
In an erudite though dense book, Jeffrey Andrew Barash discusses the relationship between collective memory and the historical past. This book is both a philosophical inquiry aiming to answer the question what it means to collectively remember, and an elaboration on the theoretical foundations of the concept of collective memory. For a long time collective memory has been a subject of debate, but Barash’s work convincingly reopens the discussion and shows a new perspective. This is done through linking academic debates on the nature of memory to a philosophical analysis that not only stretches towards every corner of the humanities and the social sciences, but also relates to the interplay between collective memory, literature, politics, everyday life, and most importantly: history. Thus, this multifaceted contemplation provides us with both a profound and extensive analysis of the role of collective memory in all aspects of modern society, as well as a new conceptual framework to be used in current philosophical debates.

Barash begins his book with a historical introduction of the concepts of remembering and collective remembrance. This conceptual exploration concludes with the idea that after the “demise of the metaphysical age” in the nineteenth century and the “crisis of historicism” in the interwar period, collective memory took a central position in debates on social cohesion, group experience, and identity formation. To put it shortly: it provided society with new forms of continuity after traditional metaphysical ideas had faded. The central question then becomes: what exactly is collective memory? In dialogue with the works of Maurice Halbwachs, Barash discusses collective memory as the remembering of lived experiences within a community. This, however, does not mean that everybody in a community needs to have a personal recollection of the things that are part of its collective memory. On the contrary: only some people in a community need to have experienced events “in the flesh,” while others relate to these events in another, indirect way. Here – in bridging the gap between personal memory and collective memory – Barash reserves an important role for the imagination. Imagination, Barash says, is not merely a faculty that produces fiction; it also constitutes our collective perceptions of reality. He writes: “Imagination ... is a condition for social existence.
per se and, as such, configures the basis for all that is communally significant. This primordial role of imagination ... renders what is collectively significant communicable by embodying it in symbols” (46). Thus a central element in Barash’s reasoning is introduced: the importance of symbolically embodied remembered experiences for the creation and mediation of collective memory. One could argue that Barash describes a hermeneutic process when he states that our individual experiences permanently interact with a symbolic context. These symbolic structures passively position our individual experiences within a broader social context – they add spatiotemporal and logical patterns to our experience – while at the same time this context is the product of the experiences shared through symbols by living generations. Hence, Barash says, collective memory should be understood as being located in a “web of experience” (51–52).

Throughout the book Barash shows in several ways how collective memory is both fluid and passive. The first notion, that it is subject to permanent change, might be rather obvious. Since Barash sees collective memory “as a contemporaneous horizon of experience and remembrance shared by overlapping, living generations,” it is inevitable that the “experiential continuity ... quickly fades when no living memory remains to recount past events to elucidate the nuances on the temporal context in which they were situated” (55). So although collective memory can be transmitted between overlapping generations, transmission becomes more and more difficult after generations start to fade. Barash provides us with a practical illustration of the capriciousness of collective memory in his assessment of Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech. The moment of the speech shows how symbols do not have a fixed meaning: symbolically embodied memories, such as individual memories of watching or hearing this speech, have different meanings within differing groups and times. This inevitably leads to a fragmentation of collective memory. So although “symbolic embodiment of a specific occurrence can be recalled and reenacted to lend significance to later collective experience” (58), this does not mean this significance is timeless and static. For Barash, that these changes in collective memory often go unnoticed is very important. This is strikingly illustrated by discussing an uncontested example of the sudden awareness of a gradually changing context: À la recherche du temps perdu by Proust.

While analyzing the dynamics of collective memory Barash frequently reflects on the connection between collective memory and collective identities. These passages reveal that the book is more than a mere philosophical exercise: it is also a critique of the current applications of the concept of collective memory and could perhaps even be considered cultural criticism. Barash