Memory and Representation in Contemporary Europe
The Persistence of the Past
MEMORY AND REPRESENTATION IN CONTEMPORARY EUROPE
To my parents,
Martin and Ann Murphy
Memory and Representation in Contemporary Europe
The Persistence of the Past

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Preface

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Siobhan Kattago
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Introduction

What then is time? If no one asks me, I know what it is. If I wish to explain to him who asks, me, I do not know. (St. Augustine)

Hardly a day goes by without some media coverage or commentary about the politicization of the past and the politics of memory. There seems to be no shortage of debates about how to represent the past to ourselves and to the next generation. The recent memory boom is visible in history museum debates, monuments, film and photography, commemorations, political speeches and tourism. Academic studies of memory abound in sociology, philosophy, literature, cultural studies and history. Whether one looks at commemorations of the Second World War, debates over appropriate Holocaust memorials or public apologies for national pasts—the issue of memory seems to have an obsessive hold on the public imagination. Are we experiencing more memory now than before or has the mass media simply made us more aware of the recent past? My sense is that the interest in memory is more than an academic trend or a new way of talking about history. Indeed, the politicization of the past is linked to modern perceptions of time and identity. While our backward glance may be seen as a response to the uncertainties of the future, it has deeper roots in modern conceptions of time. To my mind, there at least three reasons for the centrality of memory in contemporary culture: 1) the modern acceleration of time 2) shift from hard to liquid modernity entailing greater interest in the past and 3) the growing importance of the mass media in everyday life.

The Modern Acceleration of Time

The modern break with tradition, democratization of history, secularization of society and distinction between community and society are among just a few of the phrases associated with modernity. Complementing Pierre Nora’s idea of the modern acceleration of history, the German historian, Reinhart Koselleck emphasizes how the break with pre-modernity entails a qualitative shift in our understanding of time (Nora 1996, Koselleck 1985). Beginning with the French Revolution, a different sense of future emerged. While medieval time was predominantly cyclical and contained the Messianic promise of redemption, modern time is open-ended and anticipates an ever accelerating future. The shift to modernity means that ‘time is no longer simply the medium in which all histories take place; it gains a historical quality’ (Koselleck 1985: 246). Modernity
accompanies a shift in our perception of time and historical consciousness. Heralding a kind of new time (Neuzeit), modernity brings about a reversal of the structure of time enabling the future to become increasingly more important than the past. Since the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, belief in progress and the infinite perfectibility of science have become modern creeds that we often take for granted.

Acceleration, initially perceived in terms of an apocalyptic expectation of temporal abbreviation heralding the Last Judgment, transformed itself – also from the mid-eighteenth century – into a concept of historical hope. (Ibid., 36-37)

Koselleck’s ‘semantics of historical time’ is part of his lifelong project, the Geschichtliche Begriffsgeschichte (the historical history of concepts) (Brunner ed. 1972-1993). Expressing more than a lexicon of historical concepts, Begriffsgeschichte is a method of historical understanding. The purpose of his project is to examine ‘the dissolution of the old world and the emergence of the new in terms of the historicoconceptual comprehension of this process’ (Koselleck quoted in Tribe 1985: xi). By studying the Sattelzeit or dawn of modernity, Koselleck is able to gain insight into modern historical consciousness and temporality. Influenced by Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics, he examines how historical consciousness is shaped by the cultural and historical traditions that we are born into. For Gadamer, ‘history does not belong to us, but we belong to it’ (Gadamer 1975: 277). Koselleck interprets Gadamer’s retrieval of tradition as a starting point for exposing the contradictions and ruptures within one’s own lived tradition. In many ways, Koselleck’s work focuses on a central question:

How, in a given present, are the temporal dimensions of past and future related? This query involves the hypothesis that in differentiating past and future, or (in anthropological terms) experience and expectation, it is possible to grasp something like historical time. (Koselleck 1985: xxiii)

Indeed, Koselleck’s distinction between past and future can be linked with Maurice Halbwach’s model of frameworks of memory (les cadres sociaux de la mémoire) and Nora’s places of memory (lieux de mémoire). By arguing that the past is a space of experience (Erfahrungsraum), Koselleck emphasizes how the past is represented as a kind of topography in maps and timelines. The future, as the horizon of expectation (Erwartungshorizont), is qualitatively different from the past because it is open to the unknown and has not yet been experienced. ‘The presence of the past is distinct to the presence of the future’ (Ibid., 272). The poetic metaphors of the past as a spatial topography are helpful in understanding how experience can be located and concretized into places of memory such as museums and monuments. Likewise, the
metaphor of a horizon invokes Gadamer’s hermeneutical ‘horizon of understanding’ and the open horizon of a future full of unknown possibilities.

Since each epoch understands time in a different way—past, present, and future have different meanings at different historical periods. ‘Historical time, if the concept has a specific meaning, is bound up with social and political actions, with concretely acting and suffering human beings and their institutions and organizations’ (Ibid., xxii). The modern acceleration of time entails more than intensity or speed. As Koselleck notes, it means a completely different sense of temporality in which time is no longer cyclical, but linear and oriented towards the open-ended future. If modernity is associated with belief in a progressively better future, contemporary conceptions of time seem to be marred by the opposite. If anything, one senses more hesitancy towards the future than optimism. Secularization, globalization and a growing mass culture have brought questions of identity to the fore. While we may participate in the same mass culture and consume similar products, the need for a fixed place of identity pushes us further and further towards the past. For it is there, that we seem to find a sense of continuity and stability that is otherwise absent from our everyday life. In many ways, the backward glance of Benjamin’s angel of history has become emblematic of the contemporary preoccupation with memory. The angel of history is propelled towards the future while looking back at the ruins of the past.

Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise: it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. The storm is what we call progress. (Benjamin 1968: 257-258)

Benjamin’s angel of history famously captures how faith in progress and rationality was ruptured by the barbarism of the Second World War, twentieth century ideologies and the Holocaust. Whether examined as the dark side of modernity in Adorno and Horkheimer’s *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* or the modern and postmodern debates about the Enlightenment and meta-narratives; the Holocaust and the Gulag challenge a simple reading of modernity as progress. Described as an aporia for historical narration and representation, the Holocaust presents moral and philosophical challenges to modern identity and history (Friedlander 1992). It is at this point that I find the work of Pierre Nora, Zygmunt Bauman and Andreas Huyssen to be helpful. Nora’s excavation of the places of French cultural memory links the modern acceleration of history with a growing interest in the past. If change is a permanent feature of modernity, one response to continual change and the uncertainty of the future is the obligation to remember the past. ‘The commandment of the hour is thus “Thou shalt remember”’ (Nora 1996: 10).
Liquid Modernity and the Shift from Future to Past

Eschewing earlier distinctions between modern and postmodern, Bauman suggests the interesting distinction between hard and liquid modernity. Complementing Koselleck’s ideas about the structural change in temporality between pre-modern and modern, he argues that contemporary society is experiencing a second transformation in the structures of both time and space. In various places, most notably Liquid Modernity, Bauman argues for qualitative changes from hard modernity rooted in the industrial age of production to a liquid modernity of consumption and uncertainty. Expanding Marx’s idea that ‘all that is solid melts into air,’ Bauman suggests that distinctions between modern and postmodern miss what is qualitatively different in contemporary society. If Marx’s idea of the liquidity of modern society was made in the name of new ‘new and improved solids’ such as communism and the rule of the working class, Bauman suggests that liquid modernity is hesitant about the possibility of any solid future (Bauman 2000: 3).

The kind of modernity which was the target, but also the cognitive frame, of classical critical theory strikes the analyst in retrospect as quite different from the one which frames the lives of present-day generations. It appears ‘heavy’ (as against the contemporary ‘light’ or ‘liquefied’); condensed (as against diffuse or ‘capillary’); finally, systemic (as distinct from network-like). (Ibid., 25)

If the Fordist factory, bureaucracy and the panopticon represent aspects of hard modernity, liquid modernity is diffused into the globalized shopping mall, internet and advertisement. ‘The society which enters the twenty-first century is no less ‘modern’ than the society which entered the twentieth; the most one can say is that it is modern in a different way’ (Ibid., 28). To be modern is to cherish newness and ever-increasing modernization. For Bauman though, liquid modernity is characterized by two features: ‘The first is the gradual collapse and swift decline of early modern illusion: of the belief that there is an end to the road along which we proceed, an attainable telos of historical change, a state of perfection to be reached tomorrow, next year or next millennium, some sort of good society…’ (Ibid., 29) Everything solid melts without forming into a new solid. The second feature of liquid modernity is that privatization and individualization accompany the decline of solidity and stability. Large-scale improvements in society are shifted from the state to the individual. “Fluid” modernity is the epoch of disengagement, elusiveness, facile escape and hopeless chase’ (Ibid., 120).

While hard modern temporality is rooted in the French Revolution and the Enlightenment, liquid modern hesitancy toward the future makes the past more attractive. There is a marked shift away from anticipation of the future to memories of the past. Rather than attribute our obsession with the past as a form of pessimism and distrust of the future, Andreas Huyssen argues for a transformation in modern conceptions of temporality akin to Bauman’s liquid modernity. ‘Thus we are not
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just experiencing another bout of pessimism and doubt of progress, but we are living through a transformation (sic) of this modern structure of temporality itself’ (Huyssen 1996: 8). Memories of the past are not captured or relived as ‘experience’ but rather ‘re-presentations’ of remembered experience. In Twilight Memories and Past Present, Huyssen articulates the link between memory and representation. ‘The past is not simply there in memory, it must be articulated to become memory’ (Ibid., 3). If the past is the space of experience, then the process of remembering also involves layers of reconstruction and imagination. Huyssen captures how images of the past in literature, art and museums represent memories of the past as fragmentary traces, shadows and ciphers. ‘At the end of the Proustian experience, with that famous Madeline, is the memory of childhood (sic), not childhood itself’ (Ibid.). We cannot retrieve childhood in its entirety, but only a flicker of childhood as it is remembered at a particular time. It is at this juncture of the acceleration of time and the disorientation of identity that memory becomes increasingly linked to that quintessentially modern place of memory and storytelling: the museum.

Memory and the Mass Media

With the omnipresence of the mass media in everyday life, there are more ways to remember and make sense of the past. Representation has shifted not only from an oral to a written culture; but more importantly, from a written to a visual culture. Such a change affects ways in which the past is represented and narrated. Film and photography are powerful media because images simultaneously connect and distance the audience to the past. In their primal sense of immediacy, mass media images link one to the past; however, in their literal suspension of time and narrative, mass-mediated images may also alienate viewers from historical events. Photography and film possess the dual capacity to simultaneously intensify or alienate individuals from a sense of historical consciousness. We are caught in the representation of history ‘as if’ we, ourselves, were present in this historical event—although curiously outside the event itself. With the development of technology and the mass media, we have the unprecedented ability to archive, catalogue, photograph, film, and record ourselves. As Huyssen notes, the late twentieth century is ironically marked by both a culture of amnesia and an obsessive desire to remember. ‘The difficulty of the current conjuncture is to think memory and amnesia together rather than simply to oppose them’ (Ibid., 7). What does it mean to live in a culture in which the memory of historical events is so ephemeral and, yet at the same time, obsessed with chronicling and storing every human activity? Historical events are, on the one hand, recorded with minute attention to detail. Yet, on the other hand recent events are quickly forgotten as a new ‘story’ replaces the old. It was Adorno who first captured the museal-like quality of modern representation.

The German word, “museal” (museum-like), has unpleasant overtones. It describes objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and
Adorno’s concept of museal has an uncanny quality to it because the function of a museum becomes more like a mausoleum than archive. ‘Museum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association. Museums are like the family sepulchers of works of art’ (Ibid., 175). Hermann Lübbe later adds to Adorno’s musealization by moving the concept from the formal museum to that of everyday life (Lübbe 1983). Not only is time accelerating; but technological change entails a contraction and shrinking of the present. ‘In short, the contraction of the present entails a process whereby the space of time for which we can calculate our living conditions with a degree of constancy is shortened’ (Lübbe 2009: 159). What distinguishes contemporary society from previous ones is the knowledge that most of the things surrounding us will soon be obsolete. This conscious knowledge of obsolescence means that the present shrinks in duration when compared with the perception of the present in previous periods of history. As a result of this contracting present, individuals have a greater need to catalogue, record, archive and store things before they are soon replaced by something else. ‘Let me reiterate my view that the contraction of the present as outlined here, which complements the process of cultural museumification, represents a necessary but by no means sufficient condition for museumification’ (Ibid., 162). Echoing Nietzsche, Lübbe diagnoses contemporary society as obsessed with representations of the past. Reflecting on Lübbe’s broader reading of musealization, Huyssen writes that,

Lübbe showed how musealization was no longer bound to the institution of the museum, understood in the narrow sense, but had come to infiltrate all areas of everyday life. Lübbe’s diagnosis posited an expansive historicism of our contemporary culture, and he claimed that never before had a cultural present been obsessed with the past to a similar extent. (Huyssen 1996: 22)

The phenomenon of musealization is visible in commemorations, film, photography, Internet archives and television. The more uncertain the future appears, the greater the desire to find solace and security in the past. The musealization of the past is connected with changing perceptions of time and space—as time accelerates and the present shrinks, the past seems to be captured, reconstructed, copy/pasted, blogged, tweeted and frozen at a dizzying pace. Like Huyssen and Lübbe, Baudrillard recognizes the musealization of everyday life. ‘The museum is now everywhere, like a dimension of life itself’ (Baudrillard 1983: 15). The mass media age has not only altered our understanding and remembrance of recent history, but has also changed the ways in which we identify and situate ourselves within the flow of historical events. By supplying a steady stream of stock images ranging from documentary footage to television dramas and cinema, an iconic vocabulary of images has developed. Cultural memory, as the indirect remembrance of the past that is linked to the present
is both intensified and lessened through the image database of the mass media. Koselleck’s description of modernity as future-oriented and Bauman’s conception of liquid modernity helps us to situate stories of the past within the framework of liquidity, fragility and uncertainty. Likewise, the shift away from the future towards the security of the past is accompanied by an increasing musealization of everyday life as the mass media offers more possibilities for representing the past.

**Cultural Memory in the Information Age**

With the advent of the Internet, we’ve come to expect easy digital access to the past. With a click of the mouse and the right hotlinks, history seems to literally unfold before our very eyes. Yet, there is something deeply troubling about our near obsession with storing the past. Are we really more in touch with the past than before or has the digital age ushered in a false smugness? Nietzsche’s ascerbic critique of 19th century historicism still offers insight into our 21st century ‘historical fever’ (Nietzsche 1980: 10). By trying to capture every aspect and detail of the past, we risk losing sight of the present. History has to be useful for life; it shouldn’t take us away from it. Nietzsche argues for the necessity of finding a balance or horizon between memory and forgetting. To put it simply, he cautions against the tendency to become a ‘gravedigger of the present.’ In his mind, there are three different kinds of historians or gravediggers: monumental, antiquarian and critical. Monumental history is reductive and simplifies the ambiguous complexity of historical choices. Large events and heroes are contrasted with the ordinariness of contemporary life. Events in the past form a great chain or grand narrative—culminating in the paucity of the present. Nietzsche cautions against a monumental vision of the past because it tends to dwarf the present by calling undue attention to heroic ruptures and breaks within ordinary time.

Thus, whenever the monumental vision of the past rules over the other ways of looking at the past, I mean the antiquarian and the critical, the past itself suffers damage: very great portions of the past are forgotten and despised, and flow away like a grey uninterrupted flood, and only single embellished facts stand out as islands… (Ibid., 17)

Antiquarian history, on the other hand offers a pious vision of the past. Like the antique collector, the past is preserved uncritically for the sake of preservation. As such, the past becomes a place of consolation and reassurance. When the antiquarian vision of history dominates, Nietzsche detects the ‘odour of decay’ (Ibid., 21). With the emphasis on preservation for the sake of preservation, the present loses its link to the antiquarian past.
When history serves past life so as to undermine further and especially higher life, when the historical sense no longer preserves life but mummifies it: the tree dies naturally, beginning at the top and slowly dying towards the roots – and in the end the root itself generally decays. (Ibid.)

The present is eclipsed by an uncritical appreciation of the past. Finally, the critical historian condemns and judges the past based on the needs of the present. While a critical sense of history is necessary so that individuals in the present can judge the past rather than revere or preserve it, Nietzsche criticizes excessive critique because it too easily leads to a denial of the link between past and present.

It is always a dangerous process, namely dangerous for life itself: and men or ages which serve life in this manner of judging and annihilating a past are always dangerous and endangered men and ages. For since we happen to be the results of earlier generations we are also the results of their aberrations, passions and errors, even crimes; it is not possible quite to free oneself from this chain. (Ibid., 22)

Nietzsche’s observations on the abuse of a historical sense, whether monumental, antiquarian or critical still ring true today. Great leaders and epochs loom large as cultural ‘islands’ of the past while our mass culture thrives on antiquarian oddities and quaint theme parks. The building of memorials and museums coupled with the re-naming and demolition of older ones is a perennial point of contention. In this age of information overload, where yesterday’s newspaper is already an antique, the present is often reduced to a minute nanosecond. Obsessed, as we are, with archiving our personal pasts—in family albums, genealogies, videos and digital cameras—all experience is increasingly digitally mediated. Ours seems to be an age of instant memorialization. It is difficult to simply experience an event without recording or capturing it for later viewing. Caught on vacation without a camera, we somehow feel that we are missing something without the mediation of its visual representation. Whether or not we actually look back at the photos that we took is of lesser importance than the actual snapshots that magically validate our experience as authentic and meaningful. The camera placates our fears of forgetfulness by capturing the moment. Our obsession with memory is driven by an injunction against forgetting. The present exists for us as a kind of ‘memorial culture.’ Because we are saturated with images of the past through de-contextualized documentary film footage, cd-roms, websites, audio recordings, history books, novels, museum exhibitions, and memorials, the past becomes a virtual treasure chest to be ransacked at will. By blurring the line between information and entertainment, the mass media provide the illusion of re-experiencing the past. With this curious distortion of past and present, we experience time differently. It is dilated and seems to exist simultaneously within the present.
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But do the mass media help us to remember more? With the speed of contemporary technological change, old media become obsolete faster than we can translate the data into a new readable form. Paper once filled the national archives, now they include celluloid, outdated hard drives and unreadable databases. So what happened? And how might the information age affect our cultural memory? In many ways, Siegfried Kracauer’s astute observation that the things of everyday life are more revealing than philosophical systems may illuminate our peculiar predicament.

The position that an epoch occupies in the historical process can be determined more strikingly from an analysis of its inconspicuous surface-level expressions than from that epoch’s judgments about itself. Since these judgments are expressions of the tendencies of a particular era, they do not offer conclusive testimony about its overall constitution. The surface-level expressions, however, by virtue of their unconscious nature, provide unmediated access to the fundamental substance of the state of things. (Kracauer 1995: 75)

Our historical fever and obsession with the past are immediately visible in the multitude of digital collections and archives. Kracauer’s emphasis on the mundane and quotidian provides a fresh approach to understanding how new information technologies are affecting our sense of time and history. Places where information is stored such as collections, archives and digital archives provide ‘unmediated access’ to our perception of the past.

Collecting and Archiving

Any set of things no matter how small can be a collection. From stamps to rare books and paintings, a narrative is given to organize the objects. The collector is not interested in the function of the objects, but in the stories that these objects house. As Walter Benjamin wryly noted, ‘The period, the region, the craftsmanship, the former ownership—for a true collector the whole background of an item adds up to a magic encyclopedia whose quintessence is the fate of his object’ (Benjamin 1968: 60). Objects become souvenirs (or places of memory) inspiring recollection. They are ruins or traces of a bygone time. As owners of collections, we are heirs to a past and progenitors to a possible future. This passion for collection has taken on a new twist with eBay, blogs, Facebook and YouTube. Concurrent with the speed of technological change is our desire to stand still and find a link—no matter how tenuous—to a warmer past. Collections store memories and fixate identities. Here again, Benjamin rings true: ‘every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector’s passion borders on the chaos of memories’ (Ibid.). The collector has his or her own sense of order that he bequeaths to his things. Without such a narrative, the found objects are no longer collectibles worthy of another’s gaze, but oddities destined for forgetfulness. When something enters a collection, it has secured a
foothold in our memory. When Otto Bettmann fled Germany in the 1930s, he left with a trunk full of otherwise random pictures that later became the powerful Corbis collection. Many documentary stock images owe their sustenance to his chaotic passion for collecting the flickering images of recent history. Whether images, books, or china; collections are reduced to things that somehow evoke a glimpse of the past. They are ‘things’ that someone, like Bettmann, deemed worth salvaging from the dustbin of history. Whether they finally end up on someone’s shelf, a second-hand store or in a museum as part of a blockbuster exhibition, the objects are still things suffused with whimsical meaning.

Collections can be private, but archives are by nature meant for public display. Originating from the Greek *arkheia* or town hall, the archive is, by definition, ‘a repository for memories or information: the archive of the mind’ (*American Heritage Dictionary*). Historically though the conception of the archive has already gone through a dramatic sea change even before the appearance of the Internet. In pre-capitalist societies, memory was in the hands of the church, state, and noble families. Archives were maintained and used by scholars and priests rather than by society in general. In many ways, Pierre Nora’s ruminations on memory illuminate our present situation. ‘Modern memory is first of all archival. It relies entirely on the specificity of the trace, the materiality of the vestige, the concreteness of the recording, the visibility of the image’ (Nora 1996: 8). In the general introduction to his edited volumes on French national memory, Nora reflects on the structural shift that the category of memory is undergoing in a mass media age. ‘We suffer from a hypertrophy of memory, which is inextricably intertwined with our sense of memory’s loss and concomitant institutionalization’ (Ibid., 9). The obsession with storing the past accompanies a deep awareness of the loss of traditional life. Because the pace of everyday life is so fast, we try to grasp whatever remains and fragments we can. The past validates our fragile foothold on the present. ‘What we call memory is in fact a gigantic and breathtaking effort to store the material vestiges of what we cannot possibly remember, thereby amassing an unfathomable collection of things that we might someday need to recall’ (Ibid., 8). Collections, card catalogues and archives bequeath an order to the mountains of information and detritus surrounding us.

While traditional collections and archives house original objects; the Internet and visual media store copies and simulations. Photography was the first stage in the blurring of original and copy. Likewise, Andy Warhol’s prints proved the futility of trying to distinguish between the two. With the Internet, the line between referent and copy is completely distorted because ‘there is no there, there.’ The Internet heralds a structural transformation not only of our systems of information storage and retrieval but more importantly of how we think about ourselves as historical beings. What and how we remember are irreparably altered. As James Gleick says,

Meanwhile, in its unofficial way, the Internet is transforming the way information is stored. The traditional function of libraries, gathering books for permanent
storage or one-at-a-time lending, has been thoroughly confused. Archiving of the on-line world is not centralized. The *network distributes memory* (sic) (Gleick 1999).

Internet experts such as Stewart Brand caution that we are becoming cultural amnesiacs (Brand 1999). The rapid obsolescence of media technology blocks our access to the past because we will not be able to read the old files. Our fantastic short-term memory comes at a very heavy price because in the long run, we forget more. Whereas paper can be read by anyone, files stored in outdated computer languages are easily lost in space. Arguing for the necessity of a long-term time frame, Brand and his colleagues are in no way harking back to a pre-computer age. Rather they are quick to point out the irony of our information age. We seem to have more information than before, but the speed of technological change obfuscates our ability to ‘read’ the texts. While the past seems infinitely accessible, computers cannot create a living link between past and future. Acutely aware of the power of the Internet, Brand cautions against the Faustian seduction of technology and argues for a responsible use of digital media. He doesn’t advocate a return to the old Smith-Corona but attentiveness to how the Internet is altering our sense of time and historical consciousness. The Internet indulges the antiquarian in us by literally preserving infinite amounts of information. Virtual archives have merged with musty attics. As Gleick bleakly observes,

> The Internet turns a large fraction of humanity into a sort of giant organism – an intermittently connected information-gathering creature – and really, amnesia doesn’t seem to be its fatal flaw. This new being just can’t throw anything away. It is obsessive. It has forgotten that some baggage is better left behind. *Homo sapiens* has become a packrat. (Gleick 1999)

So we are back to Nietzsche and the 19th century. We have to find a balance between the historical and unhistorical. Not everything is memorable. The human ability to adapt and place events into perspective is central for keeping a perspective on life. Whether Nietzsche’s antidotes of the unhistorical (forgetfulness) or the ahistorical (art and science) are sufficient is an open question. Nonetheless, there is a correlation between the speed of everyday life, fragmentation of individual identity and obsession with the past. Nietzsche’s sharp condemnation of the 19th century sentiment as ‘gravediggers of the present’ is deeply unsettling and perhaps also unfair—but that does not mean that it is not worth thinking about. On the contrary, the digital media age seems to encourage more storage and categorization of things from the past. It is Nietzsche’s central theme, namely that the past does and should matter, *within* the light of the present that is important to keep in perspective.

* * *

Although each generation discovers new ways to order the chaos around them, the desire to remember and tell stories about the past is as old as the goddess of
Memory and Representation in Contemporary Europe

In the Greek world, memory was personified in the titan goddess, Mnemosyne. As the daughter of time (Kronos) and earth (Gaia), Mnemosyne had the gift of reason and the ability to name all objects that we now remember. As a mythological figure, Mnemosyne personifies the mysterious combination of memory, imagination and storytelling. According to Hesiod, Mnemosyne slept with Zeus for nine consecutive nights and gave birth to the nine muses: Clio, the muse of history, Urania, of astronomy, Melpomene, of tragedy, Thalia, of comedy, Terpsichore, of dance, Calliope, of epic poetry, Erato, of love poetry, Polyhymnia, of songs to the gods, and Euterpe, muse of lyric poetry. If the muses each inspire particular manifestations of creativity, Mnemosyne is the mother of all creativity. Embodying memory, she is able to order the flow of time into a narrative form that can be remembered. Combining experience and imagination, memory is an integral part of the human condition—whether in its ancient Greek or modern manifestations. Mnemosyne is thus by implication not only the goddess of memory but the mother of storytelling. Narrative and representation are attempts to cast chaos into order, to make sense of things that would otherwise seem random, chaotic and meaningless. Whether manifest as myth, history, tragedy, philosophy, song or dance—all recorded human activity has its origin in Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory.

The various chapters in Memory and Representation in Contemporary Europe: The Persistence of the Past are reflections on different aspects of memory in contemporary Europe. Why do certain places and not others symbolically capture the past and freeze time? Likewise, why does the process of memory, as a fluid and changing activity, seem to prevent its own solidification? The chapters reflect not only on the persistence of the past as a theme linked to media, modernity and time, but also discuss the politics of memory within a changing Europe. The first two chapters were written on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the fall of communism. ‘The Slippery Slope of Memory’ (Chapter 1) analyzes different ways of coming to terms with a difficult past. Discussing Timothy Garton Ash’s prescient outline of the problem of how to deal with the past, the essay argues for the fluidity of past and present as well as on the duel dangers of the sacralization and trivialization of memory. ‘Agreeing to Disagree’ (Chapter 2) addresses the question of whether Europe even needs a common memory of World War II and the post-war period. In this longer essay, the legacy of the past as both an inheritance and a burden is addressed. Framed within the context of a traumatic understanding of the past, ‘Agreeing to Disagree’ suggests that there are three broad narratives about World War II: a West European, East European/former Communist and Russian/Soviet. Each of these narratives locates the memory of the Holocaust in a different way. In reflecting on this matrix, I maintain both the centrality of the Holocaust and the importance of plurality.

The next three chapters analyze cultural examples from Germany after unification. These chapters focus on uncanny places of German memory as represented in novels, photographs and individual biographies. ‘The Ethics of Seeing’ (Chapter 3) discusses the ideological power of documentary photographs
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taken in Germany at the end of the war. Reflecting on Dagmar Barnouw’s *Germany 1945* and Barbie Zelizer’s *Remembering to Forget*, the essay is also a meditation on Susan Sontag’s concern with the power of documentary photography to shape memories of the past. ‘The Sound of Silence’ (Chapter 4) compares Bernhard Schlink’s novel *The Reader* with Gesine Schwan’s book, *Politics and Guilt*. Here, I examine the power of silence—from repression and evasion to how silence affects the next generation. In looking back one might say that both Schlink and Schwan suggest that one has a moral responsibility to address the past, *whether* one wants to or not. Connected to ‘The Ethics of Seeing’ and ‘The Sound of Silence’, the essay ‘Living in the Third Person’ (Chapter 5) reflects on the life of one individual who tried to live by the motto that not only is the past a foreign country, but also a different person. ‘Living in the Third Person’ examines how a former SS officer, Hans Schneider officially ‘died,’ renamed himself Hans Schwerte, remarried his wife and adopted his child only to later become a well-respected professor of German literature in West Germany. The life of Schneider/Schwerte is an uncanny example of self-transformation from authoritarianism to democracy.

The next two chapters, ‘Goodbye to Grand Narratives?’ (Chapter 6) and ‘Memory, Pluralism and the Agony of Politics’ (Chapter 7) deal with examples from the Estonian political landscape. ‘Goodbye to Grand Narratives?’ suggests that the controversy accompanying the re-location of a Soviet-era war memorial was testimony to what Tony Judt called the ‘unraveling’ of post-war memories. The comfortable cold war narratives of winner and loser, liberator and fascist literally crumbled at the feet of a solitary sculpture in the center of the Estonian capital. ‘Memory, Pluralism and the Agony of Politics’ discusses the dangers of reading the past through the eyes of victimhood. Taking issue with Schmitt and Mouffe’s antagonistic politics based on the dichotomy of friend and foe, I suggest a greater appreciation of pluralism in the sense of Arendt and Berlin. In many ways, the essay is linked with earlier themes and argues for a richer understanding of pluralism over a dogmatic and antagonistic representation of the past. ‘Memory, Pluralism and the Agony of Politics’ likewise attempts to steer through the difficulties of relativism and the temptation to use the past as a weapon against political opponents. The final chapter, ‘The Fata Morgana of Revolution’ (Chapter 8) highlights how memories of revolutions are part of the story of modernity. 1989 has joined the pantheon of earlier revolutions. Symbolizing radical newness and rupture, revolutions are the pinnacle of political action. Reflecting on Arendt’s ideas about revolution, the essay analyzes their ephemeral and transitory nature. The postscript discusses the legacy of totalitarianism and the revolutions of 1989. The issue is less of whether one should remember, but rather how to internalize the various lessons of the past for the future of Europe.

One could say that the challenge of a book about memory lies in its seeming randomness and incoherence. That is, to some extent true. Reflections on memory are not always read from front to back—but rather offer the reader the chance to read the parts that are of interest to them at a particular moment. Likewise, chapters do not provide a neat argument with conclusive findings. But, the more
that I teach, write and think about memory, the more I become convinced of its fragmentary and ephemeral nature. The chapters in *Memory and Representation in Contemporary Europe: The Persistence of the Past* thus offer the reader occasions upon which to take stock of different but overlapping contours of past and present in contemporary Europe. Looking back, they are united in their intellectual reference points and influences. In addition to the seminal work of Nietzsche, Gadamer, Halbwachs and Nora, there are four thinkers whose work permeates all of the chapters, that of Arendt, Berlin, Judt and Sontag. The book thus stands literally on the shoulders of giants. Why have I singled out these thinkers and not others? Simply because these are the thinkers, to whom I have returned to, over and over again as a reader, teacher and writer. Although they are different, they share deep moral convictions and poetic styles of writing. Moreover, they are masters of the essay as a literary form of writing.

Arendt is certainly a strong voice haunting this book. From her controversial ruminations on the banality of evil to her majestic plea for new beginnings and the need to think from the point of view of the other person, Arendt is a rich source of inspiration. Her discussion of pluralism complements that of Isaiah Berlin. Both recognize the allure and dangers of trying to fit the complexity of the world into one philosophical or ideological system. Berlin’s arguments against monism and passionate plea for pluralism are an integral theme throughout this book. What links Arendt and Berlin to Sontag’s work is a deep appreciation of literature. Whether found in Kafka, Broch or Benjamin, the poetic imagination is acknowledged as an important expression of the link between past, present and future. Sontag’s influence is most visible in her prescient reflections on photography. To my mind, she is unparalleled in her assessment of the power of the image to enforce and re-enforce a moral position. The final giant whose influence is felt in almost every chapter is that of Tony Judt. Unique in his combination of historian, moralist and public intellectual, this book would be unimaginable without his polemic observations on post-war Europe. By adding the suffix *mis* to memory, Judt added another dimension to the dichotomy between memory and forgetting. A mis-memory does indeed contain a grain of truth, but is somehow off the mark and remembered as the entire truth. Likewise, the metaphor of the unraveling of memory invokes Penelope as she spins her cloth each day only to unravel it in the evening. Memory of the past defies completion—parts are woven together, while other pieces unravel. What links all four writers together is a common concern with the old problem of evil. Defiant against cynicism and relativism, there is a burning sense to try and understand the moral choices that individuals make within the context of their times and to acknowledge the legacy that is the direct or indirect consequence of those actions.

Memory is a re-presentation of past experience. One can neither recall everything nor re-live something that happened in the past. Memory, by its very nature is fragmentary, episodic, unpredictable, and yet full of meaning for the one who remembers. One could say that it is the very impermanence of memory that seems to defy representation. Whether expressed in historical documents, novels, monuments, poetry or film—there is an explicit attempt to catch meaningful traces
of the past for future generations. The act of memory recalls and interprets the past in both its positive and negative aspects—as tradition and traumatic burden. Regardless of whether memories of the past are written, sculpted or captured on film—as representations, they have a way of taking on a life of their own.

References


Chapter 1

The Slippery Slope of Memory

Anniversaries provide the occasion to look back and reassess the past from the perspective of the present. One doesn’t just look back from any place or time, but from a particular location and particular time in the present. Our point of recollection, remembrance, and reassessment is ‘the now’—however fleeting or fixed we may perceive that moment to be. With the mass demonstrations of ordinary East European citizens for freedom in 1989, the fall of communism has brought about a more open society in each of the former communist countries with the exception of Belarus. Each former communist country has its own national story of suffering and liberation within the larger tapestry of that ‘place’ called East and Central Europe, the Soviet bloc or former Soviet Union. Twenty years on, prepositions of *pre* and *post* are still used: pre-war, post-war, post-communist, post-Soviet. Each preposition qualifies and emphasizes the transitional aspect of time. Pre and post link the noun to a bounded period of time: World War II and communism.

1989 is seen as an *annus mirabilis* or year of wonders, representing the dramatic break from communism, state-planned economies as well as re-entry into Europe. Twenty years on, freedom seems to have lost some of its magnetic and miraculous attraction. Amidst relatively low voter turnout, economic downturn and disappointment with the difficulties in adapting to new economic and social conditions, anniversaries and commemorations provide an occasion to rethink some of the reasons for democratic change. In any transition, advisors come and go, but the major cast of characters stays largely the same. The drama of revolutionary politics cannot compare with the mundane reality of everyday party politics. Since there is not a director with a God’s eye view who can call for new actors, a certain process of selection has to take place within the national cast of characters. In the last 20 years, both the communist and Nazi pasts have been opened up for historical examination and a renewed discussion of totalitarianism has emerged. Although modern technology provides individuals with unprecedented means to capture and freeze moments of the past, *how* experiences of war and communism are interpreted and woven into meaningful narratives is far from neutral. The dangers of opening up Pandora’s box occurs when individuals fall inside and remain fixated in the past, seeking revenge rather than reconciliation and justice. Particularly because memories of the past invoke truth and facticity, the stage is set for clashing interpretations. All too often, national stories fall into the narrative of winners and losers, liberators and occupiers, friend and foe.

Too much memory makes one a slave to the past, while forgetfulness denies history and one’s own link to the past. As Nietzsche cautioned in the 19th century,
a balance between the historical and unhistorical is required for the health of individuals, cultures and nations. Criticizing the tendency to diminish the present in the shadow of the past, Nietzsche characterizes the feverish quality of a hyper historical sense. ‘There is a degree of insomnia, of rumination, of historical sense which injures every living thing and finally destroys it, be it a man, a people or a culture’ (Nietzsche 1980: 10). Granted that Nietzsche’s reflections are general and not intended for contemporary discussions of democracy and memory—his metaphor of a balance between memory and forgetting is more relevant that ever.

**Coming to Terms with the Past: Whether, When, Who and How**

Questions about how to come to terms with a difficult past have been associated with many goals: truth, justice and recognition of guilt as well as consolidation of democracy, national healing, cleansing and reconciliation. Timothy Garton Ash raises the important question of whether there indeed exists a clear correlation between how a nation comes to terms with its past and the consolidation of a democratic culture. Since World War II, West German discussions of how to come to terms with the past have come under the framework of Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit or Vergangenheitsbewältigung. Do the rule of law, pluralism and tolerance have anything to do with how nations come to terms with their troubled pasts? (Ash 2001/2002: 38) If Spain is an example of a stable democracy that chose not to immediately examine the Franco years, Germany is an example of the opposite: a seemingly relentless confrontation with the Nazi past and one of the most successful open democracies.

Questions such as whether to open or close communist-era archives are particularly relevant because they raise the question of the truthfulness of the files and the entire process of informing. Trials are an important part of criminal justice, but can also lead to revenge and theatrical drama. Likewise, lustration as a kind of ritual purging is structurally unable to deal with the complexity of particular situations. What seems to be the most balanced and beneficial for the long-term health of a democracy are historical commissions. By listening to witnesses, who have lived through both the periods of communism and National Socialism, as well as interpreting archival material, a fuller understanding of the past may be reached. Moreover, historical commissions present a greater possibility for finding a balance between the sacramalization and trivialization of memory.

For Ash, the issue of how memory is related to democracy basically boils down to four questions: whether, when, who and how (Ash 2002). The first, and probably most important question is whether one should address the past at all or simply ignore it. Before addressing the subtleties of how much or little to remember, one has to address whether it is beneficial to recall the past or whether amnesia and a ‘new beginning’ foster a peaceful society. Is it better to remember everything or ‘forgive and forget?’ Historically, the aim of a shared future has often resulted in state-sponsored forgetfulness. As early as 403 BC, with the restoration
The Slippery Slope of Memory

of Athenian democracy after oligarchy and civil war, amnesia was declared as a way in which to prevent revenge and promote reconciliation. Moreover, the Athenians installed an altar to Lethe, the goddess of forgetfulness on the acropolis as a sign that forgetfulness is necessary for a new beginning (Misztal 2005: 1324, Connerton 2008: 61-62). The Treaty of Westphalia ending the Thirty Years War in 1648 included an injunction that both sides should forgive and forget. When Charles II became king of England in 1660 he declared ‘an act of full and general pardon, indemnity and oblivion’ (Connerton 2008: 62). For Ernst Renan, national cohesion requires both shared memories and a certain degree of forgetfulness. ‘Yet the essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things’ (Renan 1990: 11). Indeed if one considers the liberal idea of the social contract, whether in the form of Thomas Hobbes or John Rawls, a period of willed forgetfulness is deemed necessary for future social cohesion. As Winston Churchill proclaimed in his 1946 Zurich speech, if Europe is to recover from the horror of war, a ‘blessed act of oblivion’ would be necessary. Such oblivion shouldn’t conflict with the pursuit of justice, but instead prevent a vicious cycle of revenge and violence. ‘If Europe is to be saved from infinite misery, and indeed from final doom, there must be this act of faith in the European family, this act of oblivion against all crimes and follies of the past’ (Churchill 1946). From the opposite perspective, Karl Jaspers makes a powerful argument for the necessity to remember. In his book written immediately after the war, The Question of German Guilt, Jaspers outlines levels of individual guilt. Due to the crimes committed during National Socialism, each individual has a responsibility to remember—the issue becomes what kind of guilt is associated with the past: criminal, political, moral or metaphysical (Jaspers 1961). The democratic revolutions in Eastern Europe have been a watershed in claims for memory rather than forgetting. From the building of monuments and history museums, the writing of history books, films and documentaries to the academic discipline of memory studies, more memory seems to equal more democracy.

The second question that Ash raises is that of timing. When should the past be dealt with: immediately, in the near future or at some later time in the distant future. The question of timing is notoriously political because it implicates most directly those who served in the old regime. Thinkers, such as Hermann Lübbe suggest that a certain period of silence is necessary for democratic stability (Lübbe 2007). Without arguing for a magical amount of time, Lübbe cautions against disturbing the fragile texture of a new democracy with meddlesome questions about the past. German democratic stability is rooted in the official silence of the 1950s. Lübbe makes the compelling argument that future unity is more important that the seductive lure of revenge, scapegoats, and witch hunts. Here the argument to wait is as old as the adage that one should wait before reacting in a rash moment of anger. In essence, rational reflection requires a certain period of silence. In essence, ‘time heals all wounds.’ From the opposite spectrum, political thinkers such as Gesine Schwan argue that silence may just as easily be construed as justice postponed, amnesty or amnesia. Silence damages the political culture of
a fragile democracy not only in the current generation but in future ones as well. Not acknowledging the past immediately results in silenced guilt (Schwan 2001). Thinkers who argue against waiting to confront the past harken back to a Freudian model of repression and the return of the repressed if the past is not immediately confronted. If not adequately acknowledged or dealt with, the past haunts and distorts the present and the future. From the point of view of historical scholarship, waiting limits what one can research. ‘The witnesses die; others forget, or at least, rearrange their memories; and it is the worst horrors that are often the least well documented in the archives’ (Ash 2002: 268).

The third question is who should judge the past: the leaders of the new democratic government, ordinary citizens, the international community, the media, parliament or the victims? Who should judge raises difficult moral questions of acceptance, mercy and forgiveness. Should those without experience living in a totalitarian regime judge the crimes of communism?

What right have we, who never faced the dilemmas of living in a dictatorship, to sit in judgement on those who did? Do we know how we would have behaved? Perhaps we, too, would have become party functionaries or secret police informers? So what right do we have to condemn? (Ash 2002: 270)

Given the complexity of the communist dictatorship and totalitarian experience of living under both Nazism and communism, the question of ‘who’ should judge the past is linked to historical truth and justice. A lasting legacy of the war and communism in the Baltic States are the demographic changes resulting in large Russian-speaking minorities. As the riots surrounding the removal of the Bronze Soldier in Tallinn demonstrated, clashing memories are most volatile when linked to ethnic differences. If May 9 is remembered as a sacred day of victory for many Russians living in the Baltic States, it is marred by loss and occupation for many Lithuanians, Latvians and Estonians. Likewise the fact that the governments of Lithuania and Estonia chose not to attend the ceremonies commemorating the 60th anniversary of Victory Day in Moscow on May 9, 2005 revealed splits in how ‘the end’ of the war was remembered, interpreted and judged.

Finally, there is the question of how the past should be examined and judged: through trials, purges or history lessons. Each way has its own strength and weakness. Moreover, each path is dependent upon the countries transition to democracy. Ranging from the Nuremberg trials to Czech lustration and the East German Commission of Enquiry, the results are varied. Truth and History Commissions offer the most neutrality and greatest potential to learn about how regimes maintained power. For Ash, the most neutral judge of the past is the historian, rather than the politician or criminal judge. ‘In fact I do think that if you ask “who is best equipped to do justice to the past?” the answer is, or at least should be, historians. But this is also a heavy responsibility’ (Ash 2002: 281). Partially in response to international criticism about the lack of knowledge of war crimes and in an earnest attempt to document publicly recent history, each of the
Baltic States established historical commissions in the 1990s to investigate the Nazi and Communist occupations. The work of these commissions may, like the Entquete Commission in the former GDR (1995), provide a forthright historical analysis of the communist regime and post-war years. Although the Estonian commission is criticized for being more of a positivist fact-finding commission than providing in-depth historical analysis, it is the first attempt by Estonian historians in an international commission to examine the legacies of the war and occupations in Estonia. As Ash notes, historical commissions are one important way to understand the past. They complement trials, monuments, public debates, documentaries and the academic writing of history (Ash 2002: 265-282).

**Uniqueness of Memory: Interpreting and Internalizing the Past**

If, for Maurice Halbwachs, all memory is influenced by social frameworks, it is later with the work of Pierre Nora that the fascination with memory is linked to transformations in modern time (Halbwachs 1980, Nora 1989). In addition to calling attention to the locality of memory with his phrase ‘place of memory’ (**lieu de mémoire**), Nora emphasizes the cultural and mythical power of memory. ‘This upsurge in memory intersects, it seems to me, with two major historical phenomena which have marked the age, one temporal and one social’ (Nora 2002: 4). The first major transformation is a perceived acceleration of time. Modernity is more about rapid change than permanence, whether scientific, technological, social or political. In the quest for some place of certainty within an ever-accelerating world, people look towards the past for stability. Uncertainty towards a future where today’s know-how may already be obsolete makes the past appear more stable. The acceleration of time has two opposing consequences: either the past appears more stable than the present and future, or the present is dramatically distanced from the past because it seemingly has nothing to do with the present. As a result of the closeness or distance of the past, the word ‘memory’ seems to have taken on a life of its own. “‘Memory’ has taken on meaning so broad and all-inclusive that it tends to be used purely and simply as a substitute for “history” and to put the study of history at the service of memory” (Nora 2002: 5). In addition to the acceleration of time, the upsurge in memory is also linked to the democratization of history. Merging with identity politics of minority groups and history from below, one consequence of the democratization of memory is a plurality of memories. ‘Unlike history, which has always been in the hands of the public authorities, of scholars and specialized peer groups; memory has acquired all the new privileges of a popular protest movement’ (Ibid., 7).

In response to the growing use of the term ‘collective memory,’ Reinhart Koselleck and Susan Sontag both argue against the salience of collective memory. For them, memory is an individual experience. At a conference held in Sofia in 2003 on the work of Pierre Nora, Koselleck presented a paper with the provocative thesis that there is no such thing as collective memory. Given his background as a
historian and his own experience as a German soldier in a Soviet prisoner of war camp, Koselleck cautioned against the alluring confusion of collective memory. ‘I can only remember what I myself have experienced. Memory (Erinnerung) is bound up with personal experience’ (Koselleck 2004: 3). His memory of seeing Auschwitz from the first-hand perspective of a prisoner of war was different from the official commemorations of its liberation. ‘As commemoration, as re-commemoration, it is semantically a fully different memory from that which I have kept in my memory as a witness from the initial news’ (Ibid., 3). The collectivities that shape individual memory can be party, class, nation, union, religion—all the way up to the category of humanity. For Koselleck though, the question remains who is the subject, who remembers? The subject is the individual who may be influenced by what he terms ‘the 7Ps’: professors, priests, preachers, PR specialists, the press, poets and politicians (Ibid., 5). The seven groups in society simplify, mediate and define the terms of memory. ‘There are as many memories as there are people and each collectivity, who is convinced that they are the only one, is, in my opinion, a priori ideology or myth’ (Ibid., 6). In his opinion, there is no collective memory in the singular, but rather collective conditions that enable memory. ‘There is no collective memory; there are collective conditions which make memory possible’ (Ibid.). The role of the historian is not to support collective identity, but to try and understand the complexity of the past.

In a similar vein, Susan Sontag argues for the uniqueness of memory. Unlike Koselleck, who focuses on historical documents, Sontag bases her reflections on photography and art. Photography has the power to reduce the complexity of history into a single iconic image. She cautions against the facile equation of a photograph with historical truth. If memory is viewed in the singular, the complexity of human experience and the importance of culture are ignored. Interesting enough, while Sontag argues that ‘strictly speaking, there is not such thing as collective memory,’ (Sontag 2003: 85) Halbwachs insists on the opposite. For him, there is no such thing as a strictly individual memory; rather memory is always framed by membership in a group. ‘In reality, we are never alone. Other men need not be physically present, since we always carry with us and in us a number of distinct persons’ (Halbwachs 1980: 23). Culture, tradition and language are frameworks within which individual memories are located. Even if we experience something in private—like getting lost or taking a walk alone, the knowledge of the absent framework—be they smaller groups such as friends and family or larger groups like the nation—this knowledge of the absence of a group, constitutes a framework in absentia. ‘The thought of the absent family provides a framework…’ (Ibid., 38) Likewise, for Halbwachs, ‘… it is individuals as group members (sic) who remember’ (Ibid., 48). All memories are framed by some form of social collectivity—be it the family, religion or nation. It is only when we dream that Halbwachs admits some form of private and individual memory.

Both Sontag and Koselleck share a similar concern with the emphasis on ‘collective memory.’ Just as guilt is individual, so is memory. One should be careful of projecting individual experience onto collectivities. However, even if
memory is private, one can and should learn from the larger processes of history. ‘All memory is individual, unreproducible – it dies with each person’ (Sontag 2003: 86). Collective instruction means the internalization of the past and acknowledgment of some sort of responsibility for past actions. Responsibility, unlike guilt, can be collective and between generations. Likewise, collective instruction includes historical research, discussion and critical debate. The trick seems to be in distinguishing between collective instruction as education and collective instruction as ideology. If memory becomes frozen or rendered into a mythical image, it is difficult to think about. Likewise, memories of events are only the beginning, not the end of understanding.

Mesomemory: Between Sacralization and Trivialization

Contemporary historians such as Tony Judt, Norman Davies, Anne Appelbaum and Timothy Snyder argue for the importance of a balance within European memory. Too much memory can lead to endless conflict and myth, while too little memory engenders ignorance and the possible falsification of history. They argue for more research into former communist countries during both the years of National Socialism and communism. 1989 looks back not only to 1945 but, to Hitler’s rise to power in 1933. Since the experiences of 1945-1989 were dramatically different in East and West, Snyder calls for a balancing of the books. If the starting point of a common European narrative is the desire for peace after 1945 and the beginning of the European project, 1945 for Eastern Europe marked the replacement of one occupation with another. ‘The absence of a common European historical narrative, embracing both east and west, leads to failures of understanding and solidarity… The future of European solidarity, in other words, depends on a rethinking of the immediate European past’ (Snyder 2005).

For him, two issues have to be rethought: recognition that the center of suffering was in the East not the West and that for two generations, Eastern Europeans did not experience European integration, but communism. Given the different experiences in Europe, a common understanding of the recent past is complex. At the moment, three major narratives seem to co-exist: a Western narrative emphasizing the centrality of the Holocaust and Nazism, an Eastern narrative emphasizing national suffering under double occupations and deportations and a Soviet/Russian narrative remembering the victory of the Soviet Union over Nazi fascism and the suffering of the Russian people.

In Memory and Hope, Tzvetan Todorov discusses the lessons one might learn from the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century. ‘Totalitarianism now belongs to the past; that particular disease has been beaten. But we need to understand what happened. As noted by Zhelieu Zhelev, a former dissident who was briefly president of Bulgaria: before turning a page, you need to read it (sic)’ (Todorov 2003: 6). In order to understand how totalitarianism emerged and remained firmly in place until 1989 in Eastern Europe and 1991 in the USSR,
one has to examine the past. Cast within his larger critique of modernity, Todorov focuses on the fragility of humanity. Going against the grain of contemporary cynicism, hedonistic individualism and a general sense of hopelessness, he seeks to remember moments of humanity within the barbarism of totalitarianism. The question is not whether one should remember or forget, but how to internalize possible lessons for the future of Europe. If the page of history is turned too quickly, one doesn’t have time to read and reflect on the complexity of historical events. Todorov cautions wisely for a more measured memory: one that does not give into the extremes of sacralization or trivialization. Once a memory is made sacred, one cannot question or compare it with anything else. Instead it becomes an icon removed from ordinary time. Likewise, if images of suffering are repeated too often, the effect might be one of numbing indifference. ‘It is hard to find the path that skirts the pitfalls of sanctification and of trivialization that leads us neither to serve only our interest nor to give lessons only to others. But that strait and narrow path does exist’ (Ibid., 176).

Perhaps part of the difficulty resides in the either/or framework. Since memory involves selection and partial forgetfulness, the either/or dichotomy is misleading. Not everything can be remembered. Instead of either memory or forgetting, one might consider Ash’s discussion of amnesia, hypermemory, and a middle memory (Ash 2001). The term hypermemory (hypermnesie), coined by Alain Besançon denotes the injunction ‘never to forget’ and the uniqueness of the Holocaust (Besançon 2001). Hypermemory views the past as a trauma to be continually remembered. Amnesia is forgetting: the conscious blocking out of events and phases. Since both hypermemory and amnesia are extremes, Ash pleas for a more modest form of memory that is situated between the poles of total memory and complete forgetting. Mesomemory (mesomnesie) is a middle memory that seeks to learn from the past as well as to put the past behind. Mesomemory does not see the present eternally through the eyes of the past. Likewise, Ash’s middle memory recognizes the past, but doesn’t stay fixated within the traumatic moment. Mesomemory is akin to Nietzsche’s plea for a balance between the historical and unhistorical. The emphasis is on how to live peacefully together in the present. Likewise, Ash’s memory is similar to Todorov’s memory that goes between sacralization and trivialization. What Ash makes very clear though with his historical discussion of state-sponsored memory and forgetting is that memory alone is unable to guarantee democracy. The balance between memory and forgetting, the historical and unhistorical is a slippery slope. In a similar spirit, Barbara Misztal argues that memory alone is not a sufficient condition for democracy. ‘It appears that what matters for democracy’s health is not social remembering per se but the way (sic) in which the past is called up and used’ (Misztal 2005: 1336). Memory, like imagination has a certain plasticity that can fade or increase in mythological importance with the passing of time.

When memory gains a kind of ‘sacred status,’ it hinders historians from critical research. Instead there is a greater tendency towards stereotypes and myth (Misztal 2004, 2005). Particularly when discussion focuses on the victims of communism
and Nazism, the psychoanalytic framework of individual trauma is often cast onto the wider collective of society or nation. One of the ways that 1989 is linked to 1945 is the close relation between a traumatic past and democratic renewal. Since the Nuremberg trials, interpreting the past as a burden to be worked through and internalized has become a feature of democratization. Indeed, the two are linked together because the recognition and internalization of a difficult past has the possibility to strengthen a democracy. When the past however is used as a political weapon or for reasons of revenge, memory can weaken rather than strengthen a fledging democracy.

While individuals may agree on freedom as a beautiful ideal, it is democracy as a way of life and the uncertainty of living in an open society that proves to be the most difficult. Freedom can bring uncertainty, rather than stability. The question of how citizens in democratic nations should come to terms with difficult pasts puts a new twist on one of the oldest questions of social justice: ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’. Cain’s question of whether we, as individuals bear any responsibility for others is still a fundamental question of the human condition. Responses from trials, purges, truth commissions, national apologies, relocation of monuments, and the re-writing of history books are all different ways of linking responsibility for past deeds to the present community. The democratic response to a difficult past is yes; we should be our brother’s keeper. But who is defined as a brother, and how individuals decide to link together as a community balanced between the past and the future is a politically charged and delicate answer.

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3 The Ethics of Seeing: Photographs of Germany at the End of the War


Zelizer, B. 1998. Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory Through the Camera's Eye. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. This page has been left blank intentionally.


The case of Hans Ernst Schneider/Hans Schwerte is one of those uncanny stories that somehow defies the limits of the imagination and yet at the same time is so utterly normal; one tends to shrug off the strangeness of the tale. The uncanny is something secretive, something that seems familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. In Freud’s understanding, the uncanny has a ghostly haunting presence.

'Uncanny is what one calls everything that was meant to remain secret and hidden and has come into the open' (Freud 2003: 132). In the summer of 1992 an American comparative literature scholar, Jeffrey Richards discovered that Hans Schwerte, a distinguished retired professor of German literature and former university rector was actually Hans Ernst Schneider, a senior SS official and a member of Heinrich Himmler's personal staff. After a controversy in German academia and hours before Dutch television was supposed to air an exposé on Schneider’s life, Schneider admitted his double identity on April 26, 1995—50 years to the day after he had burned all of his documents.

Schneider/Schwerte’s radical reinvention of identity in many ways coincided with West Germany’s own Zero Hour (Stunde Null) as a kind of new beginning from nothing. Likewise, in the wake of unification and the
questions of how to come to terms with communism, the double identity of Schneider/Schwerte indicated that not only is the past a foreign country, but also a different person. Hans Ernst Schneider was born in 1909 in Königsberg, received a degree in German studies in 1928, studied in Berlin, Königsberg, and Vienna and joined the Sturmabteilung in 1933. He worked for the SS-Ancestral Legacy (SS-Ahnenerbe), a quasi-scientific occult organization that conformed European culture to Nazi doctrines of race and blood. In 1940 after the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands, Schneider was appointed to the SS-Ancestral Legacy office in the Haag. According to Himmler’s plan, the offices of the SS-Ancestral Legacy were to promote terror and propaganda in an effort to force members of occupied Nordic races to embrace their Germanic roots. During this time, Schneider wrote essays for Nazi publications focusing on the German duty to dominate the Slavic race. As he wrote in 1943: ‘The sacrifice-ready Nordic race seeks out the tragic fate. Only the Nordic race can experience tragedy. There is no such thing as “human tragedy.”’ (Schwerte quoted in Allen 1996: 32) Schneider burned his identification papers on the April 26, 1945 and fled west. He later obtained papers and became Hans Schwerte. He remarried his wife and adopted their three-year old daughter. Leaving Berlin, Schwerte
moved to the University of Erlangen in northern Bavaria where he once again resumed his field of German studies. He remained in Erlangen for twenty years as a graduate student and then, later as professor. Schwerte fabricated his new existence with the story that he was forced to quit school in 1937, became a book dealer and from 1939 until the end of the war in 1945 was a soldier defending his country. He received his doctorate in 1948 and his Habilitation in 1958. In 1962, Schwerte published his Habilitationschrift in a book ironically entitled, Faust und das Faustische: Ein Kapitel deutscher Ideologie (Faust and the Faustian: A Chapter of German Ideology). With this publication, he received a warm following among university students. In Faust and the Faustian, Schwerte traced the term 'Faustian' from the classical conception of individual hubris to adjective for the German Promethean spirit for knowledge beyond good and evil. As Schwerte himself ironically noted about intellectuals, they are 'on the one hand filled with a sublime aestheticism, on the hand pragmatic to the point of amoral cynicism' (Schwerte quoted in Allen 1996: 36). Doppelgänger or Life in the Third Person? In 1955, the West German Federal government issued an amnesty permitting
thousands of Germans to resume names that they had dropped due to activities in Nazi Germany. Schwerte, however, decided not to change his name back to Schneider. His transformation from the person of Schneider to that of Schwerte was more radical. His new identity did not entail any traces of National Socialism.

In many ways, he went through a private process of de-Nazification. Once Schwerte burned his documents, that past was gone. His dual identity was that of a doppelgänger (Leggewie 1998, Assmann 2006: 141-143). Yet, did Schneider really have two simultaneous identities or trade in an older one for a new one? If he had two selves, then his double was that of a younger self, with a different past, in a different country. However, rather than thinking of Schneider as a double or doppelgänger to Schwerte, we might consider his biography as that of one who lived in the third person. When Schwerte remembered his old self, Schneider— Schwerte lived in the third person. If Schneider had been a Nazi, Schwerte was an entirely different person and had nothing to do with him. In response to accusations of living a double life, Schwerte responded, ‘Double life? That’s certainly a bit overdone. I have led one life and then another. I have not doubled myself’ (Schwerte quoted in Leggewie 1998: 10). In the novel, Patterns of Childhood (Kindheitsmuster), Christa
Wolf writes

in the second and third person—it is only in the last page of the book that she

is able to speak in the first person. Accompanied by her daughter and husband,

Wolf returns to her hometown in what is now Poland and embarks on a lengthy

reflection on her life, the act of memory, and the process of coming to terms with

the past. Whereas Wolf could break out of the trap of living in the second and

third person, Schwerte seemed to cut himself off from his past and pretend to be

a stranger, to be one who, as Simmel noted, comes today and leaves tomorrow. In

the opening lines to her novel, Patterns of Childhood, Wolf writes: What is past is not dead; it is not even past. We cut ourselves off from it; we pretend to be strangers. People once remembered more readily: an assumption, a half truth at best. A renewed attempt to barricade yourself. Gradually as months went by, the dilemma crystallized: to remain speechless, or else to live in the third person. The first is impossible, the second strange. And as usual, the less unbearable alternative will win out. (Wolf 1975: 3)

Living in the first person means a certain degree of agency and continuity. After

Schwerte changed his identity, the question of a past no longer seemed to exist.

Either he could remain speechless and say nothing, or he could reinvent himself and

reinvent his past. Coming to terms with the past meant not forgetfulness, but a radical

reinvention in which the past was no longer linked to the present. For Schwerte, the

Nazi past was more than a foreign country; it was a
completely different person. After moving to Aachen in 1965, Schwerte became professor of German literature at the University of Aachen and served as university rector from 1970–1973. During his tenure in Aachen, he was a respected social democrat and publicly acknowledged the university’s role as a research center during National Socialism.

As Schwerte, he did not have a tainted past and was thus able to insist that the university come to terms with its own past. Admired by students during the student protests in the late 1960s and 1970s, Schwerte came to symbolize a solid democrat.

In 1983 he received the prestigious civil service cross (Bundesverdienstkreuz) from the governor of North Rhine-Westphalen honoring his civil service to the Federal Republic. One could argue that the case of Schwerte confirms Hermann Lübbe’s argument that a period of silence was necessary in order for Germany to prosper and become a democratic country. Schwerte’s silence about his past was complete and he turned into exactly the kind of liberal democrat that Lübbe invoked as Germany’s success story (Lübbe 1983: 2007).

Screen Memories and the Uncanny

Was Schwerte repressing and forgetting his true self as Schneider or was he remembering a different self, the person he wished that he might have been? By taking a new name, he also had to fabricate a biography...
corresponding to his new self. Freudian attention to the power of unconscious mechanisms of repression, associations, evasions and blank spots are one way of interpreting Schwerte's decision to begin a new life. In reflecting on the difficulty individuals have in recalling their childhood in its pristine entirety, Freud writes: It is perhaps altogether questionable whether we have any conscious memories from childhood: perhaps we have only memories of childhood. These show us the first years of our lives not as they were, but as they appear to us at later periods, when the memories were aroused. At these times of arousal the memories of childhood did not emerge, as one is accustomed to saying, but were formed, and a number of motives that were far removed from the aim of historical fidelity had a hand in influencing both the formation and the selection of these memories. (Freud 2003: 21)

Certain memories are displaced and others vaguely related to the real event. The compromise between wanting to remember and resistance to memory necessitates a compromise. 'Such a memory, whose value consists in the fact that it represents thoughts and impressions from a later period and that its content is connected with these by links of a symbolic or similar nature, is what I would call a screen memory' (Ibid., 15). Memories of Schwerte's past became a screen or covering for Schneider. The only thing that seemed to be common to both egos was the first name, Hans and the fact that the surnames of Schneider and Schwerte both began with the letter ‘S.’ Detailed investigation shows rather such falsifications are of a tendentious nature; that is
to say, they serve to repress and replace objectionable or disagreeable impressions. So even these falsified memories must have arisen at a time when such conflicts and the impulse to repression could already assert themselves in a person’s mental life – in other words, long after the period to which their content relates. (Ibid., 21)

What makes Schwerte’s story so disturbing is its uncanny familiarity. With the change in Eastern Europe from communism to democracy—monuments have been brought down, street names changed or returned to older pre-communist ones. The names of countries and flags have changed; currency replaced—names of universities and ministries changed. The change of names accompanies regime change. The difference though is that the official changing of names in a country did not delete or wipe out the old name. The GDR had a finite life span and was ‘reunited’ with the Federal Republic—itself a new country after the Third Reich.

What made the case of Schwerte strange and uncanny was the element of secrecy in the hiding of his past. As Freud wrote, the uncanny belongs to the realm of the frightening, the familiar and hauntingly unfamiliar. ‘There is no doubt that this belongs to the realm of the frightening, of what evokes fear and dread’ (Ibid., 123).

Looking in German-English dictionaries for the definition of unheimlich, Freud notes the associations between that which is haunted and that which is uncanny:

‘uncomfortable, uneasy, gloomy, dismal, uncanny, ghastly
(of a house): haunted, (of a person): a repulsive fellow’ (Ibid., 125). Later reflecting on the linguistic similarity between unheimlich und Geheimnis, he latches onto the secretive root of the two words. ‘Unheimlich nennt man Alles, was im Geheimnis, im Verborgenen ... bleiben sollte und hervorgetreten ist. “Uncanny is what one calls everything that was meant to remain secret and hidden and has come into the open.”’ (Ibid., 132) In the case of Schwerte, the secret (Geheimnis) of his identity was indeed unheimlich. With the uncanny, the line between fact and fiction, biography and fantasy become blurred. This is the fact that an uncanny effect often arises when the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred, when we are faced with the reality of something that we have until now considered imaginary, when a symbol takes on the full function and significance of what it symbolizes, and so forth. (Ibid., 150)

The Banality of Evil

Can one understand the actions of Schwerte as Hannah Arendt proposes that we understand Eichmann—as a thoughtless man who demonstrated the banality of evil? Or was Schwerte merely an opportunist who could remake himself to fit into the new system and was thus a kind of clever survivor? As he said about himself:

‘Only now do I understand that I had been skating over thin ice’ (Schwerte quoted in Myer 1995: 97) While he did not commit the crimes of Eichmann, some aspects of Arendt’s ‘banality of evil’ nonetheless resonate with Schneider. Her controversial
discussion of Eichmann as a man who was not a monster representing pernicious
evil but a man who refused to think about his actions seems
closer to Schwerte than
the metaphor of remorse and forgiveness. As the 86-year-old
Schwerte himself
declared: ‘I didn’t hide my identity. I turned it in for a
new one’ (Schwerte quoted
in Allen 1996: 30). It is precisely this turning over of a
new leaf, or radical self
revision without visible remorse that makes Schwerte so
difficult to categorize and
understand. Schneider is distinguished by both his distance
from his own past and
his outspoken public moral stance, against those, who were
in the Nazi regime. Schwerte was master of the
Schlußstrich. The thick line between his past and
present clearly separated his private and public lives.
Such a ‘radical distancing,’
as Legewie argues enabled Schwerte to learn from history
from the sidelines.
Schneider was externalized from Schwerte into a different
persona and identity.
‘He did not lead a double life as a Nazi in democratic
clothing; rather he had
begun a new life as a reformed (geläuterter) person both in
private and above
all as a public person’ (Legewie 1998: 297). Schwerte was
able to speak in the
second and third person of ‘you’ and ‘they,’ but unable to
use the first person
singular or plural. Unlike other Nazis such as Eichmann who
fled to Argentina and
elsewhere to bury their past, Schneider stayed in Germany and remade himself as Hans Schwerte only to later become a successful academic in German studies and an outspoken liberal for the Federal Republic. For Arendt, Eichmann did not represent a criminal monster but a feeble-minded and thoughtless person who was incapable of distinguishing right from wrong. In her eyes, the counsel and judges missed the point of the trial. They preferred to conclude from occasional lies that he was a liar – and missed the greatest moral and even legal challenge of the whole case. Their case rested on the assumption that the defendant, like all “normal persons,” must have been aware of the criminal nature of his acts, and Eichmann was indeed normal insofar as he was “no exception within the Nazi regime.” However, under the conditions of the Third Reich only ‘exceptions’ could be expected to react “normally.” This simple truth of the matter created a dilemma for the judges which they could neither resolve nor escape. (Arendt 1993: 26-27)

Arendt’s definitions of the normal and exceptional within the Nazi regime are important qualifications for her connection between thoughtlessness, judgment, and the banality of evil. For her, Eichmann was incapable of thinking from another perspective. Judgment requires the ability to think not only for oneself, but to think from another’s standpoint. In her Lectures of Kant’s Political Philosophy, Arendt interprets Kant’s Third Critique as a discussion of political judgment. Her reflections on judgment are relevant to her analysis of Eichmann’s lack of judgment and inability to think. Thinking requires a community of other
people. Likewise, The faculty of judgment requires imagination and reflection.

Imagination entails both bringing an object to mind and imagining oneself in another’s perspective. Such an ability to imagine oneself from another person’s standpoint enlarges our worldview and links individuals into a sensus communis.

It is only after one has imagined all the possible perspectives in 'anticipated communication’ that one is able to reflect and make a moral or political judgment.

In Arendt’s opinion, what was startling in Eichmann was his complete inability to think from the perspective of anyone but himself. For her, this lack of thought was due not to the monstrosity of his evil actions but to their banality. Moreover, Eichmann claimed to have followed the Kantian categorical imperative and acted out of duty. The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to think, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else. No communication was possible with him, not because he lied but because he was surrounded by the most reliable of all safeguards against the words and the presence of others, and hence against reality as such. (Arendt 1963: 49)

Arendt’s much maligned conception of the banality of evil is not intended to lessen the monstrosity of the crimes, but to call attention to the pervasive Zeitgeist of not thinking. Acknowledging that it is far easier to imagine Eichmann as a monster, Arendt chose to consider the terrifying normality of individuals such
as Eichmann. ‘The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal’ (Ibid., 276). The case of Schwerte/Schneider bears a family resemblance to that of Eichmann. Neither man was evil, but plagued by the inability to think about anyone but themself.

Reinvention and Normality

Was Schwerte an accurate representation of many Germans who lived through the war? To what extent, was his identity known, by other members of the university?

And in what ways, might he have been protected, by those, with similar pasts?

This issue of the relative normality of a man like Eichmann and the complicated levels of Nazi involvement resonate with the case of Schwerte. As head of the SS-Ancestral Legacy’s Germanic Scientific Mission, he requested materials for medical experiments carried out for the Luftwaffe by Dr. Sigmund Rascher at Dachau. Although Schwerte’s signature was on a request by Dr. Rascher’s on January 14, 1943 for medical equipment from Leiden University in the Netherlands, he denied knowledge of the use of such equipment. ‘I wore the uniform that stood for unspeakable crimes in Europe. But I myself never killed anyone’ (Schwerte
quoted in Allen 1996: 41). In Arendt’s opinion, not only were Eichmann’s actions disturbing, but also that the fact that his distortion of reality was similar to the immediate post-war years of the Federal Republic. ‘Eichmann’s distortions of reality were horrible because of the horrors they dealt with, but in principle they were not very different from things current in post-Hitler Germany’ (Arendt 1963: 58). Perhaps what makes Schwerte so remarkable is how his reinvention mirrored the radical transformation from Nazi Germany to the Federal Republic. The question is aptly posed by Arthur Allen, in his article on Schwerte, when he asks: ‘(w)as it the hidden but sincere penitence of a man who assumed that he embodied all that had changed in Germany?’ (Allen 1996: 37) As Claus Leggewie writes in his book, Von Schneider zu Schwerte, Schwerte was a ‘homo faber,’ a man who made and remade himself: He embodied a kind of self-willed blindness allowing him to act like Max Frisch’s Gantenbein and create convenient identities for himself. If Schneider would have kept his identity, he could not have continued with a university life. Schwerte’s past, as ‘Schneider,’ was not related to his post-war identity. Instead, his life had normalized. In his opinion, his youthful intoxication and embrace of National Socialism was just that—youthful. By letting Schneider die, Schwerte had
de-Nazified himself and turned into a different kind of German. As Leggewie notes, what made the case of Schwerte such an ‘irritating lesson’ for the German Left was not the way in which he maintained his double identity, but his high stature in West German society and amount of time that he was able to keep his identities hidden. The hidden identity of Schwerte indicated that the categories of ‘normal’ are dependent upon the one defining them. If normal means not standing out in a crowd, then his dramatic transformation and reinvention were an uncanny example of adapting to a new democratic Germany. Not only was the double life of Schwerte uncanny; but the vitriolic condemnation by his fellow colleagues bore traces of authoritarianism. Outrage over Schwerte’s lie and decision to hide his true identity resulted in the removal of his doctorate, title of professor, Federal Service Cross (Bundesdienstkreuz) and dismissal of his university pension. He was publicly condemned for his behavior and his accomplishments as professor, liberal thinker and supporter of students were, as it were, erased by his single decision to reinvent himself. The case of Schwerte was uncanny because he represented two sides of twentieth century Germany: fanatical Nazi ideologue and converted liberal-democrat. As Leggewie argues, Schwerte
was a man who wanted to learn from history (der aus der Geschichte lernen)

wollte). In his decision to lead a new life and to teach literature confronting the

past, Schwerte had changed. What Schwerte lacked was the public recognition of

his self-transformation. “Schwerte had not worked through his past (aufgearbeitet)
coram publico as had been demanded of him; rather he had professionally and in
the space of his institutions worked it off (abgearbeitet).’ 1 Afraid of not being able
to lead a normal academic life, he chose to hide his old identity and forge a new
one. He changed from Parteigenossen to Bundesbürger (Lübbe 1983: 2007). To return to Christa Wolf, perhaps the easiest response to a difficult past is
to live in the third person. At the end of Wolf’s introspective novel, the author is
able to speak in the first person. Interestingly enough, it is not an affirmative clear
statement, but rather a hesitant acknowledgment of the limits of self-knowledge.

‘And the past, which can still split the first person into the second and third—has
its hegemony been broken? Will the voices be still? I don’t know’ (Wolf 1975:
406). The story of Schwerte reveals the many unforeseen difficulties in changing
from authoritarianism to democracy. One cannot simply remove all the citizens
in order to begin anew—one has to trust in the human ability to learn from their
mistakes. Schneider’s second life as Hans Schwerte
demonstrated how a private conversion without public recognition can backfire and destroy the integrity of an entire life. By distancing himself from the past and living in the third person, the biography of Schneider/Schwerte was an uncanny example of the difficulties in overcoming history and beginning anew.


Arendt, H. 1993 (1954). The Crisis in Culture, in Between Past and Future. New York: Viking Press. 1 In the original German, the difference between working through (aufarbeiten) and working off (abarbeiten) is much clearer. ‘Schwerte hat seine Vergangenheit zwar nicht, wie von ihm immer weider gefordert wird, coram publico aufgearbeitet, er hat sie aber professionell und im Rahmen seiner Institution abgearbeitet’ (Leggewie 1998: 309).


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6 Goodbye to Grand Narratives? Moving the Soviet War Memorial in Tallinn


Wertsch, J. 2008. Collective Memory and Narrative


7 Memory, Pluralism and the Agony of Politics


8 The Fata Morgana of Revolution


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