COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND

Recovered Roots

THE MAKING OF ISRAELI

NATIONAL TRADITION

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THE DYNAMICS OF COLLECTIVE REMEMBERING

Collective memory has recently emerged as a major focus of interdisciplinary research. This study is part of a growing body of literature exploring the social construction of collective memory, the relationship between history and memory, the role of commemorative narratives and rituals in contemporary social life, and their impact on the political sphere. It explores how a society of immigrants, engaged in constructing a distinct national identity and culture, recreated its roots in the past. These collective memories of recovered roots became a driving force for change and a means of articulating new values and ideas. In this process the new nation relied heavily on both history and tradition. By introducing a highly selective attitude to them, alternating between rejection and acceptance, suppression and elaboration, it has reconstructed a new national memory and tradition.

This book revolves around three historical events, yet it is not a historical study. Rather, it focuses on how members of society remember and interpret these events, how the meaning of the past is constructed, and how it is modified over time. My interest here is at that level of historical knowledge that, in the final analysis, is the most meaningful one in the context of everyday life. As Carl Becker observes:

> The kind of history that has most influence upon the life of the community and the course of events is *the history that common people carry around in their heads.* It won't do to say that history has no influence upon the course of events because people refuse to read history books. Whether the general run of people read history books or not, they inevitably picture the past in some fashion or other, and this picture, however little it corresponds to real past, helps to determine their ideas about politics and society. (Emphasis added)[1]

This book is thus concerned with that level of historical knowledge that Maurice Halbwachs calls collective memory.[2] As Halbwachs points out, every group develops the memory of its own past that highlights its unique identity vis-à-vis other groups. These reconstructed images provide the group with an account of its origin and development and thus allow it to recognize itself through time.[3] Although collective memory is carried by individuals, it expands beyond their autobiographical memory, as its relies on the transmission of knowledge from one generation to another.[4]

Halbwachs's seminal work made a major contribution to the study of collective memory by identifying it as a form of memory that is distinct from both the historical and the autobiographical. By highlighting the importance of understanding collective memory within its social frameworks (*cadres sociaux*), Halbwachs has inspired a growing body of research on the social and political dimensions of commemoration.[5] Yet Halbwachs's desire to highlight the unique qualities of collective memory appears to have led him to overstate its contrast to history. He therefore portrays them as two polar representations of the past. History, the product of a scholarly scrutiny of the records of the past, is essentially a "superorganic" science detached from the pressures of the immediate sociopolitical reality. Collective memory, on the other hand, is an organic part of social life that is continuously transformed in response to society's changing needs.[6]

This opposition is in part explained by Halbwachs's view of history and collective memory as historically situated modes of knowledge. When tradition weakens and social memory is fading, he argues, history emerges as the primary mode of knowledge about the past.[7] The scholarly study of the past is thus a typical expression of the modern era, which has discredited memory as a form of relating to the past. In that sense the contemporary French scholar Pierre Nora follows Halbwachs's approach. Like him he believes in the spontaneity and fluidity of collective memory, which is "in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being dormant and periodically revived."[8] Yet history, the critical discourse, has emerged in fundamental opposition to memory, wishing to suppress it. Thus, with the decline of the tradition of memory in modern society, Nora argues, we witness only archival forms of memory located in isolated "sites" (*les lieux de mémoire*). These sites are "fundamentally remains, the ultimate embodiments of a memorial consciousness that has barely survived in a historical age that calls out for memory because it has abandoned it."[9]

As Patrick Hutton points out, few historians today would embrace Halbwachs's view of history as expressed in his *Collective Memory*.[10] Historical writing is inevitably limited by its interpretive perspective, the choice and ordering of information, and narratological constraints.[11] Historians may indeed strive to become detached analysts, but they are also members of their own societies, and, as such, they often respond to prevalent social ideas about the past. In fact, historians may not only share the basic premises of collective memory but also help to shape them through their work, as the history of national movements has shown.[12]

On the other hand, in spite of its dynamic character, collective memory is not an entirely fluid knowledge nor is it totally detached from historical memory. As Barry Schwartz points out, Halbwachs's "presentist approach" undermines the notion of historical continuity by its overemphasis on the adaptability of collective memory. "Given the constraints of a recorded history," Schwartz argues, "the past cannot be literally construed; it can only be selectively exploited."[13] Collective memory continuously negotiates between available historical records and current social and political agendas. And in the process of referring back to these records, it shifts its interpretation, selectively emphasizing, suppressing, and elaborating different aspects of that record. History and memory, therefore, do not operate in totally detached, opposite directions. Their relationships are underlined by conflict as well as interdependence,[14] and this ambiguity provides the commemoration with the creative tension that makes it such a fascinating subject of study.

Collective memory, as this study demonstrates, has by no means disappeared, nor can it be confined to the status of mere "survival" from an older age. Modern societies continue to develop their shared memories of their past in spite of the upsurge of historical research and writing. And even today poets and writers, journalists and teachers often play a more decisive role than professional historians in shaping popular images of the past.[15] A wide range of formal and informal commemorations fuels the vitality of collective memory. Holiday celebrations, festivals, monuments, memorials, songs, stories, plays, and educational texts continue to compete with scholarly appraisals of the past in constructing collective memory.

Although Halbwachs points out the fluidity of collective memory, he does not address the question of *how* it is transformed. Within this context the concept of *commemoration* emerges as central to our understanding of the dynamics of memory change.[16] Collective memory is substantiated through multiple forms of commemoration: the celebration of a communal festival, the reading of a tale, the participation in a memorial service, or the observance of a holiday. Through these commemorative rituals, groups create, articulate, and negotiate their shared memories of particular events.[17] The performance of commemorative rituals allows participants

not only to revive and affirm older memories of the past but also to modify them. Indeed, in the novel *Beloved*, Toni Morrison's expression "to rememory" articulates this idea, showing how the symbolic reexperiencing of the past reshapes its memory.[18] On the communal level each act of commemoration makes it possible to introduce new interpretations of the past, yet the recurrence of commemorative performances contributes to an overall sense of continuity of collective memory.

While scholars and intellectuals engage in a formal historical discourse, for most members of the society, knowledge of the past is first and foremost shaped by these multiple commemorations. Moreover, children's early socialization in collective memory precedes their introduction to the formal study of history and can exceed its influence. Schools play a prominent role in the socialization of national traditions. Early-childhood education in particular reinforces those shared images and stories that express and reinforce the group's memory. Children in nursery schools, kindergartens, and the first grades thus learn about major historical figures or events from stories, poems, school plays, and songs. These genres often blend facts with fiction, history with legend, for this colorful blend is believed to render the literature more appealing for the very young.[19] These commemorations contribute to the early formation of sentiments and ideas about the past that might persist even in the face of a later exposure to history.

Each act of commemoration reproduces a *commemorative narrative*, a story about a particular past that accounts for this ritualized remembrance and provides a moral message for the group members. In creating this narrative, collective memory clearly draws upon historical sources. Yet it does so selectively and creatively. Like the historical narrative, the commemorative narrative differs from the chronicle because it undergoes the process of narrativization. As Hayden White observes, the selection and organization of a vast array of chronicled facts into a narrative form requires a response to concerns that are essentially literary and poetic.[20] This fictional dimension, which he points out with regard to the historical narrative, is even more pronounced in the case of the commemorative narrative, which more easily blurs the line between the real and the imagined.[21] The creativity of the commemorative narrative within the constraints of the historical narrative, its manipulation of the historical record with deliberate suppressions and imaginative elaborations, is explored throughout this work.

Each commemoration reconstructs a specific segment of the past and is therefore fragmentary in nature. Yet these commemorations together contribute to the formation of a *master commemorative narrative* that structures collective memory. With this concept I refer to a broader view of history, a basic "story line" that is culturally constructed and provides the group members with a general notion of their shared past.[22]

To fully appreciate the meaning of individual commemorations, then, it is important to examine them within the framework of the master commemorative narrative. The study of the collective memory of a particular event thus calls for the examination of the history of its commemoration as well as its relation to other significant events in the group's past. As we shall see below, the formation of such analogies or contrasts between major historical periods and events is in itself a part of the construction of collective memory.

The master commemorative narrative focuses on the group's distinct social identity and highlights its historical development. In this sense it contributes to the formation of the nation, portraying it as a unified group moving through history.[23] This general thrust often implies a linear conception of time. Yet the master commemorative narrative occasionally suspends this linearity by the omission, regression, repetition, and the conflation of historical events. The holiday cycle, the annual calendar, and the liturgical cycle typically disrupt the flow of time by highlighting recurrent patterns in the group's experiences.[24] Indeed, the tension between the linear and cyclical perceptions of history often underlies the construction of collective memory.[25] As we shall see, the commemorative narratives of specific events often suggest their unique character, while their examination within the context of the master commemorative narrative indicates the recurrence of historical patterns in the group's experience.

Since collective memory highlights the group's distinct identity, the master commemorative narrative focuses on the event that marks the group's emergence as an independent social entity.[26] The commemoration of beginnings is clearly essential for demarcating the group's distinct identity vis-à-vis others. The emphasis on a "great divide"[27] between this group and others is used to dispel any denial of the group's legitimacy. The commemoration of beginnings justifies the group's claim as a distinct unit, often by demonstrating that its roots go back to a distant past. European national movements displayed keen interest in peasants' folklore since they believed that it provided evidence of a unique national past and traditions preserved by this folk.[28] Similarly, more modern nations attempted to recover or invent older traditions to display their common roots in a distant past.[29]

Pierre Nora comments that modern nations celebrate "birth" rather than "origins" to articulate a sense of historical discontinuity.[30] Indeed, birth symbolizes at one and the same time a point of separation from another group and the beginning of a new life as a collective entity with a future of its own. A shift in the commemoration of beginnings can also serve as a means of transforming a group's identity. The more recent emphasis by African Americans on their African origins is a case in point.

While the term "negro" is associated with their past as slaves in America, a greater desire to embrace their earlier African origins has contributed to the recasting of their identity as "African Americans."

Collective memory provides an overall sense of the group's development by offering a system of periodization that imposes a certain order on the past. Like other aspects of collective memory, this periodization involves a dialogue between the past and the present, as the group reconstructs its own history from a current ideological stance. Drawing upon selective criteria, collective memory divides the past into major stages, reducing complex historical events to basic plot structures. The power of collective memory does not lie in its accurate, systematic, or sophisticated mapping of the past, but in establishing basic images that articulate and reinforce a particular ideological stance.

The tendency to provide extreme images in the construction of collective memory accentuates the contrast between different periods and encourages the formation of unambiguous attitudes toward different stages of the group's development. Thus, it highlights certain periods as representing important developments for the group while defining others as historical setbacks. Nations typically portray eras of pioneering, conquest, or struggle for independence as "positive periods"; in contrast, they are likely to define those periods when they were part of a larger empire as essentially negative, denying the full realization of their legitimacy as separate political entities.

The mapping of the past through the construction of a master commemorative narrative also designates its *commemorative density*, which is the function of what Lévi-Strauss calls "the pressure of history."[31] Commemorative density thus indicates the importance that the society attributes to different periods in its past: while some periods enjoy multiple commemorations, others attract little attention, or fall into oblivion. The commemorative density thus ranges from periods or events that are central to the group's memory and commemorated in great detail and elaboration to ones that remain unmarked in the master commemorative narrative. Such periods or events that collective memory suppresses become subjects of *collective amnesia*.[32] Thus, the construction of the master commemorative narrative exposes the dynamics of remembering and forgetting that underlie the construction of any commemorative narrative: by focusing attention on certain aspects of the past, it necessarily covers up others that are deemed irrelevant or disruptive to the flow of the narrative and ideological message. Bernard Lewis points out the phenomenon of recovering a forgotten past. Yet it is no less important to note that such a recovery may lead to the covering up of other aspects of the past. Remembering and forgetting are

thus closely interlinked in the construction of collective memory, and it is this duality of the process of recovering and re-covering roots that this book sets out to explore.

Through the restructuring of the past, the commemorative narrative creates its own version of historical time as it elaborates, condenses, omits, or conflates historical events. By using these and other discursive techniques, the narrative transforms historical time into *commemorative time*.[33] Thus, a highly elaborate reference to the past is likely to expand historical time, and conversely, a brief and generalized commemoration symbolically shrinks it within the framework of the narrative. Commemorative time is an important dimension in the analysis of the Zionist master commemorative narrative and the narratives relating to the specific events on which this study focuses.

Although historical changes usually occur over a period of time and as a result of a process rather than a single event, collective memory tends to select particular events and portrays them as symbolic markers of change. The choice of a single event clearly provides a better opportunity for ritualized remembrance than a gradual process of transition does.[34] The master commemorative narrative thus presents these events as *turning points* that changed the course of the group's historical development and hence are commemorated in great emphasis and elaboration. In turn, the selection of certain events as turning points highlights the ideological principles underlying the master commemorative narrative by dramatizing the transitions between periods.

The high commemorative density attributed to certain events not only serves to emphasize their historical significance. It may also elevate them beyond their immediate historical context into symbolic texts that serve as paradigms for understanding other developments in the group's experience. Thus, collective memory can transform historical events into *political myths*[35] that function as a lens through which group members perceive the present and prepare for the future. Because turning points often assume symbolic significance as markers of change, they are more likely to transform into myths. As such they not only reflect the social and political needs of the group that contributed to their formation but also become active agents in molding the group's needs.

Their highly symbolic function of representing historical transitions grants the turning points more ambiguity than events that the master commemorative narrative clearly locates within a particular period. Indeed, the ambiguity stems from their liminal location between periods, presenting a pattern of separation and reincorporation typical of rites of passage in general.[36] As Victor Turner observes: "Liminal entities are neither here nor

there; there are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions."[37]

Like other rites of passage, the commemoration of these turning points is imbued with sacredness but also with tensions. This symbolic state of liminality, of being between and betwixt historical periods, contributes to the ambiguity of turning points on the one hand, and to their ability to function as political myths, subject to different interpretations, on the other hand. The ambiguity may be less apparent within a single performance of commemoration that attempts to emphasize a certain meaning of the past and suppress other possible interpretations. But the comparative study of various commemorative performances relating to the same event makes it possible to observe these tensions and the amazing capacity of the myth to mediate between highly divergent readings of the past.

This capacity may help explain why certain events can continue to occupy a central place in the group's memory in spite of the tensions underlying their commemorations. The liminal position of the turning point allows for different interpretations, obscuring the tensions between them, and thereby protecting the sacredness of these events as well as their place within the master commemorative narrative. In some cases, however, a fragile coexistence between divergent interpretations breaks down, and the myth can no longer contain those tensions. At such points the past becomes openly contested, as rival parties engage in a conflict over its interpretation. The discussion of commemorations of specific turning points in Israel shows how myths can successfully contain, and be reinforced by, multiple interpretations and how they can become the subject of heated controversy when the political stakes associated with their mythical meaning become too high to ignore. In such situations the balance between the dominant commemorative narrative and alternative narratives can be upset then triggering a more profound change in the society's collective memory.

The alternative commemorative narrative that directly opposes the master commemorative narrative, operating under and against its hegemony, thus constitutes a *countermemory*. As the term implies, countermemory is essentially oppositional and stands in hostile and subversive relation to collective memory. If the master commemorative narrative attempts to suppress alternative views of the past, the countermemory in turn denies the validity of the narrative constructed by the collective memory and presents its own claim for a more accurate representation of history. This challenge not only addresses the symbolic realm, but obviously has direct political implications. The master commemorative narrative represents the political

elite's construction of the past, which serves its special interests and promotes its political agenda. Countermemory challenges this hegemony by offering a divergent commemorative narrative representing the views of marginalized individuals or groups within the society. The commemoration of the past can thus become a contested territory in which groups engaging in a political conflict promote competing views of the past in order to gain control over the political center or to legitimize a separatist orientation.[38]

While this conception of countermemory shares Foucault's emphasis on its oppositional and subversive character, it departs from his insistence on the fragmentary nature of countermemory.[39] Countermemory is not necessarily limited to the construction of a single past event; it can be part of a different commemorative framework forming an alternative overview of the past that stands in opposition to the hegemonic one. In fact, even when countermemory challenges the commemoration of a single event, it is considered highly subversive precisely because the implications of this challenge tend to go beyond the memory of that particular event, targeting the master commemorative narrative.

Indeed, the subversive character of countermemory is acknowledged by regimes that prohibit minority groups from performing their distinctive commemorative rituals. The Bulgarians' efforts to suppress Turkish, Gypsy, Pomak, and Muslim folklore as "foreign" in order to support their construction of a distinct "Bulgarian" identity and past provide such an example.[40] Similarly, the Afrikaners, who had first used their constructions of the past to articulate their opposition to the British, later used them to reinforce the politics of apartheid on the black and colored population of South Africa.[41] But even in democratic societies the tensions between collective memory and countermemories can easily trigger intense public debates about the appropriate and more valid commemorative narrative. The controversy over Thanksgiving can illustrate this point. While the "traditional American" commemoration is constructed from the perspective of the European Pilgrims, a revisionist trend calls to include the Native Americans as active participants rather than as objects of commemoration. The issue is not limited to the specific holiday celebration; it implies a profound revision of the master commemorative narrative and its portrayal of origins. The demand to incorporate the Native Americans' countermemory in what was previously established as "American" collective memory requires the redefinition of the American collective identity and asserts a marginalized group's claim for greater representation.

The existence of such tensions ultimately forges change in collective memory and makes it a dynamic cultural force rather than a body of "sur-

vivals" that modern societies simply tolerate. Acts of commemoration recharge collective memory and allow for its transformation. The pressure of countermemory too can contribute to this vitality by encouraging further commemorative activity in response to its challenge. Collective memory can successfully suppress an oppositional memory or hold it in check; but countermemory may also gain momentum and, as it increases in popularity, lose its oppositional status. In such cases countermemory is transformed into a collective memory. The French and the Bolshevik revolutions provide examples of attempts to obliterate older commemorative systems by force, transforming what was previously a countermemory into an official memory, supporting those governments' new political, social, and economic orders.

This study focuses on the Zionist constructions of the past as they were formed in the Hebrew culture of Palestinian Jews and continued to evolve within Israeli culture following the foundation of the State of Israel in 1948. The Zionist views of the past first emerged as countermemory to traditional Jewish memory in Europe. As they developed, they constructed the master commemorative narrative of the society of Zionist settlers who immigrated to Palestine, inspired by the nationalist ideology that called for a revival of Jewish national culture and life in the ancient Jewish homeland.

Since the master commemorative narrative constructs the group's past by its periodization and delineation of major turning points, much can be learned about collective memory by studying these key events. This book therefore analyzes Israeli collective memory by focusing on events that did not occupy a major place in traditional Jewish memory yet emerged as major turning points in the master commemorative narrative of Israeli society. The themes raised in this general discussion will be further explored in the following chapters as we examine the Zionist reconstructions of the past and the development of the commemorations of the fall of Masada, the Bar Kokhba revolt, and the defense of Tel Ḥai within the national Hebrew culture.