

The Time of Collective Memory

Social Cohesion and Historical Discontinuity in Paul Ricœur's *Memory, History, Forgetting*

Jeffrey Andrew Barash

Université de Picardie, Amiens

Abstract

One of principal tasks of Paul Ricoeur's *Memory, History, Forgetting* is to analyze the phenomenon of social cohesion, understood not as a uniform bond, but in terms of human *plurality* that arises from a diversity of perspectives of remembering groups rooted in complex stratifications and concatenations. This paper focuses on the role of remembrance and of its historical inscription as a source of social cohesion, which is subject to rupture and dissolution over time. It first identifies the way in which, according to Ricoeur, memory and history function as essential preconditions of social cohesion; following this, it examines the significance and scope of temporal rupture and discontinuity to which this cohesion is subject. In examining Ricoeur's reflection on social cohesion and on the discontinuity to which it is subject over time, I aim to place his thought in a critical light in order to set in relief what I take to be an important aporia it encounters.

Keywords: Collective Memory, Historical Discontinuity, Cassirer, Halbwachs, Husserl, Symbol.

Résumé

Le livre de Paul Ricoeur *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* prend pour objet la mémoire au pluriel, capable de nourrir et de nouer une identité de groupe. Cette mémoire partagée, loin d'être uniforme, relève de stratifications et d'enchevêtrements complexes. Tout en étant fragmentée selon les perspectives des différents groupes qui se souviennent, elle est la source primordiale de la cohésion sociale qui relie les membres d'une même société. Cet article prend pour objet la manière selon Ricoeur dont la cohésion sociale, soudée par la mémoire collective et inscrite dans l'histoire, est sujette avec le passage du temps à la déchirure, la discontinuité et la rupture. En examinant le concept de cohésion sociale chez Ricoeur, tout comme la signification et la portée de la déchirure temporelle à laquelle elle s'expose, j'identifierai ce qui me paraît être une importante aporie à laquelle sa théorie se confronte.

Mots-clefs: mémoire collective, discontinuité historique, Cassirer, Halbwachs, Husserl, symbole.

Études Ricœuriennes / Ricœur Studies, Vol 10, No 1 (2019), pp. 102-111

ISSN 2156-7808 (online) DOI 10.5195/errs.2019.471

<http://ricoeur.pitt.edu>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.



This journal is published by the [University Library System](#) of the [University of Pittsburgh](#) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](#), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](#).

The Time of Collective Memory

Social Cohesion and Historical Discontinuity in Paul Ricœur's *Memory, History, Forgetting*

Jeffrey Andrew Barash

Université de Picardie, Amiens

Paul Ricœur chose as the illustration for the cover of his book, *Memory, History, Forgetting* the photograph of an 18th century Baroque statue found in Wiblingen Abbey in Ulm, Germany, that represents "History and the Winged God Chronos." The sculpture depicts an ancient allegory of the god Chronos who sits with a book between his hands while tearing out one of its pages. History, portrayed as a standing young woman with a stylus, an ink-well and a book in her right hand, attempts with her left hand to restrain the destructive act of the god. Ricœur interpreted this allegory in a brief hand-written commentary under the photograph of the statue reproduced a second time in the first pages of his book: "Between the laceration (*déchirement*) by the wings of time," he noted, "and the writing of history and its stylus." From the very cover of the book, the author of *Memory, History, Forgetting* symbolically evoked its principal theme: human beings, to redress the effects of laceration, discontinuity, and rupture, call upon memory of the past and inscribe it in history. In the face of laceration, discontinuity, and rupture, memory and its historical inscription, over time, aim to lend cohesion to human collectivities.

The great interest of *Memory, History, Forgetting* lies in its manner of analyzing social cohesion, not as a uniform bond, but in terms of human *plurality* that arises from a diversity of perspectives of remembering groups rooted in complex stratifications and concatenations. It is this role of memory and of its historical inscription as a source of social cohesion, which is subject to rupture and dissolution over time, that I will analyze in what follows. I will first identify the source of this social cohesion for which, according to Ricœur, memory and history provide an essential precondition; following this, I will focus on the significance and scope of temporal rupture and discontinuity to which this cohesion is subject. In examining Ricœur's response to these questions, I aim to place his thought in a critical light in order to set in relief what I take to be an important aporia it encounters. This will permit me to conclude by drawing out the ethical implications of my remarks.

I.

I will proceed by setting in relief three sources of social cohesion for which memory, according to Ricœur, plays an essential role. The first source, inspired by the philosophy of Wilhelm Dilthey, interprets social cohesion in relation to what Dilthey termed the "cohesion of life" (*Zusammenhang des Lebens*), through which the life of the individual is intertwined with other members of society. Beginning with the work *Time and Narrative*, Ricœur examined the way in which Dilthey conceived of the "generation" and the "series of generations" as the source of unity among individuals who belong to the same temporal period, and distinguishing them from members of earlier and later generations. In this work, Ricœur focused on the generation as the

vital time span serving to mediate – along with calendar time and the trace – between the two orders of cosmic time measured by the movement of the planets and the time of lived experience. In *Memory, History, Forgetting* Ricœur expanded this role of the generation in relation to the work of Maurice Halbwachs, *Collective Memory*, and to that of Alfred Schutz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World (Der sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt)*. For Halbwachs, collective memory arises from experience retained in the memory of contemporaries who belong to the same temporal context. As Ricœur emphasized in his analysis of Halbwachs, younger contemporaries, in the course of the succession of living generations, become aware of previous contexts revealed by the living memory communicated by their parents and grandparents. As Ricœur wrote,

It is [...] an intense experience that contributes to widening the circle of close relations by opening it in the direction of a past, which, even while belonging to those of our elders who are still living, places us in communication with the experiences of a generation other than our own. The notion of generation that is the key here offers the twofold sense of the contemporaneity of the “same” generation to which belong beings of different ages, and the succession of generations, in the sense of the replacement of one generation by another.¹

If Paul Ricœur drew on Halbwachs’s thought in this way, he did not hesitate to express his reservations concerning Halbwachs’s sociological orientation. In the brief section of his work dealing with collective memory, Ricœur challenged what he took to be Halbwachs’s over-emphasis on social ties to the point of deriving individual consciousness itself from the often unperceived influence of a social milieu.² On this basis, Ricœur rejected Halbwachs’s conception of collective memory and sought a more appropriate theoretical model to account for the cohesion of social life that collective memory enables. On the basis of a phenomenology of the social world, Alfred Schutz presented what he considered to be a more satisfactory analysis of the concept of the generation. Schutz indeed proposed to analyze the temporal realms of predecessors and successors extending in the two directions of past and future. Yet there is no specific indication in the very short passage Ricœur devoted to this approach concerning the way in which it might serve to clarify the problem of social cohesion in its relation to collective memory.³

Ricœur’s attempt to resolve this problem found a more substantial inspiration in the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, which provides a second source of reflection on the foundations of social cohesion. At an earlier stage in his philosophical work, Ricœur had admittedly placed in question the legacy of transcendental idealism bequeathed by Descartes and by Kant, which Husserl’s phenomenological method reinterpreted and renewed. In his debate with Husserlian phenomenology, Ricœur leveled his criticism against Husserl’s claim to provide an absolute foundation for the pure sphere of the cogito. While maintaining this earlier critique in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Ricœur drew on Husserl’s theory of intersubjectivity for his conception of communal cohesion. Ricœur highlighted in this perspective the theory of the shared world and of the apperception of the other in the communal sphere that Husserl elaborated in the fifth of the *Cartesian Meditations*. In stressing the fundamental role of individual consciousness, Husserl developed a concept of analogical relations between members of a shared world to serve as the basis for a general theory of intersubjectivity in the framework of what he designated as a “higher intersubjective community.” Ricœur likewise sought to ground the phenomenon of intersubjective co-existence in a common world in *analogical* relations between individual members of a

community: in the analogical transfer that enables each individual ego to identify with an alter-ego. To Ricœur's mind, Husserl's phenomenological approach, in preserving the role of individual reflexivity, was able to avoid the sociological tendency he rejected in Halbwachs's method, which to his eyes threatened to dissolve individual consciousness into the omnipresent atmosphere of the collective milieu. And the originality of Ricœur's theory lay in his identification of the analogical basis of intersubjective relations at the heart of the cohesive function of collective memory. As he wrote, in accounting for his manner of adapting Husserlian phenomenology to a theory of collective memory:

By reason of this analogical transfer we are authorized to use the first person in the plural form and ascribe to an us – whomever this may be – all of the prerogatives of memory: mineness, continuity, the past-future polarity. With this hypothesis [...] it is important, however, not to forget that it is only by analogy, and in relation to individual consciousness and its memory that collective memory is held to be a collection of traces left by the events that have affected the course of history of the groups concerned, and that it is accorded the power to place on stage these common memories, on the occasion of holidays, rites, and public celebrations.⁴

In spite of this valiant effort, however, the attempt to solve the problem by no means provides a satisfactory answer to the question of intersubjective *cohesion* as Ricœur conceived of it. How might one admit, as a principle of intersubjective cohesion, an analogical transfer arising, as Ricœur frankly acknowledged, from a relation between individuals? For Husserl, the passage from the level of the individual to that of the collectivity on the basis of an analogical relation posed no particular problem, since individual consciousness and all intersubjective communication depend on a uniform foundation in the pure subjectivity of the cogito. In the framework of transcendental philosophy, the diversity of singular perspectives is united in advance on the basis of shared *a priori* structures that are exempt from temporal modification. However, once Ricœur rejected the model of the transcendental ego, what authorizes his call for analogical interpretation that, in Husserl's theory, presupposed a pure transcendental basis for intersubjectivity? In *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Ricœur provided no answer to this decisive question.

A seminal topic to which Ricœur briefly alluded at various points in *Memory, History, Forgetting* concerning the *symbolic* configuration of intersubjective experience, is curiously absent in his brief discussion of collective memory, yet it suggests to my mind a third field of reflection that permits us to account for the phenomenon of intersubjective cohesion. As I interpret it, this field may fulfill the task that Ricœur set out to accomplish: that of steering between the charybdis of Halbwachs's sociological approach and the scylla of the pure cogito posited by Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. The absence in *Memory, History, Forgetting* of a detailed analysis of the symbol in relation to memory and the configuration of social cohesion is all the more noteworthy in view of the importance of the topic of the symbol at earlier points in the elaboration of his *oeuvre*, from *The Living Metaphor* and *On Interpretation: An Essay on Freud* up through *Time and Narrative*. This absence of an adequate discussion of the function of the symbol in *Memory, History, Forgetting* is further complicated by the fact that in earlier works Ricœur defined the symbol in different ways. I propose therefore to pursue my investigation by focusing on different significations of the symbol that Ricœur adopted in his earlier work in order to interpret the ways in which symbols, as deployed by collective memory, forge the ties of social cohesion. In

accompanying Ricœur along his path of reflection, I aim in this manner to suggest a way out of the dilemma his theory of collective memory encounters in its role of configuring intersubjective cohesion. By way of this analysis I will return to the theme of laceration and discontinuity over time that is a principal concern of his work as a whole.

II.

Let us turn to a closer examination of the concept of the *symbol* itself, which takes on different meanings both in the Western tradition and in the different periods of Ricœur's *œuvre*.⁵ I will limit my analysis to two articulations of the concept that correspond to Ricœur's principal concerns. The first articulation relates to the broad sense of the term symbol, associated with the original Greek term *sumbalein*: throw together, fuse, gather up, compare. According to this meaning, one thing may stand for another, like a token, a colored slip of paper, a word, which designates something other than itself. In the work of Aristotle, above all in book I of *De Interpretatione*, the philosopher equated language with a symbolic expression.⁶ Following a long and complex historical development of this broad conception of the symbol, Goethe revived it in the modern period. In the 20th century, it has been above all associated with the work of Ernst Cassirer, who reformulated it in his philosophy of symbolic forms in the 1920s. Here it took on its broadest sense, which is of particular interest for Ricœur and for our present inquiry. According to Cassirer, the function of the symbol, beyond that of a sign or signal, is to configure reality as such. Time, space, number, and conceptual logic in general, far from uniform structures, pattern experience in different ways, in accord with the symbolic domains in which they are deployed. Language is the primary symbolic form for Cassirer, but myth, religion, art, and science are among the other symbolic forms through which reality is made intelligible. According to this conception, space and time, the concepts of number and cause fulfill different symbolic functions in the domains of myth, religion, art, or science; in changing according to their field of application, they account for a variety of possibilities of configuration of the intersubjective realm.

The second conception of the symbol is more narrow. It is closely tied to the Christian tradition, in which the symbol refers to a superior realm which cannot be grasped in the domain of sensuous apprehension. Thus the lamb represents Christ who sacrifices Himself for humankind; the goldfinch, for a long oral and iconographic tradition since the Middle Ages, represents Christ's resurrection. These are symbols that evoke the idea of transcendence beyond the sensuous world. In the modern period, Immanuel Kant adopted this definition of the symbol in § 59 of the *Critique of Judgment* where he defined it as a representation of what cannot be presented in direct sensuous intuition. Here he referred not only to religious symbolism, but to emblematic signs of what could not be made visible as objects of sense experience: a unified body and soul that represent monarchy which governs in accord with established laws, or a machine, such as a windmill, to stand for despotism.⁷

Ricœur's early work, notably in his book *The Symbolism of Evil* (*La symbolique du mal*) initially developed his concept of the symbol in the perspective Christian theology. Later works such as *Freud and Philosophy* (*De l'interprétation, essai sur Freud*, 1965), reiterated this perspective in the framework of what Paul Ricœur termed a "phenomenology of religion." At the beginning of his work *Freud and Philosophy*, Ricœur took Cassirer's concept of the symbol, as elaborated in *The*

Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, sharply to task for “unifying all of the functions of mediation under the title of ‘the symbolic’,” thus making this concept “as broad as reality and culture.”⁸ This conception of the symbol was to his eyes far too broad to serve the purpose of hermeneutic philosophy. Against this definition Ricœur interpreted the symbolic function to be indirect in “that it means something other than what is said,” thus requiring the act of deciphering.⁹ This, indeed, leaves room for a specific designation of the kind of meaning that is not directly presented in sense experience, but which, in lying outside its limits, requires the interpretative task that has traditionally been the province of hermeneutics.¹⁰

Eighteen years later, in the first volume of *Time and Narrative*, Ricœur’s perspective shifted. Without mentioning his earlier critique of Ernst Cassirer’s philosophy developed in *Freud and Philosophy*, Ricœur referred directly to his theory of symbolic forms and wrote:

[...] I have opted for [a use] close to that of Cassirer, in his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, inasmuch as, for him, symbolic forms are cultural processes that articulate experience as a whole. If I speak more precisely of symbolic mediation, it is to distinguish, among symbols of a cultural nature, the ones that underlie action and that constitute its first signification, before autonomous symbolic wholes dependent upon speaking or writing become detached from the practical level. In this sense we might speak of an implicit or immanent symbolism, in opposition to an explicit or autonomous one.¹¹

This notion of “symbolic mediation” is of particular interest for our present investigation since it reintroduces the theory of the symbol as a source of intersubjective cohesion which I will now elucidate more closely. In this same passage in which he dealt with Cassirer, Paul Ricœur also referred to the theory of the symbol elaborated by the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz in his book *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Although he underscored the similarity of their approaches to the symbol as a general cultural phenomenon, he did not allude to the fact that Geertz, in spite of the central role he accorded to the symbol in the field of culture, questioned the *constitutive* role that Cassirer ascribed to the symbolic form as a source of all human experience.¹² Nonetheless, what is of particular importance for my discussion is the manner in which Ricœur, at a decisive moment in the development of his thought, drew on the perspective of Ernst Cassirer. It is unfortunate that he never elaborated on this interpretation in his later work. Moreover, if in *La mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli* he briefly evoked the theory of the symbol deployed in the anthropology of Clifford Geertz, he did not relate this topic specifically to the theory of collective memory.¹³

III.

After accompanying Ricœur up until this point, I would like to elucidate the way in which a broader interpretation of the symbol, in accord with his interpretation in the first volume of *Temps et récit*, permits us to more clearly identify the problem of social cohesion that to my mind Ricœur was not able to resolve. Much like Ricœur, my own theoretical engagement with collective memory has led me to renounce any claim to an absolute foundation in pure subjectivity bequeathed by the tradition of transcendental idealism. Moreover, I will leave aside the question concerning the role of symbolic forms as a mode of constitution of all reality as such. My concern lies rather in the possibility of the collective *communicability* of experience: the configuration of the public sphere

through embodied symbols, which draw on experience sedimented in the deep levels of collective memory.

As I interpret it, the possibility of communicating with others, and even with oneself, presupposes the prior existence of symbols forming a network of interwoven significations which individuals, since early childhood, appropriate and share with others through language, gesture, or style. When placed in this perspective, symbolic significations are not simple tools or instruments, but they establish the *sphere* of the communicable that awareness of self and of others assumes. As a symbolic network that is deployed in a multitude of stratifications, they concern not only individuals or smaller groups but, at the most general level, vast collectivities. Here we encounter a precondition of all intersubjective experience which has an extra-individual and meta-personal scope. These symbolic networks, far from being monolithic structures, are fragmented according to the perspective of the group that interprets them.

It is through the cohesion and continuity of these intertwined symbolic networks that the past and the present are joined together in a horizon of experience and remembrance that is turned toward the future, shared by contemporary generations of different ages whose life spans overlap. In this framework, it is not simply a question of *explicit* experience and remembrance, but also of the implicit levels drawing on multiple reservoirs of signification that are the latent sources of interpretation deployed among vast collectivities. Beyond acts of remembrance that are mobilized during commemorations or in museum displays, I refer here to a more general possibility of tacit communication that arises from *passive* levels underlying experience. These passive networks are concrete preconditions of group existence in a shared world.

Be this as it may, if these passive networks are usually not an object of direct reflection, they may be brought to awareness and, in a certain measure transformed, for example by the *active* choice of habits and conventional practices, and the development of understanding, aptitudes and capabilities. Here we are by no means threatened by absorption in a social atmosphere, according to the critique Ricœur directed against Halbwachs, which, in imperceptibly acting on individuals, would reduce personal identity to a function of the group of a given social milieu.

IV.

The interpretation of collective memory elaborated thus far permits us to set on a new foundation insight not only into the continuity between past and present in the framework of group existence; it also allows us to place in a different light the topic of *discontinuity* between group remembrance and the historical past that played such a prominent role in Ricœur's work, as illustrated by the image of the sculpture of Clio and Chronos that he placed on the cover of *Memory, History, and Forgetting* to which I referred in the opening paragraphs of the present talk.

Here, indeed, we reach the decisive point, revealing the deeper sources of laceration, break, and discontinuity, according to the terms used by Paul Ricœur. As Halbwachs appreciated in his book *La mémoire collective*, the vivacity of collective memory depends above all on shared experience that is remembered by living generations, which Ricœur, in referring to Halbwachs in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, termed "transgenerational memory" (*la mémoire transgénérationnelle*).¹⁴ Ricœur himself, in characterizing the break between collective memory and history referred to what he aptly characterized in terms of the "uncanny strangeness of

history" ("inquiétante étrangeté de l'histoire").¹⁵ On the basis of my interpretation of the symbol and of the multiple symbolic stratifications that interweave the threads of collective memory, my aim is to account for and reinforce this qualification of discontinuity through investigation of the symbolic basis of the radical distinction that Ricœur, following Halbwachs, established between collective memory and the historical past.

If collective remembrance of the past is always fragmented in accord with a plurality of different group perspectives, public communication depends upon a web of spontaneously graspable symbols that defines the contours of group contemporaneity shared by overlapping, living generations in its discontinuity with the historical past beyond living memory. This discontinuity is not simply a consequence of the demise of single individuals and groups, for the disappearance of living generations signals the evanescence of the concrete context in which their symbolic interaction transpired. Following the disappearance of this theater of group interaction, the legibility of the symbolic structures embedded in it begins to weaken. Even where the broad intelligibility of general linguistic and other symbolic categories is retained over centuries, the more specific nuances groups invest in them, constituting the living context and intrinsic sense of their co-existence, are subject to remarkable, if often barely palpable variability, as collective memory recedes into the historical past. In a situation of radical discontinuity, the passage of each successive generation marks a drift in the symbolic framework of communication and interaction. Such an abrupt change in context, calling forth mostly imperceptible displacements of its passive recesses, casts in its wake a deepening shroud over the essential significance of the symbolic patterns that constitute the past's singular texture. Without the aid of careful historical reconstruction, even the most vibrant imagination deployed by individuals or by groups is too dependent on the symbolic web that links together contemporaneous generations to be able to lift the veil shrouding the distant past lying beyond the reach of collective memory.

Discontinuity in the shared context of remembrance marks the *finitude* of living groups. Beyond the finite existence of mortal individuals, group awareness is subject to a specific kind of finitude set in relief by the limited reach of group remembrance beyond the horizon of recall of living generations. The finite temporal scope of this context comes to light in the collective inability, by virtue of any specific capacity of *memory*, to penetrate the remote depths of the historical past. This may be achieved to a very limited extent through historical reconstruction in which memory in its proper sense plays only an indirect role.

Beyond historical continuities that are presumed to retain the essential significance of past experience, this concept of collective memory highlights an incommensurable diversity of temporal contexts that underlie the historicity of human existence. As the nuances of contextual divergence fade from living memory, subtle metamorphoses in the symbolic underpinnings of group experience flowing from its passive reaches are no longer recalled to group awareness. The more fully the contours of contextual divergence between past and present are forgotten, the more readily nuances are effaced that distinguish collective memory from the historical past.

In conclusion, I will elucidate this theory by means of two brief examples. The first concerns Paul Ricœur's illustration from the Wiblingen Abbey, "History and the Winged God Chronos," that I referred to at the outset of my analysis. As noted, he chose this figure to adorn the cover of *Memory, History, and Forgetting* in order to symbolize his concept of the break in historical time and the attempt to prevent its loss by the muse of history. As a symbolic representation, this

choice is in itself indicative, for Ricœur focused on what would seem to be readily decipherable symbols, since the ancient God Chronos and the muse Clio are emblems that, in spite of their antiquity, have retained their metaphorical sense over the course of the ages. In their familiarity they would seem, indeed, to require little interpretation, even if to account for their original significance, the presence of pagan symbols in a German church indicates a complexity of contextual nuance of the baroque perspective that surrounds the initial creation and appreciation of art in this period. Here the more radical problem of discontinuity begins to make its appearance and this serves to illustrate the point I made earlier that the more specific nuances groups invest in symbols, constituting the living context of their co-existence, are subject to important, if often barely discernible transformation as collective memory recedes into history.

Following the victory of Napoleon Bonaparte at Austerlitz and the Peace of Pressburg in 1806, the Wiblingen Abbey was secularized. Its monks were dispersed and the edifice was converted into a castle.¹⁶ In this context, the radicalism of the historical break introduced by the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Empire brings to the fore more opaque aspects of the transformation of the symbolic universe that transpires with the passage of the horizon of living generations into the historical past. One further example will suffice to illustrate this idea.

In the first year of the 19th century, during a period of intense warfare with England and its allies, Napoleon Bonaparte, who was then First Consul of France, placed an order for a painting from the contemporary artist Anne-Louis Girodet-Trioson to adorn the walls of his residence in Malmaison, near Paris. This painting, "The Apotheosis of the French heroes who died for their country during the War of Liberty" (1802), portrayed three French generals, Louis Charles Antoine Desaix, Jean-Baptiste Kléber and François Séverin Marceau, who had been killed in recent battles, and are subsequently received in the afterworld by the Gaelic bard Ossian and the hero Fingal. This illustration evokes Ossian, the narrator of the poems supposedly transcribed by James Macpherson and published in 1762, which created a decades long literary and artistic fashion on a European scale that sparked Napoleon Bonaparte's ardent enthusiasm. In the painting, the realm of Ossian and of the hero Fingal replaces the traditional Christian symbols of apotheosis, providing a particularly suggestive motif that, following the restoration of the European order in 1815, completely lost its earlier symbolic power. This loss – corresponding to the dampening of Romantic enthusiasm for Gaelic mythology – illustrates the finite quality of contexts of experience and remembrance, translated in the symbolic terms of style, attitude and taste that comes to light with a particular clarity in times of sudden and fundamental transition. It illustrates the rapidity with which, after a few generations, the public intelligibility of signs, images and monuments is subject to transformation. What changes is not simply the sense of isolated symbols, but a whole context of experience that is symbolically articulated by collective memory. Here, on the basis of transformations to which symbolic configurations in the intersubjective realm are subject, we may complement Ricœur's insight into discontinuity by insisting on the role that critical awareness of it leads us to adopt: it incites us above all to underscore the risk involved where an illusory continuity is imposed upon a remote past leading us to discount the radicalism of the break with the past and with its symbolic configurations. Here the avowal of the "uncanny strangeness" of the past, in accord with Ricœur's apt phrase, must lead us to reinforce our vigilance in regard to the tendency to overlay the past with meanings projected on it from our present vantage point, engendering blindness to its original symbolic relief.

If the fundamental distinction that I have drawn between collective memory and history has an essentially theoretical aim, it also has an ethical scope. Its ethical intention, which intends to marshal, fortify, and deepen Ricœur's fruitful concept of the "uncanny strangeness" of the past, is inspired by the conviction concerning the elusiveness and, indeed, the opacity of those strata of group existence that reach into the passive layers of symbolic configuration. This consideration places in a dubious light facile presuppositions concerning long-term group continuity, allegedly forged by memory, that have become a contemporary rallying point for extremist political ideologies. From the works of Maurice Barrès, the late 19th century French novelist and nationalist prophet, up to the pronouncements of more recent proponents of nationalist extremism, the discourse of collective memory has been marshaled to attest an alleged homogeneity of national groups whose shared ethnic virtues are taken to constitute the durable matrix of national unity.¹⁷ Against this attitude, the theory of collective memory, in highlighting the discontinuity between generations and the finite reach of group remembrance, reveals its eminently critical vocation.

- ¹ Paul Ricœur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2000), 514; English translation, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, translated by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2004), 394-5.
- ² Ricœur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, 150-1; English translation, 123.
- ³ Ricœur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, 159-60; English translation, 130.
- ⁴ Ricœur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, 145; English translation, 119.
- ⁵ For a more detailed analysis of this theme see my article: "Was ist ein Symbol? Bemerkungen über Paul Ricœurs kritische Stellungnahme zum Symbolbegriff bei Ernst Cassirer," *Hermeneutik der Literatur. Internationales Jahrbuch für Hermeneutik*, vol. 6, ed. G. Figal (Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 259-74.
- ⁶ Aristotle, *De Interpretatione*, 16 a-b, *Works*, trad. E. M. Edghill, ed. W. D. Ross (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1926).
- ⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, § 59 (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000), 226-7.
- ⁸ Paul Ricœur, *De l'interprétation, essai sur Freud* (Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1965), 21; English translation, *Freud and Philosophy*, translated by Dennis Savage (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1970), 11.
- ⁹ Ricœur, *De l'interprétation, essai sur Freud*, 21; English translation, 11.
- ¹⁰ Ricœur, *De l'interprétation, essai sur Freud*, 21-3; English translation, 11-3.
- ¹¹ Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit*, vol. 1 (Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1983), 9; English translation, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, translated by Kathleen McLaughlin & David Pellauer (Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1984), 57, translation modified.
- ¹² Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, Basic Books, 1973), 92.
- ¹³ See in this regard my critical remarks concerning *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* of Paul Ricœur in my book *Collective Memory and the Historical Past* (Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2016), 71-7.
- ¹⁴ Ricœur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, 513-4; English translation, 393.
- ¹⁵ Ricœur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, 512; English translation, 394.
- ¹⁶ Michael Braig, *Kurze Geschichte der ehemaligen vorderösterreichischen Benediktiner-Abtei Wiblingen in Schwaben* (Osni, Rauch, 1834), 369-78.
- ¹⁷ See in this regard the argument concerning what I term the "ideology of the ethos" in chapter four of my recent book *Collective Memory and the Historical Past*, 87-113.