

**The Generation of Memory:  
Reflections on the "Memory Boom" in Contemporary Historical  
Studies\***

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"Whoever says memory, says Shoah." This is the cryptic remark of one of the fathers of the "memory boom" among historians, Pierre Nora, French political scientist, publisher at the prestigious house of Gallimard, and the agent provocateur and inspiration behind one of the most influential ventures in cultural history over the last twenty years, *Les lieux de mémoire*. In a series of stately tomes published between 1984 and 1992, Nora solicited and reshaped essays by leading French scholars that, taken together, constitute an inventory of knowledge and conjecture about memory in the French historical context - memory as frozen in statues, in objects, in street names, in ceremonies, in political parties, in legends, in myths, even in historical works. The success of this venture has been astonishing. The collection has sold over half a million copies in France alone. All

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\*First published: *GHI Bulletin*, 21, Fall 2000. Also available at: <http://www.ghi-dc.org/bulletin27F00/b27winterframe.html>. Permission granted by the author.

of the essays have been translated into English, first in a three-volume edition published by Columbia University Press under the slightly odd title of *Realms of Memory*; all the other chapters will appear next year in a four-volume edition published by the University of Chicago Press. An exploration of German sites of memory is under way; the same is true in Italy and Portugal;<sup>1</sup> and everywhere in the Anglo-Saxon world, historians young and old have found in the subject of memory, defined in a host of ways, the central organizing concept of historical study, a position once occupied by the notions of race, class, and gender. These themes have certainly not vanished, but they have been reconfigured and in certain respects overshadowed by the historical study of "memory," however defined.

Clearly something important has happened in our discipline, something we need to attend to as more than a passing fashion. What are the origins of the memory boom? What are its implications? Is Nora right in claiming that it is one of the cultural repercussions of the Holocaust? In this essay I hope to show that the subject of the Holocaust has indeed inspired a range of reflections on the notion of memory, trauma, and history. But there are other, distinctive sources of the contemporary obsession with memory that arise out of a multiplicity of social, cultural, medical, and economic trends and developments of an eclectic but intersecting nature. My argument here is that each of these incitements to reflect on memory has its own inner logic and constituency but that the effect of their intersection is multiplicative rather than additive. In other words, the

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<sup>1</sup>I am grateful to Peter Burke for drawing my attention to these ventures, and for general comments on this essay. Thanks are due as well to Diana Sorensen, Anton Kaes, Volker Berghahn, and Sidra Ezrahi for their critical comments.

memory boom has taken off because the impulses behind it add up to a whole greater than the sum of its parts.

### **Memory and Commemoration**

One clear impulse to much reflection on memory has been public commemoration. Here marking or remembering the Holocaust is a critical problem, one mixed together in very troubling ways with other kinds of commemoration. I shall later address the question as to whether any symbolic notation can accommodate the range of issues imbedded in the Holocaust. But on a more empirical, descriptive level, it is apparent that remembering the Holocaust has formed a significant part of a broader pattern of the commemoration of victims of twentieth-century war. The Holocaust, which took place between 1941 and 1945, has never escaped from that contextual location.

Another concentric circle of remembrance surrounds both the Holocaust and World War II. It is the commemorative moment that preceded it, addressing some of the complex issues of victimhood and bereavement during and after World War I. Taken together, these intersecting commemorations litter the calendar. On the Israeli calendar, Yom Hashoah comes one week before Remembrance Day, a solemn recollection of Israeli soldiers who died in war from the period prior to the foundation of the state of Israel until today. Yom Hazicharon is followed immediately and with a wrenching change of pace and mood by Israeli Independence Day. The link between sacrifice and redemption is clear; more on that theme in a moment. For observant Jews, Tisha Be'av is still the time on the Jewish calendar to recall the Third Catastrophe, the "Dritte Churban," of the

Nazi genocide, following the two prior disasters of the destruction of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem in 586BC and 70AD. On this day, redemption is linked not to the creation of the State of Israel but to the record of catastrophe over two millennia, a record recalled with sadness and longing for the day when the Messiah will arrive. "Even though he tarries," the affirmation of faith movingly accepts, "nonetheless I still believe." Redemption here has a direct, scriptural meaning.

How redemptive is the notation of the other moments we recall on stated days of the year marking wars? There is D-Day, VE Day, VJ Day, and the two older standbys, Memorial Day on May 29, the anniversary of Appomattox, and Armistice Day on November 11. In parts of Britain and Northern Ireland, the First of July, the anniversary of the Battle of the Somme, is marked collectively, as is dawn on April 25, the day Australian and New Zealand troops landed at Gallipoli; today that day is Australian independence day. Most are framed within a narrative of liberty being purchased through the shedding of blood. Here, as in Israeli Independence Day, the measure is the nation-state and its hard-won expression of a nation's collective life, so recently endangered by the threat of extermination.

And now we have January 27, the day Auschwitz was liberated by the Red Army. Here too commemoration cannot escape its political framework. State-sponsored commemoration is a politically sanctioned and politically funded rite of remembering in public, adjusted to a publicly or politically approved narrative. Remembering the Holocaust at this level is an extension of earlier twentieth-century

commemorative forms. It locates the narrative of war crimes and victimhood within the framework of national catastrophe and rebirth.

The case of the new Holocaust memorial to be built near the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin shows the implications of this commemorative setting. The monument, a stone's throw from the renovated Reichstag and from Hitler's bunker, is unavoidably part of the story of Germany reborn. Some believe the monument is an essential and properly placed part of the story; others, and I am one of them, opposed the location of a commemorative monument to victims of the Holocaust within such a narrative. Placing the monument in the heart of the national capital, geographically and metaphorically, also draws attention away from many original and sensitive commemorative forms in Berlin and elsewhere in Germany. Focusing on the national level of notation in my view wrongly configures the problem of how to remember the victims of the Holocaust. The alternative to a national monument is not nothing; indeed, the array of local, small-scale commemorative forms are entirely consistent with the federal, regionalized, richly complex nature of German cultural history, and helps show the multiplicity of meanings of remembrance, and indeed of history, lost in grand national narratives like that of Daniel J. Goldhagen.

What is true of Germany is true of all other parts of Europe where memorials have been built. The national level of notation in no way occludes local memorials. In Oradour-sur-Glâne, or in Drancy, or on the walls of the Jewish orphanage on the île St-Louis, monuments and inscriptions help locate the Holocaust within the particular, local context of the scars left by total war in the twentieth century. None of

these sites can "re-present" the Holocaust; nothing can do so in any conventional way. All they can accomplish - and it is a lot - is to suggest what is absent in European life because of the genocide and to leave the question of its "meaning" open. Daniel Liebeskind's design for the Jewish wing of the Berlin Historical Museum in Kreuzberg goes a long way toward describing this void.<sup>2</sup>

But absence is not meaning. My own view is that it is unwise to try to encapsulate the Holocaust within any particular system of meaning. To paraphrase Primo Levi, a set of events about which one cannot pose the question of "why?" is also an event about which it is impossible in any straightforward sense to pose the questions of historical context or meaning within twentieth-century history.

This extended international conversation as to the appropriate character and content of Holocaust commemoration is bound to go on, and I do not expect to persuade everyone reading this essay of my point of view. But for our present purposes, what is most significant about this protracted debate is the way it has made us reflect on what kind of memories are elicited by *other* commemorative projects. In whose interest are they framed? Most projects of commemoration have been created far from the center of political power. Second- and third-order elites have done the original work of remembrance, but frequently their work, originating within civil society, has been taken over by groups in power who feel they have the right and the need to tell us through commemoration how

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<sup>2</sup>Daniel Liebeskind, *Erweiterung des Berlin Museums mit Abteilung Jüdisches Museum* (Berlin, 1992).

to remember the past. And the framework they tend to adopt is redemptive: Hope springs from tragedy; life moves on.

Whatever you think of these issues, it is clear that the political debate over Holocaust commemoration describes one very salient element in the memory boom of the last thirty years. Nora had a point. But the national political focus of this story is somewhat misleading. The state is not the sole nor even the primary source of the recent upsurge of interest in memory, whether or not related to the Holocaust. Once again, we have to address processes that arise from many different sources, some at the seat of power, some not.

State agents, as much as those dedicated to a state in the making, have an evident interest in legitimating narratives; very often that is what they mean by "collective memory" - stories that polish the cultural credentials of their claim to power. To be sure, all nationalist movements present versions of their own history and construct political myths that organize stories about the past to galvanize action in the present. There is little new in the recent forms of this kind of memory work. Consider Serbian inventions of a supposedly distinctive ethnic history, remote from or opposed to that of the Muslims and Roman Catholics, Bosnians, Kosovans, and Croats, with whom they lived (and intermarried) for generations; this is just one among many similar political conjuring tricks.

But memory work has focused on other collectives, too. In some places over the past thirty years, globalization and European integration have, to a degree, diminished the stridency of some national narratives. German and French nationalism - and their

attendant rhetorical forms - are remote from those of the past. In other cases, nationalism is a direct response to the perceived dangers of globalization. The World Wide web, many French observers sadly note, is yet another *défi américain*, threatening the extinction of the Francophone world. Nationalist rhetoric has certainly not vanished, but it increasingly shares the stage with other languages of collective identity. The much-heralded end of territoriality has not yet arrived, but state-bounded narratives increasingly compete with others of a regional or ethnic kind. On both sides of the Atlantic, in the developed "north" and the developing "south," many ethnic groups and disenfranchised minorities have demanded their own right to speak, to act, and to achieve liberation or self-determination. And those struggles almost always entail the construction of their own stories, their own usable past. Collective memory is a term that should never be collapsed into a set of stories formed by or about the state.

### **Identity Politics**

Here is a second source of the robust character of what I have called the "generation of memory." The creation and dissemination of narratives about the past arise out of and express identity politics.<sup>3</sup> One clear example is the placement of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum near the National Mall in Washington, D.C. The museum is, in this sacred space, both a statement of universal truths and an expression of Jewish-American pride. Borrowing the notation of one

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<sup>3</sup>See Allen Megill, "History, Memory, Identity," *History of the Human Sciences* 11, no. 3 (1998): 37-62; Jeffrey K. Olick and Joyce Robbins, "Social Memory Studies: From 'Collective Memory' to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices," *American Review of Sociology* 24 (1998): 105-40.



literary scholar in an entirely different context, it expresses a measureless story in a grammar living on the hyphen, the hyphen of ethnic politics.<sup>4</sup>

The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum is a spectacular success in many ways, drawing a huge and varied population of visitors. Its structure and organization constitute a great achievement, bringing to millions of people of all ages searing images of a crime without parallel. Handing out identity cards of Holocaust victims to visitors inscribes us from the outset in a family of bereavement, which among other things, is a Jewish family. Ethnic pride and ethnic sadness are there in equal parts.

But the framework cannot escape its location. The redemptive elements in the story surround it on the Mall. They tell us of the wider struggle for tolerance, for freedom of religion, for freedom from persecution; they locate the Holocaust within the American narrative, itself configured as universal.<sup>5</sup> Here we have arrived at the right-hand side of the hyphen "Jewish-American." The museum is the bridge between the two.

There have been many other instances of commemoration as an expression of the tragic history of persecuted minorities. The AIDS Quilt is one such artifact of remembrance;<sup>6</sup> monuments to the

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<sup>4</sup>Gustavo Perez Firmat, *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way* (Austin, Tex., 1994).

<sup>5</sup>Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston, 1999).

<sup>6</sup>See Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley, Calif., 1997).

struggle for African-American freedom raise the same point. Recent attempts to configure the imprisonment of Japanese-Americans during the World War II express the same set of issues, both unique and universal. Again the hyphen of identity is strengthened by commemoration.<sup>7</sup>

In Latin America and elsewhere, testimonial literature rescues histories trampled on by military dictatorships. The stories of cruelty and oppression once retold constitute acts of defiance; through the narrator, the voices of the dead and the mutilated can still be heard. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa has been a focus for the release of imprisoned memory. At times, the boundaries between truth and fiction become blurred in such storytelling. As Doris Sommer has put it, the line between informing and performing is porous.<sup>8</sup> But even when the storyteller goes beyond what can be verified through other sources, the voice of the witness still stands for a generalized sense of injustice and injury. Here is identity politics as a set of narratives, a "counterhistory that challenges the false generalizations in exclusionary 'History,'" penned by those trapped in a Eurocentric and imperialist sense of what constitutes the past.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Dolores Hayden, "The Japanese-American Monument in Los Angeles," in Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan, eds., *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, 1999), 142-60.

<sup>8</sup>Doris Sommer, *Proceed with Caution, when Engaged by Minority Writing in the Americas* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), 115.

<sup>9</sup>The citation is to the words of Werner Sollors, taken from the introduction to Genevieve Fabre and Robert O'Meally, eds., *History and Memory in African-American Culture* (New York, 1994), 7-8.

Developments in information technology also help explain why the memory boom has taken off over the last generation. Since the 1960s and 1970s, audiovisual and now computer-based data banks can preserve and protect the “voice” of the victims. Their stories can be captured, and through listening to them or viewing them, we can come into contact with their lives and their tragedies.

The act of attending to such voices is what witnessing is all about. Its religious overtones are hard to miss. There is a kind of laying on of hands in such encounters. The person who suffered knows about a mystery - the mystery of evil and the miracle of survival - and we who listen may thereby enter the mystery and share the miracle. This is a difficult area to investigate, for in it there is a kind of appropriation of suffering that raises many difficult moral questions. Dominick LaCapra refers to such forms of witnessing in the language of psychoanalysis.<sup>10</sup> But I doubt that “transference” can really be a framework for those telling and those attending to such narratives.

Over the same decades that archives of Holocaust victims and other survivors of oppression and injustice were constructed, the notion of the “witness” received another kind of validation. From the Adolf Eichmann trial in 1961 to the French trials of Klaus Barbie, Paul Touvier, and Maurice Papon, witnesses came forward, men such as Leon Welizcker-Wells who made it his purpose in life to tell the story of what had happened to him as a member of a *Sonderkommando* (special unit). Literary memoirs became acts of witnessing; the success of Primo Levi’s writing is a case-in-point.

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<sup>10</sup>Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory After Auschwitz* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1998), 8.

Timing is critical. In the 1940s and 1950s such witnesses were there, but their voices were marginal to public discourse on World War II. Heroic narratives of the Resistance were more useful in the revival of the political culture of countries humiliated by occupation and collaboration.<sup>11</sup> But by the 1960s and 1970s that narrative work had done its job; the transition to postwar political stability was complete. There was now room for the victims of the camps to come forward. And come forward they did.

Some of their messages reinforced identity politics, in particular the ongoing struggle against anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial. But in other ways, the birth of the witness was the recovery of voices that had been there all along. It was the disclosure of narratives that did not fit the heroic model of the Resistance. Witnessing was another kind, perhaps an even harder kind, of resistance.

Identity politics attended the recovery of witnesses after the Soviet empire collapsed in 1989. A whole swath of eastern Europe suddenly was stripped of its politically dominant narratives. Berlin was now unified in contemplation of a single past. From Potsdam to Moscow, vast arrays of documents suddenly surfaced, helping to fuel a new and vigorous recovery of the experience of several generations of men and women whose voices had been stilled. In the 1990s these witnesses could be heard. Alongside them were Chinese voices, less attesting to identity politics than to the brutal repression of the Cultural Revolution and Tiananmen Square. Simply recording all

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<sup>11</sup>Pieter Lagrou, *The Legacy of Nazi Occupation: Patriotic Memory and National Recovery in Western Europe, 1945-1965* (Cambridge, 1999).

these stories will take decades. But in the course of doing so, scholars are helping to build new political and ethnic identities in a number of volatile regions.

### **Affluence and Commemoration**

I have tried to emphasize the multifaceted and eclectic nature of the memory boom. There have been political, technological, and philosophical impulses toward privileging the subject of memory in many discursive fields. Subsequently, I address what a demographer would call "cohort analysis" - the tracing of generations and the stories they tell over time. There is a medical dimension to this story to which I also shall turn, albeit briefly. These are the most important aspects of the efflorescence of interest in memory I wish to describe. The weaving together of these varied themes is a classic problem in overdetermination.

But there is yet another dimension to this story to which we must attend. It is more about audiences than about origins, and although not of fundamental significance, it still is part of the story of why so many people are talking about memory today. In the West, one important precondition of the memory boom has been affluence. In a nutshell, overall economic growth and the expansion of the service sector since World War II have helped shift to the right the demand curve for cultural commodities. In the history of this rising demand, higher education has played a central role. Since the 1960s there has been a rapid expansion in the population of university-trained people whose education provided them with access to and a desire for cultural activities of varying kinds. In Britain, for instance, the

number of university students expanded very rapidly after the Robbins report of 1963, granting the right to free higher education to all who could pass entrance requirements. In 1962 there were 216,000 full-time university students: 118,000 in universities; 55,000 in teacher training; and 43,000 in technical colleges. By 1990 the numbers had risen to 650,000 full-time students: 340,000 in university and 310,000 in colleges of further education. To be sure, during the Thatcher years, changes in university funding upgraded many polytechnics into universities in one fell swoop. But however tertiary sector education was defined, there were at least three times as many people studying in institutions of higher education in 1990 as had been three decades before.

The same upward trend in the size of the tertiary sector of education may be detected across Europe and in the United States after 1960. Part of the increase is demographic: The baby boom generation was coming of age. But part was policy driven. Again, comparative statistics here are treacherous: It is clear that the comparisons are flawed because they entail juxtaposing very different systems of higher education, some committed to mass entry with little individual instruction, some more geared to small-group teaching and individual instruction. Nevertheless, the international trend is unmistakable. There were eight times the number of students in higher education in Germany in 1990 compared to 1960; in France, the increase over the same period was a factor of six; in Belgium, Denmark, Italy, and the United States, a factor of five. Taken together, the fifteen member states of the European Union had 12 million students in higher education in 1990; there were about 13.5 million such students in the

United States. And the numbers have grown throughout the last decade of the twentieth century.

One other point needs to be addressed: The growth came before the student revolt of 1968 and cannot be related to it. In France, student numbers grew more rapidly in 1966-7 than in 1969-70; German growth was about the same before and after the "troubles." These are secular changes, with fundamental effects not only on the skill composition of the labor force but also on the stock of cultural capital circulating in society as a whole.<sup>12</sup>

In Europe the link between educational attainment and income levels is not as direct as it is in the United States, but it is true that affluence funded university growth, whereas university graduates fueled economic growth. By the 1990s many indicators of well-being in Europe and North America stressed the long-term trend of growing affluence, consistent as it was (and is) with massive inequalities and recurrent instability. The inescapable conclusion is that economic trends were both a cause and an outcome of the fact that by the 1990s there was a larger population of university-educated people than ever before. Their demand for cultural products of many different kinds was evident. What might be described as the industry of culture was in an ideal position for massive growth. The market was there; the target population for cultural products was there; and

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<sup>12</sup>OECD, *Educational Statistics Yearbook*, vol. 1: *International Tables* (Paris, 1974), table 7, 20; *Eurostat Yearbook 98-99: A Statistical Eye on Europe, 1987-1997* (Brussels, 1999), table 12, 123.

after two decades of retrenchment, state support for "heritage" or *la patrimoine* was - with more or less generosity - available.<sup>13</sup>

The British economic historian, Alan Milward, currently teaching in Florence, has pointed to the material echoes of these two cultural bywords, "heritage" and "patrimony." The memory boom, he rightly notes, has happened in part because both the public and the state have the disposable income to pay for it. This is how Milward put it in a recent review of books on memory and history in Europe in the *Times Literary Supplement*:

The media are the hypermarket outlet for the consumption of memory. Stern moral and methodological rejection of earlier historical fashions does not alter the reality that this latest fashion, like the earlier ones, is driven by the all-too-positivist forces of the growth of wealth and incomes. The history of memory represents that stage of consumption in which the latest product, ego-history, is the image of the self not only marketed but also consumed by the self.<sup>14</sup>

There are differences among European countries here, and I look forward to learning more about the German story, which may not fit Milward's sardonic interpretation. But in the British and French cases, which I know better, there is a symmetry between economic trends and cultural trends that we ignore at our peril.

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<sup>13</sup>On "patrimoine," see Pierre Nora, ed., *Science et conscience du patrimoine: Entretiens du patrimoine, Theatre national de Chaillot, Paris, 28, 29 et 30 novembre 1994* (Paris, 1997).

<sup>14</sup>Alan S. Milward, "Bad Memories," *Times Literary Supplement*, Apr. 14, 2000, 8.



Dwelling on memory is a matter of both disposable income and leisure time. Milward has a telling point: Affluence has helped turn identity into a commodity, to be consumed by everyone during their (increasingly ample) leisure time. A "common" identity is one sharing a set of narratives about the past. Many of these take the form of bricks and mortar - fixed cultural capital. Exploiting their attractiveness, as in Britain's stately National Trust homes and gardens, the patrimony or heritage trades became a profitable industry, with market niches and target consumers. The marketing of memory has paid off in a huge consumer boom in images of the past - in films, books, articles, and more recently on the internet and television. There is an entire industry devoted to blockbuster exhibitions in museums, whose visitors seem to respond more and more to spectacular shows. History sells, especially well as biography and as autobiography, or in Milward's (and Nora's) phrase, ego-history.<sup>15</sup>

The British satirical writer Julian Barnes produced a marvelous *reductio ad absurdum* of this phenomenon in his futuristic spoof *England, England*, published in 1998.<sup>16</sup> Why should tourists have to travel to consume the icons of British history? Surely it makes more sense to bring or to imitate the lot on the Isle of Wight? But whatever its potential for humor, the history business has never been more profitable. It would be important, though, to have more precise information on the choices cultural consumers make. My hunch is that over the last two decades, the growth rate in attendance at the Imperial War Museum, the British Museum, and Madame Tussaud's in

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<sup>15</sup>Pierre Nora, ed., *Essais d'ego-histoire* (Paris, 1987).

<sup>16</sup>Julian Barnes, *England, England* (London, 1998).

London, for instance, has been greater than the increase in attendance at sporting events or rock concerts. This is conjecture, but one worth pursuing in a more rigorous manner.

Affluence has had another by now commonplace byproduct. One vector of the memory boom may also be the exteriorization, or expression in public space, of the interior discourse of psychoanalysis. Just as Woody Allen has popularized therapy as an addictive way of life, so the nearly universal spread of therapy cultures have made memory a light consumer durable good for those - yet again - with the cash to afford it.

### **History and Family History: Vectors of Transmission**

So far I have tried to sketch some of the political and economic preconditions for the contemporary memory boom. But there is another level of significance in this story, one that is more demographic than political, more about families than about nations.

In our profession, we should be grateful that history sells; one reason that it is such a popular and moneymaking trade is because it locates family stories in bigger, more universal narratives. One way to understand the huge growth and financial viability of museums and fiction set in the wars of the twentieth century is to see them as places where family stories are situated in a wider, at times universal context. Some grandparents knew the Blitz; now they can bring their grandchildren to the "Blitz Experience" of the Imperial War Museum in London. Such imaginings of war are attractive because they rest on the contemporary link between generations, particularly between the

old and the young, between grandparents and grandchildren, at times over the heads of the troublesome generation of parents in the middle. In the 1960s and 1970s this link pointed back to World War I; later on, to World War II.

Many best-selling novels set during the two world wars take family stories as their form. Examples abound: such as Jean Rouaud's *Champs d'honneur* winner of the Prix Goncourt in 1991,<sup>17</sup> or Sebastian Japrisot's moving *Un long dimanche de fiançaille*,<sup>18</sup> or Pat Barker's fictional trilogy on the Great War,<sup>19</sup> or Sebastian Faulks's powerful *Birdsong*.<sup>20</sup> Barker has written a sequel whose central figure is a 100-year-old veteran and grandfather of the narrator.<sup>21</sup> Faulks has placed within a later novel about World War II a story of the transmission of traumatic memory between father and daughter.<sup>22</sup>

There are traces here of the history of several cohorts, moving through time, in this fictional landscape. Today's grandparents were children after the 1914-18 war, and their stories - family stories - are now imbedded in history, fiction, exhibitions, museums, and pilgrimage, in all the stuff of ritual that deepen the memory boom. The linkage between the young and the old - now extended substantially with the life span - is so central to the concept of memory that its significance may have simply passed us by.

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<sup>17</sup>Jean Rouaud, *Champs d'honneur* (Paris, 1990).

<sup>18</sup>Sébastien Japrisot, *Un long dimanche de fiançailles: Roman* (Paris, 1991).

<sup>19</sup>Pat Barker, *Regeneration* (New York, 1991); *The Eye in the Door* (New York, 1993); and *The Ghost Road* (New York, 1995).

<sup>20</sup>Sebastian Faulks, *Birdsong* (London, 1993).

<sup>21</sup>Pat Barker, *Another World* (London, 1998).

<sup>22</sup>Sebastian Faulks, *Charlotte Gray* (London, 1998).

Let me describe a personal experience that illustrates this point. I have been privileged to work as one of the creators of an international museum of World War I, located at Péronne, in the Department of the Somme, an hour north of Paris. Péronne was the German headquarters during the Battle of the Somme in 1916. This museum was the product of a specific and fleeting generational moment in the 1980s, when history became family history and therefore could include scripts not yet inscribed by the French in their national narrative of the war. Because of family memories, and traumatic memories at that, we were able to find a way to justify a major French investment in a story very few Frenchmen had acknowledged as fundamentally important to them and to their sense of the past. Verdun, that other great disaster of 1916, had occluded the Somme in France, despite the fact that the French lost 200,000 men in the battle.

The man who saw this opportunity was Max Lejeune, president of the Conseil Général and a defense minister at the time of Suez Crisis. He was a characteristic Fourth Republic politician, a man skilled in the byways of Parisian infighting, but whose power rested on a personal fiefdom and following in his own Department of the Somme. Tourism mattered to him, but so did the memory of his father, an *ancien combattant* of the Battle of the Somme who had returned from the war a troubled man. The childhood Lejeune recalled was not a happy one; the war had broken his father, and a lifetime later, in the 1980s, his son Max Lejeune wanted to find a way to put those memories to rest.

For Lejeune, the idea of a museum originated in family history, his family history. But his insight was in seeing that such a museum was a means of turning national narratives into family narratives, redolent to a very wide public of several nationalities. In this way, this venture could bring French children at the end of the twentieth century into contact with the world of his childhood in the 1920s and 1930s, shadowed as it was by World War I. It could also describe the disintegration of Europe in 1914-18 in a way that highlighted the urgent tasks of European integration eighty years later. It could combine nostalgia, ever-present in family narratives, with a civics lesson in the future of the new Europe.

With the support of a *notable* of the eminence and power of Lejeune, it was possible to secure the financial investment necessary for the creation of a museum. Ultimately, the project cost 100 million francs. Lejeune also bought the argument, and inserted it in the budget where it has remained to this day, that a museum without a research center would atrophy over time. Placing historical debate permanently within the museum, and funding postgraduate studies for people anywhere in the world working on that war, are steps that have invigorated the enterprise and ensured its survival. Without family history (and French cash), none of this would have been possible.

This positive story should not obscure other, more difficult ways in which memories of war continue to linger even now, more than half a century after 1945. The memory boom has enabled some people to hide one set of memories behind another. In France and elsewhere, some narratives of World War I help people evade both personal and

national stories about World War II. This is by no means true everywhere; in Russia, for example, World War I simply vanished as a subject of public discourse, eclipsed by the revolutions of 1917 and the civil war that followed it. But where collaboration raised uncomfortable questions in France in the aftermath of World War II, many people were happy to sing along with the French troubadour Georges Brassens, "Qu'est-ce que c'est la guerre que je préfère, c'est la guerre de '14-18."

### **Family Memory, Traumatic Memory, and War**

Here the diversion of the narrative from one war to another was deliberate. Other people were not so fortunate. When we encounter family stories about war in this century, we frequently confront another kind of storytelling, one we have come to call *traumatic memory*. The recognition of the significance of this kind of memory is one of the salient features of the contemporary memory boom. I take this term to signify an underground river of recollection, first discussed in the aftermath of World War I, but a subject of increasing attention in the 1980s and 1990s, when *posttraumatic stress disorder* became the umbrella term for those (as it were) stuck in the past. The memory boom of the late twentieth century arrived in part because of our belated but real acceptance that among us, within our families, there are men and women overwhelmed by traumatic recollection.

Public perceptions of memory in the twentieth century have become inextricably tied up with this notion of trauma, understood as a serious and enduring shock so severe that it induces a kind of

numbing or blockage of feeling. Let me try to introduce this notion and then locate its effect on the recent memory boom by turning to a celebrated text by Walter Benjamin about storytelling. My point here is that the notion of traumatic memory is by and large a product of World War I. This text was written in 1933. In it, Benjamin observes:

Experience has fallen in value. And it looks as if it is continuing to fall into bottomlessness. Every glance at a newspaper demonstrates that it has reached a new low; that our picture, not only of the external world, overnight has undergone changes which were never thought possible. With the First World War a process began to become apparent which has not halted since then. Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent - not richer but poorer in communicable experience? What ten years later was poured out in the flood of war books was anything but experience that goes from mouth to mouth. And there was nothing remarkable about that. For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly, than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky, in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body.<sup>23</sup>

There are many other indications that after the shock of World War I many men and women had grown "not richer but poorer in communicable experience." Their memories were not on the surface but went underground. Alongside the public commemorations, or

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<sup>23</sup>Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 1st American ed. (New York, 1968), 83-4.

rather in their shadow, men and women lived out lives that were overwhelmed by memory. In English, the term *shell shock*, invented in 1915 and quickly incorporated into colloquial language, stands for the point of entry into this world of traumatic memory.

The imagery of the shell-shocked soldier became generalized after World War II.<sup>24</sup> In 1939-45 the new notation for psychological casualty was *combat fatigue*, an unavoidable wearing out of one of the components of the military machine. Holocaust victims had a very different story to tell, but the earlier vocabulary of trauma was there to be seized. And seized again. This was true in commemorative art as much as in medical care. It is no accident, in my view, that the notation of Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial is that of Sir Edwin Lutyens's monument to the missing of the Battle of the Somme at Thiepval. World War I created categories that have framed some of the language we use to describe the traumatic memories of victims of World War II, the Vietnam War, and other conflicts.

This also is the case in the field of psychiatry, where the notion of posttraumatic stress disorder - previously termed *shell shock* or *combat fatigue* - was accepted as a recognized medical diagnostic classification only in 1980, seven years after the end of the Vietnam War. Once legitimated medically, it validated entitlements - to pensions, to medical care, to public sympathy. It also "naturalized" the status of Vietnam veterans. The mental scars of these vets, once legitimated, could be treated alongside other victims of urban

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<sup>24</sup>LaCapra, *History and Memory After Auschwitz*, 8.



violence, of sexual or family trauma.<sup>25</sup> In all these cases, violence seemed to leave an imprint on what is now referred to as traumatic memory.

Enormous progress has been made in this area over the last thirty years in the field of neuroscience. The biochemistry of traumatic memory is now a field of active research, and various pathways have been identified that help us distinguish between memory as recall and memory as re-enactment. There is now a biochemistry of traumatic memories, memories that are first buried and then involuntarily released when triggered by certain external stimuli. The world of neurology has had its own memory boom, which in turn has helped establish the scientific character and credentials of the notion of "trauma."<sup>26</sup>

The cultural notation of shell shock entered our conversations and our lives long before the doctors and the bureaucrats finally made up their minds to accept it. It is there in the war poets of World War I; it is there in Benjamin's reflections; it was there, in families, in villages, in the world of everyday life. In this broad discursive field, much of which is still uncharted, traumatic memory was subversive. It was a time bomb that once detonated could wreck lives and families. Its evident and troubling existence undermined more comforting or

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<sup>25</sup>Laurence J. Kirmayer, "Landscapes of Memory: Trauma, Narrative, and Dissociation," in Paul Antze and Michael Lambek, eds., *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory* (London, 1996), 173-98.

<sup>26</sup>See Allen Young, *The Harmony of Illusions* (Princeton, N.J., 1995), and Steve Southwick's work, cited in Winter and Sivan, eds., *War and Remembrance*, 15n. On this exciting field, see Daniel Schachter, ed., *Memory Distortion: How Minds, Brains, and Societies Reconstruct the Past* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995).

officially sanctioned memories, heroic narratives about war, about the reintegration of soldiers into peacetime society, about the very notions of "victory" and "defeat."<sup>27</sup>

Fiction and fictionalized memoirs have been important vectors for the dissemination of notions of traumatic memory. This has been true since World War I, and the appearance in print of the poems of Wilfred Owen, who did not survive the war, and Ivor Gurney, who did but who spent the rest of his life in a lunatic asylum. Some veterans may have retreated into silence, but there were many storytellers among them, and among their contemporaries, who to this day continue to teach us much about what "trauma" means. Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* of 1925 is one poignant example; the figure of Septimus Smith was drawn from the direct experience of her brother-in-law's suffering.

The no-man's land of traumatic memory Woolf explored has been entered many times since then. Storytellers have been our essential guides to this uncanny landscape. I cite only two recent examples of such storytelling, though more could be adduced to make the point.

The first of the narratives of traumatic memory I want to draw to your attention is an Israeli novel, *Ayen 'erekh-ahavah'* by the Israeli writer David Grossman. The title in English is *See Under love*. It is the story of generational ties as the key to the transmission of traumatic memory. These ties are never simple, and the storytelling that comes out of them is - as Benjamin suggested - bound to be indirect. Momik, the eight-year-old central figure of the first part of the novel

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<sup>27</sup>Sturken, *Tangled Memories*.

lives in a working-class quarter of Jerusalem in the 1950s. His parents cannot talk about the past but whisper about the "Nazi beasts." This leads Momik to conclude that indeed an animal is stalking the land. He tries to trap it in his cellar, but that failure is the prelude to getting his hands on the Nazi beast in another way: through storytelling.

The storyteller is his grandfather, a survivor of the concentration camps. He comes back from the dead. No one knows he has survived because he has gone insane. One day he remembers his name and then returns to the family. An ambulance is the scene of the rebirth of the older generation. And through this old, deranged man Momik finds out what the Nazi beast was.

So do we all. The same structure of storytelling appears in a quite different book, more a meditation than a novel. Its author is an Armenian-American poet, David Balakian. Its title is *The Black Dog of Fate*. It is remarkably similar to Grossman's tale, though (inevitably) with different literary and historical echoes. Balakian's story is a straightforward *Bildungsroman*, the tale of a young American boy turning into a poet. Like Grossman's Momik, Balakian learns nothing about the disaster of the Armenian genocide that had decimated his family and impelled the survivors across the world to the east coast of the United States. His parents refuse to speak of the Turkish "beast." The only way the boy learns what happened is through his grandmother, a victim of the deportation of Armenians in 1915 who gives him some inkling of what went on at moments of extreme strain and anxiety. It is then, when the veils are lifted, that Balakian hears of the catastrophe and can begin to make some sense of it.

The issue here is less the content of these stories than their structure. They grow directly out of family narratives but reconfigure them in such a way as to highlight and circumvent the traumatic silence – Benjamin's impoverishment – of the parental generation. That silence is broken, not without difficulty, and not in a linear way, but broken it is.

### **The "Cultural Turn" in Historical Studies**

Let me summarize my argument so far: My first point is that both national political imperatives and the growth of identity politics have contributed powerfully to the memory boom. Affluence and public funding have fueled it. Part of its appeal is the way the focus on memory enabled people to build a bridge between family history and history *tout court*. Museums, exhibitions, television, and computer-based projects have all expressed the public's thirst for the artifacts of memory. The passage of generations has played a part in this cultural phenomenon too. The survivors of World War I have faded from the scene, but their children, now elderly, have brought to young people over the last two decades stories about families and about what happened to them in wartime. These stories become interwoven with narratives about World War II, many of which were linked to the Holocaust. An earlier notation about traumatic memory was stretched to fit this new and unprecedented disaster. Encoding these narratives of both world wars, and of the Holocaust too, are works of imaginative literature that will endure long after the last survivors of the wars of the twentieth century have passed away.

The memory boom of the late twentieth century is a reflection of this matrix of suffering, political activity, claims for entitlement, scientific research, philosophical reflection, and art. In conclusion, it may be useful to add a word or two about the intersection of these broad trends with a number of narrower movements within the historical profession itself. The first may be described under the heading of a "cultural turn" in historical studies. When I was an undergraduate forty years ago at Columbia University, cultural history was a form of *Geistesgeschichte*, a noble tradition in which German intellectual history was of central importance. Just emerging in the mid-1960s was an exciting mixture of disciplines to challenge the prevailing consensus; it came in many forms but probably is best summarized as social-scientific history. Over the next two decades historical demography and other forms of sociologically or anthropologically inspired historical study proliferated. Alongside them was a politically committed variation of Marxist thinking that created labor history. The now essential historical journal *Past & Present* was initially subtitled "A Journal of Scientific History." The subtitle was quickly discarded; the journal thrived. These strands of historiographical innovation produced work of outstanding and enduring quality. But as broad programs of historical interpretation, both of these schools failed to deliver the goods they had promised. There was no new paradigm like that of the *Annales* school of the 1920s and 1930s, promising total history. Instead, the positivist assumptions of social scientific history and the heroic narratives of the making of the working class, wherever it happened to be, began to fade by the 1970s and 1980s.

Even in Paris, where the phrase "nous les Annales" still echoed magisterially, the hold of the old ways of thinking began to loosen. Part of the challenge came from postmodernists fed up with the grand narratives of industrialization or other forms of linear progress, or unprepared to go on charting the history of militancy, or the transformation of a "class in itself" to a "class for itself." The inspiration behind *Les lieux de mémoire* was political. After the collapse of the twin stars in the Parisian firmament, Gaullism and communism, many scholars of contemporary history, including Nora, sought a reorientation of their outlook through a reflection on what being French entails. And that meant seeking out the multiple sites of what he termed French "memory."

In North America part of the cultural turn reflected the way the neighbors began to colonize history. We should note in particular the increasing significance within historical study of literary scholarship, offering fundamental contributions to the cultural history of World War I, at least in the Anglo-Saxon world. Feminist scholars have brought to this subject and to many others powerful new perspectives. No one today writes about the cultural history of imperialism without some meditation on the work of Edward Said and some reflection on that protean concept, *Orientalism*. And one need not agree with everything Steven Greenblatt has had to say in order to appreciate the excitement of his ideas and those of his colleagues at Berkeley who edit the journal *Representations*. There were as many panels on subjects in cultural history at the Modern Languages Association meeting in San Francisco in 1999 as there were at the American Historical Association meeting in Chicago the following year.

Where once French or French-inspired historians had sought out clues toward the features of the unchanging mental furniture of a society, loosely defined as *mentalités*, by the late 1980s many were looking at language and representations. Roger Chartier has helped bury the outmoded distinction in cultural history between “superstructure” and “substructure” by insisting that “the representations of the social world themselves are the constituents of social reality.”<sup>28</sup> Gareth Stedman Jones echoed the same point in his influential study published in 1983, *Languages of Class*.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps the most daring of these scholars is Alain Corbin, who was carved out his own particular niche in this field with a series of studies of tastes, moods, and modes of comportment in the nineteenth and twentieth century.<sup>30</sup> Even before this cluster of studies of representations, Antoine Prost produced a series of sophisticated studies of the political grammar of French veterans, workers, and townsmen.<sup>31</sup> Prost took the “linguistic turn” before it existed. German scholars, following first Reinhart Koselleck in the study of *Begriffsgeschichte*, or historical semantics,<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Roger Chartier, “Intellectual History or Sociocultural History? The French Trajectories,” in Dominick LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan, eds., *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1982), 30.

<sup>29</sup>Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working-Class History, 1832-1982* (Cambridge, 1983).

<sup>30</sup>For an aperitif, the reader might dip into these tantalizing studies by Corbin: *Le village des cannibales* (Paris, 1990); *Le monde retrouvé de Louis-François Pinagot: Sur les traces d'un inconnu, 1798-1876* (Paris, 1998).

<sup>31</sup>I am preparing a translation of essays.

<sup>32</sup>For Koselleck's work, see among others, Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck, eds., *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, 8 vols. (Stuttgart, 1972-1997); Reinhart Koselleck and Klaus Schreiner, *Bürgerschaft: Rezeption und Innovation der Begrifflichkeit vom Hohen Mittelalter bis ins 19. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart, 1994); Hartmut Lehmann and

or following the work of Jan Assmann and Aleida Assmann, have created an entire literature in the field of cultural memory.<sup>33</sup>

Globalization is evident in the spread of these approaches to the study of memory. Saul Friedlander and his students in Israel, Germany, and the United States helped launch the successful journal *History & Memory* in 1987. Oral historians in many countries have added their voices and have helped ensure that the study of memory is informed by a sensitivity to issues of gender.<sup>34</sup> In much of this broad field of work, Foucault and Lacan have been the inspiration;<sup>35</sup> other scholars have found much in the reflections of Lyotard or Kristeva about the ruins of symbolic language in the aftermath of the Holocaust.<sup>36</sup> Postmodernist interventions have returned time and

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Melvin Richter, eds., *The Meaning of Historical Terms and Concepts: New Studies on Begriffsgeschichte* (Washington, D.C., 1996).

<sup>33</sup>For Assmann's work, see among others, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (Munich, 1992). See also, from a different perspective, the work of Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandel des kulturellen Gedächtnisses* (Munich, 1999).

<sup>34</sup>See the interesting collection by Christiane Cämmerer, Walter Delabar, and Marion Schulz, eds., *Die totale Erinnerung: Sicherung und Zerstörung kulturhistorischer Vergangenheit und Gegenwart in den modernen Industriegesellschaften*, special issue of *Jahrbuch für Internationale Germanistik*, Reihe A, 45 (Bern, 1997), esp. the article by Marianne Vogel, "Cherchez la femme, strategische Überlegungen zur Integration von Schriftstellerinnen ins kulturelle Gedächtnis."

<sup>35</sup>On this and other points, see Lynn Hunt's introductory essay to her edition of essays in the field, *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley, Calif., 1989).

<sup>36</sup>A good place to start on Lyotard's ideas is *La condition postmoderne: Rapport sur le savoir* (Paris, 1979). For Kristeva, see *Soleil noir: Dépression et mélancolie* (Paris, 1987).



again to memory,<sup>37</sup> but as we have seen, those engaged in them have not been alone.

Within the field of critical theory the subject of memory is both central and highly contested. To Kerwin Klein the memory boom is a betrayal of the radical credentials of critical theory, for it “marries hip new linguistic practices with some of the oldest senses of memory as a union of divine presence and material object.” In some hands, Klein argues, the evocation of memory becomes a kind of “cultural religiosity,” a “re-enchantment” of our sense of the past.<sup>38</sup>

By the 1990s these innovative approaches clearly occupied an influential, although certainly not hegemonic, position in the discipline. Some style the sum of these contributions as the linguistic turn, simply meaning the general acceptance that there are no historical “facts” separate from the language in which they are expressed in time and place. Others call it the “cultural turn,” meaning the concentration on signifying practices in the past as a major focus of current historical research.

Whatever it is called, and whatever its origins, the tide has indeed turned, and cultural history is now all around us. It has benefited from the influx of refugees from Marxist or *marxisant* history, who

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<sup>37</sup>The literature on this subject is vast. Two interesting recent points of entry are: (pro) Centre d’ étude de l’Europe médiane, *(Post)modernisme en Europe centrale: La crise des idéologies, sous la direction de Maria Delaperrière* (Paris, 1999); and (con) Ernest Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason, and Religion* (London, 1992).

<sup>38</sup>Kerwin Lee Klein, “On the Emergence of *Memory* in Historical Discourse,” *Representations* 69 (Winter 2000): 130, 136.

watched their historical paradigm disintegrate well before the Berlin Wall was breached. At times cultural history has taken an entirely idealistic turn, in the sense of suggesting that representations constitute the only reality. This is an extreme position, but it does exist. However configured, the cultural turn in historical study describes an agenda of real popularity and potential. Students are voting with their feet here: economic, demographic, and labor history have not kept their audiences; to a degree, cultural history has drawn them away.

There is a time lag in the way institutions respond to these intellectual trends. But by the 1990s it became apparent that the subject of cultural history was growing in popularity among students and scholars in such a way as to require appointments, grants, promotions, and so on. Reinforcing the trend is the way in which publishers respond positively to projects in cultural history and less positively to other specialisms. Their reaction is part of the story I have tried to illustrate: Cultural history sells, and not only in the academic market. Given the contraction of university jobs in history in Britain and a steady state elsewhere in Europe, and given chronic instability and over supply on the American job market, the future of many younger scholars in the academy has been bleak indeed. One way forward for them-and not only for them-is into the expanding field of public history. And in this field, the subject of memory is de rigueur. The story of the *Historie de la grande guerre* is only one among many.

All this is entirely invigorating and is an antidote to some of the conservative features of our discipline. Obstacles still remain: We

must not underestimate the extent to which many historians consider "popularity" to be synonymous with "superficiality" and believe that any idea that is expressed clearly must be deeply flawed. Others find the subject of cultural history vague and the notion of memory perilously ill defined - and at times they are right.

One of the challenges of the next decade or so is to try to draw together some of these disparate strands of interest and enthusiasm through a more rigorous and tightly argued set of propositions about what exactly memory is and what it has been in the past. The only fixed point at this moment is the near ubiquity of the term. No one should delude himself into thinking we all use it the same way. But just as we use words like love and hate without ever knowing their full or shared significance, so are we bound to go on using the term "memory," the historical signature of our own generation.