

Introduction

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Introduction

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The past decades have witnessed an astonishing growth in interest in the phenomenon of memory, conceived not only as a faculty for recalling past experience, but also as a source of personal identity and of the identity of groups. The preoccupation with memory, and above all with the role of “collective memory” as a source of group identity, which concerns the natural and human sciences as well as the humanities, has indeed assumed global proportions. At the same time, the intensity of interest in this phenomenon may well appear to be paradoxical: whereas the term “collective memory” and the concept to which it corresponds are relatively recent, the social function it fulfills is as old as human communities themselves and the symbolic interaction in which they engage.

This raises the question concerning the reasons for the great impact of this concept in the contemporary world. And, if we examine more closely the important efforts that have been expended toward clarifying the phenomenon of collective memory since Maurice Halbwachs first introduced this term, we perceive that its meaning corresponds closely to the role of memory as a human faculty that makes possible not only remembrance of the past but at the same time the *cohesion* of human societies. This role has assumed an ever greater importance since the collapse of the theoretical systems that were traditionally invoked to account for the cohesion of the human social world, notably the great metaphysical systems and, following their demise, the different philosophies of history and the ideological projects they inspired.

Among contemporary theorists, the philosophical work of Paul Ricœur has made a particularly fruitful contribution to the analysis of the role of memory in its different functions: as a source of remembrance of the past, of personal identity and of social cohesion. Beginning notably with his work *Oneself as Another* (*Soi-même comme un autre*, Paris, 1990), Ricœur directed his reflection toward the social role of memory, which presented for him not only a theoretical tool, but a source of practical judgment in the political realm. It is this latter role of memory that he emphasized in view of what he aptly described to be an important crisis of legitimation that a situation of plurality and fragmentation in our contemporary mass societies has brought to the fore. In a perspective that Ricœur began to elaborate in *Oneself as Another*, a response to this crisis depends upon understanding of the fundamental role of remembrance of the past in the configuration of a plurality of group identities. As he wrote in this book:

There is nothing better to offer, in reply to the legitimation crisis [...] than the memory and the intersection in the public space of the appearance of the traditions that make room for tolerance and pluralism, not out of concessions to external pressures, but out of inner conviction, even if this is late in coming. It is by calling to mind all of the beginnings and all the rebeginnings, and all the traditions that have been sedimented upon them, that “good counsel” can take up the challenge of the legitimation crisis.¹

Over the course of the decade that followed the publication of this work, as numerous articles and lectures attest, Ricœur's reflection on memory moved to the center of his philosophical concern. The book *Memory, History, Forgetting* brought to light the fruits of this inquiry. In this work he extended his reflection to encompass investigation of the epistemological and ontological status of the remembered past. This led him to examine the different interwoven functions of memory that he extended to encompass the socio-political role of collective memory and its relation to history.

The articles that comprise this issue of *Études ricœuriennes/Ricœur Studies* aim to explore and critically analyze the topic of memory in the perspective that Ricœur elaborated, involving its role as a source of recall of past experience, of personal identity and of collective cohesion. We are particularly pleased to begin this issue with the study elaborated by Professor Bernhard Waldenfels (and translated by Audran Aulanier) who, in the perspective of his own impressive philosophical oeuvre, critically examines Ricœur's philosophy of memory. Over the past decades, Professor Waldenfels's writings have explored the phenomenological implications of alterity and foreignness and, as he notes in his article, this perspective has brought him to participate in the debates that Ricœur engaged with Levinas. This point of view guides the analysis he proposes of Ricœur's philosophy of memory in the article included here, "Raconter, se souvenir et oublier," in which the accent is placed on the role of "pathos" and of the temporal and corporeal preconditions of remembering through which forgetting, beyond a simple incapacity, brings to the fore a strangeness within identity. Waldenfels's analysis in this article is by no means limited to a phenomenology of memory and of personal identity, but reaches out to encompass the collective sphere.

In a different perspective, Beatriz Contreras Tasso focuses on the problem that the conditions of passivity and corporeity raise for a philosophy of memory. Memory, as she emphasizes, in drawing on Ricœur's interpretation, is first and foremost inscribed in the body as the locus of sentiment that is marked by the passage of time, as by involuntary processes that reach beyond the threshold of awareness. Memory, as she interprets it, extends from a diversity of pre-personal and personal capacities to encompass the intersubjective realm structured by language. In drawing on Ricœur, she provides examples to illustrate the role of remembered experience as a source of the fragility of personal identity. She highlights the function of narrative in bringing to awareness this fragility in the framework of intersubjective relations in a shared world. Jeanne Marie Gagnebin's article raises the question concerning the reasons for Ricœur's preoccupation with memory in his later works. She concludes that it was an important aspect of his broader concern for political themes, above all in regard to the "ethics of citizenship." Here she engages a close scrutiny of the problem that Ricœur identified, in accord with the critical analyses of Pierre Nora, of an exaggerated focus on memory in the collective sphere, above all where commemorations serve as vehicles of collective interests in the present more than as expression of concern for the past itself. This suggests the problem of establishing what Ricœur termed a "just memory," an equilibrium founded on remembrance of the past as a source of continuity and collective stability that avoids an excessive preoccupation with the past which poses a threat to serenity and the peaceful coexistence in the present. Here Jeanne Marie Gagnebin provides an insightful investigation of the central importance of Freud's theories for Ricœur's conception of memory and of its collective significance. Francesca D'Alessandris pursues the topic of Ricœur's conception of collective memory. She seeks to clarify it in light of an original perspective: the

spatiality of public memory that is embodied in works of architecture. Through a careful examination of Ricœur's reflection on the topic of architecture and cultural heritage, she interprets his notion of the spatial habitat as an inscription in public memory that opens the way to his multifaceted conception in *Memory, History, Forgetting* of the spatial mediations between personal and collective memory as between memory and history.

The contribution of Rudolf Boutet centers on personal memory in relation to narrative and raises the intriguing question why Ricœur, who has written so extensively on the topic of narrative, devotes so little space in *Memory, History, Forgetting* to the narrative ramifications of memory. After suggesting that Ricœur's preoccupation with memory concerns above all its relation to *images* more than to narrative, he proposes to extrapolate from Ricœur's reflection on memory to examine the significance of its interrelation with narrative. This article is followed by Anaïd Mouratian's investigation of a level of remembrance to which Ricœur accorded particular importance: the remembrance of relatives and of those with whom we are close as it mediates between individual and collective memory. In interpreting Ricœur's thought she illustrates the role of reminiscence of relatives and close relations as a primary and particularly vivid source of group memory and recognition.

My own article takes as its starting point the theme of historical discontinuity and of Ricœur's reflection on it in *Memory, History, Forgetting*. My aim is to complement his highly suggestive remarks through an analysis of the theme of symbols and symbolic interaction which his interpretation of collective memory surprisingly neglects. According to my interpretation, the symbols that are spontaneously recognizable where they are retained in the collective memory of contemporaneous generations, stand at the basis of historical discontinuity where they subtly change their meaning or even lose their intelligibility as the context of living contemporaneous generations fades into the historical past beyond its reach. Following this analysis, Suzi Adams's article centers on a topic that has generally been overlooked in interpretations of Ricœur's theory of memory. She points out that Ricœur, early on in his work, manifested interest in the concept of "cultural memory." He then paradoxically abandoned this theme in later writings that were specifically devoted to the theme of memory. In her lively discussion she proposes to retrieve this early reflection on cultural memory in relating it to the topic of the social imaginary in light of the concept of cultural memory elaborated by Aleida and Jan Assmann.

The contribution offered by the different articles comprising this issue lies in the different ways in which they investigate the ethical, epistemological, and ontological dimensions of the philosophy of memory in the perspective that inspired Ricœur's own investigations. They pinpoint the profound difficulties that a philosophy of memory involves, in view of the complexity of its different levels of articulation, extending from the configuration of personal identity to that of the relation between personal and collective memory, above all in a mass social framework. We hope that this issue will open the way toward further reflection on the profound questions on this theme that Paul Ricœur's philosophy brought to light.

- ¹ Paul Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre* (Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1990), 304; English translation, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992), 261.