History Contra Collective Memory: Collective Memory's Finite Province

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Abstract
In the humanities and social sciences, with the rise of memory studies, there has been an important theoretical shift in how we engage the past. What used to be studied with the methodically elaborate field of history no longer seems adequate. With memory becoming an ever-present framework with which to look at culture, literature, social phenomena, politics, and the arts, a theoretical conviction has come to prevail that says collective memory is a larger framework within which history and other approaches to the past must be situated. This paper tries to address this theoretical conviction of conflating history with collective memory by arguing that collective memory cannot be a be-all umbrella term encapsulating historical representation or other approaches to the past such as tradition. It does so by uncovering the ground for such a conviction, during which a clearer view of the role of history and the limits of collective memory emerge. The investigation shows that indiscriminate application of the concept of collective memory in every approach dealing with the past makes the concept almost meaningless and betrays its two crucial characters, or limits: that of i) temporal finiteness and ii) fragmentariness. In so doing, it restores the vital role history plays in trying to get at the truth of the past. The article concludes by calling for deeper engagement with foundational conceptual and theoretical issues in collective memory research if it is to establish itself as a longstanding field of inquiry.

Keywords
Theory, cultural memory, interdisciplinarity, historical epistemology, cultural studies

1. Introduction

Memory has become a central theme of inquiry in the humanities and social sciences in recent times. The term "collective memory" is thus often deployed for understanding and explaining groups and their representations of the past. While collective remembrance as a practice (oral cultures, rituals, etc.) has always been a part of the human culture, this emergence of collective memory as a distinct self-reflective field of analysis is of recent origin. A correlating outcome of this development is a shift in the theoretical landscape in how we engage the past: what used to be studied with the methodically elaborate field of *history* no longer seems adequate. With memory becoming an ever-present framework with which to look at culture, literature, the arts,

politics, and society, it seems to have enveloped the study of history into itself in the way we study and relate to the past. We see it in the work of contemporary cultural scholars and historians (J. Assmann, 1988/1995, 2011; A. Assmann, 2011; Guha, 2019b) where historical representation is often conflated with collective memory, resulting in confusion. This paper tries to address this confusion arguing that collective memory cannot be a be-all umbrella term encapsulating historical representation as these scholars have suggested.

The paper is divided into two parts. Since we cannot satisfactorily address the conflation issue without going into the origin of collective memory as a field of analysis, the first part deals with the emergence of collective memory as a self-reflective tool of understanding and a self-reflexive phenomenon. The second part tackles our main issue, which is that of the conflation of collective memory with historical representation by contemporary cultural scholars. We do this first by identifying the ground of such a claim, the changes in the theoretical terrain that led to the questioning of the historical method, which necessitated collective memory to superimpose itself over other approaches to the past. Then, drawing on philosopher Jeffrey Barash's (2016) recent work in the area, we arrive at our central argument which is that this superimposition, or conflation, is mistaken and only leads to confusion. Historical representation and collective memory inhabit two different, distinct realms, and while they may have intersecting points, they are of different orders. I conclude by suggesting that collective memory, if it is to establish itself as a longstanding field of inquiry, needs more thorough foundational theoretical and conceptual clarification.

2. Emergence of collective memory as an analytical tool and a self-reflexive phenomenon

As a social practice, collective remembrance has always been a part of the human culture. It encompasses the tradition inscribed in oral cultures, rituals, and other forms of social representations, which are expressed through language and other systems of symbolic interaction, such as gestures (body) and organisation of space. Collective memory in this form is spontaneous and lacks self-awareness and hence is un-self-reflexive. However collective memory as it has come to be understood today, the terms of which were set in the pioneering work of sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1950/1980; 1925/1992) is not the same. What characteristically distinguishes our contemporary fascination with collective memory from the earlier form of collective remembrance is it contains a self-reflective moment which is absent in the former. While the former had an immediate, embodied form the latter which manifests itself in an ongoing phenomenon which historian David Blight (2009) calls "memory boom" – that sudden surge of interest in memory around the globe today since the 1980s, evident in the proliferation of archives, museums, commemorations, monuments, national libraries, and most importantly in the emergence of memory studies as a distinct field of analysis – has this self-reflective moment where it looks into itself. And hence collective memory in its contemporary guise has a theoretical focus, both as a specific topic of investigation as well as a framework of analysis. To be clear, this does not mean that this latter form of collective memory is solely self-reflective. Collective remembering as a social practice is still present here too, but as cultural scholar Astrid Erll (2011) points out, "Both the practice of remembering and reflection on that practice have become an all-encompassing

sociocultural, interdisciplinary, and international phenomenon" (p. 1). In other words, this moment of reflection is part of a larger process of self-reflexivity taking place. Collective memory which used to be immediate has now not only become self-aware but also feeds back this newly developed self-consciousness about itself back into the world of practice, thus altering the way collectives remember.

This shift to a more self-reflective form of collective memory can be attributed to two factors which are associated with the rise of modernity. The first and the deeper reason is the emergence of self-consciousness as the quintessential modern temper. In his book *Classic, Romantic, and Modern* historian Jacque Barzun (1991) wrote, "The first striking trait of the modern ego is self-consciousness" (p. 117). Modernity has brought with it a turn in the human mind where the mind looking into itself has become its core feature. Similarly sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991) wrote in context of late modern society that "the self becomes a *reflexive project*" (p. 32). His view that due to the emergent self-reflexivity in modernity "social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character" (Giddens, 1990, p. 38) aptly applies to the entry of the new self-reflective moment in collective memory. Collective memory is now not the same as it used to be during pre-modern period. A new dynamic has set in.

The second factor is a cumulation of changes which occurred in the twentieth century social, political, and intellectual sphere. These changes, according to Blight, are:

i) the broad revolution in social history that was brought over the course of the century

ii) the linguistic turn of 1970s (more on it below) which sought to establish a link between collective memory and linguistic and narrative phenomena

iii) (related with ii) the widespread debate over the nature and validity of the constructedness of narrative and knowledge itself where the notion of neutral/objective narratives was questioned, and

iv) the two great wars, the Holocaust and other bloody violence, and the focus on national identities that followed the clash of empires making us more concerned with how nations organise their pasts (Blight, 2009, p. 241)

As Blight puts it rhetorically, with these broad changes happening, "how could "memory studies" be far behind?" Blight's view also corresponds with historian Alon Confino when he writes that the rise of reflective collective memory has "been influenced by the growing interest in the Holocaust; by new approaches to nationhood and to the ways nations construct their pasts; and by a diffused body of work called cultural studies, which often centred on issues of identity (including, among others, postcolonialism and gender studies)" (Confino, 2008, p. 79).

Let us now look at how collective memory has come to be an ever-present framework with which we study and relate with the past and how it has seemingly subsumed historical representation under its wide wings.

3. Conflation of collective memory with historical representation

Egyptologist Jan Assmann has been an influential figure in the field of collective memory studies. He classifies collective memory into two broad non-opposing kinds. The first is what he calls "communicative memory" which is the memory of living generations or the recent past in which everyone gets to participate. As everyday memory, it is diffuse and has no fixed point which could bind it to the long future. Its most important attribute therefore is its limited temporal horizon. The second kind is "cultural memory" in which not everybody gets to participate and is characterised by distance from the everyday. This kind of memory is formed over a long period of time and is institutionalised. It has both formative and normative power, and is therefore crucial for group identity formation as it "engenders a clear system of values and differentiations in importance which structure the cultural supply of knowledge and the symbols" (Assmann, 1995, p. 131). He even includes repressed and unconscious aspects of past group experience in this type of memory (Assmann, 2006, p. 9).

And thus for Assmann collective memory is an all-encompassing concept that comprises not only living memory and the (evidenced) historical past, but also the whole of cultural heritage inscribed in myths, symbols, rites, legends, monuments, literary canon, and in addition to it, the unconscious. In this view, historical representation is an element within the broader framework of collective memory and this, by implication, means the study of history can be overridden with the new emerging field of memory studies. In his book *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization,* Assmann (2011) writes,

> "What counts for cultural memory is not factual but remembered history. One might even say that cultural memory transforms factual into remembered history, thus turning it into myth. Myth is foundational history that is narrated in order to illuminate the present from the standpoint of its origins . . . Through memory, history becomes myth" (pp. 37-38).

As is clear from the passage above, Assmann sees cultural memory (which is collective memory) as a weightier notion than historical representation. History for him is a medium through which we reach a greater end – in this case, myth and the rest of cultural heritage inscribed in rituals, literary creations, and monuments which he describes as "objectivized culture [that] has the structure of memory" (Assmann, 1995, p. 128). This is a position also defended by cultural scholar Aleida Assmann (2011).

Similarly, writing about his recent book *History and Collective Memory in South Asia, 1200-2000*, Indian historian Sumit Guha (2019a) has the following to say,

> "The book is an effort to view the practice of history through a wider and longer span than historians usually do. It argues that history is a part of collective memory and is therefore embedded in and constrained by the social institutions that produce knowledge. "Collective memory" is larger and more enduring than either individual memory or historical memory" (Guha, 2019b).

And then there are others such as historians Peter Burke (1997) and Ludmilla Jordanova (2000) who, in making no distinction between history and memory, effectively lump history together with the emerging field of memory studies.

Thus there is a prevailing theoretical conviction that collective memory is a larger framework on which history should be situated, that all kinds of approaches to the past may be grouped under the former's rubric. This conviction however creates confusion and does not acknowledge the limits of collective memory. But before we go into problems of conflating history with collective memory it would be appropriate to first consider the ground on which such conviction is built.

Historical skepticism and contact with the past

Starting in the 1960s and 1970s, as part of the linguistic turn Blight referred to earlier, the historian's claim to knowledge of truth/reality of the past (or at least something close to it) has been challenged from two fronts. One is from the literary theory standpoint seen in the work of figure such as Roland Barthes; the other from within historiography itself, prime example of which is Hayden White. In his essay *The Discourse of History*, Barthes, using Nietzsche's skepticism of truth essentially being a linguistic construct (Nietzsche, 1901/1967, p 267) as his starting point, declared that in historical discourse "fact never has any but a linguistic existence . . ." (Barthes, 1967/1989, p. 138). Historical writing for him is a form of literary imagination and the apparent objectivity it projects is a part of the author's rhetorical technique. In this reading there is no way of knowing the truth of the past. Attempts to do so are similar to creating realist fiction which are motivated by the author's concern of the present. This same sceptical position is expressed by White, himself influenced by Barthes, in historiography. In his essay *The Historical Text as Literary Artifact* he essentially argues that historical writing is literary writing and should be treated as such and not as objective science. He writes: "historical narratives . . . are: verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented* as *found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences" (White, 1974/1986, p. 82). This idea that history is narrative prose shaped by the historian's imagination blurs the distinction between historiography and literature and in so doing undermines the historian's claim of revealing the truth about the past. The historian's past is merely a projection of the present.

With historical representation's role essentially reduced to imagination and little else, the question now turns to how we can then address the true past. What are the ways in which we can access the real past? Or are we stuck, hermetically sealed within a solipsistic present for eternity, the past forever out of reach? At least this is the conclusion the Barthean and Whitean views of history lead us to. As per this conclusion, there is no way of establishing contact with the real past, no way to draw a line of continuity with human existence in previous eras and epochs. In other words, the course of human historical development is no longer intelligible. Social cohesion, order, and continuity, which are founded on the assumption of human historical development, no longer have grounds to stand on. It is at this moment that attention started shifting towards collective memory as a carrier of past human existence, one that is able to establish contact with the past and draw the line of continuity. As Barash writes, "at this precise juncture, theoretical attention began to turn toward the phenomenon of collective memory and to its role as a source of social cohesion and continuity" (Barash, 2017, p 212). Accordingly, collective memory has come to replace history as a truer way of engaging with the past. While the historical method can still *relate* with the past, it cannot *reveal* and establish continuity with the real past. The onus of connecting

with the real past now falls to collective memory. And thus history's role is subordinated to that of collective memory – collective memory which suggests a continuity with the real past as inscribed in cultural heritage and totems passed down to the present. Collective memory is now taken to be a larger concept than history.

'Knowing' the past and collective memory

However, there are severe problems with this theoretical conviction that conflates history with collective memory. First of all, as Barash points out, a definition of collective memory that is so broad and expansive as to encompass every form of cultural production across time, from literary legacies and myths to methods of historical scholarship, to even include repressed and unconscious aspects of past group experience, leads to confusion (Barash, 2016, p. 174). If collective memory is to be so undifferentiated and general, then the question of facts and truth of remembered events no longer seems to matter, which is reminiscent of Assmann's conclusion in the passage quoted earlier: "through memory, history becomes myth". Establishing contact with the true past, which is the reason for collective memory's supposed primacy over historical representation, turns out to be based on an uncertain premise. The suggestion of *continuity* which collective memory is supposedly able to calibrate with the true past thus appear to be founded on illusion.

Secondly, returning to the question of real historical past, historical representation (or the method of history) may not be entirely cut-off from the real past as the contemporary sceptical reading of history suggests. Over the years we have seen several critics coming up against sceptical historicism's total rejection of the truth of past (Ginzburg 1991, 1992; Carr, 1986; Ricoeur, 1984, 2004; Gossman, 1990). Thus historian Carlo Ginzburg has the following to say: "The fashionable injunction to study reality as a text should be supplemented by the awareness that no text can be understood without a reference to extratextual realities" (Ginzburg, 1991, p. 84). In other words, even if history involves a projection of the historian's present, there is always a running concern with objectivity. Similarly, from a phenomenological perspective, David Carr argues that ordinary persons have an essential *connection* with that past, what he calls the *nonthematic* or *prethematic* awareness of the past, and that is how we escape total ignorance of it. Though he doesn't equate this connection with *knowing* he says that "the historical past is *there* for all of us, that it *figures* in our ordinary view of things, whether we are historians or not" (Carr, 1986, p. 3). Philosopher Paul Ricoeur, likewise, emphasises the truth of history even while ascertaining that the historian's subjectivity is unavoidable. He is of the opinion that there is a distinction to be made between history and fiction based on the historian's contract of truth with the past, that "[historical] representation constitutes a fully legitimate operation that has the privilege of bringing to light the intended reference of historical discourse" (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 236). In all of these accounts, the point is made clear: historical representation has a running concern with truth without which it cannot be historical representation. Verbal gymnastics and rhetoric may be involved in history writing but there is always the question of the truth in the background. Opaque and seemingly impenetrable though this truth may be, it does sometimes reveal itself through the historical method, through painstaking effort and rigour of the historian, through application of what Barash calls *historical sense* "understood as the capacity to apprehend

nuances that distinguish particular sensibilities and the specific logic that predominate in a given present—and that are couched in the idioms and categories of living, contemporaneous memory—from a past to which they are alien" (Barash, 1997, pp. 172-73). Here Barash makes the following interesting point,

> "not only . . . fictive elements . . . enter into historical narrative, but also for the inverse reason: in specific instances, the novel may draw on . . . the capacity of the imagination to illuminate symbolic structures that delineate the "reality" of an historical context" (Barash, 2016, p. 182).

and then again,

> "Might one not, however, legitimately draw a different conclusion from their premises? If we accept the idea of an analogy between historiography and works of fiction, might we not account for this analogy not only in terms of the literary qualities of the historian's craft, but also of the eminently historical elements that contribute to the evocative force of exemplary works of fiction? Might it be that the historical aspect of fiction lies not only in the fanciful relations it creates between past facts and events, but in the historical sense it imaginatively engages?" (Barash, 2016, pp. 176-77)

He thus reverses the relativist claims of the historical sceptics and instead points towards the truth value of imagination itself. Asserting that the notion of imagination as used by Barthes and his school is narrow in the sense that it is pitted against truth, he proposes a broader notion of imagination, one that is not antithetical to truth, and could work with historical sense to permeate into the thick past.

> "Imagination in its full scope, placed in the service of what I have termed the "historical sense," permits us to distinguish between the timely plausibilities of contemporary existence and past possibilities that have lapsed into the sphere of the unfashionable and the anachronistic" (Barash, 2016, pp. 181-82).

History writing, as well as fiction, could both draw on historical sense and help us delineate the reality of a historical context from present concerns. Imagination could thus assist us in illuminating historical reality.

Collective memory's finite province

Let us now take a pause and reflect on what we have done so far. In exposing the limits of historical scepticism (thus restoring historical method's indispensable role in trying to get at the truth of the past) and the problems associated with so generalised a notion of collective memory (as forwarded by Jan Assmann and his school), we have destabilised the intellectual rationale that allowed for the conflation of the historical method with collective memory. Here we must once again reconsider and return to the relationship between the study of history and collective memory. It is important at this point to look back to what the founder of collective memory studies, Maurice Halbwachs, had to say on this relationship. Halbwachs made a clear distinction between the two, saying collective memory is more shifting in nature as we go from one living generation to its eventual end. The *continuity* often associated with collective memory fades with

the last remaining member of the generation who experienced past events and can explicate on the context in which they were situated. Once such events are cut off from living memory due to the natural advance of time, when they already lie too distant in the past, that is the moment historical research steps in and tries to reconstruct those events. The *temporal* dimension thus plays an important role in his distinction of collective memory from history. Another difference according to him is collective memory by definition pertains to a group and thus there are as many collective memories as there are groups. In other words it is *fragmented*. History on the other hand is "unitary", by which he meant universal and objective. There may be different, or even differing, historical accounts (of different countries, let us say), but ultimately they are and must be compatible with each other. These different accounts are variations of *one* history (Halbwachs, 1950/1980, pp. 50-87).

Halbwachs account is helpful in breaking down the generalized account of collective memory that Assmann and his school provided. Their account fails to appreciate the two crucial aspects of collective memory which makes it distinctive: i) its temporal dimension and ii) its fragmentary nature. Collective memory does indeed serve as a source for continuity and social cohesion but it does so within a temporal context, within a "horizon on contemporaneity" shared by overlapping, living generations, as Barash puts it (Barash, 2016, p. 88). What this aspect makes clear is it brings into focus the zone of its conduct, revealing its specific finite province, demarcating it from areas beyond its scope. It is within this zone that collective memory flows. And even within this zone, during the transitions between generations, there are shifts and modifications in the nature of the continuity. While Assmann's account does include this finite aspect of collective memory in his "communicative memory", his definition of collective memory isn't restricted to this zone and includes "cultural memory" that goes far beyond the living generations. He doesn't think temporality is an essential feature of collective memory, and that is at the source of his generalising approach towards collective memory. Turning to the second aspect, the fluid and fragmentary nature of collective memory is opposed not only to the methodically elaborate field of history but also to the codified, institutionalised practices we call tradition. The latter needs reiteration. Tradition and collective memory may work on each other but ultimately tradition aims towards codification and unity, whereas collective memory is unstructured and fragmentary and is time-bound. And so we see here a paradox emerging in the nature of collective memory. While collective memory orients itself towards continuity and cohesion, it does so within the horizon on contemporaneity. And if this is so, then in what way and to what extent does collective memory serve as a vehicle of continuity beyond this horizon? There is not much clarity around this question yet and needs further research. There is a tendency among collective memory scholars, unquestionably influenced by Assmann, to mythologise and even mystify collective memory. The reason for this, I believe, is due to their failure to fully appreciate the finite dimension of collective memory and its paradoxical role we just dealt with. Quite apart from the damage and destruction this mystification and mythologisation of collective memory could bring into practical affairs, in the form of let us say fake news or pogroms or virulent nationalisms – a topic which deserves a separate paper – one of the most important challenges the humanities and social sciences are facing today surrounds the theory of collective memory. If collective memory is to become a sound field of study, the theory of collective memory needs to be fully addressed. Here I would like to point out that, so far, for unknown reasons, not too many

philosophers have involved themselves in the collective memory discourse. I believe this needs to change. Some of the more serious foundational worries of collective memory research require tools only philosophers can provide. The study of collective memory needs the intervention of more philosophers.

Before I conclude the section, let me briefly outline the differences in methodologies involved in historical representation and collective memory. The study of history is first and foremost guided by the scientific method and involves careful effort and rigour to try to retrieve the past. It presupposes the opacity of the past, i.e., the past as something not immediately available and may be accessed only through the application of *historical sense* combined with the tools and techniques it has developed over the years. Fundamentally a critical discourse, it involves studying and comparing sources of diverse types obtained through a wide range of methodologies including palaeography, genealogy, numismatics, heraldry, epigraphy, the study of archives, records, texts of all kinds, historical geography, etc. Collective memory on the other hand is not a critical enterprise. As Halbwachs pointed out, there may be as many collective memories as there are groups. Its methodological presupposition that it can apply to both group recollections of living generations and the past observed and extracted through the historical method is incongruous and contradictory. Very often we see this contradiction manifesting when group recollections do not match with the findings of historical research. This is not to say that collective memory is always against the methods and rules of the historical method. Indeed collective memory do trace the representations of the past in museums, architecture, monuments, historiography, literature, and so forth, but it does so in an uncritical way. There is always an ideological and social-political context to it. This uncritical aspect of collective memory is a huge challenge for collective memory research.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, first, we dealt with the rise of collective memory studies, the mental, intellectual, and socio-political changes that led to it. Then we tried to address a theoretical conviction that emerged from this rise, a conviction largely influenced by cultural scholar Jan Assmann, that of the conflation of collective memory with other approaches to the past such as historical representation. We then tried to uncover the rationale behind such a conviction. This led us to a discussion of historical epistemology, taking us to the scepticism represented by Barthes and White, where we found that historical representation is not entirely cut off from the real past. Once this truth aspect of history shows up, we are compelled to reconsider the theoretical conviction that conflates history with collective memory. Next we took a closer look at collective memory's claim of preserving continuity with the real past. Gaps then started to surface between its claim and its finite nature as evidenced by its fragmentariness and temporality. We are no longer sure if collective memory can really serve as a vehicle of continuity with the real distant past. We come to suspect its broad character as merely illusory. We ended our paper by calling for a deeper engagement with the theory of collective memory, and in this more participation of philosophers is necessary.

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