

How societies remember

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Social memory

All beginnings contain an element of recollection. This is particularly so when a social group makes a concerted effort to begin with a wholly new start. There is a measure of complete arbitrariness in the very nature of any such attempted beginning. The beginning has nothing whatsoever to hold on to; it is as if it came out of nowhere. For a moment, the moment of beginning, it is as if the beginners had abolished the sequence of temporality itself and were thrown out of the continuity of the temporal order. Indeed the actors often register their sense of this fact by inaugurating a new calendar. But the absolutely new is inconceivable. It is not just that it is very difficult to begin with a wholly new start, that too many old loyalties and habits inhibit the substitution of a novel enterprise for an old and established one. More fundamentally, it is that in all modes of experience we always base our particular experiences on a prior context in order to ensure that they are intelligible at all; that prior to any single experience, our mind is already predisposed with a framework of outlines, of typical shapes of experienced objects. To perceive an object or act upon it is to locate it within this system of expectations. The world of the percipient, defined in terms of temporal experience, is an organised body of expectations based on recollection.

In imagining what a historic beginning might be like, the modern imagination has turned back again and again to the events of the French Revolution. This historic rupture, more than any other, has assumed for us the status of a modern myth. It took on that status very quickly. All reflection on history on the continent of Europe throughout the nineteenth century looks behind it to the moment of that revolution in which the meaning of revolution itself was transformed from a circularity of movement to the advent of the new.¹ For those who came after, the present was seen as a time of fall into the ennui of a post-heroic age, or as a permanent

state of crisis, the anticipation, whether hoped for or feared, of a recurrent eruption.² Revolutionary imagining reached beyond the European heartland; since the late nineteenth century we have lived the myth of the Revolution much as the first Christian generations lived the myth of the End of the World. As early as 1798, Kant remarked that a phenomenon of this kind can never again be forgotten.³

Yet this beginning, which provides us with our myth of a historic beginning, serves also, and all the more starkly, to bring into relief the moment of recollection in all apparent beginnings. The work of recollection operated in many ways, explicitly and implicitly, and at many different levels of experience; but I mean to single out here for specific comment the way in which recollection was at work in two distinct areas of social activity: in *commemorative ceremonies* and in *bodily practices*.

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The beginning which was sought in the trial and execution of Louis XVI of France exhibits this circumstance in a peculiarly dramatic way. The leaders of the Revolution who sat in judgement on Louis faced a problem that was not unique to themselves; it was a problem that confronts any regime, for instance that inaugurated by the Nuremberg Trials, which seeks to establish in a definitive manner the total and complete substitution of a new social order. The regicide of 1793 may be seen as an instance of a more general phenomenon: the trial by fiat of a successor regime. This is unlike any other type of trial. It is different in kind from those that take place under the authority of a long-established regime. It is not like those acts of justice which reinforce a system of retribution by setting its governing principles once more into motion or by modifying the details of their application; it is not a further link in a sequence of settlements through which a regime either achieves greater solidity or moves towards its ultimate disintegration. Those who adhere most resolutely to the principles of the new regime and those who have suffered most severely at the hands of the old regime want not only revenge for particular wrongs and a rectification of particular iniquities. The settlement they seek is one in which the continuing struggle between the new order and the old will be definitively terminated, because the legitimacy of the victors will be validated once and for all. A barrier is to be erected against future transgression. The present is to be separated from what preceded it by an act of unequivocal demarcation. The trial by fiat of a successor regime is like the construction of a wall, unmistakable and permanent, between the new beginnings and the old tyranny. To pass judgement on the practices of the old regime is the constitutive act of the new order.⁴

The trial and execution of Louis XVI was not the murder of a ruler but the revocation of a ruling principle: the principle according to which the dynastic realm was the only imaginable political system. It had indeed been possible to envisage regicide within the terms of that system. For centuries kings had been killed by would-be kings; by private assassins in the pay of would-be kings; or, more rarely, by religious fanatics like the murderers of Henri III and Henri IV of France. But whatever fate might befall individual kings, the principle of dynastic succession remained intact. Whether they died through natural causes or through foul play, the death of kings and the coronation of their successors were comprehensible episodes in the continuum of lineage. Why did the murder of kings leave the institution of kingship untouched? Because, as Camus succinctly put it, none of the murderers ever imagined that the throne might remain empty.⁵ No new rulers, that is to say, had ever thought it to be in their interests that the institution of monarchy should be called into question; once crowned, they sought to preserve for themselves the royal authority of the person whose death they had instigated. This form of regicide left the dynastic system unchallenged: the benchmarks of time were still the phases of dynastic rule. The death of a king registered a break in that public time: between one king and another time stood still. There was a gap in it – an interregnum – which people sought to keep as brief as possible. When Louis XVIII of France dated his accession to the throne from the execution of his predecessor, it was to this dynastic principle that he remained true; he was thinking of regicide as it has always been thinkable within the context of the dynastic realm, a context in which assassinations could always be accommodated as episodes within the narrative of dynastic continuity, a context indeed in which assassination was not so much a threat to the power of dynasty as rather an implicit homage to it. Assassination left the principle of the dynastic realm intact because it left unviolated the king as a public person.

The whole point of Louis' trial and execution lay in its ceremonial publicity; it was this that killed him in his public capacity by denying his status as king. The dynastic principle was destroyed not by assassination nor by imprisonment or banishment but by putting Louis, as the embodiment of kingship, to death in such a way that official public abhorrence of the institution of kingship was actually expressed and witnessed.⁶ The revolutionaries needed to find some ritual process through which the aura of inviolability surrounding kingship could be explicitly repudiated. What they thus repudiated was not only an institution but the political theology that legitimated that institution.⁷ That political theology, the belief that the king united in one person his natural body as an individual and his representative body as the king, was most clearly expressed in the coro-

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nation ceremony. It was expressed not in the act of crowning alone but also in the anointing by a bishop of the church, with the all-important phrase announcing that the anointed king rules 'by the grace of God'. It was this double component that gave the coronation rite its quasi-sacramental character. For a thousand years the kings of France had received at their coronation the holy oil as well as the crown upon their heads, after the manner of the apostles' successors. The effect was to transform the enemies of royalty into apparently sacrilegious persons. This was the effect that the public regicide of Louis sought to undo. Here was the oxymoronic element of this regicide: Louis was to be given a royal funeral to end all royal funerals. The ceremony of his trial and execution was intended to exorcise the memory of a prior ceremony. The anointed head was decapitated and the rite of coronation ceremonially revoked. Not simply the natural body of the king but also and above all his political body was killed. In this the actions of the revolutionaries borrowed from the language of the sacred which for so long the dynastic realm had appropriated as its own. Their victim well understood that this was an event in the demise of political theology; Louis XVI, like Charles I of England, explicitly identified himself with the God who died when he spoke of his defeat as a Passion.⁸ The proceedings at the trial and execution ceremonially dismantled the sense of sacrilege that had surrounded the murder of kings. One rite revoked another.

A rite revoking an institution only makes sense by invertedly recalling the other rites that hitherto confirmed that institution. The ritual ending of kingship was a settling of accounts with and giving of an account of what it repudiated. The rejection of the principle of the dynastic realm, in this case the ritual enactment of that rejection, was still an account of, and a recalling of, the superseded dynastic realm. The problem here is similar to that which arises over the question of the institution of property. Some people steal from others or defraud them or seize their product. In all these ways they may acquire possessions by means not sanctioned by the prevailing principles of justice in regard to possessions. The existence of past injustice and the continued memory of that injustice raises the question of the rectification of injustices. For if past injustice has shaped the structure of a society's present arrangements for holding property in various ways – or analogously if it is held that past injustice has shaped the structure of a society's arrangements for founding its sovereignty – the question arises as to what now, if anything, ought to be done to rectify these injustices. What kind of criminal blame and what obligations do the performers of past injustice have towards those whose position is worse than it would have been had the injustice not been perpetrated? How far back must you go in taking account of the memory of past injustice, in

wiping clean the historical record of illegitimate acts? To construct a barrier between the new beginning and the old tyranny is to recollect the old tyranny.

The styles of clothing characteristic of the revolutionary period celebrated, if not so definitive a beginning, then at least a temporary liberation from the practices of the established order. They mark the attempt to establish a new set of typical *bodily practices*. The participants in the revolution exhibited a form of behaviour that was not unique to themselves: behaviour that is to be found in all carnivals which mark the suspension of hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions.⁹ Styles of clothing in Paris passed through two phases during the revolutionary period. During the first, which dominated the years 1791–4, clothes became uniforms. The culotte of simple cut and the absence of adornments were emblematic of the desire to eliminate social barriers in the striving for equality: by making the body neutral, citizens were to be free to deal with one another without the intrusion of differences in social status. During the second phase, which dominated the years of Thermidor beginning in 1795, liberty of dress came to mean free bodily movement. People now began to dress in such a way as to expose their bodies to one another on the street and to display the motions of the body. The *merveilleuse*, the woman of fashion, wore light muslin drapery which revealed the shape of the breasts fully and covered neither the arms nor the legs below the knees, while the muslin showed the movement of the limbs when the body changed position. Her male counterpart, the *incroyable*, was a man dressed in the form of a cone with its tip on the ground; very tight trousers led up to short coats and ended in high and exaggerated collars, brightly coloured cravats and hair worn dishevelled or cut close in the style of Roman slaves. While the style of the *merveilleuse* was intended as a liberation in fashion, that of the *incroyable* was meant as sartorial parody; the *incroyable* parodied the Macaronis, stylish dressers of the 1750s, by using lorgnettes and walking with mincing steps. This was a moment in the history of Paris when inhibitory rules were suspended; when, as in all carnival, the people acted out their awareness that established authority was, in reality, a matter of local prescription.¹⁰

If the revolutionaries rejected the practices of bodily behaviour dominant under the *ancien régime*, that was because they knew that a habit of servitude is incorporated in the behaviour of the servile group by way of their own habits of bodily deportment. This was the point that the deputies of the Third Estate were making when in May 1789 they remonstrated, first at their humiliating official costume, and then, when that had been changed, at the very idea of a costume distinguishing them from the deputies of the nobility. In a pamphlet of 2 May 1789 they attacked the

convention requiring the deputies to wear different costumes emblematic of their estate; such a practice, they asserted, perpetuated 'an unacceptable inequality, destructive of the very essence of the Assembly'. What it perpetuated was inequality in an incorporated form: that tradition of bodily practice in accordance with which the upper ranks of society appeared on the street in elaborate costumes which both set them apart from the lower orders and allowed them to dominate the street, a tradition further upheld by sumptuary laws which assigned to each social stratum in the hierarchy a set of appropriate dress and forbade anyone to wear the clothing officially and publicly pronounced suitable for another social rank. The representatives of the Third Estate wanted a licensed transgression, a transgressive act which derived its point not simply from a premeditated beginning for future political activity, but from the exercise of retrospective imagination which recalled a time and a form of social order when appearances on the street were precise indicators of social hierarchy.¹¹ It has been argued – Burke is the preeminent spokesman of such a view and Oakeshott a recent exemplary exponent – that political ideology must be understood 'not as an independently premeditated beginning for political activity', but as knowledge, in an abstract and generalised form, 'of a concrete manner of attending to the arrangements of society'; that ideologies, as expressed in the form of political programmes or official maxims, can never be more than abbreviations of some manner of concrete behaviour; and that a tradition of behaviour is unavoidably knowledge of detail, since 'what has to be learned is not an abstract idea, or a set of tricks, nor even a ritual, but a concrete, coherent manner of living in all its intricateness'.¹² Such an insight, it is frequently claimed, is exclusive to the true Conservative; but the representatives of the Third Estate, in assigning such importance to the details of everyday dress, showed themselves as aware as their opponents that clothes had the function of saying something about the status of the wearer and, what is equally important, of making that statement a habitual one.

To read or wear clothes is in a significant respect similar to reading or composing a literary text. To read or compose a text as literature, and as belonging to a particular genre of literature, is not to approach it without preconception; one must bring to it an implicit understanding of the operations of literary discourse which tells one what to look for or how to set about composing. Only those who possessed the requisite literary competence would be able to proceed to make sense of a new concatenation of phrases by reading them as literature of a certain type; analogously, only those who possessed the requisite social competence would be able to read the dress of the *incroyable* as a parody of the Macaroni. Just as one group has internalised the grammar of literature which enables

them to convert linguistic sentences into literary structures and meanings, so likewise has the other internalised the grammar of dress which enables them to convert clothing items into clothing structures and meanings. Anyone who does not possess such competences, anyone unfamiliar with the conventions by which fictions are read or people clothed, would, for example, be quite puzzled if confronted with a lyric poem or a person dressed in the style of an *incroyable*. In reading literature one assigns the object in question to a genre; in interpreting clothes one proceeds likewise. An individual literary feature, or an individual clothing feature, possesses meaning because it is perceived as part of a whole cluster of meanings; and, in each case, this type of whole must be a more or less explicit guess about the kind of utterance or the kind of dress that is being interpreted. Unless interpreters make a guess about the kind of meaning they confront they have no way of unifying their transient encounters with the details. And this subsumption of the particular experience under a type or genre is not simply a process of identifying certain explicit features. It also entails a set of expectations by virtue of which one believes that many of the unexamined features in the new experience will be the same as features characteristic of previous experience; or, if they are not the same, that they are describable in terms of their degree of divergence from that set of expectations. This structure of implicit expectations is always a component of a type – a type of literature or a type of clothing – because it is by virtue of them that a new instance can be subsumed before it is completely known.¹³

In the two cases just looked at – that of ceremonial trial and execution, and that of newly developed practices of clothing – we find a common feature. The attempt to break definitively with an older social order encounters a kind of historical deposit and threatens to founder upon it. The more total the aspirations of the new regime, the more imperiously will it seek to introduce an era of forced forgetting. To say that societies are self-interpreting communities is to indicate the nature of that deposit; but it is important to add that among the most powerful of these self-interpretations are the images of themselves as continuously existing that societies create and preserve. For an individual's consciousness of time is to a large degree an awareness of society's continuity, or more exactly of the image of that continuity which the society creates. I have suggested, with respect to the French Revolution, that at least part of this deposit is to be found in repeated commemorative acts and at least part in culturally specific bodily practices. That deposit was composed, in regard to the ceremony of regicide, of feelings with respect to the king, or rather towards his kingship, that bore the mark of ancient beliefs with roots in old religions and ways of thought that left behind a sense of the inviolate and inviolable; that is why the public execution of Louis was felt by all his contemporaries to be

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so awesome an event. And it was composed, in regard to the clothing practices of the early revolutionary period and Thermidor, of hierarchic prescriptions that were incorporated in habitual bodily practices; that is why the new fashions of the 1790s were experienced by the participants as such a heady release. Regicide was a ritual revocation, sartorial licence was a carnival liberation. In both types of action we see people trying to mark out the boundaries of a radical beginning; and in neither case is that beginning, that new image of society's continuity, even thinkable without its element of recollection – of recollection both explicit and implicit. The attempt to establish a beginning refers back inexorably to a pattern of social memories.

3

We need to distinguish *social memory* from a more specific practice that is best termed the activity of *historical reconstruction*. Knowledge of all human activities in the past is possible only through a knowledge of their traces. Whether it is the bones buried in Roman fortifications, or a pile of stones that is all that remains of a Norman tower, or a word in a Greek inscription whose use or form reveals a custom, or a narrative written by the witness of some scene, what the historian deals with are traces: that is to say the marks, perceptible to the senses, which some phenomenon, in itself inaccessible, has left behind. Just to apprehend such marks as traces of something, as evidence, is already to have gone beyond the stage of merely making statements about the marks themselves; to count something as evidence is to make a statement about something else, namely, about that for which it is taken as evidence.

Historians, that is to say, proceed inferentially. They investigate evidence much as lawyers cross-question witnesses in a court of law, extracting from that evidence information which it does not explicitly contain or even which was contrary to the overt assertions contained in it. Those parts of the evidence which are made up of previous statements are in no sense privileged; a previous statement claiming to be true has for the historian the same status as any other type of evidence. Historians are able to reject something explicitly told them in their evidence and to substitute their own interpretation of events in its place. And even if they do accept what a previous statement tells them, they do this not because that statement exists and is taken as authoritative but because it is judged to satisfy the historian's criteria of historical truth. Far from relying on authorities other than themselves, to whose statements their thought must conform, historians are their own authority; their thought is autonomous vis-à-vis

their evidence, in the sense that they possess criteria by reference to which that evidence is criticised.¹⁴

Historical reconstruction is thus not dependent on social memory. Even when no statement about an event or custom has reached the historian by an unbroken tradition from eyewitnesses, it is still possible for the historian to rediscover what has been completely forgotten. Historians can do this partly by the critical examination of statements contained in their written sources, where written sources mean sources containing statements asserting or implying alleged facts regarding the subject in which the historian is interested, and partly by the use of what are called unwritten sources, for example archaeological material connected with the same subject, the point of describing these as unwritten sources being to indicate that, since they are not texts, they contain no ready-made statements.

But historical reconstruction is still necessary even when social memory preserves direct testimony of an event. For if a historian is working on a problem in recent history and receives at first hand a ready-made answer to the very question being put to the evidence, then the historian will need to question that statement if it is to be considered as evidence; and this is the case even if the answer which the historian receives is given by an eye-witness or by the person who did what the historian is inquiring into. Historians do not continue to question the statements of their informants because they think that the informants want to deceive them or have themselves been deceived. Historians continue to question the statements of their informants because if they were to accept them at face value that would amount to abandoning their autonomy as practising historians. They would then have relinquished their independence of social memory: an independence based on their claim to have the right to make up their own mind, by methods proper to their own science, as to the correct solution of the problems that arise in the course of that scientific practice.

Despite this independence from social memory, the practice of historical reconstruction can in important ways receive a guiding impetus from, and can in turn give significant shape to, the memory of social groups. A particularly extreme case of such interaction occurs when a state apparatus is used in a systematic way to deprive its citizens of their memory. All totalitarianisms behave in this way; the mental enslavement of the subjects of a totalitarian regime begins when their memories are taken away. When a large power wants to deprive a small country of its national consciousness it uses the method of organised forgetting. In Czech history alone this organised oblivion has been instituted twice, after 1618 and after 1948. Contemporary writers are proscribed, historians are dismissed from their posts, and the people who have been silenced and removed from their jobs

become invisible and forgotten. What is horrifying in totalitarian regimes is not only the violation of human dignity but the fear that there might remain nobody who could ever again properly bear witness to the past. Orwell's evocation of a form of government is acute not least in its apprehension of this state of collective amnesia. Yet it later turns out – in reality, if not in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – that there were people who realised that the struggle of citizens against state power is the struggle of their memory against forced forgetting, and who made it their aim from the beginning not only to save themselves but to survive as witnesses to later generations, to become relentless recorders: the names of Solzhenitsyn and Wiesel must stand for many. In such circumstances their writing of oppositional histories is not the only practice of documented historical reconstruction; but precisely because it is that it preserves the memory of social groups whose voice would otherwise have been silenced.

Again, the historiography of the Crusades is eloquent testimony to the role of historical writing in the formation of political identity. Medieval Muslim historians did not share with medieval European Christians the sense of witnessing a great struggle between Islam and Christendom for the control of the Holy Land. In the extensive Muslim historiography of that time the words 'Crusade' and 'Crusader' never occur. The contemporary Muslim historians spoke of the Crusaders either as the Infidels or as the Franks, and they viewed the attacks launched by them in Syria, Egypt and Mesopotamia, between the end of the eleventh and the end of the thirteenth centuries, as being in no way fundamentally different from the former wars waged between Islam and the Infidels: in Syria itself in the course of the tenth century and before, in Andalus throughout the Spanish Reconquista, and in Sicily against the Normans. A history of the Crusades cannot be found in the Muslim historical writing of that time; it contains at most only fragments of what such a history might be, embedded in treatises on other subjects. Medieval Muslim historiography is only incidentally a history of the Crusades. But in the period since 1945 an expanding body of Arabic historical writing has taken the Crusades as its theme. The Crusades have now become a code word for the malign intentions of the Western powers. Muslim historians have come to see a certain parallelism between the period of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and the last hundred years. In both cases the Islamic Middle East was assailed by European forces which succeeded in imposing their control upon a large part of the region. From a Muslim viewpoint, the Crusades have come to be seen as the primary phase of European colonisation, the prefiguration of a long-term movement which includes the Buonaparte expedition, the British conquest of Egypt, and the Mandate system in the Levant. That movement is seen as culminating in the foundation of the

state of Israel: and with each ensuing struggle – the Arab–Israel War of 1948, the Suez War, the Six Day War – the Muslim study of the Crusades gained momentum. Muslim historians now see in the rise and fall of the Crusader principalities parallels to contemporary events. The Crusaders, who crossed the sea and established an independent state in Palestine, have become proto-Zionists.¹⁵

A more paradoxical case still is that presented by the transformation of historical writing in the nineteenth century. The paradox lies in two antithetical yet equally essential aspects of this process as it was interpreted by those who were caught up in it. One view of this intellectual enterprise fastens attention upon the privileged status of the historical sciences. This way of seeing things depends upon isolating the practice of methodical understanding that takes place in the historical sciences from a more all-embracing phenomenon, the processes of interpretation that occur implicitly and everywhere in the course of everyday life. And this leads on to a sense that the practice of historical research is creating a new distance from the past by setting people free from the tradition that might otherwise have guided their assumptions and behaviour. A historically tutored memory is opposed to an unreflective traditional memory.¹⁶ And yet another sense of this same enterprise acknowledges that it is unthinkable outside its setting within the broader context of a struggle for political identity. It is part of the history of nationalism. For the transformation of the writing of history is in large part the work of the great German scholars, Niebuhr and Savigny, Ranke and Mommsen, Troeltsch and Meinecke, all of whom were intimately involved with the life of the political society to which they belonged. They rejected any form of political universalism and in particular the principles of 1789 which claimed to establish rules of common life and of participation in the activities of the state which were valid, in principle, for all peoples; and they affirmed, in opposition to this, the value of treating law, not as socially constructed machinery, but as the embodiment and expression of a nation's continuity. Whether they were writing about their own times or about distant cultures, it is this political commitment of these major figures of the historical school which imparts to their work the sense that, in constructing a canon of historical research, they are at the same time participating in the formation of a political identity and giving shape to the memory of a particular culture.¹⁷

In these cases, whether the activity of historical reconstruction is systematically repressed or whether it flourishes expansively, it leads to the production of formal, written histories. There is, however, a phenomenon more procedurally informal and more culturally diffused than the activity of producing histories understood in this sense. The production of more or

less *informally* told narrative histories turns out to be a basic activity for characterisation of human actions. It is a feature of all communal memory.

Consider the case of village life. What is lacking in a village setting is not simply the physical space but the performative space which we habitually negotiate in an urban context. We are accustomed to moving in a milieu of strangers where many of the people who witness the actions and declarations of others usually have little or no knowledge of their history and little or no experience of similar actions and declarations in their past. This is what makes it difficult to judge whether, or how far, a particular person is to be believed in a given situation. If we are to play a believable role before an audience of relative strangers we must produce or at least imply a history of ourselves: an informal account which indicates something of our origins and which justifies or perhaps excuses our present status and actions in relation to that audience.¹⁸ But this presentation of the self in everyday life is unnecessary when, as is the case in the life of a village, the gaps in shared memory are much fewer and slighter. In Proust's village of Combray a person whom one 'didn't know from Adam' was as incredible a being as a mythological deity, and on the various occasions when one of these startling apparitions had occurred in the Rue du Saint-Esprit or in the Square, no one could remember exhaustive inquiries ever having failed to reduce the fabulous creature to the proportions of a person whom one 'did know', if not personally then at least in the abstract, as being more or less closely related to some family in Combray.¹⁹ *The Return of Martin Guerre* highlights the same feature from a reverse angle. The startling apparition of the chief protagonist, who can do no more than pretend to belong, is the ultimate anomaly in a setting where deceit is rare and never on a large scale because the space between what is generally known about a person and what is unknown about them is too slight for self-interest and guile to lead to the performance of a role. What holds this space together is gossip. Most of what happens in a village during the course of a day will be recounted by somebody before the day ends and these reports will be based on observation or on first-hand accounts. Village gossip is composed of this daily recounting combined with lifelong mutual familiarities. By this means a village informally constructs a continuous communal history of itself: a history in which everybody portrays, in which everybody is portrayed, and in which the act of portrayal never stops. This leaves little if any space for the presentation of the self in everyday life because, to such a large degree, individuals remember in common.²⁰

Or again, if we consider the political education of ruling groups, we cannot fail to be struck by the distinction between their political records and their political memories. The ruling group will use its knowledge of

the past in a direct and active way.²¹ Its political behaviour and decisions will be based on an investigation of the past, especially the recent past, conducted by its police, its research bureaux and its administrative services, and these investigations will be carried out with an efficiency which is later occasionally revealed to those concerned when documents come to light following a war, a revolution, or a public scandal. But one of the limitations of documentary evidence is that few people bother to write down what they take for granted. And yet much political experience will have been built up about 'what goes without saying', and this may be particularly easy to observe in a fairly technical sphere like that of diplomacy or in the dealings of a close-knit governing class. In this sense, and it is an important one, the political records of the ruling group are far from exhausting its political memory. The distinction becomes particularly evident when its leaders have to take decisions in crises which they cannot wholly understand and where the outcome of their actions is impossible to foresee; for it is then that they will have recourse to certain rules and beliefs which 'go without saying', when their actions are directed by an implicit background narrative which they take for granted. Thus throughout the eighteenth century statesmen went on believing that, above all things, they must prevent any further power from ever achieving an ascendancy like that of Louis XIV; and they would remind themselves that nothing like the old wars of religion must be allowed to recur.²² Throughout the nineteenth century it was common to interpret every violent upheaval in terms of the continuation of the movement begun in 1789, so that the times of restoration appeared as pauses during which the revolutionary current had gone underground only to break through to the surface once more, and on the occasion of each upheaval, in 1830 and 1832, in 1848 and 1851, in 1871, adherents and opponents of the revolution alike understood the events as immediate consequences of 1789.²³ Again, if we are to understand the assumptions of 1914, we need to appreciate the links between the values and beliefs inculcated at school and the presuppositions on which politicians acted in later life; it is to the ideas of a generation earlier that we must attend if we are to appreciate how literally the doctrine of the struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest was taken by many European leaders just before the First World War.²⁴

Or consider the case of life histories. After all, most people do not belong to ruling élites or experience the history of their own lives primarily in the context of the life of such élites. For some time now a generation of mainly socialist historians have seen in the practice of oral history the possibility of rescuing from silence the history and culture of subordinate groups. Oral histories seek to give voice to what would otherwise remain voiceless even if not traceless, by reconstituting the life histories of individuals. But to

think the concept of a life history is already to come to the matter with a mental set, and so it sometimes happens that the line of questioning adopted by oral historians impedes the realisation of their intentions. Oral historians frequently report the occurrence of a characteristic type of difficulty at the beginning of their conversations. The interviewee hesitates and is silent, protests that there is nothing to relate which the interviewer does not already know. The historian will only exacerbate the difficulty if the interviewee is encouraged to embark on a form of chronological narrative. For this imports into the material a type of narrative shape, and with that a pattern of remembering, that is alien to that material. In suggesting this the interviewer is unconsciously adjusting the life history of the interviewee to a preconceived and alien model. That model has its origin in the culture of the ruling group; it derives from the practice of more or less famous citizens who write memoirs towards the end of their lives. These writers of memoirs see their life as worth remembering because they are, in their own eyes, someone who has taken decisions which exerted, or can be represented as having exerted, a more or less wide influence and which have visibly changed part of their social world. The 'personal' history of the memoir writer has confronted an 'objective' history embodied in institutions, or in the modification or transformation or even overthrow of institutions: a programme of educational training, a pattern of civil administration, a legal system, a particular organisation of the division of labour. They have been inserted into the structure of dominant institutions and have been able to turn that structure to their own ends. It is this perceived capacity of making a personal intervention that makes it possible for the writers of memoirs to conceive their life retrospectively, and frequently to envisage it prospectively, as a narrative sequence in which they are able to integrate their individual life history with their sense of the course of an objective history. But what is lacking in the life histories of those who belong to subordinate groups is precisely those terms of reference that conduce to and reinforce this sense of a linear trajectory, a sequential narrative shape: above all, in relation to the past, the notion of legitimating origins, and in relation to the future, the sense of an accumulation in power or money or influence. The oral history of subordinate groups will produce another type of history: one in which not only will most of the details be different, but in which the very construction of meaningful shapes will obey a different principle. Different details will emerge because they are inserted, as it were, into a different kind of narrative home. For it is essential in perceiving the existence of a culture of subordinate groups to see that this is a culture in which the life histories of its members have a different rhythm and that this rhythm is not patterned by the individual's intervention in the working of the dominant institutions.

When oral historians listen carefully to what their informants have to say they discover a perception of time that is not linear but cyclical. The life of the interviewee is not a curriculum vitae but a series of cycles. The basic cycle is the day, then the week, the month, the season, the year, the generation. The remarkable success in the United States of Studs Terkel's *Working* no doubt stems from the fact that it does justice to this alternative cyclical form and can be read as popular epic as well as social research. Here is a different narrative shape, a different socially determined structuring of memories.²⁵

Even so fundamental a question as what the shape of the twentieth century looks like will depend crucially upon what social group we happen to belong to. For many people, but especially for Europeans, the narrative of this century is unthinkable without the memory of the Great War. The image of the trenches from the Channel to the Swiss border is engraved in modern memory. Whereas in the Second World War the common experiences of soldiers was dire long-term exile at an unbridgeable distance from home, what makes the experience of the Great War unique, and what gives it a special burden of irony, is the absurd proximity of the trenches to home. This entrenched experience, of which the first day on the Somme is emblematic, stands like a narrative archetype. Paul Fussell has vividly evoked this primal scene and suggested that it is its particular ironic structure, its dynamic of hope abridged, that makes it haunt the memory.²⁶ And yet – this is the remarkable thing – it is possible to imagine that the members of two quite different groups may participate in the same event, even so catastrophic and all-engulfing an event as a great war, but still these two groups may be to such a degree incommensurable that their subsequent memories of that event, the memories they pass on to their children, can scarcely be said to refer to the 'same' event. Carlo Levi has given a remarkable insight into this phenomenon.²⁷ In 1935 he was exiled as a political prisoner to the remote village of Gagliano in Southern Italy. On the wall of the town hall there was a marble stone inscribed with the names of all the villagers of Gagliano who had died in the Great War. There were almost fifty names; directly or through ties to cousinship or *comparaggio* not a single household had been spared; and besides, there were those who had returned from the war wounded and those who had returned safe and sound. As a doctor, Levi soon had occasion to talk to all the villagers, and he was curious to learn how they viewed the cataclysm of 1914–18. And yet, in all his talks with the peasants of Gagliano, nobody ever mentioned the war, to speak of deeds accomplished or places seen or sufferings endured. Not that the subject was taboo; when questioned on the matter they answered not only briefly but with indifference. They neither remembered the war as a remarkable event nor spoke of its dead.

Social memory

But of one war they spoke constantly. This was the war of the brigands. Brigandage had come to an end in 1865, seventy years before; very few of the peasants were old enough to remember it, as participants or eye-witnesses. Yet everyone, young as well as old, women as well as men, spoke of it as if it were yesterday. The adventures of the brigands entered easily into their everyday speech and were commemorated in the names of many sites in and around the village. The only wars the peasants of Gagliano spoke of with animation and mythic coherence were the sporadic outbursts of revolt in which the brigands had fought against the army and the government of the north. But of the motives and interests at play in the World War they were barely conscious. The Great War was not part of their memory.

Thus we may say, more generally, that we all come to know each other by asking for accounts, by giving accounts, by believing or disbelieving stories about each other's pasts and identities.²⁸ In successfully identifying and understanding what someone else is doing we set a particular event or episode or way of behaving in the context of a number of narrative histories. Thus we identify a particular action by recalling at least two types of context for that action. We situate the agents' behaviour with reference to its place in their life history; and we situate that behaviour also with reference to its place in the history of the social settings to which they belong. The narrative of one life is part of an interconnecting set of narratives; it is embedded in the story of those groups from which individuals derive their identity.

4

There is a striking disparity between the pervasiveness of social memory in the conduct of everyday life and the relatively scant attention, at least as regards explicit and systematic as distinct from implicit and scattered treatment, that has been paid to specifically *social* memory in modern social and cultural theory.²⁹ Why is this so?

The answer is a rather complicated one, and we must begin by noting that one of the chief difficulties in developing a theory of memory as a form of cognition has to do with the variety of kinds of memory claims that we make and acknowledge. The verb 'remember' enters into a variety of grammatical constructions and the things that are remembered are of many different kinds; and if memory as a specifically social phenomenon has suffered relative neglect, that is at least in part because certain types of memory claims have been privileged as the focus of certain types of extended attention. It will be helpful, then, to distinguish in particular between three distinct classes of memory claim.

There is, first, a class of *personal* memory claims. These refer to those acts of remembering that take as their object one's life history. We speak of them as personal memories because they are located in and refer to a personal past. My personal memory claims may be expressed in the form: I did such and such, at such and such a time, in such and such a place. Thus in remembering an event I am also concerned with my own self. When I say 'I arrived in Rome three years ago', I am in a certain sense reflecting upon myself. In making that statement I am aware of my actual present, and I reflect on myself as the one who did this and that in the past. In remembering that I did this and that I see myself, as it were, from a distance. There is a kind of doubling: I, who speak now, and I, who arrived in Rome three years ago, are in some ways identical but in some ways different. These memory claims figure significantly in our self-descriptions because our past history is an important source of our conception of ourselves; our self-knowledge, our conception of our own character and potentialities, is to a large extent determined by the way in which we view our own past actions. There is, then, an important connection between the concept of personal identity and various backward-looking mental states; thus, the appropriate objects of remorse or guilt are past actions or omissions done by the person who feels remorseful or guilty. Through memories of this kind, persons have a special access to facts about their own past histories and their own identities, a kind of access that in principle they cannot have to the histories and identities of other persons and things.³⁰

A second group of memory claims – *cognitive* memory claims – covers uses of 'remember' where we may be said to remember the meaning of words, or lines of verse, or jokes, or stories, or the lay-out of a city, or mathematical equations, or truths of logic, or facts about the future. To have memory knowledge of this kind one's knowledge must in some way be due to, must exist because of, a past cognitive or sensory state of oneself;³¹ but – unlike the first class of memory claims – we need not possess any information about the context or episode of learning in order to be able to retain and use memories of this class. What this type of remembering requires is, not that the object of memory be something that is past, but that the person who remembers that thing must have met, experienced or learned of it in the past.

A third class of memories consists simply in our having the capacity to reproduce a certain performance. Thus remembering how to read or how to write or how to ride a bicycle is in each case a matter of our being able to do these things, more or less effectively, when the need to do so arises. As with experiential and cognitive memory claims, it is part of the meaning of 'remembers' that what is remembered is past; 'remembers', we might say, is a past-referring term. But as regards this third class of memories, we

frequently do not recall how or when or where we have acquired the knowledge in question; often it is only by the fact of the performance that we are able to recognise and demonstrate to others that we do in fact remember. The memory of how to read or write or ride a bicycle is like the meaning of a lesson thoroughly learned; it has all the marks of a habit, and the better we remember this class of memories, the less likely it is that we will recall some previous occasion on which we did the thing in question; it is only when we find ourselves in difficulties that we may turn to our recollections as a guide.

Philosophers have acknowledged the existence of this class of memory claims and have grouped them under the heading of '*habit-memory*', in contrast to personal and cognitive memory. But they have normally paid little attention to memory claims of this type. They have often argued or assumed that in 'true' memory the remembering itself, as well as what is remembered, is always a certain kind of event; remembering is frequently said to be a 'mental act' or 'mental occurrence'. Thus Bergson distinguishes two sorts of memory, the kind that consists of habit and the kind that consists of recollection. He gives the example of learning a lesson by heart. When I know the lesson by heart I am said to 'remember' it; but this only means that I have acquired certain habits. On the other hand, my recollection of the first time I read the lesson while I was learning it is the recollection of a unique event which occurred only once, and the recollection of a unique event cannot wholly be constituted by habit and is radically different from the memory that is habit. This leads Bergson to conclude that the memory of how to do something is simply the retention of a 'motor mechanism' and that this '*habit-memory*' is radically different from the recollection of unique events that is '*memory par excellence*'; this type of recollection alone is said to be memory proper.³² Russell follows Bergson in distinguishing between '*habit-memory*' and '*true memory*', the latter being cognitive while the former is not. He does indeed acknowledge that it is more difficult to apply this distinction in practice than it is to draw it in theory. The reason for this is that habit is an intrusive feature of our mental life and is often present where at first sight it appears not to be. Thus there can be a habit of remembering a unique event; when we have once described the event, the words we have used to do so can easily become habitual. Nevertheless, Russell wants to insist that the distinctive characteristic of memory is that it is a certain special kind of belief. What constitutes '*knowledge-memory*', he argues, is '*our belief*' that '*images of past occurrences refer to past occurrences*'. He speaks of this as '*true memory*' in order to distinguish it from mere habit acquired through past experience.³³ Here again, it is the sense of '*remember*' in which remembering is a cognitive act that is taken to be of philosophical importance.

It is perhaps easier to appreciate the significance of the range of behaviour commonly assigned to the class of habit-memories by examining cases of amnesia in which such memory capacities no longer operate effectively, rather than by noting the more or less smooth operation of such capacities in the course of everyday life. And we are fortunate in having a study, by the distinguished neurophysiologist Luria, which reports one remarkable case of such amnesia and which, in documenting this, demonstrates just how extensive and vital habit memory is.³⁴ It concerns the history of a brain wound suffered by a Russian soldier, *Zazetsky*, of the state of psychological disorder in which he was forced to live after irreparable damage had been done by a bullet that penetrated his brain and of his struggle to piece together an account of his state of psychological disarray and to combat it.

He suffered a devastating loss of personal memory. During the weeks immediately after his injury he was unable to remember his first name, his patronymic, the names of his close relatives or the name of his home town, and he had a great deal of trouble remembering anything about his recent past – even what life had been like at the front.

Equally devastating was his loss of cognitive memory. He had difficulty in identifying things in his environment. When he saw or imagined things – physical objects, plants, animals, birds, people – he could not immediately recall the words for them. And vice versa: when he heard a word he could not remember right away what it meant. This cognitive loss was syntactic as well as semantic. We express relationships through certain parts of speech – prepositions, conjunctions, adverbs, and so on – so that simple phrases like ‘the basket under the table’ and ‘the cross above the circle’ are perfectly obvious to us because we assume the faculty necessary to master such forms: the ability to remember grammatical elements and to perceive, quickly and simultaneously, the relationships of individual words and images which they evoke. But *Zazetsky* no longer had the capacity for such instantaneous grasp of patterns; and there were some grammatical patterns – for instance, inversions like that in the distinction between ‘mother’s brother’ and ‘brother’s mother’, or referred genitives as in ‘father’s brother’ – that he could no longer grasp at all.

A third area of loss had to do with habitual patterns of behaviour. While he was in hospital he discovered that he had to relearn what had once been commonplace: to beckon to someone or to wave goodbye. He was lying in bed and needed the nurse. How was he to get her to come over? Suddenly he remembered that you can beckon to someone and he tried to beckon to the nurse: that is, to move his left hand lightly back and forth. But she walked past and paid no attention to his gesturing. He realised then that he had completely forgotten how to beckon to someone. It appeared that he had even forgotten how to gesture with his hands so that someone

could understand what he meant. When a doctor wanted to shake hands with him, he did not know which hand to extend. When an instructor gave him a needle, a spool of thread, and some material with a pattern on it, and asked him to try to stitch the pattern, he simply sat with the needle, thread and material considering why he had been given these; when the instructor later returned and told him to thread the needle, he took the needle in one hand and the thread in the other, but could not understand what to do with them. When he went to a workshop to learn shoemaking, the instructor explained everything to him in great detail; but all he learnt to do was to drive wooden nails into a board and pull them out again. If later he wanted to do some simple everyday task around the house, and he was asked to chop wood, or mend the fence, or fetch some milk from the storeroom, he found he did not know how to proceed. If we are to give a name to this drastic area of loss, what can we call it but habit-memory?

5

Of the three types of memory that I have distinguished, the first two, personal and cognitive memory, have been studied in detail but by quite different methods, while the third, habit-memory, has for important reasons been largely ignored.

Central to the study of memory as understood in psychoanalysis is the distinction between two contrasting ways of bringing the past into the present: acting out and remembering.³⁵ Acting out consists in a type of action in which the subject, in the grip of unconscious wishes and fantasies, relives these in the present with an impression of immediacy which is heightened by the analysand's refusal or inability to acknowledge their origin and, therefore, their repetitive character. The behaviour of acting out generally displays a compulsive aspect which is at odds with the rest of the analysand's behaviour patterns. Often it takes the form of aggressive behaviour which may be directed against others or against the self. From the explanatory point of view, the crucial point is that acting out, whether violent or subdued, whether directed against others or against the self, and whether it occurs outside or within the relationship between analyst and analysand, is evidence of the compulsion to repeat. It is as a result of this compulsion to repeat that analysands deliberately place themselves in distressing situations: in this way repeating an old experience. But in compulsive repetition the agents fail to remember the prototype of their present actions. On the contrary, they have the strong impression that the situations in which they are 'caught up' are fully determined by the circumstances of the moment. The compulsion to repeat has replaced the capacity to remember. 'The patient repeats instead of remembering and

repeats under the condition of resistance': the formula occurs in a text crucial for analytic technique, Freud's 1914 essay on 'Remembering, repeating, and working through'.³⁶

It is at this point, in his essay of 1914, that Freud introduces the topic of transference: a phenomenon which he discusses mainly in terms of the relation between analyst and analysand because, although certainly not confined to this relation, the behaviour of acting out is observable directly and in great detail within the analytical space. He describes transference as the main instrument 'for curbing the patient's compulsion to repeat and for turning it into a motive for remembering'. Why should transference have this effect? If remembering is to be made free to occur, this, says Freud, is because the transference constitutes something like a 'playground' in which the patient's compulsion to repeat 'is allowed to expand in almost complete freedom'. Extending this analogy of the playground, he says that the transference sets up 'an intermediate realm between illness and real life through which the transition from the one to the other is made'. This intermediate realm consists to a very large extent of narrative activity: the analysands tell of their past, of their present life outside the analysis, of their life within the analysis. Freud never explicitly discussed this narrative character of the analytic experience; but later writers, for instance Sherwood and Spence, have pointed to its central importance and have shown the ways in which the psychoanalytic dialogue seeks to uncover the analysand's efforts to maintain in existence a particular kind of narrative discontinuity.³⁷ The point of this narrative discontinuity is to block out parts of a personal past and, thereby, not only of a personal past, but also of significant features of present actions. In order to discard this radical discontinuity, psychoanalysis works in a temporal circle: analyst and analysand work backwards from what is told about the autobiographical present in order to reconstruct a coherent account of the past; while, at the same time, they work forwards from various tellings about the autobiographical past in order to reconstitute that account of the present which it is sought to understand and explain. Accordingly, there is a rule of thumb in Freud's technical writings which advises the analyst to direct attention to the past when the analysand insists upon the present, and to look for present material when the analysand dwells on the past. One set of narratives is deployed to generate questions about another set of narratives. To remember, then, is precisely not to recall events as isolated; it is to become capable of forming meaningful narrative sequences. In the name of a particular narrative commitment, an attempt is being made to integrate isolated or alien phenomena into a single unified process. This is the sense in which psychoanalysis sets itself the task of reconstituting individual life histories.

Central to the study of cognitive memory, that is to say memory as understood by experimental psychologists, is the notion of encoding.³⁸ They have shown that literal recall is very rare and unimportant, remembering being not a matter of reproduction but of construction; it is the construction of a 'schema', a coding, which enables us to distinguish and, therefore, to recall. Three major dimensions of mnemonic coding are known to experimental psychologists today. The semantic code is the dominant dimension; like a library code, it is organised hierarchically by topic and integrated into a single system according to an overall view of the world and the logical relationships perceived in it. The verbal code is the second dimension; it contains all the information and programmes that allow the preparation of a verbal expression. The visual code is the third dimension; concrete items easily translated into images are much better retained than abstract items because such concrete items undergo a double encoding in terms of visual coding as well as verbal expression. Experimental psychologists explain failures of memory in terms of the operation of such coding processes; and this explanation holds for pathological as well as for normal cases. As an example of normal forgetting we might consider those cases where events and situations of a repetitive nature are not easily recalled. Any time I go to buy bread is like the last time, except for the day; in such situations only the first and the last experiences will be remembered, so that the ability to recall any given instance typically assumes the shape of a U-curve; all intermediate instances will be forgotten because their labels are practically identical. As an example of pathological forgetting we might consider the case of patients who suffer amnesia concerning the names of colours.³⁹ The fact that patients who suffer from colour amnesia are unable to 'see at a glance' which colour samples presented to them 'go together' is a specific manifestation of a more general disorder; it is a sign of the fact that they have lost the general ability to subsume a sense datum under a category. For to name a thing is to see it as representative of a category. Hence it would be wrong to say that people manifesting colour amnesia move from one principle of classification to another because they are unable to adhere to a given principle of classification; in reality, they never adopt any principle of classification.

Experimental psychologists have been concerned to understand the phenomena of remembering and forgetting as part of a deliberately scientific enterprise: the quest for a fundamental understanding of the brain and sensory apparatus viewed as a system capable of selecting, organising, storing and retrieving information. They take the view that the foundations of such understanding are to be laid through rigorously designed experiments carried out under highly controlled and thus, on the whole, highly artificial conditions. Thus in the course of experiments on memory

the experimental subject is generally presented with material belonging to two main groups: verbal and non-verbal material. Verbal material will commonly include series of names, adjectives, verbs, prose passages, poems and stories. Non-verbal material will commonly include geometrical shapes such as circles, squares and rectangles, as well as drawings, paintings and photographs of people, objects and scenes. In order to be able to describe and classify the performances of their experimental subjects, cognitive psychologists will place those subjects in experimental situations which have been as far as possible emptied of specific cultural content. Cognitive psychologists can indeed acknowledge, without prejudice to their premises, that the memories of people in different cultures will vary because their mental maps are different. The semantic code, which is the key to the whole operation of memory, is a mental map acquired in childhood, and, as such, it is a code that is shared collectively. Thus it can be readily admitted that in most cultures the memories of men and women will vary because their education and occupations are different; and it can be as easily conceded that witnesses from sharply differing cultures will inevitably differ in their recollections of the same event, particularly if that is a complex event like most of those to which oral traditions allude. In making such acknowledgements experimental psychologists are admitting the possible application of their findings to socially variable object-domains. But what their research has basically been concerned to explore is the existence and universality of basic cognitive structures; what they seek to identify are 'fundamental structures', 'primary processes', 'universals', mental faculties that are essential to human nature.

Here, then, we have two heavily colonised territories. Psychoanalysts have studied personal memory in the course of investigating the *life histories of individuals*, whereas psychologists have studied cognitive memory in the course of investigating the workings of *universal mental faculties*. Habit-memory, by contrast, appears to be an unoccupied or even non-existent space. Or perhaps it would be better to say that the intellectual space that might be occupied by a theory of habit is already occupied. The ground which it might cover appears to be already occupied by contemporary *conventionalism*. For if they now agree on little else, everyone agrees that social worlds are defined by their ruling conventions. With the idea of convention we explain to ourselves the notion of an order of objective rules at whose base lies a tacit social dimension, a world taken to be the world that it is because the rules that make it what it is are intersubjectively agreed. And language has become for us the archetypal model for all other forms of intersubjectivity, because language has its roots on the one hand in the nature of formal order and on the other hand