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## The Ciphered Transits of Collective Memory: Neo-Freudian Impressions

In the group too an impression of the past is retained in unconscious memory-traces.

—Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*

SINCE BENEDICT ANDERSON FIRST PUBLISHED HIS LANDMARK *Imagined Communities* in 1991, scholars have almost ritualistically followed Anderson in quoting the nineteenth-century French philosopher Ernst Renan.\* According to Renan's pithy formula, "the essence of a nation is that all its people have a great deal in common, and also that they have forgotten a great deal." Indeed, according to Renan, "Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation, which is why progress in historical studies often constitutes a danger for nationality." Less commonly cited, however, is what follows in Renan: "historical enquiry brings to light deeds of violence which took place at the origin of all political formations, even of those whose consequences have been altogether beneficial. Unity is always effected by means of brutality. . ." (Renan, 1990: 11).

Like much of the social scientific literature on identity that followed later, Renan did not particularly highlight the complexities that forgetting—or, in another vocabulary, "repressed memory"—of such violence might cause in the life of a nation. Famously, Renan

(1990: 19) characterized national identities as “a daily plebescite” based on perceptions of common interest and celebration of past achievements. To be sure, such a voluntarist account of identity is a salutary response to “essentialist” or “primordialist” understandings, which see collective identities as features of nature. But has it, and the work that cites it, produced an adequate account of the complex aftereffects of the violence Renan did indeed note at the core of identities?

As an example of identity reforged by violence, and the complex ways in which such brutality can challenge identity, we might consider the case of Germany in the immediate aftermath of World War II. Given the enormity of the crimes under the Nazi regime, one might imagine a radical rethinking, even rejection, of German identity, or at least a skeptical reexamination of what in German culture might have led Germany astray. And to be sure, many did undertake such an examination, with results ranging from a more active commitment to a collective *European* identity to a more thorough recognition of German history’s “dialectical” qualities, in which precisely what produced the best from Germany also produced the worst (the most famous example is perhaps Thomas Mann’s essay [Mann, 1963] on “The Two Germanys”).

More common, however, was a vigorous defense of German identity, claiming not that National Socialism was an expression of something fundamental in German society, but that it was a distortion of what was fundamental. Hence Friedrich Meinecke (1950), doyen of the German historians, argued in 1946 for a return to the German culture represented by Beethoven and Schiller as the road to German recovery. Many argued, furthermore, that German history was one of constant struggle between German culture (pure and high) and the German state (corrupt and low), and that what the German state perpetrated under National Socialism thus argued clearly for a renewed flight from power into culture (this was, for example, the solution pursued by the philosopher Karl Jaspers, who finally abandoned political Germany for cultural Germany by exiling himself to Switzerland—though only in 1948, in response to what he saw as inadequate acknowledgement of Germany’s crimes by his contemporaries [Olick, 2005: 317-319]).

Even more surprising, though perhaps only if one lacks an adequate theoretical apparatus for appreciating the complexities brutality produces for identities, is the equation many postwar Germans claimed between themselves and “the Jews.” The fact that postwar Germans considered themselves to be victims is well established in the historical literature (for example, Moeller, 2002). But the degree to which commentators made that claim with reference to being *like the Jews* has been less noticed. To give just a few emblematic examples:

- ▶ Bishop Theophil Wurm, criticizing occupation policies: “To squeeze the German people together in an ever more crowded space and to reduce its possibilities for life as much as possible cannot, in fundamental terms, be evaluated any differently than the extermination plans of Hitler against the Jewish race” (Olick, 2005: 222).
- ▶ Exile writer Thomas Mann: “Perhaps history has in fact intended for them [the Germans] the role of the Jews, one which even Goethe thought befitted them: to be one day scattered throughout the world and to view their existence with an intellectual proud self-irony” (Olick, 2005: 146).
- ▶ Philosopher Karl Jaspers again: “A world opinion which condemns a people collectively is of a kind with the fact that for thousands of years men have thought and said, ‘The Jews are guilty of the Crucifixion’” (Olick, 2005: 286). And, in a different context, “The political question is whether it is politically sensible, purposeful, safe and just to turn a whole nation into a pariah nation [the term Max Weber developed to characterize the Jews], to degrade it beneath all others, to dishonor further, once it had dishonored itself” (Olick, 2005: 286).
- ▶ And finally, legal theorist Carl Schmitt: “As God allowed hundreds of thousands of Jews to be killed, he simultaneously saw the revenge that they would take on Germany; and that which he foresees today for the avengers and those demanding restitution, humanity will experience in another unexpected moment” (Olick, 2005: 309).

Yet another common trope at the time was that anyone who criticized Germany was being “Pharisaical,” referring to the biblical Jewish cult associated with hypocrisy and self-righteousness (hence Cardinal Frings of Cologne as just one among many examples: “When men judge men—particularly victors, the vanquished—Pharisaism very easily results” [Olick, 2005: 231]). I document this phenomenon—the claimed reversal of the Germans and the Jews—in great detail in my book, *In the House of the Hangman* (Olick, 2005). My question here, however, is how to explain it. And clearly we need more than the rationalist account of forgetting and voluntarist account of identity Renan offered.

Perhaps the most obvious place to look for such a theory, or at least the easiest explanatory reflex, is to say that these commentators and their cohorts were deploying a variety of classically Freudian defense mechanisms. Most obviously, the pervasive claims that Germans were the new Jews seem to be textbook cases of displacement and projection; elsewhere, particularly in efforts by German commentators to “explain” National Socialism as a disease of the West generally, intellectualization, relativization, and rationalization seem to be at work. The problem, however, is that whether or not psychoanalysis is well suited to explaining the dispositions of individuals, it seems like it should not be the obvious choice for explaining why so many speakers reached in the same rhetorical directions, lest we speak of some kind of epidemic. Defense is the reflex of a threatened psyche. Is this the best contemporary scholarship can do to explain what are surely cultural over and above psychological processes, consistencies of a discourse rather than of a mere collection of free individual speakers? If the now enormous scholarly discourse on “social” or “collective” memory (Olick and Robbins, 1998)—whether anthropological, sociological, or literary (cultural)—has been worth even a part of the resources that have been invested in it in recent years, surely there must be other models than a reduction to individual psychology!

In fact there are, and I will trace some of their outlines in what follows. The crux of the solution, I make clear through a reading of Freud and the Egyptologist Jan Assmann, is to theorize “unconscious”

dimensions of memory at a level that supercedes that of the individual and repudiates mnemonic rationalism or identitarian voluntarism. In dialogue with Freud, Assmann and a number of others have sought to show that there are “unconscious” elements in cultures as well as in individuals and thus to theorize the “unconscious” aspect of memory at the level of the collectivity. In turn, I draw on this work to show that these unconscious elements shape horizons of understanding whereby speakers might deploy the same tropes in defense not only of their solitary egos, but of cultural identities more generally. As Assmann makes clear, “cultural memory” is no mere metaphorical extension of individual memory. Cultural memory is born of collective identity, constitutes it in time, and in turn serves it, though usually not in straightforwardly instrumentalist ways. As such, Assmann’s theory provides a corrective to the voluntarist implications of Renan and to the presentist implications with which Maurice Halbwachs founded the contemporary study of “collective memory” (although I will also argue that Assmann overstates the opposition of his “cultural” understanding of memory to Halbwachs’ more sociological emphasis).

### **FREUD’S CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY**

It might be obvious that Freud is the first place to look for a darker theory of brutality and its aftereffects for identity; but it is perhaps less obvious that Freud is also the place to look for such a theory of *collective* as opposed to just individual identities. But the place to start the search for nonindividualistic explanations of the cultural reflexes identified above is indeed with Freud himself, and the sociological (sic) thinking he inspired. While the sociological Freud is apparent in many of his writings, it is perhaps clearest, or at least most directly relevant, in his strange and controversial last book, *Moses and Monotheism* (Freud, 1939). For present purposes, Freud’s substantive claim in *Moses and Monotheism*—that Jewish identity is founded on the repressed memory of their having murdered Moses, itself a return of the repressed memory of patricide at the foundation of all culture—is less interesting than the theoretical struggles this assertion caused for Freud. The problem

is this: we understand—have a theory of—how the repressed returns in the neurotic individual; it is stored—and repressed—in the brain as memory-traces. Where individual memory is concerned, as long as mind is preserved by brain, the individual's past remains potentially active for the individual's present (and often at odds with the individual's conscious desires and interests). How, then, might this work at the level of the collective? As Freud put it, "In what form is the operative tradition in the life of peoples present—a question which does not occur with individuals, since there it is solved by the existence of unconscious memory-traces of the past" (Strachey edition quoted in Bernstein, 1998: 44; see also Freud, 1939: 119).

Since Freud asserts that the memory of patricide remains repressed but present in Jewish culture, there seem to be only two possibilities. First, explicit transmission: a tradition could be based on "conscious memories of oral communications which people then living had received from their ancestors only two or three generations back who had themselves been participants and eye-witnesses of the events in question . . . knowledge normally handed on from grandfather to grandchild" (Bernstein, 1998: 52; also Freud, 1939: 119). The problem is that no long-term cultural identity, certainly not one with a repressed patricide at its core and preserved over millennia, could be easily maintained in this way. There is no written record of the patricide Freud claims to have discovered, and it is not obviously present in the oral tradition. Freud rejects as well Ernst Sellin's theory that explicit knowledge was held through the ages by the priestly class. Such knowledge, Freud argues, would not be enough to seize the imaginative powers of the masses when it was re-presented to them.

The second possibility is that repressed memory is somehow preserved in a people without being either written or orally transmitted. "There exists," Freud in fact asserted, "an inheritance of memory—traces of what our forefathers experienced, quite independently of direct communication and of the influence of education by example" (1939: 127). But through what mechanism? Freud's answer is that "The masses, too, retain an impression of the past in unconscious memory

traces” (120). To be sure, Freud notes carefully that “It is not easy to translate the concepts of individual psychology into mass psychology” (170); something *similar* may have happened in the history of the human species as in the life of the individual, but that is not to say the processes are identical: “the processes we study here in the life of a people are very similar to those we know from psychopathology, but they are still not quite the same” (170). Freud thus speaks of an *analogy* between individual and “mass” processes, and is careful to reject the idea of a “collective unconscious.” “The content of the unconscious,” he argues, “is collective anyhow” (170). It remains to be seen, however, what this could mean.

A number of key concepts and arguments for the study of collective memory are thus already apparent in this extremely brief account of Freud’s most challenging book. Freud notes the differences between written and oral traditions, pointing out that “what has been deleted or altered in the written version might quite well have been preserved uninjured in the tradition.” “Tradition,” he notes, “was the complement and at the same time the contradiction of the written history.” As a result, “the facts which the so-called official written history purposely tried to suppress were in reality never lost” (1939: 85-86). This is a useful generalizable insight indeed. Additionally, Freud takes account of learning processes of imitation and repetition in ways suggestive for later theorists who insist on the role of incorporated as well as inscribed memories. Furthermore, given his subject matter in *Moses and Monotheism*, as well as in the earlier *Totem and Taboo*, Freud makes clear that elements of the collective past—whether transmitted in the written record or oral tradition or otherwise—recede very far into the history not only of the group, but of the human species as a whole: the complex sexual-aggressive conflict he sees played out in the founding and refounding of Jewish identity is itself but a reflection of more archaic residues, as well as forming a background for subsequent religious mythologies like the Christian and Muslim. Collective memory thus includes much more than what can be explicitly acknowledged in the record or lore of a people: memories are deep and primal as well as manifest and contemporary.

If Freud has thus posed the question of collective memory in a seminal manner, as well as provided key terms for a thorough sociological and communications-theoretic analysis of transmission, his own answer to the challenge he poses has been more controversial; indeed, the sometimes more, sometimes less confident formulations of the answer in his strangely constructed book (really a series of connected manuscripts often covering and recovering the same ground) indicates Freud's own doubts, or at least his awareness that his theory was at best unelaborated and challenging to the status quo.

At the heart of the controversy, and Freud's hesitations, is the claim that "there probably exists in the mental life of the individual not only what he has experienced himself, but also what he brought with him at birth, fragments of phylogenetic origin, an archaic heritage" (Freud, 1939: 125). In answer to his own question about what might constitute this inheritance, Freud offers "the universality of speech symbolism" and "thought-connections between ideas which were formed during the historical development of speech and have to be repeated every time the individual passes through such a development" (126). More important, however, is an even more radical claim that "the archaic heritage of mankind includes not only dispositions, but also ideational contents, memory traces of the experiences of former generations" (127). Concrete ideas—in this case, repressed memories—thus seem to be passed on not merely because they are taught and told, but in some way like a genetic inheritance.

Indeed, here is where Freud evokes the concern of critics (beyond those who question his historical assertions). In particular, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi (1982) finds in Freud's account no clear mechanism whereby a long-term repressed memory of patricide could be preserved. Without recourse to the illegitimately mystical "collective unconscious" that Freud denies, Yerushalmi believes Freud is committing the error of "cultural Lamarckism," the belief—long discredited in biology—that acquired characteristics are heritable. Indeed, Freud (1939: 128) notes the problem himself, but answers it only with vague insistence: "The present attitude of biological science . . . rejects the idea of acquired

qualities being transmitted to descendents. I admit, in all modesty, that in spite of this I cannot picture biological development proceeding without taking this factor into account.” Freud (1939: 129) goes on to offer a theory about the conditions under which a primal memory first enters into the archaic heritage—“when the experience is important enough, or is repeated often enough”—as well as in what circumstances this repressed archaic memory might become active again in the life of the group—“the awakening . . . of the memory trace through a recent real repetition of the event. . . .” But one can well understand and appreciate Yerushalmi’s concerns. How exactly does the “unconscious” work to pass on collective memories without being a mystical “collective unconscious”? And is Freud rejecting that anti-Lamarckian position of Darwinian biology or does he somehow find an adequate accommodation?

### **DEFENDING FREUD**

Both Richard Bernstein (1998) and Jacques Derrida (1996) have provided a vigorous defense of Freud’s account against Yerushalmi’s attack. Before turning to Assmann’s more fundamental and generative retheorization, it is worth looking just a bit more closely at what more Bernstein and Derrida believe can be said on behalf of Freud’s historical but not “collective” unconscious.

According to Bernstein (1998: 35), Yerushalmi is correct to notice that “The true axis of the book [*Moses and Monotheism*] . . . is the problem of tradition, not merely its origins, but above all its dynamics.” To be sure, Freud’s account of an identity-defining Jewish unconscious is complex, but Bernstein defends Freud vigorously against Yerushalmi. Freud was well aware, Bernstein points out, that his analogy between human neurosis and the course of Jewish history is problematic and requires an argument. Bernstein’s defense of Freud thus has two features. First, Bernstein emphasizes that, although Freud consistently rejected doctrines of a group or collective unconscious, he was right that there is in fact something about intergenerational transmission of trauma that invokes pre- and unconscious as well as conscious

dimensions: “What is communicated from one generation to the next,” Bernstein (1998: 59) writes, “is not only what is explicitly stated or what is set forth by precept and example, but also what is unconsciously communicated.” The problem for Bernstein is that

Unless we pay attention to these unconscious dynamics of transmission, we will never understand the receptivity (and resistance) to a living tradition. What is repressed in the memory of a people is never “totally” repressed in the sense of being hermetically sealed off from their conscious lives; there are always unconscious memory-traces of what has been repressed. This is why there can be a “return of the repressed,” a return that can break out with great psychic force in an individual *or* in the history of a people (59; emphasis added).

If we do not look harder at Freud’s account, Bernstein thus argues against Yerushalmi, we will be without an answer to his ineluctable question.

In the second place, Bernstein seeks to place Freud’s strange book—written as the storm clouds were gathering for the darkest night in Jewish history by a scientist who had spent his entire life struggling with the meaning of his Jewishness—in an ongoing line of inquiry into the operation of tradition. In this way, Freud’s strange historical assertions appear part of a less questionable tradition of inquiry into Jewish identity. Jean-Paul Sartre (1948), for instance, sought to explain the conundrum of Jewish identity in related manner: the essence of Judaism, Sartre argued, was not its theological content but Jews’ claim to chosenness and the punishment the Jews have received for this claim. Unlike Sartre, however, Freud believed the essence of Judaism was more than just these two clear elements: more fundamentally, the essence of Judaism was to be found in its complex “family romance,” with the retrospectively discoverable trauma and doubling at its core, and the peculiar dynamics these generated throughout the ages. In this regard, Judaism is paradigmatic of all religion, which Freud argues

grows from primal fear, guilt, and repression. But for Bernstein, Freud's effort to understand the simultaneous suffering and persistence of his people is an obvious and important endeavor.

Furthermore, Bernstein argues, Freud's effort—as apparently bizarre as its historical claims may be—is best understood as an early moment in the contemporary tradition of hermeneutic philosophy—including particularly the work of both Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer—a tradition from which “we gain a new appreciation of the role of narrative and storytelling in our everyday lives and in the human disciplines.” This tradition, Bernstein argues, also teaches us “to appreciate the preconscious dimension of tradition” because “there is much more to any vital tradition than lies within our field of consciousness” (Bernstein, 1998: 62-3). This contemporary tradition, Bernstein implies, would not be possible without Freud's assertions on behalf of the unconscious.

However, the question of how this pre- or unconscious dimension operates in collectivities through history, without such a claim implying the kind of “collective unconscious” Freud consistently rejected or cultural Lamarckism Yerushalmi suspected, remains to be solved, and Bernstein does not provide more than extra clarity on the question and trust in the line of inquiry. To provide further defense of Freud, Bernstein draws on the prior intervention of Jacques Derrida, whose book *Archive Fever* (1995) also intervened against Yerushalmi's reading. Like Bernstein after him, Derrida began by arguing that Freud was careful to distinguish “between acquired characters (‘which are hard to grasp’) and ‘memory-traces of external events. . . .’” “All that Freud says,” Derrida continues, “is that we are receptive to an analogy between the two types of transgenerational memory [the two types being tradition and repressed traumatic memory]” (Derrida, 1995: 35). Freud is thus not, in Derrida's reading, arguing that memory-traces are the same as inherited genetic characteristics, only that they operate in an analogous way: like genes, they are handed down from generation to generation without being explicitly or intentionally transmitted and often without being visible for many generations; but this is only an analogy.

Derrida is a believer in Freud's account of this transmission and seeks to retheorize it in his own terms. Instead of the genetic, Derrida refers to the "archival." By "archive" (and the associated "archive fever" of his title), Derrida is not referring to anything as material as a physical repository. Rather, he is referring to the operation of a tradition in such a way that does not have to be explicitly told or enacted, but also contains vast latent deposits (what Derrida calls "characters and traces") with the potential to appear long after they were stored and often without any record of them having been stored at all: "These characters and traces could well follow . . . quite complicated linguistic, cultural, cipherable, and in general ciphered transgenerational and transindividual relays, transiting thus through an archive, the science of which is not at a standstill" (Derrida, 1995: 35). Derrida thus emphasizes the obscure characters of the process—its ciphered qualities; but he does not do more than merely claim that we have progressed in our ability to decipher these relays.

As for Bernstein, the question of "the archive" for Derrida is thus a question posed by Freud to which we *must* generate an answer. Unfortunately, again, despite Derrida's claim that the "science" of "the archive" has not been at a standstill, his discussion, like Bernstein's, does not in my reading go much beyond a defense of Freud's most general assertions to provide concrete sociological or culture-theoretic tools for the analysis of "the archive." To be sure, his description of the problem is compelling:

Without the irrepressible, that is to say, only suppressible and repressible, force and authority of this transgenerational memory . . . there would no longer be any essential history of culture, there would no longer be any question of memory and of archive, of patriarchive or matriarchive, and one would no longer even understand how an ancestor can speak within us, nor what sense there might be in us to speak *to* him or her, to speak in such an *unheimlich*, "uncanny" fashion, to his or her ghost. *With* it (Derrida, 1995: 35-36).

But isn't calling the process uncanny already an abdication of Freud's challenge: to explain? Redeem Freud we must, though neither Bernstein nor Derrida, in my reading, provides a clear recipe for such an explanation.

## **FROM THE UNCONSCIOUS TO CULTURE**

Is Derrida correct that the science of the archive has not been at a standstill? If so, why is it still so easy to take recourse in individual-level psychoanalytic explanations for the cultural reflexes illustrated in the postwar German case? While Derrida does not specify exactly which work he is referring to as the science of the archive which has not been at a standstill, perhaps the most important theoretical framework since the seminal work of Maurice Halbwachs a half century earlier (to which Derrida does not refer) is that of the Egyptologist Jan Assmann and his associates (most significantly Aleida Assmann). The Assmann circle's work, while still relatively unknown in Anglo-American memory discourses (due mostly to its slow translation history) has emerged as a dominant paradigm in European, particularly German scholarship, and provides, in my opinion, one of the most promising avenues for solving the explanatory challenge my German example, as just one case, poses.

Assmann's work indeed shares many concerns and perspectives with Freud's. At the very beginning of Assmann's theory, for instance, is a deeply existential claim about memory that has obviously Freudian overtones:

The original form, in a manner of speaking the fundamental experience behind every distinction between yesterday and today . . . is death. Only with its end, with its radical incontinuity, does life become past in such a way that it gives rise to a memory culture. One could almost here speak of the first act (*Urszene*) of memory culture (Assmann, 1992: 33).

Assmann's point, beyond the violent impulses at the core of human self-understanding and the archaic roots of collective identity, is that

even something as fundamentally individual as a personal biography is already deeply social:

The difference between . . . the remembrance of the individual that gives a perspective on his life from old age and the commemoration of that life from the retrospective view of posterity makes clear the specifically cultural element of collective remembering. We say that the dead one “lives on” in the memory of posterity as if this has to do with a natural continuation deriving from its own power. In truth, however, it is a matter of an act of resuscitation that the dead owes to the determined will of the group not to allow him to fade away but to persist as a member of the community by virtue of remembrance and to carry him forward into the on-going present (Assmann, 1992: 33).

We do indeed, as Derrida asserts, speak with the dead, and in their uncanny fashion they speak to us. For this reason, Assmann states clearly that “Our expansion of the concept of memory from the realm of the psyche to the realm of the social and of cultural traditions is no mere metaphor” (Assmann, 2006: 9). Even more emphatically, “What is at stake is not the (illegitimate) transfer of a concept derived from individual psychology to social and cultural phenomena, but the interaction between psyche, consciousness, society, and culture” (Assmann, 2006: 9). As Freud argued, the unconscious is “collective anyhow.” Assmann shows how.

Assmann’s turn from the more conventional concept of “collective memory” articulated in 1925 by Maurice Halbwachs to his own concept of “cultural memory” derives as well from his agreement with Freud. As Assmann wrote at the end of his *Moses the Egyptian*,

Freud’s greatest discovery and lasting contribution to this discourse is the role which he attributed to the dynamics of memory and the return of the repressed . . . one should

acknowledge that the concepts of latency and the return of the repressed are indispensable for any adequate theory of cultural memory. They need, however, to be redefined in cultural terms. Freud reminded us of the fact that there is such a thing as “cultural forgetting” or even “cultural repression.” Since Freud, no theory of culture can afford not to take these concepts into consideration. The old concept of tradition has proved insufficient (Assmann, 1997: 215).

As Assmann wrote earlier in his foundational text, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* (1992: 34), and very much in line with Freud’s understanding, “the case of commemorating the dead as the earliest and most widespread form of memory culture at the same time makes clear that we are dealing with phenomena that are not adequately grasped with the usual concept of ‘tradition.’” Something more existential is clearly at stake, the province of the id rather than the ego. But as Freud showed, the id contains historical and evolutionary as well as psychic content.

As for Freud, “tradition” for Assmann refers to the explicit oral transmission that takes place within the horizon of about three generations. According to Assmann, this “communicative memory” is the central concern for Halbwachs, who he says focuses on the operation of “social frameworks” contained in and underwriting group identities to understand the genesis of individual memory within those social frameworks. Collective memory for Halbwachs, according to Assmann, is thus a sort of “binding” memory, and as such is subject to instrumentalization and is highly changeable. Given this reading, Assmann characterizes Halbwachs as fundamentally a social psychologist, and criticizes him for missing the important role of writing and other forms of inscription, which work against the fluidity of communicative memory in groups. There is, in other words, another dimension to memory entirely, and Assmann charges that Halbwachs misses it (though he does acknowledge Halbwachs’ late work on the *Legendary Topography of the Holy Land*, which seems at odds with this reading).

Indeed, Assmann draws his own concept of “cultural memory” in contrast to Halbwachs’ “collective memory” through a contrast between Halbwachs and the art historian Aby Warburg. According to Assmann, Warburg—who was the founding father of iconology, the study of the “afterlives” of images—was more directly concerned with history and transmission than Halbwachs. How did the old persist in the new? According to Assmann (2006: 169), “the presence of the old in the new was in Warburg’s view not a question of the sheer persistence of the subject matter, but one of spiritual appropriation and transfer. In culture we find the objectifications of human experiences which can spring into new life even after the lapse of thousands of years.” In contrast, Assmann (2006: 170) argues, Halbwachs “showed that the past is never able to survive as such, but can only survive if it is reconstructed within the framework of a cultural present.” As a result, Assmann (170) writes, “we might say that Warburg explores culture as a phenomenon of memory and Halbwachs explores memory as a problem of culture.” This is because, Assmann (170) claims, erroneously in my opinion, that “being a sociologist, Halbwachs had only limited interest in the past, in the ‘vertical anchoring’ of mankind.” Assmann rests his claim on a contrast between the nineteenth-century’s interest in the diachronic and the twentieth-century’s putative interest in the synchronic, placing Warburg in the former mindset, and Halbwachs in the later. But whatever the derivation, the contribution Assmann makes here is to show us that culture is not merely a timeless structure, but a process in time. All memory is cultural, and all culture is historical. If, as in Halbwachs’ account, memory is formed within the frames of the present, we can decipher a structure of interests at work; if, however, culture is a ciphered archive of lost memories, it can create strange and surprising patterns in the present inexplicable merely in terms of present interests or choices.

For Assmann (2006: 8), Halbwachs is thus to be credited for taking the step “leading from the internal world of the subject into the social and emotional preconditions for memory.” But Halbwachs, according to Assmann’s reading, “refused to go so far as to accept

the need for symbolic and cultural frameworks” (8). For this reason, Assmann argued, Halbwachs drew too sharp a contrast between collective memory on the one hand and history and tradition on the other: “Following Halbwachs,” Assmann (1992: 45) writes, “the collective memory is not only distinguished from history but also from that organized and objectivized form of memory that is contained under the concept of tradition. Tradition is for . . . [Halbwachs] not a form but a deformation of memory.”

In reaction, Assmann distinguishes sharply between “communicative memory”—the subject matter he attributes to Halbwachs and oral history—and “cultural memory”—the conceptual origins of which he attributes to Freud, Derrida, and Bernstein: “the concept of cultural memory corresponds to what Derrida calls ‘archive’ and Bernstein ‘tradition’ and, like them, is indebted to Freud’s insights into the psychocultural dimension and dynamics of cultural transmission” (Assmann, 2006: 27). Freud’s objection to the “traditional concept of tradition” was that it could not grasp the peculiar historical dimension of religions and collective identities that endure through centuries. Assmann’s concept of cultural memory responds to just this inadequacy because he agrees that “both the collective and the individual turn to the archive of cultural traditions, the arsenal of symbolic forms, the ‘imaginary’ of myths and images, of the ‘great stories,’ sagas and legend, scenes and constellations that live or can be reactivated in the treasure stores of a people.” For Assmann,

This explains why we must free ourselves from the reductionism that would like to limit the phenomenon of memory entirely to the body, the neural basis of consciousness, and the idea of a deep structure of the soul that can be passed down biologically. Our memory has a cultural basis and not just a social one (Assmann, 2006: 7-8).

Halbwachs thus succeeded in freeing memory from the brain, Assmann argues, but not from the context of explicit oral tradition. And it was

precisely Freud's point that somehow implicit (repressed) legacies, rather than oral or even written tradition, are the most generative.

An essential part of memory, according to Assmann (2006: 27), is thus "age-old, out of the way, and discarded" and includes "the non-instrumentalizable, heretical, subversive, and disowned." This is what Assmann means by "cultural memory," and its power makes clear why we cannot do without this additional concept. In contrast to communicative memory, cultural memory can be remarkably consistent and thus has the potential to stand in opposition to the social and political actualities of the present. It is, in this way, a "counter-present" (*kontrapraesent*) force and an "anachronistic structure," much in the way a repressed memory can be for the individual. Assmann's solution is a new enterprise, what he calls "mnemohistory," which "unlike history proper . . . is concerned not with the past as such, but only with the past as it is remembered" (Assmann, 1997: 9). Mnemohistory thus implies a theory of cultural transmission that helps us understand history not simply as one thing after another nor as a series of objective stages, but as an active process of meaning-making through time, "the ongoing work of reconstructive imagination." And it provides a method for analyzing particular cases, whereby earlier moments in a discourse can be seen to live on in later moments, even—perhaps especially—without speakers being aware of these effects.

Understanding memory as a form of culture is thus a major part of the solution to Freud's challenge; but it is not the only part. The other part is reciprocally to understand culture as a part of memory. And here Assmann's assertion that cultural memory forms the durable macro-historical heritage in contrast to the fluidity and instrumentalism of the communicative has the potential to mislead (to be sure, Assmann's case studies are sufficiently supple, and he has adequately warned against over-drawing the dichotomy). In fact, the social frameworks of communicative memory turn out to be more highly structured than Assmann's definitions imply (hence the consistency of the German discourse I discovered) and, conversely, the unconscious structures of cultural memory are more fluid, even within the space of fewer than

three generations. As Derrida says, we do in fact speak with ghosts, and sometimes they seem to speak back. This refinement, however, is not inconsistent with Assmann's proposed mnemohistorical methodology.

Assmann's distinctions are indeed simultaneously fuzzy ("tradition," for instance, is used in subtly different ways throughout his writings, as in Freud's) and too extreme (though Assmann intends them only analytically, such that the interplay between communicative and cultural dimensions is inextricable in practice). In part, however, this is because he uses the distinction between communicative and cultural memory in the service of a macro-historical perspective as much in dialogue with writers like Jack Goody (1986), Andre Leroi-Gourhan (1993), Walter Ong (1982), Reinhardt Koselleck (1985), and others who address epochal transformations in the media of communication, as it is in dialogue with the sociologist Halbwachs. Given Assmann's perspective from Egyptology and the study of ancient civilizations, questions such as the difference between oral and written cultures, and how different inscription media inform the role of memory, play a formative role in his definitions. In these regards, Assmann's theories, and those of his colleagues, are more at the level of Durkheim's work on the division of labor than the level of a political sociology, though they can, I believe—and as Aleida Assmann has shown—be applied fruitfully on this scale.

## CONCLUSIONS

It may indeed be necessary to refine Assmann's concepts and argue more strongly for Halbwachs as a cultural and political sociologist. It is nonetheless true, however, that Assmann's conceptual reaction to Freud is essential for the purpose with which I began: understanding the *culturally* structured nature of the German reflexes I outlined, which means not just their structure of interests, but their ciphered—in other words mnemohistorical—transit through the archive. For surely the strange reversals of that discourse, fitting the model of projection and displacement, are inexplicable without recourse to dimensions beyond instrumentalism or explicit tradition, just as they are irreducible to an

accidental concurrence of individual dispositions. The force that leads the quoted speakers to the “Pharisaism” trope and to the strange equation of the Germans and the Jews is indeed one best understood as unconscious—not in the sense of the psyche, but in the sense of culture as a generative structure. It may be a plebescite, as Renan wrote, but not how or for what one would predict.

The preceding should not be misunderstood as a hostile critique of Assmann, but as a celebration of his theory’s power even at a more microsocial level than Assmann claimed on its behalf (though again both Jan and Aleida Assmann have written with great insight on the structures of postwar German memory; see, for example, A. Assmann, 2006). The Assmanns’ interest in a macro, even megahistorical account of cultural memory that pays sufficient attention to the civilizational import of media is indeed a crucial corrective to Halbwachs, whose sterile modernist distinction between memory and history is both insufficient and constraining (witness the widespread dissatisfaction with the overdrawn dichotomies of Pierre Nora, perhaps Halbwachs’ most significant legatee besides the Assmanns).

But what the Assmanns have done conceptually and methodologically for culture writ large, it seems to me, is required for communication writ small. Cultural sociology has as much to say about long-term structures of the unconscious as it does about the short-term negotiations on its behalf. Without Assmann’s emphasis on the historical content of social frameworks, all we could do as political sociologists would be to decipher the common interests that led the postwar Germans to pursue the same rhetorical strategies; we could never, however, understand why they did so with exactly those terms, where those terms came from, and how those terms constituted their identities even beyond their own awareness. Communicative memory and its interactions with culture are thus not to be handled as a residual category, the second-class material for a “mere” oral history. Instead, its structures of stability and dynamism are a central part of social memory studies taken as a whole. This is an enterprise that, despite the proliferation of alternatives and parts within it, I remain committed to

seeing—if in a way decisively shaped by Freud, Derrida, and Assmann’s insistence on the unconscious—as an integrated enterprise.

## NOTES

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