

RESPONSE TO PETER NOVICK

Aleida Assmann

Professor Novick's comments are wonderfully clear and insightful. I admire this type of criticism, which is based not only on rich expertise and extended knowledge but also on vigorous common sense and skepticism. It provides much food for further reflection on controversial issues that I touched upon in my paper but could not duly elaborate within its limited scope. I am grateful for this opportunity to further clarify the main points of my argument and also reflect more explicitly on the premises of its inbuilt methodology. My response to Novick's comments focuses on what I take to be his three main objections.

First objection: The term "collective memory" is an organic metaphor and applies only to pre-modern societies

In his response, Professor Novick reflects on the possibilities and limits of the term "collective memory" as a critical tool. He bases these reflections on two associations, which are for him an intrinsic part of its semantics: a collective memory is necessarily long-lived and its status is that of an organic image. Because of the enduring quality of a collective memory, it tells an eternal truth about a collective; it represents a society as unchanging. This description, according to Novick, fits only rural and pre-modern societies and is wholly inappropriate to analyzing heterogeneous and inorganic societies of the late twentieth century.

I cannot accept the premises on which Novick defines the term "collective memory." Its longevity is not a seminal trait, nor can it be discarded as an "organic metaphor." The term collective memory was introduced, as Novick reminds us, by Maurice Halbwachs. Halbwachs already took great pains to emphasize that this term "is by no means a simple metaphor." With respect to family memory, for instance, he anchored it in "constant exchanges of impressions and opinions among family members" with the effect that "the framework of collective memory confines and binds our most intimate remembrances to each other."¹ For him, a collective memory is clearly not a mysterious fusion of individual minds or souls but the product of continuous social interaction. Personal interaction (the model of the grandson on the knee of the

grandfather), however, is not the only way in which a collective memory is created. If we replace face-to-face interaction with symbolic communication via media such as newspapers, television, history textbooks, museums, monuments, and commemoration rites, the range of participation in a collective memory widens considerably. If there is a leap of analogy involved in the thinking about "collective memory," it is not from individual memory to a mysterious collective mind, but from *unmediated* (face-to-face) interaction to *mediated* symbolic communication and from informal practices to more formal channels, occasions, and institutions of communication.

If today Halbwachs is esteemed as the pioneer of social memory studies, this is due to his constructivist stance. Had he based his studies on an organic metaphor, he would have little to offer contemporary scholars. *Constructivism*, however, is the very opposite of *essentialism*, which is what Professor Novick dislikes about the notion of "collective memory." Let me clarify the methodological difference. The term "collective memory" evolved in the 1980s and 1990s along with a discourse on *collective identities*. Up until then, the term "identity" had been mostly applied to individuals. New discourses on both memory and identity were backed up by a "constructivist turn" in the humanities. This turn was built on two basic assumptions. One is that cultural symbols (such as texts, images, and rituals) and their historically changing media matter; they play an important role in the formation of identities. The other premise is that the past is always reconstructed according to the needs of the present. As the present is in no way stable, reconstructing the past is a varying and open-ended project. If we follow this line of argument, it becomes more plausible to apply the concept of collective memory also to inorganic societies of the late twentieth century.

As history evolves, nations enter into new political alliances and constellations. Therefore, the distinction between "unchanging" and "changing" societies can no longer serve as an analytical tool to justify or negate the application of the term collective memory. A collective memory, as Novick succinctly puts it, always defines a collective self-image, and this self-image is constructed according to historical and political challenges. If it is seemingly unchanging, this is the case because the conditions persist. But one can also think of it the other way around: Problematic conditions persist because an obsolete self-image, backed up by a collective memory, has not been revised and reconstructed. In this case, an obstinate adherence to a collective memory may result in an inability to adapt to new constellations.

Second objection: “Instrumentalization” has to be dropped as an analytical term because collective memory constructs always serve a purpose

Professor Novick argues that “collective memories rise and fall following changing assessments of communal needs,” and that they are always “mobilized and deployed for some present purpose.” This insight, along with the interesting illustrations, is absolutely in agreement with the basic proposition of constructivist memory research. In his book *The Holocaust in American Life*, Novick made this astute and convincing point. The term “instrumentalization,” then, is an empty one that does not express anything but the moral bias of its user. As one person’s use is another person’s abuse, Novick comes to the conclusion that there is no “Archimedean point from which one can distinguish objectively between use and abuse of Holocaust memory.” (The same, by the way, holds true for the use of the term “ideology.” This was presented as an analytical tool but in practice was generally used as a polemical weapon, “ideology” always being a quality in the position of the other rather than something that one had a share in oneself, and was hence the target of enlightened explosion or theoretical deconstruction.) In this field, Novick claims, we are always actors and not observers; we all have vested interests, political stances, and moral preferences, and hence have no “privileged access to knowledge of what is a use and what is an abuse.”

I go along with everything that Professor Novick says, but it is this last turn of his argument that I would like to challenge. I wanted to argue in my paper that a (dogmatic or laissez-faire) relativism leaves us with self-contained, concentric memory constructs, with detrimental consequences for a federation such as the European Union. It is my aim to push the discussion one step ahead by thinking about possible transnational standards for national memory constructions. I am not looking for these standards in the realm of universals (which would mean from an Archimedean point), but rather on the basis of practical communication and mutual negotiations across borders. The standards are meant as pragmatic guidelines for international agreements concerning the peaceful coexistence of collective memories. To arrive at these standards, what is needed is not the adoption of eternal values, but rather a deeper knowledge, recognition, and internalization of the perspective of the respective other. It is hoped that if such a cognitive practice is introduced into European constellations, it could have a salutary effect, making memory constructs more permeable and inclusive, thereby neutralizing the aggressive potential of the auto-hypnotic memory constructs that were the rule in the heyday of nineteenth- and twentieth-century nationalism. The idea of Europe was formed to overcome this destructive legacy of ag-

gressive nationalism. As there is no intention to abolish the European nations, collective memory constructs remain meaningful and necessary, provided that they fit within a framework of shared knowledge and values. This means that there is an obvious need to identify and abolish problematic and pernicious memory strategies that still persist or have been revived in recent years.

Third Objection: The Holocaust should serve as a founding memory for Germany but not for Europe

Professor Novick writes that he is far from convinced “that the memory of the Holocaust can provide the role of ‘founding myth’ for a united Europe.” In the course of his argument, he touches on various issues:

1. To create a shared memory would in reality mean imposing a homogenizing view of history on the member states.
2. A large supply of external symbols, memorials, and occasions for commemoration, however, is evidence only for an external imposition of memory but not for its acceptance by the public.
3. Responsibility for the crime of the Holocaust rests primarily with the Germans.
4. The Holocaust as a minimalist moral standard denies the complexity of historical experience.

A considerable part of this criticism is based on a misunderstanding of my argument. Here I am especially grateful for the chance of clarification because the misunderstanding may be that of more than one reader. “For all of the success of the Nazi regime,” writes Professor Novick, “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.” The gravest misunderstanding of my article would be to assume that by pointing to the entanglement of European memories, I intended to smuggle in a revisionist argument. I fully agree with Professor Novick that sharing some of the responsibility with others cannot in any way lighten the burden of German guilt and memory.

The term “homogenizing” is rather misleading, as the main thrust of my argument is that the import of a standard and uniformly packaged Holocaust memory must not obliterate and discard the differences of local and national memories. A case of problematic homogenizing is, for instance, the German memory established at the “Neue Wache” monument in Berlin dedicated “To the victims of war and tyranny” [*Den Opfern von Krieg und Gewaltherrschaft*], because it creates an inclusive category of passive victimhood and suffering that obliterates all notions of

crime, guilt, and responsibility. Where there are only victims, the cause of destruction must lie in some natural disaster or vague transcendent destiny. The memory of shared suffering can provide a powerful link, but this link cannot work as a formula for European cohesion, because every memory of suffering comes with a memory of perpetrated violence. A step beyond this state is to acknowledge that where there are victims, there are also perpetrators. It is important to understand that these terms are not to be used as fixed categories. One and the same person may partake of both roles, and the victims or heroes of one period can become the perpetrators of the next.

The point of my argument, and here the misunderstanding arises, is not that we need to look for a common memory that is to be imposed in order to serve as a basis for European integration. My point is a totally different one, and starts from the empirical observation that over the last decades, different collective memories have emerged that create frictions between European neighbors and threaten to block the process of integration. On the post-World War I and World War II European landscape these memories are necessarily entangled memories, which means that the European project will have to include the task of turning these *entangled* memories into *shared* memories. By shared memories I mean neither the imposition of a common memory nor a common textbook. Instead—and this is a difficult but important distinction—I mean a shared “historical consciousness” of events and their causal connections. In this respect, revisionist claims (as those of the Preussische Treuhand addressed to the Polish government) or hardliner positions (such as the confirmation of the Benes Decrees by contemporary Czech politicians) serve to add to the inflammatory force of memories, while mutual acknowledgment of suffering relating to civilian experiences of the war can help to diminish the fervor of memory.

Professor Novick’s point is well taken that with reference to collective memory constructs, we can never clearly distinguish between what is imposed and what is really accepted. In this respect, I fully share his skeptical view. Much of what politicians and self-appointed memory activists proclaim is of no concern whatsoever to a wider public and barely touches the minds and hearts of individuals. A society is not an organic whole with a collective mind or a common set of memories. In this case, however, even more than sixty years after the events, much of what is today debated on a political and public level is still part of an experiential and embodied memory. One of the reasons why memories are so complex is that they are differently constructed on the levels of individual, family, society, and nation. These levels may exist in mutual indifference, but they may also produce dissent and friction, and collide in counter-constructions. An important insight here is that top-down

strategies and bottom-up movements reinforce each other. We know from the Kosovo war how Slobodan Milosevic “instrumentalized” (and here the term, in spite of all methodological qualms, is fully appropriate) age-old national myths for his aggressive warfare, but we still know very little about the reasons why he succeeded so well with these strategies and found public support.

To sum up: My paper is concerned with certain symptoms of a European memory crisis and reflects both on its causes and on possibilities for overcoming it. What I suggest is not a master narrative nor a common history textbook for all member states, but a generally agreed-upon frame of reference that is needed to communicate and negotiate conflicting memories. This common frame of reference is needed not in order to abolish distinctive national narratives and memories, but in order to diminish the destructive differences of national memories by making them compatible with each other. Here Novick’s analogy between the United States of America and the United States of Europe can provide another important insight. If it is part of the success story of the United States of America that it has grown into the format of a nation, now no longer referred to in the plural but in the singular, the United States of Europe might opt for the other model and, in order to visibly maintain the differences of the individual states, gladly retain the plural.

Note

¹ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, edited and translated by Lewis A. Coser, (Chicago and London, 1992), 54, 52, 53. I have discussed the issue of the legitimacy of the term “collective memory” at some length in my recent book *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit: Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik* (Munich, 2006), 29–36.