

CAN MEMORY BE COLLECTIVE?

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MEMORY, in all its guises, has been at the heart of historical inquiry over the past three decades. Cultural and social historians, sociologists, social psychologists, and those working in cultural studies and literary criticism have generated a significant body of work exploring both individual autobiographical memory and collective, public memory. Intense interest in the subject of collective remembrance, initially focusing upon the social and cultural forms through which the violent and repressive history of the twentieth century were recalled and commemorated, has developed over time into a broader, interdisciplinary field focusing upon memory.¹ Over this period, however, research into autobiographical memory has often found itself relegated to the sidelines by the scholarly community's burgeoning interest in the social or cultural memory of the group.

The journal *History and Memory*, founded in the late 1980s with a particular focus upon the collective memories and legacies of Nazism, fascism, and the Holocaust, has recently been joined by the much newer journal *Memory Studies*, intended to facilitate interdisciplinary "dialogue and debate on the theoretical, empirical and methodological issues central to a collaborative understanding of memory today."² The first issue of the new journal of *Memory Studies* kicked off with an article by Henry L. Roediger and James V. Wertsch that sought to define the emerging interdisciplinary field of memory studies.³ Within the landscape of memory studies the authors included empirical history, official national narratives, novels, memorials, case-based law, popular media, corporate memory, and religious ideas. Subsumed under the category of memory, therefore, were hugely divergent forms of historical evidence or representation that in other contexts would be identified by specific terms reflecting the different processes and purposes of creation,

epistemological assumptions, and processes of dissemination/reception, including empirical history; discourse; oral tradition; historical representation or interpretation, performance; fiction; ideology; and myth. The term "memory" has now expanded to encompass all these forms of historical consciousness, a development that received a less-than-enthusiastic response from those historians who define conventional history by its goals of objectivity and truth, as opposed to the subjectivity and partiality of memory. Whatever the merits of this argument, there is no doubt that the encompassing definition of memory studies above has many adherents across a wide range of disciplines, but even the authors acknowledge that the breadth of the field indicates the need for a much more precise terminology around memory.

MEMORY STUDIES AND ORAL HISTORY

This emerging interdisciplinary field sits alongside that of oral history, the collection and analysis of autobiographical memory, with its much earlier provenance. From the first written histories to the early nineteenth century and Jules Michelet on the French Revolution, the memories of those who participated in events were considered to be invaluable sources for the writing of history.⁴ As historical research and writing became a professional, academic discipline with an emphasis upon written archival records in the mid-nineteenth century, autobiographical memory and oral sources lost favor. In Britain, one of the pioneering accounts of "spoken history" in the mid-twentieth century was George Ewart Evans's *Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay*, originally published in 1954. This collection of memories of rural labor and life in Suffolk in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries became part of the secondary school syllabus in the 1960s.⁵ In the United States, the revival of oral history initially followed a different direction, beginning with the development of an oral history archive at Columbia University in 1948 for the memories of "significant lives."⁶ Subsequently, in Britain and the United States, a new generation of post-war historians came to value oral history as an often unique source of information about the lives and perspectives of those outside political, social, or cultural elites. Two journals, *Oral History* (UK) and *Oral History Review* (U.S.), were founded in 1969 and 1973, the product of vibrant interdisciplinary oral history movements that brought together researchers working in the academic, public history, and community sectors.⁷

It might have been anticipated that those engaged in collective and individual remembrance would have a great deal to say to each other. Yet, despite the shared interest in the contexts, concepts, forms, and content of remembering, there has been relatively little interaction. Some scholars argue that autobiographical memories are irrelevant because they have no impact upon the public world. In Nancy Wood's study of memory in postwar Europe, individual and collective memories

