

# Memory, History, and National Identity

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Eriksen, Anne 1997: Memory, History, and National Identity. – *Ethnologia Europaea* 27: 129–138.

In modern society, history and memory are ascribed very different qualities and are commonly placed in different spheres: While history is an academic discipline with its method, its sources and its whole academic apparatus, memory is regarded as individual, emotional and unstable. History plays a part in public and political life, its scene is museums, books, academia. Memory is a matter of the subject, it belongs to the private sphere and the close relations.

History is held as an important value in our societies, it gives roots, identity and belonging. But how can an academic discipline function like that? Because, under its scholarly cover, history silently borrows the disreputed qualities of memory. It is only by being spoken of as memory and by being transformed into memory that history fulfills its tasks, builds national identities, gives roots, tells us who we are and where we come from.

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In Greek mythology, we meet the goddess Mnemosyne. She is the goddess of memory. At the same time, Mnemosyne is the mother of the nine muses, who protect science and the arts. One of them is Clio, the muse of history. In this mythology, thus, memory is history's mother: Memory is the origin of history, history the product of memory. Such a relationship between history and memory occurs not only in classical mythology. In antiquity as well as in other pre- or non-modern societies, history and memory have been closely related, they have been two sides of the same coin. History, the presentation of the past, was based on memory, on the things individuals could remember and were able to tell. In part this is of course related to the problem of (il)literacy and access to written medias – without possibility to “freeze” the past in writing, history was left to consist of the things remembered by the living. But in part it is also due to the fact that the modern lack of faith in memory and recollection, and its accompanying blind belief in any “academic historiography” did not exist. Memory was regarded, not just as an individual quality like curly hair or a big nose, but as a kind of acquired skill, a highly specialised art with its respected and renowned

professionals. From antiquity and the Renaissance we know something about the techniques employed to remember, e.g. the so-called “theatres of memory” (Yates 1992). The Icelandic “lovseiðmenn” had their methods to remember and “say” the laws, and held positions as powerful officials of their society. Studies of oral literature, e.g. the medieval ballads and the heroic epics, have shown how formulas and formulaic phrases have worked as means to “remember” the contents and recreate it in the performance.

But within modernity, Clio and Mnemosyne became separated, and their relationship changed. The daughter grew big and wilful, while the old mother, Mnemosyne, for long has led a quiet life, retired from the public domain. The situation results from a slow development during the centuries, reaching a climax and a final break with the establishment of history as a modern, academic discipline, i.e. in the last century. With this, history and memory came to oppose each other. In modern culture the two are often seen as belonging to very different spheres, being ascribed very different qualities (Eriksen 1995a).

Today, memory is commonly regarded as

something individual, something personal and subjective. Memory belongs to the individual, socially it is – at best – part of the private sphere of life. It is seen as notoriously untrustworthy, belonging to the same cluster of subjective dubiousnesses as disposition and temperament, emotions and dreams. As such it may have its great importance, to the individual and his/her relations. But nobody – neither individuals nor societies – can base their life and their world on memories. To say of somebody that he “lives on his memories” is hardly to give a description of a competent and matter-of-fact person. And in a modern, complex society important things like historiography, law, genealogy or medicine can certainly not be built as something as loose as memory, on the recollections of individuals. We still consider recollecting a kind of mental activity, but hardly any kind of superior intellectual work. In modern man, memory seems to be located to the heart – or the stomach – not to his brains. So, memory is no longer neither art nor high culture, but a kind of physiological faculty, ignited by emotions.

This is not completely wrong. Under all circumstances memory needs a body, an organism: there must be somebody *who remembers* (cf. Connerton 1989, Game 1995:195). Memory is not only in itself subjective, it requires a subject to be present at all. Memory does not exist as intersubjective abstraction, but can live only in concrete, bodily shape – with all accompanying weaknesses and faults. Several words exist to describe these weaknesses, words thus also describing our ideas of memory. The most dramatic is “oblivion” – the death of memory. “Amnesia” or “loss of memory” on their side conveys sinister associations to the dissolution or non-existence of individual identity. But even other, equally dangerous, though more sneaking illnesses threaten memory. Lapse of memory and displacement of memory are two of them.

But has anybody ever heard about a lapse of history or a displacement of history? Falsification of history, on the other hand, is a well-known and commonly feared phenomenon. And such falsifications are considered something very different from lapses of memory, even though both concepts equally describe processes through which what is *told now* does not

agree with what *happened then*. As a “lapse of memory” this will be explained with references to psychology and physiology, and seen as the outcome of a perhaps regrettable but fully excusable personal defect. The notion of falsification of history, on the other hand, is commonly associated with conspiracy and intentions of evil, with sinister political views and great ambitions of power.

For history is something very different from memory, something superior and highly serious. History belongs to society, not to the individual. It is public, not private, it is intellect, not emotions. History is scholarship, academic work, it is supposed to be right and true. History is to be trustworthy, and to guarantee for this, it has its method, its sources, its whole academic apparatus. Societies may be built on history and historical consciousness. Historical knowledge is intersubjective, history is not subordinated the life and the whims of individuals, but has its own, independent existence. And it does not die with the individuals either, because it exists in the books, in the archives and the museums. History is part of our cultural heritage, history, in short, is *serious*.

## Did Clio ever Leave Her Mother?

But then of course, things are not really as simple as that. Historians as well as ethnologists and folklorists know it – blood is thicker than water: Mnemosyne and Clio are still mother and daughter. And as all daughters know: no matter how grown up, independent and wilful you get – your mother is always there behind you, in some way. So history and memory still are related, even in our modern society. One aspect of this is that even today, a great deal of historical knowledge is built on memory – the best example is supplied by the oral history movement. Historians know that by employing memories and oral testimonies as sources, they can get information that is not otherwise available – even if they have had to work hard to overcome their inherent distrust in such material (cf. e.g. discussion in Kjeldstadli 1992:183ff). Another aspect, and where my focus lies, does not consider memory as the raw-materials of history, but rather history working *as* memory.

Or more precisely: I will discuss how the social position of history actually is based on its being spoken of as memory and its working as memory. Memory, recollection, remembrance become life-giving metaphors of history, metaphors that enable history to fulfill its most important tasks in society.

That “history is important” is a frequently repeated dogma. History gives identity, roots, causes feelings of continuity and belonging. History tells us who we are – whoever we are. “Lack of history” on the other hand, does not only imply simple ignorance, but also the threatening possibilities of being both rootless and irresponsible. Such ideas about the blessings of history are not new, but have been part of the context of this academic discipline from its birth: Producing national histories, the new discipline immediately acquired an important role in the building of national states and the construction of national identities.

How can an academic discipline work in this way? Not *because* it is academic. We get no identity from theoretical astrophysics, and nobody worries about the general rootlessness caused by lack of competence in infant medicine or kinesiology. History gives roots, identity etc. because it is not *only* an academic discipline, but because it still borrows some traits from memory. This appears very clearly when historical archives, museums and the ward of historical monuments rhetorically are called “the memory of our society”. But the identity aspect also becomes very clear when continuity, stable relations, and consciousness of a common past are focused on as central elements of historical knowledge – or when it is said that “he who does not learn from history, must live it anew”. In this – rather commonly heard rhetorics – history is related to concepts remote from source criticism, periodisation, scholarly method and other characteristics of the academic discipline. On the contrary, the concepts employed belong to the sphere of memory, above all because they all demand some kind of a subject.

If history is to give identity, it must give identity to *something* or *somebody*. The whole meaning of “identity” is just that *something* may be recognised as the same, as itself, as identical. Continuity means that *something* or

*somebody* remains the same – at least recognisably so – during a certain span of time. A common past, shared experiences, presuppose that *some people* have been present and made these experiences – and that they have brought them on. The words used to explain why history can give identity are all words focusing on lived life, time experienced – *by somebody*. They thus demand the existence of a being, a body, a subject whose existence covers the span of time in question.

This subject, of course, does not have to be an individual, a human being. It might – for example – be a nation. For it is just by being regarded and spoken of as a subject, i.e. as something/somebody with a memory, being able to make experiences and thus accumulate a past, that the nation appears as real, as an organism, a living being with its own qualities and its own needs. It is the memory aspect of history that makes it so well fit for building national cultures, because through this the nation is postulated as a subject: It remembers – thus it exists. All the subjective, emotional and far too little abstract elements, so often named the weaknesses of memory, is just what history borrows and what in its mysterious ways transforms into strength.

## Memory as a Social Phenomenon

When such a thing is possible, this is also due to the fact that memory, recollections, even if they demand a subject and are subjective, are also into a very high degree social, i.e. stamped by the fact that subjects relate to other subjects, to the collective, to culture, to society. The French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, coining the term “collective memory”, argued that remembering is a fundamentally social activity. According to him, the idea of an individual memory, isolated from every social context, would be an abstraction close to meaninglessness (Halbwachs 1992). First, the need to remember something, will nearly always be caused by some social situation. Somebody may ask a question, and one tries to remember so as to give an answer. Or, one might try to remember what to say or do in a certain situation – greeting a neighbour, reciting the catechism or describe “what happened at

school today". Second, a majority of memories will in themselves be related to social situations: what did we do, who were there, what was said. Or, at least, memories have a social frame. One example: Even a childhood recollection of suddenly being quite alone, left in the forest, alone and frightened has a social context. The situation was – perhaps – a family outing, picnic, a lunch-basket, safety, a friendly atmosphere. The change was caused by the little child wandering about, disappearing behind a rock, losing sight of the others and getting scared. The fright experienced then and remembered later on, is not so much due to the forest as to the awareness of suddenly being left – the grown ups disappeared, security and happiness gone. The forest remained the same, what changed was the social situation. This was what caused the fright, and it also causes the memory.

We do not remember ourselves as isolated individuals, outside any social context. It is not very meaningful to remember e.g. "October 23rd. 1997" without at the same time remembering what one did that day, where one was, who else was there. Even individual memories thus have a social background and a social context, they hardly ever exist in an absolutely isolated form. Memories are memories of social contexts, frequently applied to *in* a social context or *because of* such a context (cf. Connerton 1989:36ff).

Because memories are so closely tied to the social, to what is common and shared, they will frequently also in themselves appear as shared and collective. Memories who refer to a certain social context will in some meanings of the word be common to everybody who relate themselves to that context and who share its frame of reference – even if each individual has made different experiences, interpreted them in different ways, and does not remember exactly the same things – or the same amount of things. For example: Norwegians who experienced World War II share a tradition of collective memories, even if each one of them made very different experiences – or perhaps did not experience very much at all – during the five years of German occupation (cf. Eriksen 1995b). When these seemingly common memories on certain occasions are called on and held together, their

similarities and aspect of collectivity frequently (though not always) will be strengthened. At the same time, the focus on the memories in itself, as well as their collectivity, will contribute to tighten the relationship between those remembering and bring them closer together.

It is within this frame of collective memory that history lives. It is nurtured by memory, that also supplies much of its meaning, while at the same time history contributes to create and to strengthen the collective memory. History books, museums, antiquarian work, the warding of monuments etc. may all be seen as contexts where collective memory is created as well as confirmed. Through such institutions it becomes clear *what* society has chosen as its collective memory, and *how* this memory is constructed. But to work as memory, as identity – giving history and not just as a cold and dead science, what is chosen must to a certain extent agree with the collective memory already existing. The history of the members of the Norwegian Nazi party and their experiences during and after the war, may for example be written as true as historical sources and academic method may make it, but this is still not the kind of history – no matter how "historical" it is – that gives roots and identity; and Norwegian collective memory still shrinks from presentations of these matters.

## Commemorative Rituals

History books and museums have been vital for the construction and spreading of national identity. But to make history "give identity", its relationship to memory must be carefully guarded. In this context, *commemorative ceremonies* play an important role (Connerton 1989:41ff). By the means of such ceremonies, or rituals, knowledge of the past is articulated and communicated not only intellectually, as history, but also as lived reality, as experience – and as memory. Modern societies regularly stage such ceremonies, frequently initiated by the state itself, or at least organised by some public institution. In Norway, the best annual example is the celebrations of May 17th. The official name, *Constitution Day*, says very clearly that this is a ritual to remember the signing of the



Fig. 1. The children's parade is a main element in the celebrations of May 17th. In the capital, the parade comes up the main street, Carl Johans gate, to salute the royal family at the castle.

constitution, on May 17th 1814, by which act Norway was established as a nation state. Other rites are less regularly occurring, but in 1995, two other important commemoratives were celebrated: the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II and, in Norway, the millennial celebration of the Christianisation of the country.

The literature on rituals, religious as well as secular, is vast. Numbers of theories have been developed to explain what rituals *are*, and what they *mean*. As a rather general point of departure, they may be said to be *social*, and to constitute a kind of *expressive behaviour*. Rituals are symbolic, i.e. they try to communicate something that can not be said in more direct and concrete ways. For this reason, they are also regarded as heavily laden with meaning: Rituals are the attempts of a society or a group to say something about itself, something important and something that is not easily expressed by other means. Still, it often is stressed that rituals relate to texts, to stories. This might be myths, but rituals may also in a more general way refer to a “grand narrative” of the society in question.

So far, these points applies to rituals in general. In his book *How Societies Remember*, the sociologist Paul Connerton builds on them to develop a theory of commemorative ceremonies, a kind of ritual which, according to him, is absolutely vital to communication and maintenance of a collective memory (1989). Connerton focuses on two aspects of the ritual: It is a performative utterance, and it employs a formalised language. By the notion *performative* he means to underline that the rituals in themselves are neither descriptive nor narrative. And they are not supposed to have any future effect, their point is simply *to be*, then and there. This is why rituals can not be abstracted or intellectualised; they are performed or not performed, one is present or one is not. This implies that ritual, like memory, is based on the presence and participations of subjects, on the existence of a *somebody* performing. The meaning of the ritual is the experience, on the one hand social, on the other completely dependent on the acting subject.

The *formalised language* gives another rea-

son why rituals can not primarily be narratives. The linguistic expressions available to a ritual are usually rather limited. They may consist of fixed sayings and formulas and/or be restricted to a very narrow range of themes. The scope of variation is for example very small when it comes to what might actually be said and what phrases may be used in the “speech for the day” when the children’s parade reach the city square of some provincial town on May 17th, or likewise when one more monument over the resistance during World War II is to be inaugurated. By focusing on these two elements – the performative utterance and the formalised language – Connerton argues that the formal aspects of rituals are as important as their supposed deeper, symbolic meaning. The ritual is not an arbitrarily chosen medium for something that might e.g. be told as a myth or presented as a picture. The main quality of the ritual is its form, and thereby its strong quality of “here and now”, of presence, of physical experience.

On the other hand, Connerton argues that what distinguishes commemorative rituals from rituals in general, is just that the former explicitly refers to certain past events, be they of religious or historical kind. His point is that the commemorative rites are re-enactments of these events, not narratives about them. The rituals commemorating past events thus give *experience* of these events, not *knowledge about* them. In this way, rituals like the annual celebrations of May 17th or the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II, are decisive to the process of turning history into memory. I will take the last as my example here.

### A Norwegian Example: The 50th Anniversary of the End of World War II

On May 8th 1995, the 50 years anniversary was celebrated all through Norway – as of course in several other countries. The number of arrangements was great, but, seeing the Norwegian celebration as a whole, the similarities and uniformity were far more striking than the local variations. The arrangements were to a very large degree variations on a well-known theme, *the liberation of Norway*. This theme has been articulated in corresponding (though gen-

erally smaller) celebrations every five years through the entire post-war era. In addition, rituals may borrow traits from each other, and in the 50 years anniversary there recurred elements known from e.g. Constitution Day celebrations and royal visits. Within this context, the local variations were mainly due to resources and to what may be called the “symbolic capital” of the respective locations in relationship to the core motive of the jubilee: invasion and war, German occupation, liberation. Small and rather unimportant places in present-day Norway – Oscarsborg fortress, communities like Nybergsund or Narvik – possess a symbolic capital based on the role they played during the war. This gives them a central position in the celebrations, which in its turn supplies them with further resources, like royal visits or stately funded monuments.

Commemoration rituals need a place – they must have a scene, an arena. The scene should

be centrally located, but there are two criteria for this: geographically or, again, symbolically. The main celebrations, taking place in Oslo, united the two criteria. The scene was the area from the Royal Palace, via the Parliament building (*Stortinget*) to Akershus Fortress. All these localities possess important symbolic capital related to the war, perhaps strongest of all at Akershus, because the fortress served as prison and place of execution. Several members of the resistance movement (Milorg) ended their lives there. A famous photograph showing a young officer from Milorg formally taking over the fortress from the Germans in May 1945 has become part of the national iconography and also serves to make Akershus a special place within this mythical universe. Such, then, was the scene of the ritual performance. But at the same time this scene in itself was part of the ritual language. The places in the centre of the capital, connected by the ritual performance



Fig. 2. The square at Akershus Fortress was the main arena for the celebrations of May 8th 1995. One element in the symbolic capital of this square is the photograph, which has become part of the national iconography. It shows a young officer from the resistance movement taking over the fortress from the Germans in May 1945.

into one scene, carry significances that were activated and thereby contributed to draw all those present into the reality of the ritual.

All over, the ritual acts were in themselves simple, and the “language” limited but expressive: parades, speeches, laying wreaths at monuments, inaugurations of new monuments, bestowing medals and other symbolic artifacts. Music played an important part. Only a small part was verbal, and the gesticulations were limited in number. To continue the example from the capital: a veterans’ parade went from the Royal Palace to Akershus Fortress, where the main arrangement was to be held. The lower and main square of the Fortress would only hold the specially invited guests, so the ordinary public had to stay in the upper square. Here one might be so lucky as to grab a place where it was possible to *see* what was going on, but to hear was nearly impossible. In spite of this, the celebration lost very little in meaning to the audience. One reason might be that all Norwegians would “know” what might be said on the occasion. Another, more generally important, is that the speeches, just like the parade, the salutes etc., did not primarily have a referential function. They just *were*, as expressions of the moment, of the here and now. It was interesting to read the king’s speech in the paper the day after, but as part of the ritual, the important thing was not *what* he said, but simply the fact *that* the king gave a speech – as he was expected to.

The ritual actors may be figured as three different groups. The first consists of persons representing the authorities of the present society, like the royal family, members of the government and, in the districts, a variety of local notabilities. Their role is, mainly, to unveil monuments, lay down wreaths and deliver medals. They also make the speeches. And again it becomes apparent that these speeches are not epical, discursive elements. They do not tell much about what actually happened during “the War”. They are interpretations, referring to the events and explaining their significance – the speeches are exegeses. What may be said, as well as how it may be expressed in these speeches is highly limited. The speeches are part of the liturgy and as such are not expected

to bring new information or fresh interpretations. On the contrary, their function is to confirm that Norwegian society still holds on to what happened, to the significance once ascribed this history and the values thus expressed. The actors representing the authorities contribute to keep the reality and experiences of the occupation as a valid obligation here and now, not only to the individual, but to the nation.

The next group is the veterans, those who took part in the actual struggle over 50 years ago. In practice this means the defenders from 1940, people who joined resistance cells of some formal organisation, members of the Norwegian forces overseas, and war sailors. Their task at the rituals is comparatively simple, as it mainly consists in being present, in the parades and on the stands of honour. To a certain degree the entire rituals are arranged in their honour. When the officials of the nation ritually confirm that the values from “the War” are still valid, this is a tribute to the veterans – to what they did and who they were at that time, as well as who they are now. In addition, their presence also has another aspect: they are present as the living past. They took part then, and they are still here – the same persons, even with the same uniforms. They are building a bridge between then and now, they are messengers from the past to the present. Within the ritual context, the veterans act as a kind of warrant. As long as they are present, the past can not turn into abstract “history”. Their physical, bodily presence gives the ritual a centre of gravity, a guarantee of lived life, of experienced reality – of memory, not history. Not without reason the 50th anniversary of the end of the war has been mentioned as the last, great anniversary of the war. Ten years hence there will hardly be any veterans left – and what do we do then?

The third group of actors is the audience, those who were looking on. This may appear as a rather passive role, perhaps so much so as to disqualify the term “actor”. But still, a commemorative ritual without its audience would not only be rather bleak, it would also lose much of its significance. Parts of the arrangements were reserved for invited guests, but to the



commemorations as such an extensive audience was absolutely required and the public should thus be regarded as a group of actors. While the notabilities expressed the recognition of the official society, the audience was present on behalf of the people and *as* the people. The audience expressed the adherence of the people to the values communicated in the ritual. At the same time, by being included in the ritual through their presence at the arena, the persons of the audience were taken into the reality of the ritual – they entered its world. During the veterans' parade in Oslo this aspect was very strongly expressed: without any previous planning or instruction, the audience started applauding when the parade started from the University square, going down the main street stretching from the Royal Palace to the Parliament. Students – the young generation watching from the University square – started clapping, and the applause spread down along the street, through the entire audience. In this way, the mass of individuals was transformed into one, organic unity, collectively and actively taking part in the parade through its homage to the passing veterans.

A closer look at the ritual reveals, however, the existence of a fourth group of actors. These are not among those present, but still they are most important of all: the dead, the fallen, those "who gave their lives" – as their names are on the monuments and in the speeches. Even if they are not here, even if they are silent, they are the core of the ritual. Just by their silence and their absence they are a most important part of the non-epical weight of the ritual, of its expressivity and its terrible incontestability. Those who gave their lives made the ultimate experience. They have made the utmost sacrifice, a deed which is not discussed. In consequence, the ritual – commemorating their deaths – is not to be discussed either. Contesting interpretations or protests against the values celebrated become impossible. Those who gave their lives have passed out of our history and into our memory. All we can do for them is just – to remember, to keep memory alive.

To be of importance to a society, to give national identity, roots, and a feeling of belonging, it is not sufficient that history is an aca-

demic discipline, that it be true, trustworthy and intersubjective. If history takes leave of memory, it turns cold, dead and without interest to anybody apart from a small circle of scholars. It is of vital importance that the tie between history and memory is cultivated and cared for: history must continually be transformed into memory. Hence the magic effect of rituals. In them, history is transformed into the experience of ever new, remembering subjects.

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