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The Turn toward Memory: From History's "Little People" to Anthropology's "Others"

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ABSTRACT:

This paper traces the intellectual genealogy of memory research among anthropologists concerned with the past-present relationship. In light of the historical turn in cross-cultural scholarship, the author reviews how social anthropologists came to use memory in their work. What motivated anthropologists to put the spotlight on memory and even to make memory itself an object of study? To what extent did this endeavor derive from radical social history's concern with "little people," often glossed as history from below? Where did anthropologists depart from the history-from-below approach as they negotiated their interactions, translations and representations with living "others"? A hopeful aspect rests in the method's potential to illuminate coercive and oppressive processes and relations. Thus, the paper assesses contributions in method and theory as well as challenges to dominant ideologies, structures and practices among little people as well as academic collaborators. Furthermore, while cautioning against viewing history itself as social remedy, the author argues for the continuing relevance of a historical approach to grasping and representing difference across time and place. The paper concludes with an agenda for the future related to the redemptive potential of memory work.

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"If anything, it is the tension or outright conflict between history and memory that seem necessary and productive."
—NATALIE ZEMON DAVIS AND RANDOLPH STARN (1989)

"Social memory studies is … a nonparadigmatic, transdisciplinary, centerless enterprise."
—JEFFREY OLICK AND JOYCE ROBBINS (1998)

"It is apparent that the past has a robust future."
—GEOFFREY WHITE (2006)

A central irony in the turn to memory is this: Anthropology discovered memory out of its aversion to history.[1] Anthropology had a palatable distaste for history even as its practitioners served as the handmaiden of history in colonial projects. Their documentations were, along with those of colonial administrators, among the early written accounts and, hence, in the world of historiography, became part of the package of legitimate history. Even so, social and cultural anthropologists were predisposed to portray their subjects as living in one-dimensional time capsules. Cultures were confirmed nouns: static, bounded and homogenous. The anthropologists of bygone days wrote their monographs in the ethnographic present. This ahistoric technique of representation did not weather the ebbs and flows in scholarly standards. By the 1960s, when peasant uprisings were all the rage, business as usual was no longer possible. The so-called natives were speaking back. Colonial uprisings woke up anthropologists to

history. They began to realize that local cultural practices in the modern age had to be understood as connected to colonial encounters and capitalist projects.

The change was remarkable. Up until the 1960s, as Evans-Pritchard noted in 1962, a "rejection of historical research of any kind" characterized the paradigms, theories and methods that anthropologists developed and drew upon in their investigations into non-Western peoples (cited in Linke 2004:2219). That approach came to a halt. Anthropologists were forced to consider the existence of indigenous histories—histories that could be grasped only if the "trauma of the colonial encounter" were taken into consideration (Linke 2004).

This necessary transformation in the orientation of anthropology vis-à-vis history, however, does not go very far toward explaining the shift to memory research. Eric Wolf's (1982) landmark *Europe and the People Without History*, now a classic known for waking up anthropologists to history, did not resort to memory. He did, however, introduce a particularly materialist version of history to anthropology, a quality that some but by no means all of the anthropology of memory shares. The turn toward memory was hardly inevitable. Nor has it been uniform in approach, intention, or genealogy.

Indeed, the diversity of purposes and projects can be daunting and lead one to observe, just as Wulf Kansteiner did for memory work broadly, whether the intentions of those now working under the rubric of "memory" research share much other than a label. In Kansteiner's words (2002:25): "while memory has clearly become a central concept in the humanities and the social sciences, it remains unclear to what extent this convergence reflects actual common intellectual and methodological interests." Geoffrey White (2006:325), in his "Epilogue: Memory Moments," which concluded a special issue of

Ethos focused on memory scholarship, echoed this sentiment: "The idiom of memory has become a code for all sorts of practices ranging from comprehension and recall to movements and monuments." That quick turn of phrase only begins to capture the diverse projects that fall under the family tree of memory scholarship.

Worth considering are the methodological challenges that anthropologists confronted as they began to incorporate history into their studies—studies that frequently involve some kind of engagement with the past-present relationship through field-based research.

Why the turn toward memory

What motivated socio-cultural anthropologists to attend to memory as an object of study? Reading broadly on memory, I have at times been confounded at the diverse genealogies. In making sense of this diversity, I have settled on three incentives that appear to have spurred scholarly interest in memory. These shifts are by no means definitive, but they do identify some patterns in the field.

Troubling tendencies led proponents to push these new approaches. First, memory as integrated with social context arose in opposition to the memory that psychologists had situated deep in individuals' minds; this was an early twentieth-century structuralist moment. Second, memory as anchored in the senses or local constructs opposed Western epistemologies that privileged documents as legitimate sources for history making. This tendency may be thought of as connected to the intellectual critiques that flowed from postmodern and postcolonial dilemmas, which brought to the fore power differentials between those who were studied and those who did the studying. Third, memory as

historical consciousness countered the dominant stories told in official histories. This genealogy emphasizes materiality as well as practice theory.

1. The endurance of social context

The first approach moors memory in its social context. In this respect it has been the most enduring and appealing. This lineage can be traced to the structuralist branch of sociology—not particularly renown for its attentiveness to history. Among the classical theorists, it was Émile Durkheim's observation about memory in relation to commemorative rituals as a defining feature of "primitive societies" that laid the groundwork for future developments (see Durkheim 2001[1915] discussed in Olick and Robbins 1998:107). The master's student, Maurice Halbwachs, made his mark with *On Collective Memory*. Halbwachs put a decidedly social spin on memory. In a review essay on social memory studies, Jeffrey Olick and Joyce Robbins offer a quintessential quote from Halbwachs' influential volume: "[I]t is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories" (Halbwachs 1992:38, cited in Olick and Robbins 1998:109). Worth noting is that Halbwachs was writing against Freud's purely psychological tact on memory. Halbwachs went so far as to say he saw "no point" in examining memories in the "nook of my mind" (ibid.). As early as 1925 he argued that "the idea of an individual memory, absolutely separate from social memory, is an abstraction almost devoid of meaning" (cited in Connerton 1989:37 and Kansteiner 2002:185). Can one imagine a more harsh assault on psychology's attempt to make a science of probing individuals' inner thoughts? Halbwachs, however, did acknowledge the existence of autobiographical memory:

Whereas autobiographical memory described recalling events that we as individuals experience, he viewed collective memory as "the active past that forms our identities," in the words of Olick and Robbins (1998:111). That collective past was what mattered most to shaping people's sense of place in the world.

Memory as a term had nearly disappeared from the scholarly scene by mid-century. Kerwin Lee Klein, in his essay "On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse," noted that *The Dictionary of the Social Sciences* in 1964 portrayed the term as nearly extinct. Klein attributes this "endangered-species" status to "[m]emory's association with old-fashioned varieties of psychologism" (Klein 2000:131)—precisely what Halbwachs had been writing against but what had apparently prevailed. Klein finds evidence in the "grim" story's low point in Raymond William's (1976) classic *Keywords*, which offered entries on "history," "myth," and "ideology" but "neglected memory altogether" (Klein 2000:131). Something happened in the decade and a half between the mid-1970s and the early 1990s. Historians and anthropologists began to exhibit an interest in memory. By 1992, sociologist of journalism Michael Schudson's *Watergate in American Memory* hit the scene. He criticized the public perception of memory as individualized. His alternative view portrayed memory as "essentially social" and also structural in its "rules, laws, standardized procedures, and records . . . books, holidays, statues, souvenirs" (1992:51, cited in Klein 2000:130). Klein bemusedly notes how Schudson could speak of the "structural usage of memory as if it were a natural feature of the landscape" (Klein 2000:131). In fact, Klein demonstrates quite convincingly how memory was anything but a natural feature of the landscape but rather a feature whose roots were quite recent and shallow.

At any rate those roots quickly took hold and have turned out to have a phenomenally wide range. As Geoffrey White (2006:328) observed for the essays in the *Ethos* issue devoted to memory, "In short, these articles underscore the importance of a methodological approach that focuses on the production of memory in context." Context endures across the contours of colonial and postcolonial history (e.g., Cole 2006, Stoler and Strassler 2000) as well as throughout the global flows of capital and ideology (e.g., Ferry 2006).

2. The challenge of epistemology

With the resurgence in social memory studies emerged questions about the relationship between knowledge and power (after Foucault 1980). Research became relational as scholars echoed the insistence of postcolonial subjects that one could not simply take for granted the terms under which knowledge was being produced. In the introduction to a special issue of *Representations* in 1989, titled "Memory and Counter-Memory," Natalie Zemon Davis and Randolph Starn made clear that at issue were "fundamental attitudes about our relationship to the past" (1989:2). Who owned it? Who created it? What assumptions underlie official histories? Debates about the past-present relationship led to discussions about whether "objective" history was even possible. Clearly, the "'new' social history … about marginal and otherwise forgotten people" depended on counter-memories that challenged official histories, typically produced by dynastic monarchies and nation-states (Davis and Starn 1989:5). If nothing else, Davis and Starn prove to be prophetic when they note that the "conflict between history and memory" has been "necessary and productive" (ibid).

That same issue of *Representations* featured an article "Imperialist Nostalgia" by anthropologist Renato Rosaldo (1989a), which appeared that same year as a chapter in his *Culture and Truth: Remaking of Social Analysis* (1989b), now vintage cultural critique. Rosaldo uses the intertwined concepts of memory and nostalgia to push a politics of critical social analysis. He derides assumptions of "innocence" that adjectives such as "detached, neutral, or impartial" imply for the social scientist. Rosaldo makes a clear case for researchers to be straight with readers about their own positions with regard to knowledge: "Because researchers of necessity are both somewhat impartial and somewhat partisan, somewhat innocent and somewhat complicit, their readers should be as informed as possible about what the observer was in a position to know and not know" (Rosaldo 1989a:107). Without such a reflexive turn, he suggests, "metropolitan observers" are as likely to become complicit with domination as they are to have strong feelings toward the non-Western, rural people they study because of the power memories to "evoke moods of imperialist nostalgia" and researchers' vulnerability to get caught up in those moods. Rosaldo's analysis convincingly reveals the not-so-innocent role of the researcher in reproducing orders of domination that follow from imperialist nostalgia (1989a:121). He locates complicity squarely in language that describes the "social scientist as impartial, detached observer" and calls for an honest, engaged approach to further a project that can challenge dominant ideologies.

Projects critical of the sacred social-science cow of impartiality invited a number of imponderables, such as the dismantling of the very epistemological foundations of social science production. In anthropology, this turn to memory occurred in what I have identified as a second motivational strand, which resulted from frustration over the

dominance of Western approaches to understanding cultural practices and transformations. Attention turned toward alternative ways of knowing such as those grounded in embodied experiences. The shift toward sensory ways of engaging with the world derived from critiques of epistemologies that privileged the mind over the body, written documents over oral sources, or artifacts of the state over experiences of everyday life. Anthropologists interested in the colonial encounter and its production of subjects viewed conventional approaches to history as a Eurocentric trap. The evidentiary expectations of historiography were narrow. They also reflected and reproduced certain relations of power. The standards of evidence required so-called legitimate sources of history, and the authors of those sources were largely colonial administrators—or early anthropologists documenting myths, rituals, kinship, religion or governance. Anthropologists tuned into local ways of interacting with the social and material world. They sought methods that could help them engage differently and better with both the past and the present as well as emergent cultural practices.

Paul Stoller, in his essay "Embodying Colonial Memories," delves into spirit possession in Niger, where Hauka spirits visit—that is, "spirits of European force" (1994:36). With a keen attention to the sensory aspects of spirit possession, Stoller aims to validate indigenous historiography and to portray embodiment as counter-memory. He attends to the sentient body, i.e., a body that is capable of knowing through feeling, capable of responding with emotion not just intellect. His work turns science on its head, particularly his critique of the Western bias of knowing through seeing or through reading behaviors as though they are merely texts (after Geertz 1973). Indeed, he warms of a great epistemological error that stems from turning the body into a text because such

an approach robs the body of its sensibilities, which are potent conveyors of meaning and memory (p. 639). Stoller's essay reads like a manifesto for the sentient body, i.e., the body that is capable of feeling and responding with emotion and not just intellect. He goes so far as to say that anthropologists have "lost their senses," and that the consequences are dire: "Anthropologists who have lost their senses write ethnographies that are often disconnected from the worlds they seek to portray. For these anthropologists, tasteless theories are more important than the savory sauces of ethnographic life. That they have lost their senses of the smells, sounds, and tastes of the places they study is unfortunate for them, for their subjects, and for the discipline itself." Stoller argues that to grasp cultural memory—and, indeed, political power—one has to take seriously bodily practices.

Similarly, but from within the quintessential cradle of Western civilization itself, Nadia Seremetakis (1994) launches a scathing critique of social science's epistemological bias for excluding the senses. Her project, situated in Greece, is aimed at countering the homogenizing tendencies of European Union policies. The crux of her powerful essay is to raise awareness of the senses as deeply entangled with history, memory, and narrative on the one hand, and forgetfulness and silence on the other. She pulls like taffy on the key point that "the senses are meaning-generating apparatuses that operate beyond consciousness and intention" (1994:6). Furthermore, she implicates the senses in the very interpretation of history because they serve as witnesses to the shifting world of material experience (1994:7). To ignore the senses, she suggests, is to succumb to a present that is tasteless.

Another evocative project appeared in 1997, by which time Ruth Behar had taken to heart Rosaldo's call to dismantle impartiality. Her collection, *The Vulnerable Observer*: *Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart,* reaches the zenith of the humanistic variety of anthropology as she combines field-based research with personal reflection. The book's most powerful essay, "Death and Memory: From Santa María del Monte to Miami Beach" shows how her probing into the meaning of death among her Spanish subjects living in a village of mostly elderly folks unfolded as she grappled with her failing Cuban-Jewish grandfather back in Miami.

Together, these contributions could not be any more different from those of Pierre Nora's influential yet problematic historicization of the memory phenomenon in France, which Kansteiner describes ambivalently as written in "elegant prose," yet "a three-stage model that is as Eurocentric as it is simple and seemingly compelling" (2000:183). The three periods of Nora's model entail a premodern, modern, and postmodern condition. These are precisely the kind of unilineal, evolutionary sorts of stages that people like Stoller and Serematakis set out to dismantle.

It is worth acknowledging here how different these projects are from one another. One might also include in this section the work of anthropologists concerned with the emotionality of memory. Geoffrey White captures that diversity in his discussion of the Ethos volume: "In contexts as diverse as psychotherapy, commemorative practices, urban renewal, and truth commissions, emotional stories about the past are used to represent and transform problems and moral conflicts of all sorts" (2006: 332). And yet astonishingly they all fall under the label of memory work. This ought serve as a cue to

look closely at the claims and concerns that scholars advance under the broad field of memory studies.

3. Historical consciousness and the quest for counter-truths

The third strand concerns itself with historical consciousness as a methodology for arriving at alternative truths. These truths are different from master narratives, which turn out to be not just-so stories but hegemonic projects. History is not merely given but made. Its making brings together force fields laden with players who have unequal access to power, prestige and privilege. The memory turn among a number of scholars involved a commitment to those subjects whose histories seemed more often marginalized, excluded or silenced than emphasized, included or amplified.

My exposure to this genealogy occurred when I entered the Ph.D. program at Arizona in 1992. I was clueless about the happenings among professional historians, anthropologists and sociologists with regard to memory research when I enrolled in an advanced seminar entitled "Social Memory and Historical Anthropology." There was a buzz around the new, young, intrepid assistant professor who slunk across the halls of the Haury Building like the ghost he would become, wearing cowboy boots and jeans with a style that defied the prerequisite of Eastern-establishment tweed. The late Daniel Nugent (1993) and my advisor, Ana Alonso (1988), both worked on historical anthropology, both wrote about peasants and the Mexican revolution, and both were protégées of anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff (1992) of the University of Chicago. It was in Nugent's class that my interest in social memory took hold. He kicked off the seminar with a scathing presentation of Francis Fukuyama's "The End of History," leaving no

doubt in anyone's mind that there was something presumptuous about claiming that the thawing of the Cold War marked the end of history. As an anthropologist drawn to historical materialism, Nugent had no patience for Fukuyama's (1989) claim that the world had arrived at "the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government." Even the least Marxist-inclined of anthropologists, say the Geertzian interpretivists, were beholden to local symbols and meanings and disciplined to challenge universalizing claims.

The seminar readings brought together anthropologists and historians concerned with the politics of history. These scholars did not see history as objective or neutral or all-inclusive. They saw history as subjective, power-laden and partial. They sought to challenge the conventional wisdoms of history-making through advancing theories and methods. Alonso (1988:37), in a sophisticated analysis of the "effects of truth" that lurk behind the stage of history, describe the dynamics thus: "The paradox is that historical discourses hide their hermeneutics so as to construct their 'credibility' and 'authoritativeness' vis-à-vis their audiences." The challenge for scholars was clear—to unveil these hidden techniques of interpretation.

Scholars influencing this third strain of memory research, which I have identified as concerned with historical consciousness, came from a number of fields. The British contributed the cultural studies cadre, making their mark with the works of historian E.P. Thompson (1963), literary critic Raymond Williams (1977) and sociologist Stuart Hall (1981), who were in varying degrees provoked by the English translation of Antonio

Gramsci's (1971) *Prison Notebooks* and his writings on the relationship between the state and civil society and his theories on hegemony.

Gramsci's writings on critical consciousness (1971) directly inspired the Popular Memory Group, who envisioned their project as an extension of political practice: "History—in particular popular memory—is a stake in the constant struggle for hegemony" (Popular Memory Group 1982:213). The group sought to use history as a tool to challenge common sense notions of the world and organically assist social groups in acquiring an awareness of the broad context of collective struggles. The goal was to use history and memory as a vehicle for engendering competence at transforming the world into a better place (1982:214).

International colleagues such as the Italian oral historian Luisa Passerini (1987) also appeared on the scene. My exposure to her work through the Popular Memory Group was infectious and lasting. Passerini's seminal work on the memories of Italian proletariat working in the Fiat factory during Fascism received attention from scholars for her perception of subjectivity as political struggle. She offered strategies for overcoming the challenges historians and anthropologists face in bridging personal stories with larger structures and histories.

The branch of history concerned with advancing the plight of the popular classes, or the so-called little people, has shared a good deal with the branch of anthropology concerned with championing stories of society's "others." These two projects have at times had more of an eavesdropping relationship than one of direct dialogue, as reading the references cited section of any given article suggests. For example, there is no mention of the cultural studies intellectuals in the epilogue to the *Ethos* special issue and

yet author White (2006:331) notes: “All of the studies in this collection argue that memory must be studied in relation to the things that people actually do with the past. If representations of history (or, more generally, the past) mediate social relations and identities, then they become tools for shaping those identities and, in a more fundamental way, determining which identities obtain public recognition and validation through acts of memory.” Perhaps Francesca Cappelletto (2005:4) characterizes the parallels best when, in the introduction to her edited volume *Memory and World War II: An Ethnographic Approach*, notes that the contributors’ focus is “not on the present but on representations of the past in the present.”

Turning to memory to get at the past-present relationship is well expressed in an introduction to a new volume entitled *Memory Work*, in which the editors, archaeologists Barbara Mills and William Walker, explain their interest in a memory paradigm as one that seeks to improve the science of interpretation, particularly as it grapples with differences across time and space: "We try to understand how social memories are constructed in their terms, not our own, creating a cross-cultural study of aesthetics and meaning” (Mills and Walker In Press: 23). The degree to which scholars engage with the political dimensions of memory work is hardly universal and varies across a broad spectrum of disciplinary leanings.

A number of historians and anthropologists have contemplated the challenges of moving private memories into the public sphere. Nancy Wood (1999:2 cited in Kansteiner 2000:188) distinguishes “public memory” as a form of collective remembering that “testifies to a will or desire on the part of some social group or disposition of power to select and organize representations of the past so that these will

be embraced by individuals as their own." Such an embrace requires that they have in some ways been authorized. This may likely require that memories serve some contemporary interests or political objectives.

In my own work, I continue to find memory to be a productive and meaningful framework for arriving at the central goal of my discipline: to understand "culture," if we take culture to be ongoing dynamic practices involving struggles over meaning and materiality. On all too many occasions while doing ethnographic fieldwork, memory seemed to serve as a guardian of truth with a little "t". When the scientific framings I was reading did not jibe with the stories that I was hearing on the ground, it troubled me to think that the former had a far greater chance of evolving into the dominant stories that society would tell about itself than the latter. I found myself employing a multi-prong approach to memory, tending to social context, embodiment, and cultural economies of power involved in experience and transformation. A focus on people's memories has the power to expose experiences that are important to people's lives and may serve to raise consciousness to counter narrow political agendas.

During an ethnographic study of Italian women's record-low fertility rate, I repeatedly encountered strong, even angry, memories about the peasant past. As I have discussed elsewhere (Krause 2005), these memories surprised me because their powerful and rich themes were largely absent from the apocalyptic perspectives frequently portrayed in demographers' reports and journalists' articles. The memories turned out to be significant to family making. They spoke to the unraveling of patriarchal hierarchy, to the devaluing of masculine authority, and to the reconfiguring of subjectivities, which

informed people's practices in order to attain certain class standings and maintain particular gender relations.

In a related project, I came across memories that revealed a history of hidden traumas and dislocations involving a complex economy of weavers and wetnurses in the early 20th century. Poor women who wove straw hats for a global economy would apply for state wetnurse subsidies that allowed them to hand over their infants to another woman, apparently so they could continue weaving; however, rather than focus on the economic realities facing these women, the state opted for moralizing discourses rooted in gender ideologies. This strategy served to turn women's work into a moral project and thereby discount it as productive work. Such strategies and stories are all but forgotten in contemporary expert diagnoses of the nation-state's demographic status. In part, my investigation aimed to upset the tyranny of global discourses about declining fertility (Krause 2007). Such fragments and narratives, however, do not necessarily come forward in a straight and coherent fashion. Anthropologists, sociologists and historians who concentrate on memory may very well find themselves as co-creators of new narratives, of new versions of history.

Conclusion

Memory as a field of study has evolved into more than an analytic tool. It is an historical encounter that allows those who use it to explore how the past exists in an ongoing dialectic with the present. History ultimately provides people with moorings for orienting themselves to their social world. Memory continuously brings the past to life.

This essay opened with the observation that anthropology's embrace of memory came, ironically, out of its aversion to history. Making sense of such a dialectic, I dare to suggest that the aversion to history meant that practitioners could not simply apply history as historians had done it all along. They had to approach history in some other way. Anthropologists in the 1980s were waking up to their own post-colonial biases and nostalgias. If the past posed a challenge, it also called on those who sought to understand its role in contemporary cultural configurations to take it seriously. Taking memory seriously can safely be said to be one characteristic that memory scholars share—whether they are drawn to memory in terms of how it mediates the individual with his or her social context, disrupts Western epistemologies through an attention to embodied experience, or constitutes stakes and historical consciousness in ongoing struggles for hegemony.

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[1] U. Linke (2004:2220) mentions but does not expand on this connection and is primarily focused on Evans-Pritchard, whose work predates the memory turn by several decades.