

Preface

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Although it is extremely hazardous to undertake the explanation of a single historical event (some would say, impossible), I will invoke the privileged rhetorical status of the preface-writer to suggest why a book on collective memory holds special interest for both the social sciences and society at this particular juncture in human history.

As anyone who has read a newspaper or watched television in the last decade is aware, the problem of collective memory is a familiar and emotion-laden political issue for people throughout the world. When I first accepted the task of writing these remarks, the leadership of the Chinese People's Republic was providing this generation with a televised lesson in the relationship between memory and power. Not only did it deny at first that anyone had been killed in the army's assault on students in Tienanmen Square, the government went so far as to declare it a crime against the state for any Chinese citizen to 'spread rumours' that such killings had occurred. A clearer illustration of George Orwell's syllogism for the ages, 'He who controls the past controls the future; he who controls the present controls the past', could hardly be imagined.

The problem is by no means a new one, nor is it restricted to any one national group. In his brilliant and moving meditation on human nature, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Milan Kundera reminds us that:

The bloody massacre in Bangladesh quickly covered over the memory of the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia, the assassination of Allende drowned out the groans of Bangladesh, the war in the Sinai Desert made people forget Allende, the Cambodian massacre made people forget Sinai, and so on and so forth . . . (p. 7)

Kundera suggests that the problem of socially organized forgetting is particularly acute at present because historical events occur with such rapidity on such a mass scale that they cannot be adequately assimilated into everyday experience. [To this we can add the fact that in the modern world, while events halfway around the globe may have a major impact on local life, individuals have no direct experience of the events affecting them, learning about them only through the selective screen of centrally controlled media.]

When that tiny segment of society whom it is fashionable to refer to as social scientists attempt to study the process of memory and forgetting, issues of power and self-determination are rarely (I am tempted to say never) at issue. As the editors of this fine book on collective remembering, David Middleton and Derek Edwards, point out in their informative introduction, memory is ordinarily considered the province of psychologists, and as 'everyone knows', psychology is the value- and power-free study of processes taking place inside the heads of individual human beings. For the past half-century, memory, the particular topic of this book, has been seen as either the accumulation of strength to habits resulting from reinforcement and frequency of occurrence, or as a system of storage and retrieval mechanisms operating in the manner of a digital computer. Working within a scientific division of labour that ceded to sociology and anthropology the explanation of behaviour of social collectivities, psychology could conceive of socio-cultural influences on memory in one of two ways. First, it could easily grant that the contents of memory are social in so far as they arise from social experience or are transmitted as lexical items in the course of communication. Secondly, it could accept that experience in different kinds of social environments may inculcate particular ways of remembering by influencing the particular social contexts that people inhabit. Thus, for example, children who have attended school may acquire special mnemonic techniques there.

A common persuasion uniting what might on other grounds be considered a quite heterogeneous collection of essays in this volume is the rejection of this view of human memory. Whether in an attempt to explain how Americans remember Abraham Lincoln or the British their Royal Family, the current authors both reject the interconnected set of dichotomies upon which the modern social sciences were founded and display a willingness to search for new paradigmatic frames for interpreting the phenomena of memory. Perhaps the most central belief that unites them is their rejection of the assumption that it is possible to maintain a strict separation between the individual and society, an assumption which can be traced back through Descartes to Plato. Once the mind and memory are seen as extending beyond the 'individual skin' to encompass both the cultural milieu and the 'body politic', other dichotomies fall too. The notions that psychological content can be strictly separated from process, or that science can be strictly separated from history by its reliance on the experimental method, come in for pointed, sceptical scrutiny.

What emerges from this examination of memory as a socio-culturally constituted process in which the individual and the social

are united in cultural artefacts is both a challenge to the existing division of scientific labour and a roadmap to new forms of scientific practice. In these new practices, issues of power and the self-determination of people(s) will no longer be cut off from scientific inquiry into memory.

It should not go without note that, although the majority of the authors have obtained their degrees in psychology or sociology, only two are currently associated with departments bearing these disciplinary insignia. Instead, we see the emergence of new academic collectivities, all of a character that at present we label 'interdisciplinary'. It is out of such efforts that the new disciplines which await us in the twenty-first century will arise; and with them, hopefully, new and more powerful ways of conceiving of the phenomena of human remembering.

To return to the issue with which I began these remarks: this book has appeared at the present time and deserves the reader's full attention because of a world-wide rejection of the political and scientific common sense of the early twentieth century, and the concomitant search for a new paradigm for living.