

## MEMORY EXPERIENCE

### The forms and functions of memory

*‘... whatever takes place has meaning because it changes into memory’*

*(Milosz 2001)*

Human ability to retain and recollect a fact, event, or person from memory has been a topic of considerable interest to both scientists and artists for a long time. Yet, taking into account varieties of personal remembering (ranging from remembering an emotional feeling, through remembering where I left my car keys, or how to run the spelling check on my computer, or the date of the Battle of Hastings or how my daughter looks), it seems almost impossible to find a common underlying conceptualization of the process. Moreover, as its task involves summarizing, condensing or rewriting past events, memory is a complex but fallible system of storing information (Baddeley 1989: 51). Because of this difficulty in analysing memory we should view this faculty as some kind of active orientation towards the past, as an act of ‘thinking of things in their absence’ (Warnock 1987: 12). By referring to the process of remembering as ‘memory experience’ (Warnock 1987), we focus on the uniqueness of memory as a ‘dialogue with the past’ (Benjamin quoted in Lash 1999).

Memory has many forms and operates on many different levels, and the things that we remember are of many different kinds and are remembered for many different reasons. For example, there is the memory of how to ride a bicycle, which has been defined as a *procedural* memory; there is also the memory of such facts as that bicycles have two wheels and sometimes a bell, which has been defined as a *declarative* or *semantic* memory (Baddeley 1989: 35–46). Another type of memory is personal memory or

*autobiographical* memory, which is the way we tell others and ourselves the story of our lives. Although autobiographical memories are not necessarily accurate, they are ‘mostly congruent with one’s self knowledge, life themes, or sense of self’ (Barclay and DeCooke 1988: 92). When talking about *cognitive* memory, we refer to remembering the meaning of words and lines of verse: ‘What this type of remembering requires is, not that the object of memory be something that is past, but that the person who remembers that thing must have met, experienced or learned of it in the past’ (Connerton 1989: 23). Yet another kind of memory is *habit* memory, which refers to our capacity to reproduce a certain performance and which is an essential ingredient in the successful and convincing performance of codes and rules. Habit is the mode of inscribing the past in the present, *as present*. In this case, memory denotes a habitual knowing that allows us to recall the signs and skills we use in everyday life. This kind of memory, like all habits, is sedimented in bodily postures, activities, techniques and gestures. Such conceptualization of the process of remembering, where memory ‘gets passed on in non-textual and non-cognitive ways’ (Connerton 1989: 102), allows us to study social remembrance by focusing on the performance of commemorative rituals.

Habit-memory differs from other types of memory because it brings the past into the present by acting, while other kinds of memory retrieve the past to the present by summoning the past *as past* – that is, by remembering it. Remembering submits the past to a reflective awareness and it permits, by highlighting the past’s difference to the present, the emergence of a form of critical reflection and the formation of meaningful narrative sequences. Although remembering, like habit, can be seen as a constant effort to maintain and reconstruct societal stability it, unlike habit, is also a ‘highly active, effortful process’ (Young 1988: 97). While remembering, we deliberately and consciously recover the past, so whatever memories ‘route into consciousness, they need to be organized into patterns so that they make some kind of continuing sense in an ever-changing present’ (Young 1988: 97–8). Hence, memory, as the knowing ordering or the narrative organization of the past, observes rules and conventions of narrative. For example, successful narratives about the past must have a beginning and an end, an interesting storyline and impressive heroes. The fact that memorizing is not free of social constraints and influences suggests the importance of another type of memory – namely, *collective* or *social* memory, which is our main concern here.

This book focuses on similarities between the ways in which people assign meanings to their common memories, while adopting the intersubjectivist approach which allows us to avoid both theories rooted in social determinism (which subordinate individuals totally to a collectivity) and visions of an individualistic, atomized social order (which deny the importance of communicative relations between people and their social embeddedness). Its

main assumption is that remembering, while being constructed from cultural forms and constrained by our social context, is an individual mental act. Therefore, our intersubjectivist explanation of how we remember also acknowledges that – despite the fact memory is socially organized and mediated – individual memory is never totally conventionalized and standardized. The memories of people who have experienced a common event are never identical because in each of them a concrete memory evokes different associations and feelings. The relation between collective and individual memory can be compared to the relation between language (*langue*) and speech (*parole*), as formulated by Saussure (Funkenstein 1993: 5–9). Language, as a collective product, is separated from the variety of uses to which particular speech acts may be put; thus it is, like collective memory, an idealized system. Variations in individual memories, which can be compared to the scope of freedom with which we use language in particular speech, reflect the degree to which a given culture permits conscious changes and variations of the narrator in the contents, symbols and structures of collective memory.

Underscoring the intersubjectivity of memory, the sociology of memory asserts that the collective memory of a group is ‘quite different from the sum total of the personal recollections of its various individual members, as it includes only those that are *commonly shared* by all of them’ (Zerubavel 1997: 96). The collective memory, as the integration of various different personal pasts into a single common past that all members of a community come to remember collectively, can be illustrated by America’s collective memory of the Vietnam War, that is more ‘than just an aggregate of all the war-related recollections of individual Americans’ (Zerubavel 1997: 96). Moreover, the prominent place of the Vietnam War (rather than, for example, the Korean War) in the memories of Americans also suggests that the division of the past into ‘memorable’ and ‘forgettable’ is a social convention, as it is society that ensures what we remember, and how and when we remember it.

Memory is social because every memory exists through its relation with what has been shared with others: language, symbols, events, and social and cultural contexts. Much research illustrates that memory is intersubjectively constituted because it is based on language and on an external or internal linguistic communication with significant others (Paez *et al.* 1997: 155). The way we remember is determined through the supra-individual cultural construction of language, which in itself is the condition of the sharing of memory, as a memory ‘can be social only if it is capable of being transmitted and to be transmitted, a memory must first be articulated’ (Fentress and Wickham 1992: 47). As the past is made into story, memories are simplified and ‘prepared, planned and rehearsed socially and individually’ (Schudson 1995: 359). Any retrospective narratives’ chance of entering the public domain is socially structured: ‘Within the public domain, not only the

recording of the past but active re-working of the past is more likely to be transmitted if it happens in high-prestige, socially consensual institutions than if it happens at or beyond the edges of conventional organization' (Schudson 1995: 359). That remembering is social in origin and influenced by the dominant discourses is well illustrated by Zerubavel's (1997: 12) example of cognitive battles over memory, which are typically between social 'camps' rather than simply between individuals. The fact that major changes in the way we view the past usually correspond to major social transformations that affect entire mnemonic communities, as shown in many studies of changes in attitudes to the past in postcommunist countries after the collapse of communism (Szacka 1997), also provides the evidence that remembering is more than just a personal act and the nature of political power can influence the content of our memories.

Memory is also social because remembering does not take place in a social vacuum. We remember as members of social groups, and this means assuming and internalizing the common traditions and social representation shared by our collectivities. Memory cannot be removed from its social context, since whenever we remember something – for example, our first day at university – we also recall the social circumstances in which the event took place: the city, the university, friends and so on. Moreover, collective memory constitutes shared social frameworks of individual recollections as we share our memories with some people and not others, and – in turn – with whom, for what purpose and when we remember, all of which contributes to what we remember. Furthermore, memory is social because the act of remembering is itself interactive, promoted by cultural artefacts and cues employed for social purposes and even enacted by cooperative activity (Schudson 1997).

In today's societies, which 'are no longer societies of memory' (Hervieu-Leger 2000: 123), social memory refers not so much to living memory but to organized cultural practices supplying ways of understanding the world, and providing people with beliefs and opinions which guide their actions. As modern societies suffer from amnesia, we witness the transformation of living memory into institutionally shaped and sustained memory (Assmann 1995). *Cultural memory*, memory institutionalized through cultural means, is 'embodied in objectifications that store meaning in a concentrated manner' (Heller 2001: 1031). As 'memory that is shared outside the avenues of formal historical discourse yet . . . is entangled with cultural products and imbued with cultural meaning' (Sturken 1997: 3), cultural memory refers to people's memories constructed from the cultural forms and to cultural forms available for use by people to construct their relations to the past (Schudson 1995: 348). These cultural forms are distributed across social institutions and cultural artefacts such as films, monuments, statues, souvenirs and so on. Cultural memory is also embodied in regularly repeated practices, commemorations, ceremonies, festivals and rites. Since the individual

‘piggybacks on the social and cultural practices of memory’, cultural memory can exist independently of its carriers (Schudson 1995: 347). Cultural memory, as memory constituted through cultural means, comes close to Warburg’s concept of the ‘social memory’ as communicated in visual imageries (Assmann 1995) – a notion which is popular mainly in the vast literature concerning museums, monuments, sculpture and festival culture in art and cultural history.

This approach, therefore, suggests that collective memory is not limited to the past that is shared together but also includes a representation of the past embodied in various cultural practices, especially in commemorative symbolism. Collective memory is not only what people really remember through their own experience, it also incorporates the constructed past which is constitutive of the collectivity. For instance, although citizens of Quebec, whose licence plates proudly state ‘I remember’, do not really remember the French colonial state, this past is a crucial element of the national memory of Quebec. Thus, the notion of collective memory refers both to a past that is *commonly shared* and a past that is *collectively commemorated*. As the word ‘commemorate’ derives from Latin *com* (together) and *memorare* (to remember), it can be said that the past that is jointly remembered and the past that is commonly shared are the crucial elements of collective memory (Schwartz 2000: 9). The fact that a commemorated event is one invested with extraordinary significance and assigned a qualitatively distinct place in a groups’ conception of the past prompts some writers to assert that if ‘there is such a thing as social memory . . . we are likely to find it in commemorative ceremonies’ (Connerton 1989: 4).

Memory’s essential role in social life is connected with the fact that ‘collective memory is part of culture’s meaning-making apparatus’ (Schwartz 2000: 17). Our need for meaning, or, in other words, for being incorporated into something that transfigures individual existence, grants enormous importance to collective memory since it ‘establishes an image of the world so compelling as to render meaningful its deepest perplexities’ (Schwartz 2000: 17). In this way, collective memory not only reflects the past but also shapes present reality by providing people with understandings and symbolic frameworks that enable them to make sense of the world. Because the past is frequently used as the mirror in which we search for an explanation and remedy to our present-day problems, memory, is seen ‘as [a] cure to the pathologies of modern life’ (Huyssen 1995: 6). By mediating and paring the past and the present, as well as providing analogies to events of the present in past events, collective memory is strategic in character and capable of influencing the present. In other words, as we search for a means to impose a meaningful order upon reality, we rely on memory for the provision of symbolic representations and frames which can influence and organize both our actions and our conception of ourselves. Thus ‘memory at once reflects, programs, and frames the present’ (Schwartz 2000: 18).

Furthermore, the importance of memory lies in the identity that it shapes. The content of memory is subject to time as it changes with every new identity and every new present, so memory and temporality cannot be detached from each other. As self-identity presumes memory and because perception hinges upon remembered meanings, two processes are at work here. On the one hand, collective memory allows people to have a certain social identification, both on an individual and a societal level. On the other, following the old sociological assertion that the present influences the past, it can be said that the reconstruction of the past always depends on present-day identities and contexts. Memory can also play an important role as a source of truth. This happens where political power heavily censors national history and where oppressed nations have a profound deficit of truth. Therefore, they tend to look towards memory for authentic stories about their past. This inseparability of the content and form of memory and the issue of power is well illustrated by the situation in Soviet Latvia from 1940 to 1991, where people's memories conflicted with the official version of history and therefore they acquired 'a central importance of the preservation of authenticity and truth' (Skultans 1998: 28).

Social memory is also the crucial condition of people relations, since both conflict and cooperation hinge upon it. Groups' cooperative attitudes are the result of their ability to critically evaluate their respective pasts in a way that secures tolerance and removes barriers to mutual understanding. On the other hand, memory which is used to close boundaries of ethnic, national or other identities and which accepts some versions of the past as 'the truth' can aggravate conflicts. For example, the central memory of the Serbs, the lost Battle of Kosovo in 1389, symbolizes the permanent Muslim intention to colonize them and therefore is one of the obstacles to harmonious relations between Serbs and Muslims (Ray 1999). Another very important function of social remembering, which is best expressed in Karl Deutsch's remark that 'memory is essential for any extended functioning of autonomy' (quoted in Hosking 1989: 119), emphasizes the role of memory as helping us to ensure and improve the conditions of freedom by mastering our democratic institutions. Without memory – that is, without the checking of, and reflection upon, past records of institutions and public activities – we will have no warnings about potential dangers to democratic structures and no opportunity to gain a richer awareness of the repertoire of possible remedies. Memory, understood as a set of complex practices which contribute to our self-awareness, allows us to assess our potentialities and limits. 'Without memory', writes Deutsch, 'would-be self-steering organizations are apt to drift with their environment' because they are unable to reassess and reformulate their rules and aims in the light of experience. This statement is supported by many empirical studies which show that the lack of interest *in* the past and the lack of knowledge *of* the past tend to be accompanied by authoritarianism and utopian thinking, and that 'the root of oppression is

loss of memory' (Gunn Allen 1999: 589). However, we need also to remember that since the nineteenth century, 'memory has seemed the mechanism by which ideology materializes itself' (Terdiman 1993: 33).

Memory, functioning as organized practices designed to ensure the reproduction of social and political order, is a source of 'factual' material for propaganda. Its task is to provide social groups or societies with identities and a set of unifying beliefs and values from which objectives are derived for political programmes and actions. Memory, when employed as a reservoir of officially sanctioned heroes and myths, can be seen as a broad and always (to some degree) invented tradition that explains and justifies the ends and means of organized social action and provides people with beliefs and opinions. This role of memory has been important since the end of the eighteenth century, when the new nation states started to construct their citizens' national identities with commemoration rituals, marches, ceremonies, festivals and the help of teachers, poets and painters (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Thus, collective memory is not *just* historical knowledge, because it is experience, mediated by representation of the past, that enacts and gives substance to a group's identity. In order to understand the production of social memory we need to examine how a group maintains and cultivates a common memory. One way to start studying the social formation of memory is to analyse social contexts in which memories are embedded – groups that socialize us to what should be remembered and what should be forgotten; so-called *mnemonic communities*.

### **The communities of memory**

In many languages 'memory stands, originally, not only for the mental act of remembering but also for the objective continuity of one's name – the name of a person, a family, a tribe or a nation' (Funkenstein 1993: 30). These groups – the family, the ethnic group and the nation – are examples of the main mnemonic communities which socialize us to what should be remembered and what should be forgotten. They affect the 'depth' of our memory; they regulate how far back we should remember, which part of the past should be remembered, which events mark the beginning and which should be forced out of our story. The process of our mnemonic socialization is an important part of all groups' general effort to incorporate new members. As such it is 'a subtle process that usually happens rather tacitly; listening to a family member recount a shared experience, for example, implicitly teaches one what is considered memorable and what one can actually forget' (Zerubavel 1997: 87). Mnemonic communities, through introducing and familiarizing new arrivals to their collective past, ensure that new members, by identifying with the groups' past, attain a required social identity. Since we tend to remember what is familiar – because familiar facts fit easily into

our mental structures, and therefore make sense to us – groups’ identities and collective memory are continuously reinforced. Due to a group’s mnemonic tradition, a particular cognitive bias marks every group’s remembering. Typically, such a bias expresses some essential truth about the group and its identity and equips the group with the emotional tone and style of its remembering. For instance, the partition of Poland in the eighteenth century gave that country an essential identity as ‘the Christ among nations: crucified and recrucified by foreign oppression’, and through this established prism of victimhood many Poles still interpret their national fate.

Furthermore, a group’s memory is linked to places, ruins, landscapes, monuments and urban architecture, which – as they are overlain with symbolic associations to past events – play an important role in helping to preserve group memory. Such sites, and also locations where a significant event is regularly celebrated and replayed, remain ‘concrete and distinct regardless of whether they are mythological or historical’ (Heller 2001: 1031). The fact that memories are often organized around places and objects suggests that remembering is something that occurs in the world of things and involves our senses. This was well understood by the ancient Greeks (see Chapter 2). Halbwachs, on the other hand, brings to our attention the fact that there are as many ways of representing space as there are groups and that each group leaves its imprint on its place. Arguing that our recollections are located with the help of landmarks that we always carry within ourselves, Halbwachs observes that space is ‘a reality that endures’, thus we can understand how we recapture the past only by understanding how it is preserved by our physical surroundings ([1926] 1950: 84–8). In *The Legendary Topography of the Gospels in the Holy Land*, Halbwachs (1941) demonstrates the working of memory. He shows how Jews, Romans, Christians and Muslims rewrote the history of Jerusalem by remodelling the space according to their religious beliefs. Hence, ‘When one looks at the physiognomy of the holy places in successive times, one finds the character of these groups inscribed’ (Halbwachs [1941] 1992: 235). The discovery of several strata of memory superimposed on the Holy Land leads Halbwachs to argue that memory imprints its effect on the topography and that each group cuts up space in order to compose a fixed framework within which to enclose and retrieve its remembrance.

The link between landscape and memory is also present in Benjamin’s (1968) viewing of the city as a repository of people’s memories. Seeing the urban landscape as the battleground for the past, where the past remains open and contestable, he argues that the city can be read as the topography of a collective memory in which buildings are mnemonic symbols which can reveal hidden and forgotten pasts. Although the city offers us ‘an illusionary and deceptive vision of the past’ as many real histories are buried and covered (Gilloch 1996: 13), new events or new encounters can help us to uncover the city’s true memories. So, memory and the

metropolis are interwoven as memory shapes and is in turn shaped by the urban setting.

The nation is the main mnemonic community, for its continuity relies on the vision of a suitable past and a believable future. In order to create a required community's history and destiny, which in turn can be used to form the representation of the nation, the nation requires a usable past. Typically the creation of such a past is the task of nationalist movements, which propagate an ideology affirming identification with the nation state by invoking shared memories (Gellner 1993). Such movements owe their success, therefore, to memory, which they effectively employ to establish a sense of continuity between generations. The main way to shape societal aspiration for a shared destiny is by the rediscovery of memories of the 'golden age' and a heroic past (Smith 1997). In addition, appeals 'to the earliest individual memories of childhood – turns of phrase, catches of song, sights and smells – and [linking] them to the idea of the historical continuity of people, its culture and land' (Wong 1994: 237), contributes significantly to the success of nationalist movements. However, as nations need to establish their representation in the past, their memories are created in tandem with forgetting; to remember everything could bring a threat to national cohesion and self-image. Forgetting is a necessary component in the construction of memory just as the writing of a historical narrative necessarily involves the elimination of certain elements. The role of forgetting in the construction of national identities has been noticed by Ernst Renan, who, in 1882, insisted that the creation of a nation requires the creative use of past events. He pointed out that, although nations could be characterized by 'the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories', the essence of a nation is not only that its members have many things in common, but also 'that they have forgotten some things' (Renan [1882] 1990: 11). In order to ensure national cohesion there is a need to forget events that represent a threat to unity and remember heroes and glory days. Renan's interpretation of collective memory continues to exert considerable influence on the way in which nations articulate themselves in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Anderson (1983) argues that being reminded of what one has already forgotten is a normal mechanism by which nations are constructed. He demonstrates how national memories, themselves underscored by selective forgetting, constitute one of the most important mechanisms by which a nation constructs a collective identity or become an 'imagined community'. Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983: 14) show that states engaged in historical construction of modern nations claim nations 'to be the opposite of novel, namely rooted in the remote antiquity'.

It has also been argued that our relation to the national past can be better described not so much as remembering but as forgetting. Billig (1995) suggests that established nations depend for their continued existence upon a collective amnesia. In such societies, not only is 'the past forgotten, but also

there is a parallel forgetting of the present' (Billig 1995: 38). Forgetting, however, can also be highly organized and strategic, as examples from less open and democratic societies illustrate. Forced forgetting (Burke 1989) was of particular importance in communist countries, where people understood that 'the struggle against power is the struggle against forgetting' (Kundera 1980: 3). As the majority of communist regimes were also nation-building regimes, they 'went to great lengths to create new myths and to instill these in society through . . . political socialization mechanisms' (Cohen 1999: 27). They, like all new states, were busy constructing the national self-consciousness and used official ceremonies, education and socialization to create and foster a single, national, Marxist-Leninist class-based interpretation of the national history (Wingfield 2000). Politically and culturally oppressive states impose forgetting not only by rewriting and censorship of national history, but also by the destruction of places of memory. The Chinese communist government, for example, aimed to destroy all places of memory, such as temples and monasteries, after the occupation of Tibet in 1951.

In today's societies, with their diversity of cultures, ethnicities, religions and traditions, we are witnessing the fragmentation of national memory. The processes of globalization, diversification and fragmentation of social interests further enhance the transformation of memory from the master narrative of nations to the episodic narrative of groups. The denationalization of memory, on the one hand, and an arrival of ailing and dispersed memories, on the other, in the context of the growing cultural and ethnic pluralization of societies, have provided a new importance to ethnic identities, whose formation is based on traditional memory narratives. Among all the groups in need of memory, 'ethnic groups have had the easiest task, for they have never entirely lost their cultural memory' (Heller 2001: 1032). Moreover, many forgotten elements can be brought to light, 'fused with new myths and stories of repression and suffering, or combined with heterogeneous cultural memorabilia such as music, crafts, and religious lore' (Heller 2001: 1032). As we witness the emergence of small, surrogate ethnic memories and a growing reliance on the specific content of a group memory to legitimize the group's political claims, battles 'for minorities' rights are increasingly organized around questions of cultural memory, its exclusions and taboo zones' (Huysen 1995: 5). With ethnic memories surfacing in affiliation with the politics of identity, which itself is a result of the increasing importance of discourses of human rights in the global and postcolonial world, memories of past injustices are a critical source of empowerment. Today's fascination with ethnic memory, in the context of the declining of authoritative memories (traditional religious and national memories), poses new challenges for democratic systems (see Chapter 6).

The family is another group that plays a crucial role in the construction of our memories. As long as the family jointly produces and maintains its

memory, its cohesion and continuity is ensured. The content of the shared family's narrative, symbolic of family unity across generations, reproduces family traditions, secrets and particular sentiments. These memories, objectified in old letters, photographs and family lore, are sustained through family conversations, as past events are jointly recalled or co-memorized (Billig 1990). Middleton and Edwards (1988) illustrated this process by researching how families collectively remembered past events by talking about photographs. As much research shows, children learn to remember in the family environment, guided by parental intervention and shared reminiscence. We do not remember ourselves as very young kids very clearly, so we rely on the memories of older members of our family, with the result that many of our earliest memories are actually recollections of stories we heard from adults about our childhood. Our memory is more accurately described as a collection of overlapping testimonies from our narrative environments, which influence our memory's emotional tone, style and content.

Presently we witness two processes: on the one hand, the growing impact of what might be described as the quest for family roots; and on the other the decline in the family's capability to maintain a living chain of memory. Family history was one of the most striking discoveries of the 1960s and has given rise to the most remarkable 'do-it-yourself archive-based scholarship of our time' (Samuel 1999: 169). This trend has been popularized by the mass media, with many books and films blending private and public memories. The growing interest in telling a family story has been recently assisted by new technologies such as the internet, where the numbers of family websites devoted to the construction of families' memory increases daily. At the same time there is a trend that suggests that families are less and less capable of maintaining their traditions due to changes in their structures and memberships, and this reflects the wider fate of memory in modern society. The decline of the extended, multi-generational family is leading to the destruction of a social framework that ensured the transmission of collective memories from one generation to the next. As family size and stability declines, the depth of family memory also suffers.

All three communities of memory (nation, ethnic group and family) are affected by the growing differentiation of society, the globalization of the world and by the development of new means of communication. These factors have also caused changes in the functioning of the institutions of memory.

### **The institutions of memory**

In today's society, collective memory is increasingly shaped by specialized institutions: schools, courts, museums and the mass media. The growing number of 'ideas, assumptions, and knowledges that structure the

relationship of individuals and groups to the immediate as well as the more distant past' (Sherman 1999: 2) is formed, interpreted and preserved by public institutions. The ideological themes that pervade the rhetoric of public authorities and the educational curricula, with history classes in school being the main example, 'tutor' public memory and promote a specific version of the past. Schools and textbooks are important vehicles through which societies transmit the idealized past and promote ideas of a national identity and unity. Textbooks have always been updated and rewritten to present the acceptable vision of the past, and although now, due to international pressures and national voices, textbooks are frequently the subject of external and domestic scrutiny, in many national narratives past events that could harm social cohesion and the authority of the state are still underplayed. Where the state controls the educational and media system, collective memory is fragmented, full of 'black holes', dominated by ideological values and used to produce legitimacy for the ruling élite. For example, in Tito's Yugoslavia, the official sanctioned memory of World War II, around which textbook narratives were structured, was a crucial element in the creation of legitimacy, myth and identity for the new communist state (Hoepken 1999). In such a situation, where the legitimization of social and political order depends upon official censorship, socially organized forgetting and the suppression of those elements that do not fit the regime's image of past events, unofficial and informal institutions as well as an oral memory transmitted informally, frequently with the help of jokes, gossip, double-speak and anecdotes, are essential to the preservation of collective memory.

Another institution which increasingly shapes our collective memory is the legal system. The relationship between public memory and the law is at the foundation of many countries' original conceptions of themselves. For example, such legal documents as the Magna Carta (UK) or the Declaration of Independence (USA) are essential for understanding these societies' origins and values. Not only is the legal system itself an enormously influential institution of collective memory, but in many countries changes in collective memory are legally induced. In all societies, to a considerable extent, courts, through their input in deciding historical questions, form collective memory. Postwar Europe saw many criminal prosecutions which aimed to influence national collective memories, the Nuremberg trials being the main example. Despite controversies and debates surrounding attempts to punish state-sponsored mass murder and readdress national memories, the trials' achievements for constructing the basis for new memories and a new order cannot be overlooked. Today, due to the proliferation of the language of human rights and the new strength of the politics of identity, we see an increase in demands for governments to address historical injustices committed in their name. Consequently, many nations, and not only those emerging from their authoritarian past, use the legal system to bring justice and to teach a particular interpretation of the country's history (see Chapter 6).

Legal attempts to construct collective memory are not without tensions and difficulties (Misztal 2001) but because they allow for confrontation of various memories, they can serve the periodic need to reawaken and strengthen the public's feelings of moral outrage.

A further important institution of memory is the museum. Museums originated in the late eighteenth century as monuments to wealth and civic patrimony, in the form of collections of material objects in courts and churches. From the nineteenth century it was an educational imperative of the emerging nation state to form national identity and 'to elevate the working class' that was responsible for the opening of exhibitions to a national public. Although museums have much in common with other institutions of memory, their authoritative and legitimizing status and their role as symbols of community constitute them as a distinctive cultural complex (Macdonald 1996). Museums are unusual not only because their development is connected to the formation and honouring of the nation state, but also because of their role in the social objectification of the past and organized memory around diverse artefacts.

Until recently, museums were mainly devoted to the preservation of a memory that constituted one of the high points of a national history, and therefore they were collecting 'objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in the process of dying' (Adorno 1967: 175). 'Museum and mausoleum', in Adorno's famous phrase, were associated by more than phonetics. Today, however, their authority as the curators of national treasures and the dictators of distinction and taste is challenged. This is a result of several factors, such as the availability of new technologies, the fragmentation and denationalization of memory and the development of a popular passion for heritage – that is, for 'the interpretation of the past through an artefactual history' (Urry 1996: 53) – resulting in an interest in old places, crafts, houses, countryside, old railways and so on.

With many museums fundamentally transforming their practice of collecting and exhibiting, their function now bears a strong relationship to memory production (Crane 2000a). Thus, 'the museum is no longer simply the guardian of treasures and artefacts from the past discreetly exhibited for the select group of experts', but has moved closer to 'the world of spectacle, of popular fair and mass entertainment' (Huyssen 1995: 19). In this process of transformation from the position of traditional cultural authority to a new role as cultural mediators in a more multicultural environment, museums redefine their strategies of representation of the past and find spaces for marginalized memories. This new opportunity for excluded memories, in the context of the decline of the management of public memory by the state, has resulted in the increased articulation of memory by various agencies from civil society and the enormous explosion of heritage and conservation organizations and movements.

Today, the most important role in the construction of collective memories

is played by the mass media (McLuhan 1962). Before the development of the mass media, most people's sense of the past and the world beyond their immediate milieu was constituted by oral traditions that were produced and reproduced in the social context of everyday life. The shift from relying only on face-to-face exchanges to depending on mediated interaction has profoundly affected the ways in which people organize material for recall as well as their modes of reconstructing the past (Thompson 1996: 95). Rapid technological advancements in the field of communication in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the creation of the mass audience have ensured that the media is an extremely powerful instrument of ordering our knowledge of the past. In the nineteenth century it was the press that was the central means of communication and that provided people with images of groups that they could identify with. The press helped the transition from the local to the national by turning existing societies, through highlighting the common past and a constant repetition of images and words, into national communities (Anderson 1983). Now, the function of memory-keeping and presentation is 'increasingly assigned to the electronic media' (Samuel 1994: 25). The nature of this media and their interest in meeting public demands for instant entertainment are not without impact on the content and form of representations of the past. Thus, the input of media into how and what we remember is a crucial factor influencing the status of memory in contemporary societies.

The shift from oral culture, through writing and print, to electronic processing of the word has induced changes in the experience of time, brought about a new conception of the past and created growing possibilities for abstract thought. Thus, it can be said that the evolution of the role and form of social memory has been shaped by technological changes in the means of communication, and this is one of the most important factors structuring the status of memory in modern society.

### **The status of memory**

Our discussion so far suggests that we rely on many social frameworks, institutions, places and objects to help us remember. The relationship between memory and objects is rather complicated because material objects, operating as vehicles of memory, can be of various types (e.g., dynamic or stable). Moreover, they provide us either with images and words, or both, while at the same time memory does not reside specifically in any image or word. Not only does our ability to remember depend on images and/or words, but how images work depends largely on their complex linkage with words, since images have in part always depended on words for direct interpretation, although images also function differently from words. If words and images offer two different kinds of representation, we can expect

that as 'modes of representation change, both the relationship between words and images changes as well as how we understand images and words independently of each other' (Zelizer 1998: 5). Thus, the dependence on either words or images results in contrasting cultural values and also in contesting roles of memory. In order to throw light on changes in the status and meaning of memory, it is useful to have a quick look at discussions of the cultural consequences of the shift from oral culture to literacy.

When discussing the role of memory it is often assumed that in an 'oral' society – that is, in a society where communication occurs in forms other than written documents – culture depends upon memory and hence memory is highly valued. A further argument is that the 'rise of literacy' threatens memory. The assertion that technological change means the devalourization of memory has been a permanent element of the history of memory since ancient times. Starting with Plato's argument that the development of writing itself is a threat to individual memory, the idea that memory is in crisis has become the focus point of the centuries-long debate about memory. However, many writers protest against misconceptions about the value of memory in oral cultures and against the notion of memory crisis with the rise of literacy (Ong 1983; Carruthers 1990; Le Goff 1992; Goody 1998).

These scholars argue that the distinction between oral and literary societies is misleading because, as the continuation of the oral component in literary societies illustrates, the possession of writing does not mean that a society has ceased to be an oral culture as well. The majority of researchers agree that the rise of literacy does not necessarily bring the devalourization of memory and that learning by hearing material and reciting it does not necessarily imply an ignorance of reading. The reliance on living memories, associated with the oral transmission of a living past persisted long after the advent of print, and indeed continues to the present day (Ong 1983). In all cultures, not only in those without writing, memorizing is a part of everyday life (Goody 1977: 35). Moreover, basing the distinction between preliterate and literate cultures on a difference in levels of rationality embedded in those cultures needs to be rejected, as the extent to which a society is capable of transmitting its social memory in a logical and articulate form is not dependent upon the possession of writing but is rather connected with that society's representation of language and its perception of knowledge (Fentress and Wickham 1992: 45). Many studies illustrating a continuity between the mnemonic habits of preliterate and literary cultures argue that the privileged cultural role of memory depends 'on the role which rhetoric has in a culture rather than on whether its texts are presented in oral or written forms' – so in societies where literature is valued for its social function, rhetoric and interpretation works to provide the sources of a group's memory (Carruthers 1990: 10, 12). In similar vein, Assmann (1997), stresses the importance of oral transmission in cultures which, despite the possession of

written means for preserving the past, keep their main texts alive through commentary.

Nevertheless, although preliterate cultures do not necessarily differ in terms of tasks and the value they assign to memory, the content of memory and the principal domain in which memory crystallizes have been affected by various processes such as the transformation of the technical means of preserving the past, changes in the experience of time, the increased interest in the past and the occurrence of dramatic events. For example, writing, because it generates cultural innovation by promoting economization and scepticism, encourages 'the production of unfamiliar statements and the thinking of novel thoughts' (Connerton 1989: 76). Furthermore, while speech can preserve memories over long intervals of time, it is too fleeting to permit any listener to pause for recollection; thus a sense of the past 'that is primarily based on hearing tales from others is different from one that is primarily based on reading oneself' (Eisenstein 1966: 49). As the 'pastness' of the past depends upon a historical sensibility, this can hardly begin to operate without permanent written records. Hence, literate societies, where records reveal the past is unlike the present, differ from oral cultures in their attitudes to the past. The repetitive regularity of most orally transmitted history means that most knowledge of the past is in fact shared, while in literate societies 'printed historical texts are widely disseminated but most knowledge of the past is fragmented into segments exclusive to small clusters of specialists and the consensually shared past shrinks to a thin media-dominated veneer' (Lowenthal 1998: 238). In literary cultures, past events, removed from living memories and fixed to printed pages, lose their vividness and immediacy. Moreover, as nobody could be expected to remember the content of continuously expanded libraries, the past is not entirely known. However, printed texts facilitate critical approaches and open inquiry into the past (Ong 1983). The new awareness of historicity came into being 'when it became possible to set one fixed account of the world beside another so that the contradictions within and between them could literally be seen' (Connerton 1989: 76). In contrast, oral societies live very much in the present and only with memories which have present relevance and which articulate inconsistent cultural inheritance.

The 'electronification' of memory provides a new dimension to the role memory plays in our image-fed society (Urry 1996: 63). Digital technology, interactive media and information systems have greatly changed the facets of memory practices in our time, and as a result today's memory is 'composed of bits and pieces' (Hervieu-Leger 2000: 129). The immediacy of communication, information overload, the speed of changing images, the growing hybridity of media, all further expand and problematize the status of memory. We have unlimited access to facts, sources and information, which we can store, freeze and replay. At the same time, visual images can interfere with and confuse our memories. For example, computer-generated

graphics can fake the truth about the past, as they do in films like *Forrest Gump* and *Zoolander*). This decline of the credibility of photographic images and other visual evidence, together with the overabundance of flickering and changing narratives and images, is a threat to the status of memory as it raises the question of whose vision of the past and whose memories should be trusted. In the same vein, just as in print culture, readers' assessment of trust in the book underwrote the stability of knowledge and society (Johns 1998), trust in media (in other words, institutional trust) is crucial in making narratives of memory and identity into dominant cultural representations of reality.

The importance of institutional trust means that technological change is not the sole factor responsible for the status of memory. Both the shift in means of communication and the changes in modes of social organization, including changes in the practice of power, influence the nature of mnemonic practices. In other words, the structuring of memory in society is shaped by technological changes in the means of communication and the transformation of the dominant institutions of society. Memory, as the main source of collective identity, has always been employed by various social forces to boost their control and standing. When the main social authority was religious institutions, for example (as in ancient Israel), religious memory was called upon to sustain followers' allegiance; thus the biblical continuous appeal to '*Zakhor*' ('remember') that ensured that remembering was 'felt as a religious imperative to an entire people' (Yerushalmi 1982: 9). Similarly, the emergence of the nation state was accompanied by inventions of new memories to enhance national identities. Today, memory is more distant from traditional sources of power, while at the same time it becomes increasingly shaped by mass media.

To sum up, this chapter, after describing different forms of memory, defined collective memory as the representation of the past, both the past shared by a group and the past that is collectively commemorated, that enacts and gives substance to the group's identity, its present conditions and its vision of the future. The following presentation of the role of main mnemonic communities and institutions of memory aimed to expand our understanding of the social formation of memory. Discussing further the status of memory, we noted how changes in modes of communication and social organization influence the structure and status of memory. Since memory has travelled from oral expression through print literacy to today's electronic means of communication, we can conclude by saying that memory has its own history. This history, linked to a large degree to the history of changing modes of communication and techniques of power, will be discussed in the next chapter.

### Further reading

- Baddley, A. (1989) The psychology of remembering and forgetting, in T. Butler (ed.) *Memory: History, Culture and the Mind*, pp. 33–60. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Goody, J. (1998) Memory in oral tradition, in P. Fara and K. Patterson (eds) *Memory*, pp. 73–94. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Renan, E. ([1882] 1990) What is a nation?, in H.K. Bhabha (ed.) *Nation and Narration*. London: Routledge.
- Schudson, M. (1995) Distortion in collective memory, in D.L. Schacter (ed.) *Memory Distortion*, pp. 346–63. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Sennett, R. (1998) Disturbing memories, in P. Fara and K. Patterson (eds) *Memory*, pp. 10–46. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.