

**Jeffrey Andrew Barash, *Collective Memory and the Historical Past*** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

*Collective Memory and the Historical Past* was first published by the University of Chicago Press in the autumn of 2016 and it was reprinted in a second, paperback edition in 2020. Its principal aim is to elaborate a philosophical basis for the concept of collective memory and to delimit the scope of this concept in relation to the historical past. The book is divided into an historical introduction and two sections. The historical introduction explores the principle significations different traditions of Western thought have accorded to memory. According to its central premise, the predominant philosophical arguments in given historical periods regarding the significance and scope of memory are more than abstract speculations, for they owe their persuasive force to fundamental convictions they convey concerning the sense of human existence and of human interaction in the socio-political sphere.

This historical introduction culminates in an examination of our *current* situation, and of the theoretical significance of memory not only as a faculty or a cognitive function, but in the contemporary role that is attributed to it under the heading of "collective memory." This role is far from transparent: the phenomenon of group remembrance is as old as human social existence itself, whereas the concept of collective memory and the term itself are of recent vintage. How might the contemporary preoccupation with collective memory be accounted for? Barash relates the rise of theoretical concern for collective memory to the decline of more traditional ways of accounting for collective cohesion in the socio-political sphere. Its conceptual visibility has followed the weakening of the conviction that immutable metaphysical ideas or, in a more modern perspective, all-encompassing philosophies of history or ideologies might definitively account for human identity and socio-political existence. The loss of plausibility of traditional theoretical frameworks has been fueled by the experience of historical contingency, discontinuity, and dislocation that became ever more pronounced following the demise of the *ancien régime* in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, industrialization, urbanization, and the advent of mass society. It was dramatically confirmed by the cataclysm of the First World War. At this precise juncture, the concept of collective memory, as it emerged in the pioneering works of authors like Maurice Halbwachs and Walter Benjamin, began to reoccupy the place left vacant by the decline of traditional ideas of human identity and it has subsequently been called upon to frame the discourse of socio-political cohesion. In this situation, the concept of collective memory requires an appropriate theoretical foundation.

The second section of this work highlights the *difficulty* of constructing such a theoretical foundation. This difficulty arises due to the paradox the concept of collective memory immediately entails, above all where it is extended beyond small groups or associations to encompass the public sphere of collective interaction. This paradox comes to light where it is acknowledged that memory in its *original* sense always transpires in the personal sphere of individual rememberers and that, at a fundamental level, it involves direct encounters among individuals and groups in the context of a

life-world. All secondary or indirect forms of remembrance presuppose this original experiential source. Nevertheless, beyond the scope of small groups and associations, direct experience and remembrance of *publicly* significant events is usually possible only for a tiny minority of witnesses. Remembrance of publicly significant events is almost always based on indirect reports or accounts diffused among the vast strata of contemporary mass societies. This indirect quality of public remembrance underlies the essential difference in kind between all forms of remembered experience in its original sense and collective remembrance of actions and events in the public sphere. In view of the gap between original remembrance in the life-world and what is indirectly retained in the diffuse representations of vast collectivities, in what sense might it be claimed that they share a common basis of "recollection"? In what way might the seemingly nebulous concept of "collective memory" be distinguished from mere figments of the social imagination? In the different chapters of this section, Barash elaborates an original answer to these questions, according to which the possibility of drawing such a distinction, and of delineating the collective reach of memory, depends on an adequate conception of the *imaginative* potency which memory deploys: it requires that we distinguish between the multiple functions of the imagination which, far from limited to the production of fantasy or fiction, engenders *symbolic* interaction through which remembered experience is made communicable among vast groups. In this perspective, the symbolic embodiment of experience, far from a secondary addition that would be tacked on to interpreted actions and events, lends it immediate spatio-temporal and conceptual configuration through which it is collectively conveyed and remembered. In this broad sense, symbols confer meaning on experience as it is communicated through language, gesture, or style and is embodied in memory. As such, they lend spontaneous intelligibility to the public world in which more particular forms of communication among small groups and individuals are deployed. Collective memory is rooted in a many-layered web of interwoven shared symbolic structures that orient spatio-temporal awareness and the conceptual logic it deploys. The continuity of this web attests the ongoing link between past and present in the shared context of experience recalled by overlapping living generations.

The third section of *Collective Memory and the Historical Past* deepens and extends the general theory of collective memory proposed in earlier sections of the work through analysis of its *temporal* articulations. This analysis engages an elucidation of the *passive* preconditions of shared remembrance that are primary sources of social cohesion and interaction. According to this interpretation, the passive temporal preconditions of shared remembrance compose a many-layered web of collectively communicable symbolic configurations interwoven in the shared context of contemporaneous living generations: a common "horizon of contemporaneity." However fragmented the memories shared among different groups may be, communication among them depends upon the network of immediately graspable symbols that defines the finite contours of their contemporaneity and sets it apart from the historical past beyond the grasp of all living memory. According to the central hypothesis of this book, providing its seminal contribution to historical theory, the passage of the collective memory retained by living generations into the historical past is the matrix that brings to the fore the *historicity* of human experience.

With the emergence of increasingly anonymous and fragmented conditions of public existence in the contemporary world, the disparity between publicly significant forms of remembrance and the life-world of direct encounters has tended to increase. The second chapter of this section examines this phenomenon in relation to the ever-growing predominance of the mass media and of their ways of shaping the public sphere. Here the gap between remembered experience rooted in the "horizon of contemporaneity" of the immediate life-world and reports communicated by the mass media appears not only as a difference between experienced events and their representation, but as a

reframing of events in terms of an autonomous symbolic order constituted by the virtual spatio-temporal pattern and logic of mass communications. This leads Barash to the important argument according to which this autonomous symbolic order draws its potency from an uncanny ability to simulate direct experience while *dissimulating* the gap which separates it from the immediate life world in which it originates. In this chapter a number of examples, such as the televised Romanian revolution of 1989 and media representation of the Balkan wars of the 1990s, serve to illustrate the unprecedented role of the media in configuring the contemporary public sphere by virtue of the singular media format through which communicated experience is symbolically embodied and remembered.

The final chapter of this section, and of the book as a whole, focuses on the difference between the horizon of collective remembrance shared by living generations and the historical past that stands outside its scope. The argument is advanced that the kind of historical skepticism that has arisen in recent decades, initially espoused in the work of Roland Barthes and of Hayden White, depends upon a tacit blurring of the essential *disparity* between the two temporal orders of collective memory and the historical past. From this standpoint, the capacity to identify differences between these two orders depends not only on a correct portrayal of the factual record of past events, but also on the possibility of discerning symbolic nuances in the contextual structures from which actions and events draw their meaning. This leads to an analysis of the much debated question concerning the "reality of the historical past," to which the author's analysis provides a singular contribution: beyond the role of factual evidence, the author identifies the contours of this reality in discontinuities in temporal horizon that distinguish the contextual structure of a recent past recalled by contemporary generations from an historical past reaching beyond the pale of living remembrance. This leads to a consideration, not of historical works, but of *temporal discontinuity* portrayed in the modern novel. Where skeptics attempt to lay bare fictive elements in historical writing, Barash highlights the novelists' capacity to reveal, in different periods and a multiplicity of forms, the contextual shifts underlying what he equates with the real contours of group experience and group remembrance. To this end, he draws on the historical novels of Walter Scott and Victor Hugo, the subtle ruminations of Proust in *A la recherche du temps perdu*, and on more recent reflections on the burden of remembrance of the past elaborated by W. G. Sebald in his novel *Austerlitz*. According to Barash's highly suggestive conclusion, if the concept of the "reality" of the historical past is indeed meaningful, its significance depends on the possibility of according a measure of reality to discontinuities in temporal horizon that separate living memory from the historical past.

The contribution of *Collective Memory and the Historical Past* lies in its pioneering investigation of the finite scope of collective memory in a socio-political realm punctuated by ongoing and ever more radical forms of discontinuity. It succeeds in providing a ground-breaking theoretical basis for the interpretation of the concept of collective memory, while critically analyzing the central role this concept is called upon to play in forging the discourse of social cohesion in the contemporary public world.