

# Personal trajectories, collective memories: Remembering and the life-course

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## **Abstract**

How do we understand the broad history to which we belong? What meaning do we give to it and what role does it have in our lives? This paper proposes to approach collective memory from the perspective of the subject, adopting a developmental perspective to explore how people build specific relations and representations of the historical past. Building on the literature on collective remembering and on life-course studies, it conceptualises memory as oriented, culturally mediated and dialogical action with a developmental history, embodied in 'trajectories of remembering'. This conception is applied to the life trajectory of Alain, a 44-year-old Belgian journalist, with a particular interest in the social and intersubjective dimensions of collective remembering. From this analysis, it will be concluded that people's relation to history is the product of the different positions they assume through time. The study of these successive experiences and their integration can thus shed new lights on how we relate to history and give it meaning.

## **Keywords**

Collective memory, life-course, life positioning analysis, remembering, social act theory

## **Introduction**

When Milgram (1974) designed his famous experiment on obedience to authority, he clearly had in mind the events of Second World War. He was trying to understand how such atrocities happened, and his research led him to the conclusion that

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it was not the 'nature' of the German people at the time that made them possible, but the authoritarian aspects of the regime they were living in. His theory has since been much criticised, with for instance Reicher's (Reicher, Haslam, & Rath, 2008) study showing how the ambient discourses led people to believe they were acting for the greater good, and not just under the pressure of authority. However, the same assumption underlies both studies: if we can learn from what happened in history, maybe we can make sure it will not be repeated in the future. Or, in the words of common sense: 'those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it'. Nonetheless, research on the memory of the collective past has tended to show that we actually do the contrary: we use references to history to defend identity projects, we are quite insensitive to facts, we tend to reduce it to a single-minded story where what matters are the intentions of the actors and we often use it to make our differences with others 'essential' to who we are (Raudsepp & Wagner, 2012; Wertsch & Batiashvili, 2012). How to understand, then, the discrepancy between these uses of collective memory?

So far, collective memory has mainly been explored through a social or sociological lens, focusing on the role of culture and society in shaping what we say about our collective past. By doing so, it has proved a useful tool to study how groups remember and mobilise the past, especially in times of conflict (e.g., Wertsch & Batiashvili, 2012) or when their identity becomes problematic or threatened (e.g., Hammack, 2010). It has, however, also painted a biased picture of how we relate to history, as it has primarily focused on how it is mobilised by societies facing a troubling past or a troubling present (de Saint-Laurent, 2017). Little attention has been given to the person who remembers and how unique understandings of history are forged. Adding such a psychological perspective to the study of collective memory could help us understand how some accounts of the past may be one-sided and encourage conflict while others may foster reflection and open up new possibilities for the future. In this paper, I propose to adopt such a perspective, looking at the developmental trajectory of our relations to history. In a first section, I will draft what may be gained from this approach and summarise previous studies' findings. Based on these, I will propose to investigate further the role of interactions with significant others through a Life Positioning Analysis (LPA; Martin, 2013). In a second section, I will apply this method to the life story of Alain, a 44-year-old journalist in Belgium. This will lead me to conclude that collective memory is produced by different yet complementary social positions that may be experienced through the life-course, and it is by giving them meaning and integrating them in unique ways that relations to history are forged. The aim of this paper is therefore to propose a new perspective on collective memory, centred on the person as she moves through life and society, and to illustrate it with a case study.

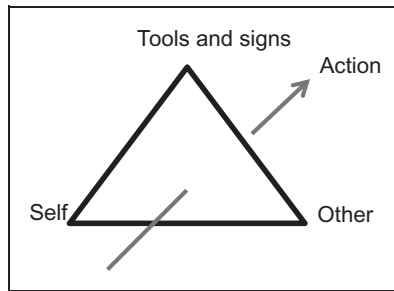
## **Collective remembering**

How can we adopt a psychological perspective on collective memory, focusing on the person who remembers, and yet not lose sight of the important social and

cultural aspects highlighted in the literature? One way to do this is to adopt a sociocultural and developmental perspective, as it has been done in life-course studies (Zittoun, 2012). On the one hand, looking at the development of a psychological function is a highly efficient way to reintroduce the individual in psychology (Zittoun, 2006). On the other hand, sociocultural approaches to psychology have placed culture and social interactions at the centre of human development (Valsiner, 1987). I thus propose to investigate people's *trajectories of remembering* and how they may forge their (unique) discourses on the historical past. To do so, I will first summarise the main findings of sociocultural approaches to memory, and especially collective memory, to then introduce what a life-course perspective entails and an integrative model.

The main contribution of sociocultural psychology to the study of collective memory has been to conceptualise it as an action – *collective remembering* – rather than as a static and more or less accurate representation of what happened (Wertsch, 2002). Indeed, most of the mainstream literature on collective memory has focused on how the past is 'stored' in the mind to be later retrieved (Danziger, 2008), modelling memory as an archive (Brockmeier, 2010) where souvenirs remain unchanged except by the deteriorating power of time. Sociocultural approaches, on the contrary, have proposed to understand collective memory as a reconstruction of the past, following the pioneer work of Frederic Bartlett (1995). In fact, Bartlett's most important insight was to focus on the adaptive nature of memory rather than on its fallibility. He theorised its main function as oriented towards the present – it allows us to adapt past action to the present situation – making accurate reproductions of the past irrelevant in everyday life (but see Brown & Reavey, 2017, for an interesting discussion of this idea).

Sociocultural approaches have also investigated the role of cultural tools in constructing accounts of past. In particular, they have explored the prominent role of cultural narratives in shaping discourses on history (e.g. Brescó de Luna, 2009; Brockmeier, 2002; Liu & Hilton, 2005; Wertsch, 2008). Wertsch, for instance, conceptualised collective memory as an action mediated by the use of cultural tools, which include official text and stories told about history as well as narrative templates that illustrate how stories are to be told in a specific cultural context (Wertsch, 2002, 2008). This model stemmed from the works of Lev Vygotsky, who posited that all human activities are mediated by the use of cultural tools and/or signs (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky also argued that they exist in a triangular relation including self and others, through which such tools and signs come to be mastered (Vygotsky & Luria, 1994). Human cognition, thus, is dialogical in nature (Fernyhough, 2008), that is, it is fundamentally oriented towards the other (Linell, 2009). Some sociocultural approaches to collective memory have thus focused on the dialogical aspects of memory, looking at how stories told about the past are deeply related to what others say about history (de Saint-Laurent, 2014). The sociocultural approach to collective memory is summarised in Figure 1, which presents this phenomenon as a dialogical, culturally mediated and oriented action.



**Figure 1.** Collective memory as oriented, culturally mediated and dialogical action

The above model offers an interesting entry into the processes by which the past is reconstructed, from a psychological perspective. It does, however, present memory as an ‘amnesic’ phenomenon, where the person who remembers is interchangeable with any other because she is deprived of the past that makes her who she is. In other words, by presenting memory as an atemporal function, it disconnects it from the subject who does the remembering.

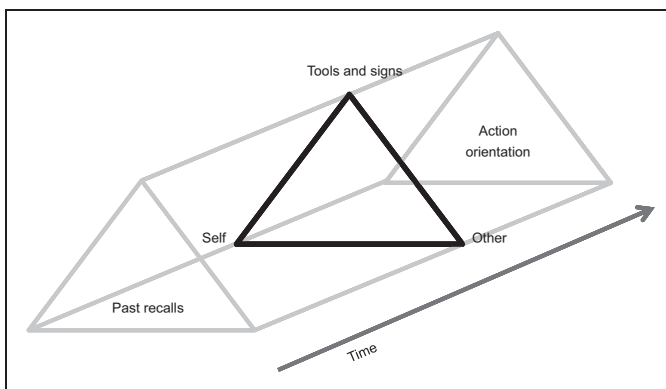
## Trajectories of remembering

In order to put the psychological subject back at the centre of memory processes, and yet not lose sight of their social and cultural dimensions, I propose to adopt a sociocultural developmental perspective on collective remembering (see also de Saint-Laurent, *in press*; de Saint-Laurent & Zittoun, *in press*). Such a perspective recognises that human life takes place in irreversible time (Valsiner, 1994), creating unique trajectories (Zittoun et al., 2013) that can account for how we relate to the world and give it meaning (Zittoun, 2006, 2008, 2012). Across the course of our life, we become familiarised with different values and systems of meanings or draw generalisations from our experiences. These may be internalised – although they are often resisted too – and given a personal meaning through life experiences (for an example, see de Saint-Laurent, *in press*).

New meanings and values are more likely to emerge in times of rupture and transitions, when ‘the obvious suddenly comes into question’ (Zittoun, 2006, p. 6) and they are thus the privileged ‘unit of analysis for studying psychological change’ (Zittoun, 2006, p. 2). In this context, culturally shared elements such as stories or systems of values can become symbolic resources to make sense of the situation at hand (Zittoun, 2006; Zittoun, Duveen, Gillespie, Iverson, & Psaltis, 2003). If new meanings are produced, the rupture may in turn lead to transitions, characterised by intransitive qualitative changes (Zittoun, 2012). Ruptures are subjectively experienced by the person, although they are often associated with socially marked events (entering school, starting to work, marriages, divorces, etc.).

Thus, the notion of trajectories used in this paper does not refer to the objective track outlined by socially recognised milestones (e.g., graduating from school, getting married, retiring) or periods of life (e.g., adolescence, adulthood), but to the subjective path constructed by the interaction between the discourses of the self and the unfolding course of one's life (de Saint-Laurent, in press). As such, a trajectory is not static – new ruptures always have the potential to lead to the re-evaluation of the significance of this or that event – but is, in a given context, the most meaningful way to explain where one stands today. Transitions and the ruptures that provoke them can be more or less general (Zittoun, 2006): they can concern central aspects of one's life (starting a new job, losing a partner, becoming a parent. . .) or be quite peripheral (developing a new hobby, changing one's understanding of an event by learning new facts, breaking a friendship. . .). Clearly, one's relation to history falls, most of the time, in the second category. However, what 'counts' as peripheral or central will depend on the person and her circumstances: changing jobs, for someone who does not care much about this aspect of their life, might be less important than discovering new information about the wrongdoings of one's family during Second World War, for instance.

Is it possible, then, to consider discourses on history as the product of a developmental trajectory, as forged through the ruptures and transitions one experiences in life? What would be the consequences of such an approach? A proposition of a model is presented in Figure 2 (see also de Saint-Laurent & Zittoun, in press, for a full presentation), and it tries to bring together the literature on collective remembering and life-course studies. It conceptualises collective memory as an oriented action done in interaction with others and mediated by cultural resources, with both a developmental history for the person who remembers (past recalls) and a specific location in her life-course (place of the central triangle in irreversible time).



**Figure 2.** Collective memory as a developmental process with socially located self, in interaction with a socially located other, using cultural resources (adapted from de Saint-Laurent & Zittoun, in press).

Understanding discourses on history, then, entails understanding how they transform over time (developing from the ‘past recalls’ triangle) and what they subsequently allow the person to do (the ‘action orientation’ triangle), that is, the person’s *trajectory of remembering*. These are best studied, as life-course studies have shown, by focusing on the ruptures and transitions in one’s relation to the past. However, this model does not just extend in time but also across social and cultural dimensions. Thus, changes in these dimensions should be given particular attention, for example, new interlocutors, access to novel information, development of alternative social positions for the self, mastery of different narrative frames, emergence of new concepts and understandings of history, etc.

This model has been applied in previous – albeit limited – research (de Saint-Laurent, in press; de Saint-Laurent & Zittoun, in press; see also Bauer & Gaskell, 1999 for the original Toblerone model). This research has highlighted the need to unpack further one important dimension of the model: the relation self-other and its evolution over time. The importance of this dimension is double. First, from a sociocultural and developmental perspective, and to paraphrase Vygotsky, the path from the self to the tools and signs one uses passes through the other (Vygotsky & Luria, 1994). In other words, the resources one uses to talk about history – from the historical facts presented to the narrative frames used to organise and interpret them – are first introduced by others and used with others. Thus, studying the relationships through which people have discovered history offers the possibility to understand which resources, information, values and representations are available to them and what importance they may give to them. Second, from a collective memory perspective, and as has been seen above in this paper, it is important to understand to which social groups people belong. However, group memberships are multiple, subjective, dynamic and historical (Gillespie, Howarth, & Cornish, 2012), and a single categorisation is both impossible and unable to shed light on people’s specific relations to the past. Focusing on how people socially position themselves vis-à-vis others, throughout the life-course, allows us to account for the fact that group memberships evolve through time, are always multiple, and to study how these are navigated to create unique yet coherent understandings of the historical past. Indeed, if we use culturally constrained narrative frames and defend socially sanctioned versions of the past, alternatives are always available (de Saint-Laurent, 2014), both within and between groups. A life-course perspective on the self-other relations through which historical representations are forged may thus shed new lights on how collective memory can at times produce extremely reflexive accounts of the past and in others by the justification for violent conflicts and nationalisms.

This is what I propose to do in this paper, with the means of LPA (Martin, 2013). It stems from Position Exchange Theory (Gillespie & Martin, 2014; Martin, 2013), a theory that considers both the ontogenetic and phylogenetic development of self and intersubjective action to be made possible by position exchange – actual or symbolic – and the integration of positions. For instance, it is by successively experiencing being taken care of (by one’s parents) and taking care of (symbolically

by playing with dolls), that children learn to take the perspective of their parents, albeit in a limited manner at first, and to look at themselves from this perspective. It is also through the integration of these positions that ‘caring’ becomes a significant symbol (Gillespie, 2005, 2006), integration that will continue throughout the life-course (for instance, when one experiences becoming a parent). LPA thus focuses on the different social positions one comes to occupy in life, their evolutions and the relations between them. Because social positions are relational, they capture quite well the dynamic between self and other, and because LPA is interested in their evolution across time, it fits well with a life-course approach.

By using LPA to investigate people’s *trajectories of remembering*, my aim is to answer the following questions: (1) what are the different positions one comes to assume in front of collective memory; (2) how do these relate to the positions of others and (3) in what way can their evolution in time shed light on how the person understands the past?

## Data and method

In order to explore people’s relation to history, nine interviews were conducted in Belgium and in Switzerland in February and March 2014 and June 2015. Participants were recruited around a theatre play (spectators and production team) on the Israel-Palestine conflict by Adeline Rosenstein (2014). The play presents a unique, historical and polyphonic perspective on the conflict and thus is of double interest for this research. First, this was an opportunity to recruit participants who were interested in the topic, comfortable talking about it (likely to be made more knowledgeable on historical issues by participating in these kinds of events) and had had experienced changes in their relation to history (at the very least because the play in itself had the potential to cause a (micro)rupture in people’s understanding of history). Second, the complex yet critical nature of the play landed itself to multiple interpretations and thus could be used to investigate how different people gave it different meanings. Most of the participants were members of the audience (seven), and the rest were part of the team around the play.

Each interview lasted between approximately 45 and 90 minutes, and the questions were open ended. Their aim was to explore the participants’ relation to history and its development over time. In practice, it means that participants were asked which historical events were important to them, how they had become so, what resources they used to understand these events, with whom they talked about history, and any changes they may have experienced because of this. They were also asked how they thought history should be taught to children in practice – in an attempt to encourage overly general or ambivalent participants to position themselves – and what was for them the ‘direction’ of history, if any – to push, on the contrary, overly particular interviewees to produce generalisations. Follow-up questions were guided by the theoretical model (especially when asking about past recall, potential tools and interlocutors) or by my own desire to obtain

more information about the events to which the participants were referring.<sup>1</sup> This meant, on a few occasions, venturing quite far from the topic at hand, particularly when the participants' relation to history seemed linked to other aspects of their lives (e.g., a broader vision of politics, religious beliefs.). The interviews were all conducted in French, which was the mother tongue of most of the participants, and in 'relaxed' settings (café, participant's garden, etc.), except for one interview conducted through Skype.

The interviews did not follow a chronological order – going from the participant's first relation to history and then moving all the way to the present – because it was assumed that most people would not have any experience in narrating such a trajectory. The questions were simply organised to facilitate the task of the interviewee. I then used a narrative and trajectory analysis (Rosenthal, 1993): the interviews were divided in sections corresponding to different periods of life and then re-ordered chronologically to create a 'reconstructed' trajectory. After this, a LPA (Martin, 2013), adapted to the model presented in Figure 2, was carried out. It focused, for each period, on (1) the ruptures experienced, (2) the positions adopted, (3) the interactions with others, (4) the resources used, (5) the outcomes of the transition and (6) the broader qualitative changes to which these may have led. In the following, I will present one example of a trajectory with the case study of Alain.<sup>2</sup> He was chosen because his trajectory is both complex – and thus it illustrates dynamics found in many separate interviews – and he is very explicit about his relation to history, making of him an exemplary case.

### **Case study: Alain**

Alain is a 44-year-old journalist, who was born and grew up in Belgium. He comes from a family with very limited education – his parents did not finish school – where people do not talk about history. As an adolescent, he is sent to a strict catholic school, known for the high level of its students and the difficulty of its examinations. And he explains, after I ask him how it was: I remember an especially scary history exam. I would say it was more, well, encyclopaedic. It was not polemical at all. Well, it was in a way because ignoring polemical aspects of the debate is polemical.

Here, Alain is put in the position of an ignorant learner, who has to repeat the 'truth' told by the knowledgeable professor. History does not have a personal meaning, but it is the factual, cold past found in encyclopaedias and needs to be learnt by heart. However, a first rupture occurs when he turns 18 and starts university. Indeed, when I ask him what changed his relation to history after adolescence, he replies:

I started university in 1989...<sup>3</sup> So it was the fall of the wall, you see... When you enter university, in political science in 1989, you find yourself, well, in one of the richest intellectual period... And a positive one. I mean you were not born... in 1940, you see... It's quite the opposite... So yes, it was a turning point. Because all my

childhood had been cradled by the Soviet Union... by the cold war, by the iron curtain, by these countries that we watch from the afar and look retrograde and scary and threatening... I am actually the opposite of my father, if you want, or my parents' generation. I mean, me, my dad did his military service in Cold War Germany... in 1963... when the Cold War was getting really strong... And me, I become of age and I don't do a military service... because I was in the first generation in Belgium... liberated from it. So conversely to my dad... well, the historical paradigm changed. I mean, you are 18, at university watching the wall fall and my dad... I mean he is 18, in his uniform, watching the wall.

The fall of the Berlin wall and wider societal changes it led to act here as a trigger, as the rupture from the previous period 'cradled by the Soviet Union'. By using the stories his father told him as a resource, as a point of comparison, he makes both of them enter history. Indeed, until then his father's past was just a story (as Alain said clearly in the interview, his parents did not talk to him about history as a child, and yet he knows this part of his father's life), but it is the stark contrast between the two men that gives the moment a historical dimension. Or, as Alain powerfully says: 'you are 18, at university watching the wall fall and my dad... I mean he is 18, in his uniform, watching the wall'. He experiences a new position: he is a witness of history as it unfolds, in front of a father who was oppressed by it. The result of this transition is that Alain starts travelling around eastern Europe: he decides to go discover these countries on the other side of the iron curtain and goes to witness their historical change. And he says:

It went all so fast. And all of the sudden we all wanted to go there... So I took Russian classes... and I went to the Baltic States in 94... and Romania in 1995. And it was terrifying... the poverty... And people at the time, I remember a young guy in the mountains who was saying: you in Europe you're not doing a thing for us and all, and I said wait, one day you'll be part of the EU and he said no, it's not possible. And I'm very happy now they are part of it. So I was right.  
... And people were starting to talk a lot about the communist years and all... and make jokes about it... I don't remember a specific one, but I remember people were doing it a lot at the table.

We can see in this excerpt the prolongation of the change started in 1989, where Alain positions himself as a witness of history. However, several differences can be noted here. If his father disappears from the story, new protagonists emerge. In the background, we can guess the presence of Alain's university colleagues ('we all wanted to go there'). He also starts interacting with people during his travels, who tell him stories about their version of history, the 'communist years'. However, these voices can be interpreted more as resources to understand a past he did not experience than full interlocutors with whom the past is debated: he remembers them talking and joking about history, but mainly among themselves. This interpretation is also based on the way Alain positions himself in the excerpt:

as a privileged witness of post-communist history. And, in this sense, the populations he interacts with are closer to the position of his father than to his, as they are considered oppressed by history. His position of 'privileged witness' is especially salient when he talks about meeting a young Romanian in the mountains: he sees so much what is going on that he can accurately 'predict' what will happen next more than the locals themselves.

When I ask him what changed next, he replies:

There is no real turning point [after that]... but maybe it was when I discovered Edward Said when I was... a student in Cambridge... We were very much on orientalism, on questions about inventions, imagination... for political usages. Maybe it was stronger in the UK than here [in Belgium]... And, evidently... when you are interested in this post-soviet universe... you have all of history to rewrite, because it was essentially a propaganda regime... For academics like us, everything was to be re-discovered... And Edward Said is a guy that really helped me in that.

Although Alain starts this excerpt by denying that there was any turning point after the rupture that 1989 was, what he says just after clearly shows that a change did occur here. Discovering Edward Said – and, he later says, Foucault – may not indeed be a rupture, but actually a new resource to help him make sense of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the events that followed it. This new resource, in the form of historical concepts ('orientalism' and, although he does not specify it, probably Foucault's genealogism) seems to provoke two major changes from the previous period. First, Alain realises that history is something that is written by people with specific political agendas and thus that it can be re-written, for instance, by people like him. Second, it turns history into something that is debatable with others ('we were very much on Orientalism...') in particular intellectual contexts ('maybe it was stronger in the UK than here'). Interestingly, the position Alain gives himself ('academics like us') is actually an anticipation of what comes next (he did not become an academic until after Cambridge). It may, however, reflect how this perspective was made possible by what he experienced there. When he, later on, does start his academic career, he explains:

What interested me at the time was to see how universities bore responsibilities in... the creation of conflicts, in the development of nationalist ideas... as was the case in Caucasus...

[So] then I travelled. I went to universities, I went to the American University in Beirut... to see for instance... how their stories, you see for instance the Maronites saying that they are not Arabs but Phoenicians... There is always this historical reflex... a bit everywhere. And I mean it's typically a very academic construction... to say yes but us we are not like the others... You see the others, there, the Shiites and all, it's not us... Us, we are Lebanese because we are the heirs of the Phoenicians... and we have an ancestral history behind us, so all of the sudden we are worth much more than others.

Alain's professional transition seems to have brought quite a few changes. If he keeps interacting with fellow academics, it is not anymore as debate partners, but as these others who write history in dangerous ways. He later insists on how these are bad academics, from bad universities, and that not all are like that. It may be an attempt to further distance himself from them, but might also be an effort to show to me, the academic who is interviewing him, that he does not paint all of us with the same brush. To develop his position of 'good' academic, analysing how others produce (dangerous) historical discourses, Alain uses two different types of the resources. First, he uses generalisations and concepts (and describes the situation in Lebanon as 'typical', as something that is 'always' like that 'everywhere'), similar to what he did in the previous period with Said and Foucault. Second, he travels and goes to discuss with locals, as he did after the fall of the Berlin wall. Thus, it seems that in his academic career, Alain managed to integrate the resources and the positions he developed during previous periods of his life: he is both the intellectual capable of historical critic, thanks to the concepts he has come to master, and the privileged witness, who travels to go experience history first hand.

Alain does not report much change in his position in the years that follow. He leaves academia and becomes UN consultant on the crisis he studied in his PhD, when he worked on historical nomadism as a justification for deportation in a specific conflict.<sup>4</sup> After a few years, he changes careers again, and he is now a journalist specialised on the same topic. However, his perspective on history did not change and becoming a journalist can be seen as the 'final' integration of his two positions: a reporter, between witness and analyst. And, when I ask him what were his thoughts on the theatre play he saw before I recruited him to participate in this research, he says:

I think that in terms of ideas we are on the same page. . . I was happy to meet people who echo in some ways. . . things that are close to what we do and well, in an other area of the world, but where I see they reflect on sedentarism, on indigenosity, on roots and well, on deportations as well.

When asked what they thought of the play or what they saw in it, no other participants referred to these dimensions (this includes more than the nine interviewees of this specific project, as the play became part of a broader project, 'Le Théâtre de la Connaissance', a year after this research was conducted). What Alain saw in the complex and multivocal theatre production, then, appears to be the result of his own, personal relation to history, forged through the different ruptures and transitions he experienced. And although not all participants gave the play such a unique meaning, others who like him developed a rather strong conception of history tended, too, to understand the play as defending a view similar to theirs, or at least to present the Israel-Palestine conflict as illustrating their views (see, for instance, de Saint-Laurent, in press, where a participant adopting a rather communist perspective presents the situation as linked to capitalist issues).

## Discussion

By reconstructing Alain's trajectory, we have seen him move through a series of different positions: the passive recipient of history, the witness and then privileged witness, the intellectual re-writing history, the critical scholar and finally the reporter. Each position was enriched by the previous ones but also gave Alain a unique perspective on history. Not only did he integrate, in the end, several perspectives, but his final position may also be seen as a reflection of where he started: who is the audience he is seeking by being a journalist, if not the ignorant recipient of history, like he used to be as a child? His trajectory, then, is not a linear progression, a perpetual replacement of a perspective by a new one, but the expansion, along social dimensions, of his understanding of how the past is built. The positions he consecutively takes are also dependent on how others place themselves and interact with him: to be the passive recipient of history, there needs to be someone transmitting said history; to be a witness, there needs to be both actors to observe and a future audience to whom one can testify; to be an intellectual re-writing history, someone must have badly written it before; to be a critical scholar, a scientific community to challenge must exist and, finally, to be a reporter requires both someone to do something worth reporting and having someone to whom it can be reported. The developmental trajectory of collective remembering, then, can be interpreted as the successive discovery and experience of the multiple positions that make talking about history possible.

What characterises Alain's relation to history is not so much the social groups to which he belongs at a given moment in time, but how he resolves (or not) the tensions between the different versions of history that are proposed to him by these groups. This trend can be found throughout the data, and not only in the case of Alain. Most participants (seven out of nine) reported being faced with contradictions in the way they learnt history (often between school and home, but also between family and friends, between different family members, or because they were told new stories as they grew older), and all proposed 'composite' accounts of history, borrowing from the different social groups they have been acquainted with throughout their life. At times, it is done through a very conscious and reflexive process, where participants explain having actively sought new meanings after experiencing a rupture. At others, larger societal circumstances seem to constrain very much what can be said or not. Similarly, some participants resolve the tensions and contradictions they are subjected to by creating new meanings for history (as Alain with 'nomadism'), while others seek answers in existing ideologies (see de Saint-Laurent, *in press*, for an example with communism).

Going back to the model proposed at the beginning of this paper (Figure 2), we can say that different positions offer different tools and afford different interpretations of the past. For instance, when positioned as an academic, Alain adopts a very critical reading of history based on concepts developed by preminent intellectual figures, and it is only later that he becomes wary about the 'bad academics' who rewrite history – an interpretation of the past less directly afforded by the

situation. It thus seems that the tools available to the person and the others with whom one interacts both open up new possibilities to think about the past and constrain them – opening the central triangle in the figure and yet delimitating it. Through time, however, people discover new resources and explore multiple positions, allowing them to go beyond the constraints of the present situation (or, at times, increasing them further). What may produce reflexive accounts of the historical past, then, in opposition to nationalistic ones, is the exposition to both alternative versions of history and to resources allowing one to make sense of the contradiction. In other words, opening new horizons (expanding the symbolic space of the triangle in the figure) is productive insofar as one disposes of resources that can frame the problem and give meaning to the situation.

Of course, the research presented here is limited, not only because it is based on nine interviews but also because of the type of participants involved: mainly intellectuals and artists with a specific interest in history (at least enough to go see a theatre play on the topic). If this facilitated the study of how new positions may be taken – most participants had travelled extensively, lived abroad at one point, changed careers multiple times or experienced a high social mobility – it did so within a very particular population. It may, thus, reflect dynamics that are specific to them. However, self-other relations and position exchange are fundamental psychosocial processes no matter what population is studied. But, if we have seen here how Alain adopted different positions, two central questions remain: how are certain positions blocked and rejected, for we do not always welcome the perspective of others? And how are these experiences of alterity mobilised to produce new understandings of the past? Answering these questions, with the help of a microgenetic method, will be the main purpose of the study following this research (de Saint-Laurent, in preparation).

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this paper has been to propose a sociocultural and developmental model of collective memory and to apply it on a case study, with a specific focus on the role of self-other relations. I hope to have demonstrated, with the analysis of the trajectory of Alain, that such an approach can shed new lights on how history is understood by people, in part because of the complex relation between self and others in collective memory. This approach does not only have analytical consequences, however. From a theoretical perspective, it involves a shift from theories focused on explaining how the image of the group is defended through biased versions of the past – borrowing from research on stereotypes, intergroup relations, social identity, etc. – to theories interested in social thinking, meaning making and perspective taking (de Saint-Laurent, submitted). At a deeper level, it means moving away from theories that treat people as the passive recipients of representations imposed by the social group to which they belong, and going towards theories able to grasp how people navigate complex social environments and assume multiple identities that forge how they think

about the world. The challenge, then, is to propose a model of collective memory that accounts for both what is shared and what is unique in the person's relation to the past, and how collective dynamics and personal understandings co-constitute each other.

From a methodological perspective, the consequences are double. First, it highlights the necessity to develop methods focusing on processes and interactions – that is looking at how the person and her context evolve through time – instead of content – that is mapping out what is said about the past and not so much how these discourses are constructed. Second, it requires studying people and how they conceive the world, instead of events and how they are perceived, as is usually done in collective memory research. Although being able to grasp the public discourses surrounding an event is a very interesting and relevant endeavour, the study of collective memory cannot be limited to it.

Finally, this has important practical consequences. To go back to the original question of this paper, how to understand both extremely reflexive and extremely nationalist accounts of history? If I believe that the analysis of the case of Alain offers hints as to what the answer may be – that it depends on both the sociocultural conditions of the person and the meaning she gives to them – the real issue here is how we may encourage people to be more reflexive about history and to resist the temptation to write a glorified 'national novel' (to borrow an expression favoured by French politicians who wish to impose such a version of the past). Conceiving collective memory as a representation more or less imposed by the group means that not only reflexivity is impossible – or limited to a very small intellectual elite of which the research is often presented as being a member – but that the only form of education possible is at best rote learning, at worst propaganda. In the end, then, understanding how collective memory transforms through time and how people resist hegemonic representations of the past is as much a societal as it is a theoretical challenge.

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## Notes

1. The level of details voluntarily given by participants varied widely, not least because of the perceived nationality difference, as expressed explicitly by some of the participants. The case study used in this paper focuses on an interviewee who grew up in Belgium and probably assumed that I was Swiss because of my university affiliation. He was thus usually quite explicit.
2. Names, places, occupations and any other information that could lead to the identification of the participant were changed.
3. ‘...’ indicates that part of the transcript was removed to shorten the quotes, but without altering their general meaning.
4. This is left voluntarily vague in order to preserve anonymity.

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