

Interview with Jeffrey Olick about Collective Memory
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In the recent 20 years, enormous amount of attention has been paid to the concept of collective memory. Particularly since you have also contributed to this „memory boom“ in your recent books and publications, how can you account for the interest in both the social sciences and humanities for the burgeoning field of memory studies?

The simplest answer, self-serving for scholars, would be that scholarship follows on what has been going in the real world. But I'm not sure that's the case here. I think that, rather than the memory boom in scholarship following a memory boom in culture, it that the same kinds of concerns that have given rise to the memory boom in politics and culture have also given rise to the memory boom in scholarship, whether it's in the humanities or the social sciences. But it is certainly true that since the late 1970s, early 1980s, interest in the concept of memory, whether it is individual or collective, as well as concern with commemoration, have grown in politics, culture and scholarship. And so the question is why? What has changed?

I would suggest we start by looking back at the late 19th century because there was a memory boom then also. So, for instance, you can look at writers like Freud, Proust, and Bergson and others from the late nineteenth century who were obsessed with memory as well, who had a sense of the precariousness of memory -- the thought that memory was declining, who believed that our hold on the past was becoming ever more tenuous. And that's in part because it was. An important aspect of this was that the rate of change in society was accelerated and the sense of continuity therefore was broken or, at least, more tenuous than it had been in the past. That trend had been going on for at least two hundred years by the late 19th century, but with the radical changes brought on by the era of industrialization and the era of nationalism and urbanization and other transformations in European societies, the obviousness of the connection to the past was lost. A previous moment in which such a major transformation occurred, by the way, was the Renaissance and the post-Renaissance period, when there was a debate between the so-called Ancients and the Moderns. At that time, for instance, there was a transformation with the concept of revolution, where revolution used to mean a complete circuit, going back and going to the same place where you started, whereas a modern revolution meant a complete rupture, the most radical break.

I think there was a sort of new form of that debate in the late 19th century when scholars and artists were all problematizing the relevance of the past. A unique aspect of the debate in the late 19th century was the transformation in the perceptions of time and space that were occurring-- the advent of railroad travel, the repetitiveness of communication with the introduction of the telegraph, and then a bit later, radio broadcast meant that our sense of distance, whether it was temporal distance or spatial distance, was vastly transformed. And so this sense of the acceleration of history exacerbated our feeling of distance from the past. It's at this point that the past became a foreign country to an even

a larger extent that it did at the end of the Renaissance, where you saw this transformation with the concept of revolution.

So, the question is: what's the relation between the memory boom of the late 20th and early 21st century and the memory boom of the previous century? Are they completely different things or are they moments in a continuous process? It seems to me one major difference between the late 20th century memory boom and the late 19th century memory boom is the failure of utopian visions. In the late 19th century, it was still possible to be motivated by future-oriented ideologies and, in fact, that was one of the main characteristics of the crisis. Progressives in the late nineteenth century were indeed rather dubious about the value of the past, seeing it as a constraint. It was Marx who said „the tradition of the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living“ (ed: *The 18th Brumaire*) The progressives' fear that the past was keeping us in chains, so that was certainly one side of it. It was Nietzsche's concern that too much memory would be a „gravedigger of the present.“ (ed: *The Use and Abuse of History For Life*) by restricting our ability to act. He speaks of the „it was“ as the great killer of creativity. By the late 20th century, the future-oriented utopian progressive programs had been largely exhausted, whether it was Marxism or fascism or even a naive faith in modernization, in the Enlightenment. It was Jacques Derrida who declared that with the destruction of some housing project in Cleveland or Cincinnati or wherever that modernity had come to a decisive end. This belief that we could make the world a better place through our programs and through the coordinated action of states was exhausted and so, I think that that certainly fed into the current memory boom. If you can't look to the future, you look to the past. But it's a past that we feel very alienated from.

I was also wondering whether the 20th century memory boom was somehow made different by the media? Film, new history museums, photography, video.

A sort of knee-jerk response is to say computer technology and the internet have changed everything. But you have to remember that the contemporary memory boom began in the late 1970s, early 1980s, before the internet and computer technology was really that pervasive.

But then you have history from below, oral histories, multiculturalism.

Absolutely. Although whether or not multiculturalism is a cause or consequence or the same sets of transformations, whether they are all tied up in the same constellations of events is certainly difficult to say. It's clear that there has been a cultural transformation in the West, in our attitudes towards the past, but I'm never particularly convinced by monocausal explanations. So I think that mediatization, urbanization, temporization, computerization, all are part and parcel of the process. The move from modernity to postmodernity, from nationalist cultures to postmodern multiculturalism are part of a general, and ultimately irreducible, trend. I don't think that it's the obligation of sociology to identify single master causes. In fact, I think it's the downfall of sociology when it does so. So I'm perfectly happy with diagnosing and describing a cultural transformation, rather than providing a single powerful explanation.

Would you agree with the French historian Pierre Nora that, as moderns, we are so obsessed with memory because there is so little left? That seems to me to be paradoxical.

I think that it's exactly the opposite. I think there's too much memory. Charles Maier, the historian, argues there is a surfeit a memory, a surplus of memory. There is so much memory that we don't even know what to do with it all. We are like Borges' Funes the Memorious, who was overwhelmed by his inability to forget every last thing. We have this unlimited storage capacity so that we don't even know what to do with it. In fact, if you go into any good library and look at the dates on the books you find out that most haven't even been checked out for years and years because there are simply too many. One of my favorite ironies is the concept of collective memory. Twenty years ago if I walked into a book store, if a book had collective memory in the title, or subtitle even a chapter title, I would buy it. Even as a graduate student, I could afford to do that. Now I can't even afford to buy them, let alone read them. It's a veritable torrent. As Paul Valery wrote, modern man is no longer interested in that which cannot be abbreviated. But we need to abbreviate out of necessity and so we now have indexes of indexes. I think that Nora is provocative but I don't think that this comment holds up in more than an aphoristic, provocative manner.

If you think back on your academic career, what made you personally interested in the topic of memory in general and in German memory in particular?

I can tell a story about that. In graduate school I was reading a lot of the recent cultural theory of the 1970s and 1980s, structuralism and post-structuralism and the like, all of which placed a lot of emphasis on culture, on symbolism and, in fact, on narrative or storytelling. It was in a seminar on symbolic politics that I began to think about this problem of storytelling and how it was odd that whether you were a disorganized or national or international organization, or a nation, or a church or a political movement, the leaders of these movements were investing a tremendous amount of resources in telling a legitimating story. And so I found that to be a really interesting place to do sociology. This was a post-Marxist moment where Western Marxism had gone through a transformation to being a Marxism of the superstructure-- that is, an analysis of culture. I was much more interested in the cultural theory of Raymond Williams, Walter Benjamin, etc, so that in that context I began to think about this problem of narrative and its connection to legitimation and political culture. And I read a book by Charles Maier on the German historians' dispute of 1985-1986 (ed: *The Unmasterable Past*), a terrific book. So all a sudden it occurred to me that Germany is a terrific negative case because unlike a lot of groups or nations, here was a case in which the leaders couldn't tell an unproblematic narrative. This resonated for me personally: despite being intensely secular, I did grow up Jewish and my wife is a non-Jewish German. So it was something we had talked about in our relationship -- what is the responsibility of the younger generations? So the personal and the political and the scholarly all came together when I read Maier's book and started thinking about the problem of narrating around difficult pasts. And so I decided that Germany was the perfect case.

Do you see some patterns from the German model of remembering and coming to terms with National Socialism which might bear some resonance for other countries, here I'm thinking of Estonia and other former communist countries, and Russia in particular? Or is the German model only for Germany and nobody else?

One of the things that is very interesting to me and where I dissent from the popular opinion is that many people consider Germany to be the model of memory, the model of remembrance and commemoration done right. And, to be sure, there's an awful lot that the Germans have done right. On the other hand, I think that there are profound deficits in German memory. They were there at the very beginning when you find a richly defensive posture. I tried to trace out that discourse in my book *In the House of the Hangman*. You find it also ironically in the 1960s in the so-called „68 generation“ where they argue that they are the ones who are really coming to terms with the past when their parents didn't. But it's a very interesting coming to terms with the past, it's a self-exculpating coming to terms with the past because the 68ers weren't responsible. And so it was easy to say we Germans are finally coming to terms with the past because it wasn't, in many ways, their past that they were coming to terms with. And you see the return of the repressed now, when the 68ers as they are becoming older are saying, wait a minute, maybe we didn't take German suffering seriously, there are complexities and we shouldn't have been so self-righteous. And now, in my opinion, they are swinging too far back in the opposite direction!

You mean, for instance, the commemoration of Dresden.

The firebombing of Dresden, the debate over Günter Grass's past and his very strange multilayered *Crabwalk* and *im Hauten des Zwiebelns*. So I guess that my major qualification is that I don't think that the German model is that successful of a model. It's certainly more successful than Japan. It's in a way more successful than any other case I can think of, but in a way, it's because of what they had to confront.

The enormity of it.

The enormity of it. And not only the enormity of it but the fact that in a way it's German arrogance that has led to requiring the most of them. They've claimed that they are the most civilized and so have even more to explain. It's one thing when a travesty occurs in a society that doesn't see itself as civilizationally advanced, but it's another thing when a travesty occurs precisely *because* the society sees itself as the most advanced.

For many citizens of the Baltic countries, there is an expectation that Russia would acknowledge the crimes of communism: the deportations, murders, appropriation of private property and the illegal „annexation“ of the Baltic states. Here I would like to ask about the possibility of national apology? How useful do you think that would be for Russia to do this? Not only for Russia, in its relations with the Baltics, but useful for Russia itself to become maybe a mature democracy? Or should there be silence. Some thinkers such as Gesine Schwan argue strongly for the power of apology to strengthen

democratic culture, others such as Hermann Lübbe would argue that silence is the best tactic in a new and fragile democracy. What do you think?

Well, I certainly wouldn't expect the Russians to apologize for the occupation of the Baltic states. I don't see why they would (would here is a different question than should). What's the advantage to them? A different point, perhaps less politically correct to say sitting in the old city of Tallinn, is that the model is not the German/Jewish model in a way. I think the model might be the French model, which is that reality is always more complicated than political slogans allow. What is the dividing line between an occupation and an annexation. My answer is that there is no such thing as a pure one of either of those. Reality is a large gray zone. I don't know enough of the history of Estonia or the Baltics to make any kind of pronouncements but I would say that there is always some degree of accommodation. There is always some degree of difference of opinion, there are always some patterns of relative advantage and disadvantage in every situation and you're never going to be able to parse all that complexity. And so I think it does everyone a disservice as it did in France to move from a myth of the resistance where there were more members of the resistance than there seemed to be the population of France to a more radical *mea culpa*. If everyone is guilty, no one is guilty. So, reality is obviously more complex, whether at an individual or collective level, than anyone wants to admit to themselves. That being said, I am ideologically in this regard an American and it looked to me like an occupation but I am not optimistic that Russia would acknowledge that for a couple of reasons. One is that I don't see what the motivation for Russia to do that would be. Second, that you don't generally expect tiny states to extract concessions from huge states. Another point is the complexities of the relationship between Russia and the Soviet Union. Of course, one is often reminded by Russians that Stalin wasn't a Russian. The places that I expect to see concessions and apologies are when states want something from international, transnational organizations. So, I expect that you are going to see greater discussion about the Armenian genocide because Turkey wants into the EU. I expect, and here I follow Habermas actually, when he talks about Japan and the so-called Asian values debate, that you are going to see Japan more and more integrated over time into the so-called human rights regime and more acknowledgements of past crimes as the international finance and corporate system becomes more interdependent. So I don't particularly see that constellation of interests happening in the Baltics versus Russia. I also think that Estonia is going to be a model of economic transformation in a society remade and is going to inspire tremendous jealousy from its' much larger neighbour.

In your work on Germany, you predominantly studied official speeches. How would you then evaluate conflicts over monuments? In particular, I have in the mind the conflict in Estonia over the infamous Bronze Soldier monument which symbolized „occupation“ for many Estonians, but for many Russians symbolized „liberation“ from fascism. How can one move from the level of speeches to monuments which tend to be more emotional and visceral in the study of memory?

Well, one of the things that I tried to emphasize in my presentation at the summer school was the importance of the differences among different media of memory. That media are

not simply vessels of truth but that they are crucibles of meaning. They are not simply carrying a message from one place to another like a basket, but that they are actually shaping the message. This goes back to Marshall McLuhan's *The Medium is the Message* and so the different media, or different mnemonic acts or practices that take place in different media, operate differently. So political speeches are in fact very different than monuments. I would just like to qualify that while one of my books, *Sins of the Fathers*, is about political speeches, *In the House of the Hangman* is about a wide range of materials, albeit mostly elite discourse. Part of it is simply the rules of exclusion. One thing about monuments though is that monuments are perhaps more polysemic than speeches. They are more open to different interpretations because they are somehow less explicit. Symbols are often more general than words and people can read into them many different things. So I think while all speech is polysemic, some speech is more polysemic than others. Often times monuments can be multi, even bi-seimic and this (ed: Bronze Soldier) is a perfect case where you can look at something and see different things, yet represented by the same image. There is a fundamental ambiguity because it is an Estonian man but it is a statue to commemorate the victory over fascism so it can be read in at least two different directions.

Why do think that the Holocaust is a central traumatic memory in Western scholarship, while Communist crimes are remembered much less and even perhaps pushed to the periphery in terms of academic scholarship? Is it because Communism was part of that utopian modern project, in terms of memory?

I think that they are profoundly different crimes. I don't want to engage in a hierarchy of suffering but the nature of the communist crimes are largely political. That doesn't mean that a communist bullet was any nicer than a Nazi bullet. But there is something elemental about the Nazi crimes, the viciousness of the racism involved and something about that feels, at least to me, starkly different than the political crimes. In a way there are political crimes in virtually every system. There are plenty of things that have happened in the name of democracy, in the name of revolutions, and the Soviet crimes are certainly atrocious but I don't think that they have that elemental quality of racism and biological discrimination that the Nazi crimes had. The numbers, whether they are comparable or not is, in some sense, besides the point. I'm not trying to say that Nazi crimes are worse than communist crimes, certainly not from the victim's perspective. But there is something different about the crimes in the same way perhaps that there is a difference between a street robbery and a rape. You can get hit over the head and your wallet stolen, but that is fundamentally different from getting hit over the head or shot in the course of a sexual crime. The end result may be the same, but there are cultural qualities to them that differentiate them. I think that the equation between Nazi and communist crimes is dangerous.

Finally, in response to those who say that collective memory is non-existent, how might you convince them that memory is not only individual but collectively constituted? .

In the first place, it's a gross failure of sociological imagination. In the second place, the argument I tried to make in the summer school presentation was that in fact, I see it as

exactly the opposite: It's psychologists who should have to append the adjective individual because, to me, our existence as part of collectivities and derivative of collectivities is more obvious. That's why I'm a sociologist. I should make clear that the sociological imagination is very different from the political imagination and being a sociological collectivist does not make one a political collectivist. So being a sociologist does not make one a Marxist, or communist, fascist or collectivist of some sort. I think that those are completely different issues. But it seems to me that, first of all, there are technologies of memory other than the brain. Anyone who pays attention to media such as writing, our ability to write, knows that the way we remember is fundamentally shaped by resources that are available to us or not and that this makes a difference. I would also say it is a fairly obvious model of collective memory to language is that we are individuals when we speak and when we say all sorts of different things, but we can only say them in language. And it's the same with memory: we can remember all sorts of different things, but we remember them as social beings. And I just don't see any validity whatsoever to this radical ontological distinction between the individual and the collectivity. Even the most radical of interrogators of the individual, Freud, sees individuality as a result of socialization, not the opposite of socialization. So just to return to where I started, I would say those who say there is no such thing as collective memory are exhibiting a radical failure of sociological imagination.