

# Commemoration and National Identity

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since the publication of Nora's *Lieux de Mémoire* some fifteen years ago its has become a common place in contemporary culture: we live in an age of commemorations. This should invite us to consider the question of the significance of commemorations for our time. Should we see commemorations as attractive and decorative social phenomena but without any real import from an academic point of view? Or is there more about commemorations than immediately meets the eye? More specifically, can, or do they really add something to our understanding of the past? Or should we agree with Nora that commemorations primarily express something about how we relate to the past, while not adding to our understanding of the past itself? Commemoration expresses or exemplifies a feeling that we have, or are expected to have about a past event, and has, as such, its origins exclusively in ourselves and not in the past. Or, so it may seem. For this question immediately raises a further one: namely the question whether a clear-cut distinction can always be made between the issue of how we relate to, or feel about the past, on the one hand, and our understanding of it on the other. Obviously, these feelings about the past will often be associations that we have with a past event; and such associations are not necessarily at odds with our understanding of the past and may, sometimes, even importantly contribute to it. For example, the associations that survivors of the Holocaust have with this event may well be worth the historian's attention, since these associations could embody or suggest a new and unexplored dimension to it. So it could well be that commemoration not only shows us how we feel about the past, but is also a deposit of hitherto neglected evidence about the past itself. And

there is no *a priori* reason to believe that the events of a remoter past should necessarily be excluded from this. So perhaps commemoration could in certain cases be a guide for how to transcend the limits of existing historical understanding.

These, then, are some of the topics that I hope to investigate in this essay.

## 2. THE TERM 'COMMEMORATION'

In English the two words 'commemoration' and 'remembrance' can both be used for our remembering the past. There is a slight difference in meaning between the two terms: 'commemoration' is primarily related to the act of remembering something, whereas 'remembrance' is more intimately associated with the object, or content of what is remembered. Thanks to this performative dimension (to use Austin's terminology) 'commemoration' is more suggestive of a social and public event than 'remembrance'. In this context it is of interest to note that French only knows the word 'commémoration' and has no equivalent of the word 'remembrance'. If language is a reliable indication of the social practices of a community of language users, as has famously been argued by Peter Winch<sup>1</sup>, it would follow that for the French a commemoration is a more solemn and public event than for the English. This difference between the two terms is further enhanced by the fact that 'commemoration' is a remembering *together*, whereas 'remembrance' primarily is a private affair. This fact suggests that we should doubt the commonsensical opinion that the contemporary memory cultus should conflict with what we expect from history. It has often been argued – for example by Hobsbawm and by Megill<sup>2</sup> – that memory is private and uncertain, whereas history is public and, because of this, the repository of truth. But the foregoing suggests already that things are more complicated and that since memory is not necessarily private it might, in principle, share in the public revelation of truth. Unless, of course, one were to postulate a necessary connection between memory and falsity. But the fact that memory may *often* delude us, does not warrant the extrapolation that it *always* does so.

Both the English and the French variants derive from the Latin verb

'commemorare', in which the emphasis is on the act of remembering. 'Commemorare' means both 'to recall to memory' and 'to remind somebody of something', and in both cases the act of remembering and not its object is at stake. 'Commemorare' and its English and French derivatives are therefore halfway between memory itself and its object or content, on the one hand, and a reminding of, on the other, as in, for example, 'this building reminds me of a cigarbox'. Here we may also discern the semantic affinity between 'commemorare' and its English and French derivatives on the one hand and the Latin word 'monumentum' on the other. This Latin word is derived from 'moneo' meaning 'all that reminds somebody of something'. The monument therefore is not itself the incorporation or expression of a memory, but has a merely intermediary function. We have learned to associate a certain memory with a monument; but some other monument could fulfil this task just as well, or may-be even better. The monument is, in this way, much like a word or sign that also ties a meaning to a thing, but which is itself a wholly arbitrary device for doing so.

'Commemoration' therefore presents us with a semantic triptych. In the first place commemoration may suggest remembrance in the sense that somebody recalls something to memory. In this case the subject of the act of memory and the person in whose mind a memory is evoked are identical. And this even is necessarily the case here since my memories are *sui generis* not identical with those of other persons, even if we recall ourselves the same events. Memories, like thoughts, are always tied to persons and do not float in some im- or intra-personal limbo. I cannot recall your memories, for the simple reason that your memories are necessarily yours, even if their content does not differ in any way from those of mine. In opposition to this we have the 'reminding of' effected by the monument; here the thing that evokes the memory – i.e. the monument – must be distinguished from the person or persons in whom a memory has been evoked. A monument does not remember itself something, but it may make *us* remember something. These two opposed meanings of 'reminding of' can be dramatized in the paradox that 'I may remind you of something or somebody without reminding you of something or somebody'. That is to say, I can draw your attention to something that you should remember, without evoking, as a person, any special memories in you. Lastly, and in the third place, between 'recalling to

memory' and 'reminding of' lies 'commemorare' (and their English and French derivatives) combining elements of both. And this is at it ought to be. For what we expect of a commemoration is that it makes us recall by reminding us of something. There is, first, the phase of reminding and only then, will memories present themselves to us. Without reminders, memories will not be 'activated', so to say. And we can only admire the genius of language by so appropriately combining these two things in the notion of 'commemoration'.

Next, German is a case apart. Let us, for a moment play Heidegger's game and try to connect some philosophical insights to the etymological peculiarities of the German language. There is, in German, in the first place the neutral term 'Erinnerung' and, next to it, the more specific notions of 'das Andenken' and of 'das Gedächtnis'. It must strike us that these German words, unlike their English and French equivalents, associate memory and monument with 'denken', hence with *thought* and are, moreover, remarkably free from associations with pastness. Furthermore, it lacks the public and performative dimension we found to be so clearly present in 'commemoration' or 'commémoration'. 'Andenken' and 'Gedächtnis' seem rather to belong to the private sphere of the human individual. Apparently, when commemorating something in Germany, one primarily does so individually rather than collectively. Here the Germans show themselves, once again, to be 'das berühmte Volk der Innerlichkeit', to quote Nietzsche<sup>3</sup>. This may suggest, next, that the nationalist collectivism in recent German history has in all likelihood been a forced and extremist attempt to overcome a characteristic of the German mind rather than an expression of this characteristic. And this might explain why this German collectivism could take on such nasty features. For people are always at their worst, when they do not coincide with themselves.

### 3. RETHINKING AND RELIVING

Commemoration brings us back to the past and has the pretension to momentarily achieve a kind of communion with the past. It is suggestive of a closeness to the past and of a directness in our relationship to it that will be absent in our more normal interaction with our collective past. If we commemorate some tragic past of our collective past during a solemn

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ceremony we are for a moment close to those who fell for the freedom of our nation, or to those who were the innocent victims of the crimes of the past. And this raises the obvious question to what extent the past is actually 're-lived' at such occasions.

If so, our experience of such ceremonies would come close to Collingwood's well-known argument in his *The idea of history* about the epistemological conditions of historical knowledge. Collingwood required of the historian 'a re-enactment of the past in his own mind'. For if the historian wishes to explain the actions of individual statesmen or generals, he should, according to Collingwood, re-live the past in exactly the same way as its relevant aspects presented themselves to the historical agent. In this sense the distance separating the historian from his object should temporarily<sup>4</sup> be undone by the historian.

However, when we commemorate something from the past, there can be no question of a 're-enactment of the past' in the Collingwoodian sense; for the past may well be the occasion of, or the object of commemoration but no effort is made to diminish, let alone to destroy the distance between the present and the relived past. On the contrary, commemoration only makes sense on the basis of the distance of fifty, one hundred, two hundred years etc. that separate us from the commemorated past. We commemorate the past precisely because of the distance between it and the present. Commemoration has a different *raison d'être* and relates to a different experience of the past, than what is suggested by the notion of 'reliving the past'.

This does not exclude that a reliving of the past may be part of the commemoration of the past. Commemorations of certain events of the Second World War, such as D-Day, the Holocaust, the resistance against the Nazi's or of the Liberation may invite in people who participated in these events a re-living of these events. And for them the commemorated past may then come quite close again. But even these people will not actually relive the past in the Collingwoodian sense. For the quite real and intense feelings that they will then have with regard to these events will be feelings *about* these events, feelings that they have *about* the past from the perspective of the present, but certainly not a reproduction of the feelings they had during these events themselves. They will then experience feelings about feelings, though I should immediately add that feelings about feelings may sometimes be no less intense than the original feelings occasioning them.

Remorse is a good example: remorse may start with the feeling that we did something wrong in the past, but then this feeling of regret may start to have a life of its own and develop into a feeling about this initial feeling of regret. And as such it may begin to dominate our frame of mind that is wholly out of proportion with the event itself.

And so it is with history. For in history it may also happen that these 'secondary' feelings become more intense than the 'primary' ones. A striking example is the first commemoration of the Fall of the Bastille in July 1790 – I shall return later on to later nineteenth century commemorations of July 14th. Justly famous is Michelet's hyperbolic account of this first commemoration in his *Histoire de la Révolution Française*. Precisely because of Michelet's intention to identify himself completely with this commemoration and to present in his account a true 'résurrection' of the event – precisely because of this can his account bring us closest to the enthusiasm that must have inspired this first commemoration. 'Gleiches durch Gleiches', to quote Nietzsche. What must strike us in Michelet's account is how commemoration and reliving are inextricably bound up in this case, and how this made this first commemoration of July 14th 1789 into an event paradoxically surpassing the commemorated event itself in symbolic meaning and significance. Michelet himself is well aware of this and this may explain why, in his opinion, the essence of the French Revolution could announce itself more clearly in this first commemoration of July 14th than in any other event of the period. The counter-intuitive fact suggested by Michelet is, therefore, that the essence of the Revolution is to be found in a commemoration, and, even more so, in one that took place when the Revolution still had to get under its way. This commemoration, spontaneous, emanating from the most vivid and authentic awareness of the commemorated event is truly here a resurrection à la Michelet of the past in a way that history – let alone historical writing – is rarely, if ever capable of producing. The commemoration here becomes more real and more intense than what is commemorated and the re-lived past becomes more actual than the past itself.

'Un sentiment inouï de paix, de concorde, avait pénétré les âmes'<sup>5</sup>, thus Michelet when writing about this commemoration: all of France, yes even all of Europe had its eyes turned to Paris on this July 14th 1790 in the awareness that the revolutionary élan, and the unity and fraternization of the French on

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that day, announced the birth of a new epoch in the history of mankind:

*'Cette foi, cette candeur, cet immense élan de concorde, au bout d'un siècle de disputes, ce fut pour toutes les nations l'objet d'un grand étonnement comme un prodigieux rêve'*<sup>6</sup>.

In this way the 'Fête de la Fédération', as this first commemoration of the Fall of the Bastille was to be known, became so much the realization of the ideal of national unity that Michelet considered to be the essence of the French Revolution, that the commemorated event itself lost its logical priority to its commemoration. By a paradoxical inversion it now looked as if July 14th 1789, the Fall of the Bastille itself, acquired the character of a commemoration, of a commemorative anticipation of what would take place only one year later in the 'Fête de Fédération'. Charles Péguy, who was in his socialist phase no less a mythologist of the French Revolution than Michelet had been, expressed this inversion as follows :

*'la prise de la Bastille, dit l'histoire, ce fut proprement une fête, ce fut la première célébration, la première commémoration et pour ainsi dire le premier anniversaire de la prise de la Bastille. Ou enfin le zéroième anniversaire. On s'est trompé, dit l'histoire. On a vu dans un sens, il fallait voir dans l'autre. On a vu. Ce n'est pas la fête de la Fédération qui fut la première commémoration, le premier anniversaire de la prise de la Bastille. C'est la prise de la Bastille qui fut la première fête de la Fédération, une Fédération avant la lettre'*<sup>7</sup>.

Indeed, the perspective has been reversed and July 14th 1789 now became birthday 'number zero' of itself or, rather, the 'minus first' commemoration of the 'Fête de Fédération'. And in this way the simulacrum of the relived commemoration could come to outshine even an event such as the Fall of the Bastille.

#### 4. THE RELIGIOUS ORIGINS OF COMMEMORATION

There is one more element in Michelet's account of this first commemoration of July 14th that will demand our attention. Lionel Gossman

has emphasized that for Michelet the French Revolution has been an event of an almost religious significance<sup>8</sup>. And it is undoubtedly true that Michelet, despite his hatred of religion as the ideological support of political repression, deliberately uses a religious vocabulary in his exposition of the 'Fête de Fédération'. He compares France to the Infant Christ on the altar, miracles occur such as octogenarian sailors who suddenly recuperate the energy of their youth and the no less amazing miracle of Kant who abandons his daily rhythm in order to hear the latest news from France – and all this is expounded to the reader in two chapters entitled 'De la religion nouvelle'. In this mood of religious exaltation that Michelet ascribed to the French in 1790, a higher and trans-temporal reality announces itself such as the one promised to the believer in the true creed. 'Le temps a péri, l'espace a péri, ces deux conditions matérielles auxquelles la vie est soumise' – and if Michelet argues here for the abrogation of the dimension of time, this may lend extra force to this inversion of the commemorated past and its commemoration that we observed a moment ago. The concepts 'before' and 'after' have lost their meaning and can no longer determine the relationship between the past and its commemoration.

This religious dimension Michelet projects on commemoration will lead us to Freud's speculations about what one may well see as the archetype of all commemoration: namely Freud's account of the origins of society as depicted in his *Totem und Tabu*. According to Freud society came into being after the slaying of the primeval father by his sons who wished to put an end his sexual dominion over the females of the tribe. All that we see as essential to society, conscience, social organization and social cohesion, the internalization of social norms, sexual repression, religion, the incest taboo etc. was not implausibly related by Freud to the drama of this murder of the primeval father. And, as Freud goes on to say:

'Die Totemmahlzeit, vielleicht das erste Fest der Menschheit, wäre die Wiederholung und die Gedenkfeier dieser Gedenkwürdigen, verbrecherischen Tat, mit welcher soviel ein Anfang nahm, die soziale Organisation, die sittliche Einschränkungen und die Religion'<sup>9</sup>

Hence, in this first commemoration in the history of mankind, and that would ritually be re-enacted *ad infinitum* nothing less is celebrated than the



birth of society itself. Commemoration is thus, right from the beginning, inextricably tied up with taboo, ethics, the internalization of social norms, hence with the strongest and most important foundations of all society. So all the elements that we may hope to discover in the phenomenon of commemoration can be retraced by establishing their place and function in Freud's story about the origins of society. And this is also where we can find out about the mutual relationships between these elements. Thus, as is suggested by Freud's myth, this repertory of elements includes the ceremony of the commemoration, the endlessly repeated rituals, the effort to let the commemoration be the equivalent of the commemorated event and the foundationalist potential of the commemoration in the double sense of founding society and of sacralizing its origins. In sum, within Freud's conception the commemoration is most intimately bound up with religion and we should be profoundly aware of this in order to properly grasp the psychological and the sociological properties of the phenomenon of commemoration.

Pierre Nora himself has also recognized this religious dimension of commemoration as will be obvious from his characteristic of commemorations as 'des sacralités passagères dans une société qui se désacralise'<sup>10</sup>. And sacrality and religion will not have lost their hold of commemoration in a society like ours that still has so many reminiscences of its Christian past. Hence Jacques Le Goff: 'l'enseignement Chrétien est donc mémoire et le culte Chrétien est commémoration'<sup>11</sup>. The Christian background of our civilization not only contributed to our love of commemoration, but has also confirmed its religious dimensions.

##### 5. COMMEMORATION, REPETITION AND DECONTEXTUALIZATION

The close relationship observed by Freud between commemoration on the one hand and ritual repetition is amply confirmed by the organization of the Ecclesiastical Year. The Ecclesiastical Year is, amongst other things, the yearly repeated series of commemorations of the crucial events of the gospel as told to the believers. Each year Christ is born anew and each year He dies again on the cross for the remission of our sins. And each time that such an event is commemorated the suggestion really is that, in a certain sense, the

commemorated events happen again. But of importance in the present context is the fact that in this recurring commemoration historical reality is robbed of its original cohesion and subjected, instead to the ritual and the schematism of the commemoration. To return to the present example, the cohesion of Christ's life, the way He lived it, is abandoned for the fixed schematism of the Ecclesiastical Year. The major events of his life, as recounted in the gospel, are detached from their original context, their chronological order is abandoned now that to each of them is assigned a fixed place and date in the Ecclesiastical Year.

And precisely here each commemoration, however sublime or humble, shows itself to be the heir of the religious commemoration – its primeval prototype. For just as with these major events of the gospel, so does commemoration ordinarily introduce a schematism that is alien to what is commemorated and to the past itself. Crucial is here the recognition that the commemoration always complies with the compulsion of round numbers. For example, Mozart's death was commemorated not in 1985, or in 1995 but in 1991 when his death was exactly two hundred years ago. And probably one will decide to commemorate his death again in 2041 or in 2091, but not in some arbitrarily chosen year somewhere in between. Hence, the relationship between the commemorated event and its commemoration (and between commemorations mutually) is not determined by any logic or aspect of the historical process itself, but exclusively by our preference for the convenience of round years and for the logic of lustrums. And this has its grounds in the contingent fact that we have five fingers on both our hands and – obviously – *this* fact has nothing to do with history in general nor with the commemorated event itself.

The direct occasion for commemoration therefore is a-historical and exemplifies a double de-contextualization. This will be clear if we realize ourselves that in commemoration the crucial axis is the axis between the commemorated event, on the one hand, and us who commemorate, on the other. And this axis cuts right across all contextualizations that history would demand us to respect. For in the first place the commemorated event is now taken out of its own historical context and considered exclusively in terms of its relationship to us. In the second place we also de-contextualize ourselves with this same movement insofar as our historical present is temporarily narrowed down to a fixation on the commemorated event. And in both

cases the brutality of this double de-contextualization is symbolized by the sacrifice of the richness of historical context itself to the attractions of round numbers.

But this is only half of the story. The human mind is associative and feels an irresistible need of contextualization. Arguably nothing is more unnatural to us and demands a greater intellectual exertion than the effort not to relate something to something else – we hardly ever succeed in doing this and our invincible desire of contextualization will almost always gain the victory. Probably this is part of the explanation of why mathematics is so difficult for most people; for mathematics requires of us an effort of de-contextualization by means of the most rigorous abstraction and that completely defies our natural propensity to contextualization. In this way mathematics is a discipline which is at odds with what one might call ‘the logic of our mind’. If, then, we combine this with the de-contextualization effected by commemoration that we discussed a moment ago, this may further contribute to our understanding of the nature of commemoration.

Perhaps this can best be expressed by means of the following metaphor. Compare our memory to a slate. Ordinarily this slate is written all over already and it will most often be difficult to find an open and still innocuiped place for writing down our new experiences. We shall then have to write the memory of these new experiences over something else that was already written down somewhere on the slate – hence the complexity and the chaos of our memory. And where it also differs so conspicuously from the memories of our PC’s where we have well-defined maps for all our old and new documents. De-contextualization can, in this metaphor, best be compared to our wiping clean of a little corner on the slate. Because of this the experiences we may have, just after having created some clean corner on the slate, will preferably be written down there. We have made there some empty space, after all. And this will produce a contingent, but nevertheless quite intimate and almost indestructible relationship between what is commemorated and the kind of experiences we contingently happen to have when commemorating something. In short, it is part of the nature of commemoration to tie in this way ‘macro-historical’ events of the historical and political past to the ‘micro-events’ of our personal life and that happened to occur when we were commemorating something. If, then, we conceive of commemoration as a form of collective memory, we will have every reason to agree with David Lowenthal when he writes that ‘memory converts public events into

idiosyncratic personal experiences<sup>12</sup>.

Something similar can be observed for statues and monuments – no less prototypical of Nora's *lieux de mémoire* than the commemoration. Take a statue. It ordinarily stands somewhere right in the middle of the bustle of a large city where absolutely nothing reminds us of the historical personality who is honored by the statue. This contextlessness of the statue may thus bring about that the public, insofar as it is aware at all of the presence of the statue, will be inclined to subsume the statue in the context of its daily routine without there being anything in the statute itself, or in the collective memory it incorporates in stone or in bronze, that could effectively resist this. The statue is a kind of protuberance of the past in the present and where the past and the present 'meet', while having turned there back to each other, so to speak. In this sense the statue is the helpless victim of all that we can project on it with impunity. As Diderot recognized already, by its imperturbable contextlessness the statue is an object that meekly and passively adapts itself to even our most capricious desires of contextualization. 'Diderot himself had great reverence for statues', thus Banville:

'he thought of them as living somehow; strange, solitary beings, exemplary, aloof, closed on themselves and at the same time yearning in their mute and helpless way to step down in our world, to laugh or weep, know happiness and pain, to be mortal, like us. "Such beautiful statues", he wrote in a letter to his mistress Sophie Volland, "hidden in the remotest spots and distant from one another, statues which call to me, that I seek out and encounter. That arrest me and with which I have long conversations"<sup>13</sup>.

Precisely this readiness to start playing a role in our conversations and to be carried along in our preoccupations is a fact that can be ruthlessly exploited for the 'invention of tradition' and for the construction and enhancement of national identity. I mention an example. When the celebration of July 14th was introduced in France in 1880, the government decided that the schoolvacations should also begin at that very same date. It is easy to imagine that in this way a kind of conflation was effected of the prospect of being free for two months from homework and from stuffy class-rooms, on the one hand, and the freedom that had been promised by the Revolution and in terms of which the Third Republic wished to legitimate itself on the other.

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Here we will find the function that statues and commemorations may have for the constitution of a national identity or for the legitimization of a certain ideology, politics or of a specific regime – hence for the kind of thing that has so intensely been discussed since the publication of Nora's studies on the 'lieux de mémoire'<sup>14</sup>.

However, the de-contextualization by the compulsion of the round numbers observed a moment ago is not free from its ironies. Indeed, human memory is constituted by contextualization and determined by a complex and ever-changing web of associations. The anonymous author of the *Ad Herennium*, the treatise that determined Western thought about memory for almost two thousand years, was very much aware of this fundamental aspect of memory and it was here that he hoped to find the answer to the question of how to optimize the capacities of our memory. 'Constat igitur artificiosa memoria ex locis et imaginibus' (artificial memory is constructed out of places and images) – thus the author of the *Ad Herennium*<sup>15</sup>. That is to say, memory has its best and most reliable support in the association of what is to be remembered with certain spatial representations, places and other images already present in our mind. Hence, by the way, this notion of the 'lieu de mémoire'. We should realize, then, that association is the most egalitarian and anti-elitist faculty of our mind. Unlike Reason, association does not connect what has equal rank; on the contrary, association has a natural affinity with the *mésalliance*. Reason is aristocratic and class-conscious, whereas association is democratic and the leveller par excellence of all our mental faculties. Association has no respect for what we respect most and it does not hesitate to connect the sublime and the most august with the banal and the trivial. In his associations even the most narrow-minded and boring neurotic may be no less fascinating than the greatest artist or poet.

An illustrative example of this democracy of association and, hence, of memory is the assassination of Kennedy in november 1963, and the question often asked in this connection 'do you still remember where you were when you heard about the assassination of Kennedy?' The unintended consequence of this contemporary mnemotechnical link between memory and place is that a shift is effected from the object or content of memory to the place that we associate with the memory in question. We tend to become more intrigued by the fact that we were at that time at a specific place than by the remembered fact itself. Put differently, the support of the recollection may then become

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stronger than the remembered fact itself. And something similar will have taken place with those nineteenth century French schoolchildren to whom each year their liberty was restored for several months on July 14th. Certainly this will have contributed to their sympathies for the Great Revolution and for the Third Republic so emphatically presenting itself as the heir of July 14th 1789. Pavlov would not have organized it differently. But the effect aimed at by the regime produced a conflation of contexts – that of the French revolution and that of freedom from school for two months and the prospect of a vacation on the beach of Deauville or at the Bassin of Arcachon. However, this conflation of contexts could just as well work in the wrong way. And in such a case the unintended result will be that the association of July 14th with the prospect of a vacation will trivialize the Revolution and revolutionary ideology, instead of enhancing and cultivating it. The prospect of a vacation then no longer contributes to the Revolution's prestige, but reduces it to the homely level of the school-vacation. Just as in the Kennedy example the historical sublime is then infected by everyday life instead of the reverse – and it is impossible to predict whether association will lead up to the sublime or downwards to the world of everyday life.

Selfevidently this mechanism, occluding the commemorated event behind associations that are irrelevant for the commemorated event, may also be effective on a macro-scale. Once again an example. The Eiffel Tower was constructed in 1889 at the occasion of the World Exposition that was organized that year in Paris in order to celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of the French Revolution. So initially the idea was to anchor the memory of the French Revolution as deep as possible in the French mind by such an extraordinary structure as the Eiffel Tower. However, now, more than one hundred years later, few people still know what originally was the occasion for the building the tower. And in this way the extraordinary height of the tower is a striking metaphor of the extent to which the the reinforcement of a collective memory may stand supreme above the commemorated past itself.

This dialectics of memory was already recognized at the time, as becomes clear from the fact that was aware of the dilemma of 'commémorer ou célébrer', as Pascal Ory so succinctly put it<sup>16</sup>. For apart of the need to commemorate the French Revolution, there also existed, what Ory refers to as 'un volontarisme célébratif' and which made one see in the

commemoration of the Revolution little more than a welcome occasion for celebrating the triumphs of nineteenth century science and technology. In this way one would celebrate the nineteenth century rather than the French Revolution – an objection that was contested at the time with the somewhat hypocritical argument that all nineteenth century scientific progress had its roots in the French Revolution<sup>17</sup>. The question now arose how these two elements had best be balanced. And though one sincerely tried to find the *juste milieu* between ‘commémoration’ and ‘célébration’, it can not be denied that in 1889 a first step had been made into the direction of a complete contemporization of this festivity. In this way the commemoration of the Revolution degenerated into little more than a welcome occasion for a day off, some collective fun and the enticing prospect of ending this day in somebody else’s bed. July 14th now lost all capacity of breathing some new and ideological life into the memory of an important historical event such as the French Revolution. ‘Le rituel devenu routinier s’accomplit chaque année dans une ambiance touristique qui paraît apriori dépourvue depuis longtemps déjà de tout caractère partisan et militant’<sup>18</sup>. Thus Christian Amalvi in his history of the commemoration of July 14th.

## 6. COMMEMORATION AND THE WRITING OF HISTORY

In this phase of my argument it may be helpful to distinguish between two kinds of commemoration. Compare the commemoration of July 14th, as discussed a moment ago, with, for example, the commemoration of the discovery of America in 1994, or with the two hundredth anniversary of the publication of Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* in 1976. In commemorations such as those of July 14th the feeling of solidarity with some conspicuous event in the national past gradually fades away; and sometimes each attempt is even abandoned to call attention to the commemorated event. This is different with the other type of commemoration; for here the aim is to rescue something from oblivion. Here all the spotlights are focussed on the commemorated event. The difference between the two kinds of commemoration can best be expressed in terms of the notion of ‘collective memory’. In both cases collective memory is central. But whereas the kind of commemoration as exemplified by the festivities of July 14th is nourished by

what collective memory we still have of July 14th 1789, the other kind of commemoration tries to add a new item to collective memory – for example, by attempting to show that the writings by Adam Smith have most importantly contributed to the birth of the modern world and that we therefore have every reason to honour this great man at the occasion of the two hundredth anniversary of the publication of his *magnum opus* in 1776. This is also where such a commemoration differs from, for example, a conference on Adam Smith. The organizers of such a conference may be no less convinced of the importance Smith's intellectual legacy – nevertheless, they apparently do not endeavor to include Adam Smith in our collective memory. Their interest is exclusively historical.

But we may now ask ourselves, what is for all practical purposes the difference between a commemoration of Adam Smith in 1976, on the one hand, and a conference at some other time devoted to his work and influence on the other? Suppose that we have two collections of papers of which one was written for commemoration of Adam Smith in 1976 whereas the other contains the papers of a conference that took place, let's say, in 1993? Apart from the title page and the introduction there may well be no appreciable difference. Of course one might argue 1976 will have produced more books and collections on Smith than the year 1993, so the difference might well be the difference between existence and non-existence. And this is obviously no small difference. But this does not yet answer the question in what way both collections of papers may be expected to differ.

In order to deal with this question it will be helpful, once again, to recall the notion of collective memory. We owe this notion to Maurice Halbwachs who developed in the interbellum a theory on collective memory that still is the point of departure of most reflections on memory and commemoration. For Halbwachs each memory essentially is a collective memory and there are no individual memories in the strict sense of the word. His argument for this surprising claim is that we always mistakenly infer the non-collective character of memory from its complexity. Since memory is so tremendously complex, we tend to believe that the abstractum of the social collectivity cannot be the subject and content of memory – or, at least, only in a derivative sense<sup>19</sup>. Obviously, this is not a very convincing argument. For in the first place, why should there be a paralellism between the dichotomy of the collectivity versus the individual on the one hand and the dichotomy of simplicity versus



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complexity on the other? Who would wish to contest that personal memories can sometimes be quite simple, whereas collective memories may well be quite complex? And, secondly, even if we assume that there should be such a thing as collective memory, it does not follow that there could be *only* collective memory. Why shouldn't we have *both* individual and collective memories?<sup>20</sup>

But if we eliminate this extremism from Halbwach's conceptions, we will have at our disposal this most fruitful notion of collective memory. Fruitful in this notion is especially the insight that the scope of the notions of memory and of recollection should not be restricted to individual memory and that we should attribute a memory to collectivities, such as nations, social groups or professional groups as well. We should realize ourselves that memory and recollection often are social conventions, sometimes even intentionally produced - as in Hobsbawm's 'invention of tradition' - by the collectivities that we are part of. And that implies the no less surprising and fruitful insight that each individual - as the representative of a certain group - may recall or remember in the proper sense of the word a past that antedating his or her birth. Nobody will dispute that we can recall or remember statements or historical narratives about a distant past, but we would normally restrict the possibility of actually *recalling* or *remembering* the past to the events that we have witnessed ourselves during our lives. You may remember that the Bastille fell on July 14th 1789, but you cannot remember the event *itself*. There is a subtle, but nevertheless crucial difference between 'remembering' and 'remembering that'.

But in agreement with the logic of his notion of collective memory Halbwachs extends the domain of events that we effectively can 'remember' beyond our birth. He gives as an example of how he himself still had a 'collective memory' of the atmosphere of the late Romanticism of half a century before his birth<sup>21</sup>. Collective memory leads its own life, it dies off, renews itself and develops in an indefinable limbo between past and present. And where it is still alive, the past will still be with us; a direct and immediate contact with the past still is open to us. Here we may find at least part of the explanation of the intense nostalgic feelings for a sometimes quite remote part of the past that we may find in the effusions of some major representatives of the West's cultural tradition. One may think here of Petrarca's or Hölderlin's nostalgia for, respectively, Roman and Greek Antiquity, of that of Viollet-le

Duc for the Middle Ages or that of Spengler for the second half of the eighteenth century<sup>22</sup>. And in all these cases we have to do with a nostalgic remembrance of a past that one cannot have lived through personally. The nostalgic past is not yet cut off from us and from the present and may persist in the kind of individuals that have a specific sensitivity for it. Indeed, it is a remembrance of the past that we should primarily attribute to individuals and not to the collectivities that Halbwachs had in mind himself; the genesis of this kind of remembrance of the past takes place on the lines of fracture between certain collective traditions and of how the historical awareness of these individuals articulated itself. Though, indeed, in this way this individual remembrance can only come into being against the background of a collective cultural or historical past that is, in principle, shared by many.

Of importance now is how Halbwachs distinguishes between collective memory and the writing of history. We may agree with Lowenthal when he writes that our first intuition will be that memory is 'inescapable and *prima facie* indubitable', whereas historical writing is 'contingent' and gropingly tries to find its way around in the complexities of the past<sup>23</sup>. But as we know since Nietzsche and Freud, memory is, above all, what we want and wish to remember. Memory is not 'objective' – and therefore in need of correction by historical writing. In continuation with this Halbwachs sees some crucial differences between memory and historical writing. Firstly, historical writing periodizes the past in more or less closed temporal wholes, whereas memory knows of no such clear demarcations. Second, historical writing strives for clarity and synthesis, whereas memory is as multiple as there are social groups entertaining a specific relationship to the past<sup>24</sup>. Nora follows here in Halbwach's steps when claiming a straightforwardly antithetic relationship between collective memory and the writing of history. Though this may not be the purpose of the writing of history, its effect is, nevertheless, according to Nora, to correct memory as deceitful and fraudulent – and as such it is a 'délégitimation du passé vécu'<sup>25</sup>.

But this distinction between memory and historical writing goes deeper than these observations at first sight seem to suggest. For we should recall now that (collective) memory should be related not to knowledge about the past but to the past itself: for as we saw a moment ago we should strictly distinguish between 1) knowledge of the past and 2) the remembrance of the past. And the remembrance of the past is not merely an insecure and

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personalized form of pseudo-knowledge, that we should always doubt because of its uncertain foundations – the difference is, rather, that in remembrance the past itself persists in us and, therefore, still is present in ourselves. So, in the same way that we cannot say of the past itself that it is true or false – for the terms ‘true’ and ‘false’ are only applicable to what we *say* or *write* about the past – so it is with memory. It may well be that our memory may make us say true or false things about the past, but *what* we say on the basis of memory should be distinguished from *memory itself*. And the crucial distinction is, once again, that memory belongs to the world, more specifically to the *world of the past*, whereas speaking and writing, more specifically historical writing, gives us *knowledge* about the world. It therefore is a category mistake to criticize memory for its being unreliable – for this criticism applies to the world (of the past) criteria that can only meaningfully be used for *knowledge* of the world. In this way we can admire the appropriateness of Nora’s observation that historical writing achieves a ‘délégitimation du passé vécu’. There is an intrinsic opposition between history, on the one hand, and memory or ‘le passé vécu’, on the other. But we should not interpret this claim as expressing the victory of sound historical knowledge over the vagaries of memory. The claim expresses, rather, the shift from *what* we have knowledge of – indeed, ‘le passé vécu’ – to knowledge.

Here, then, may we find the difference between memory and commemoration on the one hand and historical writing on the other – or between a collection of essays on Adam Smith published in 1976 and one that is published in 1993. The aim of the 1993-collection simply is to contribute to our knowledge and understanding of Smith’s writings; the 1976-collection undoubtedly has this same aim, but, primarily, also to add a new dimension to the the past itself. A past has come into being that is richer than the one that we had before: we now carry along with us in the present the memory of Adam Smith and his *Wealth of Nations*, just as we carry along the memory of the history of our nation or of World War II. Historical writing adds to our knowledge of the past, whereas commemoration enlarges the past itself. It should be recognized, however, that in practice a clear and well-defined dividing line between the two cannot be drawn. The 1993-collection will inevitably have a commemorative dimension to it as well, whereas the 1976-collection will also attempt to provide us with new insights in Smith’s writings. All historical writing is, to a certain extent, commemorative; and all

commemoration is, to a certain extent historical writing. But this is no argument against the distinction nor against the necessity of making it. For as Ernest Nagel put it long ago, it may well be that we cannot pinpoint with absolute precision where our neck ends and our shoulder begins, but this is no argument against the meaningfulness of the distinction. It is one of our most fallacious and intellectually paralyzing beliefs that distinctions not permitting of clear dividing lines should be abandoned (a fallacy which is, by the way, the lifeblood of deconstructivism).

Lastly, we will now also understand why commemoration almost invariably goes together with a double de-contextualization that was discussed in the previous section. At first sight we might be tempted to discern in this de-contextualization a movement *against* history. For is contextualization not the hallmark and condition of all historical understanding? We historicize, we understand historically, by contextualization. Hence, the de-contextualization of commemoration appears to effect a relationship between the commemorated past, on the one hand, and ourselves, on the other, that is at odds with both the nature of all historical understanding and an openness to how the past actually has been. But this is a misunderstanding of commemoration. For recall now that this de-contextualization had no other purpose than to create a clean corner on 'the slate of our memory' – a corner where now something new could be inscribed and that would respect better the authenticity of the remembered or commemorated event than when new contents of memory mingle with contents that were already present on the slate of memory. In this way commemoration will come closer to a 'resurrection' of the past than we may ever expect from historical writing. Historical writing, by contextualizing the past, inevitably dissolves the authenticity of the past in the vagaries of its 'Wirkungsgeschichte'. There is no more appropriate way for expressing this difference between historical writing, on the one hand, and commemoration on the other than by saying that historical writing may give us an *understanding* of the past, whereas commemoration will give us the *past itself*.

## 7. CONCLUSION

In the lengthy afterword Nora wrote for the huge series on the 'lieux de

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mémoire' edited by him, he spoke of 'an acharnement commémoratif des deux ou trois dernières décennies'<sup>26</sup>. Since the first ambitious commemorations of the last few decades – that of the two hundredth anniversary of the American Revolution and that of the French Revolution thirteen years later – the stream of commemorations gradually increased and would in the last ten to fifteen years erupt in a true deluge of commemorations.

If we ask ourselves how to interpret the contemporary cult of commemoration, two closely related considerations immediately come to mind. What must strike us in the first place is that commemoration must invite a certain trivialization of the past. Traditional historical writing always sought to transcend personal or group inspired oriented conceptions of the past – though, needless to say, it was far from being successful in this attempt. Nevertheless, one always aimed at some intersubjective and timeless historical truth. Commemoration, however does not aim at historical depth and truth; it is content with its superficiality. The banal and the trivial are openly and unashamedly welcomed. In the second place, commemoration re-emphasizes the place of the historical subject. Traditional historical writing always required of the historian to be absent himself from his writings: think of Ranke's 'ich wünschte mein Selbst gleichsam aus zu löschen'. But this is wholly different with commemorations: it is *we* who commemorate something and we commemorate the past only because of what it means to *us*. Commemoration is hodiecentric.

One would have expected that this abandonment of supra-historical truth and the celebration of the historical subject would have made commemoration into the plaything of ideology and of political aims. And this expectation is by no means incorrect, as we have seen when discussing above how powerfully commemoration contributed to the 'invention of tradition'. But two considerations should be taken into account. The first is that historical writing has been no less the easy victim of ideology and political aims. Think of Michelet, think of the historians of the Prussian school such as Treitschke, Sybel or Droysen, think of Marxist historical writing. We need only recall examples such as these in order to realize ourselves the hypocrisy of those historians believing that historical writing is the self-evident censor of the irresponsible effusions of commemoration. And this brings me to a second consideration. For the truth of the matter is that ordinarily it were the historians themselves who most powerfully contributed to the politicization of

commemoration. The politicization of the past began with historical writing and from there it trickled down into commemoration. Moreover, Nora offers an amazing argument suggesting that commemoration is intrinsically a-political rather than political. He observes that commemoration is most often inspired by the preoccupation of individuals and of individual groups, whereas the state, as the incorporation of (national) politics, often is the outsider in commemoration. Of course the state also celebrates its commemorations, but as we have seen, these national commemorations tend to be overgrown by sentiments that have little or nothing to do with the occasion itself of a commemoration. They are like these statues in large cities to which everybody attaches his or her own personal associations and that ordinarily have little or nothing to do with the person or event that is honored by the statue. In this way, the commemoration exemplifies, perhaps better than anything else, what one may describe as 'the privatization of the past'<sup>27</sup>.

As Nora puts it, commemoration '*est devenu, pour chacun des groupes concernés, le fil disséminé dans le tissu social qui leur permettra, au présent à établir un court-circuit avec un passé définitivement mort*'. The national and political past is dead, and has now been replaced by the many individual relationships to the past of individuals and of individual groups. Just as traditional politics died in the dissemination, or 'displacement of politics', so did the politicized past of traditional nationalist historical writing dissolve into how individuals and individual groups like to imagine their past. In this sense the contemporary cult of commemoration testifies to this death of politics that has been observed and apprehensively discussed by so many contemporary political theorists. We can therefore agree with C.S. Maier when he writes that 'the surfeit of memory is as sign not of historical confidence but of a retreat from transformative politics'<sup>28</sup>.

This privatization of the past does also have its consequences for commemoration itself: the commemorations originating in, or stimulated by the political center will more and more lose their power over the people while the periphery will become the natural locus of all commemorative desire. And here we may find, once again, a striking illustration of Tocqueville's capacity for prophetic insight into the sociology of democracy. For precisely this he predicted already in 1839 for that other paradigmatic '*lieu de mémoire*', the statue: '*ainsi, la démocratie ne porte pas seulement à faire une multitude de menus ouvrages (i.e. of small statues [F.A.]); elle les porte aussi à élever un*

petit nombre de très grands monuments. Mais entre ces deux extrêmes, il n'y a rien<sup>29</sup>. So it has primarily been democracy, and the de-politicizing potentialities of democracy, that produced this movement away from the political center and towards the priority of the local over the national commemoration. 'L'histoire s'est prodigieusement disséminée'<sup>30</sup> as Nora puts it, and the vicissitudes of the commemoration exemplify this process.

But the strained relationship between commemoration and historical writing obeys a different logic. Crucial here is, as we have seen, that historical writing is to be associated with knowledge of the past and commemoration rather than with the past itself. By its very nature knowledge of the past is a more helpless and vulnerable victim of politicization than past reality itself. Political ideologies are themselves already partly organizations of knowledge of the past and can therefore more easily be infected by ideology than the past itself. Reality itself is supremely indifferent to what we may, or may not write about it, whether inspired by political ideologies or not. Surely, there is a political dimension to what parts or aspects of the past we will be interested in – and this is why commemoration also could play its role in the 'invention of tradition' and in the formation of national identity. But even here it followed historical writing rather than guiding it. So if Nora is right when claiming that 'le modèle mémorial l'a emporté sur le modèle historique'<sup>31</sup> we can observe in this a partial victory of the past itself over historical writing.

## NOTAS:

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<sup>1</sup> P. Winch, *The idea of a social science*, London 1958; Wittgenstein's notion of the language game was Winch's main source of inspiration. The same idea was expressed already some twenty years before in the Sapir-Whorf thesis.

<sup>2</sup> E.W. Hobsbawm, The historian between the quest for the universal and the quest for identity, *Diogenes* 168 (1994); 51 – 64; A. Megill, History, memory, identity, *History of the human sciences* 11 (1998); 37 – 62.

<sup>3</sup> F. Nietzsche, *Vom Nutzen und Nachtheil der Historie für das Leben*, Stuttgart 1970 (Reclam); 41.

<sup>4</sup> But only temporarily. For as Collingwood insists the re-lived will always remain

'encapsulated' within the historian's thought. So re-enactment and the temporary dissolution of the distance between the historian and his object always, and necessarily takes place in the historian's present.

<sup>5</sup> J. Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution Française. Vol. 1*, Paris 1952; 419

<sup>6</sup> Michelet, *op. cit.*; 414.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in C. Amalvi, 'Le 14 juillet', in P. Nora ed., *Les lieux de mémoire. Vol. I: La République*, Paris 1984; 426.

<sup>8</sup> L. Gossman, *Between history and literature*, Cambridge (Ma) 1990.

<sup>9</sup> S. Freud, Totem und Tabu, in id., *Studienausgabe Band IX. Fragen der Gesellschaft, Ursprünge der Religion*, Frankfurt am Main 1982; 426.

<sup>10</sup> P. Nora, Entre mémoire et histoire, in id. éd., *Les Lieux de mémoire. Vol. 1: La République*, Paris 1984; xiv.

<sup>11</sup> J. Le Goff, Passé et présent de la mémoire, in P. den Boer and W. Frijhoff eds., *Lieux de mémoire et identités nationales*, Amsterdam 1993; 35.

<sup>12</sup> D. Lowenthal, *The past is a foreign country*, Cambridge 1985; 195.

<sup>13</sup> J. Banville, *Ghosts*, London 1993; 196, 197.

<sup>14</sup> See for example J.R. Gillis ed., *Commemorations: the politics of national identity*, Princeton 1994.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in F. Yates, *The art of memory*, Aylesbury 1966; 22.

<sup>16</sup> P. Ory, Le centenaire de la Révolution Française, in P. Nora éd., *Les lieux de mémoire. Vol. I: La République*, Paris 1984; 546 ff.

<sup>17</sup> Apparently one had forgotten the words pronounced by the public prosecutor Fouquier-Tinville when Lavoisier, the discoverer of the process of combustion, was condemned to the guillotine: 'la Révolution n'a pas besoin de savants!'

<sup>18</sup> C. Amalvi, Le 14 juillet, in P. Nora éd., *Les lieux de mémoire. Vol. I: La République*, Paris 1984; 466.

<sup>19</sup> M. Halbwachs, *Het collectieve geheugen*, Leuven 1991; 13 ff.

<sup>20</sup> Halbwachs weakens his claim when speaking of the paradox that we recall with the greatest difficulty what, as memory, is our most personal (and hence not collectively shared) possession. When saying this he seems to recognize the possibility of an exclusively personal memory. See Halbwachs, *Collectieve geheugen*; 14. A problem is that Halbwachs does not distinguish between 1) the content of a memory and 2) memory



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as the state of consciousness of a certain subject. For example, it may well be that A and B both remember that Kennedy was assassinated in 1963 – and from this perspective their memories are identical – but from the other perspective the memory of A can always be distinguished from that of B. We cannot remember the memories of other persons even if the memories of other persons are, qua content, exactly the same as our own. See for an analogous argument Lowenthal, *Past*, 195.

<sup>21</sup> Halbwachs, *Collective memory*, 22.

<sup>22</sup> See for this the last chapter of my *History and topography*, Berkeley 1994.

<sup>23</sup> Lowenthal, *Past*, 187.

<sup>24</sup> Halbwachs, *Collective memory*, 31 ff.

<sup>25</sup> Nora, *Entre mémoire et histoire*, six ff.

<sup>26</sup> 'P. Nora, L'ère de la commémoration', in id. éd., *Les Lieux de mémoire. Vol. III: Les France. 3: De l'archive à l'emblème*, Paris 1992; 983. For further details on the contemporary cult of commemoration, see also W.J. Johnston, *Postmodernisme et millénaire: le culte des anniversaires dans la culture contemporaine*, Paris 1992.

<sup>27</sup> For this privatization of the past, see my 'Die postmoderne "Privatisierung" der Vergangenheit', in H. Nagl-Docekal Hrsgb., *Der Sinn des Historischen. Geschichtsphilosophische Debatten*, Frankfurt am Main 1996; 201 – 235.

<sup>28</sup> C.S. Maier, A surfeit of memory, *History and Memory. Studies in the representation of the past* 5 (1993); 150. Maier also sees an intimate relationship between the contemporary interest for memory and the loss of projects that are supported by all of society: 'why, to return to the question that motivated this discussion of public commemoration, does memory now seem to play a larger role in political and civic life? My own belief is that at the end of the twentieth century Western societies have come to an end of a massive collective project' (p. 147).

<sup>29</sup> A. de Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique. Vol. II*, Paris 1981; 69. And because of its aristocratic past Europe possesses far more monuments than the US, as is amusingly observed by Donald Barthelme: 'every tacky little fourth-rate déclassé European country has monuments all over the place and one cannot turn a corner without banging into an eighteen-foot bronze of Lebrouche tickling the Chambermaids at Vache while planning the Battle of Bledsoe, or some such'. Quoted in Lowenthal, *Past*, 322.

<sup>30</sup> Nora, 'L'ère de la commémoration'; 1011.

<sup>31</sup> Nora, 'L'ère de la commémoration'; 988.

F. R. ANKERSMIT

**RESUMO:** Vivemos em uma era de comemorações. Comemoração exprime ou exemplifica o sentimento que possuímos, ou que se supõe que devamos ter, acerca de um evento do passado, e cuja origem está em nós e não no passado em si mesmo. Comemoração se apresenta a nós em um tríptico semântico: a rememoração a si mesmo, a rememoração de alguma coisa e a comemoração, situada entre as duas formas de rememoração. O repensar, o reviver como formas de comemoração, suas origens no campo da religião, sua descontextualização, os processos de sua privatização e de sua apropriação pela autoridade, assim como sua contraposição à análise historiográfica levam a refletir sobre a (pseudo)oposição entre memória e história.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVES:** comemoração, memória, história, historiografia