

# The Social Construction of Memory and Forgetting

*Francisco Delich*

## The state and civil society's memory

*Français, vous avez la mémoire courte* (You French have short memories) was the title of a film showing in a cinema opposite Saint-Sulpice church. It was the early 1960s; scarcely 15 years had passed since the end of the Second World War and the horrors of Nazism had not yet been fully revealed. Germany was an occupied and divided country. France was fighting in Algeria.

The film brought back those years: a vanquished Paris and maybe the French resistance. In the background the German and French societies were motionless actors, assumed presences, choruses *stricto sensu*. A silent chorus, a non-chorus, both present and absent. Virtual and real, evoked but not invoked.

'Short' cannot and should not be translated literally because this would refer to a measurement of length whose opposite would be 'long'. More precisely 'short' refers to a restricted memory whose opposite 'excellent' is a qualitative measure with vaguer outlines that acquires meaning only from its context.

The title of that film was indubitably a criticism of a society that was fast forgetting, or pretending to forget, a moment of exceptional cruelty, unprecedented humiliation. Or, rather, a time when humiliation was the cruellest form of suffering that took away all collective dignity.

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Had German and French society completely forgotten those years? Encouraged by some and dormant in others, memory survived via strange paths. 'Memory is a strange land,' said a Central American novelist many years ago. It is true that the country is strange, but not incomprehensible.

And did German society feel responsible for those horrors? Or did it rather wish to bury the recent past and attribute responsibility to its elites or the state, far beyond

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individuals. The debate is still going on in Germany, as we can see in Nolte's<sup>1</sup> and Finkelstein's<sup>2</sup> writing, with worldwide repercussions.

Goldhagen's debate began with the publication of his views in *Hitler's Willing Executioners*.<sup>3</sup>

The debate opened with Goldhagen demonstrating the collective responsibility of German society. Was that done in order to exonerate those who were physically and intellectually responsible? Not necessarily.

The memory of the Shoah, of the atom bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, is still fresh because some of those involved are still alive. If necessary the victims can still bear witness to the events.

Since the American and French Revolutions that type of genocide had become unthinkable. What will happen in the future? That was the question posed by Norbert Elias a short while before he died, when he was trying to see what were the limits of human action.

Memory and forgetting change their form and content but not necessarily their function. A society exhausted by half a century of violence and with absolutely no memory of peace, such as Colombia's, turns pathology into the norm. And how does a society experience past violence? What of the societies of the American continent's southern cone – Argentina or Chile – and Central America – Guatemala or Salvador – when peace returns after decades of pitiless fratricidal war and they feel that only ghosts have survived those cruel years?

Argentina has about ten thousand 'disappeared'. The memory of that state terrorism has been individually preserved by mothers, children, grandchildren. But the society as a whole feels it like an open wound and provides an ambiguous response. On one hand rejection of the repression upholds democratic vigour. On the other that same fact discredits the very democratic institutions that have been unable to find a real answer.

The contemporary Argentinian, Chilean and Uruguayan societies recognize themselves in the victims but cannot be reconciled either with themselves or with the state, which invites them to forget. The society does not know how to, cannot or does not wish to.

Do not societies, which for decades have suffered uncontrolled inflation or difficult times, change their habits and forms of sociability in accordance with that memory?

So does society have a memory? And assuming that it does, how does it manage to forget what it forgets and preserve what it remembers? Perhaps we need a history. An author wrote about history: 'The past is not everything, but neither is what we have left of it'.<sup>4</sup>

Of course societies have a memory, but in itself it is insignificant without its confirmation and complement, forgetting. It is this dialectic of memory and forgetting that is discussed in the following pages.

The state can decree that we should forget: the technical term is *amnesty* (similar to amnesia). It is judged that the alleged offences are less serious than what is covered by the sentence remitted; thus the state acknowledges that an offence was committed and at the same time cancels the ongoing punishment.

Society *per se* cannot decide to forget like that, even if it accepts the state's deci-

sion. That is why memory is often hidden in the inner depths of society over succeeding generations.

Not many writers have found, as Paul Ricœur has, the precise formulation for the problem: he writes that we have 'a duty to remember and a need to forget'. As we well know, and knew long before Hegel mentioned it, duty is a prerogative of the state. And need has always defined civil societies.

The state's memory is a memory that cultivates secrecy and protects its *raison d'être* in forgetting or prizing it. Society's memory is an unquiet memory, never finally settled, always searching in forgetfulness, like the labour of Sisyphus that preserves a significant action, a moment, a particular story.

This dialectic between memory and forgetting is also a never-ending tension between state and society. The double memory, the state's and society's, forgetting in the state and in society, probably corresponds to the logic of duty and need. But also to other factors: the reason that defines the state and the values, passions and emotions behind social actions.

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Toynbee wrote: 'We cannot argue by thinking what would happen if what has not happened had in fact taken place.' Constructing a totally factual, linear history, synchronic and determined in space might reconcile factual rigour and logic. Lucien Febvre, a master of French 20th-century historiography, also drew attention to the need for a history 'of events', of what actually happened.

But what really happened was not a measurement similar to the quantity of water that fell when it rained, or the ambient temperature. (Temperature is now expressed as two measures: the temperature proper as recorded by thermometers, and the sensation of heat, which is a combination of phenomena: air, wind and atmospheric pressure registered subjectively.)

The vicissitudes of memory related to history are closer to temperature than rainfall. In that case we need not only quantities but complementary sensations and subjectivity.

Objectivity tries, and sometimes manages, to separate facts from their meaning. In the memory meaning is given prominence over facts because they are constructed on the basis of their meaning.

Neither can we reduce contemporary history to individual memory. Another person or other people are the basis for our memory, especially for what we cannot remember: the story of our childhood – just as we all also keep in our memory what is not part of us.

These multiple memories coexist, like the memory of events and feelings that we do not experience, that do not belong to our time and nevertheless come to life in some cases, or are brought to life by us; we then convert all this into an active memory. This is why, 'alongside written history', as Halbwachs said, 'there is a living history that is renewed over time and in which it is possible to encounter many of those ancient currents that only seemed to have vanished'.<sup>5</sup>

General history – and not the histories on which the national and personal identities are based – is not necessarily the only source of historical memory.

Because in those mythical or poetical histories only paradigms and metaphors are enumerated.

### Social memory: Fromm and Maccoby in Mexico

For decades Erich Fromm carried out research in Mexico on rural behaviour in order to prove a theory about its social character, using psychoanalysis with groups of peasants. The fieldwork was done from the late 1950s and the results were published in 1970, in collaboration with Michael Maccoby, under the title *Social Character in a Mexican Village*.<sup>6</sup>

The book is based on research into peasant behaviour on the *ejido* (communal land: one of the lasting socio-economic institutions established by the Mexican revolution) and its analysis is attributable to the contribution of the celebrated anthropologist George Foster and the equally important socio-economist Albert Hirschman.

Fromm and Maccoby found what they were looking for, features characteristic of a peasant type (farmers on communal land), and they developed a typology based on this to assist in understanding rural life. They identified three character types: unproductive-receptive, producer-accumulator and exploiter. The first type, which the authors found to be the most common, helps us to understand not only the specific nature of rural behaviour, but also a more general social feature (noted in the same period as this research by Octavio Paz in the deservedly renowned book *El laberinto de soledad*); I am talking about Mexican *machismo*, a type of behaviour that has left its mark on the society. And they turned this feature into one of the main contributions to an understanding of the phenomenon of social memory. Fromm and Maccoby probably did not know Halbwachs's work and their text never quotes memory as a variable contributing to an explanation or understanding of action. However, the peasant character is, above all else, *memory*. These are not terms that are interchangeable with *character*, but with cultural identity; they are mutually implied.

The inter-relationship between the hacienda system, the matriarchal principle and the formation of the current receptive character can be traced back historically to Mexico up to the Spanish conquest. The Spaniards destroyed Aztec patriarchal society and in doing so left the Indians, especially on the haciendas, powerless to defend their women. The Spanish conquerors took the Indian women as wives or concubines, and the children of this union were *mestizos*. As *peones* dependent on the hacienda, *mestizos* had no real patriarchal authority and the hacienda owners took over their women as they wished. We do not mean the *peones* would not have managed to defend their women had they tried to, but that they were in such a powerless position that they could not even dare to raise their hand against the Spanish masters and the hacienda bosses. Under pressure from this lack of power all the men were deeply affected. They experienced a feeling of castration, lack of manliness and deep shame. It is obvious that a patriarchal system collapses if its men are partially or wholly affected by this type of impotence, not in the physiological sense of a sexual dysfunction, but impotence in the widest sense of the traditional male role, that is, that the male is not able to defend his women. This conditioning results in the man feeling humiliated and he tends to submit to women because he fears their contempt. It is unlikely

that the children will accept their father's patriarchal claims; they will rather choose their primary bond with their mother. In a situation where men feel unable to fill the male role, there is reinforcement of the image of the mother as the only person who loves unconditionally and will always provide the feeling of being powerful, at least as long as the son remains a child emotionally.<sup>7</sup>

The hacienda is a socio-economic system in itself and as such has been analysed in a very extensive bibliography. Its internal social relations, the division of labour and of property have given rise to heated discussions about its relationship to capitalism.

The identity of the secondary sectors of this relationship inside and outside the hacienda goes beyond the extent of the division of labour. Conflicts and relations of loyalty cut across the socio-economic relationship, whose roots are not to be found in bonds of subordination but in a historical ethnic institution, memories and narratives of various origins, the verification of behaviours and designated roles. *Ladinos* identify themselves with an ethnic group and also with a style of social action, as intermediaries between white power and the indigenous people. It is culture that was described a decade ago by Germán Aciniegas.

That culture was (but is no longer) only a social memory in action whose presence recalls that initial injury, but is now cut off from its origins. A memory that is embodied without being recognized, floating, fixed, it might be said, in the collective unconscious.

### **Memory and forgetting**

Computers have memory but, as far as I can tell from my reading, they have no memories. Neither are they able to forget, since they would no longer have a *raison d'être*. It is a perfect memory, which can be destroyed but not self-modified. It can be partly or wholly replaced, intentionally or not, but nothing forgotten will come back, no memory will disturb the perfect order of the system.

Social memory does not work like a computer since it does not store information alone, but also sensations, sounds, images and above all meanings.

Memories are constructed in intersubjectivity. The most intimate memories, which are perceived as individual, have other eyes, sometimes created by ourselves, with which to see the same behaviour but understand it in a different way.

Durkheim showed that suicide is a socially significant act by stripping it of its socially external nature. Individual memory is an integral part of a social memory where reminiscences are constructed and also form a collective memory.

But it is in the reverse side of the image, forgetting, that we see one of the meanings of social construction. It is the moments when forgetting is a condition of belonging, a negative individual condition; when the particular group needs forgetting in order to survive and when memory is brutally wiped out: memory of gods, memory of icons, memory of places and times, metaphor, signs, signals.

It is a forgetting compulsorily imposed. The replacement is performed by the narrative of an artificial memory grafted onto its own historical roots.

The dialectic of memory and forgetting thus includes the socialized individual and the individualized society: subjectivity and intersubjectivity are channels where memory is found, never perfect like a computer's because it remains ever open to a reinterpretation of actions. Being condemned to oblivion, the most terrible of exclusions, like permanent everlasting exile; past actions are stripped of their meaning and significant facts are themselves converted into objects, despised and dimmed by forgetting.

This is where the two paths of history and memory/forgetting part company.

In fact in the continuous development of collective memory, no demarcation line is clearly defined as it is in history, but merely irregular vague borders. The present (understood as extending over a certain period of time, one that concerns today's society) is not contrasted with the past to distinguish two adjacent periods. The past no longer exists, whereas for the historian it has as much reality as the present.<sup>8</sup>

Memory does not follow in the footsteps of historiography, since it is also forgetting, which historiography could not forgive. Memory contains illusions too – of losses, of time not necessarily wasted.

But in addition history can manipulate us. The history of the Russian Revolution as manipulated by Stalin was a caricature of itself. Memory stretches beyond the possible, since it can recreate itself indefinitely.

This interpretation in the content of psychoanalytic theory coincides with economic, sociological and political observations that take the same line.

Indeed Fromm and Maccoby note: 'The unproductive-receptive tendency has its roots in the history of the whole of Mexican society's feudal structure. Even before the Conquest Aztec society was organized as a feudal system'. After the Conquest the hacienda system was organized in what could be called a modified feudal system where the *peones* were assigned to their positions for life and were totally dependent on their masters without being able to change or even imagine changing their situation in any way. What made the haciendas 'semi-feudal' was the fact that the *peones* had no rights, while the hacienda bosses, unlike medieval lords, had no obligations.

Nevertheless, there are key socio-psychological features of the feudal system that characterize Mexico's socio-political structure from top to bottom. Feudal structure implies that individuals, at whatever social level, depend on a superior placed above them and also a hierarchy of dependence. Security and individual progress are not originally based on material success and skills, as in modern society, but mainly on absolute loyalty to the superior in the hope that he in turn will grant his favours and protection.

To avoid any confusion let us leave aside the term 'feudal', which in Latin America stirred up great debates that I do not wish to tackle, as they are irrelevant to the hypotheses we are pursuing here: an economic system based on the appropriation of land and captive labour without civil and political rights, in the context of a culture of domination in which ethnic discrimination is one of the chief ingredients.

The historical break due to the Conquest of Mexico, the exogenous reorganization of its structure illustrates three centuries of colonization. A second historical break

resulting in independence from Spain, successive struggles for popular and national sovereignty within the independent republic, the Mexican revolution in the 20th century, the intrusion of modernity thus endogenously reorganized national society; but Mexico has five centuries of colonial and independent history on top of the same number of centuries of indigenous history.

Mexican historiography and social anthropology are rich enough to explain their chief contributions. I shall mention briefly that the revolution in modes of production, the changes in society and political organization were accompanied by a historical memory that radiates out independently of each break, each period, and runs deep through the identity of succeeding generations.

What Fromm and Maccoby call the peasant character could be called the social memory of a country that is now radically different but possessed of a solid identity.

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For Borges memory and forgetting were inseparable. In his poem *The Blind Man* he writes:

Of books he retains what he has been left  
by memory, that variety of forgetting  
that preserves the format, not the sense  
and reflects the new titles.<sup>9</sup>

In the short story *Funes el memorioso* (Funes the Memorious) he defies the limits of knowledge through memory's powerlessness, while at the same time highlighting the charms of reason.

Borges includes himself in a narrative that goes beyond his biography but not his memory; he meets a Uruguayan peasant who is convalescing after an accident and asks to borrow some books to help him recover; dumbfounded Borges sends him an odd volume of Pliny and the *Gradus ad Parnassum*, since the man also asks for a dictionary. When he returns home Borges realizes the first volume of Pliny's *Naturalis Historia* is missing.

Much later he goes back to Uruguay and visits Ireneo. After dark he is alone with Ireneo and listens to his voice reciting in Latin the first paragraph of the 24th chapter of the *Naturalis Historia*. As Borges writes, that chapter is about memory.

Ireneo began by listing, in Latin and Spanish, the cases of prodigious memory recorded by the *Naturalis Historia*: Cyrus, king of the Persians, who could address by name all the soldiers in his armies; Mithridates Eupator who passed judgement in the twenty-two languages spoken in his empire; Simonides, the inventor of mnemotechnics; Metrodorus, who had the knack of repeating faithfully what he had heard once only. He was clearly genuinely astounded that people should find these cases amazing. He told me that before that rainy afternoon when he had been knocked down by the pied horse he had been what all Christians are: blind, deaf, dull-witted, forgetful. (I tried to remind him of his precise perception of time, his memory for proper names; he did not heed me.) For nineteen years he had lived as if in a dream: he used to look without seeing, listen without hearing, he used to forget everything, nearly everything. When he fell he lost consciousness; when he

came to, both the present as well as the oldest and most trivial memories were unbearable, so detailed and sharp were they. A short while later he realized he was crippled. This fact hardly interested him. He thought (felt) that immobility was a small price to pay. His perception and memory were now infallible.

With a glance we can see three glasses on a table; Funes saw all the shoots, bunches and fruits that go to make up a vine. He knew the shapes of the clouds in the south at dawn on 30 April 1882 and could compare them in his memory with the marbling in a leather-bound book that he had seen just once and with the lines of foam stirred up by an oar on the Rio Negro on the eve of the battle of the Quebracho. These memories were not simple; each visual image was connected to muscular sensations, feelings of hot or cold . . . . He could reconstruct all his dreams, all his half-dreams. On two or three occasions he had reconstructed a complete day; he had never hesitated, but each reconstruction had taken up a whole day. He told me: *On my own I have more memories than all the human beings have had since the world has existed* and: *My dreams are like your being awake is for you*. And again, towards dawn: *My memory, Sir, is like a rubbish tip*. A circumference on a blackboard, a right-angled triangle, a diamond are shapes we can fully perceive; in the same way Ireneo perceived the bushy hairs in a foal's mane, a small group of cattle on the crest of a hill, the flickering fire and the numberless embers, the many faces of a corpse during a long wake. I do not know how many stars he could see in the sky.

Borges is impressed but not dazzled.

He had learnt without effort English, French, Portuguese, Latin. However, I suspect he was not very capable of thinking. Thinking means forgetting differences, generalizing, abstracting. In Funes' overcrowded world there were only details and they were almost immediate.

A metaphor for the impotence and pointlessness of the effort that aims to know everything, an intuition of conflict and our insignificance, but also, in Spinoza whom he admires, the gathering of everything into the one. As he wrote in one of his best-known books, *The Aleph*, the exact point where everything is one and vice versa.

As well as being Borges' imaginary paradise, books are channels for social memory. And the libraries that bring them together are an enormous memory reservoir, now increased many times over by digital memory! The Library as a social institution is a neutral space for accumulating memory and forgetting. Even if memory alone were preserved, the effort would be just as fruitless as for Funes. Not all memory is memory. Not all forgetting is forgetting. The only thing that counts is the meaning that memory gives and we receive: it is not a fact but a creation, an invention.

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As Joël Candau observes:

A relative consensus is maintained among researchers, who accept that the same (identity) is a social construction that is continually being redefined in the context of a relationship of dialogue with the other [and later] in the same way there is consensus in acknowledging that memory is less a faithful restitution of the past than a reconstruction that is constantly



being updated from the same (past): memory, which is in fact a meeting with forgetting, is context more than content, a continual wager, a collection of strategies whose value lies less in the content than its use. The idea [Candau goes on] that past experiences are memorized, preserved and retrieved in all their perfection seems 'irreplaceable'.<sup>10</sup>

The consensus that Candau quite rightly records, and details in his book via hundreds of quotations and references, is connected with two propositions that are not in the least marginal: the vitality of memory and its social origin.

It is one of Maurice Halbwachs' great virtues (and not the only one) that he was an instigator of a sociology of *Collective Memory*. This is the title of one of his most important books, which has recently been reissued and expanded with the addition of an essay, which brings his manuscripts together again, and a postscript that clarifies and updates the unique contribution of this disciple of Durkheim. Halbwachs was deported during the Second World War and died in a concentration camp, having initiated a study that was intended to uncover the secret of the manifestations and origins of collective memory. His biography is now part of collective memory.

Thanks to Gérard Namem (p. 295) this reissue is also 'a second sociology of memory that is searching for reciprocal interaction and anteriority'.

In an article published in 1939 Halbwachs laid the foundation for a discussion on social memory: 'La mémoire collective chez les musiciens' (Collective memory among musicians), which is included in the first chapter of *La Mémoire collective* in the edition I am referring to.

Music is truly the only art that must submit to this condition since it unfolds entirely in time, *because it is not associated with a durable medium* [emphasis added], and in order to relive it we must continually recreate it. There is no other example that lets us perceive so clearly that it is not possible to retain a mass of memories with all their nuances and most precise details, except on one condition: by activating all the resources of collective memory.<sup>11</sup>

The *condition* Halbwachs is referring to 'is that, in order to preserve and record works of music, it is impossible to appeal (as in theatre) to images or ideas, to signifieds, because music has no meaning other than itself'.<sup>12</sup>

The individual philosophy of memory was well known at that time. So Halbwachs had to demonstrate that a collective memory coexisted within and outside the individual memory. The difference lies in the fact that this collective memory has no specific site in the brain. And yet it is a presence and even more a variable that intervenes in social interaction. Is it enough to note that 'a current of social thought is normally as invisible as the atmosphere we breathe'?<sup>13</sup> Certainly not.

But it is equally true that sometimes, when we hear a tune, we remember it 'because it is inscribed in our memory but comes from our consciousness'.<sup>14</sup>

Halbwachs goes on to explain that 'musical signs and the changes in the brain related to them differ from the sounds and the dizziness that the sounds leave behind in our brains because the latter are artificial'.<sup>15</sup>

However, our memory does not necessarily need to record signs or words but

merely rhythm. And rhythm, as Halbwachs says, 'is a product of life in society'; and he then adds: 'It is not material nature that recovered us but society'.

And furthermore, 'musical rhythm assumes a space that is only sound and a society of humans that is interested only in sounds'. This is the society of musicians.

When he was deaf Beethoven produced his best works. . . . He was isolated . . . but the musical symbols preserved the sounds and their articulation . . . because he was not the one who had invented them . . . it was the language of the group.<sup>16</sup>

For, concludes Halbwachs, 'The musical world is external to ourselves. It is a construction. It is in the space defined by a society and not within the limits of an individual consciousness that the spheres revolve.'<sup>17</sup>

Collective memory, like social consciousness, has no representation in human physiology, even though individual memory, like individual consciousness, has a location in the brain. But this materiality does not necessarily imply the non-existence of their collective versions.

In the eighth chapter of *The Veil of Consciousness* Roger Lewin<sup>18</sup> recalls William James, the author of a fine metaphor relating to consciousness: 'It is like the life of a bird, made up of an alternating succession of flights and landings'.<sup>19</sup> We might say the same of memory between the late 19th (James) and the late 20th century.

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Let me now return to my initial topic, the memory of the state and the memory of civil society in our era.

The state takes upon itself the duty of remembering and forgetting: its memory is, like the state itself, rational and selective. On the other hand, society remembers and forgets in accordance with certain values and, above all when those values predominate, in a practical relationship with those values.

But in our societies the state and society (and their relationship) are incomprehensible without the practical and symbolic mediation of the communication media. The paradox is that the media are dissolved in the ephemeral, without a memory and anti-memory, because, as they see it, they are the sole memory.

However, collective memory probably survives beyond the action of the state, fashion and society itself, in that intangible region we have become used to calling the 'collective consciousness'.

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## Notes

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4. Maurice Halbwachs, *La Mémoire collective*, critical edition prepared by Gérard Namer, Paris, Albin Michel, 1997.
5. Halbwachs, *op. cit.*, p. 113.
6. *Social Character in a Mexican Village: A Sociopschoanalytic Study*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice Hall, 1970. The Spanish translation was published in 1973 by Fondo de Cultura Económica and reprinted in 1974 and 1979. The quotations here are translated from the latest Spanish edition.
7. Erich Fromm and Michael Maccoby, *Sociopsicoanálisis del campesino mexicano*, Mexico City, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1979, p. 158.
8. Halbwachs, *op. cit.*, p. 134.
9. Jorge Luis Borges, *Obras completas*, Buenos Aires, Emecé, 1974, p. 1098. The long quotation from the short story *Funes el memorioso* (which was included in the 1944 volume *Artifices*) has been translated into English from the French translation by P. Verdevoye (*Fictions*, Paris, Gallimard, 1957 and 1965).
10. Joël Candau, *Mémoire et Identité*, Paris, PUF, 1998.
11. Halbwachs, *op. cit.*, p. 50.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 50.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
18. Roger Lewin, *Complexity: Life at the Edge of Chaos*, London, J. M. Dent, 1993, p. 150.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 169.