sense where they represent what is absent or what cannot be grasped in the sensuous realm – such as the State or the sacred. Yet at another, more fundamental level symbols also have a broader function, for they confer spatio-temporal configuration and logical order on immediate experience itself.¹⁹ In this broad sense, symbols lend intelligibility to experience as it is communicated through language, gesture or style and is embodied in memory. As such, they lend spontaneous intelligibility to the public world in which more particular forms of communication among small groups and individuals are deployed. In an urban environment, for example, I immediately familiarize myself with spatial differences between private yards and public parks or semi-public shopping malls, even before I explicitly reflect on them, just as the background music I hear in an airport or supermarket, a restaurant or church gives me direct clues concerning the surrounding social milieu. Collective memory is rooted in a many-layered web of interwoven shared symbolic structures that orient spatio-temporal awareness and

¹⁹ My approach to the symbol is in part inspired by the thought of Ernst Cassirer. What I have borrowed from him concerns less the theory of symbolic forms that he presented in the three volumes of his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* than what he conceived to be the “primordial forms of synthesis” (*Urformen der Synthesis*) – space, time, and number – for which symbols provide the ordering principle. See Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, vol. 3 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994), p. 17. I have dealt with this theme in more detail in my introduction to J. A. Barash, ed. *The Symbolic Construction of Reality: The Legacy of Ernst Cassirer* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. ix – xx. To this I might add the remarkable approach to the symbol found in Nelson Goodman's work *Ways of Worldmaking*, which explicitly draws on Cassirer's theory of the symbol for his conception of “worldmaking”. Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978).

the conceptual logic it deploys. The continuity of this web attests the ongoing link between past and present within the horizon of experience recalled by overlapping living generations.

A second revision of the concept of collective memory requires interpretation not only of the active functions of memory in a collective context, but above all the realms of *passivity* that underlie the weave of symbols that lend cohesion to group remembrance in a public world. Beyond the recollections that are explicitly acknowledged by groups, the notion of passivity identifies implicit levels of shared remembrance. In this framework, collective memory does not only concern commemorative acts, vestiges of the past displayed in museums, or even the ongoing public significance of a past that has been experienced and transmitted by contemporaries but, first and foremost, vast reservoirs of meaning that are latent sources of interpretation underlying public existence and configuring group identities. These passive symbolic networks serve as anthropological preconditions of group existence in a common world. Far from monolithic structures, the weave of symbolic significations flowing from these passive depths is in constant state of fragmentation as it is transmitted and interpreted among a plurality of groups that make up a given social context; it is also marked by discontinuity and flux brought on by the arrival of new generations and the gradual demise of older contemporaries. Even where the broad intelligibility of general linguistic and other symbolic categories is retained over centuries, the more specific nuances groups invest in them, constituting the living context and intrinsic sense of their co-existence, is subject to remarkable and often barely palpable variability as collective memory recedes into the historical past.

Fragmentation and discontinuity in the shared context of remembrance mark the finitude of living groups. The finite temporal scope of this context comes to light in the collective inability, by virtue of any specific capacity of *memory*, to rise beyond the horizon of living generations to penetrate the remote depths of the historical past. This can only be achieved to a very limited extent through painstaking historical reconstruction in which memory in its proper sense plays only an indirect role.

Beyond historical continuities of the spirit presumed to be capable of comprehending and retaining the essential significance of past experience, and beyond continuities taken to be unconsciously elaborated by organically transmitted dispositions, the concept of collective memory highlights an incommensurable diversity of temporal contexts which, in its tacit dimension, is readily overlooked. As the nuances of contextual divergence fade from living memory, subtle metamorphoses in the symbolic underpinnings of group experience flowing from its passive reaches are no longer recalled to group awareness. The more fully the contours of contextual divergence between past and present fall from awareness, the more readily nuances are forgotten that distinguish memory retained by living generations from the historical past.

III

In this third and final section of my talk, an example drawn from literature will serve to further elucidate my conception of collective memory as the mark of group finitude. This conception of memory is illustrated with particular eloquence in the work of Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu*.

At the original level of personal awareness itself, Proust emphasizes the essential heterogeneity of experience over time. It is memory, as he describes it, which lends cohesion to the disparate moments of individual life where, as he writes, the “agile shuttles of the years weave the threads between those of our recollections that at first seem the most independent of one another”.²⁰ In this manner Proust indicates the way in which unity is constructed out of a radical diversity of personal recollections in the changing perspective of time:

“It is true that these changes have occurred without our being aware of them; but the distance between the memory which suddenly returns and our present personality, as

20 «[...] les navettes agiles des années tissent des fils entre ceux de nos souvenirs qui semblaient d’abord les plus indépendants...». Marcel Proust, «La prisonnière,» *A la recherche du temps perdu*, vol. 3 (Paris: Gallimard/Pléiade, 1954), p. 848.

also between two memories of different years and places, is so great that it would suffice, apart from their specific uniqueness, to make comparison between them impossible. Yes, if a memory, thanks to forgetfulness, has been unable to contract any tie, to forge any link between itself and the present, if it has remained in its own place, of its own date, if it has kept its distance [...] it makes us suddenly breathe an air new to us just because it is an air we have formerly breathed [...] which offers that deep sense of renewal only because it has been breathed before, inasmuch as the true paradises are paradises we have lost.”²¹

In the sphere of personal awareness, memories taken from different periods may be wholly disparate and seemingly incommensurate in regard to our present state of being; yet, they have at the same time have been “breathed before” and are encompassed in the former atmosphere of the *same* rememberer. Memory takes on the task of harmonizing the most disparate moments of the personal past and present.

Such shifts in the context of remembrance, as Proust illustrates, are by no means limited to the sphere of personal remembrance, and are most often intimately connected to shifts in modes of social existence. Changes in sensibility and understanding of a same individual in different periods of his or her life may imperceptibly correspond to metamorphoses in milieu that are all the more difficult to detect the more they are generalized. Throughout the novel *A la recherche du temps perdu* Proust depicts such metamorphoses in individual sensibilities that stand in subtle harmony with modifications in a shared tem-

21 «Il est vrai que ces changements, nous les avons accomplis insensiblement; mais entre le souvenir qui nous revient brusquement et notre état actuel, de même qu’entre deux souvenirs d’années, de lieux, d’heures différentes, la distance est telle que cela suffirait, en dehors même d’une originalité spécifique, à les rendre incomparables les uns aux autres. Oui, si le souvenir, grâce à l’oubli, n’a pu contracter aucun lien, jeter aucun chaînon entre lui et la minute présente, s’il est resté à sa place, à sa date, s’il a gardé ses distances [...], il nous fait tout à coup respirer un air nouveau, précisément parce que c’est un air qu’on a respiré autrefois, cet air plus pur que les poètes ont vainement essayé de faire régner dans le Paradis et qui ne pourrait donner cette sensation profonde de renouvellement que s’il avait été respiré déjà, car les vrais paradis sont les paradis qu’on a perdus.» Marcel Proust, *Time regained*, tr. Stephen Hudson, Feedbooks, Project Gutenberg, p. 182; Marcel Proust, «Le temps retrouvé,» *A la recherche du temps perdu*, vol. 3, p. 869-870.

poral context. A particularly eloquent example is provided by changes in public appreciation of works of art that occur slowly over the lifetimes of individuals and groups and are often only barely noticed. Proust's example illustrates shifts in temporal context at the level of symbolic and stylistic perception which establishes, by means of shared memory, an apparent continuity between disparate moments of group experience, to the point of overshadowing and blurring what, in its originality, stands in sharp contrast with patterns of perception that predominated in the past.

At an early point in his novel, "Le côté des Guermantes", Proust evokes the work of the renowned modern painter, Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, who enjoyed enormous popularity at the beginning and in the middle of the 19th century. Ingres was the preferred painter of Napoléon Bonaparte, who commissioned a number of his works, and was later admired by his nephew Napoléon III. Ingres became famous for his representations of themes that harked back to classical antiquity, and served to suggest a subtle historical link between ancient glory and that of the contemporary Napoleonic Empires. Among them were, for example, *L'apothéose de Homère* (1827), representing the bard Homer receiving homage from the great men of Greece, Rome and modern times, and *La Source* (completed in 1856), depicting a young nude girl carrying a vase, that was a favorite motif of ancient painting.²² The contemporary art critic and writer Théophile Gautier expressed the opinion in 1855 that, aside from the more modern personalities depicted in the lower part of the painting, *L'apothéose de Homère* might have found its place in the art gallery of the Athenian Propylea, "among the ancient masterpieces".²³ And somewhat later, in his *Philosophie de l'art* (1865-1882), Hippolyte Taine, who was no admirer of Napoléon III, nor of the official art of his period, expressed

22 A more recent art critic has written the following perceptive words concerning the painting, *L'Apothéose de Homer*: «*L'Apothéose d'Homère* exalts the values of a civilization linked together in the coherent succession of history», Daniel Ternois, «Le songe d'Ossian et de la raison,» *Ossian, exposition du Grand Palais, 15 février – 15 avril, 1974* (Paris: Éditions des Musées Nationaux, 1974).

23 Théophile Gautier, *Les beaux-arts et l'Europe*, vol. 1 (Paris: Lévy Frères, 1855), p. 145.

his deep admiration for the art of Ingres: “Raphael”, as he wrote, “has no more faithful student.”²⁴

I cite these appreciative contemporary commentaries to highlight the similarity of their judgment to that voiced by the fictive characters in Proust’s novel. Their praise of Ingres, who seemed to contemporaries to establish lines of continuity with the Renaissance and with Greek antiquity, contrasts with their initial contempt for the painting of Édouard Manet, and above all for his work *Olympia*, which resolutely broke with classical styles and topics. In representing a nude lying on her bed and staring straight at the beholder of the painting, Manet, far from alluding to classical motifs, depicted a well-known contemporary woman, Victorine Meurent, to whom a maid brings a bouquet of flowers evidently sent to her by one of her clients. The scandal that the painting provoked just a few years after the general praise that had been given to Ingres’ *La Source* confirmed the break with a previous classicism and romanticism that *Olympia* announced and that would be generally confirmed by the rise of the Impressionist movement in later years.

Proust underlines the great discontinuity in attitudes toward painting, and in public sensibility more generally, among the members of contemporary living generations. Over the course of time the initial negative reaction to Manet’s *Olympia* was followed by a gradual change in attitude as the public became more accustomed to the new impressionist style and even began to find a certain charm in it. In this paradoxical situation, as Proust writes, the seemingly unbridgeable distance between what the public had first judged to be the masterpiece of Ingres and the “horrid” work (une horreur) of Manet, diminished “to the point where the two canvases “began to appear to be twins” (les deux toiles eussent l’air jumelles).²⁵

Proust illustrates in this example an important shift in temporal context which, in regard to artistic style, marked a subtle metamor-

²⁴ Hippolyte Taine, *La philosophie de l’art* (Paris: Fayard, 1985), p. 517.

²⁵ Marcel Proust, *Le côté des Guermantes. A la recherche du temps perdu*, vol. 2 (Paris: Gallimard/Pléiade, 1954), p. 420.

phosis in public sensibility. What is noteworthy, above all, as Proust remarked, is the fact that this change was barely acknowledged or was even unnoticed by most of the people who underwent it. Proust emphasizes this point in relating the shift in group perception of art to the most recent developments in painting in the years after the Impressionist movement had begun to win wide acceptance. In the fictive setting of the novel, the young narrator, while attending a large dinner party at the home of the Duke and Duchess of Guermantes, obtains a long awaited opportunity to see the paintings of a contemporary artist – the fictive painter Elstir – whose originality the protagonist greatly admires and most of the snobbish aristocrats in the milieu of the Duke and Duchess vehemently reject. The young protagonist comments that they remain oblivious to the variability of their own tastes and of those of their social milieu more generally. The appeasement of their earlier hostility toward Manet’s innovations has in no way led them to reflect on subtle changes in temporal context even where they are remembered although, as Proust adds, the eldest members of the generation who had witnessed this change might well have recognized its implications for their present artistic judgments.²⁶

Changes in concrete temporal context which lead the public to gradually accept what it had previously rejected are often tacit occurrences rooted in the *passively* sedimented symbolic preconditions of group experience. It is this obliviousness to the finitude and contingency of temporal context, that Proust qualified as the incapacity to adopt the “perspective of time” (“la perspective du temps”). Where it is brought to awareness, however, this perspective permits us to get a glimpse at the finite scope of our own point of view in conjunction with a network of perceptual dispositions and conventional attitudes shared with our contemporaries. In view of shifts in context over the course of several generations spanned by the beginning and the end of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, roughly corresponding to social transformations during the period before and after the Great War, Proust introduces the no-

²⁶ “However, the eldest would have been able to say that during their lives they had seen, the more the years removed them from the event, the unbridgeable distance diminish.” Ibid., p. 420.

tion of “lost time” that the title of the novel evokes. Lost time is neither primarily chronological nor biological; it is engendered neither by the mere passage of days and years, nor by the relentless process of ageing, but above all by radical transformations in individual sensibilities that are interwoven in a collective context formed by the shifting temporal horizon of succeeding generations. It reveals metamorphoses in human modes of understanding and of being which, in light of the change in the symbolic horizon of interaction and of communication brought on by the passage of each generation and of its living memory, casts in its wake a deepening shroud over the past’s singular texture.

This brings me to the decisive point: if we take into account the mutations in common dispositions, in shared horizons of experience and group recollections, which are not only fragmented and interpreted in different ways according to the collectivity that perceives them, but tend to fade over time, how much more radical must be the subtle changes, often unperceived, separating living generations from those whose traces, following their demise, have faded into the historical past? Here collective memory, as I conceive of it, brings to visibility the contours of group finitude and the limits of the scope of group recollection in the face of an historical past which lies beyond its pale. It is this finitude which the radical dislocation of the 20th century placed in an unprecedented relief and which came to expression in Halbwachs’ notion of the “dissolution of continuity” between present and historical past and in Proust’s conception of “Lost Time”.

I will conclude with a final illustration of this notion of the historical past lying beyond the pale of collective memory, by drawing briefly from another literary example. In 1829, roughly a century after the initial printing of an abridged version of the late 17th and early 18th century *Mémoires* of the Duc de Saint-Simon, the complete edition of this work was finally published. In the early 19th century, this publication met with great popularity at a time when the historical novel had become fashionable. What the historical novel achieved by means of fiction, Saint-Simon’s *Mémoires* seemed to accomplish, in the eyes of many contemporaries, through autobiographical narrative: the *Mémoires*, in other words, seemed to establish a line of *living* experiential continuity with an

historical past several generations away. In the mid-19th century, indeed, Hippolyte Taine, in his *Essais de critique et d'histoire* commented on this popularity of Saint-Simon's *Mémoires* in the following terms:

“Here is one of the reasons for the popularity of Saint-Simon today: he describes the exterior, like Walter Scott, Balzac and all the contemporary novelists who are willing antiquarians, auctioneers and toiletries merchants – his talent encounters our taste; the revolutions of the spirit carried us back to him.”²⁷

A century later, in a context marked by a sense of far more pronounced historical *discontinuity*, Halbwachs, without referring to Taine's remarks, evokes the 19th century publication of the full edition of St-Simon's *Mémoires*. In sharp contrast to Taine's comments, Halbwachs expressed his doubts concerning a possible encounter with the context of St.-Simon. He wondered to what extent the French public of the 20th century could possibly penetrate the sensibility of the late 17th and early 18th century high aristocracy at the court at Versailles. The only effect of such publications, as he wrote, in referring to the temporal horizon of his contemporaries, “is to make us understand our distance from the writer and those he describes.”²⁸

27 «Voilà une des raisons qui rendent aujourd'hui Saint-Simon si populaire; il décrit l'extérieur, comme Walter Scott, Balzac et tous les romanciers contemporains lesquels sont volontiers antiquaires, commissaires priseurs, et marchands à la toilette – son talent et notre goût se rencontrent; les révolutions de l'esprit nous ont portés jusqu'à lui.» Hippolyte Taine, «Saint-Simon – *Les Mémoires*», *Essais de critique et d'histoire* (Paris: Hachette, 1892), p. 237.

28 «Le seul effet de telles publications, c'est de nous faire comprendre à quel point nous sommes éloignés de celui qui écrit et de ceux qu'il décrit.» Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective*, p. 131.

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