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Guest Editors' Introduction

Aggressors, Victims, and Trauma in Collective Memory

It has been over a century since the scholarly study of memory was launched by the work of great fin-de-siècle thinkers: Henri Bergson and Sigmund Freud, among others. For them, however, memory was exclusively a property of the individual. It was Maurice Halbwachs who first postulated that memory was also a social phenomenon. Together, Halbwachs's *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (1925) and *La mémoire collective* (posthumous publication in 1950) articulated the revolutionary thesis that any study of memory and its implications must consider memory's "social frames," which include family, religion, class, and the nation.¹ Halbwachs thus validated memory as an object of sociological inquiry.

One frame that Halbwachs did not consider, however, was trauma. The two world wars—the latter of which claimed Halbwachs himself—brought trauma to the forefront of social consciousness; although memory could still be local and introspective, it also became a national, symbolic, even sacred space. Given the exhaustive attention devoted to ritual by Emile Durkheim and the nascent field of cultural anthropology, widespread practices of commemorating the dead in the interwar and postwar periods were anything but revolutionary. Nevertheless, they did prove revolutionary as a moment of global coping with trauma. Multiple, overlapping—sometimes conflicting—memories, affecting not just elites but entire societies and groups of societies, became a dominant force in politics as well as in everyday life. On the elite level—Charles de Gaulle gave his November 1945 speech at the Arc de Triomphe praising France for a heroic thirty years of resistance (see Hirszowicz and Neyman in this issue); Konrad Adenauer was in Cologne in March 1946 reflecting that he had "often been ashamed, since 1933, of being German" (Adenauer 1946); MacArthur was stripping Hirohito of the divine status that Japanese emperors had claimed for centuries (Conrad 2003). Regular citizens,

too, wrestled with traumatic memory: the German mother Käthe Kollwitz (Winter 2006) succeeded after a twenty-year campaign to memorialize her fallen son Peter, a soldier in the Great War, and the recently released Fred Korematsu sued the U.S. government for its wartime internment of Japanese Americans. Furthermore, the persistence of trauma contributed to demographic and territorial realignments that were both radical and violent: in Central and Eastern Europe, for example, massive population transfers followed Yalta and Potsdam, as families were divided, ancestral homelands were forcibly abandoned, and neighbors were expelled or even murdered.² (On this last point, see Aleksandra Jasińska-Kania's article in this issue.) In an unprecedented manner, memory became a call to action, and a world simultaneously experiencing trauma began to respond.

Then again, this response was often slow, and, arguably, in many cases it is still in progress. In the twenty years following World War II, news spread of massive wartime death tolls, as well as the extermination campaign that we know as the Holocaust or Shoah. Individuals and societies uncertain of how to judge themselves and each other took decades to accept and adopt new categories to cope with what had taken place—"genocide," "collective guilt," "societal trauma." Even as the world internalized these categories, the global transmission of collective memory of the Shoah was not yet strong enough to shape an effective juridico-political regime that might preempt the recurrence of mass violence. If we look to the 1990s, the Rwandan genocide and ethnic cleansing in former Yugoslavia force us to confront the possibility that even collective memories with a strong commemorative impulse become ensnared in cyclical patterns of trauma. Then again, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission employed as a post-apartheid mechanism of reconciliation in South Africa suggests that such cycles can be broken. The articles in this issue by Piotr H. Kosicki, Doris Gödl, and Jane L. Curry give currency to this debate.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the academic study of memory began to flourish, spearheaded by the seven-volume opus organized and edited by Pierre Nora on French sites of memory.³ Nora revived Halbwachs in tandem with Ernest Renan's focus on the nation. As important as the substance of Nora's work was its context: a French nation struggling to evolve beyond dual poles of Gaullism and communism in the aftermath of 1968. Moreover, the publication of Nora's final volumes (and especially the condensed three-volume English translation) coincided with a wave of vigorous scholarly attention to the Shoah that accompanied the rising popularity of Primo Levi's writing.⁴

Together, Nora's reimagining of national memory and the emergence of a canon of Holocaust studies heralded the beginning of a new generation of memory studies, which historian Jay Winter has called the "memory boom" (2006: 1). This generation brings together scholars from multiple disciplines, whose methodologies and even terminologies (as Piotr Kwiatkowski observed in his introduction to the previous issue of the *International Journal of Sociology** [IJS]) are often inconsistent and even contradictory. A tidal wave of concepts has deluged the

*Here and below, please refer to *International Journal of Sociology* 36, no. 4 (Winter 2006–7).

reader of memory literature: “collective memory,” “historical memory,” “national memory,” “commemoration,” “remembrance,” “identity,” and “mentalité,” to name just a few. Under the leadership of Saul Friedländer, the journal *History and Memory* published its first issue in 1989, and sociologists and cultural historians (increasingly also philologists and philosophers) seem almost to be in competition for predominance in the field of memory studies.

The conceptual debate over how to define and analyze memory has given rise to numerous critiques of canonical concepts derived from either Halbwachs or Nora. One of the most radical (and yet best developed) is the questioning of Halbwachs’s notion of “collective memory.” The critique is twofold: first, its first contention is that excessive use has reduced the term to vacuousness, in the words of Jay Winter, “framed to mean virtually anything at all” (2006: 4). Indeed, Winter persuasively justifies “acts of collective remembrance” as an object of study referring to discrete, empirically quantifiable actions that serve to reconstruct the past. We grant the category of *collective remembrance* but reject the putative bankruptcy of *collective memory*.

Collective memory encompasses at least two elements that fall outside of acts of remembrance. The first—“social sharing,” that is, “ongoing talking and thinking about the event by the affected members of the society or culture,” is a crucial component of collective memory, as James W. Pennebaker and Becky L. Banasik have persuasively demonstrated. While “talking” does fall under remembrance (which is bound by the limits of the public sphere), “thinking” frequently does not. And yet it certainly affects what takes place in the public sphere, and can be gauged through surveys and aggregated for quantitative analysis; thinking and social sharing thus require a category broader than “collective remembrance” (Pennebaker and Banasik 1997: 4, 17).

Second, collective remembrance cannot fully express the processes of mediation undergone by past events prior to their commemoration. In other words, as Halbwachs has demonstrated, the past is separated from the commemorative present by processes of selection and filtration, in some cases generational, in others environmentally determined (perhaps a repressive political regime, or a moral economy that forcibly weeds out certain past events).⁵ Each of the fourteen articles in the volume edited by Pennebaker, Paez, and Rimé (1997) persuasively uses empirical analysis to document a different aspect of this mediation process. Acts of collective remembrance alone are insufficient for an exhaustive analysis of mediation. “Collective memory,” on the other hand, encompasses not only the visible active components of memory (“remembrance,” “commemoration,” etc.), but *all* representations of the past, including the assumptions and norms that separate events in the past from commemorative events in the present.

The next element of the critique of collective memory attempts to discredit the application of “collective memory” to the nation. For example, Alon Confino (1997) and Hue-Tam Ho Tai (2001) have criticized Nora at length for his reliance on the national framework, which, in their eyes, privileges nation-state politics over culture and elites over masses.⁶ The suggestion, then, is that focusing on collective memory in the context of nations or nation-states—let alone Nora’s use of the

term “national memory”—is an abuse of the concept of *collective memory*. Winter seems to concur, arguing first that Halbwachs meant to restrict collective memory to “groups of two to groups in their thousands,” and subsequently describing “the national framework” as “but a thin cover over a host of associative forms arduously constructed over years by thousands of people, mostly obscure” (2006: 150–51).

Clearly, Winter aims to prevent the individuals and cohorts who have remembered and commemorated from being homogenized into an amorphous collective. This aim should be an essential part of any study of memory, yet we do not believe that the concept of *national memory* consigns individual agents a priori to the realm of the forgotten. We take the term “national memory” to refer not to a memory ascribed homogeneously and indiscriminately to all members of a given nation, but rather simply to a tie between the nation and other social frames: from family to gender to class to the subaltern. Since Halbwachs was willing to ascribe one underlying collective memory to all practicing Catholics,⁷ a group clearly larger than Winter’s “groups in their thousands,” why should we be wary of applying the concept of collective memory to nations and nation-states? This is not to say that the “national” memory dwarfs all other memories; there are local variations even of “Catholic” memory, yet underlying all of those variations is a collective memory common to all Catholics. The same is true within nations: the common language, culture, and political experience that bind the nation together as a community also sustain a national memory.

The current issue of *IJS* responds to these critiques of collective memory and its applications to nations and nation-states.⁸ From start to finish, this has been an interdisciplinary project, attempting to break down the language barriers and bridge the methodological gaps that artificially constrain the field of memory studies. After all, the sociologist Halbwachs and the historian Nora have become staples for sociologists and historians alike. In this issue of *IJS*, we see a historian (Kosicki), a political scientist (Curry), a political scientist and licensed psychotherapist who does sociological research (Gödl), and—this is after all a sociological journal—three sociologists (Jasińska-Kania, Hirszowicz, and Neyman).

Moreover, we have coordinated this interdisciplinary effort with Piotr Kwiatkowski, guest editor of the previous issue of *IJS*, to develop a cohesive argument about collective memory, which we offer in response to several of the criticisms frequently directed by “memory boom” scholars at the notion of “collective memory.” The previous issue of *IJS* used the concept of collective memory to balance the local and the national, and we pick up where that issue’s authors left off. Even in this age of globalization and European integration, the nation-state and the national framework retain primacy. War and trauma seem virtually omnipresent, and social and political discourses frame these experiences in “national” terms even when a given conflict takes place not between nations but within one putative nation or nation-state. The texts in this issue deal with trauma in collective memory. As Dominick LaCapra has suggested, “Trauma is a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence; it has belated effects that

are controlled only with difficulty and perhaps never fully mastered" (2001: 41). Characteristic of traumatic experience is that it involves mechanisms of denial and repression of memory even as it remains distressing and unforgettable.

Parties to a conflict or trauma tend to perceive themselves as victims and each other as aggressors, independently of the objective question of agency, that is, who perpetrated aggression against whom? A constellation of subjective and objective factors therefore defines the collective memory of "aggressors" and "victims," a memory shared and verified by third parties. (A detailed theoretical discussion of this memory follows in the opening text by Kosicki.) Stanley Cohen has succinctly described the social aspect of aggression: "There is an atrocity triangle: in the one corner, *victims*, to whom things are done; in the second, *perpetrators*, who do these things; in the third, *observers*, those who see and know what is happening. These roles are not fixed: observers may become either perpetrators or victims; and perpetrators and observers may belong to the same culture of denial" (2001: 14). The actors playing these roles can include individuals, groups, organizations, governments, states, and "the international community." Cohen discusses various forms of denying traumatic experiences, atrocities, and injuries, including personal denial of knowledge of the fact; official denials, which are public and highly organized; and cultural denials, which take place when a society "censors itself, learns to keep silent about matters whose open discussion would threaten its self-image" (2001: 11). However, acknowledging the past—that is, when knowledge of the past becomes officially sanctioned and enters public discourse—is particularly important for the reconstruction of collective memory and the development of national identity. Even if the hope that exposure of the past will prevent its repetition in the future is naive, it will "undermine the public discourse which allowed for collusion, silence and indifference" (Cohen 2001: 240).

It is crucial to understand this memory because it shapes not only present and future interactions between "aggressors" and "victims" but also interactions between both sets of groups and the rest of the world. The dynamics of collective memory include a variety of emotional responses and commemorative practices. Within nations and nation-states, those who "remember" cope with their trauma in the juridical and political realms, and globalization and the Information Age have broadcast worldwide the politics of interethnic trauma and institutions of international justice. For the sake of understanding how to deal with trauma, how to facilitate reconciliation, and how to render justice—or even whether or not these distinct goals are compatible with one another—social scientists and historians should pursue detailed analysis of the interactions between collective memory and trauma among and within nations and nation-states. Without presuming to offer definitive answers, we propose to begin this analysis.

Piotr H. Kosicki identifies elements (sites) of aggressor–victim memory through a detailed theoretical discussion followed by a case study analyzing the 1994 Rwandan genocide: he suggests that the persistence of post-traumatic culture and the failure of dialogue can lead people to kill in remembrance of earlier aggression.

Next, Aleksandra Jasińska-Kania uses the sociology of emotions to relate shame and pride to aggressor-victim memory through three case studies: Polish–German relations, Polish–Jewish relations, and Polish–Russian relations. Doris Gödl traces the development of Serbian and Croatian aggressor–victim narratives in light of their political instrumentality for nationalist projects: she suggests that such instrumentality may be curtailed only by a stable, systematic process of remembrance and reconciliation. Jane L. Curry advances an interpretation of political behavior as a locus for collective memory in South Africa, El Salvador, and Poland, with the conclusion that transitional justice can free postauthoritarian nation-states from the trappings of the past only if aggressors and victims confront one another in an open juridical space. Finally, Maria Hirszowicz and Elżbieta Neyman introduce the category of non-memory, using French and Polish anti-Semitism as case studies to explore forgetting, repression, and ignorance caused by different types of secrets, taboos, and falsifications of history.

Throughout these texts, we pursue three goals: (1) to warrant the continued use of the concepts of collective and national memory; (2) to introduce and elaborate the category of aggressor–victim memory; and (3) to explore possibilities of reconciliation and other solutions to ongoing memory conflicts. As Paul Ricoeur has written, “Let us take a step outside the circle of accusation and punishment, the circle within which there is but a marginal place for forgiveness” (2004: 478).

Notes

1. In this context, *cadres* has also been translated as “framing” (as in the title of the piece by Hirszowicz and Neyman in this issue) or “framework.”

2. A wealth of literature is devoted to this topic. Some highlights include Glassheim (2000); Gross (2006); Naimark (2001).

3. Nora’s phrase *lieux de mémoire* has also been translated as “realms of memory” and “places of memory.”

4. Among the most noteworthy studies are Friedländer (1993); LaCapra (1994); Maier (1988); and Young (1993).

5. Our analysis of mediation follows the entreaties of Alon Confino for a more nuanced approach to collective memory: see Confino (1997).

6. The paradox of that criticism is that Nora’s essays “La Nation-mémoire” and “L’ère de la commémoration” lament what Nora sees as a French collective memory that has outgrown both the nation-state and history itself. See Nora (1998) and Tai (2001).

7. Religion was one of the definitive examples of social loci for collective memory that Halbwachs provided in *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*.

8. Co-editor Piotr H. Kosicki brought the first four authors together on a March 2006 panel at the London School of Economics entitled “The Aggressor–Victim Relationship in National Memory;” and co-editor Aleksandra Jasińska-Kania initiated the development of an *IJS* issue based on that panel, with the addition of the crucial text on non-memory by Maria Hirszowicz and Elżbieta Neyman.

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