

From Usable Pasts to the Return of the Repressed

Jeffrey K. Olick

Contemporary scholars of memory have thought about the relation between past and present in at least three ways. The first is captured by the term “usable past,” originally coined by the literary critic Van Wyck Brooks.¹ Writing during World War I, Brooks argued that the American arts, in distinction from those of Europe, were riddled with contradictions stemming from their lack of an obvious binding tradition, as well as from the mixing of immigrant cultures. In order for American culture to emerge from its state of incoherence, Brooks argued, it would be necessary to construct a “usable past” for it, a set of historical referents that could give shape to contemporary efforts. A “usable past” is thus an invention or at least a retrospective reconstruction to serve the needs of the present.

Indeed, this view was for a while the dominant one in contemporary social scientific work on memory. In 1925, the Durkheimian sociologist Maurice Halbwachs introduced not only the concept of “collective memory” but a “presentist” understanding of its operation.² Collective memory, Halbwachs argued, is formed and reformed in the present for present purposes. This line of argument became even more directly instrumentalist in the well-known work of Eric Hobsbawm, whose landmark 1983

¹ Van Wyck Brooks, “On Creating a Usable Past,” *The Dial* 64.7 (11 April 1918): 337–41.

² Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. and ed. Lewis Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

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book with Terence Ranger was called *The Invention of Tradition*.³ Hobsbawm argued that, particularly from the 1870s to 1914, European states sought to shore up their declining legitimacy by propagating a bogus sense of historical endurance for their institutions and practices.⁴ In this vein, research into the “politics of memory” sought to demonstrate that behind every version of the past there must be a set of interests in the present; changes in collective memory result from efforts to use the past to attain present goals and can thus be debunked.

Nevertheless, for at least some scholars, such a presentist and instrumentalist approach is unsatisfying. In the first place, much research has shown that collective memory is often fairly impervious to efforts aimed at remaking it. Additionally, a purely presentist approach, critics argue, fails to explain where present interests come from in the first place. Moreover, an instrumentalist approach is unable to give a good account of why it is that the past works so well as an instrument of present interests. In contrast, then, a second possible understanding of the contemporary relationship between past and present is one that seeks to understand why the past is usable at all. What is it, exactly, that the past does for us? How does the past work on the present to shape identities and define purposes? This line of inquiry, while not entirely distinct from the first, often employs a more functionalist vocabulary: history, a sense of the past, tradition, collective memory, etc., all function to establish identities and give them moral purposes. In their bestselling book *Habits of the Heart*, Robert Bellah and his colleagues argued that communities “have a history—in an important sense they are constituted by their past—and for this reason we can speak of a real community as a ‘community of memory,’ one that does not forget its past.”⁵ This sense of the past, moreover, is fundamentally moral, not instrumental. “The stories that make up a tradition,” Bellah and his colleagues added, “contain conceptions of character, of what a good person is like, and of the virtues that define such character.”⁶ The insights here may come with a Durkheimian inflection on social solidarity and the collective representations that embody it, or a Tocquevillian inflection on “mystic chords of memory.”⁷ Either way, the past is not just a tool in the arsenal of power, but the very wellspring of identity.

In the first view then, the question is what *we* do *with* the past; in the second, it is what the *past* does *for* us. Nevertheless, there is a third view that sees the relationship

³ Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

⁴ Eric Hobsbawm, “Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870–1914,” *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 263–307.

⁵ Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985) 153.

⁶ Bellah et al. 153.

⁷ See Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1993).

between past and present as neither under our control nor functional. Rather, with a much darker vision shaped by the violent culture of nineteenth-century Romanticism, as well as by the unprecedented destruction brought on us by industrial warfare, a third understanding has emerged that asks what the past does *to* us. And what it does to us is assuredly not good. Here the keyword is “trauma,” and the model is psychoanalytic. According to Freudian theory, repression can work effectively to prevent dangerous knowledge from rising to consciousness, as in repression of Oedipal urges. Repression is also part of “latency,” the period necessary for processing traumatic events. Nevertheless, most associations with repression are negative, whether it is the repression of instinctual drives (a form of socially organized self-punishment, the “discontents,” in Freud’s term, imposed by civilization) or the pathological repression that prevents us from “working through” the past. Without a healthy working through of the past, there can be no escape from its grip, which thrashes us about in a miasma of “repetition compulsion” and fragmented identity.

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Indeed, one could well argue that “trauma” has become something of an emblem for our epoch. Ours is an age marked by memories of trench warfare, Auschwitz, Hiroshima, and My Lai, to mention just the greatest hits alongside slavery, colonial exploitation, torture, rape as an instrument of warfare, etc. “Trauma,” however, has become a pervasive frame for understanding diverse forms of suffering, including the suffering of others witnessed at a distance (as when people were upset by watching 9/11 on television) and legacies of earlier suffering (for example, the consequences of slavery for later generations of African-Americans), as well as blows not to the individual but to the collectivity (for example, the “national humiliation” of Vietnam), to say nothing of trivializing appropriations of the term (for example, when we colloquially refer to an inconvenience or unpleasant experience as “traumatic”).

Thus one could well argue that the term’s use is profligate. In particular, the application of a concept formulated for describing a psychological process at the individual level to the collective level can be seen as “a category mistake,” whether the use of “trauma” at the collective level is meant literally or figuratively.⁸ Whatever questions there might be about whether “trauma” describes a “real” psychological process or merely a cultural frame for understanding individual experience, the doubts are substantially more severe when one speaks of “cultural trauma” or trauma of groups. The founding father of sociology, Émile Durkheim, after all, argued vigorously that social facts not only are not reducible to psychological ones, but are defined in explicit contrast; indeed, Durkheim

⁸ Wulf Kansteiner, “Genealogy of a Category Mistake: A Critical Intellectual History of the Cultural Trauma Metaphor,” *Rethinking History* 8.2 (June 2004): 193–221.

defined the sociological enterprise in clear contradistinction to individual psychology, which he repudiated. While a careful scholar wary of category mistakes might in this way reject the notion of “collective memory,” a true Durkheimian would go so far as to reject the idea of *individual* memory: why do sociologists have to be the ones adding the adjective, rather than the burden being on psychologists to specify the memory they theorize without reference to the social?

If instrumentalist and functionalist frameworks seem inadequate to the complexities of our age, trauma theory thus seems to raise a serious ontological problem. What, then, can be done about this use of individual psychological language for collective entities? There are, it seems to me, three basic options. First, we can continue to employ this language metaphorically at the collective level without any further warning or specification. This solution, however, does not meet the standard of serious scholarship. Second, we can try to ban the use of such metaphorical language as fundamentally misleading. But not only is this solution implausible, it also sacrifices the very real explanatory power of metaphor. For there does seem to be a fundamental unity that overrides—or perhaps undermines—the very distinction between individual and psychological levels. The only reasonable option, then, is further conceptual specification, some suggestions for which I provide in the remainder of this essay.

Perhaps ironically, the place to begin is with Freud, not only because of his contributions to the psychological theory of trauma (and its conception of the past’s power over us) and to the theory of traumatic memory, but because it was Freud himself who raised the question of trauma and memory at the level of collectivities. Freud did so, however, in one of his most arcane and frustrating works, his late book *Moses and Monotheism*. Freud’s argument in this book is superficially absurd, even a bit bizarre. Without much definitive historical or archaeological evidence (he calls the book “a historical novel”), Freud claims that the biblical narrative of Moses is a gross mythic distortion of a much more complex—and indeed much more interesting—narrative. Essentially, Freud argues that the Egyptian Pharaoh Amenhotep IV, who later renamed himself Akhenaten, was the true founder of monotheism when he created a state religion centered on worship of the sun-god Aton. Moses was not a Jewish baby found among the reeds by the Pharaoh’s childless daughter. Rather, he was a priest of Akhenaten’s cult. Following Akhenaten’s death, however, Egypt returned to polytheism. Seeking to preserve the monotheistic cult, Moses chose a backward tribe of Semites to carry it on (hence, Freud argues, it was not God who chose the Jews, but Moses who did so). Because the cult could not survive in Egypt, Moses led his followers into exile. However, his people soon tired of Moses’s particularly stringent monotheism, rebelled against it, and killed Moses, their “father.” For a while, they returned to their earlier polytheism, eventually joining with another tribe that worshipped a god named Yahweh. A powerful priest of this religion was also named Moses. Over time, the fused nation returned to the practice of monotheism by combining the earlier Egyptian monotheism of Akhenaten with the religion of Yahweh.

Beyond the claim that Moses, the founding father of monotheism, was an Egyptian, two features of Freud's "historical novel" are remarkable. First, Moses's monotheism was more stringent than Akhenaten's because it included a prohibition on graven images. For Freud, this gave Judaism its decisive identity as an abstract, intellectual tradition, based on what he characterized, following Kant, as the "triumph of spirituality over the senses" (*Der Fortschritt der Geistigkeit*) resulting from the demand to worship a god one cannot see.⁹ This understanding of Judaism in turn allowed Freud to see himself as both godless and a Jew, that is, to understand scientific psychoanalysis as Jewish despite its, and his, repudiation of religion. The essence of Judaism is its absolute commitment to law and abstraction. Second, and for my purposes here more central, is the claim that the return to monotheism centuries after the murder of the first Moses was in some way compelled by the memory of that traumatic event. (This traumatic memory was also expressed in masked form in the birth of Christian mythology.) Mosaic monotheism, according to Freud, is a "return of the repressed," a traumatic memory obscured by the deceptive written mythology.

Indeed, this last point has been at the heart of the controversy over Freud's strange book. For Freud claims that the process of traumatic memory follows the same path in the Jewish people as it does in the neurotic individual: "early trauma—defence—latency—outbreak of neurotic illness—partial return of the repressed."¹⁰ He thus writes that the relationship between "the remarkable course of events that we have found in the history of the Jewish religion" and "the genesis of human neuroses" "is very complete, and approaches identity."¹¹ But how could this possibly be the case? As little as we understand the operation of "latency" in psychological trauma, at least its mechanisms are understood in reference to a theory of mind. Since there is no such thing as a group mind, what could the mechanism of latency in the history of a people possibly be? An individual psyche may well carry the "memory-traces" of a traumatic event, which may or may not be repressed and may or may not return to consciousness, but a trauma such as the collective patricide that, according to Freud, defined the Jewish religion has to be passed through generations and thus would require some equivalent agency to the psyche at the collective level. Freud's dense and circuitous argument has invited the charge, most clearly advanced by the Jewish historian Yosef Yerushalmi, that Freud was implying some sort of cultural Lamarckism, the idea that acquired traits are heritable.¹² This idea was already understood to be wrong at the biological level during Freud's

⁹ Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones (London: Hogarth/Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1939) 178.

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism* in vol. 23, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth/Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1964) 80.

¹¹ Freud, Strachey translation, 72.

¹² Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Freud's Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

time. According to Yerushalmi, Freud has no way out of the even less plausible implication at the collective level. If collective memory and trauma work either the same way or merely analogously to individual memory and trauma, what possible mechanism could there be for something as remarkable as the latency and return of the repressed that Freud claims to have discovered at the heart of Jewish origins? For Yerushalmi, this flaw in Freud's theory is fatal.

Although recognizing the profundity of Yerushalmi's critique, a number of scholars have sought to mount a more vigorous and creative defense of Freud. In the first place, Jacques Derrida has argued that Freud was careful to distinguish "between acquired characters ('which are hard to grasp') and 'memory-traces of external events.'" Derrida continues, "all that Freud says is that we are receptive to an analogy between the two types of transgenerational memory"—the "two types" being explicit doctrine and repressed traumatic memory.¹³ Derrida's own interest is to find in Freud a theory of cultural preservation and transmission, what Derrida refers to as the "archival." He thus argues that "these characters and these traces could well follow...quite complicated linguistic, cultural, cipherable, and in general ciphered transgenerational and transindividual relays, transiting thus through an archive, the science of which is not at a standstill."¹⁴ Without such a theory, for Derrida,

there would no longer be any essential history of culture, there would no longer be any question of memory and of archive...and one would no longer even understand how an ancestor can speak within us, nor what sense there might be in us to speak to him or her, to speak in such an *unheimlich*, "uncanny" fashion, to his or her ghost.¹⁵

This operation of culture, both explicit and implicit across generations, is what Derrida means when he refers to "the archive"; in other words, the archive is nothing as material as a physical repository—it is Derrida's retheorization of tradition, a question posed by Freud to which we *must* generate an answer.

Indeed, Richard Bernstein points out that, despite his critique, Yerushalmi is correct to notice that "the true axis of the book [*Moses and Monotheism*]...is the problem of tradition, not merely its origins, but above all its dynamics."¹⁶ Bernstein makes the strongest possible case for Freud, arguing that Freud is well aware that his analogy between human neurosis and the course of Jewish history is problematic and requires

¹³ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) 35.

¹⁴ Derrida 35.

¹⁵ Derrida 35–6.

¹⁶ Richard J. Bernstein, *Freud and the Legacy of Moses* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 35.

an argument. Freud writes of his analogy, as Bernstein quotes, that it “raises the question in what form the operative tradition in the life of peoples is present—a question which does not occur with individuals, since there it is solved by the existence in the unconscious of memory-traces of the past.”¹⁷ As Bernstein points out, Freud does discuss tradition, emphasizing in particular the tensions between oral and written forms (indeed, rejecting the standard account that the latter are more powerful and reliable than the former). Nevertheless, Bernstein points out, accounts of tradition that focus on such explicit means as narrative, storytelling, rituals, ceremonies, and the like cannot account for the history Freud describes. Here, again, the problem of latency is central: standard accounts of tradition, oral or written, cannot adequately explain either the delay or the return of traumatic collective memories. According to Freud, tradition and explanations of history in terms of its continuities are “based on conscious memories of oral communications which people then living had received from their ancestors only two or three generations back who had themselves been participants and eye-witnesses of the events in question.”¹⁸ Indeed, this description is almost identical to the definition of “collective memory” found in Halbwachs, an issue to which I return shortly. According to Bernstein, however, “the ‘fresh problem’ that Freud needs to solve arises when one can no longer appeal to a ‘knowledge normally handed on from grandfather to grandchild.’”¹⁹

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Bernstein’s defense of Freud has two features. First, Bernstein emphasizes that, although Freud consistently rejected doctrines of a group or collective unconscious, there is something about intergenerational transmission of trauma that invokes preconscious and unconscious as well as conscious dimensions. “What is communicated from one generation to the next,” Bernstein writes,

is not only what is explicitly stated or what is set forth by precept and example, but also what is unconsciously communicated. Unless we pay attention to these unconscious dynamics of transmission, we will never understand the receptivity (and resistance) to a living tradition. What is repressed in the memory of a people is never “totally” repressed in the sense of being hermetically sealed off from their conscious lives; there are always unconscious memory-traces of what has been repressed. This is why there can be a “return of the repressed,” a return that can break out with great psychic force in an individual or in the history of a people.²⁰

¹⁷ Bernstein 44.

¹⁸ Freud, Strachey translation, 93.

¹⁹ Bernstein 52.

²⁰ Bernstein 59.

Second, Bernstein seeks to place Freud's strange book, written as the storm clouds were gathering for the darkest night in Jewish history by a scientist who had spent his entire life struggling with the meaning of his Jewishness, in an ongoing tradition of inquiry into the operation of tradition. For unlike Sartre, Freud believed the essence of Judaism was not only not its theological contents; neither was it the punishment of Jews for their "chosenness." It was, rather, a complex "family romance" with the retrospectively discoverable trauma and doubling at its core, and the peculiar dynamics these generated throughout the ages. For Bernstein, Freud's effort is to be connected to the subsequent work of Paul Ricoeur, who distinguished between a "hermeneutics of suspicion" (which, incidentally, can be associated with the debunking "politics of memory" approach I mentioned at the beginning of my essay) and a more constructive "hermeneutics of trust," as well as to Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutic emphasis on the role of "critical dialogue." According to Bernstein, from this scholarly tradition, of which Freud's book is a part, "we gain a new appreciation of the role of narrative and storytelling in our everyday lives and in the human disciplines."²¹ Moreover, Bernstein argues, this tradition also teaches us "to appreciate the *preconscious* dimension of tradition" because "there is much more to any vital tradition than lies within our field of consciousness."²² The question remains, however, of how this preconscious or unconscious operates through history, without the kind of "collective unconscious" Freud consistently rejected.

There is one further figure in the discourse about Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* very much worth mentioning at this point, namely the Egyptologist Jan Assmann, whose work has made the connection most explicitly between Freud's concerns and contemporary scholarship—more social scientific than the philosophers just mentioned—on "collective memory." Indeed, Assmann argues that "one should acknowledge that the concepts of latency and the return of the repressed are indispensable for any adequate theory of cultural memory."²³ Both in his work on Moses and in a wide range of work on memory theory, Assmann in fact distinguishes among four different varieties of social memory: first, *mimetic* memory refers to the transmission of habits and routines; second, *material* memory refers to traces of the past contained in objects; third, *communicative* memory refers to the living memory exchanged by the inhabitants of common life-worlds, the informal storytelling and exchange of meaning Freud and Halbwachs refer to as occurring both in the course of everyday life and between grandparent and grandchild; and fourth, *cultural* memory, which entails objectification and generalization and a transsituational and transhistorical duration (similar to Derrida's "archive"). For Assmann, both latency and the return of the repressed need to be redefined in cul-

²¹ Bernstein 62–3.

²² Bernstein 63.

²³ Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997) 215.

tural, rather than psychological, terms, though all four dimensions are essential. “Freud reminded us,” Assmann writes, “that there is such a thing as ‘cultural forgetting’ or even ‘cultural repression.’ Since Freud, no theory of culture can afford not to take these concepts into consideration. The old concept of tradition has proved insufficient.”²⁴ As a transition back to the themes with which I began this essay, one could just as well add that the old concept of memory—individual and either instrumental or straightforwardly functional—is also clearly insufficient.

Indeed, as a sociologist working with the term “collective memory,” I see my own efforts very much within the tradition in which Bernstein places Freud, though more with the methodological and theoretical concerns of Assmann than with the more strictly philosophical concerns of Ricoeur, Gadamer, or Derrida. Bernstein is correct, I believe, that the question of the unconscious in culture poses the greatest challenge, though contemporary social scientific approaches to collective memory understand this problem in different terms—namely, as Assmann points out, in terms of culture and memory. But Derrida is correct as well when he asserts that “the science” of “linguistic, cultural, cipherable, and in general ciphered transgenerational and transindividual relays, transiting thus through an archive” is “not at a standstill.”²⁵ Here I would like to mention very briefly two of what I see as the most promising frameworks in recent social theory for responding to the Freudian challenge to our understanding of the uses of the past—our use of it and its use with us: Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of habitus and Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of genre.

It would certainly be folly to attempt to summarize Bourdieu’s project in the space of a few paragraphs. My purpose here in mentioning his theory of habitus is much more modest—merely to suggest that it provides some conceptual innovations that might offer a promising avenue for resolving the apparent contradiction between the operation of preconscious and unconscious forces alongside conscious ones at both the individual and social levels (as we will see, the last of these is a distinction Bourdieu dissolves).

The central question with which we began is the relationship between the individual and the collective and, by extension, between explicit tradition (traceable to overt acts of transmission between people and from grandparent to grandchild) and “the archival.” The overarching goal of Bourdieu’s theoretical project, however, is to “overcome” the dichotomies such formulations imply. Across many works, Bourdieu develops the notion of habitus as a conceptual construct for grasping the inseparability of culture, structure, and agency. In general, the habitus is understood as a set of transposable dispositions acquired early in life that shape the behavior of an individual for the rest

²⁴ Assmann 215.

²⁵ Derrida 35.

of his or her life: the “inculcation” in children of what constitutes acceptable actions and reactions generates a scheme of classification upon which they will constantly draw in the future while weighing desires against possibilities. As a result, Bourdieu argues, “there exists a correspondence between social structures and mental structures, between the objective divisions of the social world...and the principles of vision and division that agents apply to it.”²⁶

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Two features of habitus in Bourdieu’s account are most directly relevant to solving the Freudian challenge: how a repressed cultural memory can be preserved across generations (latency) and why it follows the psychological pattern of return. First, for Bourdieu, habitus is *structured* in the sense that inculcated dispositions unavoidably reflect the social conditions within which they were acquired.

In other words, the similarities and differences that characterize the social conditions of existence of individuals will be reflected in the habitus, which may be relatively homogenous across individuals from similar backgrounds. This explains the persistence of Jewish identity below the level of ideology or text, though it places greater emphasis on ritual and practice than Freud did. As Bernstein writes, Freud

does not do full justice to the meaning of Judaism and Jewishness. He tends to underestimate the creative importance of rituals, ceremonies, narratives, customs, and cultural practices that are the vehicles for (consciously and unconsciously) transmitting what he singles out as the greatest achievement of Mosaic monotheism, *Der Fortschritt in der Geistigkeit*.²⁷

This leads directly to the second contribution, namely Bourdieu’s description of the way habitus is *durable*. According to Bourdieu, dispositions are ingrained in the body in such a way that they endure through the life history of the individual, operating at the level of preconsciousness and thus not readily accessible to conscious reflection and modification. Bourdieu uses the term “bodily hexis” to refer to this durability. For Bourdieu, “bodily hexis” is political mythology realized in the body. The body is thus the site of incorporated history and at the same time the source of practices and perceptions that reproduce that history. (In this way, Bourdieu’s theory argues that Assmann’s distinction between the mimetic and material, on the one hand, and the communicative and cultural, on the other, is very difficult in practice.) This notion of “incorporated history,” in which habitus represents not just the biographical history of the individual but the entire history of society—an account not entirely alien to Freud’s

²⁶ Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 12.

²⁷ Bernstein xi.

claims on behalf of the superego in *Civilization and its Discontents*—seems to me to be a promising starting point for understanding both the preservation of repressed memory across generations and why the historical might manifest the same etiological pattern as the neurotic individual. Because Freud understood the superego as a moral agent rather than as a practical one, however, he was unable to answer his own central question. If the history of culture is incorporated preconsciously in the habitus of the individual, it is perhaps easier to theorize the connection between the psychic and the historical without engaging in the impoverished enterprise of “psycho-history,” which merely psychoanalyzes prominent individuals, rather than understanding the inseparability of the individual and the collective, the psychic and the cultural.

The second post-Freudian theoretical resource I would like to mention is Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of genre because, like Bourdieu’s theory of habitus at the level of communicative memory, this theory seems promising for solving Freud’s problem at the level of cultural memory. Indeed, as we will see shortly, there are remarkable similarities between Freud’s discussion of the Mosaic tradition and Bakhtin’s discussion of the satirical genre of which he sees Dostoevsky as the consummate practitioner.

Where presentists and functionalists debate whether images of the past are determined by the past they represent or by the present in which they are produced, Freud’s theory of trauma, individual or collective, shows clearly that memory is made wholly neither in the past nor in the present but in the continual struggle between them. Though employing a very different vocabulary, Bakhtin provides tools for understanding this. The central idea in Bakhtin’s work is that of dialogue—the ongoing addressivity and historicity of language. All utterances, he theorizes, take place within unique historical situations, while at the same time they contain memory traces of earlier usages, meaning not that any utterance can be decoded to reveal earlier usages but that the specificity of every term is the product of a long historical development. Bakhtin develops a concept of genre to identify kinds of utterances, which are historical accretions rather than ideal forms, the results of “a continuous generative process implemented in the social-verbal interaction of speakers.”²⁸ This sounds very similar to the communicative memory Assmann sees in Freud’s account of explicit tradition.

However, Bakhtin’s most important contribution to the theory of cultural transmission may be his demonstration that references need not be explicit or conscious for earlier moments in a genre to affect later ones. In his book on Fyodor Dostoevsky, Bakhtin distinguishes “influence” from what he calls “genre contact,” the former indicating explicit awareness of an earlier text by a subsequent one and the latter referring to the sharing of

²⁸ V. N. Vološinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik (New York: Seminar, 1973) 98. There is a long-standing debate about the authorship of various texts in the so-called Bakhtin Circle, which included Bakhtin himself, Vološinov, P. N. Medvedev, and others.

a common way of seeing between texts.²⁹ “A genre,” Bakhtin wrote, “possesses its own organic logic which can to a certain extent be understood and creatively assimilated on the basis of a few generic models, even fragments.”³⁰ Earlier texts, insofar as they produce and reproduce the genre in a long chain of discourse, set the stage and provide the materials for later ones. This means not that speakers are cultural dopes manipulated by or simply carrying out discourses but that the materials available to them in any context—and which they may thereby transform—are historical accretions, the results of long developmental processes.

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Genres, Bakhtin argues, are thus the central mechanisms of dialogue, “the drive belts from the history of society to the history of language.”³¹ He writes: “A genre lives in the present, but always *remembers* its past, its beginning. Genre is a representative of creative memory in the process of literary development.”³² By demonstrating the power of genre—including its explicit and implicit workings—we thus counter the tendency to see commemorative texts as wholly constituted either by the history to which they refer or by the present context in which they are produced.

In this way, genres reflexively mediate between past and present. “As the culture’s ‘congealed events’ and ‘crystallized’ activity,” Gary Morson and Caryl Emerson write, “genres constitute an important part of its memory and carry a great deal of its wisdom.”³³ By the same token, one could give this theory a more negative inflection and see genres as carrying the repressed memory of traumatic events. One need not be aware of that history for its memory to be carried forward beneath the level of individual consciousness or collective tradition.

Taken together, Bourdieu and Bakhtin thus provide promising building blocks for an answer to Freud’s dilemma: how collective traumas are transmitted across generations, remaining latent and then returning in a pattern analogous to individual neurosis without being reducible to it. Nevertheless, Freud himself saw a great challenge to the conclusiveness of his theory: he was making this generalization about the relation between individual and collective levels on the basis of only one case: the history of Jewish religion. Given the large body of work on collective memory, whether presentist or functionalist, however, we know that societies often *are* able to repress the past with-

²⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) 157.

³⁰ Bakhtin 157.

³¹ M. M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986) 65.

³² Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 106.

³³ Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990) 292.

out generating the conditions for its destructive return that arise in individuals, and commemorative trajectories do not always follow the traumatic pattern Freud rightly or wrongly diagnosed in the case of Jewish origins. For my own work as a cultural sociologist, which has focused on the strange consistencies in political rhetoric after difficult pasts, Bourdieu and Bakhtin provide powerful tools for understanding the manifold relations between the individual and the collective, the commemorative and the repressed, the instrumental and the functional. While there are cultural and communicative dynamics not reducible to psychic ones, ultimately we need to see all these dimensions as necessarily intertwined. Sometimes we use the past, and sometimes, for better (functional) or worse (traumatic) it uses us, but there is always a combination of all of these going on in every case, historical or psychiatric. The answers for collective memory scholarship, as well as for the “traumatized” self-image of our age, may not be Freud’s, but the questions most certainly are.