

Communicative and Cultural Memory

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The past exists—if it can be said to exist at all—in a double form: as sedimentation of relics, traces and personal memories on the one hand, and as a social construction on the other. This doubleness applies already to our personal past which is with us in all kinds of internal memory traces and external memory symbols, but also as an image or narrative we construe and carry with us as our autobiographical or episodic memory. As Maurice Halbwachs has shown, even our autobiographical memory is a social construction which we build up in communication with others. Only in its first aspect, as a sedimentation or unstructured archive, it can be said to be strictly personal (Halbwachs). As a social construction or narrative, the past conveys a kind of connective structure or diachronic identity to societies, groups and individuals, both in the social and in the temporal dimension.

Memory is knowledge with an identity-index. This is not to say that this knowledge is all about oneself; on the contrary, it refers to all kinds of things of the outward and the inward worlds, but with a strong link to an idea of “self” that accompanies this knowledge and sets it off against normal, identity-neutral knowledge. In memory theory, this self-reference is called the “autonoetic” function of memory (Markowitsch and Welzer). It is by virtue of this function that memory provides what I would call a “connective structure” both to persons and societies (see Jan Assmann *Early Civilization*). This connective structure seems to be a human specificity based on the exclusively human faculties of symbolization and communication. A human self is a “diachronic identity,” built “of the stuff of time” (Luckmann 67-91). Human memory brings about a synthesis of time and identity, both on the collective and on the personal level which may be called a diachronic identity. It is this identity which allows human beings both personally and collectively to orient themselves in time. This applies to the future as well as to the past. Due to our memory, we are able to think in temporal horizons far beyond our birth and our death.

This connection between time, identity and memory can be shown to work on the three levels of the individual, the social and the cultural. As we may distinguish between the *inner* time of our physical self, the *social* time we share with others and the *historical* or *mythical* time, we may distinguish between individual, social and cultural memory. Maurice Halbwachs developed the concept of social or “collective” memory. He was

careful, however, to keep this concept apart from the realm of traditions, transmissions and transferences which we propose to subsume under the term "cultural memory." We preserve Halbwachs' distinction by breaking up his concept of collective memory into "communicative" and "cultural memory," but we insist on treating the cultural sphere, which he excluded, as another form of memory. We are, therefore, not arguing for replacing his idea of "collective memory" with "cultural memory"; rather, we distinguish between both forms as two different *modi memorandi*, ways of remembering.

We may thus distinguish between embodied and embedded memory. Personal memory is embodied in our brain and neuro-mental system, social memory is embedded in the constellations of social communication but still embodied in the brains of the participants and cultural memory is neatly disembodied, exteriorized, objectified and embedded in cultural institutions such as rituals, feasts, texts, archives, all kinds of symbolic forms that, unlike the sounds of words or the sight of gestures are stable and situation-transcendent, able to be transferred from one situation to another and transmitted from one generation to another. In order to work as a memory, however, its symbolic forms have not only to be preserved but also to be circulated and reembodyed in a society. The disembodied status of cultural memory is a reason for its not having been recognized as a form of memory until recently. Memory, the argument runs, requires a mind. Therefore, things like Marcel Proust's famous Madeleine, or monuments, archives, libraries, anniversaries, feasts, icons, symbols, land- and town-scapes cannot have or carry memory, because they lack a mind. This objection, however, rests on a complete misunderstanding. Neither Proust nor Halbwachs nor anyone else who uses the term "collective memory" ever held that collective or cultural memory "exists in something that has no mind." Things do not "have" a memory of their own, but they may remind us, may trigger our memory because they carry our memories which we have invested into them, things such as dishes, feasts, rites, images, texts, landscapes, and so forth. This interaction between a remembering mind and a reminding object is the reason why the realm of things and especially of the things *meant as reminders*, that is, monuments and lieux de mémoire have to be included into our concept of memory. Moreover, groups do not "have" a memory in the way individuals do, but they may "make" themselves a memory by erecting monuments, cherishing their lieux de mémoire and by developing a variety of cultural (mnemo-)techniques supporting memory or promoting forgetting.

This institutional character does not apply to what Halbwachs called collective memory and what we propose to rename communicative memory. Communicative memory is non-institutional; it is not supported by any institutions of learning, transmission and interpretation, it is not cultivated by specialists and is not summoned or celebrated on special occasions; it is not formalized and stabilized by any form of material symbolization but lives in everyday interaction and communication and, for this very reason, has only a limited time depth which normally reaches not farther back than 80 years, the time span of three interacting generations. Change of constellations and of frames brings about forgetting; the durability of memories depends on the durability of social bonds and "frames" (see J. Assmann, "Cultural Memory" and A. Assmann "Memory").

Jan Vansina, an anthropologist who worked with tribal societies in Africa, devoted an important study to the form in which they represent the past (Vansina). He observed a tripartite structure. The recent past which looms large in interactive communication has a limited depth in time, reaching not beyond three generations. Concerning a more remote past, there is either a total gap of information or one or two names are produced with great hesitation. Since this gap shifts with the succession of generations, Vansina calls it the "Floating gap." For the most remote past, however, there is again a profusion of information dealing with traditions about the origin of the world and the early history of the tribe. This information, however, is not committed to everyday communication but intensely formalized and institutionalized. It exists in forms of narratives, songs, dances, rituals, masks and symbols; specialists such as narrators, bards, mask-carvers and others are organized in guilds and have to undergo long periods of initiation, instruction and examination. Moreover, it requires for its actualization certain occasions when the community comes together for some celebration or other. This is what we propose to call "cultural memory."

Vansina's "Floating Gap" highlights the difference between communicative and cultural memory. The communicative memory contains memories that an individual shares with his contemporaries. This is what Halbwachs understood by "collective memory" and what forms the object of Oral History, that branch of historical research that bases itself not on the usual written sources of historiography, but exclusively on memories gained in oral interviews. All studies in Oral History confirm that even in literate societies where the border between communicative and cultural memory is much less pronounced than in purely oral societies, living memory goes no further back than 80 years after which, separated by the floating gap, come, instead of myths of origin, the dates from schoolbooks and monuments.

Cultural memory is based on fixed points in the past. Even here, however, the past is not preserved as such but is galvanized in symbols as they are represented in oral myths or in writings, performed in feasts, and as they continually illuminate a changing present. In the context of cultural memory, the distinction between myth and history vanishes. Not the past as such, as it is investigated and reconstructed by archaeologists and historians, counts for the cultural memory, but only the past as it is *remembered*, that is, the past with an identity-index. Cultural memory reaches back into the past only so far as the past can be reclaimed as "ours." This is why we refer to this form of historical consciousness as "memory" and not just as knowledge about the past. While knowledge has no form and is endlessly progressive, memory involves forgetting. It is only by forgetting what lies outside the horizon of the relevant that it performs an identity-function. Nietzsche circumscribed this function by notions such as "plastic power" and "horizon," obviously intending the same thing for which now the term "identity" has become generally accepted (Nietzsche).

The difference between communicative and cultural memory expresses itself also in the social dimension, in the structure of participation. The participation of a group in communicative memory is diffuse. It has been acquired by the participants along with

language and social competence. There are no specialists of communicative memory. The cultural memory, by contrast, has always its specialists. To these belong shamans, bards, griots as well as priests, teachers, artists, clerks, scholars, mandarins, rabbis, mullas and however these specialized carriers of memory are called.

But even where the sacred tradition is committed to writing, memorisation plays the central role. There is, however, still another sense in which the participation in cultural memory may be structured in a society. This concerns the question of restricted knowledge, of secrecy and esotericism. Every traditional society knows areas of restricted knowledge whose boundaries are not simply defined by the different capacities of human memory and understanding, but also by questions of access and initiation. In Judaism, for example, general participation is required in the Torah which every (male) member of the group is supposed to know by heart. Specialized participation concerns the world of Talmudic and Medieval commentaries, codices and midrash, a vast body of literature that only specialists can master. Secrecy, however, shrouds the esoteric world of Cabbala, to which only select adepts (and after they have reached the age of 40 years) are admitted. The participation structure of cultural memory has an inherent tendency to elitism; it is never strictly egalitarian. Cultivating one's cultural memory means accumulating symbolic capital. Some have to prove their degree of admittance by formal exams (as in traditional China); or by the mastery of linguistic registers (as in England) or of the "*Citatenschatz des deutschen Volkes*" (treasure of German quotations) as in 19th century Germany. Others remain systematically excluded from this "distinguished" knowledge like the women in ancient Greece, traditional China and orthodox Judaism or the lower classes in the heydays of German "*Bildungsbürgertum*."

Transitions and Transformations account for the dynamics of cultural memory. Two typical directions have a structural significance and need to be at least briefly mentioned in this context. One concerns the transition from autobiographical and communicative memory into cultural memory, and the other concerns, within cultural memory, the move from the back stage to down stage, from the periphery into the center, from latency or potentiality to manifestation or actualization and vice-versa. These shifts presuppose structural boundaries which are to be crossed: the boundary between embodied and mediated forms of memory, and the boundary between what Aleida Assmann proposes to call "working" and "storage memories" or "canon" and "archive" (A. Assmann, *Memory*). We are presently living through a period of transition from communicative to cultural memory; the main problem is how to preserve the personal memories of holocaust survivors and other eye witnesses to the catastrophes in the context of World War II and how to transform them into durable forms of cultural memory that may be transmitted to later generations.

The biblical book of Deuteronomy offers a striking parallel to this situation (J. Assmann, *Cultural Memory*, 191-205). The problem then was how to preserve the memory of the generation who has witnessed the events in the context of the exodus from Egypt and the revelation of the Law into the cultural memory of a society that could be handed down to an infinite number of future generations. The aim of this text is to teach both

what to remember and how to remember, that is, both the lesson that must never be forgotten and the mnemotechnique that ensures its continuous transmission. Moses outlines a full-fledged mnemotechnique of individual and collective remembering.

The book of Deuteronomy is the foundational text of a religion based on a covenant between one single god and a chosen people. In this new religion, memory is to play the central role. It deals with a revolutionary change of cultural memory. Normally, cultural memory is not instituted this way but accumulates and changes in the course of centuries. The mnemotechnique of Moses belongs more to political than to cultural memory (for this distinction see A. Assmann, "Memory"). Political memory is highly normative, prescribing what must by no means be forgotten in order to form and to belong to a political identity. The case of Deuteronomy closely corresponds to this concept as it follows and elaborates a model that belongs to the political sphere. It is a ritual that Esarhaddon of Assyria had introduced to make a memory for the vassals of his empire. First, they had to travel to Niniveh in order to swear an oath of loyalty to Esarhaddon and his designated successor Assurbanipal. Then, in order not to forget this oath once they have returned to their home cities, they must annually perform a ritual that will refresh their memory. This ritual is dedicated to the goddess Ishtar of Arbela.

Water from a sarsaru-jar, she (Ishtar of Arbela) let them drink,
a goblet of 1 Seah (= ca. 6 l.) she filled with water from the sarsaru-jar and presented
it to them saying:

In your hearts you will speak thus: Ishtar, a narrow one is she! (meaning: only a
local deity, ignorant of what is going on far off)

thus: you will return to your cities and will eat bread in your districts, and will
forget these contractual stipulations

Thus: You will drink from this water and again remember and observe these
contractual stipulations which I set up concerning Esarhaddon. (J. Assmann, *Ten
Studies*, 10)

Out of this and certainly a lot of similar rituals of memory to be periodically repeated, Deuteronomy develops an entire culture of remembrance and a life-form which we have come to understand by the term "religion" and which then became the model for later world-religions, such as Christianity and Islam. This new type of religion comprises much more than just cult, it extends to every aspect of life and especially focuses on justice and morality; it develops not out of pagan cults but out of the political system which it means to supersede as a form of liberation, emancipation and enlightenment. It thus represents a totally new form both of religion and of socio-political organisation, which is primarily based on memory.

Again we meet with the connection between memory and society. Memory enables us to live in groups and communities and living in groups and communities enables us to build a memory. This connection between memory and belonging is not only a matter of self-regulating or "auto-poietic" evolution as Halbwachs presented it to be. It is

also a matter of political institution or fabrication. Both remembering and belonging have normative aspects. If you want to belong, you MUST remember: ZAKHOR, remember, is *the* Jewish imperative (Yerushalmi).

Also the Assyrian mnemotechnique was meant as the foundation of a political memory, where memory is an obligation. If you want to belong to the Assyrian empire and be safe from its political violence: remember the loyalty oath you have sworn. If you forget, you will be punished and expelled. But here, the memory is still purely ritual; whereas the Deuteronomic mnemotechnique is primarily based on written and oral language. As a form of memory, ritual is based on repetition. Each performance must follow as closely as possible a fixed model in order to make the actual performance resemble in every respect the previous ones. Thus, the flow of time is brought into a pattern that combines the irreversible and the reversible, the passing time and the returning time. Human life and social institutions are, thus, rescued from just passing away, decaying and vanishing, but are integrated into the natural cycles of regeneration. Repetition is a form of preservation, thus, of memory.

The decisive difference between ritual memory and the Torah, for example, is the fact that the first is known only to specialists who have to learn it by heart, whereas the latter is taught to everybody and every member of the community is expected to know it by heart. If, in civilizations following the ritual model, the cultural memory which is stored in specialized memories is to be made public and to circulate in general communication, it is during some feasts when the larger public is admitted to the public performance of rituals and to listening to the recitation of the sacred texts. This difference in participation is very clearly brought to the fore in a passage from Josephus' pamphlet *Contra Apionem*:

Can any government be more holy than this? or any Religion better adapted to the nature of the Deity? Where, in any place but in this, are the whole People, by the special diligence of the Priests, to whom the care of public instruction is committed, accurately taught the principles of true piety? So that the body-politic seems, as it were, one great Assembly, constantly kept together, for the celebration of some sacred Mysteries. For those things which the Gentiles keep up for a few days only that is, during those solemnities they call Mysteries and Initiations, we, with vast delight, and a plenitude of knowledge, which admits of no error, fully enjoy, and perpetually contemplate through the whole course of our lives. (193ff)

In spite of their extensive use of memorisation and even writing, the "pagan" religions were still relying on ritual continuity. Rituals and texts are both solutions of the problem how to make the transient permanent and thus to establish continuity. This is also the problem of memory and in this, both may be seen as media of memory. Rituals secure the transient by iteration, texts by duration.

Textual continuity is only achieved when institutions of learning and exegesis arise that keep the ancient texts alive and semantically transparent. Since the texts themselves must not be altered, exegesis and commentary are the only means of innovation and of

preserving the meaning of the texts in a changing world. All of the new religions that emerged since antiquity, most of them monotheistic and most of them in antagonistic opposition to older traditions and other religions which they reject as paganism, develop canons of sacred scripture and commentaries that translate the canonical texts into changing realities and conditions of understanding: Judaism and the Tanakh, Christianity and the Christian Bible, Islam and the Qur'an, Buddhism and the Pali-Canon, Jainism and the Jaina-Canon, Sikh religion and the Adi Granth, Daoism, Confucianism, etc. down to the Mormons and the Book Mormon. This strong alliance between religions of this new type, the so-called "world-religions," and the formation of canons and commentaries illustrates once again the connection between memory and identity. The transition from ritual to textual continuity means a complete reorganisation of cultural memory in the same way as the transition from the ethnically and culturally determined religions of the Ancient world to the new type of transcultural and transnational world religions meant a totally new construction of identity. The canon, in a way, functioned as a new transethnic home-land and as a new trans-cultural formation and education.

Western cultural memory, however, is informed not only by the biblical canon but also by a parallel canon of Greek and Latin literature. It was the great achievement of Irish monks and Byzantine scholars, people working on the periphery of the ancient world, to have copied and thus rescued alongside religious literature a considerable part of pagan literature of Classical antiquity. There is no time to go into any details here, but this second canon should at least be mentioned, since we are dealing with a somewhat parallel project. More or less at the same time as the final redaction of the Biblical canon, the Alexandrian philologists started to collect and to select the Greek literature by compiling lists of those works and authors that deserved to be edited and commented upon (*hoi prattomenoi*). These are the authors whom Aulus Gellius classified as "classici" employing the denomination of the first class of Roman taxpayers as a metaphor for the most important literary works and authors. Canonisation and classicism are typical phenomena in the organisation of a cultural memory, not only in the West but everywhere where writing plays a fundamental role. In our Western tradition we observe not only several epochs and movements of a return to antiquity, of classicisms such as the Renaissance in Italy, the 17th century in France, the "Augustan Age" in England and the decades around 1790 in Germany, but we also observe the formation of "Golden Ages" to which later epochs have recourse to, such as the Elizabethan Age in England, the epoch of Louis XIV in France, the time of Schiller and Goethe at Weimar or Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven at Vienna (Voskamp). The latter case is especially revealing since in music there is no possibility of a return to antiquity.

The distinction between the classical and the sacred canon lies in the fact that the sacred canon is closed and can only be amplified or modified by commentaries whereas the classical canon is open because every epoch except antiquity which is fixed may become an object of recourse, recycling and reference for another epoch and the canon of "classics" changes and rearranges itself around a central stock of unquestionable works with every new work which is admitted to the canon. One cannot deny, however, even

to the classical canon a certain religious character. It seems evident that art, philosophy and religion have common roots and these roots lay in nothing other but cultural memory.

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