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SOCIAL THOUGHT & COMMENTARY

The Abuses of Memory: Reflections on the Memory Boom in Anthropology¹

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In recent years, studies of memory have blossomed in the humanities. (Klein 2000, Radstone 2000, Zelizer 1995)² In anthropology in particular, a vast number of scholars are currently occupied with research about memory. (Candau 1998, Climo and Cattell 2002, Olick and Robbins 1998) The list of contributions in this recent field of research is too voluminous to even begin to report. In every new anthropological publication, there is another article about social, cultural or material memory. Anthropology of Memory has become a respected course of many American and European University programs, something that would have been unthinkable 20 years ago. Also, conferences and workshops are being organized with a special focus on memory issues, something that would also have been unthinkable 20 years ago.³

However, there are many unsettled areas in the field of memory studies. Historians have indeed begun warning us against the “terminological profusion” and the “semantic overload” of the notion (Kansteiner 2002, Klein 2000). Gillis observes that “memory seems to be losing precise meaning in proportion to its growing rhetorical power” (Gillis 1984: 3). As historian Jay Winter cogently writes,

“The only fixed point is the near ubiquity of the term [memory]. Just as we use words like love and hate without ever knowing their full or shared significance, so are we bound to go on using the term “memory,” the historical signature of our generation” (Winter 2000: 13).

From the idea that “a society or a culture can remember and forget” (Are not only individuals capable of remembering?)⁴ to the widely used notion of “vicarious memory”⁵ and the questionable validity of the notion of memory in approaching certain trans-cultural contexts,⁶ a broad range of fundamental epistemological issues are still to be raised with regard to memory.

The point that I would like to emphasize here concerns the “danger of overextension” of the concept. A concept losing precise meaning, memory can also be approached as an expansive notion. For Gedi and Elam, “‘collective memory’ has become the all-pervading concept which in effect stands for all sorts of human cognitive products generally” (Gedi & Elam 1996: 40). In particular, historians have already underscored the risks of entanglement of memory and identity (Gillis 1994, Megill 1998). Some anthropologists, too, started expressing concerns about the “dangers of overextension that are inherent in the current boom of memory” (Fabian 1999: 51). For Fabian, the “concept of memory may become indistinguishable from either identity or culture” (ibid: 51). Jonathan Boyarin concurs, noting that “identity and memory are virtually the same” (Boyarin 1994: 23). In this essay, I contend that the current usage of the notion by anthropologists can be a source of confusion as it tends to encompass many features of the notion of culture itself. I argue that this process of conceptual extension leading to the entanglement of memory and culture merits careful scrutiny as it tells us a great deal about the anthropological project. Needless to say, I will raise many questions and give very few answers. This piece should be taken as an epistemological challenge rather than a pessimistic reproach.

Memory in Anthropology: a Historical Perspective

It is unfortunate that there has not been yet a history, a genealogy of the concept of memory in anthropology, whereas the ongoing obsession with memory in the humanities has been abundantly documented. In a powerful article, Klein reminds us that

“Memory grew incredibly marginal, and in 1964 *The Dictionary of the Social Sciences* claimed that the word verged on extinction [...] The 1968 Edition of the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* declined to define memory at all, despite the luxury of stretching its contents out for 7 volumes. By 1976 [...] Raymond Williams’s classic study, *Keywords*, [...] ignored memory. [...] Little more than two decades separate memory’s virtual disappearance and triumphal return” (Klein 2000: 131).

To explain this triumphal return, historian Jay Winter has shown that there are “distinctive sources of the contemporary obsession with memory that arise out of a multiplicity of social, cultural, medical, and economic trends and developments of an eclectic but intersecting nature” (Winter 2000: 1). Many factors (historical, social and societal) have been invoked to explain the emergence of the memory concept in the humanities: above all the Shoah (Lacapra 1998), but also the influence of identity politics in the U.S., the marketing of memory and *rétro*-mania, the reassessment of national identities in Europe (Klein 2000). French anthropologist Joel Candau describes our present-day obsession with memory under the term “mnémotropisme.” According to him, this *mnémotropisme* is “a problem in identity caused by our incapacity to master the anxiety of loss” (Candau 1998:104, my translation). Invaded by “a profuse production of information, images and traces” (ibid: 105, my translation). Candau argues, our society is less capable of transmitting memory than others, and more obsessed with it. In the same vein, Baxter underlines, in the *Business of Memory*, that “fetishizing memory is manifesting itself in a society where we are trying to cope with information-glut what David Shrenk called the ‘data smog’” (Baxter 1999: vii).

In the academic world, the memory boom started recently in history, principally in cultural history. Pierre Nora (1989) and Jan Assman (1995) are known as the fathers of the memory craze among historians. In the wake of the “post-modernist turn” and the deconstruction of the meta-texts, students of the humanities have produced “a devastating critique of the totalizing aspects of historical discourse” (Klein 2000: 128). A concept closer to experience in its connotations, “memory” refers to the past as it is *lived* by the social agents (Dosse 1999, Ricoeur 2001). It is defined as more human and subjective, and the historian becomes interested less in the reliability of memory than in the memory work itself. A group of scholars “interested in the issue of popular resistance,” (Jing 1996: 16) and critical of the oral history practice in the early 1980s,

the Popular Memory Group also played a crucial role in orienting the attention of scholars towards the “nature and processes of remembering, as much as the contents of the memories [...]” (Thomson, Frisch and Hamilton 1994: 34).

It is tempting to understand the success of memory among anthropologists in the light of the postmodernist turn and the raging memory/history debate in the humanities, as they both affected our discipline. Recent anthropological studies have indeed abandoned the suspicious attitude toward memory that previously characterized many histories (like those of Vansina (1980) for example) for a more *phenomenological* approach, which consists of capturing the way people perceive: they remember, forget and reinterpret their own pasts. This focus on history as it is lived, on the remembrances shared and transmitted by social groups has shown that people experience and interpret their pasts from a multiplicity of viewpoints. Such a perspective, which documents the existence of multiple and sometimes antagonistic visions of the past within the same society, has been copiously developed in anthropological studies since the 1980s. A bouquet of writings springs to mind, such as those, among many others, of Appadurai (1981), Bloch (1998), Boyarin (1991), Cohn (1995), Cole (2001), Dakhli (1990), Hastrup (1992), Herzfeld (1991), Jing (1996), Kilani (1992), Lapierre (2001), Rappaport (1990), Rosaldo (1980), Stoler and Strassler (2000) and Tonkin (1992). Furthermore, some of these recent works have begun treating the body as a “vital site of memory,” (Strathern 1996: 29) such as those colonial memories explored by Bloch in Madagascar (1998) and Stoller in Niger (1995). Another spate of writings on memory and its relationship to places (Feld and Basso 1996) and objects (Radley 1990) is also emerging these days, emphasizing the way both places and objects contribute to materialize individual biography and shared history.

The Overextension of Memory: Memory and Culture

Today, most anthropologists use the notion of memory to refer to the social remembering of precise historical (and sometimes traumatic) events and experiences. They understand it as an extremely social activity by virtue of which one registers, retains and revisits events and experiences. But, for many anthropologists, readers of Halbwachs, Nora, Connerton and Bastide as well, memory is also understood roughly as the “persistence of something from the past into the present” (Halbwachs 1994 [1925], my translation) or, in other words, when “a particular past perseveres because it remains relevant for later cultural formations” (Olick & Robbins 1998:129). The label “memory” aims to grasp the past we carry,

how we are shaped by it and how this past is transmitted. Therefore, every little trace of the “past in the present” is designated as memory. Here, there is neither perception nor remembering. Memory is not seen as a set of representations of events and experiences that are shared, but as the way lasting traces of the past persist within us, as the transmission and persistence of cultural elements through the generations. Memory is not these series of recalled mental images, but a synonym for cultural storage of the past: it is the reproduction of the past in the present, **this accumulated past which acts on us and makes us act**. As Pierre Nora put it, “Collective memory is what remains from the past in groups’ life, or what groups do with the past” (Nora 1972: 398, my translation).

For instance, this is particularly clear in the powerful book by Jun Jing *The Temple of Memories*, where the author employs the word “memory” to refer to the “meticulous remembrance of past events and persons” from the Communist political persecution era (Jing 1996: 17) as well as to describe the contemporary “resurgence of popular religion” (ibid: 173) in the Chinese village of Dachuan. The notion of memory helps Jing, instead of mourning the passing of traditional society, to think through the persistence of his object of study, that is the reproduction of Kong society through time despite dramatic changes in context:

“The story of Dachuan and its Confucius Temple,” he writes, [...] “is one of proud and innovative people trying to rebuild their life after grievous assaults on their cultural identity, sense of history, and religious faith” (ibid: 22).

It is as if, after having been uncertain about how practices could be transmitted in such tormented modern worlds where “savages” were supposed to “vanish,” anthropologists realized that the past does not evaporate, but persists in multiple ways. Here, “collective memory” refers to the memory of the society, its ability to reproduce itself through time.

To the best of my knowledge, the contemporary anthropological use of memory is hovering between **history as it is lived by people** and those issues of cultural persistence. As Battaglia put it, “the study of “social memory” addresses problems in the “living history” and ongoing cultural traditions of collectivities of persons” (Battaglia 1992: 14, my emphasis). At the same time the term stands in for remembrance of past events and experiences and a “past” transmitted and stored (like in a computer, without meaning or remembering). Indeed, by virtue of its semantic multidimensionality, memory is an expansive label that seems to migrate into different places. In fact, as

we track the usages of the concept, it becomes clear that we can observe a diffusion of the problem of memory into the general process of culture.

To suggest what I have in mind, let me offer one illuminating example from the recent book edited by Climo and Cattell, *Social Memory and History: Anthropological Approaches*. In her contribution to the volume, "Exploring Venues of Social Memory," Carole Crumley begins by asking two questions: "One learns culture, but how? Which elements and events of everyday life transmit values, beliefs, techniques, strategies?" (Climo and Cattell 2002: 39). She then proposes a definition of social memory:

"Social memory", she writes, "is the means by which information is transmitted among individual and groups and from one generation to another. Not necessarily aware that they are doing so, individuals pass on their behaviors and attitudes to others in various contexts but especially through emotional and practical ties and in relationships among generations [...] To use an analogy from physics, social memory acts like a carrier wave, transmitting information over generations regardless of the degree to which participants are aware of their roles in the process" (ibid: 40).

Accordingly, social memory corresponds to those "community perceptions, attitudes, behaviors, values and institutions" that "are transmitted across generations" (ibid: 40). The thing to note about Crumley's text is that its definition of memory is so broad that it becomes increasingly impossible to discern the boundaries of the notion. Indeed, what is *not* memory then? Besides, if memory is how the past persists in and invests the present, being everything and everywhere, if it is defined as "the pattern-maintenance function of society or as social reproduction per se" (Olick & Robbins 1998: 112), then isn't memory the process of culture itself? Is that not what the concept of culture is all about?

But "how these collective memories differ from anything else learned," asks cogently Crapanzano (2004: 156)? One might indeed be puzzled by the similarity of Crumley's definition with the initial definition of culture proposed in the fifties by Kluckhohn and Kroeber:

"Culture," they say, "consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, [...] including their embodiment in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of tradi-

tional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other hand as conditioning elements of further action" (Kroeber & Kluckhohn 1952: 357).

My impression here is that, by a dangerous act of expansion, memory gradually becomes everything which is transmitted across generations, everything stored in culture, "almost indistinguishable" then from the concept of culture itself.⁷

Continuity

As many theorists have pointed out, the memory craze in history and the social sciences can be seen as a **consequence of the postmodernist turn**. Pierre Nora himself observes that "the collective memory is a recent historical problem" (Nora 1972: 400, my translation). However, there has to be more to the story if one is to understand its success among anthropologists. **To me, the memory boom in anthropology is not a surprise, nor is memory only an invention of the postmodernist turn.** Indeed, according to White,

"To anthropologists, the spate of recent writing on collective memory may seem puzzling for its familiarity. Work in the area *reinvents approaches to culture and identity* commonly pursued in ethnographic research on narrative, ritual practice, life histories, and so forth" (White 1996: 495, my emphasis).

Without minimizing the crucial impact of the postmodernist turn since the 1980s, I would like to suggest that we can, and perhaps should, also understand **the success of memory among anthropologists as an avatar of the never-ending debate about the continuity and reproduction of society.** In particular, **I find that the conceptual interferences between memory and culture teach us a great deal about the way anthropologists conceptualize society and culture.**

In anthropology, two oft-ignored authors can be seen as pioneers in the field of memory studies. The name of **Jack Goody** is associated with the first studies of memory. Inspired by research about bardic performances, Goody showed that there is no idea of a fixed model text to serve as a ritualist guide. There is no such a thing as verbatim memory in the *Bagre* myth (Goody 1972). Obviously, Goody was not interested in "popular memory," but rather in the exactitude of

remembering and memorization. However, by focusing on the successive repetitions of one myth and its metamorphoses, his research dealt precisely with the processes and conditions of learning and the transmission of culture. Also, we should pay a special attention to the work of Roger Bastide who is usually forgotten in memory studies.⁸ Analyzing the vestiges of African culture in Brazil, Bastide (1970) built his whole work around the concept of collective memory to describe religious syncretistic phenomena, especially through sensory-motor recollections of African rites in South-American contexts.

Goody and Bastide were very much concerned with issues of what has been called the presentist “malleability” of the past, and the “bricolage” dimension of our relationship toward it. However, the initial emphasis in their works (as in the works of Halbwachs) is on the continuance and transmission of society. How practices re-enact, modify and conserve “pastness” through time is the main anthropological issue that they were dealing with. Insofar as it is defined as a faculty that sustains continuity, the notion of memory helped them to think through those issues of cultural conservation and social continuity. For Connerton, whose work (like Halbwachs’) has been highly influential in anthropology, memory is also an ideal entry point to engage with issues of cultural continuity:

“Whereas some dominant contemporary trends in social theory,” he writes, “are often criticized on the ground that they do not address, or address inadequately, the fact of social change, I shall seek to highlight the way in which such theories are often defective because they are unable to treat adequately the fact of social persistence” (Connerton 1989: 39-40).

In a revealing way, memory, as it is used by anthropologists, is not this fragile and unreliable memory that embarrassed suspicious historians in the past. Today more than ever, memory is on the side of continuity, permanence and “retention” (Crapanzano 2004). For anthropologists, there is nothing new about these ideas. Has anthropology not always been concerned with the retention of the old, since initial evolutionist emphasis on “survivals,” these vestiges of older customs that resisted evolution, to the theories of cultural transmission by Herskovits? Is not the “anthropology of knowledge” developed by Barth (1990) another example of the same set of paradigmatic interests with cultural reproduction? In these days when the Bourdieusian *habitus* dominates our intellectual environment, debates about the continuity of soci-

ety and of cultural practices are crucial to anthropologists, while new developments in cognitive anthropology (Bloch 1998, Whitehouse 2002) offer a fresh look at issues of cultural transmission and persistence.

This opens onto a fundamental question as to what is actually new in our current fascination with memory. Historians Gedi and Elam suggested that “collective memory’ [...] covers the areas previously designated by ‘myth” (Gedi and Elam 1996: 41). In the same vein, for Klein, memory is “replacing old favorites” such as “nature, culture, language” (Klein 2000: 128). Following this line, I would like to suggest that the success of memory among anthropologists resides also in its conceptual efficiency to prolong the anthropological project of understanding continuity. Along with the notion of culture, with which it tends to fusion, memory helps us to think through the continuity and persistence of representations, practices, emotions, and institutions, an idea fundamental to anthropologists since the founding of the discipline.

A last word remains to be written about forgetting. The suggestion I am making for memory—that the triumph of memory in our discipline could also be understood by reference to issues of cultural continuity and persistence—may be extended to the treatment of “forgetting” in anthropological studies. In this essay, I did not consider the concept of forgetting that anthropologists have recently brought out to better tackle issues of identity construction (Augé 1998, Battaglia 1993, Carsten 1995). However, just as anthropologists tend to entangle memory and cultural reproduction, what is at stake in forgetting studies is the very reproduction or persistence of forgetting. Since it is a social process, forgetting is described as “a crucial part of the way identity is actively acquired [...]” (Carsten 1995: 318). Similarly, for Battaglia, “forgetting gives rise to “society,” (Battaglia 1993: 430) and, by virtue of its “persistent non-presence,” (ibid: 438, my emphasis), it serves to prolong “a unitary perdurable social order” (ibid: 430). Although naively held in opposition with memory, the anthropological approach to forgetting seems to be motivated by the same set of paradigmatic concerns. Middleton and Edwards are rather clear about it, by pointing out that in analyzing the “practices of institutional remembering and forgetting, it is possible to see how the continuity of social life, as preserved in certain forms of social practices, [...] depends on the preservation of those practices” (Middleton and Edwards 1990: 10). To some degree, forgetting, along with memory, looks as if it is on the side of permanence and retention, and serves also, by its non-presence, to prolong the anthropological project of understanding continuity.

Clarity

Among anthropologists, until recently, there was a high level of consensus on the concept of memory. This essay attempted to demonstrate that we should be as critical of “memory,” a problematic but indispensable concept for them, as we have learned to be of “culture” or “identity.” It seems to me that the concept of memory has become a scientific commonsense in the anthropological discourse, constantly and unthinkingly deployed. First, I argued that “memory,” as it is used by anthropologists, has gradually become a vague, fuzzy label. Indeed, some of the authors currently working on memory, start from too broad a definition, and that, as a result, we no longer see clearly what they mean by the term. Such a lack of clarity is far from exceptional for anthropological concepts, and there is, of course, no need to advocate for a rejection of the term. Rather, I argued, it is time to disentangle the multiple and expansive meanings of the notion, and to question its popularity in our discipline.

In particular, I have shown that one of these ambiguities is that the concept of memory tends to encompass the notion of culture and its reproduction. In my view, this emphasis on memory as “the presence of the past,” as continuity and persistence also explains why it has become such a trendy concept in our discipline historically skewed toward those issues. In this process of conceptual expansion, some highly influential scholars such as Nora, Halbwachs, Terdiman and especially Connerton (who use the concept in its broadest sense) can also be held for responsible. It is worth noticing that “Connerton’s slim volume is indeed often the only reference provided by anthropologists in their discussions of memory” (Sutton 2001: 10). By arguing that memory is everything or that everything is memory (as writes Terdiman) and that “society is itself a form of memory” (as Connerton put it), these scholars plainly contributed to diffuse the problem of memory into the general process of culture, and to the renewed interest among anthropologists in “social memory as culture.”

Consequently, the anthropological uses of memory can be a source of confusion. Such indiscriminate uses of a term to denote such different experiences and processes do indeed breed misunderstanding, and we must make necessary terminological distinctions (for instance, between memory as recollection and memory as cultural reproduction). Above all, by overextending the usage of this notion, aren’t we are losing the specificity of what anthropology of memory is, i.e. to understand the way people remember and forget their past? As the historian Jay Winter put it candidly,

“One of the challenges of the next decade or so is to try to draw together some of these disparate strands of interest and enthusiasm through a more rigorous and tightly argued set of propositions about what exactly memory is and what has been in the past. [...]” (Winter 2000: 13).

In the same vein as Todorov warning against the abuses of memory in the political sphere, Ricoeur invited us to look for what he calls “une mémoire juste” (Ricoeur 2001). I have argued in this essay, that in anthropology as well, it is time for a more matured use of this notion.

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ENDNOTES

¹I borrowed the title from the book *Les abus de la mémoire* by Tvetzan Todorov (1995). In this text, he denounces the exploitation of the notion of memory in the contemporary political sphere.

²Though ignored until recently, Halbwachs’ classics, *Les Cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (1994 [1925]) and *La mémoire collective* (1997 [1950]), have now been re-discovered. Since the 80s, anthropologists have been reading the colossal *Les Lieux de la mémoire* published by historian Pierre Nora (1989), while *How Societies Remember* (1989) by Connerton, described as “a touchstone for recent studies of memory,” (Sutton 2001: 10) has become an anthropological must-read.

³I should mention that these reflections have arisen out of fieldwork conducted in Guinea-Conakry, West Africa. As memory is a key-word in the social sciences today, the attitude toward the past and its transmission are a hot topic in African societies as well. Along with “identity,” memory is at present a globalized notion, and the concept is now largely used by African politicians and local elites. I don’t have time here to deepen this point, but we definitely live in a time when memory is globalized, an historical moment that Nora termed convincingly the *moment-mémoire*.

“Some scholars use dangerously the notion of “remembering” in reference to collective entities. For instance, in the introduction of her *Tangled Memories*, Sturken asks “What does it mean for a culture to remember?” (Sturken 1997: 1). In the same vein, Mary Douglas considers that institutions can “Remember and Forget” (Douglas 1986). Connerton’s *How Societies Remember* constitutes another famous example of this imprudent semantic exten-

sion. However, as Funkenstein observes, "consciousness and memory can only be realized by an individual who acts, is aware, and remembers. Just as a nation cannot eat or dance, neither can it speak or remember. Remembering is a mental act, and therefore it is absolutely and completely personal" (Funkenstein 1989: 6). For a critical look at this misuse of "remembering," see also Kansteiner (2002).

⁵"Vicarious memories" occur when someone "remembers" events that have not been personally experienced by her/him (Teski and Climo 1995). In her *Memories of the Slave Trade*, Rosalind Shaw eloquently captures contemporary memories of the Atlantic slave trade in Temne ritual practices (Sierra Leone). However, her use of "remembering" seems hazardous to me. For instance, she proposes to explore the way "in which the slave trade is forgotten as history but remembered as spirits" (Shaw 2002: 9). But, can we really "remember" something that we did not experience? Can someone "remember" the slave trade?

⁶Handler showed effectively that the concept of identity cannot "be applied unthinkingly to other places and times" (Handler 1994: 27). The same remains to be verified for the notion of memory.

⁷In the same vein, one might be intrigued by the resemblances between certain approaches to tradition and so-called "cultural memory." Consider, for instance, the definition of "tradition" proposed by Shils (1983), and see how it overlaps with the semantic field of memory. Following Shils, "Memory leaves an objective deposit in tradition. The past does not have to be remembered by all who reenact it. [...] But to become a tradition, and to remain a tradition, a pattern of assertion or action must have entered into memory" (Shils 1983: 167). What are then the conceptual limits between the notions of memory and tradition? Is tradition the "presence of the past in society" (ibid: 162) — or is that memory?

⁸For an exception, see Bourguet, Valensi and Wachtel (1990).

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