INTRODUCTION.
ON THE EARLY MODERNITY OF MODERN MEMORY*

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Most scholars who study memory believe that people in different cultures have different ways of remembering. This assumption implies that it should be possible to write a history of memory. Outlines of such a history can be found in various modern theories of memory, which often contain a macro-historical component. Jacques Le Goff distinguished five phases in the history of memory in the West, in which ‘free, creative and vital’ memory over time became ‘exteriorised’.1 Pierre Nora famously argued that ‘milieux de mémoire’ had given way to ‘lieux de mémoire’.2 Aleida and Jan Assmann have connected media revolutions to the emergence of new forms of cultural memory, while students of nationalism like Benedict Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm saw the combined forces of literacy, political change, mass media, secularization and capitalism as the motor behind the emergence of new approaches to the past.3 Increasingly, memory theories also have a ‘futurist’ component—it is alleged that postmodernity, globalization and/or the information revolution are creating changes that might lead to a new transformation of memory as we know it.4

However varied such macro-historical narratives may be, they also have a great deal in common. First, they are relentlessly linear in their approach

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4 See e.g. Elena Esposito, Soziales Vergessen. Formen und Medien des Gedächtnisses der Gesellschaft (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2002); Jeffrey K. Olick and Joyce Robbins, ‘Social memory studies. From “collective memory” to the historical sociology of mnemonic practices’, Annual Review of Sociology 24 (1998), 105–140.
and work from the assumption that when new ways of approaching the past make their appearance, old ways of doing so will be discarded—almost as if there exists a finite capacity for engagement with the past in any one culture. Secondly, they usually posit an evolution of memory and memory practices away from the organic, local, traditional and communal, first towards the hegemonic nationalist memory cultures of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and subsequently towards the hybridity and chaotic individuality of postmodern memory practices. The onset of this process is believed to have been enabled by the emergence of a new historical consciousness, a sense of difference between past and present, which is sometimes defined as a split between memory and history.\(^5\)

Nevertheless, there is little agreement about the timeframe in which this development from pre-modern to modern memory takes place. For Esposito and Le Goff the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are more important than they are for Hobsbawm and Anderson, who see most change happening from around 1800. For Walter Benjamin it was the First World War that produced a great shift, while Nora seems to set the disappearance of the ‘milieux de mémoire’ in the very recent past.\(^6\) Despite this lack of consensus about the chronology, the sociologist Jeffrey Olick, surely one of the most astute of today’s memory theorists, believes that one can glean from existing studies ‘a fairly clear account of the rise of linear historicity out of the cyclicity of rural living and church eschatology’. He is persuaded by scholars who believe that the state had an important role to play in this process but also sees a role for the interest of ‘publics’ in the post-Renaissance. Moreover, he thinks that ‘a rising sense of individuality’ in the early modern period simultaneously created an awareness that the personal past was something ‘that required preservation and recovery’.\(^7\) As far as Olick is concerned, a satisfactory paradigm about the history of memory is thus well within reach.

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\(^7\) Olick, *The politics of regret*, 185–187.