Time Maps
Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past

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in memory of my grandmother and mother,
my direct links to the past
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Preface

Most of my work revolves around the study of social structures and patterns, but thus far it has been split along two distinct foci, namely time and cognition. This book is an attempt to integrate those two strands of my scholarly endeavor. On the one hand, it is a continuation of my examination of how we structure time, as presented in my first three books (Patterns of Time in Hospital Life, Hidden Rhythms, and The Seven-Day Circle) as well as the most recent one (The Clockwork Muse). At the same time, it is an extension of work I have done in three other books (The Fine Line, Terra Cognita, and Social Mindscapes), which analyze thought patterns. By looking at sociomental representations of the past, I thus try to bring these two seemingly disparate facets of my scholarship more closely together.

Studying the past has always fascinated me. Already as a ten-year-old I enjoyed compiling biblical genealogies and lists of ancient monarchs. Books about history, both fictional and nonfictional, have long constituted a major part of my intellectual nourishment. Indeed, many of my grade-school classmates expected me to become a historian when I grew up.

In my earlier work on time I have in fact delved repeatedly into the past, examining critical historical events such as the introduction of the seven-day week, the calendrical separation of Easter from Passover, the invention of the daily schedule, and the introduction of standard time, yet never did I venture to consider history itself as my main object of inquiry. Taking this new step was the result of a highly evocative personal encounter with Mexico in 1984, when, under the irresistible spell of the spectacular ruins of Teotihuacán, Palenque, and Chichén Itzá, I decided to study the social

My interest in our outlook on the past has been greatly influenced by growing up in Israel, a country deeply obsessed with its history. Yet it was the work of my wife, Yael, on Zionist historiography—culminating in Recovered Roots, which I consider the best study of collective memory—that made me realize the tremendous potential of exploring how we collectively envision the past. Her continual encouragement as well as her extremely useful comments on earlier drafts have certainly helped make this a much better book.

My friends and colleagues Paul DiMaggio and Dan Ryan offered me excellent feedback on an early draft of the manuscript. I also benefited from many helpful comments provided by Jim Jasper, John Gillis, Jenna Howard, Karen Cerulo, John Martin, Ruth Simpson, Ann Mische, and Israel Bartal. The great enthusiasm of my editor, Doug Mitchell, with whom my intellectual bond dates to our work together on Hidden Rhythms twenty-two years ago, was a tremendous boost during the final stages of completing the book.

As is evident from its title, the book invokes rich topographic and cartographic imagery, which reflects my deep interest in the visual representation of the quasi-spatial features of time. Increasingly fascinated by the prospect of representing my ideas graphically, I soon began to draw on the excellent insights of my son, Noam, who became my special graphic consultant. I am very grateful for the many hours during which he patiently helped me realize my great desire: to depict how we actually map the way time flows in our minds.
Why do we think of the Roman Empire as having come to an end in AD 476 despite the fact that it actually lasted for another 977 years in Byzantium? Why are racists so obsessed with origins? At what historical point should the narrative of the conflict between Serbs and Albanians over Kosovo begin? How did the last shah of Iran manage to spin a 2,500-year symbolic thread connecting him to Persia’s first king, Cyrus, despite the embarrassing fact that the Pahlavi “dynasty” extended back only one generation, to his father? Was the tenth century actually less “eventful” than the twentieth?

By the same token, why did Hernán Cortés practically raze the Aztec city of Tenochtitlán before proceeding to build Mexico City on its ruins? Why was the Treaty of Versailles signed in the very same hall where the German Empire had been formally proclaimed almost fifty years earlier, following Prussia’s 1871 victory over France? Why do six of Angola’s seven national commemorative holidays revolve around its struggle for independence from Portugal during the 1960s and 1970s? Why do Spaniards regard the late-medieval Christian victories over the Moors as a reconquest? Why do some societies name their children after dead ancestors? Is a thirty-seventh cousin still a cousin?

To answer such questions we must first examine the unmistakably social maplike structures in which history is typically organized in our minds. What we need, in other words, is a sociomental topography of the past.

* * *

The Social Structure of Memory  Introduction
A "sociomental topography" implies a pronouncedly cognitive focus, and this book indeed looks at how the past is registered and organized in our minds. I am thus much less concerned with what Jesus, Columbus, or Nebuchadnezzar actually did than with their roles as "figures of memory." In other words, I am primarily interested not in what actually happened in history but in how we remember it.

As we very well know, not everything that happens is preserved in our memory, as many past events are actually cast into oblivion. Even what we conventionally consider "history" and thereby include in our history textbooks is not a truly comprehensive record of everything that ever happened, but only a small part of it that we have come to preserve as public memory.

Yet while I definitely do not wish to examine here what actually happened in history, it is also not my intent to simply replace the historian's traditional concern with facts with the psychoanalyst's traditional interest in individuals' idiosyncratic reconstructions of those facts. While the study of memory is quite distinct from the study of what actually happened in the past, it need not be reduced to Rashomonesque personal accounts of individuals. Although memory is not a mere reproduction of objective facts, this does not mean that it is therefore entirely subjective.

Consider the current curricular wars between Eurocentrists and multiculturalists over the literary tradition into which young Americans ought to be socialized or similar cultural battles over women's place in U.S. history. The very existence of such discord reminds us that our recollections of the past are by no means objective, as we clearly do not all remember it the same way. Yet the fact that such mnemonic battles usually involve entire groups and are typically fought in unmistakably public forums such as museums and school boards seems to suggest that they are not entirely personal either.

A sociomental topography of the past helps highlight this pronouncedly social dimension of human memory by revealing how entire communities, and not just individuals, remember the past. The phenomenology of history it provides is thus grounded in a sociology of memory.

In transcending strictly personal recollections, the sociology of memory effectively foregrounds what we come to remember as social beings. While there are many memories that we share with no one else, there are specific recollections that are commonly shared by entire groups. One's memories as a Pole, Mormon, or judge, for example, are clearly not just personal.
Unlike psychology, sociology is particularly attentive to the social context within which we access the past, thereby reminding us that we actually remember much of what we do only as members of particular communities. It is thus mainly as a Jew that I remember the destruction of the First Temple more than twenty-five centuries before I was born, and as a track fan that I likewise recall Paavo Nurmi's heroics at the 1924 Olympics.

Being social presupposes the ability to experience things that happened to the groups to which we belong long before we even joined them as if they were part of our own personal past. Such an ability is manifested in the Polynesian use of the first-person pronoun when narrating one's ancestral history as well as in statements like "I smelted iron in Nubia" or "I built Timbuctoo" used to express a Barbadian poet's distinctly African memories. It is likewise captured in the traditional Jewish belief, repeated every Passover, that "we were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and God brought us out of there with a mighty hand" and that "in every generation a man should see himself as though he had gone forth from Egypt." Such a remarkable existential fusion of one's personal history with that of the communities to which one belongs also helps explain the tradition of pain and suffering carried by American descendants of African slaves as well as the personal sense of shame felt by many young Germans about the atrocities of a regime that ended long before they were born.

Indeed, acquiring a group's memories and thereby identifying with its collective past is part of the process of acquiring any social identity, and familiarizing members with that past is a major part of communities' efforts to assimilate them. Prestigious law firms and elite military units thus usually introduce new members to their collective history as part of their general orientation, and children whose parents came to the United States from Honduras or Laos are nevertheless taught in school to remember the Mayflower as part of their new past. By the same token, exiting a social community often involves dispensing with its past; children of assimilated immigrants thus rarely get to learn much from their parents about the history of the societies they chose to physically as well as psychologically leave behind.

Given all this, it comes as no surprise that, when asked to list the names that first come to mind in connection with U.S. history, young Americans often invoke the same historical figures—George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin. That so many different individuals tend to have the same "free" mnemonic associations suggests
that at least some of their seemingly personal recollections may in fact be merely personalized manifestations of a single common collective memory.

The memories I examine here are unmistakably collective ones shared by families, ethnic groups, nations, and other mnemonic communities. Rather than a mere aggregate of the personal recollections of its various members, a community's collective memory includes only those shared by its members as a group. As such, it invokes a common past that they all seem to recall.

Furthermore, as becomes quite evident on any commemorative holiday, they often recall that past together, thereby reminding us that our social environment affects not only what we remember but also when we come to remember it! After all, on the same day, an entire mnemonic community manages to focus its attention on the very same moment in history—a remarkable cognitive feat that no other animal has yet been able to accomplish and that makes such holidays truly co-memorative. Such mnemonic synchronization was indeed the earliest prototechnological foreglimpse of the modern "global village." On the very same day, the birth of the Prophet is thus jointly remembered by Muslims in Malaysia, Guyana, and Sierra Leone. By the same token, on Good Friday, Christians all over the world come to recall the Crucifixion together, as a single community.

Yet the social nature of human memory is evident not only in the actual content of our recollections but also in the way they are mentally packaged. After all, remembering involves more than just recall of facts, as various mental filters that are quite independent of those facts nevertheless affect the way we process them in our minds (including the way we recall the general gist of past events, which is often all we actually remember of those events), thus leading us to remember some more than others. Such filters are highly impersonal, as they are rarely ever grounded in individuals' own experience. The difference between what Americans and Indians tend to recall from wedding ceremonies, for example, is a product of their having been socialized into different mnemonic traditions involving altogether different mental filters commonly shared by their respective mnemonic communities.

Our tendency to better remember facts that fit certain (unmistakably cultural) mental schemata is quite evident in the highly formulaic plot structures we often use for narrating the past. Only in my late thirties, for example, did I first realize that Alfred Dreyfus, whom I had always recalled languishing on Devil's Island (following the infamous trial in which
he was wrongly convicted of treason against France) until he died, was actually exonerated later by the French authorities and even decorated with the Legion of Honor. Having grown up in Israel and thereby socialized into the Zionist tradition of narrating European Jewish history strictly in terms of persecution and victimhood, such a distorted recollection nevertheless seemed, somehow, to better fit my social schematic expectations.

We normally acquire such habitual mental stances as part of the process of learning to remember in a socially appropriate manner. Far from being a strictly spontaneous act, remembering is also governed by unmistakably social norms of remembrance that tell us what we should remember and what we should essentially forget. It is through such mnemonic socialization that both born-again Christians and recovering alcoholics, for example, learn to include in their autobiographical accounts some earlier period marked by highly formulaic memories of depravity.

A considerable part of our mnemonic socialization takes place in historical museums and social studies classes, whether as explicit normative prescriptions such as "Remember the Alamo" or as implicitly encoded in virtually any history textbook. Yet much of it also occurs in a somewhat more subtle manner, as when we see George Washington's face on one-dollar bills or notice that almost everything is closed on Christmas Day. Moreover, mnemonic socialization take place in less formal settings such as family gatherings, where it typically involves both actual mentoring (through questions designed to help remind children of things they have experienced) and co-reminiscing (as parents and children jointly recount events they have experienced together). It is in such situations that we usually learn the socially appropriate narrative forms for recounting the past as well as the tacit rules of remembrance that help separate the conventionally memorable from that which can—or even ought to—be relegated to oblivion. When a young boy returns from a long day spent with his mother downtown and hears her "official" account to their family of what they did there, he is at the same time receiving a tacit lesson in what is conventionally considered memorable and forgettable.

* * *

Given their unmistakably impersonal nature, social memories are by no means confined, like personal recollections, to our own bodies. It was language that freed human memory from having to be stored exclusively in individuals' brains. Once it became possible for people to share their per-
sonal experiences with others through communication, such experiences could be preserved as essentially disembodied impersonal recollections even after they themselves were long gone.

Indeed, language allows memories to actually pass from one person to another even when there is no direct contact between them. As traditional mnemonic go-betweens, old people, for example, often link historically separate generations that would not otherwise have mnemonic access to each other. Such mnemonic transitivity enables us to preserve memories in the form of oral traditions that are transmitted from one generation to the next within families, college fraternities, and virtually any other community.

Furthermore, since the invention of writing it is actually possible to bypass any oral contact, however indirect, with any future audience. With patient records, for example, physicians' clinical recollections are readily accessible to any other physician or nurse even when they themselves are not available for consultation. That explains the tremendous significance of documents in business (receipts), law (court decisions), diplomacy (treaties), bureaucracy (minutes), and science (lab reports).

Yet the social preservation of memories does not even require any verbal transmission. Portraits, statues, photographs, and videocassettes, for example, represent various efforts to capture the images and sounds of the past and thereby offer posterity visual as well as auditory access to historical figures and events. Indeed, it is through paintings, compact discs, and television footage that we actually recall the coronation of Napoleon, the voice of Enrico Caruso, or the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

Libraries, bibliographies, folk legends, photo albums, and television archives thus constitute the "sites" of social memory as well as some useful means for studying it. So, for that matter, do history textbooks, calendars, eulogies, guest books, tombstones, war memorials, and various Halls of Fame. Equally evocative in this regard are pageants, commemorative parades, anniversaries, and various public exhibits of archaeological and other historical objects.

There are numerous kinds of data sources on which one can thus draw when conducting research on social memory. The more of them we can incorporate in our studies, the richer those studies are likely to be. Pronouncedly eclectic methodologically, the present book draws on these and many other sites of social memory in a conscious effort to provide as broad a picture of this fascinating phenomenon as possible.
In trying to uncover the sociomental topography of the past, the general thrust of my analysis is also unmistakably structural. While most studies of social memory basically focus on the content of what we collectively remember, my main objective here is to identify the underlying formal features of those recollections. Following the fundamental "structuralist" claim that meaning lies in the manner in which semiotic objects are systemically positioned in relation to one another, I believe that the social meaning of past events is essentially a function of the way they are structurally positioned in our minds vis-à-vis other events. I am therefore ultimately interested in examining the structure of social memory.

Given its pronouncedly structural focus, the book is thus organized around major formal features of the way we collectively remember the past, as each chapter sheds light on different aspects of its sociomental topography. The main themes of the book are thus unmistakably formal: the perceived "density" of history, the "shape" of historical narratives, the social structure of genealogical "descent," the mental segmentation of essentially continuous historical stretches into discrete "periods," highly structured collective mnemonic distortions of actual historical distances, and so on.

I begin the book by examining the conventional schematic formats that help us mentally string past events into coherent, culturally meaningful historical narratives. In chapter 1 I thus review the major formal patterns along which we normally envision time flowing (linear versus circular, straight versus zigzag, legato versus staccato, unilinear versus multilinear), as quite explicitly evident in the general plots ("progress," "decline," "rise and fall") and subplots ("again and again") of the stories through which we usually come to narrate its passage. I then look at the collectively perceived "density" of the past, as typically manifested in the quasi-topographic layout of the mental relief maps produced by the sharp contrast between what we conventionally recall as "eventful" periods and essentially empty historical "lulls."

In the next two chapters I examine the various mnemonic strategies we normally use to help us create and maintain the illusion of historical continuity. In chapter 2 I look at the different types of bridges we build—physical, calendrical, iconic, discursive—in an effort to "connect" the past and the present, thus shedding some light on the role of anniversaries, revivals, ruins, analogies, and souvenirs in helping coagulate essentially
noncontiguous patches of history into a single, seemingly continuous experiential stream. Then, in chapter 3, I offer a close-up of one such form of historical bridging as I explore the genealogical structures of ancestry and descent (dynasties, family trees, pedigrees) that we construct in our minds to help us spin the mental threads we envision as linking past and present members of families as well as underlying our collective visions of nations, "races," and even species.

Yet the effort to establish historical continuity is usually offset by the diametrically opposite sociomental process of constructing historical discontinuity. Whereas the former is geared to produce quasi-contiguity between essentially noncontiguous chunks of history, the latter helps transform continuous historical stretches into series of seemingly distinct segments. At the heart of this process, which I examine in chapter 4, are the "watersheds" we collectively envision separating one supposedly discrete historical "period" from the next. As we shall see, periodizing the past also distorts actual historical distances by essentially compressing those within any given "period" while inflating those across the mental divides separating such conventional segments from one another.

One particularly remarkable manifestation of such social "punctuation" of the past is the mental differentiation of the historical from the merely "prehistorical" through the establishment of what we conventionally come to regard as beginnings. In chapter 5 I look at the social construction of historical beginnings by examining how mnemonic communities (nations, organizations, ethnic groups) envision their collective origins as well as how they try to establish territorial and other political rights by claiming historical priority vis-à-vis other groups. Both of these acts, as we shall see, clearly highlight the common mnemonic effort to enhance one's legitimacy by exaggerating one's antiquity.

* * *

Yet aside from its strictly theoretical implications, so clearly reflected in the way I have organized my discussion, the pronouncedly formal-structural thrust of the book has some very important methodological implications as well, as is quite evident from the unmistakably "formal" manner in which I have collected the data for this study. 10

As in Euclidean geometry, a strictly formal-structural approach presupposes a conscious obliviousness to scale. My goal, after all, is to develop a general framework that would reveal the fundamental structure of so-
cial memory at the macrosocial level of nations as well as the intermediate level of organizations and the microsocial level of families. Only by looking at data from as many "levels" of social units of remembrance as possible would we ever be able to notice the striking formal similarity among the ways in which couples, professions, and religions, for example, normally construct their origins.

In fact, identifying the generic features of social memory at each of those levels can help us recognize their manifestations at other levels as well. We might learn quite a lot about how nations present their collective past in history textbooks and national museums, for example, from the way companies or institutes feature theirs in their publicity brochures. A strictly formal-structural approach to memory likewise helps us realize that the way states impose statutes of limitations is fundamentally similar to the way banks establish bankruptcy policies and friends let bygones be bygones!

Furthermore, my pronouncedly generic theoretical concerns call for an explicit commitment to decontextualize my findings by pulling them out of the culturally and historically specific environments within which I first happen to identify them, since my ultimate goal is to develop a transcultural as well as a transhistorical perspective on social memory as a generic phenomenon. Whether a particular national calendar I use in my discussion is Uruguay's or Namibia's is thus by and large secondary to my general interest in the generic features of social commemoration that it helps illustrate. I am likewise less concerned with whether a particular "chain" of monarchs I examine was Egyptian or French, or whether they ruled in the seventeenth century or the third millennium BC, than with the fact that it helps me illustrate some formal features of dynasties in general.

The book is thus organized around major formal themes that manifest themselves in a wide variety of substantive contexts. Identifying structural resemblances across such different contexts allows us to appreciate how fundamentally similar are the mnemonic battles between Serbs and Albanians over the "original" settlement of Kosovo and anthropologists and molecular biologists over the dating of the evolutionary split between humans and chimps!

Such pronouncedly generic concerns also call for a conscious effort to draw on a substantively broad base of concrete evidence. Ultimately interested in identifying formal mnemonic patterns that transcend any specific context of remembering, I thus illustrate my arguments with specific
examples from a particularly wide range of such contexts. Instead of locally
confining myself to one specific case study—a rather common tradition in
studies of collective memory\textsuperscript{12} that has thus far yielded no serious effort to
develop an analytic framework that would be generalizable beyond particular
societies at specific historic junctures—I therefore draw my evidence
from a wide range of cultural as well as historical contexts. I likewise ex-
amine a wide variety of specific domains (science, religion, politics) and
sites (calendars, chronicles, pedigrees) of social memory. Needless to say,
the wider the range of the contexts on which I draw in my analysis, the
broader its generalizability.

Yet though my commitment to cross-contextual evidence certainly calls
for greater substantive variety, I am not interested here in variation, and
my deliberate decision to constantly oscillate between widely different con-
texts is essentially designed to highlight their common, rather than distinct-
tive, mnemonic features. When looking at ethnic dress, historic neighbor-
hoods, and wedding anniversaries, for example, I thus focus primarily on
their structural equivalence as forms of "bridging" the past and the present.
While this does not necessarily entail a universalistic outlook on memory
that basically ignores mnemonic variation,\textsuperscript{13} it does entail a commitment
to focus on commonality rather than variability. My ultimate goal in this
book, therefore, is not to explain mnemonic variation but to identify the
common generic underpinnings of the social structure of memory.
The Social Shape of the Past

As one can certainly tell by the fact that we do not recall every single thing that has ever happened to us, memory is clearly not just a simple mental reproduction of the past. Yet it is not an altogether random process either. Much of it, in fact, is patterned in a highly structured manner that both shapes and distorts what we actually come to mentally retain from the past. As we shall see, many of these highly schematic mnemonic patterns are unmistakably social.

Plotlines and Narratives

In June 1919, as a triumphant France was preparing to sign the Treaty of Versailles, it made the portentous decision to stage the final act of the historical drama commonly known as revanche (revenge) in the very same Hall of Mirrors where the mighty German Empire it had just brought to its knees was formally proclaimed almost fifty years earlier, following Prussia’s great victory in the 1870–71 Franco-Prussian War. Not coincidentally, an equally pronounced sense of historical drama led a victorious German army twenty-one years later, in June 1940, to hack down the wall of the French museum housing the railway coach in which the armistice formalizing Germany’s defeat in World War I had been signed in November 1918, and tow it back to the forest clearing near the town of Compiègne where that nationally traumatic event had taken place and where Germany was now ready to stage France’s humiliating surrender in World War II:
The cycle of revenge could not be more complete. France had chosen as the setting for the final humiliation of Germany in 1919 the Versailles Hall of Mirrors where, in the arrogant exaltation of 1871, King Wilhelm of Prussia had proclaimed himself Kaiser; so now Hitler’s choice for the scene of his moment of supreme triumph was to be that of France’s in 1918.

Soon after Hitler finished reading the inscription documenting the historic humiliation of Germany by France in 1918, everyone entered the famous railcar and General Wilhelm Keitel began reading the terms of surrender after explicitly confirming the choice of that particular site as “an act of reparatory justice.”

Only within the context of some larger historical scenario, of course, could either of these events be viewed in terms of “reparation.” And only within the context of such seemingly never-ending Franco-German revenge scenarios can one appreciate a 1990 joke in which the tongue-in-cheek answer to the question “Which would be the new capital of the soon-to-be-reunified Germany: Bonn or Berlin?” was actually “Paris”!

Essentially accepting the structuralist view of meaning as a product of the manner in which semiotic objects are positioned relative to one another, I believe that the historical meaning of events basically lies in the way they are situated in our minds vis-à-vis other events. Indeed, it is their structural position within such historical scenarios (as “watersheds,” “catalysts,” “final straws”) that leads us to remember past events as we do. That is how we come to regard the foundation of the State of Israel, for example, as a “response” to the Holocaust, and the Gulf War as a belated “reaction” to the U.S. debacle in Vietnam. It was the official portrayal of the 2001 military strikes in Afghanistan as “retaliation” for the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon that likewise led U.S. television networks to report on them under the on-screen headline “America Strikes Back,” and the collective memory of a pre-Muslim, essentially Christian early-medieval Spain that leads Spaniards to regard the late-medieval Christian victories over the Moors as a “re-conquest” (reconquista).

Consider also the case of historical irony. Only from such a historical perspective, after all, does the recent standardization of the Portuguese language in accordance with the way it is currently spoken by 175 million Brazilians rather than only 10 million Portuguese come to be seen as ironic. A somewhat similar sense of historical irony underlies the decision made
by the New York Times the day after the 2001 U.S. presidential inauguration to print side by side two strikingly similar yet contrasting photographs featuring the outgoing president Bill Clinton outside the White House: one with his immediate predecessor, George Bush, back in January 1993, and the other with his immediate successor, George W. Bush, exactly eight years later.¹

One of the most remarkable features of human memory is our ability to mentally transform essentially unstructured series of events into seemingly coherent historical narratives. We normally view past events as episodes in a story (as is evident from the fact that the French and Spanish languages have a single word for both story and history, the apparent difference between the two is highly overstated), and it is basically such “stories” that make these events historically meaningful. Thus, when writing our résumés, for example, we often try to present our earlier experiences and accomplishments as somehow prefiguring what we are currently doing.⁶

Similar tactics help attorneys to strategically manipulate the biographies of the people they prosecute or defend.

As is quite evident from figure 1, in order for historical events to form storylike narratives, we need to be able to envision some connection between them. Establishing such unmistakably contrived connectedness is the very essence of the inevitably retrospective mental process of employment.⁷ Indeed, it is through such employment (as well as reemployment,⁸ as is quite spectacularly apparent in psychotherapy)⁹ that we usually manage to provide both past and present events with historical meaning.

Approaching the phenomenon of memory from a strictly formal narratological perspective, we can actually examine the structure of our collective narration of the past just as we examine the structure of any fictional story.¹⁰ And indeed, adopting such a pronouncedly morphological stance helps reveal the highly schematic formats along which historical narratives usually proceed. And although actual reality may never “unfold” in such a neat formulaic manner, those scriptlike plotlines are nevertheless the form in which we often remember it, as we habitually reduce highly complex event sequences to inevitably simplistic, one-dimensional visions of the past.

Following in the highly inspiring footsteps of Hayden White,¹¹ I examine here some of the major plotlines that help us “string” past events in our minds,¹² thereby providing them with historical meaning. Rejecting, however, the notion that these plotlines are objective representations of
actual event sequences, as well as the assumption that such visions of the past are somehow universal, I believe that we are actually dealing here with essentially conventional social mnemonic structures. As is quite evident from the fact that certain schematic formats of narrating the past are far more prevalent in some cultural and historical contexts than others, they are by and large manifestations of unmistakably social traditions of remembering.

**Progress**

A perfect example of such a plotline is the general type of historical narrative associated with the idea of progress. Such a "later is better" scenario is quite commonly manifested in highly schematic "rags-to-riches" biographical narratives as well as in unmistakably formulaic recollections of families "humble origins." It can likewise be seen in companies' "progress reports" to their shareholders as well as in history of science narratives, which almost invariably play up the theme of development.
Yet the most common manifestation of this progressionist historical scenario is the highly schematic backward-to-advanced evolutionist narrative. It is quite evident, for example, in conventional narrations of human origins, which typically emphasize the theme of progressive improvement with regard to the "development" of our brain, level of social organization, and degree of technological control over our environment. Similarly, it is evident whenever modern, "civilized" societies are compared to so-called underdeveloped, "primitive" ones.  

As we can see in figure 2, such an unmistakably schematic vision of progressive improvement over time often evokes the image of an upward-leaning ladder. This common association of time's arrow with an upward direction (and its rather pronounced positive cultural connotations) is quite crisply encapsulated in the title of Jacob Bronowski's popular book and television series, *The Ascent of Man*, as well as in the conventional vision of the "lower" forms of life occupying the lower rungs of the "evolutionary ladder."  

Such a highly formulaic vision of the past clearly reflects more than just the way some particularly optimistic individuals happen to recall certain specific events. Indeed, it is part of the general historical outlook of entire mnemonic communities. Though we normally regard optimism as a personal trait, it is actually also part of an unmistakably schematic "style" of remembering shared by entire communities.  

Thus, as is quite evident from Horatio Alger's and numerous other "rags-to-riches" versions of the so-called American Dream, many Americans, for instance, are much greater believers in the idea of progress than Afghans or Australian Aborigines. And as one can clearly tell from the general aversion of the working class to this idea, different historical outlooks are also associated with different social classes.  

Furthermore, as a brainchild of the Enlightenment, progressivism is a hallmark of modernity and has certainly been a much more common historical outlook over the past two hundred years than during any earlier period. Viewing history in terms of progress is an integral part of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century philosophies of Marie Jean Condorcet, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Auguste Comte. It is likewise encapsulated in major late nineteenth-century offshoots of those philosophies such as the social and cultural evolutionism of Herbert Spencer, Lewis Henry Morgan, and Edward B. Tylor, who basically envisioned human history as a progressive ascent from savagery to civilization.
Decline

This essentially forward-looking view of history sharply contrasts with yet another conventional historical outlook, which basically features *decline* as the major theme in accordance with which we come to organize our memory. Inherently pessimistic, this unmistakably backward-angling historical stance typically includes an inevitably tragic vision of some glorious past that, unfortunately, is lost forever. In marked contrast with the progress narrative, in the decline narrative things usually get worse with time. Instead of improvement, this essentially regressive mnemonic tradition emphasizes *deterioration*, thereby promoting a general view of the past most effectively represented by a downward-pointing arrow, as in figure 3. No wonder it is often coupled with a deep sentimental attachment to “the good old days.” Whereas progress implies an idealized future, *nostalgia* presupposes a highly romanticized past.

Note, however, that we are not dealing here with actual historical trends but with purely mental historical outlooks. The very same historical period, after all, is remembered quite differently, depending on whether we use a progress or a decline narrative to recount it. During the 1992 U.S. presiden-
tial election, for example, while George Bush was portraying his presidency as a period of substantial progress marked by the downfall of communism and the emergence of a new U.S.-dominated world order, a very different picture was being presented by his challenger, Bill Clinton, who quite effectively downplayed those historic international developments by relentlessly focusing on the alarming rise in domestic poverty and unemployment.

As exemplified by parole hearings and tenure reviews, historical plotlines are often extrapolated to imply anticipated trajectories. To appreciate such inherently strategic manipulation of decline narratives, consider a provocative display of the devastating effects of deforestation at Costa Rica's Lankester botanical gardens in Cartago. A series of maps depicting the progressively decreasing amount of Costa Rican land still covered by rain forest are sequentially arranged to form a disturbing narrative that begins in 1940 with an almost entirely green country and ends in the year 2025, quite evocatively represented by a virtually empty map with a big question mark. As one might expect, projecting such historical regression onto the future is a major feature of “doomsday” scenarios.

Often articulated in nostalgic visions of some mythical golden age after which things have essentially been going “downhill,” such a pronouncedly regressive mnemonic tradition is also quite apparent in the general tendency to remember our ancestors as larger-than-life, almost superhuman figures. Such an inherently conservative historical outlook, succinctly encapsulated in the traditional Jewish belief that every generation is of a
somewhat lesser quality than its predecessors (holekh u-fochet ha-dor), is explicitly manifested in the divine pedigree ascribed to humankind in various cosmogonies. It is also implicit in the unmistakably downward direction in which we conventionally depict the flow of time in family trees and other maps of so-called descent as well as in the highly reverential manner in which we normally think about Shakespeare or Mozart, or the way we tend to remember our national "Founding Fathers" as well as past sports "legends."

Like its progressionist counterpart, this highly formulaic vision of the past represents a particular social tradition of remembering. Though we normally regard pessimism, like optimism, as a personal trait, actually it is also part of an unmistakably schematic style of remembering shared by entire mnemonic communities. Indeed, though "virtually every culture past or present has believed that men and women are not up to the standards of their parents and forebears," this particular view of the past (just like nostalgia) is much more common in some historical periods than in others. And although the vision of our tragically irretrievable Edenic origins dates to ancient Judaism and our progressive degeneration from some idealized golden age was already recounted by Hesiod 2,700 years ago, many decline narratives are in fact a reaction to the overly optimistic modern belief in progress. This is quite evident in the highly pessimistic philosophies of Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche as well as in the unmistakably modern social and biological degeneration narratives produced by Cesare Lombroso, Edwin Ray Lankester, Max Nordau, and Oswald Spengler.  

**A Zigzag in Time**

Despite the obvious difference between them, however, both progress and decline narratives share one important formal feature. Whether their basic underlying plotline points upward or downward, the overall story entails a single, unmistakably uniform direction. The situation is quite different in narratives that specifically combine upward- and downward-pointing plotlines in an effort to highlight significant changes in historical trajectories. Instead of featuring just progress or decline, these narratives feature both.

As one might expect, such "zigzag" narratives assume one (or some combination) of two basic forms. One is the rise-and-fall narrative, an es-
sententially tragic scenario in which, following some unfortunate event such as losing one's job, going bankrupt, or losing a war, a story of success suddenly turns into one of decline. The histories of the Roman, British, and Ottoman Empires or the high-tech industry in the 1990s are some classic examples of this highly formulaic narrative. The other, essentially obverse form is the Cinderella-like fall-and-rise narrative, in which a sharp descent is suddenly reversed, thereby changing to a major ascent. A perfect example is the conversion narrative, in which a moral decline is finally brought to a happy end through the discovery of some new source of spiritual light, as in the case of "born-again" Christians, or the recovery narrative so common in clinical rehabilitation programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous, where members are expected to actually "hit bottom" before they can begin their ascent back to well-being. Such a highly schematic pattern is typical of autobiographical narratives that involve dramatic rebounds following some major decision to quit smoking, get a divorce, or go back to school. It is also evident in narratives of national redemption, such as the conventional postwar economic recovery histories of Germany and Japan.

Both rise-and-fall and fall-and-rise narratives, however, share an important formal feature, which is that they always involve some dramatic change of course. Whether the critical turn is upward or downward, it essentially entails a major redirection of a historical trajectory, sometimes even a complete reversal. Turning points are the mental road signs marking such perceived transitions.

Given that such "changes of course" are, after all, only mental constructions, we should not be surprised to find significant differences in how various mnemonic communities come to remember any historical "transition." To appreciate such sociomnemonic pluralism, compare the highly divergent Eastern European memories of the Communist period, or the Democratic and Republican visions of the late 1970s and early 1980s in the United States. For example, in the 1984 presidential election, former vice president Walter Mondale kept presenting his years in office during the late 1970s as a period of considerable social progress that ended with Ronald Reagan's 1980 election victory, which basically led the United States into a downward path that could only be reversed if he, Mondale, were elected president. As we can see in figure 4, he was thus invoking a classic rise-and-fall scenario with a possible future "happy ending" coda by associating 1980 with the onset of a four-year period of sharp decline and identifying 1984 as the potential beginning of a new period of resumed
progress. Reagan, on the other hand, was invoking a diametrically opposite fall-and-rise scenario featuring 1980 as a critical turning point upward, essentially reversing the disastrous political and economic downslide of the Carter-Mondale years. Confidently prompting voters to compare their quality of life in 1980 with their situation in 1984, he thus presented his first term in office as a period of great progress that would continue for at least “Four More Years” if he were reelected.

**Ladders and Trees**

Whether they are about progress, decline, or some “zigzag” combination of both, all the historical narratives we have thus far examined essentially involve strictly unilinear plotlines. Yet those are by no means the only kinds of trajectories in which we normally organize the past in our minds.

As aptly captured in the aforementioned ladder metaphor, the essence of unlinearity is the vision of a serial progression, a one-dimensional se-
quence of unmistakably successive episodes such as the Stone Age, Bronze Age, and Iron Age; the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s; or childhood, adulthood, and old age. This vision is explicitly articulated in the so-called phyletic model of organic evolution as well as in the very idea of the "life course." It is also endemic to cultural evolutionism, which basically places all human cultures, past and present, on different rungs of the same ladder. Such a perspective inevitably implies rejecting the very possibility of any form of cultural contemporaneity, to the point of actually regarding the "primitive" as some past version of the modern. "Lower" cultures are thus seen as living fossils, essentially frozen relics of our ancient past.  

Inherently teleological, unilinear narratives often attribute some purposeful design to history. As such, they usually also regard the overall direction of the historical trajectories they describe as largely predetermined. Like an escalator, history is thus seen in such narratives as having a clear course that is often articulated in terms of general laws. According to Auguste Comte, for instance, these highly deterministic laws actually dictate the path through which the human mind basically has to proceed as it moves from one stage of historical development to the next, since each of those stages is "the necessary result of the preceding, and the indispensable mover of the following." 

An early proponent of cultural evolutionism, Comte repeatedly invoked "evolution," a concept most probably borrowed from embryology, a particular branch of biology explicitly centered on a seemingly predetermined process of evolving. Indeed, evolutionary narratives are essentially teleological stories of "becoming." This is quite evident in cultural evolutionist narratives, which tend to portray modern civilization as the epitome of social, political, and economic "development," as well as in biological ones, which basically consider humans the pinnacle of creation and the entire three-billion-year evolution of life on this planet a single monothematic story leading to its "final product." Essentially regarding "lower" forms of life as mere stages in the pronouncedly unilinear evolution of "higher" ones, such narratives thus view apes, for example, as the products of early failed attempts to create man. 

Ironically, the reality of such "failed experiments" has actually led us to back away from unilinearity and develop an altogether different form of narrating the past. It was his growing awareness of biological extinction that led Georges Cuvier two centuries ago to introduce multilinear historical narratives—and their awareness of hominid extinctions in particular
that convinced anthropologists later to follow his lead. The realization that some Neanderthals actually lived alongside (rather than only before) anatomically modern humans and thus could not have been our direct ancestors first made us aware of the inevitable historiographical implications of such extinctions. Viewing the Neanderthals as a “dead-end” branch of our family tree led to our abandonment of the unilinear vision of human evolution—which, given its inevitably simplistic, one-dimensional image of successive species essentially replacing one another, obviously cannot account for such seemingly “anachronistic” contemporaneity. Only the stubborn refusal to accept the fact that some hominid species (and not just dodos and dinosaurs) actually died out without issue still prevents some of us from accepting the idea of multilinearitiy.46

Such essentially anthropocentric blinders also prevent some of us from fully appreciating the nonteological, unmistakably contingent nature of organic evolution (for any other historical process, for that matter) that is inevitably implied in a multilinear narration of history. The fact that in the overall drama of evolution our “star actor” has actually been “offstage for 99.99 percent of the play” should help us recognize that evolution is an essentially purposeless, hap hazard process that does not necessarily lead to humankind. Indeed, many of the ancient fossils we find today actually lie entirely off the direct ancestral path to us.47

It was probably August Schleicher’s ingenious use of cladograms (branching diagrams) in the 1850s to represent the complex genealogical relations between different languages that inspired Charles Darwin to present his essentially multilinear narrative of the evolution of life in the form of a tree, with the bifurcation of species along ever-diverging branches (speciation) playing a critical role in that process.48 Following Darwin, most biologists today seem to prefer the image of a two-dimensional tree to that of a one-dimensional ladder for representing this remarkably complex process. As a result, we now envision life as “a copiously branching bush, continually pruned by the grim reaper of extinction, not a ladder of predictable progress.”49

Such pronouncedly multilinear imagery also helps remind us that “‘simpler’ creatures are not human ancestors... but only collateral branches on life’s tree,” since, after all, “no living species can be the ancestor of any other.”50 As is evident from the cladogram in figure 5, despite the various popular graphic representations of human evolution inspired by unilinear narratives, modern chimps and gorillas are not
"Ladder" Narrative

Stone Age  |  Bronze Age  |  Iron Age

Orangutans
Chimpanzees
Humans
Gorillas

"Tree" Narrative

Time

Figure 5 Unilinear and Multilinear Historical Plotlines

"early" forms of human evolution but our own contemporaries. Cultural evolutionism notwithstanding, that is also true of "primitive" cultures.

Circles and Rhymes

In every historical narrative we have thus far examined, unilinear and multilinear alike, time always seems to be moving "forward." Within any sequence of events we remember, therefore, it is always quite clear which ones occurred earlier and which ones only later. However, there is yet one other major schematic form of organizing our memories that presupposes no such directionality.

Although we usually view time as an entity that can be graphically represented by a straight arrow, as in figures 1 through 5, we sometimes also experience things as moving "in circles." These two contrasting visions
of time are not incompatible, however. As we can see in figure 6, locating a particular historical instant in 2002, for example, does not preclude it from also being designated as 4:36 p.m. on Sunday, 17 February, thereby placing it on four different wheels that are nevertheless rolling along an unmistakably straight road. Essentially rejecting the linear vision of historical events as unique occurrences, such a distinctly cyclical view of history basically envisions things as being trapped, like the main protagonist of the movie Groundhog Day, in some eternal present. Jews' traditional identification of their enemies as Amalek is thus not just metaphorical: within such mythical "panchronistic" vision, that wretched biblical enemy is virtually still alive! After all, our distinctly modern notion of anachronism does not even exist within such a pronouncedly nonlinear view of history.²⁹

As odd as it may seem to us now, until relatively recently that was the way humans had probably always experienced time. Only in the last couple of millennia, in fact, did our uncompromisingly linear view of the past—symbolically captured in the modern relegation of "time travel" to science fiction—actually come into being. Yet though we may have virtually aban-
doned the mythical belief that history actually repeats itself, we have nevertheless preserved a somewhat milder version of this traditional nonlinear vision of time.

The essence of this version is quite poignantly captured by the quip, attributed to Mark Twain, that "history doesn’t repeat itself, but it rhymes." As we can see in figure 7, such historical "rhyming" is what actually enables us to envision cycles. While reading each of the three "poems" horizontally offers us a strictly linear view of history, reading them vertically allows us to notice recurrence (of autumns, Saturdays, and presidential elections). Such "rhyming" implies that, while clearly distinct, the past and the present are nonetheless fundamentally similar, to the point of evoking a déja-vu sense of "there we go again."

As exemplified by such recurrence narratives, memory often schematizes history by essentially "fusing analogous personalities or situations into one." The Rwandan mnemonic tradition of clustering past monarchs in cycles of four in accordance with the unmistakably formulistic pattern "A conquers. B is unlucky, C prospers, and D is a legislator" is a perfect case in point. That people actually recall a particular king as a "conqueror" or "legislator" reminds us that social memory basically consists of not only specific historical figures (Innocent III) and events (the Crimean War) but also distinctly generic types of figures (popes) and events (wars).

Such mnemonic typification is particularly evident when we mistake one specific historical figure or event for another. Inherently intracategorical, these mnemonic slips help reveal the outlines of the conventional categories in which we tend to mentally lump "similar" historical figures or events together. The typified manner in which Israelis, for example, come to remember their national past becomes quite apparent when they confuse traditional holidays designed to commemorate distinct historical events yet nevertheless involving the very same schematic formula ("military uprising against foreign occupation"). Mnemonic typification is also remarkably apparent when we happen to recall in great detail something that happened to one of our children, yet fail to remember exactly which one!

**Mountains and Valleys**

Aside from their overall trajectories, however, historical narratives also vary considerably in their perceived "density." Equally critical in affecting the
general shape of these narratives, such mnemonic density reflects how intensely we actually remember different historical periods.

As a strictly mathematical entity, time is homogeneous, with every minute essentially identical to every other minute, as demonstrated by the way they are conventionally measured by the clock. Experientially, however, minutes vary considerably depending on whether we are aroused or bored, whether our favorite team is leading or losing, and so on. Yet the different qualities we attach to time are not just personal. As exemplified by the much higher rate at which we are paid for the same amount of work time if it is officially considered "overtime," equal durations are often made unequal socially. Just as we conventionally distinguish "holy" days from the seemingly characterless intervals between them, such qualitative heterogeneity is epitomized by the way we differentiate extraordinary ("marked") from mere ordinary ("unmarked") time—perfectly exemplified by the week, a cycle of periodically alternating "marked" and "unmarked" days specifically designed to signify major cultural contrasts between ordinary and extraordinary chunks of social reality.

This pronouncedly qualitative approach to time is also evident in the way we envision the past, the social shape of which is profoundly affected by the rather pervasive sociomental differentiation of "eventful" historical periods from "uneventful," seemingly empty historical "lulls." Generally regarded as less memorable, "unmarked" stretches of history are essentially relegated to social oblivion. As a result, we come to remember some historical periods much more intensely than others. A powerful social projector thus highlights certain parts of the past while basically leaving others in total
darkness—which is precisely how we have come to regard the seemingly uneventful centuries between the collapse of the Mycenaean civilization circa 1100 BC and the rise of the classical Hellenic world circa 800 BC as a "dark" age.

Such an inherently "optical" vision of the past is a product of certain norms of historical focusing that dictate what we should mnemonically "attend" and what we can largely ignore and thereby forget. It thus basically involves a fundamental distinction (closely resembling the one between "figure" and "ground") between what we regard as historically "significant" and thus come to collectively remember, and what is considered "irrelevant" and thereby essentially relegated to social oblivion. The common tendency to regard wars as eventful and thus memorable, yet the considerably longer "quiet" periods between them as practically empty, is a perfect case in point.

As demonstrated by the fact that we can actually envision even several consecutive centuries as virtually empty, historical periods clearly vary in their perceived density. History thus takes the form of a relief map, on the mnemonic hills and dales of which memorable and forgettable events from the past are respectively featured. Its general shape is thus formed by a handful of historically "eventful" mountains interspersed among wide, seemingly empty valleys in which nothing of any historical significance seems to have happened.

As this explicitly topographic imagery seems to imply, socially "marked" historical periods clearly occupy much more mnemonic "space" than one would expect on strictly mathematical grounds. This variable density of historical intervals constitutes a significant semiotic code. As Claude Lévi-Strauss has noted,

We use a large number of dates to code some periods of history, and fewer for others. This variable quantity of dates applied to periods of equal duration are a gauge of what might be called the pressure of history: there are... periods where... numerous events appear as differential elements; others, on the contrary, where... (although not of course for the men who lived through them) very little or nothing took place... Historical knowledge thus proceeds in the same way as a wireless with frequency modulation: like a nerve, it codes a continuous quantity... by frequencies of impulses proportional to its variations.

Thus, for example, in the Book of Chronicles the reign of King Solomon is allotted 201 verses, while that of Joash only receives 27 despite the fact that
both are reported there to have lasted forty years. King Hezekiah's twenty-nine-year reign is likewise marked much more prominently (117 verses) than the fifty-five-year reign of his son Manasseh (only 20 verses). The clearly tells us something about the relative place of both Solomon and Hezekiah in Jewish collective memory.

Consider also the relative amount of space allotted in Clifton Daniel's *Chronicle of America* to each of the nearly fifty decades of American history from 1492 to 1988. As we can see in figure 8, the differential mnemonic marking of mathematically identical historical intervals is quite revealing. Especially in contrast with the amount of space allotted to their immediate chronological neighbors (the 1850s and 1950s), the actual number of pages allotted to the 1860s and 1940s, for instance, is quite suggestive of the particular memorability of wartime periods, since from a strictly mathematical standpoint those decades were absolutely identical. By the same token, when the exact same amount of space in the book (twenty-four pages) is allotted to the three-year interval from 1775 through 1777 as well as to the sixty-year interval from 1690 through 1749, it is quite clear how different those two periods are in terms of their perceived historical "eventfulness" (and therefore social memorability). The fact that most Americans seem to know much more about the 1770s than about the 1830s obviously suggests more than just a matter of recency.

Such essentially qualitative heterogeneity of mathematically identical time intervals underscores a pronouncedly nonmetrical approach to chronology that basically involves mnemonically inflating certain historical periods while compressing others. On the unmistakably nonmetrical time lines implicitly encapsulated in elderly Germans' life histories, for example, the years 1935-41 thus seem virtually empty compared to the years 1942-45.

Yet collective memory is more than just an aggregate of individuals' personal memories, and such inevitably personal relief maps cannot possibly capture what an entire nation, for example, collectively considers historically eventful or uneventful. To observe the social "marking" of the past, we therefore need to examine social time lines constructed by entire mnemonic communities. For that we must turn to unmistakably social sites of memory. As one might expect, historical periods that are allotted more pages in official history textbooks or assigned special wings in national museums are indeed those sacred periods on which nations are most intensely focused mnemonically. And since the sacred is often man-
manifested in ritual display, we also need to examine the way major figures and events from the past are ritually commemorated. After all, by carving marked periods out of essentially unmarked stretches of history, "ritual commemoration" helps mnemonic communities explicitly articulate what they consider historically eventful. As it "lifts from an ordinary historical sequence those extraordinary events which embody our deepest and most fundamental values," it thus basically serves as "a register of sacred history." Indeed, commemorative rituals often embody major social time lines.

Consider, for example, explicitly commemorative ritual displays such as the postage stamps, street names, and public parades specifically designed to commemorate major historical figures or events. Examining the way they are chronologically distributed certainly helps identify sacred periods in a group's history. As W. Lloyd Warner demonstrated in a classic study of the actual historical contents of a commemorative procession featuring the first three centuries of a New England town's collective past, the events constituting what mnemonic communities come to regard as their history are unevenly distributed chronologically.
The forty-three floats of the Procession... were spread throughout the three hundred years being officially celebrated... [Chronologically, they are no spread equally throughout the three centuries. There are sharp divergencies between the social time of the Procession and the chronology of objective time... Since three hundred years were being celebrated, if only the statistical probability of pure chance were at work each century would receive a third of the scenes displayed and each half- and quarter-century be given its proportion of symbolic events... But in fact, one brief period of little more than a decade received as much attention as the previous hundred years. One full quarter-century was not represented at all.]

Essentially contrasting metrical "chronology" with unmistakably nonmetrical "social time," he thus proceeded to identify uneven chronological distribution patterns such as having the years 1780-1805 represented by ten floats, yet the mathematically identical period from 1705 to 1730 by virtually none! Such patterns have also been observed in a similar examination of the chronological density of the historical events that are publicly commemorated in the U.S. Capitol's art collection in Washington, D.C. One only needs to compare the United States' public commemoration of the highly "eventful" 1770s and virtually barren 1760s, for example, to become fully aware of the fundamental contrast between the sacred mountains and profane valleys of the past.

Another extremely useful social site of memory in this regard is the calendar. As a cycle of "holy days" specifically designed to commemorate particular historical events, the calendar year usually embodies major narratives collectively woven by mnemonic communities from their past. Examining which particular events are commemorated on holidays can thus help us identify sacred periods in their history.

For instance, the remarkably "dense" cluster of historical events commemorated every year by Libya on Revolution Day (the overthrow of King Idris by Colonel Muammar Qaddafi), British Bases Evacuation Day (the closing of the military bases at al-Ayder and Tobruk), American Bases Evacuation Day (the closing of the Wheelus Air Force Base), and Evacuation of Fascist Settlers Day (the expulsion of Italians from Libya) all occurred during the brief yet exceptionally "eventful" period between September 1969 and October 1970. In like manner, Angola sets aside five days every year—Armed Forces Day, Heroes' Day, Independence Day, Victory Day, and MPLA Foundation Day—to commemorate the three-year period from the resumption of its national struggle for independence from Portugal.
in 1974 to the eventual transformation of the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola into a full-fledged political party in 1977. Note also the extremely disproportionate mnemonic preoccupation with the periods from 1803 to 1805 in Haiti, 1990 to 1991 in Azerbaijan, 1825 to 1828 in Uruguay, 1919 to 1923 in Turkey, and 1896 to 1898 in the Philippines, each of which is specifically commemorated every year on at least three different national holidays.6

Essentially housing annual cycles of commemorative holidays, calendars normally entail seismogram-like narratives encapsulating groups’ histories in the form of some highly memorable sacred peaks sporadically protruding from wide, commemoratively barren valleys of virtually unmarked, profane time. By highlighting the pronouncedly variable mnemonic density of different stretches of history, these commemorograms thus capture the uneven chronological distribution of historical “eventfulness.”

An extensive cross-national examination of 191 such commemorograms7 reveals a most intriguing pattern. As far as national memory is concerned (although evidence seems to suggest that this is a much more general pattern),8 the social shape of the past is essentially bimodal, with most of the events commemorated on national holidays having occurred either in the very distant past or within the last two hundred years. Events that are calendrically commemorated by nations thus typically form two chronologically dense clusters representing their respective spiritual and political origins and separated from each other by long stretches of commemoratively “empty” time.

The official sociomnemonic tour of the past formally encapsulated in the national calendar of Thailand perfectly illustrates this rather pervasive pattern. It opens by featuring three major events in the life of the Buddha—his birth circa 563 BC (commemorated annually on Visakha Puja), his first public sermon circa 528 BC (Asalaha Puja), and the announcement of his imminent death circa 483 BC (Makha Puja).9 As we can see in figure 9, this mnemonically dense eighty-year period is followed by a commemoratively barren 2,265-year historical “lull,” which ends in 1782 with the foundation of the current royal dynasty (Chakkri Day). Thailand’s three remaining historical holidays are specifically designed to commemorate the reign of King Rama V from 1868 to 1910 (Chulalongkorn Day), the country’s historic transition to constitutional monarchy in 1932 (Constitution Day), and the accession of its present ruler, King Rama IX, in 1946 (Coronation Day).10
Yet societies often encompass more than just a single mnemonic community, and some countries consequently observe holidays of two (Syria), three (Suriname), four (Bangladesh), and even six (India) different religions, thereby officially commemorating side by side \textit{multiple pasts} that are quite independent of one another. As one might expect, when nations trace their spiritual roots to more than one religion, their calendars often embody commemograms reflecting the structural complexity of their identities.

A fine example of such \textit{mnemonic syncretism} is the "three-act" commemogram encapsulated in Burkina Faso’s national calendar. As we can see in figure 9, with the single exception of the thwarted sacrifice of Ishmael, a mythical prehistoric event commemorated annually on the Muslim holiday Tabaski, the former Upper Volta’s calendrically commemorated past basically consists of three sacred historical mountains separated from one another by wide, virtually empty historical valleys. A first cluster of commemorative holidays specifically designed to invoke the country’s Christian roots features the birth of Jesus circa 4 BC (Christmas), his ascension to heaven circa AD 30 (Ascension Day), his mother’s assumption into heaven not too long after that (Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary), and a chronologically vague early period represented by All Saints’ Day. A second cluster designed to invoke Burkina Faso’s distinctive Muslim roots
features the birth of Mohammed circa AD 570 (Birthday of the Prophet) as well as the period circa 610 when he started having divine revelations (Ramadan). A long, commemoratively empty, 1,350-year lull is then followed by a third cluster of relatively recent national political events such as Upper Volta's decision to become a republic in 1958 (Republic Day), its formal independence from France in 1960 (Independence Day), and the military overthrows of presidents Maurice Yaméogo in 1966 (Revolution Day) and Thomas Sankara in 1987 (Anniversary of the 1987 Coup).

One of the most striking features of such commemorates is the long historical stretches that are left virtually empty in groups' collective memories. Thus, throughout the Muslim world, a thirteen-century calendrical commemorative gap extends from Mohammed's celebrated night journey to heaven circa AD 620 (which is traditionally commemorated on Leilat al-Miraj) or the martyrdom of the Shi'ite saint Hussein in 680 (Ashura) down to the twentieth century. Even more remarkable is the eighteen- to nineteen-century mnemonic gap we see in most national calendars throughout the Christian world—an official commemorative blackout that usually begins right after the assumption of Mary in the first century and is ultimately broken off only by the glow of relatively modern sociomnemonic beacons such as the British settlement of Australia in 1788 (Australia Day), the storming of the Bastille in 1789 (Bastille Day), or the American Revolution (Fourth of July).

Indeed, of the 191 national calendars I have examined, only twenty-two actually invoke the memory of any specific historical event that happened (other than the celebrated European "discovery" of America in 1492), or figure who flourished, between 680 and 1776; and in thirteen of those twenty-two cases, only the sixteenth or seventeenth century is involved. Thus, around the entire globe, only nine countries actually commemorate on their national holidays anything specifically related to the period from 680 to 1492: India (the birth of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, circa 1469), Hungary (the reign of King Stephen I, from 1001 to 1038), the Czech Republic (the birth of Slavonic culture in 863 and the martyrdom of Jan Hus in 1415), Lithuania (the coronation of Grand Duke Mindaugas circa 1240), Andorra (the joint suzerainty agreement between France and the bishop of Urgel in 1278), Slovakia (the birth of Slavonic culture in 863), Switzerland (the establishment of the Swiss confederation in 1291), Bulgaria (the invention of the Cyrillic alphabet in 855), and Spain (the reputed discovery of Saint James's body in Compostela in 899). This also means...
that, at least as far as calendrical commemoration is concerned, the eighth, tenth, twelfth, and fourteenth centuries are considered virtually “empty” worldwide!

Needless to say, such seemingly barren historical valleys were never really empty. In 1926, an intriguing, richly textured portrait of a typical ordinary (and therefore “unmarked”) year, effectively demonstrates that even periods that we may later come to recall as practically empty were in fact quite eventful, thereby reminding us of the fundamental difference between history as it actually occurs and the way it is conventionally remembered.

**Legato and Staccato**

Regardless of the specific form of historical narrative we use to help us impose some retrospective structure on the past, there are two basic modes of envisioning the actual progression of time within it. While one of them features essentially contiguous stretches of history smoothly flowing into one another like the successive musical notes that form legato phrases, the other tends to highlight unmistakably discontinuous breaks separating one seemingly discrete historical episode from the next, like the successive notes that form staccato phrases. As we can see in figure 10, whereas in the first type of historical phrasing change is basically viewed as gradual, as manifested in the way we tend to narrate the unmistakably continuous progression of one’s skills as a reader or chess player, in the second, by contrast, it is quite abrupt, as manifested in the way we normally narrate medical or military careers. As exemplified by the way we use concepts like “style” and “wave” when narrating the histories of art and immigration, these two general modes of envisioning change entail two rather distinct visions of the past. Nowhere, however, is the fundamental contrast between those visions sharper than in the way we narrate the history of life on this planet.

Gradualist paleobiological narratives are essentially a temporalized form of the classical image of natural plenitude commonly known as the Great Chain of Being. Exemplifying such a narrative is Darwin’s theory of organic evolution, which does not recognize any “leaps” in nature and basically envisions species mutating by short, slow steps. Evolution is thus a gradual process in which a perfectly graded chain of intermediate forms evolve from one another almost imperceptibly, with no sharp cut-
offs. Any breaks between species are therefore only an illusion resulting from an imperfect fossil record. If it were perfect, an insensibly graded fossil sequence formed by every possible transitional “missing link” connecting successive species would allow us to actually see the unmistakably continuous nature of biotic evolution.

Staccato paleontological narratives, by contrast, consist of discrete historical episodes separated from one another by pronounced breaks marking abrupt, rapid changes. Both Georges Cuvier’s and Louis Agassiz’s catastrophic visions of history as essentially punctuated by dramatic climatic upheavals are perfect examples of such narratives. So is Niles Eldredge and Stephen J. Gould’s punctuated equilibrium scenario, which features episodes of rapid speciation involving sharp, sudden interspecific breaks. Species are thus envisioned as occupying discrete historical niches, with breaks in the fossil record essentially reflecting the actual biological gaps between them. “Missing links” clearly have no place in such a narrative.
Each of these general visions of change represents a particular mnemonic tradition often associated with a specific community. As part of the professional socialization, different generations of biologists, for example, come to envision the past as members of altogether different mnemonic communities. While gradualism was the predominant manner of narrating the history of life for more than a century after Darwin, punctuated-equilibrium theory has been the commonly accepted way of doing it for the past twenty-five years.

As we shall see in the next two chapters, “legato” narratives are natural quite indispensable to any effort to establish historical continuity. However, as we shall see in the last two chapters, “staccato” narratives are inevitably at the heart of any attempt to introduce some historical discontinuity. As we try to organize the past in our minds, we clearly seem to need, and in fact frequently use, both.