

# Memory Acts: A Theory for the Study of Collective Memory in Everyday Life

Constance de Saint-Laurent

*Institut de Psychologie et Education, Université de Neuchâtel, Neuchâtel, Switzerland*

History abounds in everyday life: It is in the discourse of the politician who makes a patriotic use of World War II, in the epic movie of medieval inspiration, in the latest museum opening in town, or in the magnet on your fridge that makes a humorous use of advertisement posters from the 1950s. What tools can help us understand how history is used in these contexts, and with what purposes? And, more importantly perhaps, how to understand the effects these uses have on us? To answer these questions, this article proposes a framework to study the uses of collective memory in everyday life. After a short review of the history of collective memory, the concept of memory act is outlined, based on three theoretical traditions: James's pragmatism, Austin's speech acts, and Mead's social acts. They are used to argue that everyday uses of collective memory are better understood as intersubjective and discursive acts that are part of larger activities. Finally, some of the consequences of this theory are discussed.

## INTRODUCTION

What is the place of history in our everyday lives? How does it weigh on the present? What are we, in fact, doing when we refer to historical events in everyday conversations? Collective memory studies—the field of psychology interested in lay representations of history—have been on the rise for the past few decades. However, one important question has been left unanswered: What do we actually do when we refer to history? When listening carefully to what people say about history—as one tends to do when studying intently a topic—it becomes clear that references to the past abound in everyday life. Between the politician making analogies between past and present to rally supporters, the latest blockbuster using a well-known historical period as a narrative background, and the expression your friend uses and abuses and that actually refers to a specific historical event (think, for instance, of the simple “grammar Nazi” expression, used to designate someone obsessed with the use of proper grammar), everyday life is full of references to lay representations of history that often go unnoticed. Unfortunately, they also go unstudied, although they are far from insignificant. One of the reasons—beyond, of course, the potential lack

of interest—may be the difficulty one faces in understanding what collective memory actually is and to what broader field of psychological studies it belongs.

Is collective memory actually memory? Can it belong to the larger family of memory studies, alongside semantic or autobiographical memory? Does talking about the fall of the Berlin Wall bear resemblances to remembering how to tie one's shoes? Or is it a social representation, an ideology, a component of social identity? Can calling someone a grammar Nazi be studied with the same theories one uses to understand the social dynamics of the Israel/Palestine conflict? Although these questions may seem silly—or, at best, overly theoretical—they matter because they tell us which theories and methods one should use to study collective memory in everyday life. The following is thus a short review of the different paradigms existing in the field of collective memory studies and a proposal for a new conceptualization of collective memory: the *memory act*.

## FROM HISTORY TO COLLECTIVE MEMORY

Collective memory first appeared as a concept in the sociological work of Maurice Halbwachs (1925/1994). In his second book, titled *La Mémoire Collective* (Halbwachs, 1950), he further conceptualized collective memory as the “living memory” of one's social group. Whereas history is the “dead frame” of the past, full of dates and events thoroughly organized but empty of human existence, collective memory is the past as it is remembered by those who lived it. For him, memory stops where the group does. On one hand, what happened outside of the group will hardly be remembered by its members. On the other hand, collective memory returns to history when the groups who lived it disappear. Halbwachs's concept did not concern so much lay representations of history, then, and was more a general statement about the social and cultural nature of memory: It rests on cultural frames and is always performed with others, present or imagined (Halbwachs, 1950).

In the following decades, the notion started to be given another meaning, to designate social groups' representations of the past. The differences between history as an academic discipline and lay representations of the past were thought to be greater than the differences between living memory and dead history. Thus, the opposition between systematized knowledge and subjective representations became widely used to define history in opposition to memory. However, this distinction also implied a problematic hierarchy: Whose knowledge has the ability to make history, and whose knowledge is confined to memory? By focusing on the subjective understanding of social groups' and nations' history, the concept of collective memory became an important tool to understand how groups define themselves and interact with others (e.g., Rosoux, 2001). And, whereas Halbwachs exclusively referred to groups of a limited size, from the family and group of schoolmates to local groups of workers, subsequent researches on collective memory have focused on social groups as large as nations. It became impossible to distinguish between “living” and “dead” past: For whom is it alive, and for whom is it dead, when you work at such a scale?

Halbwachs's concept of collective memory, although extremely fruitful in many contexts, left us with a paradox that still goes unresolved: A group cannot “remember,” only the person can; but memory depends so much on social processes that if all social layers are removed, nothing remains. To study people's memories of the collective past, then, one has to study them as the

collective's memories of the past. One way to solve this issue has been to consider collective memory as a social representation (e.g., Haas & Jodelet, 2000, 2007), as something that is both shared by the group and appropriated by its members. Nonetheless, transforming memories into representations came at a price: "Living" memory was no more, and texts, museums, and memorials came to be seen as incarnating collective memory more than personal narratives and experiences (see, i.e., Beim, 2007). This may be what led Pierre Nora to famously declare the death of memory (Nora, 1997). However, I would argue that it is the line we drew that killed memory: It did away with the person, with the one who lived history, heard it from parents and grandparents, saw it in movies, and learned about it in school. In the end, collective memory did away with the one who remembers.

### FROM COLLECTIVE MEMORY TO COLLECTIVE REMEMBERING

In order to bring the person back into collective memory but keep its social and cultural dimension, Wertsch proposed the notion of collective remembering. Focusing on memory as a process had been Bartlett's idea (Bartlett, 1932/1995), although he had not applied it to discourses on the collective past. For Bartlett, remembering was first and foremost a reconstructive process: People do not retrieve already existing memories stored somewhere in their minds; instead, they actively reconstruct what happened with the help of cultural schemas. Thus, when collective memory had been turned into static representations deprived of a subject, collective remembering became the active process by which group members created accounts about the past. Cultural tools such as texts and narrative frames mediate people's relation to the past and provide the means to produce discourses about the group's history (Wertsch, 2002).

This notion has been used to study specific accounts of historical events, but also in attempts to uncover the underlying cultural narrative schemas that serve as the basis of collective remembering (e.g., Wertsch, 2002). By studying discourses on the past as the product of a process, it indeed became possible to go beyond content and focus on the mechanisms through which these discourses have been forged. It showed, for instance, how social and cultural groups tend to use a single narrative to explain multiple events (Wertsch, 2008), or how the complex dynamic of remembering/forgetting transforms meanings through time (Brockmeier, 2002). It also encouraged microgenetic studies of collective remembering—that is, how discourses on the past are produced in the here and now of the situation (Wagoner & Gillespie, 2013).

Distinguishing between the tools one uses to remember and the discourses produced on the past has also made salient what may be called the "politics of remembering." Indeed, official texts, museums, school teachings, and the like are tools to remember, to produce specific understandings of the past of the group, and to give it meaning and direction (Liu & Hilton, 2005; Wertsch, 2002). Thus, collective memory may be an important political instrument (e.g., Hazareesingh, 2004). But controlling what is publicly said about history does not mean controlling what is privately thought about it. Or, as Wertsch put it, it is not because states and public institutions produce specific narratives that populations are going to consume them as had been intended (Wertsch, 1997). The notion of collective remembering, then, allows for the study of the tension between different discourses on the past and of the active processes by which these are forged.

## THE LIMITS OF COLLECTIVE REMEMBERING/MEMORY

Collective remembering leads, as the preceding concept of collective memory did, to a paradox. It recentered discourses on history around the process by which one narrates past experiences and made memory alive again: always moving, transformed, and mobilized. But who lived it? Where is the experience of the subject? It encouraged researchers to move away from static representations and proposed to see collective memory as an action. But is the process studied really remembering? Collective remembering was thought to be more a construction than a reconstruction. That is, it is often more concerned with how people produce stories and meanings about the past (a construction) than with how people attempt to recall past experiences (a reconstruction). And actually, in many ways, talking about history does not involve memory more than any other human activity: It involves remembering what was in that book you read or what you learned about it in school, but so do many other intellectual activities. It does, however, also require people to remember experiences they lived, or to build on what others remember about them.

One of the difficulties, then, is that collective remembering regroups multiple, but intertwined, processes under a single heading. How to study with a single concept such diverse discourses? Subdivisions may at first appear to be a solution: Why not make use of Halbwachs's distinctions, and consider separately living and dead memory? Why not distinguish between remembering the past and representing it? First, as has been stated, discourses on history draw on many elements at once. Even when talking about an event one lived through, narrative frames, others' stories, and so on are necessary. Conversely, talking about events one has not seen unfold does not mean relying purely on cultural tools: Discourses of others and personal experiences, for instance, remain resources to talk about history. Second, from whose perspective are these distinctions made? When talking about World War II with my grandmother, for instance, is she doing memory work while I am doing history? And, if I tell her story to someone else, am I remembering or representing it? This leads to the third problem subdivisions would create: What are the practical differences between these "categories?" Pragmatically, does it change anything if a politician calling an opponent a Nazi was born before or after 1945? Theoretically and methodologically, subdivisions run the risk of fragmenting intertwined phenomena with arbitrary classifications.

Moreover, because collective remembering regroups extremely heterogeneous discourses, the required subdivisions would be as endless as they would be artificial. Collective remembering can concern whole eras or a single event, one life or a multitude, be summarized in a word or run across volumes. But, in a way, references to history exist at all these levels at once. First, historical periods are made of a multitude of unique events that give them their flavor and concreteness. These events are, in turn, interpreted on the basis of the period to which they belong. Second, history is the story of single lives, yet single lives do not make history. That is, historical events are historical because they affect a multitude of single lives at once. Third, to evoke the past, single words and expressions need to have been part of larger historical discourses, discourses that were constructed by these references. Collective remembering is thus distributed along temporal, social, and discursive lines.

One way to respect this heterogeneity has been to focus on the narrative forms of collective remembering (e.g., Brockmeier, 2002). Indeed, stories bridge together multiple levels—social, cultural, individual, but also symbolic, representational, and emotional (de Saint-Laurent, 2014b)—and thus facilitate the study of collective remembering in its multiplicity without creating artificial

divisions (for instance, allowing one to focus simultaneously on the cultural aspects of the narrative frame employed, the emotional tone of the story, and the symbolic elements used to give meaning to the past). This has proved to be an efficient tool in many occasions (e.g., Brescó de Luna, 2009; Goldberg, Porat, & Schwarz, 2006; Gómez-Estern & Benítez, 2013; Wagoner, 2008), yet it is problematic when one wants to study everyday references to history. In many cases, these references do not take the form of a story, or only do so partially. And supposing that an implicit narrative necessarily supports them is problematic for two reasons. First, it means the full story would “preexist” somewhere in the person’s mind, as a static representation stored to be partially or fully retrieved; it is precisely what collective remembering was supposed to avoid. Second, it supposes that the story exists in the mind of the speaker because it does in the mind of the researcher. Indeed, it is often necessary to refer to more general storylines to interpret isolated references. But supposing that the storyline has to exist in the mind of the participant too is committing the psychologist fallacy (James, 1890).

## FROM COLLECTIVE REMEMBERING TO MEMORY ACTS

How to avoid, then, unnecessary fragmentation without reducing discourses on history to single and partial concepts? By adopting a pragmatic and social approach to this phenomenon, an approach that conceptualizes talking about the past as a *memory act*. In the rest of this article, I first propose a tentative definition of what a memory act could be, and then present the different traditions on which the concept was built—pragmatism, speech acts, and social acts. Finally, some of the theoretical, methodological, and analytical consequences of this model of memory will be highlighted.

A memory act can be defined as the act of presenting one’s discourses as narrating, describing or interpreting something that happened in the past, or as referring to something that is commonly believed to have happened. *Acts of collective memory* are thus the subcategory of memory acts that refers specifically to the collective past—what may be generally understood as belonging to history, no matter whether it is recent history or concerns century-old events. Before going further, it is important to be precise about what is meant by “commonly.” It designates the beliefs that are assumed to be shared between a speaker and his or her audience. For instance, using the expression grammar “Nazi implies” assumes that one’s interlocutor knows who the Nazis were, but also, preferably, that it is a gross exaggeration. Such common beliefs, however, can also take place at much smaller scale: Saying that something is like a cinnamon pizza remains my sister’s favorite way of referring to two good things that turn bad together. This is a long-lasting reminder of the day I decided, as a child, to add cinnamon to a homemade pizza, thinking that if both were good they would necessarily go well together. Using such an expression outside of my close family would probably be met by surprise and incomprehension, because we do not have a common understanding of the event to which it refers.

## A PRAGMATIC APPROACH

The concept of memory act borrows from three theoretical traditions. First, it stems from James’s and Peirce’s pragmatism (James, 1922; Peirce, 1878). Pragmatist epistemology rests on the simple

yet powerful assumption that what makes an idea “true” is not its correspondence to any underlying reality but whether it “works.” To use Rorty’s famous example (Rorty, 1998), as explained in Cornish & Gillespie, “Just as the anteater’s snout is not a mirror of ants in hard-to-reach places, human knowledge of horticulture and animal husbandry is not a mirror of plants and animals. It is a purpose-driven mediator between the human desire for food and the world as we find it” (Cornish & Gillespie, 2009, p. 802).

For pragmatists, what makes the value of an idea is whether holding it for true (a) leads to different consequences than if it was believed to be false (in a way quite similar to Popper’s falsifiability) and (b) the difference it makes is positive (it leads to a more desirable outcome). Applied to collective memory, it leads to an interesting conclusion: Subdivisions in collective memory—between remembering, representations, living and dead memory, and so on—matter only if these different categories indeed refer to processes with distinct consequences. That is, if there is no difference in practice between representing history and remembering it, if they “work” similarly, then both refer to the same thing, to the same process. For instance, if I was now to summarize the recent conflict in Ukraine, it would be impossible to make the difference between what I remember from the events as they unfolded at the time and what I took from an article I just read that briefly recapitulated the conflict. Beyond the subjective feeling that I probably remembered this or that before reading this article, the distinction would be as hazardous as it would be useless. In the end, what would matter much more would be how such events are mobilized, for instance, to give meaning to the present situation in Ukraine or in a conversation about Russia. Equating collective memory to a psychological process such as remembering thus rests on the assumption that a concept can be defined by the subjective feeling that a specific process did indeed take place. Pragmatism argues, on the contrary, that if the consequences of two processes are the same—here, remembering and representing the collective past—there is no basis on which to distinguish between them.

A pragmatist approach to collective memory also invites us to consider the pragmatic value of collective memory. Or, simply put, what do we remember for? As Bartlett noted, memory is not about reproducing the past but about using it to adapt to the present (Bartlett, 1995). Studies have highlighted the importance of collective memory for identity (Gómez-Estern & Benítez, 2013; Hirst, Cuc, & Wohl, 2012), in political argumentation (de Saint-Laurent, 2014a), in defining intergroup relations (Delori, 2011), in imagining the future (Brescó de Luna, in press), and so on. Although the idea that remembering serves specific purposes is not new, studies of collective memory as it manifests itself in everyday life remain rare. As a result, the pragmatic value of memory has been rendered rather static; it is assumed that if a specific story is told within the context of the interview, it is because it has a function in one’s broader life, and is thus not the result of the demands of the interviewer. Moreover, memory has often been reduced to a tool to develop, for instance, a positive social identity or to argue for one’s position. However, little attention has been given to everyday uses of collective memory (de Saint-Laurent, in press b), how it is mobilized within broader discourses, or how the orientation of the immediate activity gives it shape and meaning.

The notion of memory act aims at reflecting such ideas in the way we conceptualize collective memory. Indeed, the notion of “act” implies defining collective memory as the fleeting moment where the collective past is “enacted” in discourses and practices in the present. However, it also supposes that there is a before that led to such an act—a process—and an after that follows it—its consequences—and that these are inseparable from the act itself. Thus, instead of defining

collective memory as the product of a specific process—remembering—leading to different actions, it defines it as a specific action—referring to the past—that is produced by different processes. The interest of such a reversal also lies in the fact that it allows us to focus on a specific phenomenon that we want to study instead of focusing on the theories that were built to explain it. Finally, the notion of memory act highlights its inscription in irreversible time, drawing attention not only to the specific context within which the act takes place or to the processes that led to it but also to its consequences for the future.

## DISCURSIVE ROOTS

The second body of work that inspired the notion of memory act is that of Austin (1962/1975), who proposed the concept of *speech act* to designate those actions that are performed through, and only through, speech. A classical example of a speech act is apologizing: It is not possible to apologize without speech (it is possible to *show* that you are sorry without speech, but it would not *be* an apology), and uttering the words “I am sorry” is enough to have apologized (even if the apology is not sincere, it is still performed). Speech acts can be distinguished from statements, among other things, on the basis that the later can be true or false (I can wrongly state, for instance, that Denmark is more populated than France) whereas the former can only be dishonest or infelicitous (if I say I promise to do something, I can be dishonest about it, but it cannot be false that I did promise to do it).

Discursive psychology, and especially work done on memory, has already taken on the task of applying such ideas to collective memory (see also Middleton, 1997, 2002; Middleton & Edwards, 1990):

[P]sychological phenomena such as memory are best understood as accomplishments that occur in the course of communicative action. Memory is, on this account, something that speakers perform rather than simply possess in the course of routine interaction. These performances are informed by cultural understandings of what is to be counted as adequate and felicitous recall. (Brown, Middleton, & Lightfoot, 2001, p. 125)

Interestingly, memory speech shares characteristics with both statements and speech acts. On the one hand, what I say about what I did yesterday can be true or false: I could say that I remember lying on the beach in Rio; unfortunately, that would not be true. On the other hand, remembering in conversations is about more than “describing” the past. Indeed, it is commonly accepted that memory is fallible, and when an inaccuracy is discovered in an account of the past, the honesty of the speaker often matters more than the truth. A recent example is the story of American TV journalist Brian Williams, who wrongly stated that he had been involved in a helicopter attack in Iraq in 2003. In early 2015, after many witnesses of the attack accused him of lying, he made a public statement in which he admitted he had not been directly involved, but explained that it was an involuntary exaggeration of his role in the events (Williams, 2015). Whether people believed he made a mistake or that he lied does not quite matter, and fellow journalists reporting the story seem to have been divided on the issue. What is interesting is that once it had been established that the story was not true, an argument came back again and again in newspapers: If the mistake was involuntary, which could happen in such a case, then all could be forgiven.

The notion of memory act is an attempt to capture this characteristic of memory: Utterances about the past can be honest and yet not true. Indeed, one can truly remember something that did not happen. Talking about the past, then, is both describing something—a statement—and performing a memory—a speech act. If these two aspects of memory are inseparable and both deserve our full attention, most studies have explored only the former. Indeed, whether researchers have focused on the accuracy of memory (the traditional encoding–storage–retrieval model) or its transformation (the “reconstruction” model of collective remembering), the center of attention remains the relation between the statement and the event, not the performance (see Brown & Reavey, in press, for a similar argument about testimonies). One example of the confusion between the declarative and performative aspects of memory can be found in the way the relation between narratives and memory has been conceptualized. Indeed, narrative approaches to memory (e.g., Brockmeier, 2002; Wertsch, 2008) have often equated one with the other: Collective memory is seen as having a narrative shape, and thus one can talk about “memories” and “stories” interchangeably. The limits of this approach have been discussed earlier. However, a discursive approach like the one proposed here allows us to conceptualize narratives not as memory but as one of the culturally privileged way in which memory is *performed*.

## SOCIAL ACTS

The importance of these social and cultural dimensions of the memory act is also at the center of the third theory used to build this concept: the *social act*, as developed by Mead (1977). Because this is first and foremost a theory of consciousness, a slight detour through Mead’s understanding of the mind is necessary. For Mead, consciousness is the ability to look at oneself from the outside (Gillespie, 2005, 2006). This ability arises through participation in social activities—social acts—that require more than one position, such as caring for/being taken care of, buying/selling, giving/receiving, and so on. Through time, people come to assume these different positions, either through games, as is often the case with children, or by participating in different social settings. This allows them to look at themselves from the perspective of the other, as they have, so to speak, been there in the past (through play or by assuming the position of the other in a previous social setting), and thus to develop an outside view of themselves.

Understood in these terms, can the memory act qualify as a social act? Is it a social activity, with norms and expectations, and does it require at least two positions? The first half of the question has been answered already, both in this article and elsewhere in the literature: Memory is a social activity requiring the use of norms (e.g., narrative templates, chronologies, and time measurements) and has been at least partially institutionalized (e.g., memory tests, archives). As for the second half of the question—whether memory involves more than one position—three arguments can be made.

First, speech acts can be said to be social acts as well, because the very notion of performance implies there is someone doing the performance and someone witnessing it (Reinach, 1913, quoted in Kasabova, 2010). Memory, then, can be understood as a social act, involving at least two positions: the one who remembers and the one to whom the past is recounted.

Second, as the example of Brian Williams has shown, memory acts involve an important part of trust. That is, those to whom the past is narrated need to believe that what is said is not just a story, it is a story that really happened (see also Linell & Keselman, 2011, for a dialogical per-

spective on trust and distrust). In the case of Brian Williams, once it had been established that he misreported the past, it became impossible for him to continue his job as a journalist. How could the public trust someone who was supposed to inform them about what was happening on the other side of the world if he was known to have deformed such information in the past? Interestingly, Williams's story about Iraq was not fictitious: He reported events that did happen, they just did not happen to him. Yet, once the "lie" had been established, trust became impossible; as the popular saying goes, "Once a liar, always a liar." The argument here is not that if I tell you a story about my childhood and you don't believe me then it was not memory, but that memory, as a social act, rests on the assumption that what is told is globally true, or at least told in good faith. And indeed, we do not listen anymore to the stories of established liars, and we usually do not narrate our past to people we know do not believe us. A whole industry has actually been dedicated to helping us detect who is trustworthy or not, in the form, for instance, of lie detectors and technics to uncover the real emotions of speakers. The second position of the memory act, then, is more complex than just the one of an audience, as established above. It is the position of being told the story of something that happened but that we did not witness, of constructing a representation of it. Thus, being someone who remembers or who represents the past may actually be two positions within the same act (see also Bakhtin, 1990, for a similar account of heroism).

Third, the developmental history of declarative memory already involves a form of position exchange. Indeed, Nelson's work on autobiographical memory in children has highlighted the importance of perspective taking in the development of declarative memory (e.g., Nelson, 2000; Nelson & Fivush, 2004). That is, to be able to tell one's life, children need to realize that the past recalled did not just happen, it happened *to them*. This "autonetic consciousness" (Tulving, 2002) is possible only once children understand that memory is a matter of perspective, and thus that the past is always told from one. This happens through conversations with others, in which the past is conjointly remembered and different positions and perspectives can be explored (Nelson, 2008). Such findings can be extended to collective memory on the grounds that it shares the main characteristics of autobiographical memory: It is both declarative and perspectival, perhaps even more so than autobiographical memory. Thus, it can be argued that participating in memory acts has a developmental history (de Saint-Laurent, in press a, in press b) in which different yet complementary positions have been experienced, and that it is through position exchange that declarative memory develops over the life course.

We do not, however, always remember the past in the presence of others, nor utter it out loud. Is memory, in these cases, still a social act? Dialogism offers a preliminary answer to this question: Utterances are always a reply to something, an anticipation of an answer, even when we are alone (Bakhtin, 1986). The other remains present, in the souvenirs themselves (Habermas, 2012), the social frames that support remembering (Halbwachs, 1950), or as a generalized other to whom the story is addressed (Bakhtin, 1986). Remembering, even alone, is never a solitary action. Yet the notion of social act goes beyond addressivity and the simple need to take into account the effect of social interactions on memory, as has been done in a few studies (e.g., de Saint-Laurent, 2014a; Raudsepp & Wagner, 2012; Wagoner, 2012): Speakers and audiences are both constitutive of the memory act.

Mead's conception of speech is the key to understanding this coconstitution. For him, the specificity of speech is that it can affect speakers and audiences alike, as we can easily hear

ourselves just as others do. It thus offers a unique opportunity—being, simultaneously, in the position of the speaker and of the audience. Retelling a frightening episode of one’s past, for instance, has the potential to scare others as much as oneself. Seen from this perspective, memory acts are always also addressed to oneself, even in social settings, and the question of solitary recalls becomes irrelevant: Memory is also a performance to the self. This is where the part of the power of many therapeutic practices resides: Retelling one’s life is an opportunity to look at the past through the perspective of others, and thus to give it new meanings. Actually, for Mead, symbols become significant because they “[entwine] two or more attitudes that belong to the two or more positions within a social act” (Gillespie, 2005, p. 32). One could then argue that the past becomes meaningful when it is told precisely because it allows the simultaneous consideration of one’s subjective experience of the past and the positions of others on and within it.

### REDEFINING COLLECTIVE MEMORY

Before discussing the consequences of the theory proposed here, let me briefly come back to the definition I started with and summarize the main points of the previous section. I defined a memory act as the act of presenting one’s discourses; as narrating, describing, or interpreting something that happened in the past; or as referring to something that is commonly believed to have happened. This implies focusing on memory as an action—not as a mental process—that is performed through discourse: It is constructed verbally or materially through the use of signs and symbols. This act is social: It follows certain norms and requires at least two complementary positions to be made possible. This new understanding has several important consequences for how we define collective memory/remembering. In particular, it makes clear what this often-used concept is not:

- *Collective memory is not memory.* It does use memory, but in large part because the way we understand the world is based on our past experiences (e.g., how I understand being a feminist is based in part on how it is represented in society but also, to a very large extent, on my past experiences both as a woman and as a feminist).
- *Collective memory is not just a social representation, either.* It cannot be reduced to a social representation but it is the product of multiple processes that intertwine socially shared discourses, personal experience, memory, family history, ideology, and so on.
- *Collective memory is not a narrative.* Narratives are just a way to organize and to communicate about the past.
- *Collective memory is not about accuracy and deformations, yet it should not do away with reality, either.* On one hand, talking about the past is always a construction, not a copy of what happened, and what matters is what it allows us to do in the present. On the other hand, if events can be interpreted in multiples ways, if new causes can be found, and if the motivations of historical actors can be discussed, the basic facts on which they are based can only be, very simply, true or false. Doing away with reality is thus running the risk of becoming blind to issues of power (Who can impose what version of the past?), legitimacy (Who has the right to present what narrative?), and reparation (Who may have been victimized by whom?), and ultimately disconnects collective memory itself from reality.

But this theory also suggests what collective memory might be:

- *Collective memory is the collective past as it is enacted and mobilized* in discourses, practices, and artefacts. Because the past is always open to interpretation and our relation to it is always evolving, performing collective memory is proposing a certain version of the past that has the potential to change how it is perceived, both by self and others.
- *Collective memory is a construct*. First, it is a theoretical construction that designates, in the eyes of the researcher, the past as it is understood by people, from the perspective of the present. Second, it is a social construct in the eyes of the research participant, who has learned to mobilize collective memory to think and argue about both past and present. Collective memory may not be a known concept outside of social sciences, yet most people have seen commemorations, visited history museums, heard politicians use and abuse national narratives, or been moved by the testimonies of victims of conflicts. And they have learned over time to use history to move and to convince others.
- *Collective memory is socially negotiated*. What can be said about the past and how, what may qualify as truth, and who may talk about it are all parts of an ongoing negotiation between people proposing versions of the past and their audiences. Collective memory regroups an ensemble of practices (commemorations, storytelling, history teaching, etc.) in which both the roles of those who remember (experts, witnesses, statesmen, etc.) and the roles of those who listen (amateur historians, compassionate listeners, critical citizens) are socially and culturally prescribed.

In practice, such a perspective changes how we understand references to the past. Looking at recent political slogans making reference to history—for instance, both in the Brexit campaign (“We want our country back”) and in the 2016 American presidential campaign (“Make America great again”)—most collective memory studies would conclude that they are classical cases of glorification of the past and nostalgia, and that this is why they had so much appeal to people. A memory act approach, on the other hand, would look at these slogans as attempts to reframe the past in a way that suits a political argument about the present (usually more or less in the form of, “Foreigners ruined our country and we need to go back to a time when we had less of them”). From this perspective, if these slogans have proven to be so viral—the first “Make America great again” caps sold out within days of being introduced—it is not so much because they appeal to a representation of the past all of Trump’s or Farage’s supporters originally shared, as a preexisting collective memory. It is, on the contrary, because they justify a certain vision they have of the present and propose an interpretation of the past that makes sense of their current malaise. The more these slogans are repeated by people, the more people can be convinced that they carry an undeniable truth about the past. Not only because of the power of the majority, but because the more the past is acted in such a way, the more it appears to be true.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

What are the theoretical, practical, and methodological implications of the memory act? First, conceptually, it blurs the line between autobiographical and collective memory (as had been done, as well, by Brockmeier, 2002, for instance). Indeed, because this theory focuses primar-

ily on the performative aspects of memory, it can be applied to all forms of declarative memory. However, it does suggest another distinction: between the descriptive and performative aspects of memory. In practice, these have already been studied separately, by different and often opposed branches of psychology and the social sciences. Accuracy of recall and disturbances in memory processes have so far mainly been the center of attention in cognitive and neurological studies, whereas social psychology, cultural psychology, and sociology have globally been more interested in the transformation and transmission of memories (see, i.e., Wagoner, 2012). Conceptualizing memory as an action, nonetheless, allows us to highlight that these approaches are not exclusive—that is, adopting one implies rejecting the other—but that they simply answer different questions.

The second theoretical implication of this model is that it puts *intersubjectivity* at the heart of memory. It is by taking the perspective of the other that the past becomes both “tellable” and meaningful (see also de Saint-Laurent & Zittoun, in press, for a similar account). In fact, stories about the past are worth telling because there is a difference of perspective with the other, and it is by hearing them from an outside perspective that they can be given new meanings. The position of this other to whom the past is told has so far been completely ignored, and there is thus still much to be done to fully conceptualize it. It does bring to the fore, however, questions of trust and believability, and of the importance we give to witness accounts and expert interpretations of the past. It also calls for a better understanding of the relations between remembering and representing the past. They may be two different positions within the memory act: Representing the past may well be what we do when we trust that what is told did in, fact, happen. But this hypothesis, needless to say, requires further exploration.

On the practical side, the theory of the memory act calls for a shift in attention. Instead of focusing solely on the stories told and the cultural tools and narrative frames used to build them, research on collective memory should focus on how the context—both material and intersubjective (Grossen, 2001)—shapes what is told and how it is told. More attention should be given to what is actively silenced (see Brockmeier, 2002, for a similar argument), to the broader activity the memory act is part of (i.e., through the argumentative aspects of the stories told), to how cultural and social tools are both used and presented to the interlocutor (for example, by looking at the roles given to witnesses and official texts), and to the interactions with present and absent others. Globally, this involves studying discourses on the past neither as externalizations of how the past is represented (as in classical collective memory approaches) nor as the processes by which one can construct a story about the past (as in most collective remembering approaches), but as social actions that are performed with others and for others in a context that is both constitutive of and constituted by the discourses that are held within them.

Finally, and perhaps more importantly, the memory act has methodological implications. Indeed, putting such an emphasis on the roles of context and intersubjective interactions calls for a new consideration of the situations built to collect data. First, the type of method used (questionnaire, open or semi-open interview, naturally occurring data, quantitative or qualitative experiment, etc.) will profoundly change how the past is performed. Questionnaires, for instance, may call for school-like answers because the situation reminds participants of a test, whereas open interviews may encourage people to “personalize” (or not) their answers because of the rapport they build (or not) with the researcher. Although this is not specific to collective memory research, these methodological issues have so far been largely ignored in this field. Not only do different forms of data collection create different situations, but each of these will be understood

differently by different participants. Second, the interactions with the researcher should be an integral part of the analysis of the data. Indeed, how the researcher reacts to what is told—asking for more details, acting surprised or sceptical, and so on—and how she or he may be understood by the participants will change how the past is performed. Do the participants feel they should look clever, convincing, or say the clichés that are probably expected of them? Because collective memory is socially and culturally shared, perceived and actual differences in nationality, class, and social groups should also always be taken into consideration. This calls as well for more studies based on naturally occurring data, for they offer a unique opportunity to look at how memory acts are both performed and used in everyday life.

In the end, the memory act is a sensitizing concept—telling us where to look—rather than a defining one—telling us what to see (Liu, 2004). Thus, as other theories in collective memory, it is nonparadigmatic and does not exclude other approaches (Olick, 1999). Rather, its aim is to add to the already rich literature by (a) providing a frame to study everyday uses of collective memory and (b) pointing to new venues of enquiry. This is the natural step that follows this proposal: to put the memory act to its own pragmatic test and see if it does, indeed, “work” and allows us to achieve the double aim above. For this, further empirical work is needed, leading to new and critical dialogues about theory—the continuous cycle that defines research itself as dialogical action.

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