

Memory and History: Understanding Memory as Source and Subject

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Editor: Joan Tumblety

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Reviewer: Adam Timmins

Officially, the designated revolution that took place in historical theory since the Second World War is that of the so-called 'linguistic turn'. But as the postmodernist era in historical theory begins to fade, one begins to wonder if the real revolution in post-war historical theory actually consisted of the rise of memory studies. As the editor of this collection points out in her introduction, 'Memory is now as familiar a category for historians as politics, war or empire' (p. 1). The rise of memory studies began at the turn of the 1970s, and the reasons for its rise are multifarious. The Holocaust and the idea of the 'duty to remember' undoubtedly played a part, as did some of the new social history of the 1960s; the decline of positivism's standing in historical method and the 'cultural turn' must also be taken into account. One might say that, 'taking all of the aforementioned factors together, that the 'memory boom' of recent years has been over-determined' (p. 5). Nonetheless, regardless from whence it sprung, the point is that memory is now an inescapable feature of the historiographical landscape.

The collection under review is published as part of *The Routledge Guides to Using Historical Sources* series; and unsurprisingly, the introduction argues that what distinguishes the volume from other introductions to history and memory is its focus on sources. The volume is divided into three sections, with the first looking at working with oral testimonies; the second deals with memorialisation and commemoration; while the third examines the intersections between individual and collective memory. A select bibliography is provided for all three areas at the end of the book.

One of the key critical issues in the area of memory studies is the reception of memory, with more than one commentator arguing that not enough has been done to address the issue. Most historical studies of memory 'favour analysis of the textual, visual or oral representations of the past over the pursuit of evidence for responses to those cultural artifacts' (p. 8). The issue of reception is touched upon in several of the essays in *Memory and History*. Polly Low looks at the use of inscribed monuments in Ancient Athens to examine not only *what* the Athenians were attempting to communicate with these monuments; but also whether their attempts were successful. However, the evidence for whether the attempts were successful is slim, and the answer to the question is left somewhat opaque; commemorative monuments 'may well have been set up with specific intentions, but it does not follow that they were always or only used for those purposes' (p. 81).

In her essay on the role that photography plays in museums, Susan A. Crane asks ‘how did the inclusion of photographs in museums shape the way that diverse audiences, from curators to scholars to the visiting public, interacted with the visual presence of the past?’ (p. 123). But as with Low’s chapter on Athenian monuments, the essay by and large focuses on what those who exhibited the photographs *intended* them to portray, as opposed to how said photographs were *received* by their audience. Audience reception is only really addressed in the last two pages of the chapter. Finally, Jason Crouthamel admits on the second page of his chapter on the characterisation of ‘shellshock’ in the Weimar Republic that ‘individual memory proves to be more difficult to locate and analyze’ – although to be fair it should be noted that Crouthamel is more successful in trying to present the reception of memory than either Crane or Low (p. 144). Nonetheless, the impression one gets from *Memory and History* is that the gauging the reception of memory is a highly problematic affair which even the doyens of the field have struggled to get to grips with. In her introduction Tumblety states that the aim of the volume is to ‘animate and interrogate’ rather than resolve outstanding problems – but with regards to the reception of memory, animation seems thin on the ground.

A theme that runs throughout the entire collection – or ‘haunts’ the volume as Tumblety puts it (like a spectre perhaps?) – is the problematic notion of collective memory. In Lindsey Dodd’s chapter on French oral history during the Second World War (by far the best essay in the book), the author emphasises the importance of ‘cultural scripts’. If there is a gap between individual memories and ‘public’ forms of remembering, then the individual may be left feeling alienated as a result (p. 37). The Allied bombing of France during the Second World War has been described a ‘black hole’ with regard to French collective memory of the war: Dodd’s doctoral research found that it was fairly well remembered at a local/individual level, but a silence prevails at a public and institutional level (p. 37). On Dodd’s reading, public memory acts as a kind of ‘jelly mould’ that shapes personal memories; with no such mould to hand, the individuals memories will be shapeless, and in the case of Dodd’s interviewee, coalesce around other psychological landmarks.

Continuing the theme, Rosanne Kennedy’s essay ‘Memory, history and the law’ examines the role of the law in shaping collective memory. The Nuremberg trials chose documentation over testimony with regard to the evidence, and therefore did not significantly contribute to the collective memory of the Holocaust. By contrast, the trial of Albert Eichmann in 1961 was designed almost as more of an exercise in collective memory than as a trial (1); lead prosecutor Gideon Hauser allowed witnesses to present narratives – opposed to the usual courtroom fare of question and answer – and the trial was significant in ‘bringing Holocaust survivors, who had been marginalised in Israeli society, into the forefront of national consciousness, and making the Holocaust central to national identity and remembrance in Israel’ (p. 55). As Peter Novick has noted, ‘collective memory works selectively; it is a form of myth-making that is shaped by the needs of groups, and the formation of group identity, in the present’ (p. 57). A historical approach to the past recognises the complexity of events, whereas memory tends to simplify – shaping the past to fit within the jelly mould of a cultural script. I will return to the tension between ‘history’ and ‘memory’ shortly.

Another theme raised in this collection is the idea of visual memory. Franziska Seraphim makes the obvious, but nonetheless important point that images function differently from texts; ‘we *see* with memory ... Images tend to tap into the habits of mind (as distinct from critical thinking) ... to make sense’ (p. 98). Similarly, Joan Tumblety documents how the image of resistance fighters in post-war France was cultivated through films which were ‘often publically funded and controlled’ (p. 109). Such films functioned as historical sources ‘in the absence of much written material about that had been of necessity secret’ (p. 109). Tumblety also examines the written form of memory in her essay, through an examination of the challenge to official memory via the written memoirs of those ‘with an axe to grind about the present regime and its alleged manipulation of the past’ (p. 115).

The final essay deals with the idea of memory and materiality.(2) Susan M. Stabile puts it that a palimpsest is not only a material object, but also a metaphor for memory.(3) The original ‘inscription’ – the act itself – is erased and forgotten, and thus lived experience is *deposited* in memory, and *reposited* in narrative (p. 194). But memory changes with each iteration, ‘shaped by the moment in which it is recalled. That

recollection will be overwritten at a future moment, shadowed by a new memory' (p. 194). The past therefore, only exists as a fragment or ruin – or if you're a fan of Hayden White, as synecdoche. But traces of the past survive in what has come to be known as a 'cumulative palimpsest'. In the words of Geoff Bailey, 'successive episodes of deposition ... remain superimposed one upon the other without loss of evidence, but are so re-worked and mixed together that it is difficult or impossible to separate them out into their original constituents' (p. 195). Stabile's essay examines 19th-century antiquarian John Watson, and in particular his perpetuation of colonial ruins through a relic box. Material culture is a palimpsest – 'the literal things that people leave behind...material culture embodies and evokes memory' (p. 197).

I spoke above of the tension between history – as in academic history – and memory. The historian has often been sceptical of oral testimony; Anna Wiewiorka makes the case that the Eichmann trial was crucial in legitimising testimony as an epistemically acceptable form of truth telling about the past – and that this had a negative impact on historical writing. The Holocaust thus came 'to be defined as a succession of individual experiences with which the public was supposed to identify' (p. 56). The problem is that this is not a particularly good foundation for writing history; D. J. Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners* is probably the most high profile example of this. One can learn a lot from listening to personal testimonies – 'but does one learn history?' (p. 57). At the other end of the pendulum, Pierre Nora felt that history had been a bad thing for memory; 'true' memory has been obliterated by 'modern' memory – the latter consisting of 'the practise of oral history, heritage, commemoration, archives and genealogy' (p. 160). There are some commentators however, who occupy a position somewhere between these two poles, James Young feels that the distinction between history and memory – 'history as that which happened, memory as that which is remembered of what happened' – is somewhat forced (p. 58). Similarly, Hannah Ewence contends at the start of her essay that 'Nora establishes between history and memory appear fabricated and unnecessarily provocative, overlooking the ways in which history and memory can, and do, successfully overlap and crossfertilize' (p. 160). Even 'atomized memory' uses the materials and milestones of 'official' memory to construct and reconstruct the past (p. 161).

It is the tension between 'history' and 'memory' that provides the jumping off point for Ewence's essay 'Memories of suburbia: autobiographical fiction and minority narratives'. Ewence studies three autobiographical novels to not only make the point that history, memory and fiction share points of similarity; but also as a means of introducing the idea of the 'spatial turn' – 'ideas about space and place are encoded with individual and collective identity(ies), memories and histories' (p. 162). All three novels contain autobiographical elements, but their respective authors have resisted attempts to draw explicit parallels with their own lives – and the fact that they are not straightforward autobiographies is one of their strengths, as 'Fiction alone has the capacity, perhaps the audacity, to challenge history ... whilst autobiography typically prefers to "save face"' (p. 169). In all three novels, a clear sense of space is 'fundamental within their writing as a site for exploring history, memory and identity' (p. 172). Fiction allows authors to explore and deposit memory, and readers can draw upon their own memories to evoke their own past experiences; and to an extent it allows the negation of power structures that determine what history can be told by whom in a way that sometimes oral history cannot.

One of the interesting things about this collection is the lack of reference made to those we might call some of the doyens of postmodernism. I recently had a rather spirited exchange with Alun Munslow in these pages over whether postmodernism was on the wane or not.⁽⁴⁾ It could be argued that the absence of the likes of Derrida and Barthes from these pages might be taken as an indicator that the postmodernist turn in historical theory is on the decline. In a review of a similar work on memory a few years ago, Patrick Hutton noted that the 'diminishing enthusiasm among historians for postmodernist theory' might prompt a 'return to the old and very practical historiographical problems of testimony, evidence, and interpretation'.⁽⁵⁾ The approach and contents of *Memory and History* would suggest that this has indeed taken place.

Memory and History provides an interesting cross-section of essays from the front-line of memory studies; but its broadly based empiricist tone is both the book's main strength and weakness, depending on your predilections in these matters. If you tend towards the view that historical theory should be aligned more

closely with historical practice, then this collection of essays will be seen as a step in the right direction. If on the other hand, one inclines towards what we might call the Wulf Kansteiner/ Jörn Rüsen end of the spectrum, then there will be a woeful lack of theory in this one for your tastes, and a quick retreat to the pages of *History and Memory* journal may be necessary.

Notes

1. I am aware of the anachronism of using the term ‘collective memory’ here.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Although this is addressed tangentially in chapters one and four as well.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. For the uninitiated, a palimpsest is ‘Paper, parchment, or other writing material designed to be reusable after any writing on it has been erased’. Definition taken from the *Oxford English Dictionary*.
[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. See <<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1356> [2]> [accessed 3 June 2013].[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Patrick H. Hutton, ‘Memories of trauma: problems of interpretation’, *History and Theory*, 43 (2004), 258.[Back to \(5\)](#)

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