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THE MEMORY PHENOMENON AS A NEVER-ENDING STORY

THE POLITICS OF REGRET: ON COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND HISTORICAL RESPONSIBILITY. By Jeffrey K. Olick. New York: Routledge, 2007. Pp. viii, 229.

Since the late 1970s, memory studies have assumed a prominent place in contemporary scholarship in history and related fields, long enough for some scholars to wonder whether the "memory boom" will ever come to an end. My view is that such a demise for what is still an intense intellectual preoccupation is unlikely to occur anytime soon. Today such studies, particularly those that deal with the role of memory in the dynamics of popular culture, or that probe the relationship between memory and history, continue to proliferate, diversify topically, and grow more sophisticated.[1] Jeffrey Olick helps us to understand why. In doing so he offers an insightful interpretation of current issues in both the theory and practice of such scholarship.

One might argue that memory studies are nothing new. They already have a long and memorable history among scholars, dating from the formulation of a rhetorical art of memory in the transition from primary orality to manuscript literacy in Greco-Roman antiquity. But it is only recently that historians have thought hard about the politics of memory, and in the course of that inquiry to admit a hitherto naïve understanding of the relationship between the evocation of memory and historical reconstruction. In retrospect, one might contend that the self-conscious historiographical interest in that relationship is symptomatic of a crisis of modern historical identity. It is worth noting that the rise of the current discourse about memory parallels another about a postmodern temper distinct from that associated with modernity. The commonplaces of historical reference for the modern age—the rise of the bourgeoisie, class struggle, the nation-state as avatar of progress, the prestige of European high culture—have lost their force as touchstones with which to frame historical interpretation from the vantage point of today's culture, while the new realities of a globalizing economy—consumerist affluence, the politics of gender, innovations in electronic media, scientific advances in biotechnology, the looming environmental crisis, and the ubiquity of terror—have obliged historians to rethink the adequacy of the grand narrative of the rise of modern Western civilization on which they had long relied as a framework for their endeavor. As the grand narrative fragmented, lost places of memory rose from their hiding places, as Walter Benjamin once characterized them with metaphorical verve, like heliotropes turning toward the sun rising in the sky of history.[2]

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[1] The website H-Memory provides evidence of the ongoing interest. It posts announcements of forthcoming conferences on memory studies worldwide, together with an email list on current research underway. http://www.h-net.org/~memory/ (accessed September 30, 2008).

French scholars led the way during the late 1970s. With the bicentennial of the French Revolution in the offing, the appeal of its memory had lost its once considerable power as a guiding referent to define perspectives on modern French politics. François Furet became an intellectual celebrity in France and abroad by proclaiming that the interpretation of the French Revolution as a beacon for the future of politics no longer cast its once lustrous illumination.[3] Its primacy for the interpretation of modern French, and for that matter European, identity was at an end. France was then feeling the identity crisis of modern nationalism with particular poignancy, caught between vanishing Gaullist dreams of national grandeur and uncertainty about the political implications of redefining its identity within the emerging European confederation. Furet's manifesto made clear that preparations for the Revolution's bicentennial celebration would become the scene of a contested politics of memory, as in fact it did.[4] The historiographical showpiece of the 1980s, therefore, was not to be another big book on the Revolution or the Revolutionary tradition it inspired, but rather Pierre Nora's *Les Lieux de mémoire*, a mammoth project for teasing out the myriad of mnemonic practices, many barely remembered, that through the ages had imperceptibly contributed to the making of the French national memory.[5] Among the countless topics raised within its three lengthy volumes, the French Revolution was rarely mentioned.

But memory studies were about to take a sobering turn, one that challenged the notion that the narrative of the rise of Western civilization was quite the story of progress it had seemed to earlier generations of historians who had contributed to its composition. Germany rather than France served as the setting for this historiographical redirection. During the 1980s, historians' reckoning with the Holocaust took center stage, and the consideration of its place in history turned what had once been conceived as a story of change for the better into a fragmented tale of how the present might redeem the past for its errant ways. The postwar repression of reflection on the Holocaust's meaning was eventually lifted, but amid anxieties about the difficulty of placing events of such sublime infamy within any available historical narrative.[6] This effort among German scholars to reckon with their "toxic past" (Olick's term, 140) was dramatized in the "Historians' Controversy" of the mid 1980s over the conditions under which the memory of the Holocaust might be permitted to pass into history.[7] There were questions about how that transition might be accomplished in the face of the still untold stories of victims of Nazi persecution demanding public recognition and accountability before they might be contextualized within any settled account of Germany's political past. Then, some scholars contended, that narrative would have to be rethought and rewritten. Meanwhile, they argued, historical judgments about the meaning of the suffering of the victims of Nazi crimes should be held in abeyance, leaving a void in the story of modern German history not to be filled until all repressed memories of its horrors had been uncovered and acknowledged. For some scholars, the controversy remains unsettled to this day.

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[2] Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History" (1940), in *Selected Writings*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), IV, 390.

[3] François Furet, *Penser la révolution française* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978).

[4] Steven Laurence Kaplan, *Farewell Revolution: The Historians' Feud, France, 1789–1989* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

[5] Pierre Nora, *Les Lieux de mémoire*, 3 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1984–1992).

[6] On the sublime infamy of the Holocaust, see Frank R. Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 350-363.

[7] Charles Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

There were other, less emotionally laden ways in which the rise of memory studies contributed to the dissolution of the grand narrative. In the 1990s, some scholars experimented with alternate ways of presenting their subject matter, these with morally neutral yet more subversive implications for long-standing rhetorical protocols of historical discourse. Here, for example, cultural historians—such as Matt Matsuda in his study of memory in late-nineteenth-century France or Simon Schama on the theme of nature in modern memory—reversed the conventional understanding of the relationship between historical narratives and the topics they routinely contextualized.[8] Rather than seeking to locate topics within a comprehensive narrative, they instead localized their narratives at topical sites in the manner of the ancient art of memory. Abandoning a sequential timeline of narration, such history was presented as a topical map, its places of memory points of departure for a host of discrete narratives, juxtaposed simultaneously and not necessarily congruently in the pathways they traced. Such studies revealed the many milieux of memory that history may subtend, and so projected a disaggregating pluralism into the historian's enterprise, together with an interest in synchronic conceptions of historical time. The common denominator of a master narrative in which all stories might be located had been undermined in the face of memory's newfound claims upon history.

It is at this juncture in the methodological development of memory studies that Jeffrey Olick finds his point of departure. He seeks to move to still another plane of inquiry in contending that memory should be considered not merely as one among many elements of culture but rather as its constituent glue. The concept of collective memory, he argues, is a particularly useful one because it is more capacious than the older alternatives of myth, heritage, and tradition for comprehending the dynamics of culture as these have played out over time.

Olick proposes that the memory phenomenon today elicits an excitement not unlike that evident at the end of the nineteenth century, albeit for different reasons. History then wore the mantle of official memory, and its narrative of ongoing progress in the making of the good society was closely associated with the projects of the developing nation-state. But the nineteenth century was also a time in which the pace of historical time was perceived to be accelerating in light of rapid industrialization and urbanization. Dizzying change triggered anxieties about the loss of connection with venerable traditions. So nostalgia was born as the shadow side of progress, regret over a vanishing past idealized in its sentimental appeal.[9] The twentieth century, by contrast, has at its end come to be interpreted in light of its failings, not as a past that has regrettably disappeared but rather as one that haunts our conscience with demands for the redemption of the suffering of victims of crimes against humanity.

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[8] Matt Matsuda, *The Memory of the Modern* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York; Knopf, 1995). See also my review essay, "Mnemonic Schemes in the New History of Memory," *History and Theory* 36 (1997), 378-391.

In his assessment of memory's cultural role, Olick offers an intricate mix of theory and practice. Throughout his study, he addresses philosophical issues about a changing perspective on historical time that has brought the memory phenomenon to the fore in contemporary historiography. This historiographical turn, he explains, has deepened our understanding of memory's essential role in political culture. Along the way, he elaborates a complex model of the modes through which memory structures that culture over time. While memory may be a resource in historians' explanations, he suggests, history itself might be regarded as one mode of memory among others in a shared search for meaning in the past.

Olick matches his chapters on memory theory with others on mnemonic practice, notably that concerning Holocaust memory during the forty-five-year history of the Federal Republic prior to German reunification. It is here that he localizes his historiographical perspective on what he characterizes as "the politics of regret." It is his emblem for a stance on historical time that puts its accent on redeeming the past rather than anticipating the future. Like most scholars, Olick regards the Holocaust as an event exceptional for its evils, the most egregious of the twentieth century, and for the Western world at least, the defining experience shaping the historical temper of our times. But he also recognizes that the Holocaust stands as the most salient episode in an emerging historical account of the larger record of mass killings and displacements of populations in and about two world wars and other venues of human suffering. These events have led Mark Mazower to characterize twentieth-century Europe as the "dark continent," and Tony Judt to remark that we must heed the bitter legacy of the havoc of the twentieth century should we hope to do better in the twenty-first.[10] If the nineteenth century for all its failings was once regarded as an age of reform, the near past is being interpreted as the horrible twentieth century. Olick acknowledges these broadly cast disappointments. But for him, the Holocaust serves as the "canary in the mine of historical consciousness" (140), the most compelling example of this larger politics of regret that informs the historical understanding of our times.

To illustrate his argument, Olick concentrates on mnemonic practices in the strategies employed by statesmen of the Federal Republic of Germany over the course of its first fifty years, for no case is more poignant in revealing the difficulties of the political reckoning with the memory of the Holocaust. He takes May 8, 1945 as his point of departure, the day the Allies won Nazi Germany's unconditional surrender. From the outset, he explains, there was an underlying ambiguity about its meaning in postwar commemorations. Among Germans, was May 8 a day of defeat or one of liberation? To choose the former might be construed as an affront to German patriotism. To opt for the latter might be viewed as an attempt to evade responsibility for this nefarious past. Framed as an irreconcilable opposition between ways to remember the last day of the war in Europe, the lines of tension its commemoration generated remained taut for decades. As Olick puts it, public discourse on the subject was taboo for the generation that had come of age during the war years. Only for the following generation, reaching its prime during the 1960s, was the moral reckoning with the Holocaust opened for public discussion. By the 1980s, the question of the place of the Holocaust in history launched a heated debate among historians and obliged statesmen to devise a new strategy for reconciling present-day Germany with the pernicious legacy of its past. To trace the history of the official commemoration of May 8 as the end of a regrettable era, Olick explains, illustrates the nature of the standoff between generations en route to a symbolic compromise. As such, the politics of regret was to become a new "principle of political legitimation" (14). Though he does not employ psychoanalytic language, Olick's argument about symbolic compromise is reminiscent of that offered about screen memories by Sigmund Freud in *Totem and Taboo* (1913). Intolerable memories of violence are repressed and find conscious expression only in more tolerably benign images. The existential horror of the private memories of individual victims of the Holocaust, therefore, would be brought to the surface of public memory only in commemorative disguise. What had once been a repressed taboo about discussing the misdeeds of the wartime generation emerged into consciousness as a ritualized prohibition, to serve as an admonition for future generations.

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[9] Peter Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), and "Specters of History: On Nostalgia, Exile, and Modernity," *American Historical Review* 106 (2001), 1587-1618.

[10] Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (New York: Knopf, 1999); Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005), and *Reappraisals: Reflections on the Forgotten Twentieth Century* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008); *Disturbing Remains: Memory, History, and Crisis in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Michael Roth and Charles Salas (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2001).

To make his case, Olick formulates a theory of genre memory. For him, a genre is the commemorative matrix of a memorable event. The first commemoration sets the chronological track that subsequent ones will follow. The memory of that event is modified over time, but there is a logic to the way it evolves into more abstract and idealized images of remembrance. In his terminology, the trajectory of the periodic commemoration of an event is "path dependent" upon its first formulation (56).

In tracing the path of the commemoration of May 8, 1945, Olick identifies three successive modes of official remembrance.[11] During the 1950s, Konrad Adenauer endeavored to create an image of Germany as a "reliable nation," its people saddened by the way its governance had been hijacked by Hitler and his henchmen, and now ready and willing to comply with the demands of the victorious Western allies that they rededicate themselves to the democratic ideal. In fashioning an official memory of the meaning of May 8, Adenauer put his accent on the culpability of the few in order to spare the many ordinary Germans from guilt by association. During the following decade of the 1960s, Olick contends, the government moved left under the leadership of the idealist Willy Brandt, who chose the high ground of portraying Germany as a "moral nation" willing to acknowledge its sins and its incumbent responsibilities in light of them. Olick recalls Brandt's now famous personal gesture of atonement in the name of his nation, as he spontaneously knelt at the monument commemorating the uprising of the Warsaw ghetto in which so many Jews valiantly lost their lives. Here emerged the first stirrings of the politics of regret, to be practiced through the ritual remembrance of the horrors of the genocide of European Jews at the hands of a German regime. But there was a politics to this remembrance, too. For Brandt, accepting responsibility was also a means of asserting a measure of German independence vis-à-vis the American-dominated Western alliance, and of making overtures to the Eastern bloc in the interest of promoting a lasting peace in Europe. The periodic commemoration of May 8 during the 1970s and especially the 1980s, in turn, signaled the desire of more conservative German statesmen such as Walter Scheel and especially Helmut Kohl in his long tenure as chancellor to lift the burden of atoning for the memory of the Holocaust by placing its commemoration in a broader historical context. Kohl's political purpose was practical. He wanted to institutionalize the commemoration of May 8 so as to permit a younger generation to move forward with the project of rebuilding the pride of the nation as it entered the twenty-first century.

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[11] In another chapter, Olick delineates these stages in a slightly different way, noting five moments in the development of the genre of May 8 commemoration: victimhood in the 1950s; liberation in the 60s; the search for normalcy in the 70s; relativization in the 80s; and the new Germany in the 90s.

But not all Germans were ready to concede unresolved issues about the moral responsibility of their nation in the name of pragmatism, notably some of its most articulate scholars. Contention over this turn of official attitude toward the remembrance of May 8 was dramatized in the Historians' Controversy of the mid 1980s. This debate about whether it was possible to historicize the memory of the Holocaust pitted conservatives such as Ernst Nolte against progressives such as Jürgen Habermas.[12] Nolte called for "historicizing" the Holocaust in the interest of a return to normalcy. Habermas argued that no existing narrative was adequate to explain evil of such proportions, and that more time was needed to work through the meaning of the memories of long-traumatized Holocaust victims. At the time, Olick notes, Habermas's argument appeared to carry the day. But over the long run, Nolte's view prevailed. Over time, particularly with the coming of a unified Germany, its statesmen insisted on the advantages of a pragmatic political compromise, and they were to have their way. The Kohl government made official apologies to Holocaust victims, and would continue to do so in annual ceremonial observances. But these symbolic acts of atonement tacitly exonerated ordinary Germans, nearly all of whom by the 1990s were too young to have been guilty bystanders anyway.

In his discussion of Germany's quest to find release from collective guilt through ceremonial atonement, Olick gives particular attention to the moral question involved. He formulates an antinomy between what he characterizes as an "ethics of conviction" and an "ethics of responsibility." The ethics of conviction calls for rational rigor that is uncompromising in its demands for atonement. The ethics of responsibility, by contrast, prefers a more practical assessment of the measures to be taken. In this view, it is unrealistic to make demands in the name of a moral imperative based on abstract reason, which flies in the face of the complexity of the human psyche and the intractable messiness of the human condition. The misdeeds of the past cannot be undone, and can be redeemed only to the degree that their errors and evils are acknowledged and ritually remembered. Without formally taking sides, Olick seems to favor the latter view. Paradoxically, he claims, institutionalized remembrance holds out more hope for the future by arriving at a responsible compromise on ethical issues that can never be perfectly resolved.[13] If perpetrators and victims of the Holocaust can never be reconciled, one must believe that their children can be. The record of mankind's inhumanity to man, as exemplified in these crimes in the midst of modern times in the most civilized of nations, may never find final atonement. But its remembrance can serve as a cautionary tale on which the hopes of the future depend. A symbolic compromise permits a new generation to pursue more fervently than before respect for universal human rights and the high ideals of political democracy.

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[12] Anthologies of the major essays in the debate may be found in *Reworking the Past: Hitler, the Holocaust, and the Historians' Debate*, ed. Peter Baldwin (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990); *Forever in the Shadow of Hitler? Original Documents of the Historikerstreit*, ed. James Knowlton and Truett Cates (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1993).

And what misdeeds they were, of such magnitude that they lead Olick to digress upon an abstruse theoretical, one might argue theological, tangent, in which he explores the relationship between medieval theodicy and modern *ressentiment*. Here Olick posits a transition from a theist to a humanist understanding of historical time, lodged between the end of the Middle Ages and the full blossoming of modernity in the nineteenth century. The key era for understanding that shift is the Enlightenment. Its philosophers redefined the human prospect in terms of universal values. Born with great hope in the prospect of a forthcoming science of humanity, projects for their implementation nonetheless met with rough passages along the way, and eventually, devastating failure in light of the atrocities of war and genocide committed over the course of the twentieth century.

This tension between universal ideals and concrete political practice, Olick argues, has put modern humankind in a tragic bind. Rising expectations for the implementation of justice based on universal rights were counterbalanced by rising awareness of the possibilities of random injury in a more urbanized, industrial society. It raised the question of how to come to terms with these accidents, given the abandonment of a divinely guided eschatology that tolerated excuses based on human frailty. Reason's judgment permitted none in a world devoid of divine transcendence. Humankind henceforth would be obliged to come to terms with its own failings in distributing justice equitably. In the process, a new morality emerged based on the idea of fair compensation for unfair suffering.

Olick suggests that the ethics of theodicy, for all of its mystification, had been easier to accept in an age that believed that God intervened in history. Blame for the evils of the world could be written off as an enigma, in some measure known only to an inscrutable Providence whose purposes are beyond our ken. But when history is reduced to human proportions, its course would have to be judged in light of humanist moral imperatives. That necessity launched the movement to define universal human rights legally and to promulgate them globally. Failure to measure up to these standards, however, prepared the way for a new kind of disillusionment and with it demands for a new kind of remedy. *Ressentiment*, a notion of existential envy first articulated by Friedrich Nietzsche, addressed the seamy side of disillusionment born of misfortune. If one could no longer blame God, one could still blame government and industry. One mode of recourse, Olick explains, has been to purchase insurance against risk. But another more historically significant demand has been for awarding reparations to victims of injustice. In Olick's view, this kind of compensation was a modern invention. The idea of trauma conceived as unjust injury, he argues, was the by-product of the modern secular conception of temporality. Humans have no one to blame for life's injustices but themselves, especially when considered in light of an uncompromising standard of rational morality to which the modern age holds itself accountable. It was one thing to measure up to such standards in the nineteenth century, in which so much hope was invested in the promise of future perfectibility. But how much more difficult it was to hold onto such hopes under the shadow of the mass atrocities of the twentieth century. In light of its injustices, the issue of reparations would become a major preoccupation for late-twentieth-century statesmen and by implication for historians as well.

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[13] See Peter Brown's similar contrast of ethical positions in his discussion of the tension between an ethics of "single-hearted commitment" and that of "double-hearted care" among Christians in the late Roman Empire, in his essay "Late Antiquity," in *A History of Private Life*, ed. Paul Veyne (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), I, 269-285; 297-311.

In this rapid review of the descent from a providential to a secular view of history, Olick offers a persuasive explanation for why reparations has become such an emotion-laden issue in our times, even if he makes no claim to having resolved it. He reviews some such cases sympathetically, notably that of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, and he sees the commemorative compromise in Germany as a political strategy for resolving the issue in as practicable terms as might be possible. Olick does not adopt an explicit position on reparations here. But his analysis of the politics of regret does suggest his implicit belief that efforts to redress human loss in the "life world" are likely to founder on the unrealistic expectations of a modern ideal of humanitarianism based on a disembodied rationalist morality.

All of this discussion of the practice of a politics of regret serves as the groundwork for Olick's elaboration of the theory of collective memory that informs his study. As a preface, it is worth noting that Olick is a sociologist by training. In this respect, he rejects the behaviorist and normative social theories popular among social scientists in the mid twentieth century in favor of others better attuned to the realities of historical change. For his model, he looks to the ideas of Norbert Elias about the stages of changing social mores, Mikhail Bakhtin about dialogue between past and present, Emile Durkheim on representations of the collective imagination, and especially Maurice Halbwachs, recognized by most scholars as the founder of today's approach to memory studies. Olick points out that Halbwachs has become a scholarly totem for both sociologists and historians engaged in memory studies, and his purpose is to expose the inadequacies of Halbwachs's theory of collective memory. Olick sees therein a dichotomy between Halbwachs's discussion of individual memories in their social contexts and his concept of collective memory, construed as a symbol system of shared meaning. He argues that Halbwachs made the mistake—followed by so many of today's historians of memory—of drawing too fine a line between memory and history. For Halbwachs, history begins where collective memory ends, in effect a process of historicizing memory. The passage from collective memory into historical reflection is portrayed as an end game. Collective memory has been studied largely as the stuff of once-vital traditions that have lost their force, lifeless products of a process of entropy available for historians' analysis. This argument has been especially appealing to scholars in the late twentieth century, Olick contends, because of the visible decline of so many modern traditions, especially those through which the identity of the modern state had been fashioned. The effect has been to put the accent on the manipulative character of official national memory, as did Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger famously in their study of the "invention" of tradition.[14] Nora, too, followed such an interpretation of the waning of memory's force in his argument about the passage of living "*milieux*" of memory into fossilized "*lieux*."[15]

Olick wishes to redirect attention from this interest in memory's residues as an object for historians' scrutiny to another that concerns ongoing interactions within the dynamics of memory itself. He begins by drawing a distinction between "collected memories" and "collective memory." These are memories of a different order mediated by a transformation of the process of remembering. Collected memories are individual memories that accrue over time. They are born within the subjective privacy of individual minds, though they may be voiced and recorded. Collective memory, by contrast, is the emergence of a shared set of attitudes, confirmed and reinforced by mnemonic practices. Here Olick draws upon recent research in the neuropsychology of the brain, particularly as explained by the psychologist Daniel Schacter, who has done so much to bridge the divide between scientists and humanists in exploring the memory phenomenon. Schacter explains how short-term memories are encoded in engrams that permit long-term conservation. It is a dynamic process of ongoing configuration and reconfiguration of the networks of synapses that connect the neural pathways of the brain in response to the external stimulae of sense experience.[16] Olick makes an analogous argument from the vantage point of cultural history. Collected memories, he explains, are "re-membered" in the process of their transformation into the shared symbols and myths that sustain tradition. They are reborn, in effect, as collective memory. Following Habermas, Olick suggests that this distinction between private and public memory may be of comparatively recent origin, dating from the sixteenth century.

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[14] *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Terence Ranger, "The Invention of Tradition Revisited: The Case of Colonial Africa," in *Legitimacy and the State in Africa*, ed. Terence Ranger and Megan Vaughan (London: Palgrave, 1993), 62-63.

[15] Pierre Nora, "Entre mémoire et histoire," in *Les Lieux de mémoire*, I, xxxiv-xlii.

[16] Daniel Schacter, *Searching for Memory: The Brain, the Mind, and the Past* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 39-71.

Olick gives his conception of collective memory a complex structure—or perhaps better, offers a review of the varied perspectives needed to draw out that structure's dimensions. He posits four coordinates: field, genre, medium, and profile, each of which casts collective memory in a different light. "Field" is a synchronic perspective; it surveys the networks of interrelated images that constitute its range, tending toward ragged and ill-defined boundaries as memories fade on social peripheries. "Genre," as we have noted above, is a diachronic perspective; it traces the pathway through which mnemonic practice evolves toward idealized and increasingly abstract representations. "Medium" is the sum of mnemonic practices that sustain a collective memory in its ongoing transactions between past and present in light of changing realities. "Profile" is the overview of a particular collective memory, for each collective memory is configured in a different way.

To apply his theory, Olick gives special attention to the issue of the political imagination, so long focused on nation-building, which in its nineteenth-century formulation aspired to lord patriotism over all other social allegiances. He understands today's rising preoccupation with memory to be a symptom of a crisis of an identity intimately tied to the declining fortunes of the nation-state, once conceived as the main engine of progress. The identity of the nation-state is now jostled by a congeries of alternative collective identities, as other social groups vie for our allegiance, or at least our attention. In this respect, Olick views the nature of collective memory today in a way analogous to that in which we have come to understand historical time—not diachronically but synchronically. Memory invariably imports the past into the present randomly from places that have no necessary grounding in a linear conception of time.

Just as there is today no master narrative of history, so there is no single collective memory that shapes our perceptions. Rather many collective memories compete for our attention in our understanding of contemporary culture. He characterizes this discrimination among collective memories as a process of "chronic differentiation," by which he means the capacity to move easily among the many identities that we may choose to take on (189).

Such chronic differentiation, Olick proposes, enables us to understand collective memories as emblematic of different modes of remembrance at different times in history. He alludes to some of the scholars' efforts to identify them—the historians Mary Carruthers's and Frances Yates's commentary on the conceptual structure underpinning the medieval *ars memoria*, for example, or Henri Bergson's and Freud's formulations of a science of memory at the end of the nineteenth century. Olick sees the profile of late-nineteenth-century memory as akin to that of our own to the degree that it addresses issues of memory in crisis. The nineteenth-century crisis concerned the loss of traditional ways, which generated nostalgia and a desire to resurrect lost worlds. Such a profile, particularly in the aesthetic vision of Marcel Proust, or the psychoanalytic one of Freud, presented memory as a coherent whole, hidden but intact in the archive of the mind awaiting discovery and restoration. Nineteenth-century culture also had its distinctive modes of memory in the expansion of governmental archives, the protocols of professional historiography, the rites of political commemorations, the fascination with genealogy, and the construction of the middle-class cemetery.

The late-twentieth-century profile is of a different order of crisis. It concerns the contest among different social groups for recognition in today's politics of identity. Ours is an age in which competing collective memories more obviously coexist. It is as if the idea of collective memory in our times has been reconceived as a motion-picture show, in which images are endlessly revised from different vantage points. Memories are no longer the stable images they were understood to be in the nineteenth century, but rather mnemic traces traveling intersecting pathways in constant flux. Ours, moreover, is an age of publicity, and mass media, with their capacity for instant mobilization of images out of the past into our present in no particular sequence, reinforce a sense of the simultaneity of past and present. Perception in a media culture conjures up fantasies of time travel, as opposed to the nineteenth-century historicist habit of fixing memories in their places in a well-settled timeline. Now we gain access to imagery out of the past in a spatial format, as we seek to uncover it hidden beneath icons on the computer screen.

Olick presents his theory, therefore, as a compensation for the heavy emphasis in earlier work on memory as objectified in commemoration. It offers the advantage of building an interpretation of collective memory as the sinews of culture, interposing the realities of mnemonic practice for suspect generalizations about collective memory as a transcendental ethos of an age, the linchpin in the conceptualization of nineteenth-century cultural history. Collective memory does not hover over our activities as disembodied images upon which we draw, he explains, but rather operates through the many mnemonic practices with which we fashion our understanding of the relationship between past and present.

Here Olick speaks for historians who over the last decade have sought to identify and analyze such mnemonic practices. They have taken up the call of historians Alon Confino and Peter Fritzsche, who, in an essay summing up the work on memory at the turn of the twenty-first century, encouraged their colleagues to "move out of the museum and beyond the monument," the most visible objects of earlier memory studies, to inventory less obvious practices that nonetheless have been essential in shaping the collective memory of the past.[17] In this respect, a number of historians—notable among them Jay Winter in his study of the memory of the First World War, or Alon Confino on the theme of *heimat* in German collective memory—have displayed acute perception in identifying those souvenirs, mementos, memoirs, and related practices that aggregate around the memory of an event as a prelude to their integration into the symbol systems of myth, legend, and tradition.[18]

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[17] Alon Confino and Peter Fritzsche, "Noises of the Past," in *The Work of Memory: New Directions in the Study of German Society and Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 3.

[18] Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 1-13, 275-289; Alon Confino, *Germany as a Culture of Remembrance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006). See also Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Making Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995), on the revitalized role of the museum in an age of media.

This view, which stresses the interplay between memory and history rather than the passage of the former into the latter, has also found an impressive application in Jean-Marc Largeaud's recent study of the fortunes of the Napoleonic legend as encapsulated in the remembrance of the battle of Waterloo. Largeaud traces the early debates about whether the events of June 18, 1815 signaled a national liberation from Napoleonic tyranny or a glorious defeat for Napoleonic heroism, a question formulated in a way not unlike Olick's in his discussion of the West German commemoration of May 8, 1945. Largeaud shows how the Napoleonic legend was historicized over the course of the nineteenth century. But he follows by showing that this process was not a one-way street, for with the passage of time history was transformed into memory once more by artists, playwrights, and novelists who looked to the event not for its historical meaning but rather for its capacity to inspire the moral imagination of what heroism may be under conditions of duress.[19]

In its composition, Olick's own study employs the organizational principle he identifies with recent work in this kind of scholarship. It integrates essays written over the course of at least a decade for different kinds of audiences. For all of his theoretical insight and well-conceived examples, Olick does not try to make his case through a unified narrative. Rather he circles his topic from a variety of perspectives, each introducing a different antinomy whose tensions lead us into the puzzles attending the transition from collected to collective memory: as he notes in his discussion of the move from taboo to prohibition, for example, or from the ethics of commitment to the ethics of responsibility. Olick's study, moreover, has the particular merit of drawing on the best of three decades of work in this field, and he is generous in his recognition of the accomplishments of his colleagues engaged in the memory game. His book may be read as a stimulating conversation with them.

I would close with an afterthought on an issue that Olick raises that begs for further discussion: the idea of a temper that characterizes the culture of a historical epoch. The historiographical framework of a politics of regret goes far toward a comprehensive overview of contemporary political culture in its efforts to come to terms with the dismal political record of the twentieth century. At the same time, there has been a turn to a more encompassing cultural history since the 1960s, evinced in the enormous popularity of the history of mentalities, which deals less with political culture, more with the attitudes of ordinary people toward their everyday social lives. Most of this work has concentrated not on the temper of our own times, but on those of a premodern era. As for the contemporary age, its history of mentalities remains to be written, and any project to do so is likely to look for a conceptual framework larger than that permitted by the idea of a politics of regret. Beyond the question of the culture of politics, that of society and culture in the late twentieth century has thus far resisted systematic interpretation.[20] Its realities, after all, augur a future of a different order: the coming of unprecedented affluence in the West; the psychology of consumerist desire; the globalization of the economy; the women's revolution; the politics of constructed gender identity; and the transition from print to electronic technologies of communication with their far-reaching effects on perception, learning, and the organization of knowledge. In their ensemble, these new historical realities invite an evaluation of the temper of our times beyond that envisioned in the interpretation of the havoc wrought by the politics of the twentieth century. Efforts to interpret these phenomena in light of a "postmodern" conception of the present age might easily contain elements of regret. But such an overview would require a thoroughgoing interpretation of the cultural implications of these new historical trends. Olick does not have much to say about the use the term "postmodern," and one suspects that he is suspicious of it. As an analyst of the memory phenomenon, he remains focused on collective memories whose profiles issue from a conception of time identified with the modern era. But the cultural panorama opened by such emerging realities can hardly be subsumed under a covering interpretation of a historical temper generated by worries about past failings.

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[19] Jean-Marc Largeaud, *Napoléon et Waterloo: La défaite glorieuse de 1815 à nos jours* (Paris: La Boutique de l'Histoire, 2006).

[20] Concerning the conundrums of the concept of the postmodern, see Perry Anderson, *The*

Still, there is every reason to believe that Olick's method for understanding collective memory might be applied in the conceptualization of such a future-oriented perspective. My digression here is not to minimize his accomplishment, which is considerable for the way it may influence future study of the relationship between memory and history. He succeeds in showing us why the current fascination with memory in its many cultural contexts is more than a passing fashion, and so is here to stay given its usefulness for understanding the workings of culture. If there is a looming end to memory studies, it may be no more than an end to the self-consciousness with which the phenomenon has been addressed over the past three decades, and why the next turn in contemporary historiography may revisit questions concerning the nature of cultural history toward which these investigations point.

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Origins of Postmodernity (London: Verso, 1998); Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).