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# The Generation of Memory Reflections on the "Memory Boom" in Contemporary Historical Studies

Jay Winter

Jay Winter delivered the following in the form of a lecture at the Canadian War Museum on 31 October 2000. A distinguished academic, Winter has been writing about the cultural history of the First World War for nearly three decades. He has taught at the University of Cambridge in England and is presently at Yale University. Since 1988, he has been a director of the Historial de la grande guerre in Péronne, an important war museum in northern France. In this capacity, he has become familiar with a great many institutions of war and military history around the world and he has great knowledge and familiarity with the important historical and intellectual debates that will be fundamental to the creation of a new Canadian War Museum, which is now slated to open in May 2005.

Probably Winter's best-known book is *Sites of Memory. Sites of Mourning: the Great War in*



European Cultural History published in 1995. In it, he argues that the rituals of mourning associated with commemoration after the First World War had a history stretching far back in human life and experience. In this he contradicts the thinking of Canadian historian Modris Eksteins who argued that the Great War marked the birth of the modern age. Lately, Daniel Sherman has proposed that

commemorative ceremonies and memorials are significantly politicized in the interests of state control. In the following paper Winter warns against the dangers of collective memory being collapsed into "a set of stories formed by or about the state" while also providing a rich overview of the great importance that attention to memory and culture studies has taken on in contemporary thought. These cannot be ignored in any serious attempt to lay the intellectual foundation of any new museum, and perhaps especially may have specific relevance to a new war museum.

Laura Brandon

"Whoever says memory, says Shoah." This is the cryptic remark of one of the fathers of the memory boom among historians over the last 20 years, Pierre Nora, French political scientist, publisher at the prestigious house of Gallimard, and the *agent provocateur* and inspiration behind one of the most influential ventures in cultural history in the last 20 years, *Les lieux de mémoire*. In a series of stately tomes, published between 1984 and 1992, Nora solicited and reshaped essays by leading French scholars which, taken together constitute an inventory of knowledge and conjecture about memory in the French historical context – memory as frozen in statues, in objects, in street names, in ceremonies, in political parties, in legends, in myths, even in historical works. The success of this venture has been astonishing. The collection has sold over half

a million copies in France alone. All of the essays have been translated into English, first in a three-volume edition published by Columbia University Press under the slightly odd title of *Realms of memory*; all the other chapters will appear next year in a four-volume edition published by University of Chicago Press. An exploration of German sites of memory is under way; the same is true in Italy and Portugal; and everywhere in the Anglo-Saxon world, historians young and old have found in the subject of memory, defined in a host of ways, the central organizing concept of historical study, a position once occupied by the notions of class, race, and gender. These themes have certainly not vanished, but they have been reconfigured and in certain respects overshadowed by the historical study of "memory," however defined.

Clearly something important has happened in our discipline, something we need to attend to as more than a passing fashion. What are the origins of the "memory boom"? What are its implications? Is Nora right in claiming that it is one of the cultural repercussions of the Holocaust? In tonight's lecture I hope to show that the subject of the Holocaust has indeed inspired a range of reflections on the notion of memory, trauma, and history. But there are other, distinctive sources of the contemporary obsession with memory, which arise out of a multiplicity of social, cultural, medical and economic trends and developments of an eclectic but intersecting kind. My argument is that each of these incitements to reflection on memory has its own inner logic and constituency, but that the effect of their intersection is multiplicative rather than additive. In other words, the "memory boom" has taken off because the impulses behind it add up to a whole greater than the sum of its parts.

## 1. Memory and commemoration

One clear invitation to much reflection on memory has been public commemoration. Here marking or remembering the Holocaust is a critical problem, one mixed together in very troubling ways with other kinds of commemoration. It is apparent that remembering the Holocaust has formed a significant part of the commemoration of the victims of twentieth-century war. The Holocaust, implemented between 1941 and 1945, has neither been fully integrated nor has it escaped from that contextual location.

A second concentric circle of remembrance surrounds both the Holocaust and the Second World War. It is the commemorative moment which preceded it, addressing some of the complex issues of victimhood and bereavement during and after the First World War. Taken together, these intersecting commemorations litter the calendar. In the Israeli calendar, Yom Hashoah comes one week before Remembrance day, a solemn recollection of Israeli soldiers who died in war from the period prior to the foundation of the State of Israel until today. Yom Hazicharon is followed immediately and with a wrenching change of pace and mood by Israeli Independence Day. The link between sacrifice and redemption is clear; more on that theme in a moment. For observant Jews, Tisha Be'av is still the time on the Jewish calendar to recall the Third

catastrophe, the "Dritte Churban," of the Nazi genocide, following the two prior disasters of the destruction of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem in 586BC and 70AD. On this day, redemption is linked not to the creation of the State of Israel, but to the record of catastrophe over two millenia, a record recalled with sadness and longing for the day when the Messiah will arrive. "Even though he tarries," the affirmation of faith accepts, "nonetheless I still believe." Redemption here has a direct, scriptural meaning.

How redemptive is the notation of the other moments we recall on stated days of the year marking wars? There is D-Day, VE-day, VJ day, and the two older standbys, America's Memorial Day, on 29 May, the anniversary of Appomattox, and everyone's Armistice Day on 11 November. In parts of Britain and Northern Ireland, the 1st of July, the anniversary of the Battle of the Somme, is marked collectively, as is dawn on 25 April, the day Australian and New Zealand troops landed at Gallipoli; today that day is Australian independence day. Most are framed within a narrative of liberty being purchased through the shedding of blood. Here, as in Israeli independence day, the measure is the nation state and its hard-won expression of a nation's collective life. And now we have 27 January, the day Auschwitz was liberated by the Red army. Here too commemoration cannot escape its political framework. State-sponsored commemoration is a politically sanctioned and politically funded rite of remembering in public, adjusted to a publicly or politically approved narrative. Remembering the Holocaust at this level is an extension of earlier twentieth-century commemorative forms. It locates the narrative of war crimes and victimhood within the framework of national catastrophe and national rebirth.

The case of the new Holocaust memorial to be built near the Brandenburg gate in Berlin shows the implications of this commemorative setting. The monument, a stone's throw from the new Reichstag and from Hitler's bunker, is unavoidably part of the story of Germany reborn. Some believe the monument is an essential and properly-placed part of the story; others, and I am one of them, opposed the location of a commemorative monument to victims of the Holocaust within such a narrative. Placing the monument in the heart of the national capital, geographically and metaphorically, also draws attention away from many original and sensitive commemorative forms

in Berlin and elsewhere in Germany. Focussing on the national level of notation, in my view, wrongly configures the problem of how to remember the victims of the Holocaust. The alternative to a national monument is not nothing; indeed the array of local, small-scale commemorative forms are entirely consistent with the federal, regionalized, richly complex nature of German cultural history, and helps show the multiplicity of meanings of remembrance, and indeed of history, lost in grand national narratives like that of Daniel Goldhagen.

What is true of Germany, is true of all other parts of Europe where memorials have been built. In Oradour-sur-Glâne, or in Drancy, or on the walls of the Jewish orphanage on the Île St-Louis, monuments and inscriptions help locate the Holocaust within the particular, local context of the scars left by total war in the twentieth century. None of these sites can "re-present" the Holocaust; nothing can do so in any conventional way. All they can accomplish — and it is a lot — is to suggest what is absent in European life because of the genocide, and to leave the question of its "meaning," if any, open. Daniel Liebeskind's design for the Jewish wing of the Berlin Historical Museum in Kreuzfeld goes a long way towards describing this void.

But absence is not meaning. My own view is that it is unwise to try to encapsulate the Holocaust within any particular system of meaning. To paraphrase Primo Levi, a set of events about which one cannot pose the question of "why?" is also an event about which it is impossible in any straightforward sense to pose the questions of historical context or meaning within twentieth-century history.

This extended international conversation as to the appropriate character and content of Holocaust commemoration is bound to go on, and I do not expect to persuade everyone in the audience tonight of my point of view. But for our present purposes, what is most significant about this protracted debate is the way it has made us reflect both on the notion of memory and on what kind of memories are elicited by *other* commemorative projects?

Whatever you think of these issues, it is clear that the political debate over Holocaust commemoration describes one very salient element in the "memory boom" of the last 30 years.

Nora had a point. But the national political focus of this story is somewhat misleading. The state is not the sole nor even the primary source of the recent upsurge of interest in memory, whether or not related to the Holocaust. Once again, we have to address processes which arise from many different sources, some at the seat of power, some not.

State agents, as much as those dedicated to a state in the making, have an evident interest in legitimating narratives; very often that is what they mean by "collective memory" — stories that polish the cultural credentials of their claim to power. But memory work has focussed on other collectives too. The new Viennese memorial to victims of the Holocaust, an installation designed by Rachel Whiteread is a case in point; it is a very successful urban memorial. There are many others.

The nation is only player in this commemorative ensemble. In some places (though not in others) over the past 30 years, globalization and European integration have, to a degree, diminished the stridency of some national narratives. In other cases, nationalism is a direct response to the perceived dangers of globalization. The world wide net, many French observers sadly note, is yet another *défi américain*, threatening the extinction of the Francophone world. Nationalist rhetoric has certainly not vanished, but it increasingly shares the stage with other languages of collective identity. The much-heralded end of territoriality has not yet arrived, but state-bounded narratives increasingly compete with others of a regional or ethnic kind. On both sides of the Atlantic, in the developed "north" and the developing "south," many ethnic groups and disenfranchised minorities have demanded their own right to speak, to act, and to achieve liberation or self-determination. And those struggles almost always entail the construction of their own stories, their own usable past. Collective memory is a term that should never be collapsed into a set of stories formed by or about the state.

## 2. Identity politics

Here is a second source of the robust character of what I have called the "generation of memory." The creation and dissemination of narratives about the past arise out of and express identity politics. One clear

example is the placement of the National Holocaust Memorial on the Mall in Washington. It is, in this sacred space, both a statement of universal truths, and an expression of Jewish-American pride. Borrowing the notation of one literary scholar in an entirely different context, the museum expresses a measureless story in a grammar living on the hyphen, the hyphen of ethnic politics.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is a spectacular success in many ways, drawing a huge and varied population of visitors. Its structure and organization constitute a great achievement, bringing to millions of people of all ages searing images of a crime without parallel. Handing out identity cards of Holocaust victims to visitors inscribes us from the outset in a family of bereavement, which among other things, is a Jewish family. Ethnic pride and ethnic sadness are there in equal parts.

But the framework cannot escape from its location. The redemptive elements in the story surround it on the Mall. They tell us of the wider struggle for tolerance, for freedom of religion, for freedom from persecution; they locate the Holocaust within the American narrative, itself configured as a universal. Here we have arrived at the right-hand side of the hyphen "Jewish-American." The museum is the bridge between the two. There have been many other instances of commemoration as an expression of the tragic history of persecuted minorities. The Aids quilt is one; monuments to the struggle for African-American freedom raise the same point. Recent attempts to configure the imprisonment of Japanese-Americans during the Second World War express the same set of issues, both unique and universal. Again the hyphen of identity is strengthened by commemoration.

In Latin America and elsewhere, testimonial literature rescues histories trampled on by military dictatorships. The stories of cruelty and oppression once retold, constitute acts of defiance; through the narrator, the voices of the dead and the mutilated can still be heard. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa has been a focus for the release of imprisoned memory. At times, the boundaries between truth and fiction become blurred in such story-telling. As Doris Sommer has put it, the boundaries between informing and performing are porous. But even when the storyteller goes beyond what can be verified through other sources, the voice of the

witness still stands for a generalized sense of oppression. Here is identity politics as a set of narratives, a "counterhistory that challenges the false generalizations in exclusionary "History", " penned by those trapped in a Euro-centric and imperialist sense of what constitutes the past. This dimension of the "memory boom" has little purchase with respect to Holocaust testimonies, but it tells us much about other narratives of oppression.

Developments in information technology also help explain why the "memory boom" has taken off over the last generation. Since the 1960s and 1970s, audio-visual and now computer-based data banks can preserve and protect the "voice" of the victims. Their stories can be captured, and through listening to them or viewing them, we can come into contact with their lives and their tragedies.

The act of attending to such voices is what witnessing is all about. Its religious overtones are hard to miss. There is a kind of laying on of hands in such encounters. The person who suffered knows about a mystery — the mystery of evil and the miracle of survival — and we who listen may thereby enter the mystery and share the miracle. This is a difficult area to investigate, for in it there is a kind of appropriation of suffering which raises many difficult moral questions. Dominick LaCapra refers to such forms of witnessing in the language of psychoanalysis. But I doubt if "transference" can really be a framework for those telling and those attending to such narratives.

Over the same decades that archives of Holocaust victims and other survivors of oppression and injustice were constructed, the notion of the "witness" received another kind of validation. From the Eichmann trial in 1961 to the French trials of Barbie, Touvier and Papon, witnesses came forward, men like Leon Welizker-Wells who made it his purpose in life to tell the story of what had happened to him as a member of a *Sondercommando*. Literary memoirs became acts of witnessing; the success of Primo Levi's writing is a case in point.

Timing is critical here. In the 1940s and 1950s, such witnesses were there, but their voices were marginal to public discourse on the Second World War. Heroic narratives of Resistance were more useful in the revival of the political culture of countries humiliated by occupation and

collaboration. But by the 1960s and 1970s, that narrative work had done its job; the transition to post-war political stability was complete. There was now room for the victims of the camps to come forward. And come forward they did.

Some of their messages reinforced identity politics, in particular the ongoing struggle against anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial. But in other ways, the birth of the witness was the recovery of voices that had been there all along. It was the disclosure of narratives which did not fit the heroic model of the Resistance. Witnessing was another kind, perhaps an even harder kind, of resistance.

Identity politics attended the recovery of witnesses after the Soviet empire collapsed in 1989. A whole swathe of Eastern Europe suddenly was stripped of its politically-dominant narratives. Berlin was now unified in contemplation of a single past. From Potsdam to Moscow, vast arrays of documents suddenly surfaced, and helped fuel a new and vigorous recovery of the experience of several generations of men and women whose voices had been stilled. In the 1990s, these witnesses could be heard. Alongside them are Chinese voices, less attesting to identity politics than to the brutal repression of the cultural revolution and Tienanmen Square. Simply recording all these stories will take decades. But in the course of doing so, scholars are helping to build up new political and ethnic identities in a number of volatile regions.

### **3. Affluence and commemoration**

I have tried to emphasise the multifaceted and eclectic nature of the "memory boom." There have been political, technological, and philosophical impulses towards privileging the subject of memory in many discursive fields. In a moment, I will address what a demographer would call "cohort analysis" — the tracing of generations and the stories they tell over time. There is a medical dimension to this story to which I shall also turn albeit briefly. These are the most important aspects of the efflorescence of interest in memory I want to describe tonight. The braiding together of these varied themes is a classic problem in over-determination.

But there is yet another dimension to this story to which we must attend. It is more about audiences than about origins, and while not of

fundamental significance, it still is part of the story of why so many people are talking about "memory" today. In the west, one important precondition of the "memory boom" has been affluence. In a nutshell, rising real incomes and increased expenditure on education since the Second World War have helped shift to the right the demand curve for cultural commodities.

In the history of this rising demand, higher education has played a central role. Since the 1960s there has been a rapid expansion in the population of university-trained people, whose education provided them with access to and a desire for cultural activities of varying kinds. In Britain the number of university students expanded very rapidly after the Robbins report of 1963, granting the right to free higher education to all who could pass entrance requirements. There were at least three times as many people studying in institutions of higher education in 1990 as had been there 30 years before.

The same upward trend in the size of the tertiary sector of education may be detected across Europe and in the United States after 1960. Part of the increase is demographic: the "baby boom" generation was coming of age; but there was more at work here than the shadow of post-war fertility. Systems of higher education differ markedly, but even with a host of qualifications, the international trend is evident. There were eight times the number of students in higher education in Germany in 1990 compared to 1960; in France, six times more over the same period; in Italy, Belgium and Denmark, and the United States, 5 times more. Taken together, the 15 member states of the European Union had 12 million students in higher education in 1990; there were about 13.5 million such students in the United States. And the numbers have continued to grow throughout the last decade of the twentieth century.

The student revolt of 1968 was an effect, not a cause, of this trend. In France, student numbers grew more rapidly in 1966-7 than in 1969-70; German growth was about the same before and after the "troubles," precipitated in part by rising numbers and insufficient resources devoted to them. Changes in higher education had fundamental effects not only on the skill composition of the labor force, but also on the stock of cultural capital circulating in society as a whole. By the 1990s there was a larger population of university-educated people than ever before.

Their demand for cultural products of many different kinds was evident. What might be described as the industry of culture was in an ideal position for massive growth. The market was there; the target population for cultural products was there; and after two decades of retrenchment, state support for “heritage” or *le patrimoine* was there, with greater or lesser degrees of generosity.

The British economic historian, Alan Milward, currently teaching in Florence, has pointed to the material echoes of these two cultural bywords, “heritage” and “patrimony.” The “memory boom,” he rightly notes, has happened in part because both the public and the state have the disposable income to pay for it. This is how Milward put it in a recent review of books on memory and history in Europe in *The Times Literary Supplement*:

The media are the hypermarket outlet for the consumption of memory. Stern moral and methodological rejection of earlier historical fashions does not alter the reality that this latest fashion, like the earlier ones, is driven by the all-too-positivist forces of the growth of wealth and incomes. The history of memory represents that stage of consumption in which the latest product, ego-history, is the image of the self not only marketed but also consumed by the self.

There are differences among European countries, but in the British and French cases, which I know best, there is a symmetry between economic trends and cultural trends which we ignore at our peril.

Dwelling on memory is a matter of both disposable income and leisure time. Milward has a telling point: affluence has helped turn identity into a commodity, to be consumed by everyone at her (increasingly ample) leisure time. A “common” identity is one sharing a set of narratives about the past. Many of these take the form of bricks and mortar — fixed cultural capital. Exploiting their attractiveness, as in Britain’s National Trust stately homes and gardens, the patrimony or heritage trades became a profitable industry, with market niches and target consumers. The marketing of memory has paid off, in a huge consumer boom in images of the past — in films, books, articles, and more recently on the internet and television. There is an entire industry devoted to “blockbuster exhibitions” in museums, whose visitors seem to respond more and more to spectacular shows. History sells, especially well as biography or as auto-biography, or in Milward’s (and Pierre Nora’s phrase) ego-history.

The British satirical writer Julian Barnes produced a marvelous *reductio ad absurdum* of this phenomenon in his futuristic spoof *England, England*, published in 1998. Why should tourists have to travel to consume the icons of British history? Surely it makes more sense to bring or imitate the lot on the Isle of Wight? But whatever its potential for humour, the history business has never been more profitable. It would be important, though, to have more precise information of the choices cultural consumers make. My hunch is that over the last two decades, the growth rate in attendance at the Imperial War Museum, the British Museum, and Madame Tussaud’s in London, for instance, has been greater than the increase in attendance at sporting events or rock concerts. This is a conjecture, but one worth pursuing in a more rigorous manner.

Affluence has had another by now commonplace byproduct. One vector of the “memory boom” may also be the exteriorization, or expression in public space, of the interior discourse of psychoanalysis. Just as Woody Allen has popularized therapy as an addictive way of life, so the nearly universal spread of therapy cultures have made memory a light consumer durable good for those — yet again — with the cash to afford it.

### 3. History and family history: Vectors of transmission

So far I have tried to sketch some of the political and economic pre-conditions for the contemporary “memory boom.” But there is another level of significance in this story, one which is more demographic than political, more about families than about nations.

In our profession, we should be grateful that history sells; one reason that it is such a popular and money-making trade is because it locates family stories in bigger, more universal, narratives. One way to understand the huge growth and financial viability of museums and fiction set in the wars of the twentieth century is to see them as places where family stories are set in a wider, at times universal context. Some grandparents knew the Blitz; now they can bring their grandchildren to the “Blitz experience” of the Imperial War Museum in London. Such imaginings of war are attractive because they rest on the contemporary link between generations, and in particular

between the old and the young, between grandparents and grandchildren, at times over the heads of the troublesome generation of parents in the middle. In the 1960s and 1970s, this link pointed back to the First World War; later on, to the Second.

Many best-selling novels set in the two world wars take family stories as their form. Examples abound: like Jean Rouaud's *Champs d'honneur* winner of the Prix Goncourt in 1991, or Sebastian Japrisot's moving *Un long dimanche de fiançaille*, or Pat Barker's fictional trilogy on the Great War, or Sebastian Faulks's powerful *Birdsong*. Barker has written a sequel whose central figure is a 100-year old veteran and father of the narrator. Faulks has placed within a later novel about the Second World War a story of the transmission of traumatic memory between father and daughter.

There are deep traces here of the history of several cohorts, moving through time, across this fictional landscape. Today's grandparents were children after the 1914-18 war, and their stories — family stories — are now imbedded in history, and fiction, and exhibitions, and museums, and pilgrimage, in all the stuff of ritual that deepen the "memory boom." The linkage between the young and the old — now extended substantially with the life span — is so central to the concept of memory that its significance may have simply passed us by.

Let me take a moment to describe a personal experience which illustrates this point. I have been privileged to work as one of the creators of an international museum of the First World War, located at Péronne, in the Department of the Somme, an hour north of Paris. Péronne was German headquarters during the Battle of the Somme in 1916. This museum was the product of a specific and fleeting generational moment in the 1980s, when history became family history, and therefore could include scripts not yet inscribed by the French in their national narrative of the war. Because of family memories, and traumatic memories at that, we were able to find a way to justify a major French investment in a story very few Frenchmen had acknowledged as of fundamental importance to them and to their sense of the past. Verdun, that other great disaster of 1916, had occluded the Somme in France, despite the fact that the French lost 200,000 men in the battle.

The man who saw this opportunity was Max Lejeune, president of the Conseil Général, and a former Defence Minister at the time of Suez. He was a characteristic Fourth Republic politician, skilled in the byways of Parisian infighting, but whose power rested on a personal fiefdom and following in his own Département of the Somme. Tourism mattered to him, but so did the memory of his father, an *ancien combattant* of the Battle of the Somme, who had returned from the war a troubled man. The childhood Lejeune recalled was not a happy one; the war had broken his father, and a lifetimes later in the 1980s, his son Max Lejeune wanted to find a way to put those memories to rest.

For Lejeune, the idea of a museum originated in family history, his family history. But his insight was in seeing that such a museum was a means of turning national narratives into family narratives, redolent to a very wide public of several nationalities. In this way, this venture could bring French children at the end of the twentieth century into contact with the world of his childhood, in the 1920s and 1930s, shadowed as it was by the Great War. It could also describe the disintegration of Europe in 1914-18 in a way which highlighted the urgent tasks of European integration 80 years later. It could combine nostalgia, ever-present in family narratives, with a civics lesson in the future of the new Europe.

With the support of a *notable* of the eminence and power of Lejeune, it was possible to secure the financial investment necessary for the creation of a museum. Ultimately, the project cost 100 million francs. Lejeune also bought the argument, and inserted it in the budget where it has remained to this day, that a museum without a research centre would atrophy over time. Placing historical debate permanently within the museum, and funding postgraduate studies for people anywhere in the world working on the Great War, are steps which have invigorated the enterprise and ensured its survival. Without family history (and French cash), none of this would have been possible.

This positive story should not obscure other, more difficult, ways in which memories of war continue to linger even now, more than half a century after 1945. The "memory boom" has enabled some people to hide one set of memories behind another. In France and elsewhere, some narratives of the First World War help people evade both personal and national stories about the



Second World War. This is by no means true everywhere; in Russia, for example, the First World War simply vanished as a subject of public discourse, eclipsed by the Revolutions of 1917 and the civil war which followed it. But where Collaboration raised uncomfortable questions in the aftermath of the Second World War, many people were happy to sing along with the French troubadour Georges Brassens, "Qu'est-ce que c'est la guerre que je préfère, c'est la guerre de '14-18."

#### 4. Family memory, traumatic memory, and war

Here the diversion of the narrative from one war to another was deliberate. Other people were not so fortunate. When we encounter family stories about war in this century, we frequently confront another kind of story-telling, one we have come to call "traumatic memory." The recognition of the significance of this kind of memory is one of the salient features of the contemporary "memory boom" I take this term to signify an underground river of recollection, first discussed in the aftermath of the First World War, but a subject of increasing attention in the 1980s and 1990s, when post-traumatic stress disorder became the umbrella term for those (as it were) stuck in the past. The "memory boom" of the later twentieth century arrived in part because of our belated but real acceptance that among us, within our families, there are men and women overwhelmed by traumatic recollection.

War veterans bore the scars of such memories even when they did not have a scratch on them. The imagery of the shell-shocked soldier became generalized after the Second World War. In 1939-45, the new notation for psychological casualty was "combat fatigue," an unavoidable wearing out of one of the components of the military machine. Holocaust victims had a very different story to tell, but the earlier vocabulary of trauma was there to be seized. And seized again. This was true in commemorative art as much as in medical care. It is no accident, in my view, that the notation of Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial is that of Sir Edwin Lutyens's monument to the missing of the Battle of the Somme at Thiepval. The Great War created categories which have framed much of the language we use to describe the traumatic

memories of victims of the Second World War, the Vietnam war and other conflicts.

This is also the case in the field of psychiatry, where the notion of post-traumatic stress disorder — previously termed "shell shock" or "combat fatigue" — was accepted as a recognized medical diagnostic classification only in 1980, a few years after the end of the Vietnam war. Once accepted as a syndrome, PTSD validated entitlements — to pensions, to medical care, to public sympathy. It also "naturalized" the status of Vietnam veterans. The mental scars of Vietnam vets, once legitimated, could be treated alongside other victims of urban violence, or sexual or family trauma. In all these cases, violence seemed to leave an imprint we now call "traumatic memory."

In this area, enormous progress has been made over the last 30 years in the field of neuroscience. The biochemistry of traumatic memory is now a field of active research, and various pathways have been identified which help us distinguish between different kinds of memory traces. There is now a biochemistry of traumatic memories, memories which are first buried and then involuntarily released when triggered by certain external stimuli. The world of neurology has had its own "memory boom" which in turn has helped establish the scientific character and credentials of the notion of "trauma."

Fiction and fictionalized memoirs have also been important vectors for the dissemination of notions of traumatic memory. This has been true since the Great War, and the appearance in print of the poems of Wilfred Owen, who did not survive the war, and Ivor Gurney, who did, but who spent the rest of his life in a lunatic asylum. Some veterans may have retreated into silence, but there were many storytellers among them, and among their contemporaries, who to this day continue to teach us much about what "trauma" means. Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* of 1925 is one poignant example, the figure of Septimus Smith was drawn from her encounter with her brother-in-law and his condition. If time permitted, I would love to dwell on a number of other story-tellers and their role in the public understanding of traumatic memory as a fact of twentieth-century family life. Two recent books, David Grossman's "See under Love" and Peter Balakian's "The Black Dog of Fate," are wonderful evocations of this mood of remembrance.

## 5. The "cultural turn" in historical studies

The memory boom of the late twentieth century is a reflection of a complex matrix of suffering, political activity, claims for entitlement, scientific research, philosophical reflection, and art.

In conclusion, it may be useful to add a few words about the intersection of these broad trends with a number of narrower movements within the historical profession itself. The first may be described under the heading of "the cultural turn" in historical studies. When I was an undergraduate at Columbia, 40 years ago, cultural history was a form of *Geistesgeschichte*, a noble tradition in which German intellectual history was of central importance. Just emerging in the mid-1960s was an exciting mixture of disciplines to challenge the prevailing consensus; it came in many forms, but probably is best summarized as social scientific history. Over the next two decades historical demography and other forms of sociologically- or anthropologically-inspired historical study proliferated. Alongside them was a politically-committed variation of Marxist thinking which created labour history. The now essential historical journal *Past & Present* was initially subtitled "*a journal of scientific history*." The subtitled was discarded; the journal thrived. These strands of historiographical innovation produced work of outstanding and enduring quality. But as broad programmes of historical interpretation, both of these schools failed to deliver the goods they had promised. There was no new paradigm like that of the *Annales* school of the 1920s and 1930s, promising total history. Instead, the positivist assumptions of social scientific history and the heroic narratives of the making of the working class, wherever it happened to be, began to fade by the 1970s and 1980s.

Even in Paris, where the phrase "*nous les Annales*" still echoed magisterially, the hold of the old ways of thinking began to loosen. Part of the challenge came from post-modernists, fed up with the grand narratives of industrialization or other forms of linear progress, or unprepared to go on charting the history of militancy, or the transformation of a "class in itself" to a "class for itself." The inspiration behind *Les lieux de mémoire* was political. After the collapse of the twin stars in the Parisian firmament, Gaullism and communism, many scholars of contemporary

history, including Pierre Nora, sought a reorientation of their outlook through a reflection on what being French entails. And that meant seeking out the multiple sites of what he termed French "memory."

In North America, part of the "cultural turn" reflected the way the neighbors began to colonize history. We should note in particular the increasing significance within historical study of literary scholarship, offering fundamental contributions to the cultural history of the First World War, at least in the Anglo-Saxon world. Feminist scholars have brought to this subject and to many others powerful new perspectives. No one today writes about the cultural history of imperialism without some meditation on the work of Edward Said and some reflection on that protean concept, "Orientalism." And one need not agree with everything Steven Greenblatt has had to say in order to appreciate the excitement of his ideas and those of his colleagues at Berkeley who edit the journal *Representations*. There were as many panels on subjects in cultural history at the 1999 Modern Languages Association meeting in San Francisco as there were at the American Historical Association meeting in Chicago the following year.

Where once French or French-inspired historians had sought out clues towards the features of the unchanging mental furniture of a society, loosely defined as *mentalité*, by the late 1980s many were looking at language and representations. Roger Chartier has helped bury the outmoded distinction in cultural history between "superstructure" and "substructure" by insisting that "The representations of the social world themselves are the constituents of social reality." Gareth Stedman Jones echoed the same point in his influential study *Languages of Class*, published in 1983. German scholars, following first Reinhard Koselleck, in the study of *Begriffsgeschichte*, or historical semantics, or following the work of Jan Assmann and Aleida Assmann, have created an entire literature in the field of cultural memory. And these seminal works are but the crest of a much wider wave of scholarship they have inspired and informed.

Globalization is evident in the spread of these approaches to the study of memory. Saul Friedlander and his students in Israel, Germany and America helped launch the successful journal *History & Memory* in 1987. Oral historians in many countries have added their voices, and have

helped ensure that the study of “memory” is informed by a sensitivity to issues of gender.

In much of this broad field of work, Foucault and Lacan have been the inspiration; other scholars have found much in the reflections of Lyotard or Kristeva about the ruins of symbolic language in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Post-modernist interventions have returned time and again to memory, as a site of nostalgia. Some favour turning to the individual’s stories as the cornerstone for the recovery of the subject, whose position is always in question.

Others in the field of critical theory are sceptical about all the talk about memory. To Kerwin Klein, the memory boom is a betrayal of the radical credentials of critical theory, for it “marries hip new linguistic practices with some of the oldest senses of memory as a union of divine presence and material object.” In some hands, Klein argues, the evocation of memory becomes a kind of “cultural religiosity,” a “re-enchantment” of our sense of the past.

By the 1990s these critical standpoints and innovative approaches clearly occupied an influential, though certainly not hegemonic, position in the discipline. Some style the sum of these contributions as the “linguistic turn,” simply meaning the general acceptance that there are no historical “facts” separate from the language in which they are expressed in time and place. Others call it the “cultural turn,” meaning the concentration on signifying practices in the past as a major focus of current historical research.

Whatever it is termed, and whatever its origins, the tide has indeed turned, and cultural history is now all around us. It has benefitted from the influx of refugees from Marxist or *marxisant* history, who watched their historical paradigm disintegrate well before the Berlin Wall was breached. At times, cultural history has taken an entirely idealist turn, in the sense of suggesting that representations constitute the only reality. This is an extreme position, but it does exist. However configured, the “cultural turn” in historical study describes an agenda of real popularity and potential. Students are voting with their feet here: economic, demographic and labor history have not kept their audiences; to a degree, cultural history has drawn them away.

There is a time-lag in the way institutions respond to these intellectual trends in our profession. But by the 1990s it became apparent that the subject of cultural history was growing in popularity among students and scholars in such a way as to require appointments, grants, promotions, and so on. Reinforcing the trend is the way in which publishers respond positively to projects in cultural history, and less positively to other specialisms. Their reaction is part of the story I have tried to illustrate earlier tonight: cultural history sells.

And not only in the academic market. Given the contraction of university jobs in history in Britain, and a steady state elsewhere in Europe, and given chronic instability and over supply in the American job market, the future of many younger scholars in the academy has been bleak indeed. One way forward for them – and not only for them – is into the expanding field of public history. And in this field, the subject of memory is *de rigueur*. The story of the *Historial de la grande guerre* is only one among many.

All this is entirely invigorating, and an antidote to some of the conservative features of our discipline. Obstacles still remain. We must not underestimate the extent to which many historians consider “popularity” to be synonymous with “superficiality” and believe that any idea that is expressed clearly must be deeply flawed. Others find the subject of cultural history vague and the notion of memory perilously ill-defined. And at times they are right.

One of the challenges of the next decade or so is to try to draw together some of these disparate strands of interest and enthusiasm through a more rigorous and tightly-argued set of propositions about what exactly memory is, and what it has been in the past. The only fixed point at this moment is the near ubiquity of the term. No one should delude herself into thinking we all use it the same way. But just as we use words like love and hate without ever knowing their full or shared significance, so we are bound to go on using the term “memory,” the historical signature of our own generation.

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