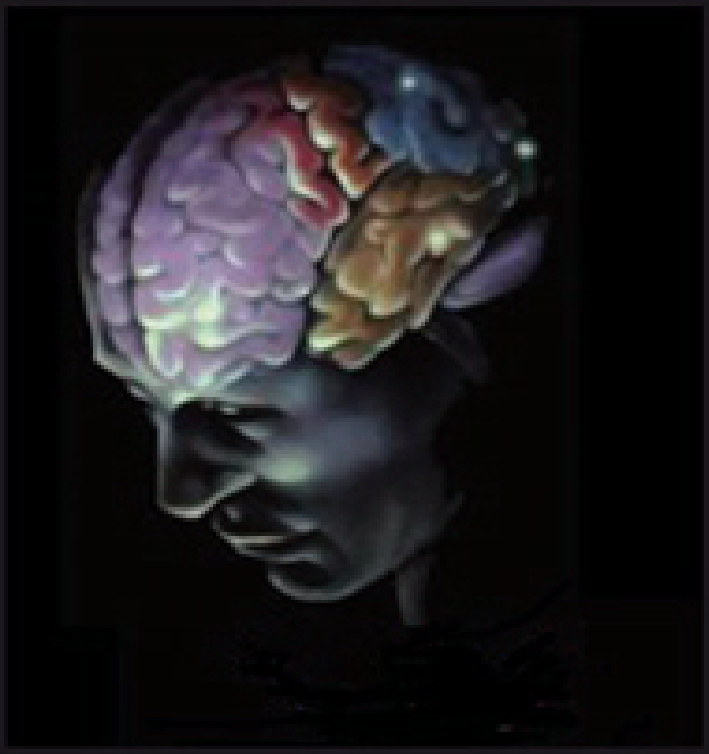
On Memory

An Interdisciplinary Approach



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Introduction

The theme of memory has become quite fashionable in historical research over the past decade or so. There has been a revived interest in the theories of the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, and many volumes and papers have been published on different aspects of historical public memory. In this volume the reader will find a reflection of this research and various reactions to what has been done in this field, all of which has been set against the background of two papers on the biological processes that "manufacture" the memories in our brain.

This collection of essays is the outcome of a conference held at the Institute for Advanced Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in April 2005. At the conference the speakers attempted to tackle the problem of public memory from the viewpoint of various disciplines in the humanities, the social sciences and the exact sciences. Their deliberations led to many important results, some of which are presented here. I will not summarize the topics dealt with in the various chapters, as this would do an injustice to the authors, who have argued their cases extensively and with a great deal of complexity. I will just mention some of the issues that were tackled and emphasize that this volume, if read in its entirety, will give the reader some idea about the mosaic of public memory.

First and foremost, many articles in this volume clearly show that the concept of "collective memory" has sometimes been used too loosely; here it is examined cautiously and from various angles. Individual memory and the narrative of it are tackled by a psychotherapist, showing once again that the "behavior" of memory in the individual can sometimes serve as a metaphor for the behavior of memory in the group. The relationship between individual and collective memory is discussed in some of the articles and emerges as

an important facet of any form of public memory. Most scholars participating in this volume would agree that alongside aspects of memories that are collective to a group there are many subdivisions within the group that have their own memories, which are not shared by others in the larger group. These I would call fragmented memories.

On the basis of the various contributions to this volume it can be concluded that "public memory" can refer to a memory that is imbued in a national entity, or just in groups and institutions within this entity, or in both. Public memory as discussed here includes blocks of memories "belonging" to any group of people that transcend individual recall. It can be the memory of a class at school, the memory of a generation concerning some particular event it experienced, the memory that is imbued in a group that fought a certain battle, the memory that is embodied in an ethnic group or in a sect within a monotheistic religion. Individuals and groups can carry memories of the experience of others who left it as a legacy in oral or written form. Thus we can adopt the idea of Amia Lieblich concerning "primary" and "secondary" public memories.

We have tackled in various degrees and depths the problem of the *nature* of public memory and the ways in which it is connected to the society in which it is embodied. A public memory can be visible to the society, the most obvious example being the language we speak, which enfolds common memories and associations when spoken by a group. Everyone in the group has to memorize the language in order to be able to speak and understand it. A language develops and changes from decade to decade; thus people who are disconnected from their mother tongue for a while are "stuck" with an old-fashioned version of the language. But there are also public memories that are invisible. They are the memories embedded in the society's institutional structure, such as the legal system. The precedent used in the law courts is based, as Nili Cohen has argued, on the concept that a legal memory should be preserved from generation to generation. Just as individual memory can be "measured" to a certain extent, so too can public memory that is stored in its institutions. The more visible aspect of public memory is perhaps less measurable in the democratic nation-states; it can more easily be observed in the totalitarian ones.

From most articles in this volume it becomes clear that various factors have an effect on public memory. These include the *media* that create and preserve memories in societies as well as the *time* that elapses from the moment the event is memorized to its becoming public. Fashions and ideologies have an impact on the nature and durability of public memory. The nature of the regime is another crucial factor, since in autocratic and totalitarian regimes memory is largely shaped and formed for the population. Barring clandestine groups that preserve their own memories, the media in such regimes are restricted and censured in order to promote the general "collective" memory that includes made-up and filtered versions of the past as well as other experiences that are grafted onto a formal narrative. In such cases the term "collective memory" can be much more easily used than in democracies. Here the use of such a term becomes quite problematic, from the very definition of the concept of democracy; here some of us would prefer to speak of "fragments of memory" that have their own "life" in segments of the society alongside some collective aspects of memory in the entire citizen-body of the state in different time spans.

The media, as many articles in this volume show, are crucial for the creation, preservation, enhancement and destruction of public memory. The volume tackles the problems of how the media create, revive or promote certain items of knowledge that become the memories of a society (I can have a "memory" of a biblical scene from having learned it). The media may comprise radio, television, theater, cinema, the law courts, rituals and sacred places as well as religious academies. In a tight religious society or ethnic group, the media are defined and restricted regarding what the people within the group are allowed to memorize. In this context some of the authors have dealt with the issue of the communicative power of symbols and their visualization through architecture and other artifacts of art. The media in democracies and open societies can influence the impact a public memory has and the length of time it stays within the public sphere before it becomes inscribed in historiography.

Time is mentioned by most scholars, implicitly and explicitly, as a crucial factor in the "life" of a collective public memory or fragments thereof. How long does it take from the creation of a memory

until it becomes imbued in the public mind? The processes that shape a public memory are also dealt with, as is the issue of the time it takes for memory to be transformed or translated from its oral to its inscribed or physical form. In this volume it becomes quite clear that the physical representations of experiences that were embodied in a society lose their role as soon as the generation that erected them starts to loosen its grip on these representations, which then gradually disappear from the public arena. In other words, sites are not necessarily a guarantee that a memory will be preserved for ever after. But among groups, societies and institutions that keep very strong religious memories, time has worked miracles in the preservation of sites that powerfully represent religious individuals, religious events and rituals. In such groups the memory of a physical site can also be kept in written narratives and thus become a mnemonic symbol in itself. The Hebrew Bible is full of examples of such preservation of public memory (Josh. 22:9–34).

Public memory is nourished by a canon. The Hebrew Bible is a text that nourished the collective memory of Jews and Christians for centuries; each generation memorizes its stories with the help of its filters and additional experiences. But there are also secular canons and foundational books that nourish a group that has some collective memory. A foundational event that becomes public memory needs at times also a "collective audience," as Tamar Liebes has formulated it.

The linkage between experience, the above-mentioned factors and the element of time is what creates what we call here public memory. I would like to demonstrate this point a little further. My example is drawn from the visual arts of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in central Italy.

Here is not the place to elaborate on this vast subject, but just to air some ideas about it.[1] It would be difficult to speculate about what people in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries memorized. Here and there we may get a glimpse into someone's thoughts, but basically it is impossible to form an idea about this aspect of life. However, since even today much of what was painted is preserved in public places we

1 I hope to publish a full version of what follows in M. Blondheim and D. Mendels, *History and Communication*, forthcoming.

can assess what people saw and what they probably memorized as a collective audience. It was Leon Battista Alberti who in his *De Pictura*, Book II.25, said about the visual arts:

> Painting possesses a truly divine power in that not only does it make the absent present (as they say of friendship), but it also represents the dead to the living many centuries later, so that they are recognized by spectators with pleasure and deep admiration for the artist.

First, one should recall who the "manufacturers" were of the objects to be remembered in the public sphere. Those who patronized the arts were usually the strong institutions at that time, including rich merchant families, the mendicant orders, politicians and the church, as well as secular and religious institutions. True, they supported the greatest artists of that period and brought about the rise of professionalism. But it was also they who made the decisions concerning the themes to be represented (Kempers 1992). Art and politics went hand in hand and could hardly be separated at any given time. Let us view in brief the factors that shaped the public memory in central Italy at the time under consideration.

1 The Public Sphere and its Media – The Visual Arts

During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries a vast outpouring of art can be detected in the public sphere. Every tourist on his first visit can't help but notice this. In addition to monuments there are artifacts that were placed in the public sphere: churches, public institutions, the marketplace, etc. The public would assemble in large groups for many rituals, religious as well as secular. It became an active participant, either directly or indirectly, in the governance of cities (Kempers 1992). Thus we can start with a basic assumption that the public was exposed to artifacts of art in the public sphere all the time and everywhere. Interestingly, the architectonic space that became a medium for messages for the public is also reflected in the paintings

themselves and has a significant role in the memorializing role of Renaissance architecture.[2] In other words, this medium created a "bombardment" of art within the public sphere.

2 Canon of Themes

During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries a canon of topics and subjects was formed that found expression in the visual arts, among other media (such as literature and political science). It is no accident that a more or less fixed "list" of topics and scenes was presented in the public sphere during these two centuries and beyond. Some of the recurring topics had similar fixed narratives that were only partly dependent on the Bible, either Hebrew or Greek.[3] Other paintings drew on narratives from popular literature such as the Aurea Legenda.[4] This framework of selected motifs from the canonical sources (classical mythology, the Bible and the Apocrypha) created a new canon for central Italy (as well as other parts of the country) upon which the public memory of the communities was based. One can imagine that the choice of loci and the "mass production" of public art, taken together, had a strong effect on people.

2 Examples of this abound. See for instance the use of familiar architecture by Domenico Ghirlandaio (Cadogan 2000, 77 and plate 91, 94–100; familiar architecture appears in the scene of "The Expulsion of Joachim from the Temple" and in the presentation of the Virgin in the Santa Maria Novella, 86). Or see Masaccio's "The Shadow Healing and the Distribution of Goods," in the Brancacci Chapel (Joannides 1993, pls.103–4).

3 See for instance Uccello in the Chiostro Verde: stories from Genesis (Borsi 1994, 178–87). See also the Old Testament scenes (and embellishments on them such as that of Job's) in the Collegiate Church of San Gimigniano by Bartolo di Fredi (Imberciadori and Torriti 2002, 45–60).

4 For the Aurea Legenda see de Voragine 1993. See for instance Opitz 1998, 44–59 ("Adoration of the Magi" by Gozzoli); Galli 2005, 24 ("St. Sebastian" by Piero del Pallaiuolo, pl. 23); Borsi 1994, 256–9 (the two St. George's by Uccello); the various versions of "The Massacre of the Innocents" by Matteo di Giovanni (Van Marle 1937, 16: 336–41).

3 Sending Clear Messages

In addition to the choice of location within the public sphere and the canonical framework on which the themes presented were based, the topics were well known, as were the personalities and the landscapes used for the old scenes.[5] This probably created ideal conditions for a clear message to be sent, a message that would be understood as it was meant.[6] This closed system avoided a communication method of just "speaking into the air" (Peters 1999). The messages that were visualized are of various kinds: moral messages are very strongly represented in art, e.g. a visualization of the good versus the evil man. The list of vices and good traits represented in certain works of art is a long one.[7] The symbolic and allegoric elements could be very effective in a community educated in this kind of dichotomous thinking of good and bad. In the words of Marilyn Lavin:

> Pictures of the saints and other holy personages were never meant to emulate viable reality. They were aids to memory, representation of models of perfection, maps of the road to salvation.[8]

The political message was also quite dominant in the visual arts of these centuries: the representations of good and bad government, good

5 Lavin rightfully argues (1990, 6) that "most spectators/worshipers knew the story and interacted with the narrative" (see her chart illustrating the interaction between narrative and spectator, ibid). For the mnemonic value of the imitatio Christi as a technique to evoke the suffering of the past, see Mills 2005, esp. 151–6.

6 For the methods used to ensure that a message would be understood as it was meant, see Katz and Popescu 2004.

7 See for instance representations of the virtues and the vices (such as hope, faith, justice, anger, idolatry, injustice) by Giotto in the Cappella degli Scrovegni, Padua (Von der Haegen-Mueller 1998, 50–3).

8 Lavin 1990, 121. For the communication value of narrative frescoes see ibid., passim.

and bad citizenship and adherence to the laws.[9] Moreover, politicians of the time and their relatives were represented in many works of art, sometimes in the garb of ancient classical and biblical figures, and sometimes as people depicted in their own reality.[10] Art became such an effective medium in shaping public memory that it was increasingly used by politicians, churchmen and influential business people. Were it not effective, art would not have been so central in the life of the communities, and artists would have not achieved so high a level of professionalism.

4 Timing and the Audience

An audience at that time could be captivated by a combination of three aspects that the visual arts provided: (1) The loci where the audience got the exposure were the most central in the city or village – namely, the church, the city hall, etc. (2) Many visual narratives were painted for – and thus connected to – certain religious dates and their rituals (Lavin 1990, 99–118). (3) Many of the painted scenes were representations of actualities and events taken from reality. Here we can include famous battles and scenes that occurred in the past or during the lifetime of the artist and his patron.[11] A state visit, for instance, was thus imprinted in the public memory by the artist who painted it in the public space.[12]

9 For good and bad government see Frugoni 2002, 201–55 (Ambrogio Lorenzetti); for good and bad citizenship and the reflection of the legal system see Kempers 1992, esp. 133–41.

10 Baetzner 1998, 50–73 (Mantegna: "The Camera degli Sposi – the Gonzaga Court").

11 See for instance "The battle of San Romano" by Uccello, in Borsi 1994, 212–31; "The battle of Maxentius" by Piero della Francesca (Lightbown 1992, 152–5).

12 For instance the political scenes by Pintoricchio in the Piccolomini Library in Siena (Luchinat 1999, 51–67).

5 Meaning

It was Gregory the Great (590–604) who argued already for the importance of pictorial representations for the (illiterate) masses (Migne, P. L. vol. 77: 1027–8). The combination of the above elements provides a fair picture as to what public memory was like in the early Renaissance, and it was effective in creating a clear and familiar message in the public sphere. Moreover, the themes, persons and historical narratives all had a significant *meaning* for the people in Italy, enabling whole communities to feel connected to the vast amount of art around them. This kind of link between communities and what they remember, and the mnemonic meanings they attach to the physical symbols around them is a central theme of this volume. Once this linkage disappears, public memory vanishes and becomes historiography – an attraction for tourists who preserve it as a vague memory of past times.

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