

Excursus: Collective Memory

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The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe (Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas) in Berlin.
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The idea of a "collective memory" (*"kollektives Gedächtnis"*) was popularized in the 1990s by Egyptologist Jan Assmann (2011 [German original 1992]). He states: "It is fundamental to the thesis that the past only comes into being insofar as we refer to it." (p.17). This means that the past is only constructed in memory. Assmann calls this "memory" (*"Gedächtnis"*) because, with reference to Maurice Halbwachs' theory of memory (1992), he assumes that individual memory can only arise in the community. It is acquired through socialization, i.e. it is learned. Memory is therefore "collective" when it relates to groups and not to individuals. Thus, it is closely linked to collective and individual identities (Thiemeyer 2020; Nora 2009).

Assmann divides "collective memory" into two areas: "communicative memory" and "cultural memory". The former is connected to generations. It is based on shared "biographical memories" (Assmann 2011, p. 34f.) of contemporary witnesses and is tied to their lifetime because it is passed on orally. It occurs in many different forms because it tolerates numerous, sometimes contradictory stories about the past side by side. "Cultural memory", on the other hand, is artificially created. It is supported by institutions of remembrance such as museums, memorials or archives and is given a fixed place in people's everyday lives through monuments, rituals, festivals or holidays so that they can remember certain people or events permanently (Nora 1984). The "cultural memory" does not spread by itself (like the "communicative memory"), but it must be specifically organized. It is subject to controlling bodies (institutions, researchers) that regulate access authoritatively. The transition from

private "communicative" to publicly negotiated "cultural memory" is the moment in which history is made. It marks the transition "from the memory struggle [*Erinnerungskampf*] to the culture of memory [*Erinnerungskultur*]" (Frei 2005, 26).

The concept of "collective memory" has been widely received in cultural studies because it makes clear that our view of the past (transmitted as history) (Munslow 201?) is always culturally shaped and learned. However, it is also criticized because it tends to essentialize: The concept of "collective memory" suggests that there is such a thing as a naturally evolved (national) culture of remembrance that determines people's identity. You have to submit to it and cannot change it. Since people de facto actively contribute to the formation of memories and change them again and again, "collective memory" can be understood as a central element of a ResourceAssemblage, which would expand the concept of "collective memory" to include contingency. Secondly, the idea of a "collective memory" is based on homogeneous societies with a uniform socialization of all their members that is binding for everyone. However, in societies characterised by migration and fluctuation of its members, this premise is increasingly questionable.

References

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