

Collective Memory

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Collective memory refers to the distribution throughout society of beliefs, feelings, moral judgments, and knowledge about the past. Only individuals possess the capacity to contemplate the past, but this does not mean that beliefs originate in the individual alone or can be explained on the basis of his or her unique experience. Individuals do not know the past singly; they know it with and against other individuals situated in conflicting groups, in the context of alienation, and through the knowledge that predecessors and contemporaries transmit to them.

History and commemoration are the vehicles of collective memory. At the formal level, history includes research monographs and textbooks; at the popular level, magazines, newspapers, television, and film; at the informal level, conversations, letters, and diaries. Commemoration consists of monuments, shrines, relics, statues, paintings, prints, photographs, ritual observances and hagiography (eulogy and ritual oratory). Since historical and commemorative objects are transmissible, cumulative, and interpreted differently from one group to another, they exert influence in ways difficult to understand solely in terms of their producers' convictions and characteristics.

Historians and commemorative agents perform different functions. Historians seek to enlighten by revealing causes and consequences of chronologically-ordered events. Commemorative agents seek to define moral significance by marking events and actors that embody collective ideals. Historians describe events in all their complexity and ambiguity; commemorative agents simplify events as they convert them into objects of moral instruction. On the other hand, history and commemoration are interdependent: just as history reflects the values and sentiments that commemoration sustains, commemoration is rooted in historical knowledge.

At the turn of the twentieth-century, many scholars wrote about the social context of history and commemoration, but Maurice Halbwachs's pioneering work made it a separate research field. That Halbwachs worked on collective memory while Karl Mannheim wrote his classic essays on the sociology of knowledge is no coincidence. The sociology of memory, like the sociology of knowledge, arose during the era of post World War I disillusionment and flourishes in societies where cultural values no longer unify, where people have already become alienated from common values, and separate communities regard one another distrustfully. The sociology of memory, like the sociology of knowledge, represents the erosion of dominant symbols.

Between 1945, the year of his execution by the SS, and the early 1980s, sociologists ignored Halbwachs' work. After 1980, however, Halbwachs was cited time and again, even though his two major books, *The Social Frames of Memory* (1925) and *The Legendary Topography of the Gospels in the Holy Land* (1941), had not been translated from their original French. Halbwachs' discoveries did not cause the current wave of collective memory research; they were rather swept into it.

Since the 1980s, collective memory scholars have worked on and debated six sets of basic issues: *history and commemoration* (how historical events furnish the stuff of commemoration and how commemorative symbolism, in turn, defines historical significance);

enterprise and reception: (who produces commemorative symbolism and why their products are sometimes accepted, sometimes rejected); *consensus and conflict* (which beliefs about the past are shared; which beliefs, polarizing); *retrieval and construction* (how historical documentation limits the range of historical constructions); *mirroring and modeling* (the degree to which collective memory shapes and reflects reality); *continuity and change* (how collective memory's malleability is superimposed upon its durable structures). As many scholars addressed these issues in terms of power relations and hegemony, collective memory's traditional articulations of virtue, honor, and heroism began to appear as elite "mystification." Newly favored topics included the commemoration of victims, diversity, unpopular wars, and ignoble events. Holocaust and slavery topics abounded. This pattern accompanied two late twentieth-century trends: multiculturalism, which recognized minorities' dignity and entitlements, and postmodernism, which documented the erosion of tradition and the individual's declining identification with the past. Multicultural and postmodern influence is evident in the continuing debunking of history and a growing body of research on ritual apologies, the "politics of regret," negative commemoration (e.g., museums and monuments for the victims of oppression and atrocity), and discrediting of the great legends and myths that once linked men and women to the dominant symbols of their cultural tradition.

Despite multicultural and postmodern influence, collective memory has remained centered, at the popular level, on traditional (heroic) contents. Also, new perspectives emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s: (1) appreciation of objective properties that limit what can be done with the past interpretively; (2) a keener sense of the past as a lost source of moral direction, inspiration, and consolation; (3) individual beliefs, once inferred from historical and commemorative materials, are assessed directly within the sociology of cognition, psychology, and, most prominently, through sample survey methods, and (4) models of collective memory are formulated in an increasingly active voice, depicting individuals dialogically reinforcing and modifying the historical texts and commemorative symbols they consume.

The units, trends, and issues of collective memory that show up so clearly in the analyses of communities and nations appear also in the fields of family, organizations, institutions, and communities. Within each field, however, recent claims of collective memory scholarship begin to ring hollow. "Demystifying" the past is a vital program as long as there is something to be mystified, some injustice or atrocity to be concealed. In every culture and in every age we see exclusion and bias, but as the work of civil rights, multiculturalism, and inclusion continues, it becomes more difficult to squeeze out insights from their analysis. How new realities will affect collective memory's program remains for the next generation of scholars to determine.

SEE ALSO: Cognitive Sociology; Halbwachs, Maurice; Sociology of Knowledge

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