

Commemoration

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Abstract

Commemoration employs narratives, icons, music, monuments, shrines, naming conventions, and ritual observances to awaken ideas and feelings about those parts of the past that embody current ideals. Two categories of commemoration are distinguishable. Positive commemoration, the traditional mode of marking past events and persons, transmits images that affirm society's ideals and grand achievements. Negative commemoration, the marking of events weighing on the present as sources of shame and dishonor, became conventional during the late twentieth-century human rights movement. The early twenty-first century is thus distinctive in its commemoration of guilt and victimhood. To explain these developments, the theories of the 'politics of memory' and 'memory as a cultural system' are invoked.

Commemoration refers to the mobilization of symbols to awaken and preserve beliefs and feelings about the past. The word commemoration derives from Latin (com –together + memorare – to remember: to remember together). Remembering together occurs in every sphere of life – family, association, occupation, community, and society – but its dynamics are most visible in the most inclusive, societal, sphere. Commemoration is society's moral memory, distinguishing events its members believe to be deserving of remembrance from those deserving of being merely recorded. Commemoration promotes society's sense of itself as it affirms its members' mutual affinity and common identification with its past.

Commemorative Symbolism

The primary vehicles of commemoration include written and oral hagiography, icons, music, monuments, shrines, relics, naming conventions, and ritual observances. These 'cultural objects' (Griswold, 1987) lift from the historical record those events that represent a given collectivity's conception of its highest ideals and lowest misdeeds.

Commemorative writing includes biographies, eulogies, poems, plays, and commentaries motivated by admiration or enmity. Emphasizing the moral rather than factual aspects of the past, commemorative texts tend toward hagiography or condemnation and are thus distinguishable from analytic history and chronicling. The line between commemoration and analytic history blurs, however, when the latter is written and published with a view to marking the anniversary of the event or person, which is its subject. First-century Christian lectors read to illiterate Christian communities written accounts of Jesus' life during their Sabbath observances. Newspapers played the major role in the anniversary of Hurricane Katrina (Robinson, 2009).

Music, consisting of anthems, hymns, and inspirational songs, aligns melodic and harmonic structures and lyrics to historical events in such a way as to dramatize their significance. National anthems, school, and military songs are cases in point.

Icons, signs resembling what they represent, commemorate the past by bringing it to visual presence through paintings, statues, prints, photographs, motion picture film, television, and online video.

Monuments, including obelisks, antique temples, and other memorial structures, are designed to elevate the public imagination by dramatic reference to both grand events and atrocities.

Shrines, such as birthplaces, residences, state buildings, military headquarters, battlefields, cemeteries, and places of surrender, execution, and extermination – all play a key role in commemoration because they bring the individual into direct contact with sacred sites. Shrines are sacred because they are, by definition, ‘containers’ (Latin, *scrinium* – case, chest) of relics. In contrast to mundane things, relics are physical objects associated with extraordinary events or used by extraordinary people.

Naming patterns make past events ubiquitous by incorporating their memory into the identity of businesses, streets, cities, towns, counties, states, rivers, and mountains.

Observances (periodic performance of anniversary, centennial, and holiday rites) have been analyzed more extensively than other commemorative forms, but their functions are the same: to maintain the vitality of the past, to prevent it from being forgotten and to preserve what is essential to the collective consciousness.

Commemoration’s observances, together with its other media, comprise a sign system recommending selected historical events for contemplation, promoting a common legacy by making them tangible and accessible to all.

Commemoration, History, and Collective Memory

Commemoration, history, and collective memory perform interrelated functions. Memory is a necessary property of the mind, a fundamental component of culture, and an essential aspect of tradition. Although individuals alone possess the capacity to remember the past, they never do so singly; they do so with and against others situated in different groups and through the knowledge and symbols that predecessors and contemporaries transmit to them.

A variant of collective opinion, collective memory refers to the *distribution* throughout society of what individuals believe, feel, and know about the past, how they judge the past morally, how closely they identify with it, and how much they are inspired by it as a model for their present conduct. The word ‘distribution’ is

emphasized because its key property is variation, which denies the possibility of consensus. That every distribution also has a central tendency makes total dissensus equally impossible. Because similar memories appear in comparable groups of individuals widely dispersed and unknown to one another, and because these memories replicate themselves across generations they must be treated as emergent, objective entities that stabilize and link the consciousness of present and past.

History, as French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1980 [1950]) defined it, seeks an objective standpoint to assess the causes and consequences of events. It is 'situated external to and above groups' and describes the past independently of contemporary opinions and conditions. Once established, Halbwachs believed, historical knowledge remains stable – its stream of facts and demarcations 'fixed once and for all.' In contrast, commemoration and collective memory remain significant only as long as they remain relevant (pp. 80–81). Pierre Nora, a French historian, explicitly adopts Halbwachs' belief in the fundamental opposition between history and memory, and he regards all commemorative forms as *lieux dememoire* (sites of memory), that is, feeble efforts to defend against the relentless disenchantment of analytic history.

History's goal is, thus, to rationalize the past; commemoration and its sites, to sanctify it. History makes the past an object of analysis; commemoration, an object of commitment. History is a system of 'referential symbols' representing known facts and their sequence; commemoration is a system of 'condensation symbols' (Sapir, 1930: pp. 492–493) that simplify events of the past and clarify the moral sentiments they inspire. History, like science, investigates the world by producing models of its permanence and change; commemoration, like ideology, seeks to promote commitment to the world by producing symbols of its values and aspirations (Geertz, 1973: pp. 193–233).

Contrasts among history, commemoration, and memory must not be exaggerated. James Dunn (2003), prominent among historical Jesus scholars, declares that 'the quest for the historical Jesus' can only be a quest for the 'Jesus remembered' by contemporaries and successors who heard or wrote about him (p. 335). Dunn's statement stands out in the context of successful efforts, beginning in the first decade of the twenty-first century, to integrate collective memory, commemoration, and biblical studies (Kirk and Thatcher, 2005).

Commemorative Networks

When commemorative symbols are combined, they convey meanings that differ from those borne by any one symbolic object. To activate the commemorative process through story, monument, song, icon, ceremonial observance, or other signs, therefore, is to activate memories that include but extend beyond the persons and events commemorated. The significance of historical figures and events also change as they are placed in commemorative networks composed of objects absent

in previous networks. Thus, Jefferson Davis was sworn in as president of the new Confederacy in Richmond, Virginia beside a massive equestrian statue of George Washington, which was itself adopted as the Confederacy's emblem. During the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln ordered large-scale offensive operations on Washington's Birthday. Upon death, scores of mourning prints placed him in the company of Washington. During the Progressive Era, visual images of Abraham Lincoln were paired with contemporary figures, including President Theodore Roosevelt, identifying Lincoln as one who would have supported Progressive Era reforms. The pairing processes fanned out broadly not only within a network of people whose prestige enhanced and was enhanced by Lincoln's but also to networks of events and structures – notably, political and economic reforms and relentless condemnation of plutocracy. In such mnemonic webs, existing beliefs about Lincoln were reorganized, their institutional roots deepened, and a new and autonomous collection of beliefs about him accumulated. Common features of people and events with which Lincoln was symbolically connected were generalized to Lincoln himself. In this way, he changed through the late nineteenth century from a symbol of national unity to a symbol of social and economic reform.

Commemoration, as Abraham Lincoln's case suggests, is a structuring process that partially overrides the qualities of its objects and imposes upon them its own pattern. Commemoration is creative because it fills in what is lacking in its objects, whether historical figures or events, by attributing to them the features of people and events that a given community deems similar (and other communities deem offensively dissimilar).

Memory of Commemoration

Commemorative symbols represent both the events they commemorate and the concerns of those creating them. Because commemorative symbols refer to the memory of their own genre, they exhibit traces of the way events presently commemorated have been recognized previously. In other words, commemorations are 'path dependent' – shaped by their development as well as their referents; they express an ongoing process of meaning making. Jeffrey Olick's (2007) analyses of discourses marking historical regret, including the memory of National Socialism in Germany, demonstrate this point persuasively. Not only are present commemorations modeled on past commemorations; the style of these earlier commemorations, as Andrea Cossu's (2011) study of Italian antifascist representation shows, are themselves path dependent and therefore essential to reinforcing the memory of commemoration and the understanding of how it works.

The redundant, cyclical features of path dependency are exemplified in the holiday calendar. In the United States, the annual repetition of Martin Luther King Day, Lincoln's Birthday, Washington's Birthday, Memorial Day, July Fourth, Columbus Day, Veterans Day (formerly Armistice Day), Pearl Harbor Day, in that order, enables the single individual to experience, year after year, although with

demonstrably decreasing enthusiasm and solemnity, the representation of major events in his nation's history.

Path dependency can negate rather than reaffirm earlier commemorative objects. Conceived in light of their generic predecessors, certain war memorials, in certain social circles, evoke more criticism than approval. The establishment of a Korean War Veterans Memorial, supervised by a committee hostile to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial's antiwar inspiration, set down firm requirements in its invitation to design competitors (Schwartz and Bayma, 1999). The Korean Memorial had to be visible, uplifting, expressing honor, pride, and dignity, evoking admiration and gratitude. It had to be visible rather than set below ground level, as is the Vietnam Memorial, whose original plan expressly excluded patriotic symbolism. The Korean War Memorial's design is shaped as much by its negative Vietnam War predecessor as by the actual war it commemorates.

Commemoration in the Post-Heroic Era

Commemoration sites are viewed, witnessed, or attended with solemnity by some; ignored, regarded with indifference, or even ridiculed by others. During the Enlightenment, commemoration began to lose its capacity to instruct and inspire, but this trend assumed its sharpest downward turn during the last third of the twentieth century, strongly evidenced in the United States by multiple indicators, including site visitation statistics and national surveys of historical figures' diminishing renown. As the public's interest in its history fades, however, its commemoration ceases to be taken for granted and scholarly interest therefore escalates. In the Dissertation Abstracts, with commemoration the keyword and Masters and PhD theses included, two entries are found between 1970 and 1979, 6 and 17 entries during the 1980s and 1990s, respectively. During the first decade of the twenty-first century, 53 entries appeared. In JSTOR, an online journal archive, the very same trend appears. Academic interest in commemoration increases exponentially at the turn of the twenty-first century as the heroic past fades from the collective consciousness and becomes an object for dissection rather than adoration.

Until the last third of the twentieth century, references to the anniversary of significant events, such as George Washington's birth, filled local newspapers' front pages with editorials, commentaries, ink drawings, stories about different parts of his life, including schedules where civic organizations, from trade to professional organizations and churches, held their programs. Schools gave special lessons and ceremonies the day before Washington's Birthday, when all federal and most state and municipal activities were suspended. Presently, the commemoration of his birth consists mainly of brief remarks about his life in newspapers and television commentary. In contrast, the anniversary of Martin Luther King's January birth is widely recognized, with an increasing number of streets and organizations annually named for him and more printed space and television time devoted to him. These rites are consolidated during the entire month of February, federally recognized in

2008 as Black History Month, succeeding Negro History Week, begun in 1926.

The present 'Era of Commemoration' largely perpetuates the memory of victims of injustice, despised minorities, and oppressed people. 'The explosion of minority memories,' according to Pierre Nora (2002), has changed commemoration's cultural function. "Swayed by the democratization of history," it has come to resemble a protest movement, a "revenge of the underdog."

The superimposition of sites of regret upon sites of triumph is now the keystone of many national commemorations. Writing about Grozny's monument to the Soviet Union's wartime deportation of Chechnyans, Brian Williams (2000) declares: "One must know a nation's tragedies and the way they commemorate them to know its soul" (p. 128). Tragedy, not triumph, he says, defines national memory. But the two are often indistinguishable. Villainy and heroism, the mundane and the epic, events worth forgetting and those worth preserving – it is the blurring of these lines that goes to the core of the postmodern condition. The transition from a pre-World War II culture of commemoration stressing heroic achievement to a postwar culture stressing oppression, trauma, victimhood, and injustice is widely evident. In his observations on the commemoration of French resistance against Nazi occupiers, Nathan Bracher (2007) declares that the general evolution of European sensibilities is driven by disinterest, if not disdain, for warrior virtues, and a newfound appreciation of warriors' victims. Europe as a whole is now united by rejection of war, intolerance, and inequality – all dramatized by its use of the Holocaust narrative as a more or less de-Judaized symbol of human rights. France, for example, commemorates often the victims of the occupation; rarely the valor of the resistance. The memorial to militant resisters, located at Mount Valerian, site of more than 1000 resister executions, bears no mention of their successes against the strong enemy with whom most Frenchmen passively cooperated. It implies reluctance to commemorate French men and women as slayers rather than victims of their Nazi rulers.

Commemorating historical wrongdoing became commonplace during the late twentieth century in connection with the emerging 'human rights movement.' The new 'politics of recognition' also bends the commemorative impulse to achievements and sufferings of communities previously marginalized and underrepresented in the historical record. These sites of regret are more likely to be found among 'cultures of dignity,' dedicated to the cultivation of democracy and individual rights, than among 'cultures of honor' dedicated to the cultivation of individual obligations to the nation, state, or community. The creation by the American government of the United States Holocaust Memorial, to take but one instance, justifies itself, as do European memorials, on the ground of a universal moral relevance transcending the suffering of European Jewry. Doing so, the Memorial erodes the Holocaust's particularistic relevance (Rabinbach, 1997) by ignoring the link between genocide and Jewish history. The same rationale applies to museums of Native American, African-American, Asian-American, and Hispanic-

American experience. The commemoration of helplessness is Roosevelt was leader of the free world during its most severe economic and military challenges, but his memorial recognizes Americans' affection for handicap by placing on the site a statue of the paralyzed president in his wheelchair. Likewise, Dwight D. Eisenhower's Memorial, as presently planned, deliberately qualifies his military and presidential achievements by representing him as a barefoot boy in Kansas.

Diversity, another aspect of post-heroic commemoration, distinguishes the Korean War Veterans Memorial, which includes a wall divided into slanted vertical and straight horizontal lines, the resulting cells of which represent each of the military services. Within each service, different branches of activity, and within each branch of activity different racial, ethnic, and gender groups, are recognized. For example, engineering, armor, infantry, artillery, and medical units are represented by men and women of all racial and visibly ethnic groups. The 19 statues of infantrymen, too, are meant to be recognizable as European-American, African-American, Asian-American, and Hispanic-American. A war memorial conceived to honor sacrifice for the sake of a transcendent nation ironically takes a pluralistic turn and, by so doing, commemorates equally the separate communities of which that nation is composed. Commemorative pluralism, in this precise respect, articulates the mundane segments, rather than the transcendence, of the nation-state.

Anomalous Commemoration

Diversification of the commemorative process admits of anomalous sites. Anomalous commemoration combines aspects of the past conventionally deemed morally incompatible, such as President Ronald Reagan's (1985) visit to Germany's Bitburg military cemetery, where the remains of Wehrmacht and SS personnel are buried, on the same day as his visit to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp site. Tokyo's Yasukuni Shrine, likewise, commemorates the souls of convicted and executed war criminals as well as the innocent who died for their country, which is why Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's public visits to the shrine set off indignant protests abroad, especially in Korea and China, and, at home, a torrent of controversy that has yet to abate (Mochizuki, 2010). In the United States exists a similar incongruity: monuments to Confederate leaders and soldiers who defended slavery are accompanied in Richmond, Virginia, the Confederacy's capital, by a statue of The Great Emancipator, Abraham Lincoln, and his son overlooking the former Tredegar weapons factory. The Vicksburg, Mississippi statue of Lincoln in the friendly presence of Confederate President, Jefferson Davis, is another instance of anomalous commemorative pairing. In Bitburg, Tokyo, and Richmond, those considered virtuous and villainous are commemorated together.

Monuments to executed military deserters are equally striking. Once the embodiment of disloyalty and cowardice, desertion is now defined as a symptom of stress or battle fatigue. The Shot at Dawn Memorial in Staffordshire, England, dedicated in 2001, consists of the statue of an executed 17-year old surrounded by

306 stakes to which British and Commonwealth soldiers were tied and executed during World War I. A single stake, also dedicated in 2001, commemorates English, French, and Belgian soldiers executed in Ypres, Belgium. French President Nicholas Sarkozy spoke at the Douaumont Fort, France, site of the Battle of Verdun, announcing that those executed were 'men like us' who deserved to be remembered because they had 'reached their extreme limits.' Germany commemorates more deserters than any other country. In Kassel, Hannover, Ulm, Cologne, Stuttgart, and other cities stand monuments recognizing the men executed during World War II by the German military.

Commemoration is no less anomalous when its intensity is disproportionate to the significance of its object. The apotheosis of Rosa Parks included public memorial services in three cities, including Washington, DC, where she laid in state in the US Capitol Rotunda under a flag flying half-mast while a plan was inaugurated to place her statue in the Capitol Rotunda. Her celebrity occasioned the forgetting of others who risked and accomplished more, far more, than she (Schwartz, 2009).

Surface Commemoration

The 'death dip,' which refers to lowered mortality rates among the intensely religious on days leading up to their major holidays, followed by the steep increase in rates when the holiday is over, is a measure of commemoration's role in the life of the individual. This effect is variable. To find a death dip among orthodox Christians prior to Christmas and Easter, and among orthodox Jews prior to Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur is unsurprising; to find it related to such American holidays as Presidents' Day, whose object is ambiguous, would be shocking.

The Monday Holiday Act presupposes the weakened state of the national consciousness by moving holidays that fall in the middle of the week to Mondays with an explicit view to promoting more tourism, shopping, travel (and fuel use) by automobiles and public carriers over long weekends. Presidents' Day is the new name for George Washington's Birthday, the only president on the federal holiday calendar. Absent from this calendar but now on most state calendars, Presidents' Day commemorates different people: here, George Washington; there Abraham Lincoln; elsewhere, Washington and Lincoln; somewhere else, all presidents; in another place, Abraham Lincoln and Daisy Bates. The casualness with which Presidents' Day is recognized embodies Amitai Etzioni's (2001) claim that as 'recommitment holidays' have declined in relevance, 'tension management' holidays, including New Years Day, Halloween, and Valentine's Day, have become more widely celebrated. Tension management holidays are said to perform a 'safety valve' function: they contribute to reducing tension accumulated through the normal difficulties of life. Presidents' Day is one of these holidays. Most importantly, certain recommitment holidays have been converted into holidays of tension release. Memorial Day and July Fourth, observed with almost religious passion a century ago, are still federal holidays but observed with relatively little ritual and

even less fervor. They provide more opportunity for recreation than commemoration.

To be severed from the past is no longer to be identified with it. Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2000), for example, explains that national apologies and rituals of regret for past offenses are superficial because their participants, representatives of aggressors and victims, have no organic connection to the communities they represent. Commemoration is only skin deep when it preserves but fails to instruct and inspire, when its participants recognize forebears as benefactors but no longer feel themselves to be beneficiaries, when earlier sacrifices, even those made explicitly for the benefit of posterity, fail to evoke gratitude, when the past is remembered but unfelt and unjudged.

The death of living faith is not contradicted by recent surges of national enthusiasm. Ritual displays accompanying the 1991 Gulf War, 9/11, and enthusiasm at the start of the Iraq War show that nationalist sentiment, which generally exists in a latent state, is a powerful source of social energy during crises. Yet, the ends for which such energy is expended exist in the national present; they recognize but draw little inspiration from the national past.

Transitory Commemoration

Some commemorative structures, although inspired by deep sentiment, are impermanent. They consist of easily removable objects that express feelings (usually regret) over a (usually recent) loss or calamity. Immediately after 9/11, people across the country set up memorial candles in memory of the thousands killed. As the shock wore off, the sites were vacated. Often, religious markers are placed at the site of a fatal automobile accident, but most are recognized by only a few drivers before the elements destroy them. Some temporary sites assume conspicuous dimensions. After Princess Diana's death, an enormous mound of flowers appeared at the gate of Buckingham Palace, but on the first anniversary of her death the Palace gate was conspicuously vacant. The 2005 London Subway Bombing, too, led to a fleeting, media-driven commemoration but no physical monuments (Hoskins, 2011).

In some places, the permanent and transitory coexist. At the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the aggrieved place personal objects beneath the name of the lost. Gathered up by the US. Park Service and stored, these items are selectively displayed in a remote museum, giving them at least a probability of permanence they would otherwise lack.

Aborted Commemoration

'To abort' is an infinitive denoting the act of preventing an activity from completing itself. Among the best known of aborted commemorations is that of the Smithsonian Museum's (1995) Enola Gay exhibit that was intended to depict the consequences of

the nuclear attack on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The exhibit's undertone, critical of the bomb's use and deftly criticizing the United States for excessive force, despite the 1000 daily American casualties at sea during the weeks prior to Hiroshima, disturbed many influential persons and associations. Congress withheld funding, and the exhibit was canceled. So, too, organizers of the International Freedom Center planned to use the Ground Zero site to redefine 9/11 as one of a long line of atrocities throughout human history, including American slavery, the mistreatment of native Americans, Japanese Americans, and poverty. New York's political representatives perceived the Freedom Center a 'blame America first' project; others interpreted its plans as an effort to mute 9/11 by commemorating victims who had no relation to it. Despite its many supporters, including the influential New York Times, Governor George Pataki declared the museum an anti-American platform at worst; at best, an inappropriate site for ideological expression, and he refused to approve it.

The logic framing The Freedom Center's proposal and rejection is also manifest in efforts within the nation of Israel to commemorate the Nakba (Catastrophe), namely, the establishment of the state of Israel. Almost all Arab-Israelis, including their Knesset (Parliament) representatives, commemorate this day with expressions of grief, but the idea is not only debated but endorsed within leftist Jewish institutions. The most enthusiastic supporters are, in fact, urging their society to mourn its success at preventing its own destruction. In addition, editorial headlines in Israel's left-leaning Ha'aretz endorse efforts to change the lyrics of the national anthem and the design of its flag to make them acceptable to Israeli-Arabs. Although reenergized within many Jewish and Muslim organizations, the movement to commemorate the Nakba's anniversary is vigorously rejected by the Israeli mainstream.

Delayed Commemoration

Construction of some commemorative sites are unduly delayed rather than aborted. Throughout World War II, American and British magazines honored Air Chief Marshall Arthur (Bomber) Harris by placing his photograph on their front cover. He had avenged the Blitz many times over by attacks on German cities. Almost 50 years passed before a statue of Harris was officially approved. England's left had always viewed the ferocity of Harris's raids as disproportional to the damage and death caused by the Luftwaffe. Indeed, activists vandalized the statue shortly after its London unveiling. In this connection, 67 years passed before public subscriptions paid for an official memorial to the RAF Bomber Command, which lost 55 000 men in the air war against Germany. All the social and economic problems associated with recovery from war make delayed commemoration the rule rather than the exception, but opposition to Bomber Harris and his air crews could have only arisen on a mass scale in the late twentieth century, when obsession with human rights transformed German populations supporting Nazi war factories into helpless victims of overwhelming force; the British airmen, brutes deserving no place

in posterity. Allies used that same 'disproportionate force' to drive the Nazis out of France – a heroic act at the time but one that now violates the moral sensibilities of French textbook writers as much as it disturbs the humanitarian conscience of many English and American intellectuals.

Theories of Commemoration

The common feature of current commemoration theories is their strong although not exclusive emphasis on minorities and victims, but each takes up a different facet of the problem. Hegemony theory, multiculturalism, postmodernism, and critical theory give insight into the political motives that commemorative objects embody. By contrast, the cultural lens focuses on why creators design such objects as they do and what they mean to viewers and listeners. The theories also differ on what commemoration is: whether a process of construction or retrieval, a mirror reflecting the concerns and interests within a society or a lamp of inspiration and moral precedent.

The Politics of Commemoration

In the first strand of the politics of commemoration, power is concentrated and expresses the tastes, values, and interests of society's elite. Elite producers of commemorative symbolism bring the past to life as they manipulate the attitudes of their audience in their own interest (Gillis, 1994). Despite efforts to universalize this model, it is most applicable to authoritarian societies wherein 'memory laws' (Koposov, 2011) sustain the official version of history. The premise of the second strand of the politics of memory is that power is diffused and that commemorative objects emerge from a matrix of cross-cutting coalitions, networks, and enterprises rather than a ruling elite's interest in maintaining its privilege. The fate of artistic and presidential reputations, Holocaust memories, monument making, place naming, and the organization of museums exemplify commemoration as a pluralistic network of interest and power. John Bodnar's (1992) distinction between 'official' and 'vernacular memory' is an instance of the pluralistic mode, as is Lorraine Ryan's (2011) conception of resistance as a necessary component of memory. Monopolies on memory and commemoration are, thus, difficult to establish because competing interpretations are inevitable, and free societies allow, indeed, encourage, their expression.

The politics of commemoration are also evident in 'counter-monuments.' The Korean War Veterans Memorial was expressly conceived to counter the design of the nearby Vietnam Veterans Memorial. An even more radical instance of counter-monuments is based on James Young's conviction that commemoration is a substitute for memory and cuts off the people from a real appreciation of their past. Open-ended debate over the meaning of an event, Young asserts, is the ultimate counter-monument (374). Shortly after the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, admirers constructed a monument near the spot where a right-wing zealot assassinated him. For many years, Rabin admirers, mainly liberal, assembled

at the monument every Friday to hear speeches and music in remembrance of his life. No such assembly and no such monument exist in the conservative city of Jerusalem (Vinitzky-Seroussi, 2009).

Political ideology also influences commemoration at the aesthetic level. Cultural conservatives tend to favor 'triumphal' commemorative sites, exemplified by the Washington Monument, Lincoln Memorial, Mount Rushmore, the Iwo Jima Memorial – sites that affirm patriotism and the virtues of the nation-state and its leaders. In contrast, liberals tend to reject traditional commemorative forms. Massive monuments, imposing statues, long and noisy parades, among other ostentatious displays are sources of disfavor. The political left, however, commemorates its favored groups by this very same aesthetic. Leftist critics consider Washington's World War II Memorial to be 'fascist' and condemn it artistically because its gothic design fails to conform to the existing Mall monuments. They raise no such objections against the Native American museum, located near the Capitol Building but colored yellow to give the appearance of a huge adobe structure. Nor do they criticize the massive Martin Luther King monument, designed by a sculptor from the People's Republic of China, representing the great peace leader in the same genre as that commemorating Kim Il Sung in North Korea and Mao Zedong in China. Visitors look up to see an enormous Martin Luther King stepping out of an enormous granite block.

Subordinating memory to political power, the politics of memory falls short in three respects. First, in the United States and Europe, no institution does more to commemorate its past wrongdoings than the state. Second, given that all commemoration requires political authority to make it effective, the question of why national and local elites choose to commemorate some persons and events and not others remains unanswered. Third, ideology often trumps politics in determining why the public accepts some elite efforts and rejects others.

Commemoration as a Cultural System

Most commemorative events involve political ideals, sentiments, and judgments, but they are rarely efforts to gain political advantage. The roots of commemorative conflict run too deep for such a simplistic account. In Michael Schudson's (1992) words, "Examining the past is motivated not only by a drive for legitimation . People seek to know what is right, what is true. They seek some kind of direction when they are aimless. They seek in the past some kind of anchor when they are adrift" (p. 213). In short, commemorative symbols articulate meaning, not power.

Conceived as a source of meaning, commemoration is less the construction of a manipulative interest group than a moral frame in terms of which people orient themselves. Commemorative agents, thus, perform more like priests than like

manipulators and lobbyists; they seek to reaffirm beliefs they share with rather than impose on their audiences. Commemoration is always a model *of* society – a reflection of its needs, interests, fears, mentality, and aspirations – but it is more importantly a model *for* society – a program defining its values and goals and a frame for organizing the meaning of its members' experience.

As a cultural system, commemoration makes past and present meaningful in terms of one another, which is why the production of commemorative objects becomes most urgent when some significant event is in danger of being forgotten – a situation to which Jan Assmann's concept of *Traditionsbruch* (tradition break) refers. Assmann introduced the *Traditionsbruch* concept during the 1990s, but it was rapidly assimilated into the field of biblical studies during the first decade of the twenty-first century (Kirk and Thatcher, 2005; Thatcher, 2008). Thus situated, it demonstrates the limits of 'communicative memory' (including oral tradition) and explains why the first written gospel appeared when it did. As the generation that lives through a particularly significant event dies out, those intent on preserving knowledge of it begin to write, paint, sculpt, build monuments, and organize observances. In particular, the first Gospel was written 40 years after the death of Jesus, when the last of his contemporaries were still able to tell each other what they knew about him. Likewise, questions of guilt and identity on the British islands of Guernsey and Jersey, whose citizens cooperated with the Nazi occupiers, "became more urgent with the realization that the witnesses of these times would no longer be around" (Carr, 2012: p. 53). Just so, the Korean War and World War II Memorials were rushed to completion as those who deserved recognition for serving in these wars were on the verge of vanishing. Each case reflects society's fear of the *Traditionsbruch* – the rupture that erodes irretrievably the present generation's knowledge of its forebears.

Society's fear is justifiable, for symbol systems are mutable. The generation that ascribes the same meaning to commemorative objects as did its forebears is theoretically impossible, for doing so would require a society to be so fixed as to clone itself culturally. Commemorative transformations are always superimposed upon commemorative continuities, and they can be dramatic. The destruction of King George's statue by rebelling American colonists in 1776; the deterioration and defacing of countless Civil War monuments throughout the United States, and the late twentieth-century vandalizing of images of sacred figures are simple examples. More complex is the development in Dublin of the Irish National Memorial to honor 300 000 Irishmen who fought with the English during World War I (Rigney, 2008). The Memorial's plan was drafted in 1919, implemented during the 1930s, but interrupted by World War II and Irish neutrality. After the war, the eroded monument was restored and formally dedicated in 1988 as England and Southern Ireland reconciled. Such are the vicissitudes of commemorative objects and of the mentalities they articulate.

Commemorative symbols gain and lose relevance and resonance independently of the distribution of power, but power or, for that matter, any social or economic

asset, performs significant cultural functions. Brian Conway's *Bloody Sunday* (2010) is one of the best examples of a multiple factor theory of commemoration, defining explicitly its cultural, economic, political, and situational contexts – a 'thick (contextual) description' that roots the concept of commemoration deeply in the social fiber. That Conway's topic consists of victims of oppression rather than agents of victory, however, is what makes it so apt an example of commemoration as a twenty-first century cultural system.

Conclusion

The past's relevance diminished during the late twentieth century in two ways. First, the individual's connection to his or her society and its past was weakened by the discrediting of its metanarratives – its great legends, myths, and histories. Since the key feature of metanarratives is embodied in a plot structure that interprets events in a way that can be widely understood and shared, people require them, collectively and individually, to make sense of experience. 'Of what great story is my life and death a part?' is the question they ask in their effort to define themselves and the meaning of their lives. This question would not be worth asking if the great stories that impressed our forebears still impressed us – and if there were no consequence, no cost, to the repudiation of the greatneses of history.

As the positive aspects of societal narratives are ignored, the orienting past tense of the individual's life is negated. These positive narratives are not completely ignored, but few would deny that diminished engagement with the past distinguishes recent from remote generations. The adjective 'diminished,' however, must be underscored, for diminishings are more difficult to describe and comprehend than disappearances. At question is whether traditional reverence for the past is destined to disappear or whether it remains because it is not traditional at all but rather a fundamental requirement of societal continuity, because there is a level below which commemorative interest, if not passion, does not fall. Amy Corning and Howard Schuman's (2013) surveys of events as different as 11 September and Woodstock are relevant to this point. As the 10th and 40th anniversaries of these events approached, media coverage grew and more people named them as memorable events. The percentage mentioning these events fell after the mass media ceased coverage, but that percentage remained higher after the coverage than before.

The present situation, then, must be rightly understood: balkanized preferences have enervated the West less politically than culturally. Because the West's mentality is currently progressive, compassionate toward the underdog and skeptical of everyone else, because it is irreverent, pluralistic, relativistic, and less attached to tradition than ever before, it has begun to alienate individuals from whatever historical legacy they possess. In the deliberate minimizing of founders and their ideas, the substitution of shallow pity for the invocation of sacrifice, courage, and perseverance, and the anxious commemorative concessions to even the most outrageous claims of 'oppressed minorities,' there is something at once

gained and lost. The West has never been freer of religious, ethnic, and racial hatred; yet, its historians – often justly, frequently unjustly – challenge official accounts of their nations’ historical virtues. As democratic peoples adopt the mea culpa perspective on history, they lose sight of the great transformations wrought by their forebears; they lose sight of themselves as historical beings, forget that they have inherited their most valuable possessions from those whom they so ardently criticize. Merely to contemplate these issues is to affirm commemoration’s ironic functions in twenty first century society.

See also: Civil Religion; Collective Identity; Collective Memory, Anthropology of; Collective Memory, Psychology of; Durkheim, Emile (1858–1917); Names and Naming; Narrative Networks.

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