

II

The Invention of Cultural Memory: A Short History of Memory Studies

Titling this chapter the ‘invention’ of cultural memory is intended to emphasize that this is not a history of the phenomenon of memory itself, but rather a history of memory studies. Acts of cultural remembering seem to be an element of humans’ fundamental anthropological make-up, and the history of creating a shared heritage and thinking about memory can be traced all the way back to antiquity, for example to Homer, Plato, and Aristotle. However, it was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that there developed a scientific interest in the phenomenon. Forms of collective reference to the past were observed methodically and made the focus of research in the humanities and the social sciences. The field’s fundamental assumption about the constructedness of cultural memory, however, is also valid for the level of theory: Every theoretical idea about the contents or functions of cultural memory is itself a construct and more of an academic ‘invention’ than a discovery of cultural givens.

Today’s research on cultural memory takes its origin from two strands of tradition in particular, both of which have their roots in the 1920s: Maurice Halbwachs’s sociological studies on *mémoire collective* and Aby Warburg’s art-historical interest in a European memory of images (*Bildgedächtnis*). Halbwachs and Warburg were the first to give the phenomenon of cultural memory a name (‘collective’ and ‘social’ memory, respectively), and to study it systematically within the framework of a modern theory of culture.

Yet it was not until the 1980s that the topic of memory again elicited interest in the humanities and social sciences, in the context of what may be called the ‘new cultural memory studies’. Pierre Nora’s *lieux de mémoire* have proven to be the most influential notion internationally. Roughly at the same time, Aleida and Jan Assmann, with their idea of a ‘Cultural Memory’, advanced a theory which is the most authoritative

in the German-speaking world and, in international comparison, also the most elaborate.

II.1 Maurice Halbwachs: *Mémoire collective*

The French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1877–1945), a student of Henri Bergson and Emile Durkheim, wrote three texts in which he developed his concept of *mémoire collective* and which today occupy a central place in the study of cultural memory. In 1925 he published his study *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (1994; ‘The Social Frameworks of Memory’, partially translated in *On Collective Memory*, 1992) in which he attempted to establish that memory is dependent on social structures. In this he opposed the theories of memory of his contemporaries such as Henri Bergson and Sigmund Freud, who emphasized the individual dimension of memory. Halbwachs’s theory, which sees even the most personal memory as a *mémoire collective*, a collective phenomenon, provoked significant protest, not least from his colleagues at the University of Strasbourg, Charles Blondel and Marc Bloch. The latter accused Halbwachs, and the Durkheim School in general, of an unacceptable collectivization of individual psychological phenomena (see Bloch 1925).

Stirred by this criticism, Halbwachs began elaborating his concept of collective memory in a second book. For more than 15 years he worked on the text *La mémoire collective* (1997; *The Collective Memory*, 1980), but it did not appear until 1950, posthumously and incomplete. Before that, Halbwachs did publish a third book, in which he illustrated the forms and functions of memory sites using a specific example: *La Topographie légendaire des Évangiles en Terre Sainte* (1941; ‘The Legendary Topography of the Gospels in the Holy Land’; partially translated in *On Collective Memory*, 1992). In August 1944 the Nazis deported Halbwachs, whose wife was Jewish, to Buchenwald, where he was killed on 16 March 1945. (See also Vromen 1975; Namer 2000; Becker 2003; Marcel and Mucchielli 2008.)

Halbwachs’s writings on collective memory in particular, and also the interest in the cultural dimension of remembering in general, were largely forgotten in the postwar period. Today, however, virtually no theoretical model of cultural memory exists without recourse to the sociologist. It is possible to distinguish three main areas of analysis in Halbwachs’s studies on *mémoire collective*, which point to three prominent directions of research on cultural memory:

- first, Halbwachs’s theory of the dependence of individual memory on social structures;

- second, his studies of the forms of intergenerational memory; and
- third, his expansion of the term *mémoire collective* to include cultural transmission and the creation of tradition.

Thus, Halbwachs unites – albeit not explicitly – two fundamental, and fundamentally different, concepts of collective memory (see chapter IV.1):

1. Collective memory as the organic memory of the individual, which operates within the framework of a sociocultural environment (see chapter II.1.1).
2. Collective memory as the creation of shared versions of the past, which results through interaction, communication, media, and institutions within small social groups as well as large cultural communities (see chapter II.1.2).

II.1.1 *Cadres sociaux*: the social frameworks of individual memory

The starting point of Halbwachs's theory of collective memory is his concept of *cadres sociaux*. In the first part of *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, using his reflections on dreams and language, Halbwachs gives a detailed illustration of the collective elements of individual memory. He comes to the conclusion that the recourse to *cadres sociaux*, social frameworks, is an indispensable prerequisite for every act of remembering. Social frameworks are, for Halbwachs, first of all simply the people around us. Humans are social creatures: Without other humans, an individual is denied access not only to such obviously collective phenomena as language and customs, but also, according to Halbwachs, to his or her own memory. This is partly because we generally experience things in the company of other people, who can also later help us to remember the events.

Much more fundamental for Halbwachs, however, is the fact that it is through interaction and communication with our fellow humans that we acquire knowledge about dates and facts, collective concepts of time and space, and ways of thinking and experiencing. Because we participate in a collective symbolic order, we can discern, interpret and remember past events. From *cadres sociaux* in the literal sense, our social environment, derive 'social frameworks' in the metaphorical sense: Metaphorically speaking, *cadres sociaux* are thought patterns, cognitive schemata, that guide our perception and memory in particular directions. Social frameworks, thus, form the all-encompassing horizon in which our perception and memory is embedded. They are constituted

from social, material, and mental phenomena of culture. Hence Halbwachs would probably have said Kaspar Hauser (a young man in nineteenth-century Germany who allegedly grew up without any human contact) had no collective memory, while the lonely Robinson Crusoe most certainly did, since in his thoughts he could fall back on the social frameworks of his homeland, the English middle-class ways of thinking he had learned in his youth. For Halbwachs the sociologist, however, it is the *cadres sociaux* in the literal sense, the social group, which is of central importance, since without social interaction worlds of meaning can neither come into being nor be passed on.

Social frameworks convey and interpret the contents of collective memory – the supply of shared knowledge and experiences relevant to the group. ‘It is in this sense that there exists a collective memory and social frameworks for memory; it is to the degree that our individual thought places itself in these frameworks and participates in this memory that it is capable of the act of recollection’ (Halbwachs 1992, 38). Our perception is group-specific, our individual memories are socially formed, and both are unthinkable without the existence of a collective memory. However, the collective memory is not a supra-individual entity separate from the individual’s organic memories. Collective and individual memory are instead mutually dependent: ‘One may say that the individual remembers by placing himself in the perspective of the group, but one may also affirm that the memory of the group realizes and manifests itself in individual memories’ (Halbwachs 1992, 40).

It is only through individual acts of memory that the collective memory can be observed, since ‘each memory is a viewpoint on the collective memory’ (Halbwachs 1980, 48). This ‘viewpoint’ (Halbwachs’s French term is *point de vue*) can be understood as a position people assume based on their socialization and cultural influences. Every individual belongs to several social groups: family, religious community, colleagues, and so on. Each person thus has at his or her disposal a supply of different, group-specific experiences and thought systems. Thus, what Halbwachs seems to suggest is that while memory is no purely individual phenomenon, but must be seen in its fundamentally collective dimension, it is the combination of various group allegiances and the resultant frameworks for remembering that are the actual individual element which distinguishes one person from another.

II.1.2 Intergenerational memory and religious topography

In the second part of *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, Halbwachs distinguishes between various forms of collective memories and provides

sociological case studies, addressing family, religious community, and social class. Family memory is a typical intergenerational memory. This type of collective memory is constituted through social interaction and communication. Through the repeated recall of the family's past (usually via oral stories which are told at family get-togethers), those who did not experience the past firsthand can also share in the memory. In this way an exchange of living memory takes place between eye-witnesses and descendants. The collective intergenerational memory thus goes back as far as the oldest members of the social group can remember.

Halbwachs makes a sharp distinction between history and memory, which he sees as two mutually exclusive forms of reference to the past. Right at the beginning of his comparison of 'lived' memory and 'written' history in *La mémoire collective*, Halbwachs emphasizes that 'general history starts only when tradition ends and the social memory is fading or breaking up' (1980, 78). History and memory are irreconcilable: Halbwachs sees history as universal; it is characterized by a neutral coordination of all past events. Central to history are contradictions and ruptures. Collective memory, in contrast, is particular; its carriers are groups which are restricted both chronologically and spatially, whose memory is strongly evaluative and hierarchical. A central function of remembering the past within the framework of collective memory is identity formation. Things are remembered which correspond to the self-image and the interests of the group. Particularly emphasized are those similarities and continuities which demonstrate that the group has remained the same. Participation in the collective memory indicates that the rememberer belongs to the group.

For Halbwachs, history deals with the past. Collective memory, in contrast, is oriented towards the needs and interests of the group in the present, and thus proceeds in an extremely selective and reconstructive manner. Along the way, what is remembered can become distorted and shifted to such an extent that the result is closer to fiction than to a past reality. Memory thus does not provide a faithful reproduction of the past – indeed, quite the opposite is true: 'A remembrance is in very large measure a reconstruction of the past achieved with data borrowed from the present, a reconstruction prepared, furthermore, by reconstructions of earlier periods wherein past images had already been altered' (ibid., 68). This already points to what half a century later, within post-structuralist discussions, will be called 'the construction of reality.'

Already in his work *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (in the chapters on aristocracy and the memories of religious communities), and even

more so in his later study on the Christian mnemonic topography of Palestine, Halbwachs breaks through the constrictions that had limited his studies to intergenerational memories, whose medium is everyday communication and whose contents are for the most part autobiographical memories. In 'The Legendary Topography' he turns his attention to collective memories, whose temporal horizons reach back thousands of years, thus transcend the horizon of living memory, and therefore need objects and topographical sites of memory to provide structure. Material phenomena, such as architecture, pilgrimage routes, or graves, take on a primary meaning. At this point, Halbwachs leaves the area of socially shared memories of recent events and enters the area of culturally constructed knowledge about a distant past and its transmission through the creation of traditions.

Halbwachs's theory of collective memory has been applied by a broad spectrum of disciplines to a wide variety of research objects. But his writings have not been able to serve as the basis of a single, coherent theory of cultural memory; this might be because his broad concept of *mémoire collective* is insufficiently differentiated. However, specific elements of Halbwachs's writings have been adapted in various disciplines. Halbwachs thus became the forefather of a variety of memory theories (see Table II.1): In the field of psychology the focus is on Halbwachs's idea of the collective nature of individual memory, and the *cadres sociaux* are understood as culturally specific schemata (see chapter III.3.1). Oral history refers to his studies of intergenerational, communicative and everyday forms of remembrance (see chapter III.1.4). And Halbwachs's interest in mnemonic space and objects, as, for example, in his studies of the religious topography of Palestine, broke the ground for later historical and cultural studies approaches which deal with the transmission of cultural knowledge and national sites of memory (see chapters II.3 and II.4 on Jan and Aleida Assmann and Pierre Nora).

Table II.1 Three dimensions of Halbwachs's concept of *mémoire collective* and fields in which they have been applied

Halbwachs's <i>mémoire collective</i>	1. Dependence of individual memory on social frameworks	→ Social psychology
	2. Intergenerational memory	→ Oral history
	3. Transmission of cultural knowledge	→ Theory of the 'Cultural Memory' (A. and J. Assmann), <i>Lieux de mémoire</i> (Nora)

II.2 Aby Warburg: Mnemosyne – pathos formulas and a European memory of images

The second fundamental concept of cultural memory is likewise the work of a scholar of the 1920s. The art and cultural historian Aby Warburg (1866–1929) is today considered an important forefather of the modern, interdisciplinary study of culture, and the Warburg Library (*Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg*), once situated in Hamburg, its icon. Its original arrangement was characterized by Warburg's dislike of the 'policing of disciplinary boundaries'. He organized his extensive collection according to cultural-historical themes, thus encouraging an approach that transcends borders between different epochs, media, and genres. A circle of significant researchers, including Ernst Cassirer, Erwin Panofsky, and Hellmut Ritter, were associated with the Warburg Library. After Warburg's death, the library was transferred to London in 1933, rescuing it from the Nazi takeover in Germany. Since 1944, the Warburg Institute has been part of the University of London. The Warburg Foundation in Hamburg, in cooperation with the publishing house Akademie Verlag of Berlin, has edited Aby Warburg's collected works.

Aby Warburg's interest was in a memory of art, in the reappropriation of vivid images and symbols in different epochs and cultures (see Gombrich 1986; Ginzburg 1989; Woodfield 2001). Warburg observed a return of artistic forms – for example, motifs of classical frescos in Renaissance paintings by Botticelli and Ghirlandaio or on stamps in the 1920s – and instead of interpreting the re-use of these forms as the result of a conscious appropriation of the ancient world by artists of later periods, attributed it to the power of cultural symbols to trigger memories.

Warburg placed particular importance on the so-called pathos formulas (*Pathosformeln*), a kind of *imagines agentes*: in their attempts to represent the 'superlatives' of human expression – passionate excitement in gesture or physiognomy – Renaissance artists returned to the symbols of ancient models. Because, according to Warburg, ancient pathos, pagan emotional intensity, is reflected in these symbols, he termed them 'pathos formulas'. In order to explain why the affective properties of these symbols had such an unusual staying power across the centuries, he used a model suggested by the memory psychologist Richard Semon and conceived of pathos formulas as cultural 'engrams' or 'dynamograms', which store 'mnemonic energy' and are able to release it under other historical circumstances or at far distant locations.

According to Warburg, the symbol is a cultural 'energy store'. Culture rests upon the memory of symbols. In this way, Warburg developed the concept of a cultural memory of images which he called, among other terms, 'social memory' (see also Kany 1987; Ferretti 1989; Michaud 2004).

Warburg felt that the 'social memory' was tied to deeply moral questions, since the pathos of antiquity is a memory which artists can succumb to but which they can also master. The re-use of pathos formulas is connected to two fundamental aspects of culture, 'expression' and 'orientation'. The affective content of symbolic gestures offers the 'civilized' artist who comes into contact with them the chance to create an intensive and incisive vivid expression, but on the other hand also represents a threat as it stems from 'primitive' levels of culture. Art always moves within the dangerous zone between magic and logic, between 'primitive' ecstasy and 'civilized' self-control. The decisive factor is whether the artist is able to take up the traditional symbolism and simultaneously maintain a safe distance from it in order to create clarity and beauty through this balancing act. Warburg is interested in 'artistic *sophrosyne*', the restraint and moral self-assertion of modern humans in the face of the memory of the deep layers of their culture. Artistic techniques of *sophrosyne* can include an emphasis on the purely metaphorical character of the symbols, for example through *grisaille* painting techniques, or on modern re-interpretations, such as new, Christian understandings of pagan symbols. 'Warburg describes the reserves of transmitted cultural possessions as "humanity's treasure of suffering" (*Leidschatz*) which is waiting to be transformed into human property. "Humanity's stores of suffering become the possessions of the humane"' (Diers 1995, 68).

Warburg emphasizes the changes and actualizations of social memory typical for every place and time. As a result of this constant renewal, studying the specific interplay between continuity and re-interpretation of cultural symbols in artworks allows one to draw conclusions regarding the mental dimension of culture. 'The variations in rendering, seen in the mirror of the period, reveal the conscious or unconscious selective tendencies of the age and thus bring to light the collective psyche that creates these wishes and postulates these ideals' (quoted in Gombrich 1986, 270–1).

How central the concept of memory and the idea of administering an artistic inheritance was to Warburg's thought becomes evident in his last exhibition project, which was entitled 'Mnemosyne' (1924–29; see Warburg 2000), after the muse who personifies memory and is also

the mother of all the other Muses. The exhibit was an atlas and was meant to illustrate the transcultural memory of images, which crosses the chronological and spatial borders of epochs and countries. By bringing together apparently heterogeneous panels, the atlas presents an outline of an overlapping community of memory which connects Europe and Asia.

Warburg referred to his concept of memory not only as 'social memory' but also as a 'European collective memory' (quoted in Gombrich 1986, 270), pointing to a significant expansion of its scope. This is possible since Warburg assumed as the central medium of cultural memory not oral speech but rather works of art, which can potentially survive for long periods of time and traverse great spaces. Warburg's concept of memory thus accommodates the historical variations and local imprints of cultural memory, while at the same time not losing sight of its embeddedness in the European-Asian community of memory.

Halbwachs's and Warburg's concepts of cultural memory are fundamentally different. While Halbwachs's writings are an example of the elaborate development of a theory, Warburg did not leave behind any general theory or system. Warburg proceeded inductively, starting with the material – following his famous dictum: 'God is in the details'. His approach shifts the material dimension of culture to the centre of focus. Warburg studied the ability of objects and symbols to evoke memory and create cultural continuity. His primary interest was the highly expressive visual culture, which he saw as closely related to unconscious, mental processes, albeit in such a broad understanding that he also enlisted for his analysis objects of everyday culture, festivals, and literary sources. In contrast, Halbwachs's argument begins with the social dimension of culture (for more on this difference, see also chapter IV.2). He was primarily interested in social groups' creation of a past related to their identity, which he saw as an active, constructive process, one attuned to the needs of the present.

What the two concepts have in common, however, is the perception that culture and its transmission are products of human activity. At the beginning of the twentieth century this assumption was by no means a matter of course. Inspired by Darwin and the evolutionism and biological determinism of the turn of the century, many scientists tried to explain the phenomenon of cultures' survival with concepts of 'racial memory'. Halbwachs and Warburg deserve credit for showing that the key to the continuation of ephemeral culture lies not in any kind of

genetic memory but rather in its transmission through social interaction and its codification in material objectifications. At the same time, the two scholars demonstrated through their approaches that getting to the root of the phenomenon of cultural memory necessitates an interdisciplinary methodology.

Halbwachs's and Warburg's studies were part of a very animated discussion about cultural memory in the first decades of the twentieth century. Friedrich Nietzsche (*Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben*, 1874), Henry Bergson (*Matière et mémoire*, 1896), and Sigmund Freud (*Die Traumdeutung*, 1900) had brought the theme of memory to center stage. Arnold Zweig, in his essay *Caliban* (1927), developed an idea inspired by Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis: a concept of collective 'group affects', on the basis of which he attempted to explain the anti-Semitism of the time. Siegfried Kracauer, in an essay entitled 'Photography' (1927), considered the differences between photographic and memory images. Frederic Bartlett, at the end of the decade, began his experiments on culture-specific schemata and constructive processes of memory (*Remembering*, 1932). Wilhelm Pinder (*Das Problem der Generation in der Kunstgeschichte Europas*, 1926) and Karl Mannheim (*The Problem of the Generations*, 1928/29) addressed concepts of identity, the perception of time, and the memory of generations. Walter Benjamin doubted that, in the modern era and in particular after the shock of mechanized warfare in the First World War, direct experience and meaning-creating memory were still possible (see 'The Storyteller', 1936). In his essay 'On the Concept of History' (1940), he criticizes the historicist tradition of the nineteenth century, whose selection criteria invariably yielded solely a 'history of victors'. Using a term borrowed from Jewish tradition – remembrance (*Eingedenken*) –, Benjamin pleads instead for reading history 'against the grain', and for keeping alive the memory of the victims and the nameless.

II.3 Pierre Nora's *lieux de mémoire* – and beyond

Whereas today Halbwachs's and Warburg's concepts are acknowledged as having laid the foundations for theories of cultural memory, at the time of their writing they found only a limited audience. Ideas of memory as a collective phenomenon which constitutes and maintains culture were not taken up again on a broad basis until the 1980s. One of the most influential concepts of the interdisciplinary 'new cultural memory studies' emerging in the late twentieth century was developed within the field of French cultural history, namely Pierre Nora's *lieux de*

mémoire, a notion which revolves around memory, history and nation. As early as 1978 Pierre Nora had drawn on the idea of collective memory, in order to describe the numerous popular and political forms of addressing the past, which he – and this is Halbwachs's legacy – strictly separated from history.

Between 1984 and 1992 Nora edited his monumental, seven-part work *Les lieux de mémoire* (for English translations see Nora 1996–98 and Nora 2001–10). The collection is introduced by an essay entitled 'Entre mémoire et histoire' ('Between Memory and History', 1989, 8) in which Nora, closely following Halbwachs, emphasizes that 'memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear now to be in fundamental opposition'. Yet unlike Halbwachs, who starts from the premise of the existence of collective memories, Nora summarizes our current time by saying: 'We speak so much of memory because there is so little of it left' (ibid., 7). Thus, the focus of his attention shifts to *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory. In the tradition of ancient mnemotechnics, they can be understood as *loci* in the broadest sense of the term, which call up *images*, the memory images of the French nation. Such sites can therefore include geographical locations, buildings, monuments and works of art as well as historical persons, memorial days, philosophical and scientific texts, or symbolic actions. Thus, Paris, Versailles, and the Eiffel Tower are sites of memory, but so are Joan of Arc, the French flag, 14 July, the *Marseillaise*, and Descartes's *Discours de la méthode*.

However, sites of memory cannot constitute a collective memory as defined by Halbwachs. Quite the contrary, as Nora explains: 'There are *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory, because there are no longer *milieux de mémoire*, real environments of memory' (ibid.). The French sites of memory have their origin in the nineteenth century, during the time of the Third Republic. At that point, the national memory was still capable of fostering a collective identity, but this function has disintegrated during the twentieth century. According to Nora, today's society is in a transitional stage, during which there is a breakdown of the connection to a lived, group- and nation-specific, identity-forming past. Thus, sites of memory function as a sort of artificial placeholder for the no longer existent, natural collective memory.

Les lieux de mémoire, edited by Nora, is a collection of essays about different elements of French culture. And while they each stand for aspects of a common past, they do not, in their variety, amount to a binding comprehensive memory, but instead leave the reader with a fragmented image of the French past. Each individual will make his or her own selection from the many sites of memory offered. Their pluralization

does not allow for any hierarchization, any configuration into a coherent narrative or structured meaning. In addition, the rupture which separates the past from the present is too great for sites of memory to elicit reactions in a contemporary observer that are anything but nostalgic. Sites of memory are thus signs which not only refer to aspects of the French past which should be remembered, but at the same time always point to the absence of living memory (see Carrier 2000).

In his theoretical preface to the first volume of *Les lieux de mémoire*, Nora explains the conditions which an event or an object must fulfil in order to be identified as a site of memory. According to him, three dimensions of memory sites can be distinguished: material, functional, and symbolic (1989, 19).

- **Material dimension:** Sites of memory are cultural objectifications in the broadest sense of the term. They include not only 'graspable' objects, such as paintings or books; past events, too, and even commemorative minutes of silence exhibit a material dimension, since they, as Nora explains, 'literally (break) a temporal continuity' (ibid.).
- **Functional dimension:** Such objectifications must fulfil a function in society. Famous books, such as the *Histoire de France* by Ernest Lavisse (Nora 1997, 151–86), are first – before being turned into memory sites – created for a particular purpose. The *Histoire de France* served as a textbook and structured history teaching in schools. The aforementioned minute of silence has the function of periodically evoking a memory.
- **Symbolic dimension:** Finally, the objectification must, in addition to its function, also have a symbolic meaning. This is the case, for example, when actions become rituals or places are shrouded with a 'symbolic aura' (Nora 1989, 19). It is this intentional symbolic signification – whether ascribed to the objectification already at the point of its creation or not until later – that first makes a cultural object a site of memory.

These last two characteristics, symbolic dimension and intentionality, distinguish sites of memory from other cultural objectifications: 'To begin with, there must be a will to remember. If we were to abandon this criterion, we would quickly drift into admitting virtually everything as worthy of remembrance' (Nora 1989, 19).

This actually quite clear definition of a site of memory, however, is, in the course of the three volumes – *La République*, *La Nation*, and *Les Frances* – with their 130 contributions, deconstructed bit by bit: Popular

phrases ('dying for the fatherland'), ways of thinking and arguing ('Gaullists and Communists'), and social manners ('gallantry') are promoted to the status of *lieux de mémoire* and become objects of mnemo-historical research. Thus, many critics pose the question of just what exactly can become a site of memory (see for example, den Boer and Frijhoff 1993). The answer is likely: any cultural phenomenon, whether material, social or mental, which a society associates with its past and with national identity. Aleida Assmann (1996a) has blazed a trail in the thicket of sites of memory with her distinction between *lieux de mémoire* as media and *topoi* of cultural memory.

Nora's strict separation of history and memory is also not entirely unproblematic. While Halbwachs's polemic needs to be understood against the backdrop of nineteenth-century historicism, blocking out the memorial function of historiography appears strange in light of the discussions among historians – beginning as early as the 1970s – regarding the constructed nature, subjectivity, and perspectivity of all history writing.

In addition, it is hard to understand Nora's civilization-critical, strongly judgemental construction of a history of the deterioration and decline of collective memory. According to Nora, contemporary memory cultures are confronted with 'globalization, democratization, and the advent of mass culture', the end of 'societies based on memory', and the end of 'ideologies based on memory' (1996, 1f.). Nora contrasts this with a romanticized version of original, natural and authentic *milieux de mémoire*, such as 'peasant culture, that quintessential repository of collective memory' (ibid.). What we are faced with today, in Nora's diction, is a 'terror' or 'tyranny' of memory. Accordingly, he ends his *Lieux*-project with the words 'The tyranny of memory will reign for only a certain time – but this time will have been ours' (Nora 1984–92, III.1012).

Nora's *lieux de mémoire* are the most prominent example of a mnemo-historical approach, in which an (admittedly discontinuous) theoretical conception of cultural memory is borne out by a rich variety of case studies illuminating the dynamics of cultural remembrance. The concept of *lieux de mémoire* is restricted neither to the discipline of history nor to the study of French memories; on the contrary, it has inspired scholars of the most varied of disciplines to undertake memory research. Nora's project of charting national sites of memory has been favourably received and imitated in many other countries. There are publications on Italian *luoghi della memoria* (Isnenghi 1987ff.), American sites of memory (Hebel 2003), sites of memory in Quebec (Kolboom and Grzonka 2002), as well as Dutch *Plaatsen van Herinnering*

(Wesseling 2005–06), which, however, concentrates only on literal, physical places of memory.

Arguably, one of the greatest problems of the *lieux de mémoire*-approach is its nation-centredness. Hue-Tam Ho Tai (2001a) has convincingly criticized Nora's construct of a *nation-mémoire*, a French national memory, which ignores, despite its striving for polyphony, 'la France d'outre-mer' (the French colonies) as well as the memory cultures of immigrants (see also Judt 1998; Taithe 1999). More and more scholars are trying to address these shortcomings and focus on sites of memory under postcolonial, multicultural, diasporic, transcultural, and transnational perspectives, on what Andreas Huyssen (2003, 95) has called 'memory sites in an expanded field'.

Building on Nora's work, Etienne François and Hagen Schulze initiated the project *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte* (2001, 'German Sites of Memory'), which is, in contrast to the French model, strongly oriented towards Europe as a whole: International authors, a combination of insider and outsider perspectives, as well as the inclusion of sites of memory which are also significant for Germany's neighbors (for example, 'Versailles' and 'Charlemagne') all serve to reflect the more general process of an opening up of Germany towards Europe. More recent publications show an even greater sensitivity towards the complex inter-, multi- and transcultural constellations of memory sites. With *België, een parcours van herinnering* (Tollebeek and Buelens et al. 2008) and *Lieux de mémoire au Luxembourg/Erinnerungsorte in Luxembourg* (Kmec et al. 2008) this pertains, perhaps unsurprisingly, to volumes which address the memory sites of nation-states that are characterized by bilingualism and diglossia. Finally, projects dedicated to European memory sites are increasingly coming to the fore, for example on the transnational *lieux de mémoire* in Central Europe (Le Rider, Czàky and Sommer 2002; Le Rider 2008) or on European realms of memory (Buchinger et al. 2009).

One notable attempt to rethink the conception of the *lieu de mémoire* and provide a more solid theoretical fundament is Ann Rigney's work on the emergence and 'life' of memory sites. She emphasizes that:

Although it has proven useful as a conceptual tool, the metaphor of 'memory site' can become misleading if it is interpreted to mean that collective remembrance becomes permanently tied down to particular figures, icons, or monuments. As the performative aspect of the term 'remembrance' suggests, collective memory is constantly 'in the works' and, like a swimmer, has to keep moving even just to

stay afloat. To bring remembrance to a conclusion is de facto already to forget. (Rigney 2008a, 346)

Understanding the *lieu de mémoire* not as a stable entity but as fundamentally a mnemonic *process*, Rigney (2005, 18) emphasizes that ‘sites of memory are constantly being reinvested with new meaning’ and that they thus ‘become a self-perpetuating vortex of symbolic investment’. She advocates the study of *lieux de mémoire* in the wake of what she terms a ‘shift from “sites” to “dynamics” within memory studies [which] runs parallel to a larger shift of attention within cultural studies from products to processes, from a focus on cultural artifacts to an interest in the way those artifacts circulate and influence their environment’ (Rigney 2008a, 346; see also 2008b).

All in all, it can be said that while Nora’s *lieu de mémoire* is certainly the most prominent and internationally most frequently practised approach to cultural remembrance, it also constitutes one of the most sorely under-theorized concepts of memory studies. On top of this, it carries with it some old-fashioned and ideologically charged assumptions about the nature of memory, history and the nation, which memory studies had better shed if it wants to capitalize on the great inspirational value of the idea of the *lieu de mémoire* in order to study the increasingly globalizing processes and constellations of cultural memory (see chapter III.1.6).

II.4 Aleida and Jan Assmann: The Cultural Memory

The theory of ‘Cultural Memory’ (*das kulturelle Gedächtnis*), which was introduced by Aleida and Jan Assmann at the end of the 1980s, has proved to be the most influential approach of memory studies in the German-speaking world. (To distinguish it from a more generic use of the term ‘cultural memory’, this text capitalizes ‘Cultural Memory’ when referring specifically to the Assmanns’ concept.) One of its central achievements is to describe the connection between culture and memory in a systematic, conceptually nuanced and theoretically sound manner. In particular through its accent on the interdependences among cultural memory, collective identity, and political legitimation, the Assmanns’ theory makes it possible to deal with a range of phenomena which have been of increasing interest in the humanities and the social sciences since the 1980s. The theory of Cultural Memory has generated a shared field of research and brought together under one roof such disparate academic fields as history, anthropology, archaeology, religious studies, media theory, literary studies and sociology.

II.4.1 Communicative Memory and Cultural Memory

The starting point of the theory of Cultural Memory is the distinction between two registers of Halbwachs's collective memory. Jan and Aleida Assmann's concept, which is in many aspects indebted to Halbwachs's findings, is grounded in the insight that there is a qualitative difference between a collective memory that is based on forms of everyday interaction and communication and a collective memory that is more institutionalized and rests on rituals and media. In response, they differentiate between two 'memory frameworks' – communicative memory on the one hand and the Cultural Memory on the other.

Jan Assmann (1992, 56) pointedly contrasts characteristics of communicative memory and Cultural Memory, in order to show that the contents, forms, media, temporal structure and carriers of these two memory frameworks are fundamentally different from one another (see also Table II.2):

- *Communicative memory* comes into being through everyday interaction; its contents consist of the historical experiences of contemporaries and it thus always refers only to a limited, shifting temporal horizon of about eighty to one hundred years. The contents of communicative memory are changeable and not ascribed a determined meaning. Within this framework, everyone is considered equally competent in remembering and interpreting the common past. Communicative memory, according to Jan Assmann, belongs to the field of oral history. The Assmanns use communicative memory as a contrasting term to better demarcate the field of Cultural Memory, which represents the actual focus of their research.
- *Cultural Memory* is a memory which is tied to material objectivations. It is purposefully established and ceremonialized. Remembering within the framework of the Cultural Memory takes place in what Jan Assmann calls the 'temporal dimension of the festival' (while communicative memory is tied to the 'temporal dimension of everyday life'. Cultural Memory transports a fixed set of contents and meanings, which are maintained and interpreted by trained specialists (for example, priests, shamans, or archivists). At its core are mythical events of a distant past which are interpreted as foundational to the community (for example, the exodus from Egypt or the Trojan War). Between the time remembered in the framework of the communicative memory and that remembered in the Cultural Memory, thus, there is a gaping hole, or – using the term coined by the anthropologist Jan Vansina – a shifting 'floating gap' that moves along with the passage of time.

Table II.2 Comparison of communicative memory and Cultural Memory (J. Assmann 1992, 56)

	Communicative memory	Cultural Memory
Content	historical experiences within the framework of individual biographies	mythical past/ancient history, events from an absolute past
Forms	informal, loosely shaped, natural, created through interaction and everyday experience	consciously established, highly formalized, ceremonial communication, festival
Media	living memory in individual minds, experience, hearsay	established objectivations, traditional symbolic encoding/staging in word, image, dance, etc.
Temporal structure	80–100 years, a temporal horizon of three or four generations that shifts with the passage of time	absolute past of a mythical ancient time
Carriers	non-specific, eyewitnesses within a memory community	specialized carriers of tradition

In an essay entitled ‘Collective Memory and Cultural Identity’ (published in German in 1988 and in English in 1995), Jan Assmann coined the term ‘Cultural Memory’ and offered the following definition:

The concept of cultural memory comprises that body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose ‘cultivation’ serves to stabilize and convey that society’s self-image. Upon such collective knowledge, for the most part (but not exclusively) of the past, each group bases its awareness of unity and particularity. (1995, 132)

A cluster of central characteristics establishes the meaning of the term ‘Cultural Memory’ (J. Assmann 1995, 130–2):

- *Concretion of identity* means that social groups constitute a Cultural Memory, from which they derive their collective identity.
- Cultural Memory’s *capacity to reconstruct* takes into account the insight that every memory is related to the present situation: Cultural Memory is a retrospective construction.
- *Formation* is the first distinctive characteristic that distinguishes between the frameworks of communicative and Cultural Memory. Cultural Memory requires the continuation of meaning through

established, stable forms of expression; communicative memory is more flexible. One of Cultural Memory's methods of stabilization is the creation of 'memory figures' (*Erinnerungsfiguren*), the amalgamation of an image and a term or a narrative (as, for example, in the memory figure of 'Exodus'; see J. Assmann 1992, 37).

- *Organization* refers to the institutionalization of Cultural Memory and the specialization of its carriers. These gatekeepers of memory are usually elites, such as shamans, priests, or professors of history.
- The *obligation* of Cultural Memory 'engenders a clear system of values and differentiations in importance' (J. Assmann 1995, 131) for the group.
- The characteristic of *reflexivity*, lastly, points to the fact that Cultural Memory reflects the group's lifeworld and its self-image, and is moreover self-reflexive.

Such a bisection of Halbwachs's collective memory has proven to be highly suggestive for numerous authors and it turns up again and again, in one form or another, as *milieux de mémoire* and *lieux de mémoire* (Pierre Nora), as 'vernacular' and 'official' memory (John Bodnar), and as 'lived' and 'distant' memory (William Hirst and David Manier). This tendency to further subdivide cultural remembrance into two modes likely results from the need to differentiate between the reference to events of one's own epoch and the reference to more distant epochs; between unofficial and official forms of commemoration; between modifiable, negotiable everyday memory and meaning-laden traditions; between oral forms of remembrance and a memory which relies on other, more elaborate media technologies; and thus also, as Aleida Assmann puts it, between the relative fluidity and fixity, the more liquid and the more stable forms of cultural memory (see A. Assmann 1991).

However, at first glance, the Assmanns' use of the terms 'cultural' and 'communicative' may seem confusing. The adjective 'cultural' in the context of their theory does not denote a broad understanding of culture, that is, the totality of human self-interpretations in a given context, but rather the area which Aleida Assmann (1991) calls 'culture as monument' (as opposed to 'culture as lifeworld', the staged, stylized, observer-oriented areas of (high) culture). This use of the term 'culture' is not fully compatible with the current anthropological understanding, which also encompasses practices of everyday life and popular culture. 'Cultural Memory' does therefore *not* describe all manifestations of 'memory in culture'; rather it represents a subset of this: the societal construction of normative and formative versions of the past.

In fact, the attribute 'cultural' in the broad anthropological sense can be applied to both the communicative as well as the Cultural Memory, as both are certainly phenomena of culture. The opposite also holds true: Both Cultural and also communicative memory are 'communicative' as it is only through media communication that memory can be conveyed intersubjectively.

And, of course, Jan Assmann's distinguishing criteria – contents, media, forms, time structure, carriers – cannot really be unambiguously assigned to one or the other framework of memory. Life experience, for example, is nowadays by no means transmitted solely through oral everyday speech, but also through a host of mass media and the so-called new media (for example, in blogs and on Facebook). And equally, in the age of the Internet and formats such as Wikipedia there is an increased blurring of the distinction between specialists and laymen of the Cultural Memory.

Relativizing his polarizing contrast of Cultural and communicative memory, Jan Assmann (1992, 51) explains: 'At stake here are two modes of remembering, two functions of memory and the past – "uses of the past" – which one must first carefully distinguish, even if they permeate one another in manifold ways in the reality of a historical culture.' Working from this insight, Cultural Memory and communicative memory should be conceived of as two *modi memorandi*, modes of memory, possible horizons of reference to the past. Their distinction depends upon the (conscious or unconscious) decision as to which mode will be applied for the remembering – the mode of the 'foundational' or the 'biographical memory' (ibid.). This means that in a given historical context, the same event can become simultaneously an object of the Cultural Memory *and* of the communicative memory. Such a scenario is not an exceptional borderline case, but is rather a recurrent characteristic of modern memory culture. In societies which have experienced massive changes in recent times, it is in fact the rule. For example, the French Revolution around 1800 and the First World War in the 1920s were objects of both the Cultural and also the communicative memory. The Second World War and the Holocaust still are today. In this sort of historical constellations we are dealing with a 'simultaneity of the non-simultaneous' (Wilhelm Pinder) evoked through concurrent yet divergent modes of imagining the past.

As part of life experience, of a 'lived' or 'experienced history' (Halbwachs's *histoire vécue*), such historic events are the content of communicative generational memories. They are understood as a component of temporally limited, group-specific worlds of experience, as events

which had an effect on individuals' lives. Memories in accordance with communicative memory belong, in Aleida Assmann's (1991, 12) words, to the everyday 'near horizon' of a time perceived as the 'present'. The rememberers connect the memories with their lifeworld: 'The lifeworld context is a near horizon, which tightly and flexibly encloses the present.' As objects of 'foundational remembering', the same events have very different implications. They are part of a cultural 'distant horizon'. Remembering in accordance with the Cultural Memory means the 'transformation of the past into foundational history, that is, into myth' (J. Assmann 1992, 77).

The 'distant horizon' of Cultural Memory, however, can, in terms of historical-chronological time, be extremely near. Not only has foundational history, at least since the beginning of modernity and the associated experience of an 'acceleration of time' (Koselleck) in the eighteenth century, as well as the founding of nation-states in the nineteenth century, slipped largely into the area of historical time, but its most significant elements even arise from a very close historical past. The French Revolution took on the character of a foundational event almost immediately. The same holds true for the founding of the German Reich in 1871, for the world wars in the twentieth century, and last but not least for '9/11'. Such ad hoc transformations of events barely past into foundational history share basic characteristics with the memory of 'distant', 'mythical' times and fulfil the same functions. The mode of Cultural Memory generates meaning which, first, is to a greater extent binding and obligatory than is the case for the mode of communicative memory, and which, second, claims to be valid for very large mnemonic communities (religious groups, societies, and so on). Connected with Cultural remembering are usually political or ideological functionalizations of the past. Cultural Memory therefore has to be legitimized (which is not necessarily the case with communicative memory). To this end, foundational events are tied to events of a distant past and/or visions of a distant future.

The central criterion to differentiate the 'Cultural' from the 'communicative' mode of remembering is therefore, it seems, not the measurable time (the chronological distance of the remembered events from the present in which the act of remembering takes place). It is rather the way of remembering chosen by a community, the collective *idea* of the meaning of past events and of their embeddedness within temporal processes, which makes a memory 'Cultural' or 'communicative'. Thus the distinction between the two modes rests not primarily on the *structure* of time (a universal, measurable category), but rather on the *consciousness* of time (a culturally and historically variable phenomenon of

the mental dimension of culture). The criterion 'consciousness of time' also overrules the strict differentiation between the media associated with each of the two frameworks of memory. Neither is the production of communicative memory limited to orality, nor do all texts and images automatically belong to Cultural Memory. The deciding factor is rather the media *usage*.

II.4.2 Cultural memory, writing, and political identity

In Germany, the most influential book in the area of cultural memory studies is arguably still Jan Assmann's *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* ('The Cultural Memory,' 1992), in which he addresses the connections between memory, the formation of collective identity, and the exercise of political power, and also the differences and similarities between oral and written cultures. 'Societies imagine their self-images and maintain an identity over the course of generations by developing a culture of memory, and they do this in *entirely different ways*', Jan Assmann emphasizes (*ibid.*, 18). His goal is to illustrate these differences in the 'connective structure' of societies (that is, a structure that brings together different times – past and present – as well as different groups of a society through acts of remembering; see *ibid.*, 16), by creating a typology of cultures. The Egyptologist Assmann uses as examples the early eastern and western civilizations – Egypt, Israel, the Hittites, and Greece.

The two central media of Cultural Memory, orality and literacy, can fulfil fundamentally the same functions, as far as the creation of cultural coherence is concerned: They are *functionally* equivalent. However, the introduction of writing does influence the *forms* through which the past is envisioned in a culture. Assmann speaks of the ritual coherence of oral cultures and of the textual coherence of literate cultures. Oral cultures depend on the relatively exact repetition of their myths, since the Cultural Memory is stored in the organic memories of the singers or shamans and any variation could endanger the tradition. Textual coherence, on the other hand, relies on the outsourcing of cultural meaning into the medium of writing. By means of such medial externalization, it becomes possible to transmit more than that which the individual is able to keep in his or her memory. However, the obligatory, canonical texts of Cultural Memory must be re-appropriated by later generations. Their meaning has to be laid out, interpreted: Textual coherence thus goes hand-in-hand with the cultural techniques of commentary, imitation or critique.

Drawing on a distinction made by Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jan Assmann names two possible strategies of memory policy: the 'hot' and the 'cold'

options. Hot cultures, such as ancient Israel, are dynamic societies which make memory the engine of their development. Alternatively, societies can 'freeze' historical change through remembering an eternally unchanged past. Examples of such cold cultures are ancient Egypt or medieval Judaism.

The Cultural Memory is founded on 'myths', stories about a common past, which offer orientation in the present and hope for the future. These stories can (as in the case of ancient Egyptian culture) feature elements of an absolute past, of mythical time; but they can also (as in the case of ancient Israel) deal with a relative past, with history. No matter whether they rest on facts or fiction, either way, the myths of the Cultural Memory fulfil a specific function: 'Myth is a story one tells oneself in order to orient oneself in the world; [it is] a truth of a higher order, which is not simply true but in addition makes normative claims and possesses a formative power' (ibid., 76).

Myths tend to exhibit both a foundational as well as a contra-present dynamic. The myth provides the fundament for and legitimizes existing systems when it is perceived by society as an expression of a common history, from which present circumstances derive. In contrast, the myth can also take on a contra-present and potentially delegitimizing meaning if it serves to contrast a 'deficient present' with the memory of a past, better era.

The case studies in the second part of *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* show that writing, cultural memory, and political identity are quite closely entwined. Shared, identity-forming cultural meaning is established and maintained in literate cultures through normative and formative texts. '*Normative* texts codify the norms of social behaviour. *Formative* texts formulate the self-image of the group and the knowledge that secures their identity' (J. Assmann 2006, 104). The former answer the question of 'what should we do?'; the latter that of 'who are we?' Such texts constitute the monumental discourse of Egypt, are the prerequisite for religious memory as resistance in Israel, and cultivate the ethnogenesis, the birth of a culture, in Greece.

II.4.3 Memory as *ars* und *vis*, functional memory and stored memory

Aleida Assmann prefaces her book *Erinnerungsräume* (1999, 'Memory Spaces'), which further develops the theory of Cultural Memory, with a fundamental distinction: memory as *ars* vs memory as *vis*. The concept of memory as *ars*, as art or technology, goes back to the topological model of ancient mnemonics (see chapter III.2.1). Memory as *ars*

appears as a storehouse of knowledge, in which information can be deposited and later recalled in the same form. The concept of memory as *vis*, an anthropological 'force', in contrast, accentuates the temporal dimension and time's transformative effect on the contents of memory, thus highlighting memory's processual nature and its reconstructive activity. Memory as *vis* always also implies forgetting, since from the plethora of things that could be remembered only a few elements can be chosen which speak to the present situation.

Assmann uses these two traditional conceptions of memory as a basis for a typology of cultures: It is the period 'around 1800' – when the ancient mnemotechnics became less prestigious, Locke had developed his philosophy of identity, the bourgeois subject had come into being, and finally the 'romantic concept of identity-through-memory' was arising – which she identifies as the turning point: The previously dominant concept of memory as *ars* is now replaced by an understanding of memory as *vis* (ibid., 89–113). During the nineteenth century, then, the philosopher and cultural critic Friedrich Nietzsche became the 'patron of the paradigm of identity-creating memory' (ibid., 29).

To describe how the contents of the Cultural Memory are activated and deactivated, Assmann makes one further distinction, that between functional and stored memory (or: working and archival memory). Functional memory is the 'inhabited memory'. It consists of 'meaningful elements' which can be configured to form a coherent story. Functional memory is characterized by its 'relevance to a group, selectivity, its relation to shared values and an orientation towards the future'. The stored memory, on the other hand, is the 'uninhabited memory', 'an amorphous mass' of unconnected, 'neutral elements', which do not exhibit any 'vital connection' to the present (ibid., 134f.).

On a collective level, the stored memory contains that which has become unusable, obsolete, or foreign; the neutral, identity-abstract factual knowledge; but also the repertoire of missed opportunities, alternative options, and unused chances. The functional memory, in contrast, is an acquired memory, which emerges from a process of choosing, connecting, and constituting meaning. Unstructured, disconnected elements enter the functional memory composed, constructed, and connected. Meaning emerges from this constructive act, a quality which the stored memory fundamentally lacks. (ibid., 137)

Aleida Assmann describes the relationship between these two areas of the Cultural Memory as 'perspectival'. The functional memory should

be seen as existing in the foreground, silhouetted against the background of the stored memory (see also A. Assmann 1996b).

While the functional memory fulfils such important tasks as identity construction or the legitimization of an existing societal form, the stored memory is no less important. It serves as a 'reservoir for future functional memories', as a 'resource for the renewal of cultural knowledge' and thus as a 'condition for the possibility of cultural change' (ibid., 140). The elements of the stored memory can – should they acquire an additional dimension of meaning for society – cross over into the functional memory. The decisive aspect is thus not only the contents of the two areas of Cultural Memory, but also the degree of permeability between them, as this determines the possibilities for change and renewal (see Table II.3).

The distinction between a stored and a functional memory allows an explanation of processes of change within the Cultural Memory. In *Erinnerungsräume*, Assmann recounts the history of such changes from ancient to postmodern times.

Aleida Assmann's concept of Cultural Memory as the totality of stored *and* functional memory entails an enormous expansion of the phenomena that can be studied from a memory studies perspective. All objectifications which a given culture preserves now come into sight: not only the central 'reusable' texts, images and rituals, but also documents stored in archives, long-forgotten works of art, scarcely heeded

Table II.3 Differences between stored and functional memory (Assmann and Assmann 1994, 123)

	Stored memory	Functional memory
Content	'the Other', transcending of the present	'the Self', the present rests on the fundament of a specific past
Temporal structure	anachronous: dual temporal horizon, the past exists alongside the present; contra present dynamics	diachronic: continuity between past and present
Forms	inviolability of texts; documents have autonomous status	selective = strategic, perspectival use of memories
Media and Institutions	literature, art, museums, science	festivals, public rituals of collective commemoration
Carriers	individuals within a cultural group	collectivized subjects

buildings, and so on. The bundle of characteristics suggested by Jan Assmann in his 1988 essay clearly applies only to the core area of functional memory – to the Cultural Memory in the narrow sense – which has merely one characteristic in common with Cultural Memory in the broader sense, namely that of ‘formation’. The distinction between functional and stored memory further clarifies why the Assmanns’ concept is not merely a ‘reissue’ of the study of tradition. Cultural Memory, in contrast to tradition, exists not only ‘in the modus of actuality’, but also in the ‘modus of potentiality as an archive, as a “total horizon”’ (J. Assmann 1988, 13). The concept of tradition brings only the actuality of memory culture into focus. The Assmanns’ concept not only describes a larger field than could be grasped with research on tradition or on *lieux de mémoire*; it also allows for a description of the reservoirs, origins, dynamics, and changes of cultural recall.