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Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire

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ation; it amounts to the internal subversion of memory-history by critical history. Every history is by nature critical, and all historians have sought to denounce the hypocritical mythologies of their predecessors. But something fundamentally unsettling happens when history begins to write its own history. A historiographical anxiety arises when history assigns itself the task of tracing alien impulses within itself and discovers that it is the victim of memories which it has sought to master. Where history has not taken on the strong formative and didactic role that it has assumed in France, the history of history is less laden with polemical content. In the United States, for example, a country of plural memories and diverse traditions, historiography is more pragmatic. Different interpretations of the Revolution or of the Civil War do not threaten the American tradition because, in some sense, no such thing exists—or if it does, it is not primarily a historical construction. In France, on the other hand, historiography is iconoclastic and irreverent. It seizes upon the most clearly defined objects of tradition—a key battle, like Bouvines; a canonical manual, like the *Petit Lavis*—in order to dismantle their mechanisms and analyze the conditions of their development. It operates primarily by introducing doubt, by running a knife between the tree of memory and the bark of history. That we study the historiography of the French Revolution, that we reconstitute its myths and interpretations, implies that we no longer unquestioningly identify with its heritage. To interrogate a tradition, venerable though it may be, is no longer to pass it on intact. Moreover, the history of history does not restrict itself to addressing the most sacred objects of our national tradition. By questioning its own traditional structure, its own conceptual and material resources, its operating procedures and social means of distribution, the entire discipline of history has entered its historiographical age, consummating its dissociation from memory—which in turn has become a possible object of history.

It once seemed as though a tradition of memory, through the concepts of history and the nation, had crystallized in the synthesis of the Third Republic. Adopting a broad chronology, between Augustin Thierry's *Lettres sur l'histoire de France* (1827) and Charles Seignobos's *Histoire sincère de la nation française* (1933), the relationships between history, memory, and the nation were characterized as more than natural currency: they were shown to involve a reciprocal circularity, a symbiosis at every level—scientific and pedagogical, theoretical and practical. This national definition of the present imperiously demanded justification through the illumination of the past. It was, however, a present that had been weakened by revolutionary trauma and the call for a general reevaluation of the monarchical past, and it was weakened further by the defeat of 1870, which rendered only more urgent, in the belated competition with German science and pedagogy—the real victors at Sadowa—the development of a severe documentary erudition for the scholarly transmission of memory. The tone of

national responsibility assigned to the historian—half preacher, half soldier—is unequalled, for example, in the first editorial of the *Revue historique* (1876) in which Gabriel Monod foresaw a “slow scientific, methodical, and collective investigation” conducted in a “secret and secure manner for the greatness of the fatherland as well as for mankind.” Reading this text, and a hundred others like it, one wonders how the notion that positivist history was not cumulative could ever have gained credibility. On the contrary, in the teleological perspective of the nation the political, the military, the biographical, and the diplomatic all were to be considered pillars of continuity. The defeat of Agincourt, the dagger of Ravallac, the day of the Dupes, the additional clauses of the treaty of Westphalia—each required scrupulous accounting. The most incisive erudition thus served to add or take away some detail from the monumental edifice that was the nation. The nation’s memory was held to be powerfully unified; no more discontinuity existed between our Greco-Roman cradle and the colonies of the Third Republic than between the high erudition that annexed new territories to the nation’s heritage and the schoolbooks that professed its dogma. The holy nation thus acquired a holy history; through the nation our memory continued to rest upon a sacred foundation.

To see how this particular synthesis came apart under the pressure of a new secularizing force would be to show how, during the crisis of the 1930s in France, the coupling of state and nation was gradually replaced by the coupling of state and society—and how, at the same time and for the same reasons, **history was transformed, spectacularly, from the tradition of memory it had become into the self-knowledge of society.** As such, history was able to highlight many kinds of memory, even turn itself into a laboratory of past mentalities; but in disclaiming its national identity, it also abandoned its claim to bearing coherent meaning and consequently lost its pedagogical authority to transmit values. The definition of the nation was no longer the issue, and peace, prosperity, and the reduction of its power have since accomplished the rest. With the advent of society in place of the nation, legitimation by the past and therefore by history yields to legitimation by the future. One can only acknowledge and venerate the past and serve the nation; the future, however, can be prepared for: thus the three terms regain their autonomy. **No longer a cause, the nation has become a given; history is now a social science, memory a purely private phenomenon.** The memory-nation was thus the last incarnation of the unification of memory and history.

The study of *lieux de mémoires*, then, lies at the intersection of two developments that in France today give it meaning: one a purely historiographical movement, the reflexive turning of history upon itself, the other a movement that is, properly speaking, historical: the end of a tradition of memory. **The moment of**

lieux de mémoire occurs at the same time that an immense and intimate fund of memory disappears, surviving only as a reconstituted object beneath the gaze of critical history. This period sees, on the one hand, the decisive deepening of historical study and, on the other hand, a heritage consolidated. The critical principle follows an internal dynamic: our intellectual, political, historical frameworks are exhausted but remain powerful enough not to leave us indifferent; whatever vitality they retain impresses us only in their most spectacular symbols. Combined, these two movements send us at once to history's most elementary tools and to the most symbolic objects of our memory: to the archives as well as to the tricolor; to the libraries, dictionaries, and museums as well as to commemorations, celebrations, the Pantheon, and the Arc de Triomphe; to the *Dictionnaire Larousse* as well as to the Wall of the Fédérés, where the last defenders of the Paris commune were massacred in 1870.

These *lieux de mémoire* are fundamentally remains, the ultimate embodiments of a memorial consciousness that has barely survived in a historical age that calls out for memory because it has abandoned it. They make their appearance by virtue of the deritualization of our world—producing, manifesting, establishing, constructing, decreeing, and maintaining by artifice and by will a society deeply absorbed in its own transformation and renewal, one that inherently values the new over the ancient, the young over the old, the future over the past. Museums, archives, cemeteries, festivals, anniversaries, treaties, depositions, monuments, sanctuaries, fraternal orders—these are the boundary stones of another age, illusions of eternity. It is the nostalgic dimension of these devotional institutions that makes them seem beleaguered and cold—they mark the rituals of a society without ritual; integral particularities in a society that levels particularity; signs of distinction and of group membership in a society that tends to recognize individuals only as identical and equal.

Lieux de mémoire originate with the sense that there is no spontaneous memory, that we must deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and notarize bills because such activities no longer occur naturally. The defense, by certain minorities, of a privileged memory that has retreated to jealously protected enclaves in this sense intensely illuminates the truth of *lieux de mémoire*—that without commemorative vigilance, history would soon sweep them away. We buttress our identities upon such bastions, but if what they defended were not threatened, there would be no need to build them. Conversely, if the memories that they enclosed were to be set free they would be useless; if history did not besiege memory, deforming and transforming it, penetrating and petrifying it, there would be no *lieux de mémoire*. Indeed, it is this very push and pull that produces *lieux de mémoire*—moments of history torn away from the movement of history, then returned; no longer quite life, not yet death, like shells on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded.

Memory Seized by History

What we call memory today is therefore not memory but already history. What we take to be flare-ups of memory are in fact its final consumption in the flames of history. The quest for memory is the search for one's history.

Of course, we still cannot do without the word, but we should be aware of the difference between true memory, which has taken refuge in gestures and habits, in skills passed down by unspoken traditions, in the body's inherent self-knowledge, in unstudied reflexes and ingrained memories, and memory transformed by its passage through history, which is nearly the opposite: voluntary and deliberate, experienced as a duty, no longer spontaneous; psychological, individual, and subjective; but never social, collective, or all encompassing. How did we move from the first memory, which is immediate, to the second, which is indirect? We may approach the question of this contemporary metamorphosis from the perspective of its outcome.

Modern memory is, above all, archival. It relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image. What began as writing ends as high fidelity and tape recording. The less memory is experienced from the inside the more it exists only through its exterior scaffolding and outward signs—hence the obsession with the archive that marks our age, attempting at once the complete conservation of the present as well as the total preservation of the past. Fear of a rapid and final disappearance combines with anxiety about the meaning of the present and uncertainty about the future to give even the most humble testimony, the most modest vestige, the potential dignity of the memorable. Have we not sufficiently regretted and deplored the loss or destruction, by our predecessors, of potentially informative sources to avoid opening ourselves to the same reproach from our successors? Memory has been wholly absorbed by its meticulous reconstitution. Its new vocation is to record; delegating to the archive the responsibility of remembering, it sheds its signs upon depositing them there, as a snake sheds its skin.

What we call memory is in fact the gigantic and breathtaking storehouse of a material stock of what it would be impossible for us to remember, an unlimited repertoire of what might need to be recalled. Leibnitz's "paper memory" has become an autonomous institution of museums, libraries, depositories, centers of documentation, and data banks. Specialists estimate that in the public archives alone, in just a few decades, the quantitative revolution has multiplied the number of records by one thousand. No society has ever produced archives as deliberately as our own, not only by volume, not only by new technical means of reproduction and preservation, but also by its superstitious esteem, by its veneration of the trace. Even as traditional memory disappears, we feel obliged assiduously to collect remains, testimonies, documents, images, speeches, any visible signs of what has been, as if this burgeoning dossier were to be called upon to