



## Introduction:

### What Is “Cultural Memory”?

#### 1. The Socially Conditioned Nature of Memory: Communicative Memory

Our memory has a twofold basis, neural and social. Without its neural basis memory is not possible; injury to its neural functions can damage the memory and even destroy it. As long as seventy-five years ago, Maurice Halbwachs claimed something of the sort for its social basis.<sup>1</sup> In his books about the social framework of memory and collective memory he proposed the thesis that our memory only develops through our intercourse with other people. I would like to make this social basis my starting point and then take one further step and postulate a cultural basis as well, since only then can we comprehend the vast depths of time, extending to thousands of years, in which man has established himself as a being with memory.

According to Halbwachs, memory is a social phenomenon. It grows into us from outside. Its neural foundation can be thought of as memory's “hardware”; it can be more or less strongly developed and we can perfect it individually through training. But its contents and the use we make of it are determined by our intercourse with others, by language, action, communication, and by our emotional ties to the configurations of our social existence. Like consciousness, language, and personality, memory is a social phenomenon; in the act of remembering we do not just descend into the depths of our own most intimate inner life, but we introduce an order

and a structure into that internal life that are socially conditioned and that link us to the social world. Every act of consciousness is socially mediated; only in our dreams do we find that the social world relaxes its structuring grip on our inner life.

Among the aspects of memory that enter us and gradually accumulate, we can distinguish two different modes of remembering: episodic memory and semantic memory, or what might be termed memories derived from experience and learning.<sup>2</sup> Episodic memory refers to our experiences, semantic memory to everything we have learned and memorized. It is called "semantic" because it is connected to meaning and reference. It is difficult to memorize senseless data, such as pages in the telephone directory. It can be done only by people endowed with a "photographic" memory, and this in turn is often accompanied by problems of socialization, such as autism. This fact points to the close links between meaning and society. Semantic memory is preeminently social, "photographic" memory, in contrast, is a special case, uncoupled from its social foundation. At first glance, episodic memory seems no less independent of life in society. We can recollect experiences that do not involve anyone else and that we have not spoken about to anyone. These are experiences with which we are "quite alone." But even episodic memories possess a meaningful structure much of the time. As to their structure, we can perhaps make a further distinction between a visually organized, scenic memory and a narrative memory that is organized linguistically. Scenic memory tends to be incoherent and remote from meaning, while narrative memory tends to have a meaningful and coherent structure. And it is these connecting links that are socially mediated, according to Maurice Halbwachs's theory. These distinctions can be related to the difference between voluntary and involuntary memory introduced by Marcel Proust. Scenic memory is closer to involuntary memory, and it penetrates to layers of personality that are deeper and further removed from consciousness than is the case with narrative memory. Of course, these distinctions are not hard and fast. On the contrary, there is always a lively cross-frontier traffic within the personality. The processes of articulation ensure that stocks of scenic, involuntary memories are transformed into narrative, voluntary ones, and that the acts of forgetting and repression force conscious memories into the depths of the unconscious inner life. Halbwachs undoubtedly exaggerates when he asserts that a human being who grew up in total isolation would have no memories at

all. But we can agree that his narrative memory would be underdeveloped and that such a person would find it hard to distinguish between scenes he had experienced and ones he had only dreamed or hallucinated. On the other hand, we can readily agree that our social life with its norms and values, its definitions of meaning and importance, is able to give meaning and structure to our experience in ways that go to the heart of even our most private experiences.

This is why it is difficult, or even impossible, to distinguish between an "individual" and a "social" memory. Individual memory is always social to a high degree, just like language and consciousness in general. A strictly individual memory would be something like a private language that is only understood by one person—in other words, a special case, an exception. For this reason Aleida Assmann and I have proposed the term *communicative memory* to describe the social aspect of individual memory identified by Halbwachs. This memory belongs in the intermediary realm between individuals; it grows out of intercourse between people, and the emotions play the crucial role in its process. Love, interest, sympathy, feelings of attachment, the wish to belong, but also hatred, enmity, mistrust, pain, guilt and shame—all of these help to define our memories and provide them with a horizon. Without such definition they would not imprint themselves on our minds; without a horizon they would lack relevance and meaning within a specific cultural context. For a functioning communicative memory, forgetting is just as vital as remembering. This is why it is not "photographic." Remembering means pushing other things into the background, making distinctions, obliterating many things in order to shed light on others. This is what brings horizon and perspective into individual memory spaces, and these perspectives are emotionally mediated. Emotional emptiness, in contrast, points to arbitrariness of content. Only emotionally cathected forms of communication bring structure, perspective, relevance, definition, and horizon into memory. This holds good for narrative memory, but applies to scenic memory even more strongly. Images and scenes imprint themselves on the mind exclusively through their emotional force, whereas in the case of narrative memory interpretative factors are added to the emotional ones.

Like the neural basis of memory, the communicative side can be subject to disorders and pathologies. The best-known instances of this in recent years have been the cases of false memories; for example, when in the

course of psychoanalytical treatment memories of traumatic experiences in early childhood (such as sexual abuse) come to light that on closer inspection turn out to be the “confabulations” of the analyst and his client.<sup>3</sup> The most spectacular case of such a confabulation was recorded in the award-winning memoirs of Binjamin Wilkomirski, alias Bruno Dössekker, that have been translated into many languages. The researches of Daniel Ganzfried have revealed that Dössekker was born outside marriage in 1941 and was subsequently adopted by the Dössekker family. He believes that his early childhood was spent in Majdanek and Auschwitz. His book, which was published with the title *Fragments*, depicted scenes of unimaginable cruelty while largely dispensing with narrative coherence. This means that his reminiscences retained the semblance of authenticity even though they failed to abide by the rules of communicative plausibility. Dössekker’s memories have no historical truth, but his book is nevertheless no “forgery” since he evidently regards these “remembered” scenes as the only consistent etiology of the picture he has of himself with all his inconsistencies and contradictions.<sup>4</sup>

It is evident that Wilkomirski’s is a particularly grave instance of memory disorder, one that—and this is where its interest lies—explicitly points to the social and affective dimensions of memory. If it is true that memories grow within us via external affective bonds, it follows that much will grow up within us that influences collective life. The Holocaust and the terrors of the past are examples of this. Hence it is possible for someone to believe in all sincerity that he has experienced something which in reality he has only read or heard about and absorbed in the course of collective communicative processes. Wilkomirski remembers a childhood that he never experienced in order to externalize inner problems and to shift the burden of them onto society and history, but undoubtedly also because he wishes to belong to the group of victims and contemporary witnesses who can testify to these atrocities and thus find themselves at the center of public attention and sympathy. Something of this longing for attention and the wish to belong is active in every memory. The socialization process enables us to remember, but the converse is also true: our memories help us to become socialized. Socialization is not just a foundation, but also a function of memory. We can go so far as to speak of a “bonding memory.”

## 2. Memory as a Sociogenetic Force: Collective or Bonding Memory

The theoretician of bonding memory is Friedrich Nietzsche. Just as Halbwachs has shown that people need bonds in order to develop a memory and to be able to remember, Nietzsche has shown that people need a memory in order to be able to form bonds. What Nietzsche has in mind, however, is not the self-regulating, diffuse, "communicative" memory that Halbwachs described, in which remembering and forgetting interact. Instead, Nietzsche postulated a different, special memory that he called the "will's memory," where in his words, "forgetfulness is suspended in certain cases," namely in those instances where a promise is to be made. Nietzsche takes the example of a promise as paradigmatic, *pars pro toto*, for the entire realm of social bonds. To be able to establish bonds presupposes responsibility, soundness of mind, and reliability. Guided by the "law of obligations," Nietzsche develops his notion of the cultured human being, the "predictable individual" who will still remember tomorrow what he promised yesterday. The "will's memory" is based on the resolve to continue to will over and over again what you have once willed. This memory is not provided for in nature; man has "bred" it into himself so as to be able to live in a society which has been culturally constructed.<sup>5</sup>

Nietzsche is one-sided in his exclusive concentration on the compulsive, even coercive aspect of the acculturation process, the "breeding" of man into a fellow human being. Like Halbwachs, Nietzsche recoils from the transition from the corporeal, neural, and emotional into the purely symbolic. This becomes all too clear in the further development of his discussion, which we shall look at more closely in Chapter 4. The only symbols he can accept are those that are capable of being directly inscribed in the body through the emotions—that is, pain. All the examples he adduces—sacrifices, torments, pledges, cults—are symbols and symbolic actions. But they exercise their power through cruelty and not through any power of conviction inherent in them. Religions are systems of cruelty, for the power they exert over the human soul is not otherwise explicable to Nietzsche. "Only something that continues to hurt remains in the memory."

Nietzsche's assessment of religion reminds us of Freud, who regarded religion as an obsessional neurosis. This obsession arose in his view from

repressed truths that had been buried in the unconscious and which re-emerge from the unconscious to plague the conscious mind with all the violence of the return of the repressed. But what Freud had in mind was not Nietzsche's bonding memory. He took the step into the temporal depths of the diachronic, with the intention of explaining transferences across the generations that reach back into the primal history of mankind. But like Halbwachs and Nietzsche, Freud insists on the frontier of the body, refusing to cross it in the direction of culture with its symbolic forms and archives. For him, too, memory is corporeal inscription. What pain, the never-healing wound, is for Nietzsche, trauma is for Freud. Both develop a concept of collective memory, but they anchor it in a very immediate way in the mind and body, and are evidently not minded to extend the concept of memory to the realm of symbolic mediation. The memory function of culture can only be explained, in their view, in terms of mental and physical "inscriptions." Here, too, then, we see a reductionism at work that seeks to limit the dynamics of collective and cultural memory to the physical parameters of the body of the individual.

A further quality that Freud shares with Nietzsche is his pessimistic view of culture, particularly in his essay *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Conceived as a system of values and norms, rules and rituals, culture appears as a kind of straitjacket whose purpose is to train the individual, to knock him into shape, and force him to adjust to its goals and functions. What remained completely obscure in this process was the enabling aspect of culture, which does not just mutilate people and knock them into shape (for which the Jewish ritual of circumcision has always been the most conspicuous symbol—and the Bible itself speaks of the "circumcision of the heart"), but which also (and we would like to say above all) develops forms of life, opens up possibilities in which the individual can invest and fulfill himself. Thus Nietzsche simply ignores the fact that society's interest in subjecting the individual to its purposes is counterbalanced on the side of the individual by the natural (and in Nietzsche's eyes, banal) desire to belong and to develop a social identity. However, the bonding memory has its roots in man's desire to belong, in his nature as a *zoon politikon*. This desire is not necessarily feebler than the corresponding normative and formative acts of coercion that "culture" imposes on the individual.

Alongside the individual bonding memory, there is also a collective memory in an authentic and emphatic sense. The task of this memory,

above all, is to transmit a collective identity. Society inscribes itself in this memory with all its norms and values and creates in the individual the authority that Freud called the superego and that has traditionally been called "conscience." In his acceptance speech for the [1998] award of the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade, Martin Walser observed that "everyone is alone with his conscience." He rejected every external interference in how he and others chose to come to terms with the German past. And yet conscience is precisely the authority in which society confronts him with its demands and reminds him about unwelcome memories.

Collective memory is particularly susceptible to politicized forms of remembering. Aleida Assmann pointed this out in the context of the debate triggered by Martin Walser's speech.<sup>6</sup> At issue was the use of history to mobilize support for common political goals with the assistance of catchy formulas, such as "Remember what Amalek did unto thee," "Masada must never fall again," "REM[ember] 1690" (the Battle of the Boyne between Protestants and Catholics in Ulster), "Auschwitz: never again," "Kosovo" (the Battle on Blackbird Plain in 1389). These are the irreconcilable, mutually opposed memories of the winners and losers, the victims and perpetrators. Memorials, days of remembrance with the corresponding ceremonies and rituals (such as wreath-laying), flags, songs, and slogans are the typical media of this form of commemoration.

The political cult of the dead plays a particularly significant role here.<sup>7</sup> Memories can be as short-lived as the collective that makes use of them (who still remembers the memorials of the Nazi period?), but they can also be very tenacious, as we can see from the Battle of Kosovo in 1389, the fall of Masada in A.D. 73 and the villainous attack of the Amalekites during the exodus from Egypt.<sup>8</sup>

Here memories are "made," as Nietzsche puts it. They are not built up gradually as with communicative memory, and they do not disappear again within the cycle of three generations. Sometimes they vanish after twelve years, sometimes they endure for thousands. It is not a matter of a physical wound that never stops hurting, nor is it a memory trace in the "archaic inheritance" of the soul. It is a projection on the part of the collective that wishes to remember and of the individual who remembers in order to belong. Both the collective and the individual turn to the archive of cultural traditions, the arsenal of symbolic forms, the "imaginary" of myths and images, of the "great stories," sagas and legends, scenes and con-

stellations that live or can be reactivated in the treasure stores of a people.

This explains why we must free ourselves from the reductionism that would like to limit the phenomenon of memory entirely to the body, the neural basis of consciousness, and the idea of a deep structure of the soul that can be passed down biologically. Our memory has a cultural basis and not just a social one. This brings me to what Aleida Assmann and I call cultural memory.

With the concept of cultural memory we are taking a major step beyond the individual who alone possesses a memory in the true sense. Neither the group, nor even culture, “has” a memory in that sense. To talk as if they did would be an illegitimate act of mystification. As always, man is the sole possessor of a memory. What is at issue is the extent to which this unique memory is socially and culturally determined. Halbwachs took the step leading from the internal world of the subject into the social and emotional preconditions of memory, but refused to go so far as to accept the need for symbolic and cultural frameworks. For him, that was a frontier that should not be crossed. Memory in his view was always *mémoire vécue*, lived, embodied memory. Everything lying beyond that frontier he called “tradition” and contrasted it with memory. But can that distinction really be sustained? Is not tradition too always embodied in something?

What communication is for communicative memory, tradition is for cultural memory. In her book *Time and Tradition*, Aleida Assmann has contrasted communication and tradition: “Tradition can be understood as a special case of communication in which information is not exchanged reciprocally and horizontally, but is transmitted vertically through the generations.”<sup>9</sup> In this way, cultural memory can be considered to be a special case of communicative memory. It has a different temporal structure. If we think of the typical three-generation cycle of communicative memory as a synchronic memory-space, then cultural memory, with its traditions reaching far back into the past, forms the diachronic axis.

The interaction of symbol and memory is a continuous process being played out at every level. That applies in particular to “memory of the will.” Whenever we think about something that we do not want to forget under any circumstances, we invent memory aids that range from the famous knot in our handkerchief to our national monuments. Such aides-mémoires are also the *lieux de mémoire*, memory sites in which the memory of entire national or religious communities is concentrated, mon-



uments, rituals, feast days and customs. In short, the entire panoply of things that go to make up what Halbwachs called tradition and which he contrasted with *mémoire vécue* can be understood as a system of memory sites, a system of markers that enables the individual who lives in this tradition to belong, that is, to realize his potential as the member of a society in the sense of a community where it is possible to learn, remember, and to share in a culture. In the last book he published Halbwachs himself crossed the frontier between *mémoire vécue* and *tradition*, communication and tradition. This was the *Topographie légendaire des évangiles en Terre Sainte* of 1941 (*La Mémoire collective* appeared posthumously in 1950). In this book he draws on pilgrim itineraries to describe the Christian *lieux de mémoire* in the Holy Land, and shows the extent to which Byzantine and Western memory politics were influenced by theological assumptions. He applies the concept of memory to monuments and symbols of all kinds and shows that memory and symbolism are inextricably intertwined.

Our expansion of the concept of memory from the realm of the psyche to the realm of the social and of cultural traditions is no mere metaphor. It is precisely the misunderstanding of the concepts of "collective" and "cultural memory" that has impeded comprehension of the dynamics of culture up to now.<sup>10</sup> What is at stake is not the (illegitimate) transfer of a concept derived from individual psychology to social and cultural phenomena, but the interaction between the psyche, consciousness, society, and culture.

### 3. Rituals of Collective and Connective Remembering

#### *a. The Neo-Assyrian Sarsaru Ritual*

The Assyrian state archive in Nineveh contains a text that relates to a collective memory ritual. Entirely in the spirit of Nietzsche, it is concerned to "make a memory," in this case for the subjects and vassals of the Assyrian empire who were forced by King Esarhaddon to swear an oath of allegiance to his successor, King Ashurbanipal. The ritual is based on the experience that was of decisive importance for Halbwachs: the dependence of memory on the general social and above all local context. The subjects