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Social Memory

Classical Theories and New Perspectives

Translated from German by

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Introduction

By the phrase ‘to have a skeleton in the cupboard’ we say that in the past somebody violated the social order, that there has not been any expiation for this violation, and that, in one way or another, the person concerned is still tainted by this; that this violation still remains with him or her. But when saying this, we don’t always intend to suggest that this person could certainly be connected to, as yet, undiscovered crimes, if only we looked closely enough. The metaphor of the skeleton in the cupboard also refers to all those minor sins for which we cannot forgive ourselves and which, as soon as we are reminded of them, burden us – such as if we have been unfaithful, have bad-mouthed somebody, have made fools of ourselves, or have hurt or even betrayed somebody. Such minor or major transgressions visit us in the form of a bad conscience; something which could traditionally be remedied by going to confession or, in our secular times, by going to a therapist. Given this, how much easier would things be if we could just take a little pill and purposefully forget about that stupid event that burdens us?

Such ideas of beneficial oblivion have been around since antiquity, they have been a subject of literature and film, and are still today a matter of neurophysiology if it is about fighting the suffering caused by post-traumatic stress disorder. Simply deleting certain memories could be imagined if the memory was a store of past events from which anything could be removed if we do not want it anymore. Thus, as in Michel Gondry’s film Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, we could simply undergo a treatment to forget about an unhappy love affair. However, to achieve this we would have to give away everything which might call such a memory back again, and all the friends of both parties would be obliged to never mention the person concerned anymore. The portrait, the ‘soundtrack’ of happier days, the cap knitted as a Christmas gift, and the slipper left behind are comparably easily disposed of. Things become more difficult, however, in the case of events belonging to the social world – joint activities: the memory of which is connected not to just one person but to certain places and to other people. Whatever triggers reminiscence is part of the environment into which we have been born and to whose order our bodies and minds have adapted.

But regardless of whether it may be one day possible to manipulate perception or memory through medical intervention, we are confronted with issues of memory; of remembering and forgetting on a daily basis. When we complain about having a bad memory – not remembering something, or having forgotten something – the first places to turn to would be neuroscience and
psychology. We naturally tend to associate our ability to remember with the functioning and efficiency of the brain. However, in this way we ignore those aspects of memory which cannot be explained in psychological or neuroscientific terms. This includes, for example, the fact that remembering does not come from deep within us but depends on previous experiences as well as on the situation we are in at a given moment (alone or together with other people, in a social gathering or at an official meeting) as well as on the way in which we perceive such situations. All this is closely connected to the fact that the way we are and the way in which we perceive ourselves at a given moment is a result of a continuous exchange with others or with the traces they have left. Consequently, culture and society are connected both to what we currently believe to be important and relevant and to our past experiences.

In this book we intend to have a look at issues of memory, of remembering and forgetting which are not limited to the brain and to individual consciousness. Although, from an historical perspective, physiological and psychological perspectives have paved the way for memory research, today we have good reasons to assume that memory, remembering and forgetting are co-determined by – to put it in the words of social phenomenologist Alfred Schütz – the social world and environment of the individual and the social groups to which he or she belongs. Human relationships are connected to memory insofar as that, on one hand, they make memories possible, and on the other hand, they allow the individuals in the relationship to forget many things. The same applies with social structures, norms, values, roles and institutions – all these concepts from the conceptual-theoretical toolbox of sociology describe a selection of thematically determined possibilities for action, based on past events and developments. Indeed, these insights have already been discussed elsewhere, but what is lacking is a systematisation of insights concerning the issue of socially communicated memories as well as connecting sociological concepts of memory to the memory-theoretical research tradition. The book is intended to fill this gap, while at the same time highlighting the specificity and necessity of a sociological – rather than a psychological, historical or cultural-studies – perspective of memory, remembering and forgetting. Sociology, itself, is a very recent voice of the interdisciplinary concerto of memory research. However, it discusses memory, remembering and forgetting in a way which not only leads

1 Some of the works dealing with issues of social memory, remembering and forgetting include, among others, the overview presented by Jeffrey K. Olick and Joyce Robbins (1998), the introductory work by Barbara A. Misztal (2003b), the topical exploration by David Middleton and Stephen D. Brown (2005), the compilation of ‘classical’ passages of memory research by Jeffrey K. Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi and Daniel Levy (2011) of the compilation edited by Siobhan Kattago (2015).
to new and unexpected insights but to innovative research questions and fields of application.

Since history, by means of interviews with contemporary witnesses in the context of oral history, has opened up issues of memory and in the field of cultural studies the concept of memory has been important for quite some time; an extended and unspecific way of using the terms memory, remembering and forgetting has been established. This is also the case with regard to social or societal relationships. The starting point for this development has its origins in works critical of modernity and ideology, such as those by philosopher and literary scholar, Walter Benjamin, among others. Benjamin questions the desire to arouse or ignore memories, thus exploiting the past. In this way he creates important preconditions for thinking about the politics of memory, which is not only used by ruling elites to maintain power. Remembering also serves for creating and securing social peace in the wake of social conflicts, that are accompanied by the traumatisation of collectives, and which require a way of dealing with a bad past which is acceptable for all parties involved in the conflict. For example, in some cases it seems to be necessary to impose oblivion – or more precisely, amnesty – on a historically conditioned perpetrator-victim relationship between individuals or groups. In other cases, such as the memory of the Holocaust, the common hope of a ‘never again’ leads to a way of remembering which is maintained and politically controlled by selected institutions.

A look at the history of memory research in the humanities, the social sciences or cultural studies, however, makes obvious that the interest in scientifically reflecting on issues of remembering and forgetting had mostly vanished in the post-war era. Only in the 1980s did Jan and Aleida Assmann again take up the concept of memory in the field of cultural studies. With their distinction between communicative and cultural memory they systematically examined both the ways in which social groups deal with their pasts and the ways in which social groups refer to cultural objects. Their widely-adopted considerations were inspired by classical memory-sociological positions – in

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2 In this context there basically exist two lines of research focusing on the way in which contemporary witnesses remember: the oral history research of the science of history which, as a kind of ‘bottom-up history’, deals, sometimes critically, with the problem of the contemporary witness (see e.g. Plato, 1999; 2000), and social-scientific biography research which focuses on the remembering of life histories and life courses (see e.g. Rosenthal, 1995).

3 Such as the compilation by Jan Assmann and Tonio Hölscher (1988) and Jan Assmann’s (2011) monography on cultural memory as well as the more recent publications in the context of the work of Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (see e.g. Erll, 2005; Erll & Nünning 2010).

4 In several passages of his work Benjamin deals with the issue of remembering – such as in his essay On the Concept of History (Benjamin, 2003). Lars Alberth (2014) discusses the issue of seizing a memory which is found in Benjamin.
particular by Maurice Halbwachs’ theory of the collective memory. Meanwhile, the research of memory and remembering – *memory studies* – has become a gigantic interdisciplinary research field covering the science of history, archaeology, ethnology and folklore studies, literary science, theology and religious studies, social psychology, political science and, finally, sociology.5

Assessing the sociology of memory here cannot pursue all traces which, starting out from psychology and philosophy in the 19th century, lead to a genuinely sociological conception of social memory. We must limit ourselves to those currents, theories and names which, in our opinion, have been very influential; while minor branches of the history of theory are, at best, hinted at, while some basic or promising questions and issues of memory, remembering and forgetting will only be sketched. A general introduction to sociology is also something this book cannot offer – we assume a working knowledge of important technical terms, as well as a basic understanding of the issues of the discipline. For us it is important to point out theoretical and theory-historical connection points, to consider the topic of memory in the light of both relevant and influential sociological theories and theoreticians, and to point out fields of application and studies merely for the purpose of illustration. All of this is based on the assumption that questions of social memory can be found in all sociological theories and that these questions at the same time offer a connectable research orientation for the variety of specialized sociological fields, which has not yet been pursued or only with the help of insufficient equivalents for the concept of memory. Memory-relevant questions are found in the fields of economic and organisational sociology, educational sociology, the sociology of law, family sociology, sociology of science, sociology of work, industrial sociology and occupational sociology, the sociology of generations and the sociology of social inequality – to name but a few of the manifold points of connection. Accordingly, the history unfolded here of the theory of the sociological study of memory, remembering and forgetting is not only meant to inform the reader about the theory-systematic advantages of this perspective but to also encourage the reader to pursue this stimulating path of theory themselves. Our proposal is structured as follows:

As memory is always connected to the phenomenon of time, and as time may not be understood to be naturally given but to be socially construed, we start with a short discussion of classical theories of time. Although the question as to whether remembering comes from time or time comes from remembering is somewhat like the chicken-and-egg problem, it is nevertheless helpful

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5 Among these, one can count, since a couple of years ago, the US American journal *Memory Studies* as a special discussion forum.
to start by clarifying the relation between past, present and future. We will see
that in this way certain basic problems and crucial theoretical traditions of a
sociology of memory will already become obvious (Chapter 1).

In our second step we deal with some psychological and philosophical roots
of the sociology of memory. In particular, we look at those theories that have
already served as an inspiration for sociological theories of memory. What
makes this section fruitful is broadening the horizon to include two dimen-
sions of meaning of the concept of memory that are not commonly used
in everyday understanding: firstly, that memory is not considered a purely
intellectual-cognitive tool but a process in which the entire body is involved.
Secondly, it is elaborated that memory is no simple store, but must be under-
stood as a delegating orientation mechanism which refers to emerging situa-
tions (Chapter 2).

Based on from such an expanded concept of memory, it becomes possible
to work out related concepts in more detail. To these belong, apart from the
still missing established components of the triad ‘memory – remembering –
forgetting’, terms such as ‘event’, ‘occurrence’ and ‘experience’. Thus, the con-
nected considerations still basically refer to the ego-logical perspective – the
focus is on the individual’s consciousness of the past (Chapter 3).

After having discussed issues of individual consciousness and memory, the
step from the individual perspective to the consideration of social relations
should not be made without some basic knowledge of the sociology of time.
As yet, the ways in which societies deal with time has hardly been a topic of
memory-sociologic questions. However, we believe it to be necessary to point
out to some basic elements of this debate, since even a social or collective time
consciousness may considerably influence the ways in which social memories
work (Chapter 4).

The main part of the book consists of an inspection and discussion of soci-
ological theories, in view of their more or less explicitly presented memory-
thetical motifs. We begin by paying tribute to those sociologists who may
be considered classical representatives of the sociology of memory. The focus
here is on the Chicago School, which belongs to the tradition of American
Pragmatism; on French sociology in the wake of Émile Durkheim and Maurice
Halbwachs; as well as on the perspective of social phenomenology as signifi-
cantly developed by Alfred Schütz (Chapter 5).

Following this, we shed light on current social theories, including the aspects
of social memories, social or collective memories and social oblivion. Among
these, we address structure- and differentiation-theoretical approaches and
the more recent sociology of knowledge and practice-theoretical approaches.
This section demonstrates how crucial and yet insufficiently examined issues
of social memory, remembering and forgetting are to this day in the context of sociological theory and where certain equivalents of memory-theoretical concepts are used (Chapter 6).

Sociology has frequently been called a child of modern society, since its establishment as an academic discipline is chronologically in line with the first diagnoses of modernity. One element of these analyses of society is the discovery that the way of dealing with the social past has been shifted from remembering to forgetting. It therefore makes sense to question sociological social theory with regard to its memory motifs or to examine which temporal diagnostic impulses can be gained from this direction for a theory of social memory (Chapter 7).

If the concepts of memory, remembering and oblivion are made fruitful for sociological use, a set of tools is gained with which we can describe how social actors – both individuals and collectives – base their actions on their own past. The sociology of memory demonstrated here takes into account the social construction of predictabilities derived from a long-term structure of knowledge. Seen in this way, social memories provide a key for answering the question of why social orders have developed in this way, and not in any other.

One more word about the location within sociology itself: the sociology of memory is no special sociology. Due to its interest in the social constitution and meaningful construction of relations to the past, the sociology of memory deals with a fundamental issue of sociological theory building and is at odds with hyphenated sociologies and general sociology. As such a perspective is connectable to any research field of sociology while at the same time providing new research questions, we believe it to be helpful – at least for the time being – to call those theory projects and empirical projects as dealing with the development of social orders sociology of memory. This may be unprecise but clamps together terms such as remembrance research, sociology of social memories, sociology of oblivion or memory studies.