A Note on Ricœur's Early Notion of Cultural Memory

Suzi Adams

Flinders University, Australia

Abstract

This essay considers Paul Ricœur's early notion of *cultural memory* from 1956-1960. He discusses it in two texts: "What does Humanism Mean?" and the slightly later *The Symbolism of Evil*. In the former, cultural memory appears as an ongoing and dynamic process of retroaction focussed on questioning and rethinking the meaning of classical antiquity for contemporary worlds, on the one hand, that is linked to an important critical aspect as a counterweight to the flattening effects of modernity, on the other. In the latter, cultural memory expands the reach of the classical heritage, and, in addition to retroaction, further modes of orientation, such as relations of depth and breadth, are delineated. At first glance, cultural memory, in Ricœur's sense, appears to be embodied in the singular, albeit generalized self. Yet, in reconstructing its meaning, the essay argues that Ricœur's articulation of cultural memory relies on an implicit collective dimension. The present essay's hermeneutic reconstruction of Ricœur's notion of cultural memory comprises a preliminary step of a broader project that aims to rearticulate Jan and Aleida Assmann's *cultural memory* framework along social imaginary lines. In this vein, the essay concludes with an overview of the Assmannian approach to cultural memory and considers possible bridges between Ricœur and the Assmanns.

Keywords: Paul Ricœur, Jan and Aleida Assmann, Cultural Memory, Social Imaginaries, Collective Memory, Cultures and Civilizations, Social Theory, Sociology.

Résumé

Cet essai porte sur la notion de *mémoire culturelle* dans les écrits de jeunesse de Ricœur datant de 1956-1960. Le philosophe aborde cette question dans deux textes: "Que signifie 'humanisme'?" et *La symbolique du mal* qui est légèrement postérieure. Dans le premier texte, la mémoire culturelle apparaît comme un processus dynamique et continu de rétroaction qui, d'un côté, est voué à questionner et à repenser le sens de l'antiquité classique pour les mondes contemporains et, de l'autre, joue un rôle critique important comme contrepoids aux effets aplatissant de la modernité. Dans le second texte, la mémoire culturelle est considérée comme une extension de la portée de l'héritage classique et, outre la rétroaction, d'autres modes d'orientation comme la profondeur et l'étendue se trouvent définis. À première vue, la mémoire culturelle, au sens où l'entend Ricœur, semble s'incarner dans un soi singulier bien que généralisé. Cependant, en reconstruisant sa signification, cet essai défend l'idée selon laquelle la conception ricœurienne de la mémoire culturelle repose sur une dimension collective implicite. La présente tentative de reconstruction herméneutique de la notion ricœurienne de mémoire culturelle constitue une étape préalable pour un projet plus large visant à repenser la conception de la *mémoire culturelle* de Jan et Aleida Assmann dans la perspective de l'imaginaire social.

Suzi Adams

Dans cette veine, cet essai se conclut par un aperçu de l'approche assmannienne de la mémoire culturelle et envisage des ponts possibles entre Ricœur et les Assmann.

Mots-clés: Paul Ricœur, Jan et Aleida Assmann, mémoire culturelle, imaginaires sociaux, mémoire collective, cultures et civilisations, théorie sociale, sociologie.

A Note on Ricœur's Early Notion of Cultural Memory

Suzi Adams

Flinders University, Australia

Paul Ricœur's magisterial work, *Memory, History, Forgetting* was published on the cusp of the appearance of memory studies as an (inter)disciplinary field in its own right.[1] Therein, Ricœur argued the case for the political and moral imperative of remembrance. His quest to articulate the "just allotment of memory" animated the sense of a "civic duty of justice" that permeates the book.[2] The interpretative framework that Ricœur develops sought to mediate individual and collective approaches to memory and was meant to encompass nations, political communities, and other macro-constellations that can be broadly categorized as "society." Despite the scope of *Memory, History and Forgetting*, however, Ricœur did not address collective memory as *cultural memory* as articulated in Jan and Aleida Assmann's influential accounts. The Assmanns cast cultural memory as a variety of collective memory that is *embedded* in social frames not *embodied* in human minds. Its sociality is irreducible to interaction and intersubjectivity. It is, however, not unsurprising that Ricœur did not take up the Assmanns' work on cultural memory. Ricœur's abiding interest in the self in his/her living and concrete historical conditions, on the one hand, and anathema to anonymous and objectified human forms as alienating, on the other, mitigated against any such engagement and led him to pursue an understanding of the social domain on the basis of intersubjectivity.[3] Yet, if, as is the overarching argument of this research program, the Assmannian framework for cultural memory incorporates a latent turn towards social imaginaries, then dialogue between the Assmanns and Ricœur becomes vital. Given that Ricœur has himself utilized the notion of cultural memory, a preliminary step of any such a dialogue would be to reconstruct its meaning in Ricœur's work, as well as any potential bridges to the Assmannian version. Ricœur's notion of cultural memory was not an enduring or systematic concept. It appeared in his thought from 1956-1960, however, he only discussed it in two texts: "What does Humanism Mean?," first published in 1956, and *The Symbolism of Evil,* first published a handful of years later in 1960. In exploring the meaning of cultural memory for Ricœur's thought, the present essay is organized around four sections. The first hermeneutically reconstructs Ricœur's early notion of "cultural memory" as found in "What does Humanism Mean?," whilst the second section focuses on *The Symbolism of Evil*. The third part presents an overview of the Assmannian account of cultural memory, and the final provisionally considers Ricœur's notion of cultural memory in relation to the Assmannian one. Despite appearances to the contrary, Ricœur's articulation of cultural memory must be understood as a varietal of collective memory.

Cultural Memory: The Meaning of Humanism

Ricœur's usage of the term "cultural memory" first appears in the early essay, "What does Humanism Mean?" and then less than a handful of years later in *The Symbolism of Evil*.[4] The latter usage builds on the former but there are some interesting contextual differences, as we shall see.

In the earlier essay on humanism, the discussion of cultural memory takes place within the context of debates on the "politics of culture" where Ricœur seeks to vindicate the importance of a liberal politics of humanist culture and to understand its role and place within modernity. For him, the work of cultural memory safeguards a shared ancient heritage through ongoing renewals, but he further emphasises its *poetic* and *critical* roles as part of a culture of leisure in the face of the modern human condition as strikingly utilitarian, consumerist, and technological. In contrast, Ricœur argues that the meaning of humanism is found in a philosophy of limits and the non-knowledge of belief as a critique of the modern preoccupation with absolute knowledge, in which cultural memory plays an important part. But for Ricœur, sorting through the implications is impossible without work at the level of *meaning* that distils living and true meanings from "superficial significations and dead pretensions."[5]

As a first step, Ricœur organizes his search for the meaning of humanism into a more modest account of humanism in the university, and then the broader understanding within the "cultural life of a people." Cultural memory arises in the former context. In the first instance, he links cultural memory to a narrow definition of the humanities as scholarly reflections on the west's ancient Graeco-Latin heritage (after which the next step would be to connect humanism to the cultural life of a collective, more generally). He explains that

> [i]f our attachment to the ancient heritage of our culture is to be anything other than a simple prejudice, it is necessary that we find again the very meaning of our whole "heritage," which is the function of every cultural "memory," in a humanism and an élan of humanity more profound than simply respect for the past.[6]

The work of cultural memory is thus understood as a central aspect of the ongoing problematization of the meaning of heritage, in general, and to articulating – and rearticulating – the meaning of western classical heritage for each contemporary world, a relationship that is irreducible to prejudice or to an insipid respect. This suggests a dynamism and perpetual activity of the task of cultural memory. Cultural memory is central to humanism in the narrow sense as a "resistance to forgetfulness" of the cultural past. Ricœur compares this to the "modern humanities" with its focus on the "present" that disengages the contemporary world from its past. But as a preservation of ancient heritage, he is also careful to note that it is not an invitation to an "irrational piety." Ricœur locates the rationale for such resistance in the function of memory itself. Memory is a requirement of a self in order to exist; cultural memory needs a living tradition and serves as a point of anchorage in a "tide of contradictory influences."[7] He rejects the notion that memory is a passive preservation. Rather, ancient heritage survives through renewal and renaissances, not as a "sterile repetition": "To imitate the ancients is to do as they did, that is, to create a civilization."[8] Thus the meaning of humanism is to take up the challenge of the reactivation of the past as a creative interpretation in order to shape civilizations both now and into the future.

Ricœur then turns to contrast humanism (as the humanities) as disinterested culture as a response to modernity. Here modernity is understood as a technological civilization with an overwhelming emphasis on work and technical activities.[9] But humanism is not only culture but the *élan of humanity* whose values crystallize in customs and political activity as an "open direction of this civilization."[10] In this vein,

the man of culture recaptures these values "crystallized" in the mish-mash of collective conduct. It is this "renewal" which gives a reasonable content to the belief in the proper efficaciousness of the cultural act in which we have recognized the meaning of humanism.[11]

Ricœur concludes that "heritage only survives through renewal" as the rekindling of "certain values embodied in the works and the conduct of Greek and Roman man."[12]

Renewal – that is, *the work of cultural memory* – consists in a *critical* and *poetic* aspect. Overlapping with Ricœur's understanding of humanism more broadly, the work of cultural memory as renewal incorporates a practice of lucidity and reflection; the humanist participates in "protest and denunciation" of "pseudo"-civilizations.[13] Thus, cultural memory as the safeguarding of ancient heritage is the inverse of humanism as a "present cultural invention" where the critical and poetic aspects work in tandem.

Ricœur distinguishes between the humanist project and the exercise of political power, but precisely because of this, the humanist works at the deeper level of "representations and guiding images which orient a civilization toward well-being or toward force, toward stagnation or expansion, toward a particular conception of education, or toward a particular 'system' of relations between the economic, the social, the political, and the cultural." In this way, the poetic aspects the "opens up the horizon of possibilities."[14]

Thus, humanist activity – the work of renewal – makes possible a new kind of anthropic being, but without directing it in a calculating or teleological sense; that is, without conscious intention.[15]

Cultural Memory: The Symbolism of Evil

Let us turn to consider Ricœur's notion of cultural memory as it appears a few years later in *The Symbolism of Evil*. Therein, Ricœur aims to articulate a general theory of symbols through investigation into the concrete symbol of evil. He builds on the earlier articulation of cultural memory (from the Humanism essay) in the "Introduction" ("The Phenomenology of Confession") to *The Symbolism of Evil*. There he enquires into the relation between hermeneutics and reflection; or, put another way, he asks how to make the revelatory aspect of a hermeneutics of symbols amenable to the rationality of philosophical thought. His outline of the notion of cultural memory occurs in this context. Let us look at this portion of the text more closely.

In a preparatory step, Ricœur argues that symbols comprise a more primeval experience and infrastructure of myth. In this vein, "the confession of sins" provides myth (specifically, the myth of the Biblical Fall) with a substratum of experience that is not directly accessible; it appears via symbolic language. Symbols are thus crucial within the hermeneutic circle of confession, myth, and speculation. Ricœur enquires how philosophical reflection (as a rational endeavour) might be integrated into a phenomenology of confession through consideration of myth. His provisional response is articulated via his now famous maxim: *symbols give rise to* [or: *invite*] *thought*. What he means is that the encounter with symbols that are already there in the fullness of meaning, rather than as a starting point (*à la* Descartes or Husserl), "gives us something to think about."[16] He explains that the symbol "wants to be thought not presuppositionless, but in and with all its presuppositions. Its first problem is not how to get started, but, from the midst of speech, to

recollect itself."[17] Ricœur moves to consider the philosophical significance of the "re-enactment of confession, carried out at all its levels of symbolization."[18] This first step does not provide a fully-fledged philosophy of fault but a preparatory descriptive phenomenology. Whilst Ricœur considers myth to be already logos, this does not mean that mythos can be straightforwardly or automatically taken up philosophically; instead, further work is first required.

Consideration is then given to the philosophical terrain proper, which will, in turn, lead to the phenomenon of cultural memory. If the primordial stratum of experience is symbolic, then this, argues Ricœur, induces us to reflect on the radical and cultural contingency of philosophy itself. A few points are to be noted: philosophy cannot be conversant with all symbols the field of endeavour because it is situational, that is, it is "oriented" and hence also "limited" in scope. There are two sources of orientation: first, the philosopher's location in the cultural symbolic field, and, second, "the historical, geographical, cultural origin of the philosophical question itself."[19] It is the latter source of orientation that most interests us in considering cultural memory.

Ricœur focuses on the cultural origin of the western philosophical tradition. As an ancient Greek creation, Western philosophy's "pretentions of universality are 'situated'" and thus limited. He continues: "The philosopher does not speak from nowhere, but from the depths of his *Greek memory*." The original Greek question, borne by cultural memory on the tide of a living tradition orients the enquiry into the religions which are "open to philosophical investigation."[20] Put another way: philosophy intrinsically relies on its "cultural memory" of its positioning Greek question, which frames the paths of enquiry and shapes the space for bringing religious mythos into philosophical logos. This carries through to investigations of it religious "other." Although, in principle, all cultures could be incorporated into such an enquiry, cultural memory is structured by relations of "proximity" and "distance," of "near" and "far."[21] As such, some cultures (and the prefiguration of the possibility of religious experience) are more amenable than others to philosophical enquiry.[22] In this case, Ricœur argues, the historical "encounter" of Jerusalem and Athens comprises the basic "intersection that forms our culture." The double privileging of Jerusalem and Athens provides then the "'nearest' [socio-cultural-historical] origin" for the study of fault. Ricœur then notes the historical "privileged proximity" of Greek and Jewish cultures for "the structure of cultural memory," which constitute the "first stratum of our philosophical memory."[23] Although there is merit in understanding this passage as a reference to frameworks of religious hermeneutics of symbols and rational philosophical reflection that allow for a hermeneutic philosophy of the symbolism of evil, such as Ricœur was trying to develop, there are more macro-sociological consequences to unpack here as well; these have been taken up most recently in the recent historical sociological debates on comparative civilizational analysis and a rethinking of the Axial Age.

Other relational modes of orientation – depth, breadth, and retroaction – further configure the interplay between history and cultural memory. In brief, relations of depth refer to the "thickness" and transparency of present-day consciousness – Ricœur uses the pre-eminent example of "defilement" – that are at risk of being lost to oblivion. To gain access to this "sedimentation of our cultural memory," Ricœur argues in favour of drawing on historical records of civilizations outside of that memory – such as Africa, Asia, etc. – that is, ethnological sources as a diagnostic tool regarding the West's own past.[24] Concomitantly, relations of breadth also come into play. As an example, Ricœur argues that to understand Judaic civilization, it is necessary to

situate its "beliefs and institutions" within the context of its enduring encounter with the Middle East in both the creative interpretation of common sources, on the one hand, but also for its significant deviations from it, on the other. He tells us that "[t]he understanding of those likenesses and unlikenesses pertains henceforth to the proper understanding of the Hebrew source of our memory, so that the culture of the ancient Middle East itself belongs marginally to our memory."[25] So he sets up the historical encounter between Judaic/Christian culture and the ancient Greeks, that is, the encounter between religion and philosophy, as the West's historical and spiritual heritage, which in turn brings into play wider-reaching inter-civilizational encounters as formative aspects.

We can already see clear overlaps with Ricœur's earlier use of cultural memory: it is the philosopher (the humanist) whose cultural memory of antiquity is exercised. However, the inter-cultural – indeed, inter-civilizational – "encounter" of Jerusalem and Athens starts to signal an expanded understanding of cultural memory in Ricœur's thought. This widens the meaning of culture from a more restricted sense of the sphere of culture (as opposed to the sphere of, for example, economics), to implicitly include a broader, anthropological sense of culture as an open totality of the narratives, symbols, etc., of broader civilizations and/or political communities.[26]

Returning to the text, Ricœur pushes his argument further:

> More precisely, the *encounter* of the Jewish source with the Greek origin is the fundamental intersection that founds our culture. The Jewish source is the first "other" of philosophy, its "nearest" other; the abstractly contingent fact of that encounter is the very fate of our occidental existence. Since our existence begins with it, this encounter has become necessary in the sense that it is the presupposition of our undeniable reality.[27]

Thus Ricœur puts the inter-civilizational encounter between Athens and Jerusalem as the basis of the western world, as the conflict and creativity between the two sources, with the Judaic (religious) source the first "other" of (Greek) philosophy, its "'nearest' other," and as the central fundament of philosophical cultural memory.[28]

Ricœur then turns to the retroactive relation which shapes – and continually reshapes – relations of breadth and depth (retroaction is fundamentally an orientation toward *meaning*):

> Our cultural memory is unceasingly renewed retroactively by new discoveries, returns to the sources, reforms and renaissances that are much more than revivals of the past and constitute behind us what one might call a "neo-past." […] Thus, by retroaction from the successive "now," our past never stops changing its meaning; the present appropriation of the past modifies that which motivates us from the depths of the past.[29]

Ricœur singles out two forms of retroaction for especial mention as the "restoration of lost intermediaries and later suppression of distance." In relation to the former, the discovery of, for example, the Dead Sea Scrolls restores key transitions in the Judaeo-Christian past; the discoveries reconfigure the recognized tradition and illuminates obscure relations of depth as motivations, and thus allows new memories to emerge.

Ricœur utilises the term "retroaction" unsystematically throughout his trajectory. As we can see from his usage of it within both his iterations of cultural memory, it is tied to memory, history, and tradition. Interestingly, Ricœur employs the notion of retroaction in his radio dialogue

with Cornelius Castoriadis from the mid-1980s.[30] Their discussion was not focussed on cultural memory, but on the possibility of historical novelty, social imaginaries, and the meaning of human creation. The possibility for retroaction relies on the under-determined aspect of meaning and history, and for its potential for ever renewed reactivation, recreation and reinterpretation. Through retroaction, our past "never stops changing its meaning; the present appropriation of the past modifies that which motivates us from the depths of the past" – this is a "re-creation" of historical meaning through cultural memory.[31]

In *The Symbolism of Evil*, Ricœur broadened the scope of cultural memory to include a more specifically historical, macro-civilizational dimension that was based on inter-civilizational encounters in history. Inter-civilizational encounters with forms of "otherness," rather than a substantive identity, goes to the core of cultural memory. This phenomenological, relational account of cultural memory is enriched through an expanded articulation of modes of orientation, of which retroaction, in that it featured in his earlier discussion in the Humanism essay, takes on particular importance. Let us turn now to consider Jan and Aleida Assmann's later framework for articulating cultural memory.

Jan and Aleida Assmann's Concept of Cultural Memory

Jan and Aleida Assmann's decisive contribution to memory studies focuses on collective memory, in particular, on the phenomenon of "cultural memory."[32] Their approach to cultural memory is distinctive. On their account, cultural memory encompasses "that body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose 'cultivation' serves to stabilize and convey that society's self-image."[33] Unlike Maurice Halbwachs, for example, the Assmanns aim to bring three aspects – collective memory, culture, and society – into relation.

The Assmanns distinguish *cultural memory* from *communicative memory*. Communicative memory – the Assmanns' equivalent to Halbwachs's notion of *collective memory* of living generations – comprises the field of oral history. As a form of "everyday memory," it is characterized by disorganization, the exchange of roles (from listener to narrator and back), and it deals with the mundane aspects of social life (e.g. the telling of a joke or the relaying of gossip). It is intersubjective and constituted in dialogue with others, as well as socially mediated and relates to groups (e.g. families, professional groups) that have in common a mutual image of their past. For the Assmanns, the most important feature of communicative memory is its *limited temporal horizon*: it extends back for 80-100 years (i.e. three to four generations). Beyond that timespan, we enter the realm of cultural memory and objectivized culture that lies beyond informal, everyday memory. The Assmanns disagree with Halbwachs's view that, at the end point of communicative memory – that is, once the arena of objectivized culture has been entered – the character of collective memory is erased and transformed into history. They argue instead for the close link between groups and their identity that is very similar to that found in everyday memory. They refer to this as the *concretion of identity*.[34]

In this way, cultural memory forms the culturally institutionalized heritage of a society. It is "living communication crystallized in the forms of objectivized culture – whether in texts, images, rites, buildings, monuments, cities, or even landscapes."[35] It is characterized by its distance from – and transcendence of – the everyday. Aleida Assmann has discussed this in terms of the

relation between the (everyday) lifeworld and (objectivized) monuments.[36] Cultural memory has a fixed temporal horizon, and includes, for example, "fateful events" of the past whose memory is sustained through *figures of memory*, such as cultural formation and institutional communication. In the flux of everyday communication, such festivals, rites, etc., comprise *islands of time*: "islands of a completely different temporality suspended from time," which, in cultural memory, enlarge into memory spaces of *retrospective contemplativeness* and the stabilization of cultural memory.[37]

Where memory is characterized by a complex interweaving of remembering and forgetting, cultural memory is triadic not bipolar. It is configured by remembering, forgetting, and a latent *remembering-forgetting.* This third aspect includes the storage of information in libraries, museums, archives (etc.) which by far exceeds the capacities of human memories. As Aleida Assmann puts it, "[t]hese caches of information […] are neither actively remembered nor totally forgotten, because they remain materially accessible for possible use."[38]

Within the Assmanns' overall cultural memory framework, Aleida Assmann later distinguished between social memory, political memory, and cultural memory as varieties of collective memory (as objectivized memory). *Social memory* belongs to communicative memory and supports individual memory. It is the everyday memory of lived experience as embodied memories, defined by clear temporal limits, but can transcend a person's life span where several generations dwell together. *Political memory* is highly normative, homogenous and charged with emotional intensity whereas *cultural memory* is more heterogeneous in that it, for example, includes works of art that are intrinsically open to a great diversity of interpretations and that call for greater ongoing re-assessment. Importantly, Aleida Assmann argues that where political memory addresses a group, cultural memory addresses a group above all as individuals and individual forms of participation (such as writing, reading, criticizing, etc.) that is both trans-generational and trans-national. However, neither political nor cultural memory is fixed. Instead, it is "permanently challenged and contested. Its very contesting, however, is part of its status as lived and shared knowledge and experience."[39] But can these two accounts of cultural memory be brought into dialogue?

Varieties of Cultural Memory

These preliminary reflections are organized around two overlapping questions. First, on what basis, if any, can the Ricœurian and the Assmannian accounts of cultural memory be brought into dialogue? Second, if cultural memory for Ricœur is embodied in the philosopher/humanist, on what basis is it justifiable to understand it as a variety of collective memory?

At first glance, Ricœur's elucidation of cultural memory is quite different from the Assmannian version. For Ricœur, cultural memory is confined to the humanities (from philosophy to history to art) and to the sphere of culture (including and most especially religious symbols) more broadly, whereas the Assmannian version serves the basic self-formation of an image of society and collective identity. Ricœur locates cultural memory in the contemporary humanist – and more generally in the self.[40] However, this notwithstanding, Ricœur's notion of "cultural memory" cannot be understood as "memory" in any conventional sense, as ancient heritage goes well beyond the scope of living memory. In this sense, it presupposes cultural memory in the

Assmannian sense of objectified culture embedded in institutions, rites, etc., rather than embodied in human minds as living memory.

As mentioned, the Assmannian approach has generally associated cultural memory with its formative role in producing and reproducing collective identity. This always includes a political dimension. Collective political identity is not foregrounded in Ricœur's early use of cultural memory. Indeed, in the case of the Humanism essay, the humanist project is expressly identified as not participating in the political sphere. Ricœur's account of cultural memory, however, incorporates aspects of collective political identity in its substratum. This is evidenced by the importance of civilizations and inter-civilizational encounters (as elaborated in *The Symbolism of Evil*) both in relation to the immediate encounter between Athens and Jerusalem, but also as linked to more historically and culturally distant encounters with Middle Eastern civilizational complexes. Thus, in *The Symbolism of Evil*, at least, cultural memory cannot be separated from an articulation of a broader political identities. Even in the earlier Humanism essay, although the humanist's cultural memory is separated from the political realm, this is not to say that it is apolitical. On the contrary, as we have seen, cultural memory plays an important role in interrogating the institution of modernity in its flattening, dehumanizing aspects. The problematization of the social institution – of modern society – opens onto politics as *la politique* in Castoriadis's sense of interrogation of society (which is understood as a political institution).[41] In this sense, cultural memory in relation to the humanist project must be regarded as at least proto-political. For the Assmanns, cultural memory is embedded in – and engendered by concomitant social practices – rites, institutions, monuments, and the like. These aspects are foregrounded. Yet Ricœur does not articulate how the transmission, appearance, and renewal of cultural memory is embedded in objectified culture. However, their existence is the precondition of the cultural memory of the humanist-philosopher.

Unlike the Assmanns, Ricœur's articulation of cultural memory appears always in interplay with a "living tradition" and history (both in the sense of retroaction as incorporating an historical not just memorial aspect, and also in the sense of civilizational breadth orientations, as elucidated in *The Symbolism of Evil*). All three realms relate to meaning in their own way and provide the sources and context for the cultural memory of the present day humanist to endure, manifest and renew itself. Jan Assmann, by contrast, sharply distinguishes between cultural memory, tradition, and history. Assmann understands history as neutral events as a "thing of the past," and tradition as characterized by continuity, whereas cultural memory also incorporates "a process of forgetting, moments of rupture and rebirth."[42]

In *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Ricœur has a clear account of collective memory.[43] But his understanding of "the social," as with his use of "collective memory," relies on intersubjective categories. Two points are worth noting here: Objectivized forms of culture are not intersubjective but trans-subjective. Their sociality is impersonal. This kind of anonymous sociality has often been criticized and/or misunderstood. Ricœur, for example, is well known for his antipathy against the anonymity of structures as they dehumanize the self in his/her concrete lived reality of history. And yet, especially in his later work on institutions, Ricœur rethinks this aspect of the social in a more positive light.[44]

And yet there is a distinctly "individual" aspect to Ricœur's articulation of cultural memory. Aleida Assmann's distinction between cultural and political memory, as discussed above,

speaks to this issue. Both political and cultural memory are forms of collective memory but the telling difference for her was that political memory knew itself to address a collective whereas cultural memory addresses a group foremost as individuals. But here it is also important to note that this later distinction between cultural and political memory makes apparent a latent tension in the Assmannian approach. By reducing cultural memory to the sphere of culture and distinguishing it from political memory, a tension between an anthropological version and the more traditional, narrower understanding of the sphere of culture creeps in. As mentioned above, an anthropological approach to culture understands the imaginary-symbolic web of meaning as an overarching an open totality that is irreducible to a narrower understanding of "culture" as the sphere of cultural works. Yet for the Assmanns, as for (the later) Ricœur, the basis of the social world (as the collective institution of each society or culture) is the symbolic-imaginary.

This brings us onto the terrain of the social imaginary, where, for Ricœur, the human condition cannot "go behind" the symbolic web that comprises the fabric of the social world.[45] As mentioned above, the present essay paves the way for a rethinking of Jan and Aleida Assmann's approach to cultural memory along social imaginary lines. It is in fact surprising that such a dialogue between Ricœur and the Assmanns has not yet been suggested: their shared understanding of the symbolic-imaginary institution of the world horizon, along with a shared emphasis on the importance of memory, and concrete contributions to frameworks for understanding cultural and political memory creates a window through which such an encounter could be fruitfully pursued.

There are promising openings in the Assmanns' thought onto the symbolic-imaginary aspects of the human condition. Jan Assmann, for example, in discussion of Benedict Anderson's understanding of nations as "imagined communities," disagrees with Anderson's approach. Assmann argues that the notion of imagined communities implies that some communities are "real" or "hard"; instead Assmann argues that all societies, all collective identities are the product of the imagination.[46] In contrast to Halbwachs, who identifies emotions as the link that binds communities together, Assmann holds that symbolization, or symbolic forms, in Cassirer's sense, is more important.[47] For him, the notion of symbol transcends categories of the self/body/individual consciousness, and leads to consider a whole array of cultural expressions, such as texts, actions, and images as carriers of memory. In this vein, Ricœur's articulation of the utopian and ideological imaginary brings the imaginary dimensions of culture – and cultural memory as collective identity – together in innovative ways. Such a dialogue holds much promise.

In conclusion, this brief essay has considered Ricœur's early notion of cultural memory. Appearing in his early thought, it was not systematically developed. Nonetheless, his pioneering articulation opens onto key groups of problematics – such as the links between cultural memory, tradition, and history, or between retroaction, creation, critique, and interpretation – as well as onto a nascent macro-phenomenological approach to inter-civilizational encounters as foundational for cultural memory and constitutive for western identity. Although Ricœur presented cultural memory as belonging to the self – and thus not to collective memory – consideration of Jan and Aleida Assmann's notion of cultural memory provided pathways to problematize this understanding, and to show its social, particularly its impersonal social, underpinning. Additionally, Aleida Assmann's distinction between political and cultural memory offered further ways to understand Ricœur's account, whilst also pointing to underlying tensions in the

Assmanns' different characterizations of "culture," its scope, and its meaning. This brought us onto social imaginary terrain and its problematics, and, concomitantly, to the limits of this essay, whilst opening onto the continuation of the hermeneutic spiral in the next.

[1] Paul Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2004 [2000]). The first issue of the flagship journal, *Memory Studies*, for example, appeared in 2008, that is, just a few years after the publication of *Memory, History, Forgetting*.

[2] Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, xv.

[3] This can be especially seen in his social theoretical reflections on the social imaginary as anchored in the practical world of social (inter)action.

[4] Paul Ricœur, "What does Humanism Mean?," *in* Id., *Political and Social Essays*, edited by David Stewart & Joseph Bien (Athens, Ohio University Press, 1974 [1956]); Paul Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (New York, Harper and Row, 1967 [1960]).

[5] Ricœur, "What does Humanism Mean?," 68.

[6] Ricœur, "What does Humanism Mean?," 69.

[7] Ricœur, "What does Humanism Mean?," 70.

[8] Ricœur, "What does Humanism Mean?," 71.

[9] Ricœur, "What does Humanism Mean?," 72 ff.

[10] Ricœur, "What does Humanism Mean?," 77.

[11] Ricœur, "What does Humanism Mean?," 77-8.

[12] Ricœur, "What does Humanism Mean?," 78.

[13] Ricœur, "What does Humanism Mean?," 79.

[14] Ricœur, "What does Humanism Mean?," 79.

[15] This role of cultural-collective memory as both critical and poetic is expanded in Ricœur's thought via the ideological and utopian imaginary in the 1970s, although they are in turn obscured in his later work on memory in the 1990s and beyond.

[16] Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 19.

[17] Paul Ricœur, "The Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection," in *Philosophy of Paul Ricœur: An Anthology of his Work*, edited by Charles E. Reagan & David Steward (Boston, Beacon Press, 1978 [1962], 36-58), 36-7.

[18] Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 19 ff.

[19] Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 20.

[20] Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 20.

[21] Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 20.

[22] However given that the institution of ancient Greek philosophy occurred within a social-historical context, the orientations of distance and proximity need to be extended to intra-civilizational contexts as well as consideration of the polis religion on democracy and philosophy.

[23] Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 20.

[24] Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 21. This is in contrast to his initially more critical view of ethnology in the earlier humanism essay.

[25] Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 21.

[26] Ricœur's reflections on civilizations (in the plural) is no isolated example. Indeed, during the 1950s and 1960s he incorporated a number of discussions of civilizations as macro-historical phenomena of collective human existence. Ricœur's account of civilizations emerged in tandem with his critical reflections on modernity. These aspects of his œuvre are yet to be considered in the secondary debates (be that within Ricœur scholarship or the recently revived historical sociological field of comparative civilizational analysis and multiple modernities) by S. N. Eisenstadt, Johann P. Arnason, Bjorn Wittrock, and others.

[27] Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 20.

[28] Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 20.

[29] Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 21-2.

[30] Paul Ricœur & Cornelius Castoriadis, "Dialogue on History and the Social Imaginary," in *Ricœur and Castoriadis in Discussion: On Human Creation, Historical Novelty, and the Social Imaginary*, edited by Suzi Adams (London, Rowman and Littlefield International, 2017).

[31] Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 22-3.

[32] Jan and Aleida Assmann pursue distinct but overlapping research programs that centre on their distinctive notion of cultural memory. However, as they centrally complement each other, and they have at times also co-authored key texts, the present essay will refer to an overall Assmannian understanding of cultural memory. This is also reflected in their joint receipt of the 2018 Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels for their *"zweistimmge" Lebenswerk*.

[33] Jan Assmann, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," *New German Critique*, 65 (1995), 125-33.

[34] Jan Assmann, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," 125-8.

[35] Jan Assmann, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," 128.

[36] Aleida Assmann, "Kultur als Lebenswelt und Monument," in *Kultur als Lebenswelt und Monument*, edited by Aleida Assmann & Dietrich Harth (Frankfurt/M, Fischer Verlag, 1991).

[37] Jan Assmann, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," 129.

[38] Aleida Assmann, "Memory, Individual and Collective," in *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis*, edited by Robert E. Goodin & Charles Tilly (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006), 220.

[39] Aleida Assmann, "Memory, Individual and Collective."

[40] Even then he recognized the importance of memory for selfhood: "It is necessary to have a memory in order to have a self." Ricœur, "What is the Meaning of Humanism?," 70.

[41] Castoriadis distinguished between the political realm *(le politique)* which every society must institute, and politics *(la politique)* in the strong and explicit sense of problematization and contestation of the social institution.

[42] Caroline Gaudriault, "Conversation with Jan Assmann," *ZigZag-Blog.com*, ND/NP, http://www.zigzag-blog.com/spip.php?article3, accessed 10th March, 2019.

[43] For a critique of Ricœur's account of collective memory, see the very interesting discussion by Jeffrey Barash "The Place of Remembrance: Reflections on Paul Ricœur's Theory of Collective Memory," *in* Brian Treanor & Henry Isaac Venema (eds), *A Passion for the Possible: Thinking with Paul Ricœur* (New York, Fordham University Press, 2010), 147-57.

[44] For an insightful discussion of this aspect of Ricœur's thought, see George Taylor, "Ricœur and Just Institutions," *Philosophy Today*, 58 (4) (2014), 571-89.

[45] Further discussion of the tension between broader and narrower understandings of the "cultural" in "cultural memory" is beyond the scope of the present essay but will feature in the next instalment of this research program, provisionally entitled, "Cultural Memory and Social Imaginaries: Ricœur and the Assmanns in Dialogue" (in-progress).

[46] Jan Assmann, "Form as a Mnemonic Device: Cultural Texts and Cultural Memory," *in* Richard A. Horsley, Jonathan A. Draper & John Miles Foley (eds), *Performing the Gospel. Orality, Memory, and Mark. Essays dedicated to Werner Kelber* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2006, 67-82), 68.

[47] Jan Assmann, "Form as a Mnemonic Device: Cultural Texts and Cultural Memory," 68.