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History as Social Memory



The traditional view of the relation between history and memory is a relatively simple one. The historian's function is to be the custodian of the memory of public events which are put down in writing for the benefit of the actors, to give them fame, and also for the benefit of posterity, to learn from their example. History, as Cicero wrote in a passage which has been quoted ever since (*De oratore*, ii. 36), is 'the life of memory' (*vita memoriae*). Historians as diverse as Herodotus, Froissart and Lord Clarendon all claimed to write in order to keep alive the memory of great deeds and great events.

Two Byzantine historians made the point particularly fully in their prologues, utilizing the traditional metaphors of time as a river and of actions as texts which may be obliterated. The Princess Anna Comnena described history as a 'bulwark' against the 'stream of time' which carries everything away into 'the depths of oblivion', while Procopius declared that he wrote his history of the Gothic, Persian and other wars 'to the end that the long course of time may not overwhelm deeds of singular importance through lack of a record, and thus abandon them to oblivion and utterly obliterate them'. The idea of actions as texts can also be seen in the notion of the 'book of memory', employed by Dante and Shakespeare, who wrote of 'blotting your name from books of memory' (*Henry VI, Part 2, Act 1, Scene 1*).

This traditional account of the relation between memory and written history, in which memory reflects what actually happened

and history reflects memory, now seems much too simple. Both history and memory have come to appear increasingly problematic. Remembering the past and writing about it no longer seem the innocent activities they were once taken to be. Neither memories nor histories seem objective any longer. In both cases historians are learning to take account of conscious or unconscious selection, interpretation and distortion. In both cases they are coming to see the process of selection, interpretation and distortion as conditioned, or at least influenced, by social groups. It is not the work of individuals alone.

The first serious explorer of the 'social framework of memory', as he called it, was of course the French sociologist or anthropologist Maurice Halbwachs, in the 1920s.¹ Halbwachs argued that memories are constructed by social groups. It is individuals who remember, in the literal, physical sense, but it is social groups who determine what is 'memorable' and also how it will be remembered. Individuals identify with public events of importance to their group. They 'remember' a great deal that they have not experienced directly. A news item, for example, can become part of one's life. Hence memory may be described as a group reconstruction of the past.

Like a faithful pupil of Émile Durkheim, Halbwachs couched his arguments about the sociology of memory in a strong if not an extreme form. Halbwachs did not assert (as the Cambridge psychologist Frederick Bartlett once accused him of asserting) that social groups remember in the same literal sense that individuals remember.² As we shall see (below, p. 170), a similar misunderstanding of Durkheim's position was shown by those British historians who claimed that the 'collective mentalities' studied by their French colleagues stand outside individuals rather than being shared by them.

However, Halbwachs was more vulnerable to the more precise criticisms of the great French historian Marc Bloch. It was Bloch who pointed out the danger of borrowing terms from individual psychology and simply adding the adjective 'collective' (as in the cases of *représentations collectives*, *mentalités collectives*, *conscience collective*, as well as *mémoire collective*).³ Despite this

¹ Halbwachs (1925); cf. Halbwachs (1941, 1950); Lowenthal (1985), 192ff.; Hutton (1993), 73–90.

² Bartlett (1932), 296ff.; Douglas (1980), 268.

³ Bloch (1925); cf. Connerton (1989), 38.

critique, Bloch was prepared to adopt the phrase *mémoire collective* and to analyse peasant customs in these interdisciplinary terms, noting for example the importance of grandparents in the transmission of traditions (a later historian of the *Annales* school has criticized this 'grandfather law', in the seventeenth century at least, on the grounds that grandparents rarely survived long enough to teach their grandchildren, but he does not cast doubt on the importance of the social transmission of tradition).⁴

Halbwachs made a sharp distinction between collective memory, which was a social construct, and written history, which he considered – in the traditional manner – to be objective. However, many recent studies of the history of historical writing treat it much as Halbwachs treated memory, as the product of social groups such as Roman senators, Chinese mandarins, Benedictine monks, university professors and so on. It has become commonplace to point out that in different places and times, historians have considered different aspects of the past to be memorable (battles, politics, religion, the economy and so on) and that they have presented the past in very different ways, concentrating on events or structures, on great men or ordinary people, according to their group's point of view.

It is because I share this view of the history of history that this chapter is entitled 'History as social memory'. The term 'social memory', which has established itself in the last decade, has been chosen as a useful piece of shorthand which sums up the complex process of selection and interpretation in a simple formula and stresses the homology between the ways in which the past is recorded and remembered.⁵ The phrase raises problems which need to be addressed at the start. The analogies between individual and group thought are as elusive as they are fascinating. If we use terms like 'social memory' we do risk reifying concepts. On the other hand, if we refuse to use such terms, we are in danger of failing to notice the different ways in which the ideas of individuals are influenced by the groups to which they belong.

Another serious problem is raised by the historical relativism implicit in this enterprise. The argument is not that any account of the past is just as good (reliable, plausible, perceptive, and so on) as any other. Some investigators can be shown to be better informed or more judicious than others. The point is that all of

⁴ Goubert (1982), 77.

⁵ Connerton (1989); Fentress and Wickham (1992).

us have access to the past (like the present) only via the categories and schemata – or as Durkheim would say, the ‘collective representations’ – of our own culture (discussed in chapter 11).

Historians are concerned, or at any rate need to be concerned, with memory from two different points of view. In the first place, they need to study memory as a historical source, to produce a critique of the reliability of reminiscence on the lines of the traditional critique of historical documents. This enterprise has in fact been under way since the 1960s, when historians of the twentieth century came to realize the importance of ‘oral history’.⁶ Even historians who work on earlier periods have something to learn from the oral history movement, since they need to be aware of the oral testimonies and traditions embedded in many written records.⁷

In the second place, historians are concerned with memory as a historical phenomenon; with what might be called the social history of remembering. Given the fact that the social memory, like the individual memory, is selective, we need to identify the principles of selection and to note how they vary from place to place or from one group to another and how they change over time. Memories are malleable, and we need to understand how they are shaped and by whom, as well as the limits to this malleability.

These are topics which for some reason attracted the attention of historians only in the late 1970s. Since that time, books and articles and conferences about them have multiplied, including the multivolume survey of ‘realms of memory’ edited by Pierre Nora, developing the insights of Halbwachs into the relation between memory and its spatial framework and offering a survey of French history from this point of view.⁸

The social history of remembering is an attempt to answer three main questions. What are the modes of transmission of public memories and how have these modes changed over time? What are the uses of these memories, the uses of the past, and how have these uses changed? Conversely, what are the uses of oblivion? These broad questions will be examined here only from

⁶ Thompson (1978).

⁷ Davis (1987).

⁸ Nora (1984–92); cf. Le Goff (1988); Hutton (1993), esp. 1–26; Samuel (1994).

the relatively narrow point of view of a historian of early modern Europe.

Transmission of the Social Memory

Memories are affected by the social organization of transmission and the different media employed. Let us consider for a moment the sheer variety of these media, five in particular.

(1) Oral traditions, discussed from a historian's point of view in a famous study by Jan Vansina. The transformations of this study between its original publication in French in 1961 and the much revised English version of 1985 make useful indicators of the changes which have taken place in the discipline of history in the last generation, notably the decline of the hope of establishing the objective 'facts' and the rise of interest in symbolic aspects of narrative.⁹

(2) The traditional province of the historian, memoirs and other written 'records' (another term related to remembering, *ricordare* in Italian). We need of course to remind ourselves that these records are not innocent acts of memory, but rather attempts to persuade, to shape the memory of others. We also need to keep in mind, as historians have not always done, the warning of a perceptive literary critic: 'As we read the writings of memory, it is easy to forget that we do not read memory itself but its transformation through writing.'¹⁰ However, a similar point could be made about oral tradition, which has its own forms of stylization. Hence it is difficult to justify a sharp contrast like Pierre Nora's between the spontaneous 'memory' of traditional societies and the self-conscious 'representation' of modern ones.¹¹

(3) Images, whether pictorial or photographic, still or moving. Practitioners of the so-called 'art of memory' from classical antiquity to the Renaissance emphasized the value of associating whatever one wanted to remember with striking images.¹² These were

⁹ Vansina (1961).

¹⁰ Owen (1986), 114; cf. Fussell (1975).

¹¹ Nora (1984–92), vol. 1, xvii–xlii.

¹² Yates (1966); cf. Bartlett (1932), ch. 11.

immaterial, indeed 'imaginary' images. However, material images have long been constructed in order to assist the retention and transmission of memories – 'memorials' such as tombstones, statues and medals, and 'souvenirs' of various kinds. Historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in particular have been taking an increasing interest in public monuments in the last few years, precisely because these monuments both expressed and shaped the national memory.¹³

(4) Actions transmit memories as they transmit skills, from master to apprentice for example. Many of them leave no traces for later historians to study, but ritual actions at least are often recorded, including rituals of 'commemoration': Remembrance Sunday in Britain, Memorial Day in the USA, 14 July in France, 12 July in Northern Ireland, 7 September in Brazil, and so on.¹⁴ These rituals are re-enactments of the past, acts of memory, but they are also attempts to impose interpretations of the past, to shape memory and thus to construct social identity. They are in every sense collective re-presentations.

(5) One of the most interesting observations in Halbwachs's study of the social framework of memory concerned the importance of a fifth medium in the transmission of memories: space.¹⁵ He made explicit a point which had been implicit in the classical and Renaissance art of memory, the value of 'placing' images that one wishes to remember in impressive imaginary locations, such as memory palaces or memory theatres, thus exploiting the association of ideas. One group of Catholic missionaries in Brazil, the Salesian fathers, were apparently aware of the link between spaces and memories. One of their strategies for the conversion of the Bororo Indians, as Claude Lévi-Strauss has reminded us, was to move them from their traditional villages, in which houses were arranged in a circle, to new ones in which the houses were arranged in rows, thus wiping the slate clean and making the Indians ready to receive the Christian message.¹⁶ We might ask ourselves whether the European enclosure movement may not have had similar effects (however unintentional) in wip-

¹³ Nipperdey (1981); Ozouf (1984).

¹⁴ Warner (1959); Amalvi (1984); Larsen (1982).

¹⁵ Hutton (1993), 75–84.

¹⁶ Lévi-Strauss (1955), 220–1.

ing the slate clean for industrialization, especially in Sweden, where the enclosure decree of 1803 was followed by the destruction of traditional villages and the dispersal of their inhabitants.¹⁷

Yet in certain circumstances, a social group and some of its memories may resist the destruction of its home. An extreme example of uprooting and transplantation is the case of the black slaves transported to the New World. Despite this uprooting, the slaves were able to cling to some of their culture, some of their memories, and to reconstruct them on American soil. According to the French sociologist Roger Bastide, the Afro-American rituals of *candomblé*, still widely practised in Brazil, involve a symbolic reconstruction of African space, a kind of psychological compensation for the loss of a homeland. Bastide thus uses evidence from Afro-American religious practices to criticize and refine the ideas of Halbwachs. The loss of local roots was compensated, to some degree at least, by a more general African consciousness.¹⁸

From the point of view of the transmission of memories, each medium has its own strengths and weaknesses. I should like to place most emphasis on an element common to several media which has been analysed by investigators as different as the social psychologist Frederick Bartlett, the cultural historian Aby Warburg, the art historian Ernst Gombrich, and the Slavist Albert Lord, who studied oral poetry in Bosnia.¹⁹ This common feature is the 'schema'. The schema is associated with the tendency to represent – and sometimes to remember – a given event or person in terms of another.

Schemata of this kind are not confined to oral traditions, as the following chain of written examples may suggest. In his fine study of *The Great War and Modern Memory*, the American critic Paul Fussell noted what he calls 'the domination of the Second War by the First', not only at the level of the generals, who are supposed always to be fighting the previous war, but at the level of ordinary participants as well.²⁰ The First World War in its turn was perceived in terms of schemata, and Fussell notes

¹⁷ Pred (1986).

¹⁸ Bastide (1970).

¹⁹ Bartlett (1932), 204ff., 299; Warburg (1932); Gombrich (1960b); Lord (1960).

²⁰ Fussell (1975), 317ff.

the recurrence of imagery from Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, especially the Slough of Despond and the Valley of the Shadow of Death, in descriptions of life in the trenches in memoirs and newspapers.²¹ To go back a little further, Bunyan's own writing – including his autobiography, *Grace Abounding* – also made use of schemata (cf. p. 140 above). For instance, Bunyan's account of his conversion is clearly modelled, consciously or unconsciously – it is difficult to say which – on the conversion of St Paul as described in the Acts of the Apostles.²²

In early modern Europe, many people had read the Bible so often that it had become part of them and its stories organized their perceptions, their memories and even their dreams (above, chapter 2). It would not be difficult to cite scores of examples of this process. For example, the French Protestant community viewed the sixteenth-century wars of religion through biblical spectacles, including the Massacre of the Innocents. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries they 'remembered' the houses of Protestants as having been marked for the slaughter by the Catholics at the time of the Massacre of St Bartholomew in 1572.²³ To go back still further, Johan Kessler was a Swiss Protestant pastor of the first generation. In his memoirs, he tells the story of how, as he puts it, 'Martin Luther met me on the road to Wittenberg.' When he was a student, he and a companion stayed the night in the Black Bear at Jena, where they shared a table with a man who was dressed as a knight but was reading a book – which turned out to be a Hebrew psalter – and was eager to talk about theology. 'We asked, "Sir, can you tell us whether Dr Martin Luther is in Wittenberg just now, or where else he may be?"' He replied, "I know for certain that he is not at Wittenberg at this moment" . . . "My boys," he asked, "what do they think about this Luther in Switzerland?"' The students still don't get the point until the landlord drops a hint.²⁴ My own point, however, is that consciously or unconsciously, Kessler has structured his story on a biblical prototype, in this case that of the disciples who met Christ at Emmaus.

The chain of examples could be stretched still further back, since the Bible itself is full of schemata, and some of the events

²¹ Fussell (1975), 137ff.

²² Tindall (1934), 22ff.

²³ Joutard (1976).

²⁴ Kessler (1540), 23ff.

narrated in it are presented as re-enactments of earlier ones.²⁵ However, the examples already given are perhaps sufficient to suggest some features of the process by which the remembered past turns into myth. It should be emphasized that the slippery term 'myth' is being used here not in the positivist sense of 'inaccurate history' but in the richer, more positive sense of a story with a symbolic meaning involving characters who are larger than life, whether they are heroes or villains.²⁶ These stories are generally made up of a sequence of stereotyped incidents, sometimes known as 'themes'.²⁷

There is an obvious question for a historian to ask at this point. Why do myths attach themselves to some individuals (living or dead) and not to others? Only a few European rulers have become heroes in popular memory, or at least remained heroes over the long term: Henri IV in France, for example, Frederick the Great in Prussia, Sebastian in Portugal, William III in Britain (especially Northern Ireland), and Matthias Corvinus in Hungary, of whom it was said that 'Matthias died, justice perished.' Again, it is not every holy man or woman who becomes a saint, official or unofficial. What is it that determines success?

The existence of schemata does not explain why they become attached to particular individuals, why some people are, shall we say, more 'mythogenic' than others. Nor is it an adequate answer to do what literal-minded historians generally do and describe the actual achievements of the successful rulers or saints, considerable as these may be, since the myth often attributes qualities to them which there is no evidence that they ever possessed.²⁸ The transformation of the cold and colourless William III into the popular Protestant idol 'King Billy' can hardly be explained in terms of his own personality alone.

In my view, the central element in the explanation of this mythogenesis is the perception (conscious or unconscious) of a 'fit' in some respect or respects between a particular individual and a current stereotype of a hero or villain – ruler, saint, bandit, witch, or whatever. This 'fit' strikes people's imagination, and stories about that individual begin to circulate, orally in the first instance. In the course of this oral circulation, the ordinary

²⁵ Trompf (1979).

²⁶ Burke (1996).

²⁷ Lord (1960).

²⁸ Burke (1982, 1984).

mechanisms of distortion studied by social psychologists, such as 'levelling' and 'sharpening', come into play.²⁹ More speculatively, one might suggest that processes like condensation and displacement, described by Freud in his *Interpretation of Dreams*, are also to be found in these collective dreams or quasi-dreams. These processes assist the assimilation of the life of the particular individual to a particular stereotype from the repertoire present in the social memory in a given culture.³⁰ A process of what might be called 'crystallization' occurs in which traditional free-floating stories are attached to the new hero.

Thus bandits (Jesse James, for instance) turn into Robin Hoods, robbing the rich to give to the poor. Rulers (Harun al-Rashid, Henri IV of France, Henry V of England, and so on) are perceived as travelling their kingdom in disguise to learn about the condition of their subjects. The life of a modern saint may be remembered as a re-enactment of the life of an earlier one: St Carlo Borromeo was perceived as a second Ambrose, and St Rose of Lima as a second Catherine of Siena. In similar fashion the emperor Charles V was perceived as a second Charlemagne (his name helping in the process), while William III of England was perceived as a second William the Conqueror, and Frederick the Great as a new 'Emperor Frederick'.

Explanations of the process of hero-making in terms of the media are of course insufficient in themselves. To present them in this way would be politically naive. It is equally necessary to consider the functions or uses of the social memory.

Uses of the Social Memory

What are the functions of the social memory? It is hard to get a purchase on such a large question. A lawyer might well discuss the importance of custom and precedent, the justification or legitimation of actions in the present with reference to the past, the place of the memories of witnesses in trials, the concept of 'time immemorial', in other words time 'whereof the memory of man . . . runneth not to the contrary', and the change in attitudes to the evidence of memory consequent on the spread of literacy

²⁹ Allport and Postman (1945).

³⁰ Freud (1899); cf. Allport and Postman (1945).

and written records. Custom was indeed discussed in the article on *mémoire collective* by Bloch, cited above, and a few medievalists have pursued these questions further.³¹

The examples of rulers as popular heroes, discussed above, also illustrate the social uses of collective memories. In the stories, disasters follow the death or disappearance of the hero. However, there is a case for turning this point around and arguing that a ruler whose reign is followed by disasters, from foreign invasion to steep rises in taxation, stands a good chance of turning into a hero, since the people will look back with nostalgia to the good old days under his rule.

For example, the Ottoman invasion of Hungary in 1526, a generation after the death of Matthias, and the Spanish takeover of Portugal soon after the death of Sebastian were good for the posthumous reputation of these two kings. In similar fashion, Henri IV may well have seemed a hero to the French people not only because he followed the disorder of the wars of religion but also because the reign of his son and successor Louis XIII was marked by a sharp rise in taxes. The appeal to memories of this kind is one of the main ideological resources of rebels, at any rate in traditional societies. Thus the Spanish rebels of the 1520s, the *comuneros*, appealed to the memory of the late King Ferdinand, while the Normans who rose against Louis XIII in 1639 expressed their desire to return to the 'golden age' of Louis XII, who was said to have wept whenever he had to tax the people.³²

Another approach to the uses of social memory is to ask why some cultures seem to be more concerned with recalling their past than others. It is commonplace to contrast the traditional Chinese concern for their past with the traditional Indian indifference to theirs. Within Europe, contrasts of this kind are also apparent. Despite their reverence for tradition and concern for 'the national heritage', the social memory of the English is relatively short. The same point has been made about the Americans, notably by a penetrating French observer, Alexis de Tocqueville.³³

The Irish and the Poles, on the other hand, have social memories which are relatively long. In Northern Ireland, it is possible

³¹ Guénée (1976–7); Clanchy (1979); Wickham (1985).

³² Foisil (1970), 188–94; cf. Fentress and Wickham (1992), 109.

³³ Schudson (1992), 60.

to see portraits of William III on horseback, chalked on a wall, with the inscription, 'Remember 1690'.³⁴ In the south of Ireland, people still resent what the English did to them in Cromwell's time as if it were yesterday.³⁵ As the American bishop Fulton Sheen once put it, 'The British never remember it: the Irish never forget it.'³⁶ In Poland, Andrzej Wajda's film *Ashes* (1965), translating into cinematic terms a classic novel of 1904 about the Polish Legion in the army of Napoleon, provoked national controversy about what Wajda presented as the Legion's futile heroism.³⁷ In England, on the other hand, at much the same time, Tony Richardson's film *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1968) was viewed as little more than a costume picture. The English seem to prefer to forget. They suffer from, or rejoice in, what has been called 'structural amnesia'.³⁸ Since structural amnesia is the complementary opposite to the concept 'social memory', I shall refer to it henceforth as 'social amnesia'.

Why should there be such a sharp contrast in attitudes to the past in different cultures? It is often said that history is written by the victors. It might also be said that history is forgotten by the victors. They can afford to forget, while the losers are unable to accept what happened and are condemned to brood over it, relive it, and reflect how different it might have been. Another explanation might be given in terms of cultural roots. When you have these roots you can afford to take them for granted, but when you lose them you feel the need to search for them. The Irish and the Poles have been uprooted, their countries partitioned. It is no wonder that they seem obsessed by their past. We have returned to that favourite theme of Halbwachs, the relation between place and memory.

The Irish and the Poles offer particularly clear examples of the use of the past, the use of the social memory and the use of myth in order to define identity. The point of remembering 1690 (in a particular way), or re-enacting the 12th of July, or of blowing up Nelson's Pillar in Dublin – as the IRA did in 1966 – or of reconstructing the old centre of Warsaw, after the Germans had blown it up – as the Poles did after 1945 – the point of all this is surely

³⁴ Cf. Larsen (1982), 280.

³⁵ Macdonagh (1983), ch. 1.

³⁶ Quoted Levinson (1972), 129; cf. Buckley (1989).

³⁷ Michalek (1973), ch. 11.

³⁸ Barnes (1947), 52; Watt and Goody (1962–3).

to say who 'we' are, and to distinguish 'us' from them. Such examples could be multiplied. In the case of Europe, they are particularly easy to find in the nineteenth century.

The later nineteenth century has been provocatively described by Eric Hobsbawm as the age of the 'invention of tradition'.³⁹ It was certainly an age of a search for national traditions, in which national monuments were constructed and national rituals (like Bastille Day) devised, while national history was given a more important place in European schools than ever before or since. The aim of all this was essentially to justify or 'legitimate' the existence of the nation-state; whether in the case of new nations like Italy and Germany, or of older ones like France, in which national loyalty still had to be created, and peasants turned into Frenchmen.⁴⁰

The sociology of Émile Durkheim, with its emphasis on community, consensus and cohesion, itself bears the stamp of this period. It would be unwise to follow Durkheim and his pupil Halbwachs too closely in this respect, and to discuss the social function of the social memory as if conflict and dissent did not exist. Northern Ireland has made its appearance several times already and the region offers a classic example, though far from the only one, of both memories of conflict and conflicts of memory. The seventeenth-century siege of Londonderry ('Derry') and the battle of the Boyne are re-enacted every year by the Protestants who identify with the victors and apply the phrases of the past ('No Surrender', for example) to the events of the present.⁴¹ In the south of Ireland, the memory of the rising of 1798 against the British is still very much alive. For a French parallel, one might turn to western France, especially Anjou, where the memory of the Vendée, the peasant rising of the 1790s, remains alive and controversial, so much so that a recent historian has described the situation as a 'war over memory'.⁴²

Given the multiplicity of social identities, and the coexistence of rival memories, alternative memories (family memories, local memories, class memories, national memories, and so on), it is fruitful to think in pluralistic terms about the uses of memories to different social groups, who may well have different views about

³⁹ Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983).

⁴⁰ Weber (1976), esp. 336ff.

⁴¹ Larsen (1982); Bell (1986); Buckley (1989).

⁴² Martin (1987), ch. 9.

what is significant or 'worthy of memory'.⁴³ The American literary critic Stanley Fish has coined the phrase 'interpretative communities' in order to analyse conflicts over the interpretation of texts. In a similar way, it might be useful to think in terms of different 'memory communities' within a given society. It is important to ask the question, who wants whom to remember what, and why? Whose version of the past is recorded and preserved?

Disputes between historians presenting rival accounts of the past sometimes reflect wider and deeper social conflicts. An obvious example is the current debate about the importance of history from below, a debate which goes back at least as far as Aleksandr Pushkin, a historian as well as a poet, who once told the Tsar that he wanted to write about the eighteenth-century peasant leader Pugachev. The Tsar's reply was brutally simple: 'Such a man has no history.'

Official and unofficial memories of the past may differ sharply and the unofficial memories, which have been relatively little studied, are sometimes historical forces in their own right; the 'Good Old Law' in the German Peasant War of 1525, the 'Norman Yoke' in the English Revolution, and so on. Without invoking social memories of this kind, it would be hard to explain the geography of dissent and protest, the fact that some Calabrian villages, for example, take part in different protest movements century after century, while their neighbours do not.

The systematic destruction of documents which is such a common feature of revolts – think of the English peasants in 1381, the German peasants in 1525, the French peasants in 1789, and so on – may be interpreted as the expression of the belief that the records had falsified the situation, that they were biased in favour of the ruling class, while ordinary people remembered what had really happened. These acts of destruction broach the last theme of this chapter, the uses of oblivion or social amnesia.

The Uses of Social Amnesia

It is often illuminating to approach problems from behind, to turn them inside out. To understand the workings of the social memory it may be worth investigating the social organization of

⁴³ Wickham (1985); cf. Fentress and Wickham (1992), 87–143.

forgetting, the rules of exclusion, suppression or repression, and the question of who wants whom to forget what, and why. In a phrase, social amnesia. Amnesia is related to 'amnesty', to what used to be called 'acts of oblivion', the official erasure of memories of conflict in the interests of social cohesion.

Official censorship of the past is all too well known, and there is little need to talk about the various revisions of the Soviet Encyclopaedia, with and without the entry on Trotsky. Many revolutionary and counter-revolutionary regimes like to symbolize their break with the past by changing the names of streets, especially when these names refer to the dates of significant events. When I visited Bulgaria in the mid-1960s, the only guide-book I had with me was a Guide Bleu of 1938. Despite the useful street-maps it provided I sometimes lost my way, and so I had to ask passers-by how to find 12 November Street, or whatever it was. No one looked surprised, no one smiled, they simply directed me, but when I arrived, 12 November Street turned out to be 1 May Street, and so on. In other words, I had been quoting dates associated with the fascist regime without knowing it. This incident may be taken as a reminder of the strength of unofficial memories and the difficulty of erasing them, even under the so-called 'totalitarian' regimes of our own day.

As it happens, what might be called the 'Soviet Encyclopaedia syndrome' was not the invention of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. In early modern Europe too, events could become non-events, officially at least. King Louis XIV and his advisers were very much concerned with what we would call his 'public image'. Medals were struck to commemorate the major events of the reign. These medals included one of the destruction of the city of Heidelberg in 1693, complete with inscription HEIDELBERGA DELETA. However, when the medals were collected together to form a 'metallic history' of the reign, this particular medal disappeared from the catalogue. It seems that Louis had come to realize that the destruction of Heidelberg had not added to his reputation, his glory, and so the event was officially suppressed, erased from the book of memory.⁴⁴

The official censorship of embarrassing memories, 'organized oblivion' as it has been called, is well known.⁴⁵ What is in greater

⁴⁴ Burke (1992), 110–1.

⁴⁵ Connerton (1989), 14.

need of investigation is their unofficial suppression or repression in post-Nazi Germany, post-Vichy France, Franco's Spain and so on.⁴⁶ This topic raises once more the awkward question of the analogy between individual and collective memory. Freud's famous metaphor of the 'censor' inside each individual was of course derived from the official censorship of the Habsburg Empire. In a similar manner, a social psychologist, Peter Berger, has suggested that we all rewrite our biographies all the time in the manner of the Soviet Encyclopaedia.⁴⁷ But between these two censors, public and private, there is space for a third, collective but unofficial. Can groups, like individuals, suppress what it is inconvenient to remember? If so, how do they do it?⁴⁸

Consider the following story, recorded by the anthropologist Jack Goody. The origin of the territorial divisions of Gonja, in northern Ghana, was said to have been the act of the founder, Jakpa, who divided the kingdom among his sons.

When the details of this story were first recorded at the turn of the present century, at the time that the British were extending their control over the area, Jakpa was said to have begotten seven sons, this corresponding to the number of divisions . . . But at the same time as the British had arrived, two of the seven divisions disappeared . . . sixty years later, when the myths of state were again recorded, Jakpa was credited with only five sons.⁴⁹

This is a classic case of the past being used to legitimate the present, of what the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski described as myth functioning as the 'charter' of institutions (borrowing the term 'charter' from the historians of the Middle Ages).

I would not care to assert that this adjustment of the past to the present is to be found only in societies without writing. Indeed, it is often quite easy to show major discrepancies between the image of the past shared by members of a particular social group, and the surviving records of that past. A recurrent myth (to be found in many forms in our own society, today) is that of the 'founding fathers'; the story of Martin Luther founding the Protestant church, of Émile Durkheim (or Max Weber)

⁴⁶ Rousso (1987).

⁴⁷ Cf. Erikson (1968), esp. 701ff.

⁴⁸ Reik (1920).

⁴⁹ Watt and Goody (1962-3), 310.

founding sociology, and so on. Generally speaking, what happens in the case of these myths is that differences between past and present are elided, and unintended consequences are turned into conscious aims, as if the main purpose of these past heroes had been to bring about the present – our present.

Writing and print are not powerful enough to stop the spread of myths of this kind. What they can do, however, is to preserve records of the past which are inconsistent with the myths, which undermine them – records of a past which has become awkward and embarrassing, a past which people for one reason or another do not wish to know about, though it might be better for them if they did. It might, for example, free them from the dangerous illusion that the past may be seen as a simple struggle between heroes and villains, good and evil, right and wrong. Myths are not to be despised, but reading them literally is not to be recommended. Writing and print thus assist the resistance of memory to manipulation.⁵⁰

Historians also have a role to play in this process of resistance. Herodotus thought of historians as the guardians of memory, the memory of glorious deeds. I prefer to see historians as the guardians of the skeletons in the cupboard of the social memory, the ‘anomalies’, as the historian of science Thomas Kuhn calls them, which reveal weaknesses in grand and not-so-grand theories.⁵¹ There used to be an official called the ‘Remembrancer’. The title was actually a euphemism for debt collector. The official’s job was to remind people of what they would have liked to forget. One of the most important functions of the historian is to be a remembrancer.

⁵⁰ Schudson (1992), 206.

⁵¹ Kuhn (1962), 52–3.