

The Invention of Cultural Memory

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1. Guiding Metaphors and Concepts

One can often observe that certain words and terms common in daily usage contain, like trace elements, metaphorically coded clues to a semantic deep structure, the investigative explication of which can shed light on hidden connections. For example, the lexical field “*Erinnerung-Gedächtnis-Gedenken*” (remembering-memory-remembrance) refers not only to a conditioning process of internalization (*Innerlich-Machen*) but also to the cognitive processing of that which is “internalized.” This suggests a dynamic relationship between passive as well as active attainments of learning, knowledge processing, and meaning-making which allows us to use “*Gedächtnis*” and “*Erinnerung*” as interlinked key terms in a wide variety of multi-dimensional contexts. This possibility of a transdisciplinary terminological freedom is encouraged by the descriptive strategies of neuroscientific and recent psychological memory research. In these fields the “net” metaphor is used in order to illustrate the coordinative and cooperative activities of memory in the—*sit venia verbo*—antiphon of inner (neuronal) and external (social) voices (Markowitsch; Welzer; see also their articles, this volume). In the terminology of sociological memory studies based on systems theory, the metaphor of the net, in marked contrast to the expression “archive,” takes on the function of a cybernetic explanatory model which promises insights regarding the procedural dynamics of mnemonic practices in various social systems (Esposito 337ff.).

The metaphor of the net evokes the work of knotting together loose ends to interlacements and thereby offers an image for the coordinative and cooperative continuity in the action plan of interdisciplinary research programs. What this metaphor leaves aside are the hierarchies and other vertically organized structures of subordination. However, what it encourages is something I would like to call an “epistemology of relations.” By this I mean a path to knowledge that draws attention to the relations (*Beziehungen*) between the elements by means of their connections (*Verknüpfungen*) and interactions, in order to use these interrelations to be able to probe the forces of gravity that operate within a particular socio-cultural field (Bourdieu).

It is by no means surprising that the epistemology of relations, albeit only partly discernible, is also tangent to the examples of wordplay which thematize “*kulturelles Gedächtnis*” (see the articles by A. and J. Assmann,

this volume). The “connective structure” which Jan Assmann discusses in the introduction to his principal work on cultural theory (*Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* 16f.) uses the metaphor of connection, which, in a sort of homologous reflection, connects the descriptive language to the inner form of that being described. To put it more simply, Assmann argues that every culture connects every one of its individual subjects on the basis of shared norms (rules) and stories (memories; *Erinnerungen*) to the experience of a commonly inhabited meaningful world. It is only because of this experience that individuals are able to frame their personal identity through the orientating symbols of identity of their social world, symbols which are embodied in the objectified forms of a commonly shared cultural tradition. In the term “connectivity” the two types of memory which are decisive for this theory meet: “*kommunikatives Gedächtnis*,” active on the level of simultaneity, which connects the present and the most recent past (*Verknüpfung*); and “*kulturelles Gedächtnis*,” which, like a large storehouse filled with traditional “memory figures” (*Erinnerungsfiguren*), offers various possibilities to link the present to an ancient past (*Anknüpfung*).

The imagery of the *co-nexio* at this point should bring us back to the imagery of knotting nets, to consider again some fundamental aspects. The denser the net, the more it resembles a fabric. True, the production techniques are different, but in the end, as in the knotting of rugs, the results are quite comparable. Precisely this similarity between net and fabric—the latter in the meaning of “texture” and “text”—benefits both the construction of scholarly conceptualizations and also the construction of appropriate research objects. And yet: The difference between “net” and “fabric/texture” becomes relevant when one considers the openness, flexibility, and extent of the phenomena constituted by these craft metaphors. Nets are not only more permeable and thus also more transparent than fabric; in addition they offer, as seen in the example of the World Wide Web, possibilities for linking and unlinking within seconds, without the fear of disturbing or destroying key organizing patterns. If the Heidelberg cultural theory prefers as its guiding conceptualization the textuality and fabric metaphor to the net metaphor (A. Assmann, “Was sind kulturelle Texte?”), then primarily because of an appreciation of those durable “textures” that are protected by ancient gods such as the Egyptian deity Thoth, who by his own account invented writing as an “elixir of memory and wisdom” (Plato 7).

2. Invention, Elaboration, Adjustment

Invention here does not mean creation *ex nihilo*, but is instead to be understood in the meaning of the rhetorical *inventio*, best compared to a "création par bricolage" (Bastide 103). Referring to this discipline of ancient rhetoric (also known as heuristics) connected to the process of producing written texts intended for oral presentation, Roland Barthes paraphrased ancient texts when he said it was like an argumentative "net" that one had to skillfully throw over the material if one wants to catch a successful text (*discours*) (197). This refers to the production of written texts, but is also valid in the larger framework of developing concepts for research programs, although this does of course call for a careful reconstruction of the elements that flow into the *inventio*.

A Brief Remark Regarding Linguistic Differences

The German expression "*kulturelles Gedächtnis*" is not translated here, but rather used in the original, out of a consideration of the two languages involved. Already the words "*kulturell*"/cultural" have different semantic connotations in German and in English, as a glance at any common dictionary of standardized language use will show. Anglo-American usage locates "culture" as a collective term for ideas, customs, and art in the contexts of society and civilization, while the lexeme "*Kultur*" stands for the intellectual, artistic, and creative achievements of a community and is used to express the advanced development of humanity. In addition, "*Gedächtnis*" and "memory" are not only very different morphologically and etymologically, but also their standard semantics signal subtle differences which can only be hinted at here: "Memory," as force, process, or repository, primarily refers to the reproducing and recalling of learned knowledge. "*Gedächtnis*," however, stands for the capacity to store not just what is learned but also sensory impressions and "mental processes," which can then at an opportune moment be allowed to "enter one's consciousness" again. In both cases, the standard languages cleave to the scientifically and empirically questionable storage metaphor in order to give the abstractions an eidetic meaning. Simultaneously, we recognize already on this level that language as a register of "*mémoire collective*" exerts a creative force which also molds the objects of the *Kulturelles Gedächtnis* (Linke 75). The conventional storage metaphor to a certain extent forms the pre-scientific hinge between the idea of an inner *Gedächtnis* and a *Gedächtnis* which has in the course of its phylogeny become an

“exteriorized memory” (Leroi-Gourhan 273-332; J. Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* 22, note 5), located in tools, material symbols, (writing) techniques, and institutions.

As a cultural-theoretical blueprint, the Heidelberg concept, which came to be known as “*Kulturelles Gedächtnis*,” has in an astonishingly short time successfully entered into the circulation process of interdisciplinary structures (Erl 263-76). This has been the result of various factors, and certainly not solely the dexterity in knotting argumentative nets mentioned by Roland Barthes. Flexible forms of self-organization, which promote the development of informal communicative structures free of strict efficiency imperatives and cumbersome administrative regulations, are necessary conditions for the success of scholarly work in temporary academic groups with changing personnel. The author of this article, at the beginning of the teamwork in Heidelberg, had in mind the French model of the *École des Annales*, founded in the late 1920s, a community of scholars whose name stands for a widely influential reform of historiographical thinking, and whose interest in the social sciences and methodological syncretism is also reflected in the work of the Heidelberg initiative.

For a long time, Jan Assmann’s Egyptological Institute in Heidelberg served as an interdisciplinary “center of gravity” for a similar policy of open association, discussion, and the initiation of projects. Here workshops, guest lectures, conferences, and lecture series were planned which all revolved around the topic of culture and memory. In response to growing interest, the cultural-studies groups meeting there were soon replaced by a transdisciplinary discussion group which for many years met on a regular basis in the *Internationales Wissenschaftsforum* of the university (a center for scholarly exchange in all areas of academic research) and which dated its unwritten charter to the time before 1933, when a distinguished generation of scholars well-known outside the university established the international reputation of the “Ruperto Carola” (University of Heidelberg). A crucial step in furthering the versatile application and interdisciplinary implementation of the concept of *Kulturelles Gedächtnis* was the volume of collected essays published by Suhrkamp in 1988 and edited by the archaeologists Jan Assmann (Egyptology) and Tonio Hölscher (Classical Archaeology): *Kultur und Gedächtnis*. This publication grew out of a lecture series organized by the discussion group on the occasion of a mnemonically prominent event, namely the 600th anniversary of the founding (in 1386) of the University of Heidelberg, with the intention of proving to the public that cultural studies and the humanities are in fact ideally suited to reflect and support the endowment of the complexities of modern life with meaning.

The group strategies and organizational frameworks indicated here cannot replace personal dedication, which of course also profits from the type of informal infrastructures mentioned above. Personal dedication in the humanities is most clearly reflected in written and printed words, and the Heidelberg initiative brought forth quite an impressive number of publications. Worth mentioning are particularly the books that appeared in the relatively short period from 1990 to 1992 and which had a profound effect on promulgating the key concept and its versatility: *Ma'at* (1990), *Kultur und Konflikt* (1990), *Kultur als Lebenswelt und Monument* (1991), *Weisheit* (1991), *Mnemosyne* (1991), *Die Erfindung des Gedächtnisses* (1991), *Das Fest und das Heilige* (1991), *Revolution und Mythos* (1992) and, last but not least, Jan Assmann's programmatic study *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (1992).

The meaning of "invention" in this context has in the meantime, along the lines of Barthes's argumentative networking, gradually been worked out and intersubjectively tested on both the level of philological-historical and of comparative cultural studies. Even before the term *Kulturelles Gedächtnis* was found for the new theory, the initiators, Aleida and Jan Assmann, had launched a continuing series of interdisciplinary colloquia, under the title *Archäologie der literarischen Kommunikation*. The emblematic character of the name for this series, later established as a book series title, aptly indicates the complexity of the undertaking. The label "archaeology," particularly in this context, not only denotes the excavation work carried out by Jan Assmann and others, it is also directed towards the connectivity between death and writing characteristic of ancient Egyptian culture (J. Assmann, "Schrift, Tod und Identität"; cf. also Dupont 281f.). What is more, "archaeology" alludes to Sigmund Freud's use of the same expression as an image for the deep-hermeneutic seeking, bringing together, and restoring of dispersed fragments of individual memory.

A relation is indicated here which is explicitly discussed in the closing essay of the first volume of the *Archäologie* series in 1983 (A. Assmann and J. Assmann, "Nachwort") and five years later in "Schrift, Tradition und Kultur" (A. Assmann and J. Assmann). As in an overture, some of the main motifs of the concept of *Kulturelles Gedächtnis* are raised, and then elaborated, rendered more precise, and adjusted in later writings:

- Differentiation of oral and literal processes of transmission corresponding to the experienced time of everyday life on the one hand, and to the anamnestic time of events transcending entrenched habits ("time of solemn reflection") on the other hand;
- *Kultur* as an authoritative, symbolically coded "world of meaning";

- (Collective) memory as a repertoire and generator of values which transcend the span of a lifetime and create identity;
- Standardization of collectively accepted "self-images" (we-identities) through the "sacralization" (canonization) of religious, historic, legal, and literary traditions;
- Organization of a "script-based culture" (for example in Greek antiquity) as the origin for the active appropriation and continuation of canonized traditions, supported by annotation, explanation, and interpretation.

With these points, the new theory contested earlier literacy research that purported an equation of the alphabetic writing system with an allegedly advanced "rational" mentality (in comparison to other writing systems). In fact it is not the formal features of the written characters that are important; mental conditioning is instead much more a result of the social organization of oral and written communication processes, which include not only the institutionalization of experts and schools, but also the differentiation of such varied activities as reproduction, annotation, critique, canon creation, censorship, and the writing of literary history (J. Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* 87ff.). In short, it is the way the script-based culture is organized that determines which pragmatic, mnemonic, and formative functions the medium of writing can be accorded in the construction of a cultural system.

Since Jan Assmann's reading of Maurice Halbwachs in the summer of 1986 (J. Assmann, "Das kollektive Gedächtnis" 65), the main motifs sketched out above have remained central elements in the subsequent elaboration of the concept. One of the results of the Halbwachs reading was the replacement of the unwieldy composite "*Gedächtniskultur*" with the metaphorical construct "*Kulturelles Gedächtnis*" (A. Assmann and J. Assmann, "Schrift, Tradition und Kultur" 27). This was by no means merely a superficial shift, as the introduction of the new expression accompanies a conscious demarcation from Halbwachs's term "*mémoire collective*," a term the French sociologist was familiar with thanks to his teacher Émile Durkheim and the writings of Arnold van Gennep (Gierl 161ff.). In his posthumously published book *La mémoire collective*, Halbwachs assigned this term the status of a key concept which mediates between the individual and the society. He also tried to define it more exactly by distinguishing it from the historical work of the rational reconstruction of the past, which his colleague Marc Bloch, one of the founding fathers of the *École des Annales*, had taken as a starting point for his critique of the psychologistic transference of the term "*mémoire*" from the individual to the collective.

Assmann's use of the term "*Kulturelles Gedächtnis*" reflected this distinction and could thus profit from Halbwachs's theory. It was not sufficient to balance memory (*Gedächtnis*) against the scholarly reconstructions of historiography. It is true that the semantics of the term "memory" does indeed include cognitive intellectual operations, but that does not mean that the success or failure of remembering (*Erinnerungsleistung*) can be measured by the alternative "true or false?" (A. Assmann, "Wie wahr sind Erinnerungen?"). In contrast, the inherent logic of mnemonic shaping corresponds to a quasi-poietic force, as already reflected in the ancient myth of Mnemosyne, and as Halbwachs affirmed anew in the framework of his social-psychological reflections. This force, not directly visible and thus best regarded as a virtual entity, evinces a legend- and myth-creating productivity. The effectively normative, symbolically coded "truth" of a great memory figure—such as Assmann's example, the prophet Moses—is thus not to be found in the past of this religious founder, a past that can be reconstructed by comparatively rational means, but rather in the perspectives from whose vantage point later generations have interpreted and incorporated into their own self-image his history, passed down in writing, and the story of the exodus associated with his name (J. Assmann, *Herrschaft* 247-80). The example clarifies once again the twofold function of the memory metaphor (*Gedächtnismetapher*): On the one hand it designates the cognitively simplified visualization of the past, and on the other hand it provides a symbol for the formation of ideological convictions conceived in analogy to the internalization of concepts of religious belief.

A comparison of *mémoire collective* and *Kulturelles Gedächtnis* also brings important differences to light. Halbwachs was above all attempting to get to the bottom of the cognitive discrepancy between the scholarly reconstruction of the past and the experienced, that is, the lived, tradition. Assmann's concept, on the other hand, looks at the medial conditions and social structures of organization which groups and societies use to connect themselves to an objectified supply of cultural representations, available in diverse forms (for example, in writing, image, architecture, liturgy), in order to construct patterns for self-interpretation legitimized by the past.

The Heidelberg cultural theory thus does not lay weight on the formations, however created, of a collective consciousness. Rather, it differentiates, along the lines of the aforementioned dual coding of the social mneme, between the "communicative" group memory (*Gruppengedächtnis*), meant to guarantee the organization of "profane" everyday acts, and the memory of tradition (*Traditionsgedächtnis*) of the interpreting elites, which is there to keep at hand the longer-lasting, the "sacralized" world view. No doubt, with this concept of the Sacred (A. Assmann and J. Assmann,

“Schrift, Tradition und Kultur” 27), the theory of *Kulturelles Gedächtnis* holds to a schema of collective thought which includes the idea of a quasi-prophetic appeal to the living to forget neither victims nor past traditions’ broken promises of salvation.

The ethical component of the Heidelberg cultural theory suggested here has a thanatological background which points to the ancient Egyptian cult of the dead and the associated forms of a monumental burial architecture enclosed in and covered with writing. Assmann sees in this culture-specific feature of the ancient Egyptian commemoration of the dead the “origin” of *Kulturelles Gedächtnis* in the symbolically embodied presence of the absent person (J. Assmann and Rack 96). Here a methodical relationship between the Heidelberg cultural theory and the fundamentals of semiotic hermeneutics à la Clifford Geertz becomes evident. That is to say, only in light of the interpretation of the signs, which can certainly be allegorizing, do the dead specters step out of the darkness of forgetting and transform themselves into ambiguous memory figures, on whose side the interpreter in the role of the *Remembrancer* (Burke 110) can hold up to his present time the debts of the past.

Thanks to Jan Assmann’s sovereign mastery of this variety of hermeneutical necromancy, cultural history has gained a deep understanding not only of the ancient Egyptian religion and state, but—mediated through its Otherness—also new insights into the “history of influence” (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) of “Occidental” thought. The concept denoted by the formula “*Kulturelles Gedächtnis*” is to be understood—as is made clear by Assmann’s extensive comparative cultural studies—as a *hermeneutical category*, which leads the efforts to reconstruct the historically shaped consciousness beyond that teleologically constructed realm of memory (*Gedächtnisraum*), the historical border of which is demarcated by, to use Karl Jaspers’s term, the “Axial Age” (J. Assmann, *Ma’at* 11).

3. Limits of the Concept

The idea of interconnecting “culture” and “memory” is not particularly new. In 1910, Arnold van Gennep pointed to the tenacious longevity of the “*mémoire des faits d’ordre culturel*” (164), which can allow technical know-how and religious traditions, but also rules and regulations of social and political organizations, to outlast historical “expiration dates.” Nor may one forget Maurice Halbwachs, important for the early history of the concept even beyond the aforementioned aspects. For sound reasons, the editor of the critical edition of *La mémoire collective* emphasizes the French sociologist’s tendency to cross the conventional borders of “*mémoire psy-*

chologique” in the direction of “*mémoire culturelle*” (Namer 270f.). One must also mention Aby Warburg, who in the early twentieth century pondered the socio-cultural implications of remembering. In his posthumously published work he called attention to the dark, even “demonic,” as he called it, side of the emergence of cultures, and advocated the thesis that the iconographic memory (*Bildgedächtnis*) provides the means to endure, and even to sublimate, the horrors of existence.

It was not until the 1970s that the Moscow-Tartu semiotic school (Lotman) once again established a loose affiliation between “culture” and “memory”; the Heidelberg concept drew on this at the beginning (J. Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* 21). A short time later the first volumes of Pierre Nora’s “*lieux de mémoire*” appeared, which not only provided an encyclopedic repertoire of constructions of a nationally significant collective memory, but also reflected on the changing functions of the French memorial sites in the framework of post-traditional lifestyles (see den Boer, this volume). More recently, a group of American philosophers appealed to the historically saturated, reflective “cultural memory,” in order to stand up to the vagueness and loss of history and memory disseminated in certain academic communities (Cook).

It would be futile to compare the positions mentioned here with the Heidelberg cultural theory and ask which one of these should enjoy the rights of the firstborn. The Heidelberg theory can justifiably claim to be an argumentatively well-founded theory without fulfilling the rigid demands of an orthodox system. The theory of *Kulturelles Gedächtnis* instead offers an open concept that is thus adaptable in other disciplines and which it is no rebuke to call conservative. After all, with its reconstructive path through the “great tradition” (Redfield 43ff.), its application convincingly spreads a wealth of guiding ideas before our eyes which, to name just one, albeit very important, aspect, brings together political and religious thought. The authors of the Heidelberg cultural theory have expressly linked their concept with the problems of German historical memory and have participated in controversial debates regarding appropriate forms of commemoration of the Holocaust (J. Assmann, “Das kollektive Gedächtnis” 67). This relationship of the theory of *Kulturelles Gedächtnis* to controversial questions of identity-creating politics of memory does, though, draw attention to a difficult aspect of the concept which I would like to, in closing, comment on with a critical remark.

Key elements of the Heidelberg cultural theory include the way the medium of writing is charged with the task of passing on tradition and its standardizing function. *Kultur*, in this view, unfolds as a dense fabric of writings before the eyes of those who read and are able to interpret what they read. These are both abilities acquired through learning, and in earlier

times were mastered by only a few, very powerful elites, and which even today are associated with privileged access to the general culture and corresponding group loyalties. Illiteracy, inadequate mastery of the written word, and hermeneutic incompetence would, according to this understanding, exclude large majorities and entire social classes from participation in the *Kulturelles Gedächtnis* and its rewards of identity creation.

This raises the question as to the effects of a social distinction that is based on the unequal distribution of symbolic capital and thus offers only a few groups the possibility to satisfy their need for orientation through an institutionally anchored *Kulturelles Gedächtnis* kept alive by the constant care and regeneration carried out by scholars. The crucial point is that society's acceptance of norms and values does not depend on a "sacralized," written, or in any other form symbolically coded canon. The genesis and validity of values and their translation into effective practical norms is instead based on the processes of negotiation and agreement that are part of common experience. This refers to communicative practices that would be overstrained with charges to safeguard memory and create identity, and yet which nonetheless hold to cultural standards, while not immunizing themselves against alternative interests through the "sacralization" of a cultural canon. This sort of defense of cultural standards is transverse to the distinction between everyday memory (*Alltagsgedächtnis*) and sacred memory (*Festtagsgedächtnis*), and does not require an appeal to identity. In general, it is sufficient if the members of a group or society can explain why they keep to their effectively operating self-images and are not interested in any other, without necessarily needing to denigrate or despise alternative kinds of cultural experience (Waldron).

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