

COMMENTS ON ALEIDA ASSMANN'S LECTURE

*Comment delivered at the Twentieth Annual Lecture of the GHI,
November 16, 2006*

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Professor Assmann in her talk says many things with which I agree, but listing them all hardly seems the best use of my allotted time. Scholars, it is said, cooperate by disagreeing, and I will try to be a cooperative commentator. I will focus on problems I see with the ways in which Professor Assmann talks about "collective memory": its nature, its power, its deployment, and its prospects.

My own understanding of the term derives mostly from the work of the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who in the 1920s began to study what he was one of the first to call "collective memory." Instead of viewing collective memory as the past working its will on the present, Halbwachs explored the ways in which present concerns determine what of the past we remember and how we remember it. (There is a certain grim appropriateness in adopting Halbwachs's approach to the study of Holocaust memory. During France's occupation, he protested the arrest of his Jewish father-in-law. Halbwachs was then sent to Buchenwald, where he died.)

Typically a collective memory, at least a significant collective memory, is understood to express some eternal or essential, often tragic truth about the collectivity. A memory once established comes to define that eternal truth, and along with it an eternal identity for the members of the collectivity. Serbs' central memory, the lost Battle of Kosovo in 1389, symbolized the permanent Muslim intention to dominate them. The partitions of Poland in the eighteenth century gave that country an "essential" identity as "the Christ among nations," crucified and re-crucified by foreign oppression. Some collective memories are very long-lived indeed: the Battle of Kosovo for Serbs, the expulsion of 1492 for Sephardic Jews. But the reason that these memories endured for centuries is that the conditions they symbolized also endured: foreign oppression, foreign exile. Long-lived memories are most characteristic of stable, relatively unchanging societies. When we speak of "collective memory," we often lose sight of the fact that we are employing a metaphor—an *organic* metaphor—that draws an analogy between the memory of an individual and that of a community. The organic metaphor seems to me to work best when we are speaking of an organic (traditional, stable, homogeneous)

community, one in which consciousness, like social reality, changes slowly. When Halbwachs first advanced the idea of “collective memory” in the 1920s, the great French medievalist Marc Bloch, who was generally suspicious of organic metaphors for society, nevertheless thought it might be usefully applied to such things as a peasant grandfather, grandchild on his knee, passing on rural traditions. A very organic image. How appropriate the metaphor is for the very inorganic societies of the late twentieth century (fragmented rather than homogeneous, rapidly changing rather than stable, the principal modes of communication electronic rather than face-to-face) seems to me very questionable. Metaphors are supposed to, and sometimes can, enrich and sharpen our understanding, but they can as easily impoverish and dull it.

The life expectancy of memories in contemporary society seems greatly diminished. With the circumstances of our lives changing as rapidly as they do, it is the very rare memory that can resonate with an unchanging “essential” condition. So my first critical observation is that I think that Professor Assmann too easily infers from the undoubted power and endurance of “collective memories” in pre-modern societies that they are likely to have similar power and endurance in our own time.

There is another problem connected with the way in which the organic metaphor of “collective memory” seduces us into imagining society as an organic whole. In the case of an individual, any memory is by definition part of that individual’s mental makeup. But how can we make parallel judgments about the significance of collective memory for what we wind up assuming is a “collective mind”? In her other writings, Professor Assmann has usefully divided enduring collective memories—those that survive the death of contemporary witnesses—into political and cultural components. Political memories are enshrined in state-sponsored memorials and commemorative ceremonies; cultural memories in literature and other art forms. Professor Assmann appears to infer the strength and consequentiality of Holocaust memory among various communities—and, indeed, across the globe—from the frequency with which we encounter these “sites of memory.” But this sort of “supply-side” approach really tells us very little about how these representations are received, and with what impact. I am certainly not saying that there are *no* inferences to be drawn from the multiplication of memorials and literary treatments of the Holocaust. In some instances, it is certainly possible that they reflect broad and deep concern in the community in which they appear. But even when national legislatures support various forms of commemoration, this does not necessarily mean more than that a particular initiative is hard to reject—or awareness that foreign commentators are watching and judging. And in the case of “cultural memory” the undoubted excellence of some representations of the Holo-

caust tells us nothing about their impact (or non-impact) on the public. This seems to me another way in which the seductiveness of the organic metaphor can lead us to “misoverestimate” the phenomenon we are confronting.

An additional problem I have with Professor Assmann’s conception of collective memory concerns her invocation of a distinction one constantly encounters in discourse about memory: She wants, she says, to “regulate the use and banish the abuse of collective memories.” Elsewhere—and in this, too, her remarks reflect a very common usage in these discussions—she inveighs against the “instrumentalization” of memory. The problem with the first distinction is that one person’s use is another person’s abuse. To take one among countless possible examples, in Israel the invocation of the Holocaust to undergird a punitive policy toward Palestinians rests on arguments that are by no means obviously absurd. And the same is true of its invocation in support of an accommodationist policy. I am not saying that anyone can be expected to find these invocations equally compelling. One will favor one or the other invocation by weighing various values and making various calculations. But it cannot be made perched on some Archimedean point from which one can distinguish objectively between use and abuse of Holocaust memory.

The charge of “instrumentalization” seems to me even less sensible if one accepts Halbwachs’s argument—compelling to many of us—that collective memories are characteristically mobilized and deployed by nations and other collectivities for some present purpose. I lack the time to go into this at any length, but let me offer two examples from the long history of Jewish memory.

The suicide at Masada was absent from Jewish memory for almost two thousand years, though the text describing the event was readily available. This was not because Masada was a “trauma” that was “repressed,” but because traditional Judaism focused on survival and holy study rather than military resistance. The tradition remembered Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai and the establishment of the academy at Yavneh, not Elazar ben Yair and the mass suicide. Zionists in the twentieth century found Masada more relevant to their self-understanding and self-representation, and a new collective memory emerged. Some memories, once functional, become dysfunctional. The concluding chapters of the Book of Esther tell of the queen soliciting permission to slaughter not just the Jews’ armed enemies, but the enemies’ wives and children, with a final death toll of 75,000. These “memories” provided gratifying revenge fantasies to the Jews of medieval Europe; in the current era of ecumenism these chapters have become an embarrassment and have simply disap-

peared from Purim commemoration; probably most American Jews today are unaware that they exist.

If it can be shown, as I believe it can, that collective memories rise and fall following changing assessments of communal needs—that they are *always* “instrumental” for some perceived need—the charge of “instrumentalization” is quite empty. I might add that I find Professor Assmann’s use of “instrumentalization” as an epithet particularly ironic. She devotes most of her talk to suggesting various ways in which a certain sort of carefully shaped memory of the Holocaust can be used as an *instrument* for the promotion of European unity. So I am forced to the conclusion that, like “abuse” when contrasted with “use,” “instrumentalization” is a word she employs to refer to uses of which she disapproves. (I should perhaps note here that I am fairly sure that Professor Assmann and I would be in near complete agreement about the uses, or “instrumentalizations”, which we would prefer. But I would insist that they are just that—preferences—not the result of privileged access to knowledge of what is a use and what is an abuse.)

Finally, let me say a few words about Professor Assmann’s central argument: that a shared memory of the Holocaust is the best—and perhaps indispensable—foundation of the currently shaky European Union. The role of Holocaust memory in the moral reconstruction of Germany is surely a special case that cannot be generalized. Though repeated reminders of the Holocaust, like anything else, can be pushed too far, mobilizing a backlash, its results in Germany have on the whole been salutary. I greatly admire those Germans—historians and others—who have led in that painful effort. I am also on the side of those in other countries who have pressed for acknowledgment of the ways in which some of their countrymen were complicit in that great crime. Having said that, I am far from convinced that the memory of the Holocaust can provide the role of “founding myth” for a united Europe. For one thing, it seems to me that there is something illegitimately “homogenizing” about establishing a “shared” memory that, in words quoted approvingly by Professor Assmann, would have all Europeans think of themselves as perpetrators—and also as victims. I by no means endorse Daniel Goldhagen’s argument that the Holocaust was a “German national project,” and I was distressed at the enthusiastic reception his arguments often received from the younger generation of Germans. (A Harvard colleague of Goldhagen’s once remarked to me that Goldhagen had made a “Faus-tian bargain” with young Germans: “Give me the souls of your grandfathers, and I will give you a certificate of moral health.”) But it remains true that for all of the success of the Nazi regime in finding accomplices throughout the continent, the responsibility for that crime rests primarily

with Germany. Other states will quite properly reject an invitation to full partnership in that responsibility.

Furthermore, it has always seemed to me that there is something absurdly “minimalist” about a moral consensus based on affirming that, indeed, murdering six million men, women, and children is an atrocious crime. Is this really the moral standard on which the EU would want to base itself? And there is the other side of the coin. The Holocaust is often spoken of as the preeminent symbol of absolute evil, and it is suggested that this leads to much-needed “moral clarity,” enhancing our ability to distinguish evil from good. But as a historian I cannot forebear from observing that what ended the Holocaust—the defeat of Nazi Germany—was, more than anything else, the result of the efforts and sacrifices of the armed forces of Joseph Stalin—Hitler’s competitor for the title of greatest monster of the twentieth century. Not much “moral clarity” here.

Professor Assmann concludes by saying that without a shared framework of historical consciousness, “the project of a United States of Europe will remain an empty idea.” As a renegade historian of Europe who has become a historian of the United States, I wonder about the implications of this dictum for my own country. Not only do Americans lack a shared historical consciousness—they barely have any historical consciousness at all. Does this mean that the United States of America is “an empty idea?” It is an arguable proposition, but surely not a settled one.

There were some shared ideas at the time of the founding of the United States, and over the years some Americans focused on some, others focused on others. During the Civil War both sides appealed to the “Principles of 1776”: Northerners to (rather ambiguous) ideas about equality; Confederates to the “sacred right of rebellion.” And finally, I would note that the establishment of the United States as an *entity* was the work of many generations. Few besides historians know about an interesting grammatical evolution. In its first decades the phrase “the United States” took the plural: “the United States are”; “the United States were.” It was only toward the end of the nineteenth century that it came to take the singular: “the United States is.” With sufficient wisdom and patience, the same thing may, over time, happen in Europe. But if it does I think it will have much more to do with the success with which it conducts its affairs than with its ability to draft a common textbook of history.