

A Bibliographical Review on the Uses of the Past¹

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In a world bent on barreling full-bore into the future, the past shows up with surprising frequency and force. Examples range from the commonplace to the terrifying: an entire channel of cable television serves up history in entertaining one-hour segments; politicians call for a return to old-fashioned values; and suicide bombers invoke the words of a seventh-century prophet before destroying themselves and their victims.

On closer examination, the enormous velocity of social and cultural change during the modern era may actually be one of the causes of the modern preoccupation with the past. “We speak so much of memory,” Pierre Nora famously observed, “because there is so little of it left.”² Human beings have always been backward-looking as well as forward-looking creatures, but in a world that nearly always prizes “progress” and “growth” over stasis, the past may seem to offer particularly welcome possibilities—consolation, justification, critique—for individuals and even for entire societies. As Karl Marx once noted, even modern radicals, from Luther to the French republicans, conjured up the names, costumes, and battle cries of the past at the very moments when they seemed most engaged in “revolutionizing things and themselves.”³ Even for revolutionaries, the past is both useful and inescapable.

The interwovenness of past and present, the ways in which individuals and societies constitute themselves through reference to the past—these alone would suffice to make

¹ The author thanks Allan Megill and Monica Black for commenting on drafts of this bibliography.

² Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*,” *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 7.

³ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (Chicago: Kerr, 1913) 9.

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the study of the past in the present interesting and important. Growing awareness of the malleability of history and memory, and a growing horror at the ways they have been deliberately manipulated to justify the atrocities of the modern era, have made the topic unavoidable over the past several decades. In the academy, these aspects of historical consciousness have been examined most frequently under the rubric of “collective memory,” a term highlighting the insight that memory creates and is created by collectivities as well as individuals.

The rise of memory as a popular subject of academic study during the 1970s and 1980s was driven by a mixture of social and intellectual developments. The task of studying the Holocaust and other atrocities strongly suggested the need for new approaches to the past. What sort of justifications had been powerful enough to rationalize wholesale genocide? Could any sources document that horror as adequately as the memories of the individuals who had suffered at the hands of the Nazis? At the same time, critiques of the historical profession’s claims to objectivity created intellectual space for the study of memory, which seemed compatible with the newly tentative and fragmented nature of historical knowledge. Growing interest in narrative and social constructionism within the social sciences drew attention to the ways in which various pasts had been “assembled” or “invented” for specific purposes. Some scholars argued that the writing of history had been used as an instrument of cultural domination, that it was often not so much about “getting the facts right” as about justifying some present or encouraging some future social order. As a field of study and a source base, memory seemed to offer greater scope for unmasking oppression and attending to the voices of the marginalized and oppressed, those whose histories had not been recorded in the traditional repositories of historical knowledge.

Although the critiques that paved the way for the burgeoning field of “memory studies” have been widely accepted, the new emphasis on memory has created a great deal of controversy among scholars, particularly in the field of history. Some historians have identified a sharp divide between memory and history and worked hard to protect the study of history against the relaxation of scholarly standards they associate with the study of memory. Even some historians who affirm the importance of memory studies have criticized the way the field has developed, calling for more careful attention to the historical context and reception of memory as well as more concentrated efforts to tease out the implications of memory’s lapses and suppressions.⁴

This bibliography highlights key theoretical contributions to the study of how individuals and societies form and use their histories, narratives, memories, and other accounts of the past. In ways as seemingly frivolous as a trip to the theater to watch the latest Mel Gibson epic and as obviously significant as the formation of modern nation-states

⁴ Alon Confino, “Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method,” *The American Historical Review* 102.5 (December 1997): 1386–1403.

and the justification of atrocities in Bosnia and Rwanda, the past is continually called into the present. It never arrives without being shaped by those who summon it and, in turn, shaping its summoners.

Collective Memory

While memory has been a popular subject of academic study since the 1970s, scholarly reflection on collective memory is much older than that. Its most important theorist was the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, whose writings from the interwar period were rediscovered in the 1980s. Halbwachs argued that individual memories are constructed and recalled only within groups, each of which offers a distinctive “social framework of memory.” For Halbwachs, collective memories varied according to social location; their defining feature was a continuous and socially constituted connection with the past. He distinguished collective memory from historical memory, which he saw as discontinuous with the past, unembedded in social groups, and aiming for a unitary explanation of the past.

While much has changed since Halbwachs died in Buchenwald in 1945, his insights continue to inform and stimulate. The following books are part of an ongoing scholarly effort to understand the ways that social groups form and use collective memories. Some also tackle the relationship between collective memory and historical memory, a debate that has received a great deal of attention in the wake of the Nazi atrocities that claimed Halbwachs’s life.

- Assmann, Jan. *Religion and Cultural Memory: Ten Studies*. Trans. Rodney Livingstone. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2005.
- Bal, Mieke, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer, eds. *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*. Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 1998.
- Connerton, Paul. *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Halbwachs, Maurice. *On Collective Memory*. Trans. and ed. Lewis A. Coser. 1952; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- Heim, Otto, and Caroline Wiedmer, eds. *Inventing the Past: Memory Work in Culture and History*. Basel: Schwabe AG, 2005.
- Koselleck, Reinhart. *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2002.
- Le Goff, Jacques. *History and Memory*. Trans. Steven Rendall and Elizabeth Claman. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992.
- Megill, Allan. *Historical Knowledge, Historical Error: A Contemporary Guide to Practice*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.
- Rüsen, Jörn, ed. *Meaning and Representation in History*. New York: Berghahn, 2006.

- Zerubavel, Eviatar. *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

National Identity and the Past

The historian Eric Hobsbawm observed a generation ago that nation-states have often had a curious relationship to the past: historically new, they have claimed to be so ancient that their origins were lost in the mists of time. Hobsbawm pointed to a reality that scholars have since explored in great depth—the use of myths, rituals, symbols, monuments, commemorations, and other evocations of real or fictitious pasts to cement the bonds of nationality. The books in this section analyze the manifold ways in which memory, tradition, and narratives of the past have been pressed into the service of nationality and nationalism.

- Confino, Alon. *Germany as a Culture of Remembrance: Promises and Limits of Writing History*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006.
- Gillis, John R., ed. *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.
- Hobsbawm, Eric, and Terence Ranger, eds. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- Kenney, Padraic, and Max Paul Friedman, eds. *Partisan Histories: The Past in Contemporary Global Politics*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- Kosher, Rudy. *From Monuments to Traces: Artifacts of German Memory, 1870–1990*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.
- Moeller, Robert G. *War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.
- Nora, Pierre, ed. *The State*, vol. 1, *Rethinking France: Les Lieux de Mémoire*. Trans. Mary Seidman Trouille. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.
- Ozyurek, Esra, ed. *The Politics of Public Memory in Turkey*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007.
- Wertsch, James V. *Voices of Collective Remembering*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Zerubavel, Yael. *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

Narrating Ourselves

Individuals as well as nations constitute themselves through reference to the past, most obviously by telling stories that shape the raw materials of their lives into coherent narratives. This is a matter of self-understanding as much as self-presentation, and it is a highly personal process as well as an unavoidably social one. The books in this section examine the ways that individuals draw on culturally approved narratives to explain

themselves and give moral definition to their experiences, including their triumphs, traumas, and sufferings.

- Bland, Sterling Lecater. *Voices of the Fugitives: Runaway Slave Stories and Their Fictions of Self-Creation*. Westport: Greenwood, 2000.
- Bruner, Jerome. *Acts of Meaning: Four Lectures on Mind and Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990.
- Davis, Joseph E. *Accounts of Innocence: Sexual Abuse, Trauma, and the Self*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- Prager, Jeffrey. *Presenting the Past: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Misremembering*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998.
- Rosenzweig, Roy, and David P. Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.
- Shay, Jonathan. *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming*. New York: Scribner, 2002.
- Wright, Lawrence. *Remembering Satan: A Case of Recovered Memory and the Shattering of an American Family*. New York: Knopf, 1994.

Remembering Mass Suffering and Atrocity

The enormous suffering of the modern era has posed special challenges to those who have sought to document it. A major topic of discussion has been how to write with proper respect about suffering and atrocity. A closely related question concerns the degree to which non-participants are able to understand and describe the suffering of others. Some of the most powerful depictions of the Holocaust, for example, are memoirs, gripping eyewitness accounts by those who survived the concentration camps. These testimonies possess such great authority in a culture that affirms the authenticity of personal experience that some historians worry they will overwhelm more critical and interpretive historical accounts. Individual experiences are by nature partial and idiosyncratic; extreme suffering and lapsed time can distort memory; and eyewitness accounts, however emotionally compelling, cannot interpret themselves.

Scholars argue about these concerns; the appropriate role of eyewitnesses and the proper relationship between history and memory are matters of ongoing discussion and dispute. In any event, eyewitness accounts are sometimes all that historians have to work with. One of the serious challenges of writing about the Holocaust or other large-scale atrocities in places as diverse as Cambodia, Russia, and the United States is that perpetrators are often ruthlessly efficient at eliminating incriminating evidence. But the shaping of memory involves more than the blatant manipulation of the historical record portrayed by George Orwell in *1984*. Those who inflict suffering are usually eager to defend their actions to others and to themselves; perpetrators as well as victims perform a great deal of “memory work” in the wake of atrocity.

- Browning, Christopher R. *Collected Memories: Holocaust History and Post-War Testimony*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003.
- Eyerman, Ron. *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Fussell, Paul. *The Great War and Modern Memory*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1975.
- Gonzalez, Mario, and Elizabeth Cook-Lynn. *The Politics of Hallowed Ground: Wounded Knee and the Struggle for Indian Sovereignty*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1999.
- LaCapra, Dominick. *History and Memory after Auschwitz*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998.
- Merridale, Catherine. *Night of Stone: Death and Memory in Twentieth-Century Russia*. New York: Viking, 2001.
- Olick, Jeffrey K. *The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility*. New York: Routledge, 2007.
- Wieviorka, Annette. *The Era of the Witness*. Trans. Jared Stark. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006.
- Winter, Jay. *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Young, James E. *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000.

Whitewashing the Past

Individuals and collectivities often want to ignore or misrepresent aspects of their pasts. While the natural limitations of memory and the inherent selectivity of narrative produce inevitable gaps in both historical and collective memory, some gaps are deliberately created or at least unconsciously welcomed. The creation of such gaps is linked inextricably to the practices of commemoration. As Paul Ricoeur observed, “Speaking about memory necessarily means speaking about forgetting.”⁵ Indeed, a recurrent theme in recent studies is that remembering allows forgetting; memorialization facilitates suppression. Scholars have examined the interwoven practices of remembering and forgetting in cases as diverse as the writing of nineteenth-century British fiction and the aftermath of the American Civil War. The rampant nostalgia of the modern era has sometimes served radical purposes; more often, as in the fascination with the Old South evidenced in Margaret Mitchell’s novel *Gone With the Wind* (1936) and Disney’s feature film *Song of the South* (1946), it glosses over the ugliness and injustice of the past. The past is not ignored; it is prettified beyond recognition.

⁵ Paul Ricoeur, “Memory—Forgetting—History,” *Meaning and Representation in History*, ed. Jörn Rüsen (New York: Berghahn, 2006) 16.

- Blight, David W. *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2001.
- Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic, 2001.
- Crinson, Mark, ed. *Urban Memory: History and Amnesia in the Modern City*. New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Dames, Nicholas. *Amnesiac Selves: Nostalgia, Forgetting, and British Fiction, 1810–1870*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Evans, Richard J. *Lying about Hitler: History, Holocaust, and the David Irving Trial*. New York: Basic, 2001.
- Goody, Jack. *The Theft of History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Homans, Peter, ed. *Symbolic Loss: The Ambiguity of Mourning and Memory at Century's End*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000.
- Huyssen, Andreas. *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Ricoeur, Paul. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.
- Rousso, Henry. *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944*. Trans. Arthur Goldhammer. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006.

History, Morality, Education

The ways in which individuals and societies draw on the past shape and are shaped by their moral commitments. We see this clearly in heated public debates over, for example, the religious beliefs of the “Founding Fathers,” reparations for slavery, and how history should be taught in museums and schools. Some of the books in this section describe morally charged interpretations of history, and the uses to which those interpretations are put; others, in a more philosophical vein, reflect on the relationship between history, narrative, memory, and ethics.

- Booth, W. James. *Communities of Memory: On Witness, Identity, and Justice*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006.
- Coles, Robert. *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1989.
- Linenthal, Edward T., and Tom Engelhardt, eds. *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past*. New York: Holt, 1996.
- Novick, Peter. *The Holocaust in American Life*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999.
- Simon, Roger I. *The Touch of the Past: Remembrance, Learning, and Ethics*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- Torpey, John. *Making Whole What Has Been Smashed: On Reparations Politics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006.
- Volf, Miroslav. *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007.