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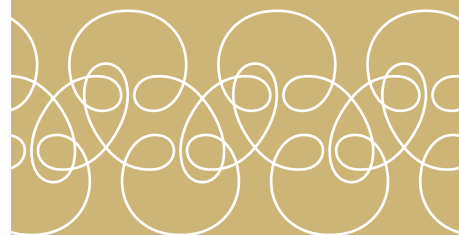
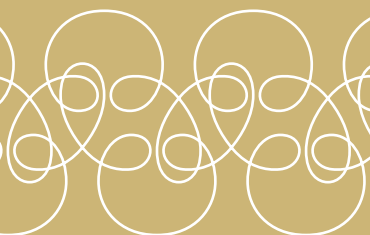
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NEW SERIES OF ACTA HISTORICA
ACADEMIÆ SCIENTIARUM HUNGARICÆ

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Boundaries of Contemporary History

Zsombor Bódy, András Keszei
Special Editors of the Thematic Issue

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Memory and the Contemporary Relevance of the Past

András Keszei

Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Institute of Sociology

As products that can be sold and bought, elements of the recent and more distant past become more and more important from the point of view of consumption, a process which adheres to the logic of commercial culture. At the same time, academic history is becoming less relevant as a source of authentic images of the past. As a result of the arbitrary selection of sources for different purposes and needs, the past has moved into our neighborhood (i.e. it has become an omnipresent part of the jumbled image repertoire of our everyday lives), and as a consequence, we find ourselves surrounded by a rather eclectic type of history. The past has become a commodity, and it has acquired a new valence as a source of collective and personal identity. Societies relate to their own pasts through the mechanisms of memory. Collective memory, as a source of social and personal identity, is partly a kind of history appropriated by the different groups of contemporary society. The manner in which this appropriation is effected highlights the potential role of academic history as a critical observer of relevant social processes in the past (and present).

Keywords: contemporary history, appropriation of the past, collective memory, social and personal identity

The past is made into history – constructed into analysis, narrated into interpretation, fashioned into stories, made serviceable as assumptions and ideas, which are then released into public circulation – in many different ways, only some of which remain susceptible to the professional historian’s influence or control. Indeed, the legitimacy of the latter’s authority has arguably become far less secure and generally acknowledged than before. As images of the recent and more distant past teem ever more chaotically across the public sphere, emanating from all manner of sites of cultural production (for example from television, advertising, magazines, museums, cinema, exhibitions, reenactments), which only rarely include universities, then the academic historian’s particular voice easily becomes drowned out, a fate which the performative successes of a few celebrity exceptions tend only to confirm.¹

1 Eley, “The Past Under Erasure?” 555.

In 2011, the British historian Geoff Eley published an article in *The Journal of Contemporary History* on the changing relationship of history, memory, and the contemporary. Summing up the essence of these changes, he arrived at the conclusion cited above. According to his rather pessimistic opinion, history as a discipline can do little to prevent the commodification of the past. Seen as products that can be sold and bought, elements of the recent and more distant past become more and more important from the point of view of consumption, a process which adheres to the logic of commercial culture. The role of academic history is becoming less relevant as a source of authentic images of the past.² Together with the changes that are taking place in the nature and sources of public culture, the use of the past to suit particular needs is a widely observable and experienced practice in an era in which the alleged validity and authenticity of history is used to secure value for an array of products. The past, not so much in the form of professional history but rather as something resulting from the arbitrary selection of sources for different purposes and needs, has moved into our neighborhood, and as a consequence we found ourselves surrounded by a rather eclectic type of history. There were of course significant variations in the aforementioned changes depending on the history of different countries.

East-Central European communist regimes strictly controlled publicness and the production of historical knowledge. On the basis of the dominant ideology, renderings of the past primarily emphasized “progressive” elements of national history which proved adaptable to relevant political needs and self-images. Control over the past was exercised through institutions which filtered the content of the history that was offered to the public. After the change of regimes, the newly established democracy, with its economic equivalent (a market economy), opened the public sphere to reevaluations of history, and alongside the clearly positive ones (removing former ideological constraints) this had some negative consequences as well. No longer under the supervision or even influence of academic history, the past suddenly began to appear in various forms and according to various, sometimes clearly biased interpretations. From the point of view of memory studies what happened came as no surprise. It was the logical result of the liberation of the past for the purpose of identification. Free access to the public sphere created a wide range of newly rediscovered elements and narratives of history for different Hungarian social groups. Instead of being the product of scientific study, theories, and methods, the past became a

2 Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 396–97.

commodity, and it received a new valence as the source of collective and personal identity.³ Knowing for instance Hungarian society's general indifference to and ignorance of its own past, we could add: at least for those who cared about grounding their identities in the past. Yet, although not in an explicit way, when defining themselves as members of groups (nations, confessions, ethnicities, or other kinds of social groups, for example the middle class) people always use elements taken from their collective past, known as history.⁴ There are important questions yet to be answered. How do people inform themselves or learn of (or devise or refashion) parts of the past that are relevant to them? Are there any specific institutions and mechanisms that help provide historical knowledge for a wider public? What kinds of roles does memory play in this process? And finally, how can we interpret the relationship of memory, history, and the contemporary in light of the problem of identity and identification in an ever-changing present? Before I try to formulate answers, I will turn to the general conditions of history and memory.

According to literary theorist Andreas Huyssen (whose opinion is very similar to that of Pierre Nora), as a necessary consequence of modernization the dissolution of the culture of unified common memory has changed the way in which people relate to the past.⁵ The general speeding up of life, the flow of information, and the growing frequency of motion (vertical and horizontal mobility) has increased our distance from the past, which we could consider our own, as a dimension in which we could easily navigate. Broadening the horizon of the present paradoxically has meant tightening it at the same time.⁶ Modern techniques can bring different parts of the world close to one another at a very rapid pace, creating a kind of synchronicity. The ever expanding horizon of the present is changing more and more quickly in accordance with the needs of the

3 About the past being “improved” for present purposes, see: Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country – Revisited*, 497–584.

4 The most seminal works on the relationship between social groups and memory are of course *Les Cadres Sociaux de la Mémoire* and the posthumous *La Mémoire Collective* by Maurice Halbwachs. Based on Halbwachs' notion of social memory (but stressing mainly the role of long term cultural memories and, from this perspective, the relationship between social groups, memory, and identity), see Assmann, “Globalization, Universalism, and the Erosion of Cultural Memory,” 123. On the significance of the interpretation of memories as a dynamic process and the entangled, relational nature of remembering, see: Feindt et al., “Entangled Memory,” 27.

5 Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, 1–29; Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Levy, “Introduction,” 6–8; Csáky, “Die Mehrdeutigkeit von Gedächtnis,” 2; Nora, “Between Memory and History”; Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity*.

6 Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, 22–24.

news industry and show business.⁷ Modern life is changing so quickly that we can hardly realize it, and the moment is over, it has become past.⁸ Because of this incertitude, people turn to the harmonic unity of a past allegedly governed by traditions, which does not necessarily correspond to any historical reality, though this is not really important from the point of view of the psychological need for security. A second relevant factor here is the consequence of modern urbanization. As Paul Connerton claims in a recent book, the production of urban space produces cultural amnesia. Spaces and places in modern cities are becoming more and more homogeneous and less memorable as a consequence. It is hard to anchor memories that could preserve (or be used to fashion the illusion of) stable identities in spaces in which functional requirements of traffic and dwelling prevail. Change, speed, and the deeply human psychological need of attachment to place and the preservation of identity with the help of memories—all these factors are relevant when we try to maintain an appropriate relationship with the past. As Pierre Nora observed more than 30 years ago, there are no longer milieus, which is why we need to create lieux of memory.⁹

First, one must consider basic differences between history and memory, as they are of particular relevance here.

Community, Emotions, Identity

Much as individuals construct their identities in the form of autobiographical memory through narratives, communities also construct narratives of self-interpretation.¹⁰ To maintain continuity and coherence, collective identity needs effective preservers and mediators.¹¹ Because of our innate group instinct and our constant need of reliable attachments, we can consider culture as a chance to belong somewhere and not as a burden, as has been claimed by Nietzsche and Freud.¹² The emotional character of memories can be partly explained by the successes and failures of the human striving to achieve appreciation, attention,

7 Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity*, 113.

8 Connerton, *How Modernity Forgets*, 139.

9 Nora, "Between Memory and History." This meant an explicitly presentist view of history, as reflected in the writings of Nora and the series *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, see: Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity*, 141.

10 Williams and Conway, "Networks of Autobiographical Memory," 41–46; Wertsch, "Collective Memory," 132–35.

11 For a social level application of Conway's self-memory-system: Wessel and Moulds, "How Many Types of Forgetting?," 290–91.

12 Assmann, *Religion*, 6.

and attachment. To a considerable extent, the aims and plans of our working selves concern these goals to realize a kind of social embeddedness. At the birth of communicative memory, the emotional valence of relations among individuals plays a very important role.¹³ Feelings of love, the longing for attachment, hate, anger, distrust, pain, shame, and guilt are inseparable from memory—indeed they are defined by memories. The role of emotions is supported by empirical results concerning autobiographical and more particularly flashbulb memory: memories accompanied by strong emotions are likely to remain more vivid than more general and less emotional memories.¹⁴ We cannot remember everything, recollection is guided by emotional relationships concerning past events. Emotional relevance creates the structure of communicative memory in the case of images and narratives.¹⁵ The desire to belong somewhere makes the individual participate in an identity mediated by collective memory. Social values and norms are written into the minds of the members of society, producing a super ego which controls their acts, constantly confronting them with social obligations.¹⁶

Extending to three generations and approximately 80 years, communicative memory survives with the help of social relationships, mediated and provided with means of preservation by society. Socialization is both the cause and effect of memory according to Assmann. However, on the long run and for larger communities it is not enough. They need a more durable form of memory on which to base their identities, namely cultural memory, which mediates the contents of the official canon.¹⁷ In this case, society reaches back to a “reality” beyond communicational memory, a “reality” that is not necessarily a truthful one, because “truth” could make identification problematic. Compared to the relativistic view of history, taking into consideration different perspectives on the past, myths, legends, and only partly true renderings of the past in the form of memory, they have basically only one valid interpretation, namely, how

13 Pennebaker and Gonzales, “Making History,” 185–91; Lambert et al., “How Does Collective Memory Create a Sense of the Collective?,” 198–99; Assmann, *Religion*, 3–4.

14 Christiansen and Safer, “Emotional events,” 223, 238; Robinson, “Perspective, meaning,” 199–200. Barclay, “Autobiographical remembering,” 123: “Life is meaningful when experiences can be tied to functional affects and emotions, and one’s self is sensed as coherent when there is a useful temporal-spatial system for organizing, interpreting, and explaining life events.”

15 Assmann, *Religion*, 3.

16 Ibid., 6–7.

17 Assmann, “Canon and Archive,” 104–05.

emotional loading and identification can connect to each other.¹⁸ Memory has only one valid perspective on the past. It cannot bear multiple interpretations.¹⁹ Usually, we choose exemplary, patriotic ancestors with which to identify. Recalling the past as cultural heritage has the aim of promoting identification instead of the impartial study of the national past. The national past as common heritage serves present centered purposes: to convince, to strengthen and to mobilize.²⁰ Memories of historical events may generate strong emotions, whether or not these memories are connected to personal experience. A couple of days after the assassination of president Kennedy as it could be reconstructed from the conversation between Lyndon Johnson and Martin Luther King, the time had come to have the Civil Rights Act (supported by Kennedy) accepted in the context of collective national mourning.²¹ Emotional reaction can serve as a dangerous weapon in the hands of political manipulation. The politics of identity can use history to produce an emotionally affected or manipulated community. We use our original essentialism, that is to say our innate disposition to attribute some unchangeable inner essence to individuals and groups.²² Considering the inner essence as a kind of an innate core can lead to a perspective from which other groups are easily be seen as so closed and strange that this perception precludes any kind of possible cooperation. There is no need to warn against the potential dangers of an identity politics based on essentialism after the tragic events of the 20th century. These dangers are all too familiar. Totalitarian regimes often used exclusion based on essentialist ideology in order to maintain the feeling and image of coherence. Whether the narrative trying to produce this coherence functions according to racial, ethnic, or class ideology is of secondary importance. The stranger is essentially a stranger by his/her race, ethnicity, or class. In the 1950s, exclusion from the working class meant a secondary social status.²³ The events of 1956 could serve as very effective counter-memories of the victory and betrayal of truth and freedom. Myths of cultural memory function differently in closed, dictatorial systems and in open, democratic societies. The relationship between the archive and the canon can change with time, the former being the passive contents of cultural memory, the latter the

18 Nora, "Between Memory and History"; Assmann, "Transformations," 65.

19 Winter, "Historians," 267; Wertsch, "Collective Memory," 126–27.

20 Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade*, 88–172.

21 Lambert et al., "How Does Collective Memory Create a Sense of the Collective?," 213.

22 Haslam, "Natural Kinds"; Gil-White, "Are Ethnic Groups Biological 'Species'"; Mahalingam, "Essentialism."

23 Standeisky, "A kommunista polgárellenség."

actual cultural memory.²⁴ Every system needs stability, which is partly provided by regularly held commemorative ceremonies (according to the calendar of national celebrations). The content of the canon, that is to say the actual cultural memory, depends on the prevailing ideology and character of the political system.²⁵ Commemoration can be considered successful if it strengthens the feeling of collective belonging.²⁶ Society too is able to remember, and practices of commemoration have important roles in maintaining continuity with the past and strengthening a sense (or illusion) of community, which is the main source of identity for the individual.

The Birth of History

Will an event become a chapter or only a footnote in future books on history? Spectacular events sometimes survive as chapters and sometimes only as footnotes. Why and how are they preserved (or rather fashioned as artefact, commodity, or political implement) by posterity?²⁷ How can social memory influence the writing of history? The transmission of tradition once cultivated as living memory became more and more problematic due to radical social changes initiated by industrialization and urbanization. Society became separated from its own (vision of the) past, which returned in the form of national memory and history. The two were often intermingled in the service of identity politics. As Nora claims, with the proliferation of lieux de mémoire and communities of memory, the canon of a unified national past disintegrated.²⁸ According to Ágnes Heller, it is due to its versatility and rejection of orthodoxy that modern civil society cannot have real cultural memory. Following the logic of identity politics, the state is trying to appropriate particular events from the past.²⁹ Since

24 Assmann, "Canon and Archive," 101–02.

25 Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, 83–88. Connerton used the notion of "habitual memory" when analyzing rites in society. Memory is written into the body so to speak. It is most effective when there is other communal, family relevance as well. See e.g. July 1 reminding people of the losses of World War I: Winter, "Historians," 266.

26 Assmann, *Religion*, 11.

27 Emphasizing the role of media: Kansteiner, "Finding Meaning," 189–95. We can formulate the following question: how would collected memories become collective memory? The emphasis is on its processual nature. See: Olick, "From Collective Memory," 155–59; Wertsch and Roediger, "Collective Memory," 319–20.

28 Nora, "Between Memory and History."

29 Heller, "A Tentative Answer." E. Esposito holds a similar opinion concerning collective memory in the more and more complex societies: Esposito, "Social Forgetting," 183–84.

it has become a national holiday in Hungary, October 23 (1956) has ceased to be a counter-memory. It has lost its oppositional value and people are much less aware of what they are celebrating. The more real communities there are in society, the more complicated it is for the official national canon to integrate the common past into a unified cultural memory. Professional historians have a choice: either they stay within their own territory and continue to render impartial, objective accounts of the past (or least accounts that are as impartial as their institutionalized positions as the proprietors of scientific discourse allow), or they serve memory.³⁰ The historian is guided by the past, more precisely a certain memory of the past. He or she cannot get rid of his or her own past, in which socialization took place, neither can he/she remain unaffected by questions of identity. Even the most objective historical works attest these influences, as one immediately sees when one considers the questions and research topics which are accorded the status of “relevant.” As far as the choice of the professional historians is concerned, certainly we cannot speak of total independence or isolation from the context of national identity. However we can expect a historian to reflect on her/his own position, method, and narratives.³¹

History as preserved in memory can easily serve ideology and identity politics, which is why we should take a closer look at the selection of past events. Perhaps there are events that prove more significant for society as a whole.³² Even the historian is picking elements from the past in a selective way, keeping in mind the relevance of the past for the present and the future. In Hungary, for example, the tragic fall of the Hungarian State in the battle of Mohács against the Ottoman Empire in 1526 was reevaluated after World War I and the Treaty of Trianon, which was a comparable loss. However, the history of the multiethnic Hungarian kingdom can easily connect the two events, because the consequences of the first, which included changes in the ethnic structure of society, clearly contributed to the second.³³ We cannot separate ourselves from the present or from those elements of the past that in the course of history became relevant for society as a whole. The need for identity both at the collective and the individual (which are interrelated) levels necessitates memory. Individual identity is always

30 In Hungary Gábor Gyáni wrote about the phenomenon. See: Gyáni, *Az elveszített múlt*, 68–84; 85–102.

31 See e.g. Wilson, “A Critical Portrait,” 34–35; Jenkins, “Introduction.”

32 Pennebaker and Gonzales, “Making History,” 172–75; Blatz and Ross, “Historical Memories,” 226.

33 On the tragic image of Mohács: Gyáni, *Az elveszített múlt*, 117–33.

part of a greater group-level identity.³⁴ Although perhaps not in the form of a unified, closed system of cultural memory (as Heller pointed out), but modern societies and historians as members of these societies can still have a “stock” of common memories that can be considered the basis of identification in some way or another. From the point of view of national history, the narrative positing a connection between the battle of Mohács and Trianon is partly the result of an actual widespread self-interpretation (Hungarians have endured great losses), which was supported and even fueled by the prevailing political power.

How can society select from among different historical events? What meanings will be attributed to September 11 a few decades from now? Will it be a main chapter in the books on the history of the 21st century or only a footnote? According to the findings of research concerning events of the past, there is a kind of social dynamics working in communities which make memories durable.³⁵ Generally, we can better recall unexpected, spectacular, shocking events, but only events which remain relevant endure as memories because they brought about significant changes in people’s lives and they have been used in the fashioning of a positive image of the community.³⁶ According to the results of a follow up study in the US, in the future September 11th is more likely to be considered an important chapter in history than the Gulf War, which did not prove to be that significant after all, despite the overall effect of the media coverage of the war. The streets of American cities were empty because people stayed home and watched the war on TV. In the beginning, it seemed (at least according to the official rhetoric) that an international coalition emerged after the fall of the Soviet Union which would fight for freedom, justice, and democracy. One year later, however, the troops returned home, Saddam Hussein was still in power in Iraq, and there was no consensus on the part of the democratic powers about the aim of the war. Were they fighting for oil or democracy? To sum up, as far as its consequences were concerned this war was not significant.³⁷ At the same time September 11th, in addition to being directly relevant to many people, produced very strong negative emotions, fear, worry, and incertitude in American society. Based on the analysis of 75,000 blogs, scholars claimed that after the first shock people were seeking the company of family and friends and tried to share their experiences in order to distance themselves from the experience. As a result, it

34 Somers, “The Narrative Constitution.”

35 Erdelyi, “Forgetting and Remembering,” 276.

36 Pennebaker and Gonzales, “Making History,” 171–93.

37 *Ibid.*, 172.

became a shared, collectively formed, and later collectively recalled common memory, thus more and more a real collective memory.³⁸ Switching to a “we mode”, people more frequently used the personal noun “we”, and they were more attentive to each other. Conversely, we have ample evidence of the fact that the lack of mutual support after a tragic event produced negative effects, for instance in Chicago after the 1871 fire or in Dallas after the assassination of Kennedy, events which were followed by a significantly higher death rate. For those who were directly affected by a shocking event it was more difficult to get over it. They faced the difficulty of finding an appropriate form of communication for traumatic memory. I would make one last point concerning the audience. If there is a compassionate, attentive audience then it is always easier to communicate shocking experiences as memory narratives.³⁹

According to psychological research, past events can be best integrated into memory between the ages of 13 and 25. Adolescence and early adulthood are particularly important from the point of view of identity formation.⁴⁰ We retain significantly more memories from this period than from other periods. For those who experienced World War II as young adults, September 11, 2001 was less significant than it was for younger generations. There are differences concerning possible future communicative memories as they have been theorized by Halbwachs and Assmann. They are not equally suitable as potential cultural memories. Events and celebrated personalities once considered significant might lose their appeal for society. Some of them become marginal, since they cease to be the source of consensus because they are highly disputed. Instead of symbols, they are rather seen as burdens. One could take Christopher Columbus as an example. First, he was celebrated as a hero. Then, his fame was overshadowed by new discoveries, but in the mid-16th century he began to become popular again. In the 18th century, he was considered a national hero in the United States, but by the end of the 19th century he was simply associated with important discoveries. At the same time, in France Columbus was seen as one of the greatest Christian missionaries. By the middle of the 20th century, however when the colonial past had become a burden for democratic societies, his name was frequently used in the context of imperialism and even genocide. No surprise that the 500th

38 Ibid., 179–83.

39 Ricoeur, *History, Memory, Forgetting*, 505; Heller, *Trauma*, 14; Erős, *Trauma*, 23–26.

40 Pennebaker and Gonzales, “Making History,” 173.

anniversary of his arrival in the Americas was not really celebrated and indeed was almost ignored.⁴¹

The same events can be remembered in different ways. World War II is generally evaluated negatively by Poles and neutrally or positively by Russians (mainly members of the older generations). According to the American psychologist James Wertsch, there are schematic narrative templates which represent a general view of history and guide the interpretation of national history without going into details. Russian history, for example, is represented in the minds of ordinary Russian people according to the following simple schema: Russia was always a peaceful country, which was suddenly invaded by foreign powers and suffered huge losses; through heroic fights, Russia finally triumphed over its enemies. We can discover elements of academic history in this scheme, though in a very simplified form. The public use of history reminds one of the functioning of memory: it is constructed by the needs of identity. The Hungarian version of the schematic narrative template reflects another narrative deep structure of collective memory which is centered around losses and inevitable failure. Collective identity is strengthened by mourning, which can be dangerous if a society has not worked through earlier experiences. Continuous reliving of the past can produce an inflexible identity firmly attached to the past. What is the relevance of the schematic structure when we try to concentrate on memory, history, and the contemporary?

For me, the schema represents the contemporary intersection of history and memory in the service of identity. Professional history, in addition to producing and reconstructing data and facts in a scientific way and establishing the interrelationships among facts, perhaps in a less scientific manner often provides a kind of a raw material for the public. In order to be applicable to the purpose of identity construction, history is used in a highly selective way. The source of selection is identity. The collective self-image of societies and of respective social groups cannot do without reliable historical material because to some extent it has to be anchored in real events and places. The meaning of these events and places is not determined by history alone, it can change according to eventual identity claims. Contemporary relevance necessarily results in oversimplification. Objective, impartial accounts of the past are problematic because they cannot always be easily integrated into personal and collective identity, which are better adapted to the schematic interpretations of history.

41 Ibid., 187–88.

As I mentioned earlier, identity as a multi-layered phenomenon has more facets. The historical layer, which become manifest in the form of narratives, is the eminent source of identity as a collective entity. This collective identity seeks a favorable self-image and, as a result, has a highly selective, perspectival character, playing down aggression, for example, on behalf of the state and community. A narrative deep layer of Hungarian history's collective memory emphasizes pointless struggle and inevitable failure.⁴² Considering the great endeavors in Hungarian history, this picture is not unrealistic. Collective identity can be mainly strengthened on the basis of common mourning for the past 500 years. Again, if a society has not worked through its past, excessive mourning can lead to ceaseless reliving and to an inflexible identity that rigidly adheres to the past.⁴³

20th-century history is a huge repository of traumatic events. There is much to mourn. In Hungary (as in many other countries, especially in those of the multi-ethnic region of Central Europe), there are hardly any social groups which did not suffer considerable losses over the course of the previous century: wars, genocide, executions, the Treaty of Trianon, deportations, population exchange, violent collectivization – mainly as a result of political regimes based on ideologies. Ethnic, confessional, and social groups of a great variety fell victim to these powers and ideologies.⁴⁴ As many 20th-century biographies indicate, losses and traumas are here to stay in the aloof and isolated victims and in their offspring.⁴⁵

For the time being, traumatic experiences have more real consequences at the level of personal traumas. In an atmosphere of mistrust, they cannot become common cultural traumas which are widely admitted in society after the act of self-inspection, which potentially can lead to a clearer social conscience, stronger social solidarity, and perhaps even the transformation of collective identity. This is not an easy task, however, because it is often hard to find an impartial “third side” that would create the necessary condition for the social interrogation of

42 The social psychologist Ferenc Pataki about the deep layer of Hungarian memory in a Wertschian manner, stressing the role of inevitable failure. Pataki, “Kollektív emlékezet.”

43 Ricoeur, *History, Memory, Forgetting*, 79. Erős, *Trauma*, 17–20: About the consequences of collective traumas.

44 See e.g.: Argejő, “A hatalomnak alávett test”; Bögre, *Asszonyországok*; Brahm, *A népiértés politikája*; Matuska, *A megtorlás napjai*; Ö. Kovács, “‘Ekkora gyűlölet még nem volt a falunkban, mint most’”; Pető, “Budapest ostroma”; Saád, *Telepesszók*; Standeisky, “A kommunista polgárellenség”; Szederjesi, *Megtorlások évszázada*; Tóth, *Hazatértek*.

45 Losonczi, *Sorsba fordult történelem*, 294; Erős, *Az identitás*, 117–18.

the traumatic events by providing objective information on these events for a wider public.⁴⁶

Groups, Pasts, and Relevance

With the changing relationship between history and “truth,” academic history has become merely one version among many, and it is less and less suitable for the purpose of identity politics. Fueled by the singular emotional perspective of collective memory, identity can renew itself also on the basis of losses and mourning. As society is broken up into several memory groups, macro level inquiries are likely to give way to micro level investigations. With the increasingly widespread confession and recognition of sufferings and losses, and with their increasingly central role in history and international relations, the micro level gains ascendancy over the super-individual, and this makes it possible for professional history to connect individual and collective history with the mediation of microhistory.⁴⁷ This is increasingly seen as a moral duty for academic history.

The real significance of an event taking place in a society unfolds only afterwards, depending on whether or not it has the potential to change society as a widespread communicative memory. It is also important to know how a given community is characterized by the memories that anchor our collective identity. Flashbulb memories, identified in the late 1970s by researchers, are the consequences of the very exact and detailed recollection of extraordinary events. These types of memories are particularly vivid regarding the time and circumstances of certain events, events that were extremely important for the subject even in the moment in which they happened, as if someone actually had turned a light on to see things better. Flashbulb memories, however, do not have equal relevance for each social group. As it turned out in the 1970s, when this type of memory was discovered, the assassination of Martin Luther King was much more of a flashbulb memory for African Americans than it was for others. The same applies to September 11, 2001 in an international context: US citizens were much more affected than others.⁴⁸ Being closed within their ingroups, people react differently, and they are prone to overlook the faults of

46 Giesen, “Social Trauma.”

47 Gabriel, “Introduction,” 4. About the danger of leaving history to non professional historians and history serving the purpose of identity, eventually the marginalization of academic history: Levi, “Historians,” 85–86.

48 Roediger, Zaromb, and Butler, “The Role of Repeated Retrieval,” 150–53.

the members of their groups more easily than they will overlook the faults of members of so-called outgroups.⁴⁹ Given this bias, one of the most important social functions of memory would be to remind us to our duties, which we can construe as obligations which provide us with what we as communities tend to allege as moral character.⁵⁰ As we have seen, alongside notions of past glory, tragedies can also be subjects of social memories. The result is more or less the same in both cases: strengthening group solidarity, emphasizing the mutual commitments of members and the outlines of the group itself. Our victories and our sufferings are construed as unique, and they belong only to us, no one else can possibly understand them.⁵¹ Recently, the growing wave of apologies on the international scene directs our attention to the potentially positive consequences of giving up rigid “ingroup positions” and emphasizing the importance of a notion of the mutually accepted common fate of the international community.⁵² In order to create peaceful relations, we surely have to begin working through our (real or imagined) grievances. It is not clear, however, whether our incorporated conscience (which has a deep social origin in the form of common rules) would be willing to undergo an overall self-inspection, or only a limited one relating to the past of its own society.

*

The interrelated nature of memory, history and identity is one of the most important phenomena for every past and present society and consequently also for those studying social groups in the present and the past. As for the future, this interrelation seems to be so deeply rooted in human nature that we are hardly able to get rid of it. It is an interrelation which is highly relevant both for the social sciences and the humanities. Using the results of psychological and anthropological research, we can better understand the role memory and identity have played in historical processes both at the national and the international level. Interdisciplinary cooperation of the social sciences (above all psychology and anthropology) and history can help us make sense of the way people as members of groups relate to one another in time by the means of memory and through identification.

49 Blatz and Ross, “Historical Memories,” 227–29.

50 Poole, “Memory, History,” 162–63.

51 Blatz and Ross, “Historical Memories,” 230.

52 Ibid., 230–34; Gyáni, *Az elveszített múlt*, 373–74.

After these general statements, I should return to the problems I originally raised, namely the relationship between history (historical writing) and memory (individual, collective and cultural). Following a functional approach, one can identify one of the main tasks of memory as providing a tool with which to travel, mentally, in time, i.e. a means of summoning (or crafting while appearing to summon) information from the past.⁵³ Past knowledge can serve many practical purposes in our everyday lives, but humans have one particular need that we cannot do without as individuals living in societies: identities. Some information from the past is only relevant for us because it concerns who we are. Self-definition and self-image have more than a merely decorative role here. In order to be able to live in society, we need to have a coherent self consisting of more or less reliable self-knowledge provided by our memories of ourselves in earlier times.⁵⁴ This view can be considered general among psychologists. As it was formulated by neuroscientists:

We are not who we are simply because we think. We are who we are because we can remember what we have thought about. ... Memory is the glue that binds our mental life, the scaffolding that holds our personal history and that makes it possible to grow and change throughout life. When memory is lost, as in Alzheimer's disease, we lose the ability to recreate our past, and as a result, we lose our connection with ourselves and with others.⁵⁵

If memory is so important in the life of the individual it surely has some significance in the lives of social groups as well. The overlap of personal and collective, historical, cultural memories in the course of self-definition, for example in the case of defining ourselves as individual members of a national and/or a religious community, highlights the interconnected nature of individual and collective identity as a result of their common supra-individual sources for identification, consisting of history and, broadly speaking, cultural memory.⁵⁶

Considering the issue from the perspective of history writing and, more particularly, contemporary history, one is prompted to ask whether or not there are any relevant consequences. The notion of the present as having a constantly

53 For the functional approach and the need to study memory in an interdisciplinary way, see: Boyer, "What are Memories for?"

54 Conway, "Memory and the Self," 597.

55 Squire and Kandel, *Memory*, IX.

56 See e.g. Assmann, *Religion*, 6; Wertsch, "Collective Memory."

moving horizon can lead to definitional problems and eventually to impasses.⁵⁷ Either we live in the eternal present or, seen from the opposite extreme position, there are only vanishing seconds for the present between past and future. Accepting a realist view of time, with duration and succession, we can attempt to conceptualize and reconstruct past, present, and future. We can speak about past pasts, presents, and futures, present pasts, presents, and futures, and of course of future pasts, presents, and futures as well, based on the mutual relationship among these time dimensions.⁵⁸ Using this conceptual tool, we can avoid the traps of the eternal presentism of our own time without losing the advantage of being able to study every historical period as contemporary history with possible perspectives from the past and the future. The problem, however, with the actual present in which we live and the contemporary history of this present is its unsettled, unfinished character, which makes it very difficult to interpret in clear cut time dimensions. So the question—and it is a very troubling question indeed—is whether or not we can identify our present position. I think that the functional approach to memory both at the individual and the social level can help solve this problem. If we take the general human need for self-consistency into consideration, the interconnectedness of memory and identity shed light on the overall context of historical writing. Actual self-definition and future planning serve as the basis of society's interpretation of its own past. However, society in itself cannot produce these interpretations without historical contents formulated by the science of history. Political forces and influential intellectuals exert a kind of distortion when they use the “raw material” of academic history for the purpose of strengthening identity and feelings of belonging. Professional historians, mainly those who research the recent past, often feel obliged to react to out-of-context interpretations and distortions in order to defend their position as the legitimate producers of historical knowledge. Since history in its scientific form is less appropriate for identity purposes, we can claim that there is a necessary inconsistency between the two.⁵⁹ The actual present helps orient people with the support of common historical, cultural memories. It provides a kind of anchor for definitions of the present through memories and a point of departure towards the future. The context of contemporary history is heavily influenced by the past in the form of memories, both for the wider public and

57 Koselleck, *Zeitschichten*, 247–48.

58 *Ibid.*, 249.

59 See e.g. Wertsch, “Collective Memory and Narrative Templates,” comparing history and memory.

for historians. The influence is manifold, for it reflects social needs and political aspirations, as well as the research areas of the study of history.

These interrelationships notwithstanding, there are significant differences between public and scientific interpretations of the past. Defined by the brokered memories of professional historians, history is expected to be reflective at least, i.e. to reflect on its own topics, methods, and narratives, as well as its position and functions within society. With the help of social scientific concepts and methods, which are especially relevant in the case of contemporary research, history can strengthen its position as a practice of critical observation of social processes and production of scientific knowledge.

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