

Social Mindscapes

*An Invitation to Cognitive
Sociology*

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Eviatar Zerubavel

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doorknob, a feather, or a laptop computer if we so wish. By the same token, we can designate mere pieces of otherwise-useless paper as being worth \$100 (or even thousands of dollars in the case of checks) precisely because, unlike milk or eggs, for example, money is valuable *only* as a means of exchange and is therefore intrinsically worthless!³⁵

Such cognitive flexibility, in fact, is one of the great advantages we have over other animals, which, being seriously constricted semiotically by the fixed meanings of the signs they use, are clearly unable to transcend their strictly indicative function. A lion cannot decide what a particular roar it produces would mean. And while dogs can certainly respond to words we teach them (*sit, stay, no*) as indicators, they obviously lack the cognitive ability to actively determine (and possibly even change) their meaning, which we, of course, are free to do with those same words *as symbols*.³⁶

Reifying the meaning of symbols essentially reduces them to mere indicators and therefore implies a readiness to give up the greatest advantage that being able to use symbols offers us. It basically means giving up the cognitive freedom that typically comes with flexible-mindedness³⁷ for the inevitably constrictive way of thinking promoted by the rigid mind. Given the virtually unlimited signifying potential of symbols, it also means a terrible waste of our distinctly human capacity to think creatively.³⁸

Social Memories

Not only does our social environment influence the way we mentally process the present, it also affects the way we remember the past. Like the present, the past is to some extent also part of a social reality that, while far from being absolutely objective, nonetheless transcends our own subjectivity and is shared by others around us.

As evident from the universalistic tendency of those who study memory today to focus primarily on the formal aspects of the processes of organizing, storing, and accessing memories which we all share, they are largely interested in how *humans* remember past events. And yet, when they come to examine the actual contents of those memories, they usually go to the other extreme and focus on the individual. Nowhere is this individualistic bent more glaringly evident than in psychoanalysis, which deals almost exclusively with our distinctly personal memories.

Once again one can identify a relatively unexplored intellectual terrain made up of various "remembrance environments" lying somewhere between the strictly personal and the absolutely universal. These environments (which include, for example, the family, the workplace, the profession, the fan club, the ethnic group, the religious community, and the nation) are all larger than the individual yet at the same time considerably smaller than the entire human race.

Admittedly, there are various universal patterns of organizing,

storing, and accessing past experiences that indeed characterize all human beings and actually distinguish human memory from that of dogs, spiders, or parrots. At the same time, it is also quite clear that we each have our own unique autobiographical memories, made up of absolutely personal experiences that we share with nobody else. Yet we also happen to have certain memories which we share with some people but not with others. Thus, for example, there are certain memories commonly shared by most Guatemalans or art historians yet only by few Australians or marine biologists. By the same token, there are many memories shared by nearly all Beatles fans, stamp collectors, or longtime readers of *Mad Magazine*, yet by no one else besides them. The unmistakably common nature of such memories indicates that they are clearly not just personal. At the same time, the fact that they are almost exclusively confined to a particular thought community shows that they are not entirely universal either.

Such memories constitute the distinctive domain of the *sociology of memory*, which, unlike any of the other cognitive sciences, focuses specifically on the social aspects of the mental act of remembering. In doing so, it certainly helps us gain a finer appreciation of the considerable extent to which our social environment affects the way we remember the past.

The work on memory typically produced by cognitive psychologists might lead one to believe that the act of remembering takes place in a social vacuum. The relative lack of explicit attention to the social context within which human memory is normally situated tends to promote a rather distorted vision of individuals as "mnemonic Robinson Crusoes" whose memories are virtually free of any social influence or constraint. Such a naive vision would be quite inappropriate even within the somewhat synthetic context of the psychological laboratory, where much of the research on memory today (with the notable exception of "ecologically" oriented work)¹ typically

takes place. It is even less appropriate, however, within the context of real life.

Consider the critical role of others as witnesses whose memories help corroborate our own.² No wonder most courts of law do not give uncorroborated testimony the same amount of credence and official recognition as admissible evidence that they normally give to socially corroborated testimony. After all, most of us tend to feel somewhat reassured that what we seem to remember indeed happened when there are others who can verify our recollections and thereby provide them with a stamp of intersubjectivity. The terribly frustrating experience of recalling people or events that no one else seems to remember strongly resembles that of seeing things or hearing sounds which no one else does.³

Furthermore, there are various occasions when other people have even better access to certain parts of our past than we ourselves do and can therefore help us recall people and events which we have somehow forgotten. A wife, for example, may remind her husband about an old friend of his which he had once mentioned to her yet has since forgotten.⁴ Parents, grandparents, and older siblings, of course, often remember events from our own childhood that we cannot possibly recall. In fact, many of our earliest "memories" are actually recollections of stories we heard from them about our childhood.⁵ In an odd way, they remember them for us!

Yet such social mediation can also assume a somewhat negative form, since such "mnemonic others" can also help block our access to certain events in our own past, to the point of actually preventing some of them from becoming memories in the first place! This is particularly critical in the case of very young children, who still depend on others around them to define what is real (as well as "memorable") and what is not. A 35-year-old secretary whose boss tells her to "forget this ever happened" will probably be psychologically independent enough to store that forbidden memory in her mind anyway. However, a five-year-old boy whose mother flatly

denies that a certain event they have just experienced together ever took place will most likely have a much harder time resisting her pressure to suppress it from his consciousness and may thus end up repressing it altogether.

Such instances remind us, of course, that the reasons we sometimes tend to repress our memories may not always be internal and that our social environment certainly plays a major role in helping us determine what is "memorable" and what we can (or even should) forget. Needless to say, they further demonstrate the ubiquity of sociomental control.

The notion that there are certain things that one *should* forget also underscores the normative dimension of memory, which is typically ignored by cognitive psychology. Like the curricular institutionalization of required history classes in school, it reminds us that remembering is more than just a spontaneous personal act, as it also happens to be regulated by unmistakably social *rules of remembrance* that tell us quite specifically what we should remember and what we must forget.

Such rules often determine how far back we remember. In the same way that society helps delineate the scope of our attention and concern through various norms of focusing, it also manages to affect the extent of our mental reach into the past by setting certain historical horizons beyond which past events are regarded as somehow irrelevant and, as such, often forgotten altogether.⁶

The way society affects the "depth" of individuals' memory by relegating certain parts of the past to official oblivion is often quite explicit, as in the case of the 1990 ruling by the Israeli broadcasting authorities prohibiting television and radio announcers from referring to places in present-day Israel by their old Arab names. Just as blatant is the aptly-named statute of limitations, the ultimate institutionalization of the idea that it is actually possible to put certain things "behind us." The very notion of such a statute implies that even events that we all agree happened can nonetheless be mentally

banished to a "pre-historical" past that is considered legally irrelevant, and thereby officially forgotten. The unmistakably conventional nature of any statute of limitations, of course, reminds us that it is very often society that determines which particular bygones we let be bygones.

Yet the extent to which our social environment affects the "depth" of our memory is also manifested somewhat more tacitly in the way we conventionally begin historical narratives.⁷ By defining a certain moment in history as the actual beginning of a particular historical narrative, it implicitly defines for us everything that preceded that moment as mere "pre-history" which we can practically forget. Thus, for example, when the founders of Islam established the flight of the Prophet from Mecca to Medina in A.D. 622 as the pivot of the conventional Mohammedan chronological dating system, they implicitly defined everything that had ever happened prior to that momentous event as a mere prelude to the "real" history that every Muslim ought to remember.⁸ By the same token, when sociologists say (as they often do) that sociology was "born" in the 1830s with the work of Auguste Comte (who was indeed the first ever to use the term "sociology"), they are implicitly saying that their students need not really read the work of Aristotle, Hobbes, or Rousseau, which is somehow only "pre-sociological."

Nowhere is the unmistakably social partitioning of the past into a memorable "history" and a practically forgettable "pre-history" more glaringly evident than in the case of so-called discoveries. When the *New York Times*, for example, offers its readers a brief historical profile of Mozambique that begins with its "discovery" by the Portuguese in 1498 and fails to remind them that that particular moment marks only the beginning of the *European* chapter in its history, it relegates that country's entire pre-European past to official oblivion. A similar example of such "mnemonic decapitation" is the way Icelanders begin the official history of their island. Both the Book of Settlements (*Landnámabók*) and Book of Icelanders (*Íslendingabók*) mention in passing the fact that when the first

Norwegians arrived on the island in the ninth century, they found Irish monks already living there, yet their commitment to Iceland's Scandinavian identity (and therefore origins) leads them to present those Norwegians as its *first* settlers!¹⁰ While not trying to explicitly conceal the actual presence of Celts prior to Iceland's official "discovery" by Scandinavians, they nevertheless treat them as irrelevant to its "real" history.

Consider also the way we conventionally regard Columbus's first encounter with America as its official "discovery," thereby suppressing the memory of the millions of native Americans who were already living there. The notion that Columbus "discovered" America goes hand in hand with the idea that American history begins only in 1492 and that all events in the Western Hemisphere prior to that year are just part of its "pre-American" past. From this historiographic perspective, nothing that predates 1492 truly belongs in "American history." Indeed, it is conventionally considered part of a mere "pre-Columbian" prologue.

America's "pre-history" includes not only its own native past but also earlier, "pre-Columbian" European encounters with it, which explains why the Norse voyages across the Atlantic (to Greenland, Newfoundland, and possibly Nova Scotia) in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries are still not considered part of the official narrative of "the discovery of America."¹¹ Despite the fact that most of us are fully aware of the indisputable Norse presence on the western shores of the Atlantic almost five centuries before Columbus, we still regard his 1492 landfall in the Bahamas as the official beginning of American history. After all, if "America" was indeed born only on October 12, 1492 (a notion implicitly supported by the official annual celebration of its "birthday" on Columbus Day), nothing that had happened there prior to that date can be considered truly part of "American history."¹²

Needless to say, this grand division of the past into a memorable "history" and an officially forgettable "pre-history" is neither logical nor natural. It is an unmistakably social, normative convention. One

needs to be socialized to view Columbus's first voyage to the Caribbean as the beginning of American history. One certainly needs to be taught to regard everything that had ever happened in America prior to 1492 as a mere prelude to its "real" history. Only then, indeed, can one officially forget "pre-Columbian" America.

We usually learn what we should remember and what we can forget as part of our *mnemonic socialization*, a process that normally takes place when we enter an altogether new social environment, such as when we get married, start a new job, convert to another religion, or emigrate to another country.¹³ (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.) In acquainting us with the specific rules of remembrance that operate in that environment, it introduces us to a particular "tradition" of remembering.

A *mnemonic tradition* includes not only what we come to remember as members of a particular thought community but also *how* we remember it. After all, much of what we seem to "remember" is actually filtered (and often inevitably distorted) through a process of subsequent interpretation, which affects not only the actual facts we recall but also the particular "light" in which we happen to recall them. Thus, it is hardly surprising that a girl who grows up in a highly traditionalistic family which tends to embellish and romanticize the past would come to "remember" her great-grandfather as a larger-than-life, almost mythical figure. Indeed, that is why Americans who grow up today in liberal and conservative homes "remember" so differently the great social upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s.

As the very first social environment in which we learn to interpret our own experience, the family plays a critical role in our mnemonic socialization. In fact, most subsequent interpretations of early "recollections" of particular events in one's life are only *reinterpretations* of the way they were originally experienced *and remembered* within the context of one's family! That explains why we often spend a lot

of mental effort as we grow up trying to “reclaim” our own personal recollections from our parents or older siblings. Indeed, what is often experienced in intensive psychotherapy is the almost inevitable clash between recalling certain people and events through the *mnemonic lenses* provided by our immediate family and recalling those same people and events by gradually regaining contact with deeper layers of our selves.

Yet mnemonic traditions affect our memory even more significantly by prompting us to adopt a particular cognitive “bias”¹⁴ that leads us to remember certain things but not others. As an increasing body of research on memory seems to indicate, familiarity usually breeds memorability, as we tend to remember information that we can somehow fit into ready-made, familiar schematic mental structures that “make sense” to us¹⁵ (the same structures that, as we have already seen, affect the way we mentally process our perceptual experience). That is why it is usually much easier to recall that a particular character in a story we have read happened to wear glasses when she is a librarian, for example, than when she is a waitress or a nurse. This tendency to remember things schematically applies not only to actual facts but also to the way we recall the general “gist” of events (which is often all we can remember of them)¹⁶ as well as to the way we interpret those memories.¹⁷

To further appreciate such tendency to remember events that proceed according to a certain schematic set of prior expectations, consider also the formulaic, script-like “plot structures”¹⁸ we often use to narrate the past, a classic example of which is the traditional Zionist view of the history of Jews’ “exilic” life outside the Land of Israel almost exclusively in terms of persecution and victimization.¹⁹ I find it quite interesting, in this regard, that only in my late thirties did I first realize that Captain Alfred Dreyfus, who I had always “remembered” languishing in the penal colony on Devil’s Island until he died (following the infamous 1894 trial at which he was wrongly convicted for treason against France), was actually exoner-

ated by the French authorities and even decorated with the Legion of Honor twelve years later! Having grown up in Israel during the 1950s and having been socialized into the Zionist mnemonic tradition of narrating European Jewish history, it is hardly surprising that that is how I "remembered" the end of the famous Dreyfus Affair.

Needless to say, the schematic mental structures on which mnemonic traditions typically rest are neither "logical" nor natural. Most of them are either culture-specific or subculture-specific,²⁰ and therefore something we acquire as part of our mnemonic socialization. Thus, if we tend to remember so much better situational details that are salient in our own culture or subculture,²¹ it is mostly because so many of our pre-existing expectations are based on conventionalized, social typifications.²²

Once again we are seeing indisputable evidence of society's ubiquitous cognitive role as a mediator between individuals and their own experience. In fact, since most of the schematic mental structures that help us organize and access our memories are part of our unmistakably social "stock of knowledge,"²³ much of what we seem to recall is only socially, rather than personally, familiar to us! Indeed, it is what we come to "remember" *as members of particular thought communities*.

The fact that I can actually "recall" the Dreyfus Affair also reminds us that what we remember includes far more than just what we have personally experienced. In other words, it underscores the unmistakably impersonal aspect of memory.

I was already forty-three when I first saw Venice, yet I soon realized that it was actually quite familiar to me. The majestic Grand Canal, for example, was something I had already "seen" on the cover of an album of brass concerti by Venetian composer Antonio Vivaldi when I was eighteen. And when I saw the infamous "Lion's Mouth" (where anonymous accusers once dropped their denunciations of

fellow Venetians to the secret police) in the Palace of the Doges, I was actually seeing something I remembered from a book I had read some twenty years earlier.

Stored in my mind are rather vivid "recollections" of my great-grandfather (who I never even met and about whom I know only indirectly from my mother's, grandmother's, and great-aunt's accounts), the Crucifixion (the way I first "saw" it in Nicholas Ray's film *The King of Kings* when I was twelve), and the first voyage around the world (the way I first envisioned it when I read Stefan Zweig's biography of Ferdinand Magellan as a teenager). I have somewhat similar "memories" of the Inca Empire, the Punic Wars, and Genghis Khan, despite the fact that I personally experienced none of them.

In fact, neither are my recollections of most of the "historical" events that have taken place in my own lifetime entirely personal.²⁴ What I usually remember of those events is how they were described by others who did experience them personally! They are socially mediated memories that are based entirely on secondhand accounts of others.²⁵ Thus, for example, I "remember" the French pullout from Algeria and the Soviet invasion of Prague mainly through the way they were reported at the time in the newspapers. I likewise "recall" the Eichmann trial, the Cuban missile crisis, and the landing of Apollo 11 on the moon mainly through radio and television reports.²⁶

In fact, much of what we seem to "remember" we did not actually experience personally. We only do so as members of particular families, organizations, nations, and other *mnemonic communities*²⁷ to which we happen to belong. Thus, for example, it is mainly as a Jew that I "recall" so vividly the Babylonian destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem more than twenty-five centuries before I was born. By the same token, it is as a member of my family that I "remember" my great-great-grandmother (whose memory is probably no longer carried by anyone outside it), and as a soccer fan that I recall Uruguay's historic winning goal against Brazil in the 1950 World Cup

final. Consider also the special place of the Stonewall riots and of Charlie Parker's early gigs with Dizzy Gillespie at Minton's Play House in the respective memories of homosexuals and jazz aficionados.

Indeed, being social presupposes the ability to experience events that happened to groups and communities long before we even joined them as if they were somehow part of our own past, an ability so perfectly captured by the traditional Jewish claim, explicitly repeated every Passover, that "we were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and God brought *us* out of there with a mighty hand." (On Passover Jews also recite the following passage from the Haggadah: "In every generation, a man should see himself *as though he* had gone forth from Egypt. As it is said: 'And you shall tell your son on that day, it is because of what God did for *me* when *I* went forth from Egypt.'")²⁸ Such existential fusion of one's own biography with the history of the groups or communities to which one belongs is an indispensable part of one's unmistakably social identity as an anthropologist, a Mormon, a Native American, a Miami Dolphins fan, or a member of the U.S. Marine Corps.

In marked contrast to our strictly autobiographical memory, such *sociobiographical memory*²⁹ also accounts for the sense of pride, pain, or shame we sometimes experience as a result of things that happened to groups and communities to which we belong long before we even joined them.³⁰ Consider the national pride of present-day Greeks, much of which rests on the glorious accomplishments of fellow Greek scholars, artists, and philosophers some twenty-four centuries ago, or the institutional arrogance of many current faculty of academic departments that were considered great forty years ago but have since been in decline. Consider also the long tradition of pain and suffering carried by many present-day American descendants of nineteenth-century African slaves, or the great sense of shame that pervades the experience of many young Germans born many years after the collapse of the Nazi regime.

Indeed, identifying with a particular collective past is an important part of the process of acquiring a particular social identity

(hence the appeal for some students of African-American and Women's Studies programs in universities, for example). Familiarizing new members with their collective past is an important part of groups' and communities' general efforts to incorporate them. Business corporations, colleges, and army battalions, for example, often introduce new members to their collective history as part of their general "orientation." Children whose parents came to the United States from Ghana, Ecuador, or Cambodia are likewise taught in school to "remember" Paul Revere and the *Mayflower* as part of their own past. From Poland to Mexico, from Israel to Taiwan, the study of national history plays a major role in the general effort of the modern state to foster a national identity.³¹

At the same time (and for precisely the same reasons), exiting a group or a community typically involves forgetting its past. Children who are abandoned by one of their parents, for example, rarely carry on the memories of his or her family. Children of assimilated immigrants likewise rarely learn much from their parents about the history of the societies they chose to leave, both physically and psychologically, behind them.

Given its highly impersonal nature, social memory need not even be stored in individuals' minds. Indeed, there are some unmistakably impersonal "sites"³² of memory.

It was the invention of language that first freed human memory from the need to be stored in individuals' minds. As soon as it became technically possible for people to somehow "share" their personal experiences with others, those experiences were no longer exclusively theirs and could therefore be preserved as somewhat impersonal recollections even after they themselves were long gone. In fact, with language, memories can actually pass from one person to another even when there is no direct contact between them, through an intermediate. Indeed, that has always been one of the main social functions of the elderly, who, as the *de facto* custodians of the social memories of their communities, have traditionally

served as “mnemonic go-betweens,” essentially linking historically separate generations who would otherwise never be able to mentally “connect” with one another.

Such “mnemonic transitivity” allows for the social preservation of memories in stories, poems, and legends that are transmitted from one generation to the next. One finds such oral traditions³³ in practically any social community—from families, churches, law firms, and college fraternities to ethnic groups, air force bases, basketball teams, and radio stations. It was thus an oral tradition that enabled the Marranos in Spain, for example, to preserve their secret Jewish heritage (and therefore identity) for so many generations. It was likewise through stories that the memory of their spectacular eleventh-century encounter with America was originally preserved by Icelanders, more than a century before it was first recorded in their famous sagas and some 950 years before it was first corroborated by actual archaeological finds in Newfoundland.³⁴

Furthermore, ever since the invention of writing several thousand years ago, it is also possible to actually bypass any oral contact, however indirect, between the original carrier of a particular recollection and its various future retrievers. Present-day readers of Saint Augustine’s *Confessions* can actually “share” his personal recollections of his youth despite the fact that he has already been dead for more than fifteen centuries! Doctors can likewise share patient histories readily, since the highly impersonal clinical memories captured in their records are accessible even when those who originally recorded them there are not readily available for immediate consultation.³⁵ That explains the tremendous significance of documents in science (laboratory notes, published results of research), law (affidavits, contracts), diplomacy (telegrams, treaties), business (receipts, signed agreements), and bureaucracy (letters of acceptance, minutes of meetings), as well as of the archives, libraries, and computer files where they are typically stored.³⁶ It also accounts for the critical role of history textbooks in the mnemonic socialization of present and future generations.

Yet preserving social memories requires neither oral nor written transmission. Given the inherent durability of material objects as well as the fact that they are mnemonically evocative in an immediate, "tangible" manner, they too play an important role in helping us retain memories.³⁷ Hence the role of ruins, relics, and old buildings as *social souvenirs*. A visit to the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City, for example, helps "connect" modern Mexican "pilgrims" to their Toltec, Maya, and Aztec origins. A walk through the old neighborhoods of Jerusalem likewise allows present-day Jews a quasi-personal "contact" with their collective past.³⁸

As evident from the modern advent of preservationism³⁹ as well as from the modern state's political use of archaeology as part of its general effort to promote nationalism,⁴⁰ we are certainly more than just passive consumers of such quasi-physical mnemonic links to our collective past. Numerous medals, plaques, tombstones, war memorials, Halls of Fame, and other commemorative monuments (and the fact that we make them from stone or metal rather than paper or wood)⁴¹ serve as evidence that we purposefully design such future sites of memory well in advance. Like souvenirs, class year-books, and antiques,⁴² such objects have a purely commemorative value for us, and we design them strictly for the purpose of allowing future generations mnemonic access to their collective past.⁴³ The entire meaning of such "pre-ruins" derives from the fact that they are mnemonically evocative and will therefore help us in the future to recover our past.

The self-conscious effort to preserve the past for posterity is manifested even more poignantly in the statues, portraits, stamps, coins, and paper money we produce as social souvenirs. The visual images so vividly captured on them represent an ambitious attempt to somehow "freeze" time and allow future generations the fullest possible mnemonic access to major individuals and events from their collective past. National galleries that try to offer posterity a comprehensive visual encapsulation of a nation's history (the collection of paintings displayed in the U.S. Capitol building,⁴⁴ Diego Rivera's

murals at the National Palace in Mexico City) are the culmination of such artistic endeavors.

Since the invention of the camera (as well as its two major offspring, the motion-picture and television cameras), these more traditional means of "capturing" the past have gradually given way to photographs and films.⁴⁵ The family photo album and the television archive, indeed, are among the major modern sites of social memory. In fact, it is primarily through snapshots, home movies, and television footage that most of us nowadays remember old relatives, family weddings, or the Gulf War.

As evident from the rapid evolution of audio-recording technology from the phonograph to the portable cassette-recorder, in our attempt to somehow "freeze" time we actually try to capture not only visual images but also the very sounds of the past. Historic recordings of Winston Churchill's speeches and Vladimir Horowitz's concerts, for example, underscore the growing significance of tapes, cassettes, and compact discs as modern sites of social memory.

Video technology, of course, represents the modern attempt to integrate such graphic and sonic efforts to preserve the past. The ultimate progeny of the camera and the phonograph, the camcorder generates remarkably vivid audio-visual memories that are virtually independent of any individual carrier! The famous videotaped beating of Rodney King by members of the Los Angeles police, for example, is the epitome of such absolutely disembodied and therefore truly impersonal memory. As evident from its repeated use in court, it may very well represent (not unlike the increasingly common use of instant video replay in televised sports)⁴⁶ the ultimate victory of social and therefore "official" over purely personal memory.

Not only are many of our recollections impersonal, they are often also collective. My memory of the first mile ever run under four minutes, for example, is actually shared by the entire track world. So are some of the memories I share with other sociologists, Jews, or Rutgers University employees. In each of these cases my own

recollections are part of a *collective memory*⁴⁷ shared by an entire community as a whole.

The collective memory of a mnemonic community is quite different from the sum total of the personal recollections of its various individual members,⁴⁸ as it includes only those that are *commonly shared* by all of them (in the same way that public opinion, for example, is more than just an aggregate of individuals' personal opinions).⁴⁹ In other words, it involves the integration of various different personal pasts into a single common past that all members of a community come to remember collectively. America's collective memory of the Vietnam War, for example, is thus more than just an aggregate of all the war-related recollections of individual Americans, just as Israel's collective memory of the Holocaust⁵⁰ is more than the mere sum of the personal recollections of all the Holocaust survivors living in Israel.

We must be particularly careful not to mistake personalized manifestations of a mnemonic community's collective memory for genuinely personal recollections.⁵¹ When asked to list the first names that come to their minds in response to the prompt "American history from its beginning through the end of the Civil War," Americans usually list the same people—George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Robert E. Lee, John Adams, and Ulysses S. Grant.⁵² The fact that so many different individuals happen to have the same "free" associations about their nation's past shows that their memories are not as independent as we might think but merely personalized manifestations of a single common collective memory. In so doing, it also underscores the tremendous significance of mnemonic socialization.

Yet the notion of a "collective memory" implies a past that is not only commonly shared but also jointly remembered (that is, "commemorated"). By helping ensure that an entire mnemonic community will come to remember its past *together*, as a group, society

affects not only what and who we remember but also when we remember it!

Commemorative anniversaries such as the 1992 Columbus quincentennial, the 1995 fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II, and the 1976 American bicentennial are classic manifestations of such *mnemonic synchronization*. Yet we also “co-remember” past events by associating them with holidays and other “memorial days” which we jointly celebrate on a regular annual⁵³ (or even weekly, as in the case of both the Sabbath and the Lord’s Day)⁵⁴ basis. Fixed in a mnemonic community’s calendar, such days ensure members’ synchronized access to their collective past. Indeed, keeping certain past events in our collective memory by ensuring their annual commemoration is one of the main functions of the calendar.⁵⁵

Thus, on Easter, millions of Christians come to remember their common spiritual origins together, as a community. By the same token, every Passover, Jews all over the world jointly remember their collective birth as a people. The annual commemoration of the French Revolution on Bastille Day and of the European colonization of New England on Thanksgiving Day play similar “co-evocative” roles for Frenchmen and Americans, respectively.

That also explains various attempts throughout history to remove certain holidays from the calendar in an effort to obliterate the collective memories they evoke. The calendrical dissociation of Easter from Passover, for example, was thus part of a conscious effort by the Church to “decontaminate” Christians’ collective memory from somewhat embarrassing Jewish elements,⁵⁶ whereas the calendar of the French Revolution represented an attempt to establish a mnemonically sanitized secular holiday cycle that would be devoid of any Christian memories.⁵⁷ Given all this, it is also clear why the recent political battle over the inclusion of Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday in the American calendar was actually a battle over the place of African Americans in America’s collective memory.

The battle over whether to officially include Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday in the American calendar is one of numerous battles fought between as well as within mnemonic communities over the social legacy of the past. The very existence of such *mnemonic battles* further underscores the social dimension of human memory.

The most common mnemonic battles are the ones fought over the "correct" way to interpret the past. As we develop a collective sense of history, we may not always agree on how a particular historical figure or event ought to be remembered. While many Americans regard Columbus as a hero who embodies the modern Western quest for knowledge and spirit of free enterprise, there are many others who claim that he should actually be remembered as the villainous spearhead of the modern Western expansionist spirit that is responsible for both colonialism and the massive destruction of the environment.⁵⁸ By the same token, whereas many Israelis still accept the official Zionist view of the fall of Masada and the Bar-Kokhba rebellion nineteen centuries ago as exemplary heroic events, a growing number of others are voicing the concern that they are actually symptomatic of a rather myopic stubbornness that resulted in terrible national disasters that could have been avoided by a more politically expedient way of dealing with the Romans who occupied Judaea.⁵⁹ Consider also the cultural battles fought among Americans over the "correct" interpretation of Watergate,⁶⁰ or the debate among historians over whether the origins of Greek (and therefore Western) civilization are Indo-European or African,⁶¹ as well as everyday marital battles over past infidelities.

Mnemonic battles are also fought over what ought to be collectively remembered in the first place. Eurocentrists, multiculturalists, and feminists, among others, battle over the literary tradition into which young members of society ought to be mnemonically socialized. Consider also the problem of delineating the historical narratives that are to be remembered. Given the inherently conventional nature of any beginning,⁶² "where" a particular historical narrative ought to begin is by no means self-evident.⁶³ After all, even people

who are trying to recount an event they have just witnessed together often disagree on the precise point at which their account ought to begin. It is not at all clear, for example, whether we should begin the "story" of the Vietnam War during the Johnson or Kennedy years. Nor is it absolutely clear whether the narrative of the events leading to the Gulf War ought to begin in August 1990, when Iraq invaded Kuwait (which is the standard American version), or several decades earlier, when both were still part of a single, undivided political entity (which is the standard Iraqi version).

As we might expect, such narratological pluralism often generates discord. Japan and the United States wage an ongoing mnemonic battle over the inclusion of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 in the narrative of the events leading to the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the United States four years later. Consider also the Arab-Israeli dispute over the point at which a fair narration of the history of the West Bank ought to begin, or the strong objection of Native Americans to the Eurocentric depiction of 1492 as the beginning of American history. After all, for anyone whose ancestors lived in America thousands of years before it was "discovered" by Europe, that date certainly constitutes more of an ending than a beginning.

Like Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, the fact that such discord exists at all reminds us that our memory of the past is not entirely objective, since we evidently do not all remember it the same way. Yet mnemonic battles usually involve not just individuals but entire communities, and are typically fought in the public arena (such as in newspaper editorials and radio talk shows), which suggests that the past is not entirely subjective either. That remembering is more than just a personal act is also evident from the fact that major changes in the way we view the past (such as our growing sensitivity to multiculturalist historiographic concerns) usually correspond to major social changes that affect entire mnemonic communities.⁶⁴ This, again, underscores the intersubjective, unmistakably social dimension of human memory.