Dynamics of Distortion in Collective Memory

Michael Schudson

The notion that memory can be “distorted” assumes that there is a standard by which we can judge or measure what a veridical memory must be. If this is difficult with individual memory, it is even more complex with collective memory, where the past event or experience remembered was truly a different event or experience for its different participants. Moreover, whereas we can accept with little question that biography or the lifetime is the appropriate or “natural” frame for individual memory, there is no such evident frame for cultural memories. Neither national boundaries nor linguistic ones are as self-evidently the right containers for collective memory as the person is for individual memory. If you recall the wars between the United States government and Native Americans as part of the history of nation-building, it is one story; if you recall it as part of a history of racism, it is another. If you see the skeletal remains of Native Americans from long ago as part of an impersonal history of the human species, the remains are valuable specimens for scientific research; if you understand them as the cherished property of their descendants, they deserve reverent treatment and should be reburied according to the customs of Native American groups (Roark, 1989).

I take the view that, in an important sense, there is no such thing as individual memory, and it is well for me to make this plain at the outset. Memory is social. It is social, first of all, because it is located in institutions rather than in individual human minds in the form of rules, laws, standardized procedures, and records, a whole set of cultural practices through which people recognize a debt to the past (including the notion of “debt” itself) or through which they express moral continuity with the past (tradition, identity, career, curriculum). These cultural forms store and transmit information that individuals make use of without themselves “memorizing” it. The individual’s capacity to make use of the past piggybacks on the social and cultural practices of memory. I can move over great distances at a speed of 600 miles per hour without knowing the first thing about what keeps an airplane aloft. I benefit from a cultural storehouse of knowledge, very little of which I am obliged to have in my own head. Cultural memory, available for the use of an individual, is distributed across social institutions and cultural artifacts.

Second, memory is sometimes located in collectively created monuments and markers: books, holidays, statues, souvenirs. This is really a restatement of my first point except to say that these are dedicated memory forms, cultural artifacts explicitly and self-consciously designed to preserve memories and ordinarily intended to have general pedagogical influence. This is not the case with jet engines.

Third, where memory can be located in individual minds, it may characterize groups of individuals—generations or occupational groups. In these cases memory is an individual property but so widely shared as to be accurately termed social or collective (Mannheim, 1970; Schuman and Scott, 1989).

Fourth, even where memories are located idiosyncratically in individual minds, they remain social and cultural in that (a) they operate through the supra-individual cultural construction of language; (b) they generally come into play in response to social stimulation, rehearsal, or social cues—the act of remembering is itself interactive, prompted by cultural artifacts and social cues, employed for social purposes, and even enacted by cooperative activity; and (c) there are socially structured patterns of recall. This last point is well illustrated in the work of Robert Merton on the “Matthew effect” in science, where citations tend to credit the better-known scientist of jointly authored papers, even when the scientist is the junior author of the work (Merton, 1968, 1988). You can see this kind of social structure of recall operating in almost instantaneous fashion, as I did at a conference of well-known journalists and moderately well known academics. Two or three times in the space of several hours of discussion, a participant referred back to something that one of the academics had said earlier, remarking, “As Daniel Schorr told us earlier . . . ,” attributing the statement to the most famous journalist in the group.

As soon as you recognize how collective memory, and even individual memory, is inextricable from social and historical processes, the notion of “distortion” becomes problematic. As the British historian Peter Burke writes, “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, this selection, interpretation and distortion is socially conditioned. It is not the work of individuals
alone” (Burke, 1989, p. 98). Distortion is inevitable. Memory is distortion since memory is invariably and inevitably selective. A way of seeing is a way of not seeing, a way of remembering is a way of forgetting, too. If memory were only a kind of registration, a “true” memory might be possible. But memory is a process of encoding information, storing information, and strategically retrieving information, and there are social, psychological, and historical influences at each point.

This is not to say that there are no grounds for arriving at a degree of consensus about the past. People normally accept some sorts of standards of what counts as true distortion and what counts simply as the inevitable variability of perspectives of people looking at the same phenomenon from different values and viewpoints at different points in time. Leaving aside the question of what distortion is inevitable versus what distortion is open to remedy, I want to offer here a catalogue of forms of distortion in collective memory. There are at least four important and distinguishable processes of distortion in collective memory: distanciation, instrumentalization, narrativization, and conventionalization. I will devote some remarks to each of these, drawing on my own research on American memories of Watergate as well as on other materials.

The dynamics of distortion operate in three different realms, all of which might be referred to as “social” or “collective” or “cultural” memory. I will not often need to distinguish among these types of social memory, but it may help clarify the subject to recognize the differences at the outset. First, collective memory may refer to the fact that individual memory is socially organized or socially mediated. Second, collective memory may refer not to socially organized memories in individuals who experienced the past but to the socially produced artifacts that are the memory repositories for it—libraries, museums, monuments, language itself in clichés and word coinages, place names, history books, and so forth. Third, collective memory may be the image of the past held by individuals who did not themselves experience it but learned of it through cultural artifacts. My remarks here concern all three domains of cultural memory—socially mediated individual memories, cultural forms for social mediation, and individual memories constructed from the cultural forms.

**Distanciation: The Past Recedes**

The simple passage of time reshapes memory, in at least two respects. First, there is a loss of detail. Memory grows more vague. Second, there tends to be a loss of emotional intensity. This is culturally variable, of course. Serbs, Croats, and Bosnians seem able to harbor ancient hurts in ways many other people cannot. Family attachments—and grievances—persist across generations; in China, vengeance may be sought for wounds inflicted well beyond living memory (Madsen, 1990). Cultural traditions may overcome the loss of individual memory over time, by no means always to the good.

Still, as a general rule, time heals all wounds. Constructing cultural objects as memoirs of the past may mitigate the ebbing of memory, but they battle an ultimately irresistible force. The mystery writer K. C. Constantine has one of his characters express it this way: “The surest way you know something’s dead was when somebody started talking about preserving its memory. There wasn’t a coffin around that could match a museum for saying something was crooked” (Constantine, 1993, p. 3). The novelist Robert Musil observed, “There is nothing in the world as invisible as a monument ... Anything that endures over time sacrifices its ability to make an impression. Anything that constitutes the walls of our life, the backdrop of our consciousness, so to speak, forfeits its capacity to play a role in that consciousness” (Wiesel, 1993, p. 19). If memory retains intensity, it sometimes does so at the cost of sentimentality of some sort. The recovery of ethnic origins and loyalties among third and fourth generations who retain little in the way of lived experience of ethnicity may be one example. The question of sentimentality we might think of as the Stephen Spielberg problem. If it is granted that human beings not only write poetry after Auschwitz but about it, what kind of poetry will that be? Is it doomed to demean, reduce, or sentimentalize the events it seeks to sanctify? Not everyone agrees that Spielberg failed in this with his film Schindler’s List, but everyone recognizes that this was the sort of failure he risked.

There are gains as well as losses in distanciation. The major gain is perspective—distance can give people historical perspective on matters that may have been hard to grasp at the time they happened. With time, not only does emotional intensity diminish but individuals can increasingly view from multiple perspectives events they originally could see only from one. Sometimes this is because the past changes—and should change—with time. In an era of liberalization and the cultural unfashionism of groups denied a voice in the past, a history told from the viewpoint of elite white males is rewritten from multiple viewpoints. Often new information becomes available about events experienced at the time through a veil of misinformation and ignorance. The past, at any rate the significance of the past, is not a constant. Judgments of the meaning of Richard Nixon’s Watergate misdeeds in 1973 and 1974 when they became public knowledge were necessarily revised in 1975 when it became apparent—through congressional investigations that Watergate itself had prompted—that earlier presidents, including Lyndon Johnson and John F. Kennedy, had like Nixon engaged in extra-legal activities in both foreign and domestic policy. They approved the CIA’s involvement in domestic surveillance in violation of its charter, illegal wiretaps on Martin Luther King, attempted assassinations of foreign leaders, and so forth. In a word, they abused the powers of office in ways
not at all dissimilar from those in Article I of the articles of impeachment against Richard Nixon. Nixon’s opponents in the Congress had taken pains to distinguish his misdeeds from those of past presidents. Their case, and public outrage at large, rested on the uniqueness of Nixon’s errors. It turned out that, although some of his misdeeds were in fact novel, others were entirely in keeping with a degree of lawlessness in the White House that in the era of the Cold War had become nearly routine. In retrospect, some of the indignation turned toward Richard Nixon personally was misplaced. What people thought to be unique and unprecedented wrongdoing in 1974 we learned to be part of a continuing pattern in the modern presidency (Schudson, 1992).

To take another example, the Holocaust, though a central element in thousands of private memories, did not command public attention from the time of the Nuremberg trials until the Eichmann trial in 1963 and then, in a more sustained way, following the 1967 Six-Day War. Until then, the Holocaust was a matter held within the Jewish community but not paraded before a general public. What changed, it appears, was a new openness and pride on the part of Jews about their Jewishness, a reflected glory for European and American Jews from the valor and expertise of the Israeli military.

The moral character of memory is implicated in distanciation. As Iwona Irwin-Zarecka observes, distance in time is invoked as an argument both for and against attention to Nazi (and other) war crimes. On the one hand, people argue that “the sheer passage of time removes that past from the sphere of direct communal responsibility” and so justifies reducing attention. On the other hand, “with the passage of time, moral lessons accrue ever greater universal significance” and so justify increased focus on the past. “On both sides,” Irwin-Zarecka adds, “the increasing distance in time appears to reframe remembrance, from that of concrete individual actions to one of general cultural background” (Irwin-Zarecka, 1994, pp. 94–95). It is no wonder that anniversaries or commemorations of events forty and fifty years in the past become especially significant, as the possibility of living memory fades and the only memories that remain are those culturally institutionalized.

The moral character of memory is asserted in a different fashion by the historian Carl Degler, who observed that historians are obliged to rewrite history as social values change. If historians did not change their minds about the past, he wrote, “their history would cease to be a living part of the culture and therefore incapable of illuminating the present with the light of the past.” A historian of slavery who did not begin from the assumption that slavery is bad, he argues, would not be a historian but an antiquarian, someone for whom there is no vital connection between present values and telling the story of past events (Degler, 1976, p. 184). Our history, writes Stephen Macedo, is no more than the record of the past, but our “tradition,” in contrast, “is a critical distillation of the past, a rendering that seeks to be true not to the past entire but to what is best in it, to what is most honourable and most worth carrying forward” (Macedo, 1990, p. 171). Tradition, not history, is imbued with moral purpose—and, Macedo obviously believes, rightly so.

One powerful counter to the usual diminished intensity of memory with the passage of time lies in trauma and various manifestations of post-traumatic stress disorder. “The traumatized person,” writes Cathy Caruth, “... carries an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptoms of a history that they cannot entirely possess” (Caruth, 1991, p. 4). With trauma, whether in the experience of war veterans or Holocaust survivors or the survivors of other major disasters, or in the wider range of “normal traumatic events” like incest, child sexual abuse, and rape, including acquaintance-rape, there may be intrusive recollections of the traumatic event later in life, or recurrent dreams of it, or the sudden acting by the person as if the event were reoccurring, or more generalized responses to new phenomena with the frightful image of the past experience blotting out normal perceptions of the new. Traumatic bodily experience may have a special capacity to renew itself in memory without emotional or psychological distanciation.

Instrumentalization: The Past Is Put to Work

Memory selects and distorts in the service of present interests. The present interest may be narrowly defined—memory may be called up and shaped in an instrumental fashion to support some current strategic end. Or the present interest may be more a semiotic one than a strategic one. That is, the rememberer may be seeking not to conquer the world through the manipulation of the past but to understand the world—especially the present world—through the use of the past. Israelis recall Masada and Texans the Alamo not because these were triumphs that flatter the present but because they were tragedies that can help explain it (Schwartz et al., 1986).

Examples of instrumentalization are legion. Indeed, the problem may be to find cases of cultural memory that cannot be readily understood as the triumph of present interests over truth. The world of Orwell’s 1984 is the extreme case. But it was not necessary to wait for twentieth-century totalitarianism for rulers to see instrumental value in manipulating the past. It was Louis XIV’s censor who declared that changes in the political situation may “make it necessary or suppress or correct” information about the past (Burke, 1992, p. 126). Efforts at censorship and “cover-up” are all cases of instrumentalization. What Richard Nixon’s aides, H. R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman and Charles Colson, really remembered about Watergate, we don’t know. What they said on the record was, “I don’t recall,” “I don’t..."
exactly remember,” “I have no recollection.” The way the military has remembered the role of the media in Vietnam is a nice case of instrumentalization. By blaming media coverage of the war for the war’s failure, the military, following the lead of the Nixon administration itself, drew attention away from its own failures of intelligence and strategy and training in Vietnam, and justified subsequent curtailments of press freedom in Grenada and the Gulf War. George Bush self-consciously evoked the consensually pleasing, grand memory of World War II in leading the United States into the Gulf War, in an attempt to prevent comparisons to the more recent and wounding Vietnam war (New York Times, 1991, p. A16).

On the fiftieth anniversary of D-Day in 1994, instrumentalization lay not in a particular version of what happened on the beaches of France in 1944 but in choosing this event rather than some others to commemorate so lavishly. The commemoration, New York Times reporter R. W. Apple observed, lacked “context.” The British prominence at the commemoration was in some respects an act of nostalgia for a time when Britain was a world power on a par with the United States. The Russian absence from the ceremonies—Russian President Boris Yeltsin was not invited—is perhaps peculiar because, although Russian troops did not participate in D-Day, Soviet forces suffered many more casualties than the British or American armies and incurred many more losses to the Germans on the Eastern front than in all other engagements in the West, Italy, and North Africa (New York Times, June 5, 1994). The Russian absence reflected as much their unsettled international standing in 1994 as the historical reality of 1944.

Intellectuals are often the agents of instrumentalizing the past. Early nineteenth-century European intellectuals, imbued with romantic nationalism, created the field of folklore and made use of folk culture to advance nationalist causes. This led to some remarkable fabrications, like the kilt and tartans of the Scottish Highlands (Trevor-Roper, 1984). The Kalevala, the purportedly ancient Finnish epic poem, was in fact constructed of unrelated fragments of folk poetry by folklorist Elias Lönnrot and carefully cultivated by later scholars as Finland’s ancient treasure, even when they knew better, as part of Finland’s struggle for political independence (Wilson, 1976).

Instrumentalization is not necessarily calculated. A study of French bakers found that those who rose from apprentice to master tended to forget the humiliations of apprenticeship, while those who remained workers tended to recall them vividly (Debouzy, 1990, p. 60). Is there conscious or intentional distortion going on here? Not necessarily. Rationalization is a more complex process than that. This is related to the cognitive bias that Anthony Greenwald calls “benefectance,” the bias of recalling success more readily than failure or seeing the self as responsible for success and outside forces responsible for failure. These and other “ego biases” serve the ego but do not necessarily do so self-consciously (Greenwald, 1980, 1984). A kind of “benefectance” may operate at a community or national level, too. Nineteenth-century Jacksonville, Illinois, town leaders shifted quickly from boosting their town as one with a glowing future to celebrating it as one with a glorious past when the legislature located the state university that Jacksonville had been counting on in Champaign-Urbana (Doyle, 1978, p. 265).

Some things that appear to be instrumentalization may be instances of cognitive bias not directly connected to self-interested motives. Michael Ross and Fiore Siculo suggest that the tendency, in co-authored scientific papers, for each co-author to believe he or she made the larger contribution is not an obvious case of ideology serving self-interest. Instead, they suggest, it has to do with the “ego-centric bias in availability of information in memory.” Each co-author is better informed and more knowledgeable about the contribution he or she has made than about the work put in by the partner (Ross and Siculo, 1982, pp. 180–189). Similarly, I suspect that in the organization of household chores between a husband and wife, the husband’s belief that he has done his share is not necessarily patriarchal pig-headedness nor the wife’s view that she has done the lion’s share necessarily feminist protest. Both are more knowledgeable about and better able to recall the labor they themselves put in.

Repression is a special case of instrumentalization. Winners name the age. With Watergate, Senator Ervin’s partisanship or Archibald Cox’s Kennedy ties or the Washington Post’s long record of liberalism are typically repressed. In textbooks, the partisanship of Watergate evaporates altogether. One would never know that Richard Nixon was a Republican facing a Democratic-dominated Congress. The repression may be a form of consensus—liberal historians and journalists repressing something they do not want to remember or to face. Or it may be something less conscious than that, a repression in the name not of partisan triumph but of a drive for consensus or reconciliation. Community and town historians regularly repress past social conflict in the interest of present togetherness (Dykwstra, 1968, pp. 361–367). French recollection of the Holocaust is shaped by a willful effort to avoid reliving conflicts that would tear contemporary French society apart, with resistance members and collaborators condemning each other (Miller, 1990, p. 141).

First-order instrumentalization promotes a particular version of the past to serve present interests. Second-order instrumentalization makes use of the past, and distorts it, without necessarily favoring a particular vision of the past. What is favored is any version of the past that can add fame or fortune to those charged with conveying it. So, for instance, journalists who tell the story of John F. Kennedy’s assassination assimilate it to a larger myth about journalism itself. They typically recast an event that did not include them—reporters did not see Kennedy shot, after all—into an event
in which they are heroes. Journalists’ narratives typically emphasize Oswald’s murder by Jack Ruby, which television crews did witness, and the President’s funeral, where reporters served a ritual function in healing the nation. As Barbie Zelizer’s studies suggest, journalistic accounts and re-tellings of the assassination hijacked the past for purposes of their own unconnected to the event narrated. That is, the journalists’ interest was not to promote one or another version of the assassination but to “consolidate the authority” of the journalists themselves as narrators (Zelizer, 1990, p. 373; Zelizer, 1992).

Commercial culture offers many instances of second-order instrumentalization. It is not, for commercial developers, that a particular meaning of the past is sought but that meaningfulness can be made marketable. So the past is employed not to promote a particular view of it but to attract a ticket-buying crowd to a book, movie, or play. Thus an effort may be made to make an account of the past palatable to all tastes—hence, bland and uncontroversial—an effort that often characterizes the writing of textbooks to be sold to school districts throughout the country (Schudson, 1994). Or, at the opposite extreme, an account of the past may be sensationalized to attract adventurous or prurient tastes, as seems to be the case in the writing of some idol-bashing biographies.

The use of history, not as memorial to the past or promotion of a particular view of it, but as fodder for amusement attracted the indignation of many professional historians in the recently proposed “Disney’s America” theme park. “We have so little left that’s authentic and real. To replace what we have with plastic, contrived history, mechanical history is almost sacrilegious,” said historian David McCullough of the theme park plans (Rich, 1994).

Without doubting that commercial memorialization distorts and may diminish the past, it is worth observing that public, non-profit memorialization distorts as well. What possible relationship does a stately seated Lincoln inside a mammoth Greek temple have to the sixteenth president of the United States? Indeed, there was opposition to this Great Emancipator-Deity model when the Lincoln Memorial was designed and built in the 1920s. “Our national capital has Washington as a Roman general. Let us not add the more atrocious anachronism of Lincoln as Apollo,” according to one contemporary critic. Some advocated a living memorial, like a national vocational school, or a freeway from Washington to Gettysburg as more fitting for the democratic Lincoln. But a memorial that may have been ill-suited to the living Lincoln represented very ably the reverence in which by the 1920s he had come to be held; the monument was a “virtual reality” in its own way that quickly came to be a fully consecrated, utterly uncontroversial sacred place (Peterson, 1994, pp. 206–217).

The controversy over the Lincoln Memorial is a fair indication that instrumentalization—like the other processes I am discussing here—operates on a social playing field. 1984 is the near-perfect case where the past is remade to serve present power, and no opposition dares raise a protest. But in liberal societies and in a porous international system where it is difficult or impossible to curtain one population from the next, instrumentalization is more often attempted than achieved. In Japan in 1994, Justice Minister Shigeto Nagano was forced to resign within days of a public statement denying Japanese atrocities in China and Korea during World War II. His comments “sparked outrage across Asia” and quickly sealed his political fate (Boston Globe, 1994). Powerful as the tendency to instrumentalization is, it is checked and countered so long as living memory, available written records, the integrity of journalists and historians, and a pluralistic world where different groups make competing claims on the past endure (Schudson, 1992, pp. 205–221).

Narrativization: The Past Gets Interesting

To pass on a version of the past, the past must be encapsulated into some sort of cultural form, and generally this is a narrative, a story, with a beginning, middle, and end; with an original state of equilibrium, a disruption, and a resolution; with a protagonist and obstacles in his or her way and efforts to overcome them. Reports of the past observe certain rules and conventions of narrative (White, 1973). An account of the past must choose a point to begin. This is not always easy or obvious; indeed, it is always to some degree arbitrary. When Russians commemorate the “Great Patriotic War,” their beginning point is June 1941 when Germany invaded the Soviet Union. This enables Russians to pay homage to the 20 million war dead but at the same time conveniently helps them to overlook the 1939 Hitler-Stalin Non-Aggression Treaty that so significantly aided the build-up of the German military machine (Miller, 1990, p. 212; Tumarkin, 1987).

The usual telling of the story of Watergate begins with a burglary at the Democratic National Committee headquarters in Washington, D.C. Why? Because that was the point at which the set of events to which the term “Watergate” was ultimately attached first became known publicly. But that burglary was one of several, that particular flouting of the law one of many, and the cover-up that began days later that became a larger and more identifiable crime than the burglary itself was probably centered on concealing from public knowledge not White House involvement in the burglary but in other sordid deeds. To start the Watergate story on June 17, 1972, seems by no means inevitable.

Narrativization is an effort not only to report the past but to make it interesting. Narratives simplify. The most popular version of the Watergate story makes the journalists the central part of the story and nearly excludes the battles among the branches of government. Watergate has come down
to us most prominently as a battle between a liberal, investigative press in the persons of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein of the Washington Post, and Richard Nixon and his cronies in the White House. The book by Woodward and Bernstein, All the President's Men, was published in 1974 even before Richard Nixon left office. When it appeared in May, it was the fastest-selling nonfiction hardcover book in the history of American publishing. A few months before, actor Robert Redford, who had acquired film rights to the book, asked screenwriter William Goldman if he had heard of Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward. He had not, even at a time when people claimed that they had heard quite enough about Watergate. The film version of the book appeared in the spring of 1976 during the presidential primaries and became both a critical and commercial success. In the film, as in the book, Woodward and Bernstein are the protagonists, and a set of mysterious, shadowy figures in the White House and in the Committee to Re-Elect the President are the antagonists seeking to damage our heroes and protect the President from scrutiny.

The curious thing about the book and the film, in retrospect, is that they end in January 1973, six months after the Watergate break-in, with the second inauguration of Richard Nixon and a public backlash against the Washington Post for having published a (slightly) misleading story on the Watergate affair. Only then, as a coda to the film, does the viewer see a teletype machine printing out the indictments and guilty verdicts on Watergate conspirators and the notice of Nixon's resignation from office. The actual experience of Watergate, if I may speak of it that way, did not begin for most Americans until the Senate Watergate committee hearings in the summer of 1973, followed by the Saturday Night Massacre in October, the release of the White House tapes in April 1974, and the House Judiciary Committee hearings in June and July. All this is omitted from All the President's Men, a story of David and Goliath, this two-headed David young, innocent of politics, ever stumbling and learning—the book is a kind of novel of education—all in the effort to uncover a dark mystery. It is a tale of growing up, a mystery story, a true-crime drama, an update of the newspaper film of the 1930s, all rolled into one. On June 17, 1972, Woodward and Bernstein were freshmen in Washington politics; by January 1973, though most of Watergate had yet to happen, they were seniors ready to graduate.

Although the Woodward-Bernstein version of Watergate is the most familiar one, and the one that has most successfully reshaped the memory of Watergate for people who can personally recall the events, passing on a memory to a next generation may operate by different rules. Woodward and Bernstein fall out of the Watergate story in schoolbook renditions. These typically focus on the President, the Ervin committee, and the Supreme Court decision against Nixon on the question of executive privilege for the subpoenaed White House tapes. In textbook accounts of Watergate, there is little or no mention of the role played by the news media or by the special prosecutor. Why? I think that these actors fail to make an impression largely because "Watergate" is presented as a late-in-the-school-year reprise of lessons learned about the Constitution early on. The dramatis personae in the American history course are the executive, judicial, and legislative branches of government—adding a "fourth branch" of government, with the press, is messy. To discuss the special prosecutor, technically an agent of the executive but acting in the case of Archibald Cox out of a primary loyalty to the Congress, confuses the otherwise neat scenario of the separation of powers. In textbooks, Watergate is reorganized to fit into a larger narrative about constitutional government.

Successful narratives often foreground individual protagonists and antagonists rather than structures, trends, or social forces. Particular works of art or efforts at story-telling may live on in memory in ways that overwhelm less dramatic, less lucid, less epitomized, less narrativized ways of telling the past. Judith Miller offers two instances in her comparative study of how six nations recall the Holocaust—and their own involvement in it. She suggests that Austria, from early on portrayed worldwide as the first "victim" of Nazism, was in most respects an exceedingly willing, even enthusiastic, victim. Three-quarters of the guards at the Nazi concentration camps, for instance, were Austrians. Yet a combination of political expediency on the part of the Allies and the 1965 film The Sound of Music have left for Americans at least an image of the Austrians as noble folk resisting the Nazis (Miller, 1990, p. 62).

Similarly, the Dutch have wrapped themselves around a book by a thirteen-year-old girl, The Diary of Anne Frank, as proof to the ages of their national heroism in saving Dutch Jews from destruction. But the Dutch were in fact among the strongest collaborators with the Germans. And while their historical tradition demonstrates much less anti-Semitism than in Austria or France or many other countries in Europe, the widespread rule-following, order-obeying, well-mannered behavior of hundreds of thousands of Dutch citizens made the Netherlands perhaps the easiest of all occupied countries for the Germans to administer (Miller, 1990, pp. 95-98).

Narratization, as I have discussed it so far, refers to telling a story about the past. But there is a second line of narrativization: telling a story about the past's relation to the present. In this larger narrative, understanding the past is often subjugated to an overarching story about how our own time fits into the passage of human history. For much of the past 200 years in the West, the grand narrative has been one of human progress or "Whig history." This was not always the case, of course, and in some fields and in some countries the overarching narrative line is a story of decline. The Romantics felt burdened by the "perfection of the past." John Keats worried
that there was nothing original for a poet in the land of Shakespeare to achieve—Shakespeare had done it all (Bate, 1970, pp. 5, 82). For the past fifty years in the United States, both past and present have been understood in terms of the Cold War struggle with the Soviet Union, and other narratives of recent history have necessarily borrowed their structure or framework from this overarching narrative. After the Cold War, making sense of international affairs becomes more difficult.

Cognitization and Conventionalization:
The Past Becomes Knowable

In a well-known essay, “On Memory and Childhood Amnesia,” Ernest Schachtel makes some telling observations about how adults remember, from their own lives, not what they experienced but what they learn they are conventionally supposed to have experienced. “Thus the memories of the majority of people come to resemble increasingly the stereotyped answers to a questionnaire, in which life consists of time and place of birth, religious denomination, residence, educational degrees, job, marriage, number and birthdates of children, income, sickness and death.” A traveler remembers the road signs better than the landscape he or she has passed through, and the “average traveler through life remembers chiefly what the road map or the guide book says, what he is supposed to remember because it is exactly what everybody else remembers too” (Schachtel, 1982, pp. 193–194).

What Schachtel refers to as “the conventionalization of the adult memory” is a vital process in social or collective as well as in individual memory (Schachtel, 1982, p. 195). The past that comes to be known best or known at all is not only the one made into stories; it is the one made at all rather than the one experienced without being specifically constructed. John Dean certainly heard both his own words in conversations with President Nixon and the words of Nixon himself. One might even predict that he would recall Nixon’s words better than his own—Nixon, after all, was the President of the United States, and Dean, his young counsel, might be expected to hang on his every word. But when Ulric Neisser compared John Dean’s Watergate testimony to the record of the tape-recorded White House conversations, he discovered that Dean recalled his own remarks better than he did Nixon’s. Neisser believes that this is because Dean prepared and rehearsed his own comments ahead of the meeting with Nixon and may very well have agonized over them afterwards, wondering if he had said the right thing or if he should have put his thoughts in a different way. The planning, preparing, and rehearsing, both before and after the “performance,” enhanced Dean’s recall for his own words (Neisser, 1982, p. 158).

Memories are prepared, planned, and rehearsed socially as well as indi-

vidually. Experiences attended to by powerful social institutions are likely to be better preserved than experiences less favored by rich institutional rememberers. Recorded or archived materials are more likely to enter into public memory than materials that are never recorded or stored, or poorly recorded or stored. Oral histories may, with effort, be collected by professional historians; but people or institutions with their own tape recorders, minutes, file cabinets, and institutionalized, legally pertinent reasons for keeping records are more likely than others to produce materials that will one day be made part of a public record. Culturally valued and memorialized activities are more easily retrievable than culturally derogated, repressed, or stigmatized activities. Whatever past is remembered or commemorated, it must be drawn from the available past; and availability of the past, to borrow a term from Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman (1974), is socially structured.

Within the public domain, not only the recording of the past but active re-working of the past is more likely to be transmitted if it happens in high-prestige, socially consensual institutions than if it happens at or beyond the edges of conventional organization. The retrospective narration of Watergate is conducted not only by historians with a relatively wide range of views or journalists of various stripes but also by Congressmen who invariably represent centrist liberal and conservative positions. When they battled over the meaning of Watergate as they did in debating government ethics legislation for several years after Nixon’s resignation, they did so with each other as chief antagonists, excluding any mention of viewpoints to the left or right of congressional representatives. They also seemed obliged by their legitimate political position to dignify Watergate’s memory. They may think that Watergate proved the system worked (conservatives) or that it almost failed to work and so requires reform (liberals), but the very process of shaping post-Watergate legislation requires them all to take Watergate seriously as a constitutional crisis. More skeptical, subversive, or irreverent views have been proffered by intellectuals and political activists on the far left and far right, but these never had a hearing in the central political arena.

A special case of conventionalization is memorialization. Turning something into a monument or memorial changes the past in that very process. Memorialization moralizes the past, creates out of a chronicle a tradition. A commemorated event is one “invested with an extraordinary significance and assigned a qualitatively distinct place in our conception of the past.” It is in a sense “a register of sacred history” (Schwartz, 1982, p. 377). Memorials—whether in monuments, holidays, or commemorative programs—tend to be audience-centered, and their creators worry about their rhetorical effect. Critics of the twenty-fifth anniversary celebration of Stonewall, the beginnings of the contemporary gay liberation movement, have objected to its
commercialization, its corporate sponsorship, and the selling of T-shirts and other merchandise. But organizers of the celebration observe how expensive the Central Park rally would be (New York Times, May 6, 1994).

Frequently, memorialization evokes conflict even though it may be meant to pacify it. Efforts to name the campus library at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, after black leader W. E. B. Du Bois (who was born nearby and whose papers are deposited in the library’s special collections) evoked heated opposition from a conservative student newspaper (Boston Globe, May 8, 1994). Debates rage over how to preserve Auschwitz as a memorial to the Holocaust (New York Times, January 5, 1994). Efforts to create a national Martin Luther King, Jr., holiday and local attempts to rename streets or parks in King’s honor evoked conflict (New York Times, January 18, 1987). The fortieth anniversary of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, sponsored by the Communist government in Poland, presumably in an effort to gain international support for a regime then operating under martial law, spawned protests by Jewish groups and by supporters of Solidarity. When a P.L.O. representative laid a wreath at the memorial to the Jewish resisters in the ghetto, the Israeli delegation was ordered home. What was to be a great public relations gesture became a political embarrassment (New York Times, April 17, 1983, p. 9 and April 22, 1983, p. A5). Protesters used the Communist government’s official commemoration of Hungary’s 1848 nationalist revolution in 1987 to protest and question the legitimacy of the regime (New York Times, March 16, 1987, p. 3).

Conclusion

In broad terms, collective memory is characterized by four general principles. First, memory is in fact social. People remember collectively, publicly, interactively. This is true even of individual memory that is sustained only by social interaction, by rehearsal, review, and the language people have by virtue of being social beings.

Second, memory is selective. Remembering one thing requires forgetting another.

Third, selection is driven by various processes, both willful and unconscious. Most often, students of a particular cultural memory seek to show the self-interested ways in which the memory has been shaped. The focus on self-interest may be the beginning but should not be the end of wisdom. Instrumentalization is one of the dynamics of memory construction, but it does not operate independently of other processes like narrativization, conventionalization, and distanciation. Nor is it necessarily the captain of this contingent of forces. Judging which processes of memory are most important depends on the particular case at hand.

Fourth, collective memory, at least in liberal pluralistic societies, is provi-

sional, always open to contestation and often actually contested. In the American case, no icon is so sacred that its sanctity will not be challenged. Indeed, the more sacred the symbol is, the more potent it becomes as a focal point for protest. This makes legitimated historical markers, from school textbooks to monuments, apt targets for symbolic politics. The negotiations over the Vietnam Veterans Memorial are a case in point. So is the speech of Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall on the 200th anniversary of the Constitution, attacking the Founding Fathers for leaving out of constitutional purview so many peoples, notably African-Americans (New York Times, May 7, 1987, p. 1).

The past, anthropologist Arjun Appadurai has suggested, is a “scarce resource,” and conflict over its ownership is recurrent. Today, however, the past may be increasingly a superabundant resource, and conflict may emerge not from its scarcity but from its superfluity. Memory today has a thousand champions. We even memorialize memorialization. Spielberg’s Schindler’s List was a testimony to the Holocaust. The Jewish sector of Krakow, where the filming took place, has now become a tourist attraction, an actual site of Jewish suffering made famous as much for its cinematic role as for the role the film commemorated (National Public Radio, Deidre Berger, reporter, July 7, 1994).

Contest, conflict, controversy—these are the hallmark of studies of collective memory, rather than the concept of distortion. Discovering the attitudes and interests of the present becomes of much greater concern than the legitimate claims of the past upon them. Still, a focus on distortion makes sense in studies of collective or cultural memory. Even the most ardently relativist scholars among us shiver with revulsion at certain versions of the past that cry out “distortion.” The most famous example is the flourishing fringe group of Holocaust revisionists who deny that there was ever a plan to exterminate the Jews or that such a plan was ever set in place. The question of what content of the past is not or cannot or should not be subject to later-day reinterpretation haunts the papers at a 1990 conference at U.C.L.A. on “Nazism and the Final Solution: Probing the Limits of Representation” (Friedlander, 1992). The fascination with contesting versions of the past and the excitement over legitimately revisionist interpretations of once settled and consensual accounts come precisely from the fact that even trained historians (or perhaps especially trained historians) retain strong beliefs in a veritable past. If reinterpretation were free-floating, entirely manipulable to serve present interests, altogether unanchored by a bedrock body of unshakable evidence, controversies over the past would ultimately be uninteresting. But in fact they are interesting. They are compelling. And they are gripping because people trust that a past we can to some extent know and can to some extent come to agreement about really hap-

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References


Ancient Egyptian Antijudaism: A Case of Distorted Memory

Jan Assmann

During the last two decades, our sensibility has been sharpened for the role of collective imagination in the construction of reality and the building up of the world we live in. Cornelius Castoriadis (1975) has analyzed the “imaginary institution of society”; Benedict Anderson (1983) has shown the nations of modern nationalism to be “imagined communities”; the French notion “imaginaire” has been made use of in a great variety of contexts and usually with great profit (Baczko, 1984). This chapter follows this line of research in elaborating on the imaginary side of historiography and in focusing on the image of the (religious and/or ethnic) other. The case that will be presented here sheds light on the question of how the image of “the” enemy is generated. It draws its general interest and relevance from the fact that the construction of the “Jew” as the religious enemy par excellence passed through and determined the course of Christian occidental history and culminated, in the context of German fascism, in genocide. It is important to know that Christian anti-Jewish propaganda inherited some of its central clichés from Egyptian paganism. It is even more important to realize that in Egypt these clichés can be traced back to a past which originally had nothing to do with the Jews but which, in the course of history, underwent such transformations and “distortions” in the collective memory of the Egyptians that it could eventually be cast into the Egyptian version of the exodus and fulfill the function of anti-Jewish propaganda. By retracing these transformations we get new insights into the workings of collective cultural memory but above all into the social construction of religious otherness. It is a well-known fact that there is no absolute and objective truth in memory. Remembering is always transformation and reconstruction. This applies to collective as well as to individual memory. One could perhaps