Collective Memory
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Mediated through the televisual image and its allied transmission technologies, the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Centre and the collapse of its burning “twin towers” remains arguably the most widely apprehended event in the history of the world. Within hours of two hijacked airplanes decisively crashing into the buildings killing thousands, vast numbers of people with widely different histories and social identities underwent a technologically mediated experience. This experience has become part of the image repertoires and affectively and diversely invested narratives of dispersed people who remain mostly unknown to each other. To conceptualize this vast plurality of recalled images, narratives, and affects as a specific “collective memory” is to define such as the conjoint remembrance of a particular event by people without overlapping histories and without a shared place or project.¹ This is a deceptively simple conceptualization. It is quite divergent from those put forth by scholars who have either viewed collective memory as referencing the group matrix within which individual re-collections and silences are set² or have mobilized the study of collective memories in an effort to identify and clarify how they serve the function of helping preserve (and, at times, re-constitute) a framework that regulates the meaning and coherence of the self-image of specific social entities (such as one’s nation, ethno-cultural group, spiritual community, extended family, and so on). On these terms, collective memory refers to the use of specific set of texts, images, and rites within which a group’s sense of unity and individuality is based.³ In this instance, an a priori intimacy and bonding are central to a social practice of remembering that serves to reproduce and reinforce these relations. Quite differently, when taken as conjoint remembrance by people without prior relationships, collective remembering is understood as a serial formation defined only by each member’s relation to a definite event but not to each other.⁴ In this instance, rather than starting with the assumption of existing set of social bonds and asking the functionalist question of how remembrance is of necessity implicated in their renewal, viewing collective memory as a serial formation poses the quite different questions. The focus here becomes understanding the specific practices of
remembrance that organize and regulate seriality as particular instance of a social form as well as an exploration of how differing remembrance practices might instantiate the transformation of relations so as to forge new public identities and their associated political frameworks, attitudes, and behaviors.

Such divergent perspectives concerning collective memory are hardly surprising. Anyone pursuing the study of the various ways past events are made present in people’s lives and held in social significance will be confronted by an expanding literature with a confusing, contradictory set of conceptualizations as to its core phenomena. These disagreements are more than a matter of the mis-alignment of terminology. Admittedly there is general agreement with the argument that memory is not just an isolated cognitive operation but rather personal recollections are immersed in collective narratives often reinforced in group rituals and commemorations. However beyond this, there are sharp differences among various problematics which set up the study of collective memory regulating the system of asked (and unasked) questions and consequently what is understood and desired as answers to distinct forms of social inquiry. These differences lead to very different forms of theorization and investigation of practices of remembrance.

Beginning with questions regarding the coherence and durability of existing social forms, inquires into collective memory are often focused on questions of the social production and regulation of “shared memories” as these form the connective structures of societies integral to the reproduction of cultural continuity and group identity. This work concerns not only the way the project of social recollection is mediated by various institutionally grounded, communicative practices but as well, how hegemonic social power is articulated (and contested) through the institution of particular memorial narratives and images. Much recent work on these terms has been addressed to studies of the ideological formation of national and ethno-cultural “memory” particularly through various technologies of mediation. Exemplary in this regard is David Simpson’s analysis of the *New York Times* series of visual and textual remembrances of a large number of people from all walks of life who died in the attacks on September 11, 2001. The focus here is on the ideological illumination of a cultural imaginary linking meaning and identity within rituals that attempt to secure social cohesiveness by
invoking iconic memories that evoke affective structures of identification. On such terms, remembrance practices are seen as attempts to mobilize collective commitments based on the psycho-social dynamics of recognition, identification, and affirmation. These not only organize and legitimate narratives structures that make possible conversations regarding the “lessons of history,” lessons within and/or against which commitments might be rationally articulated and affectively grounded, but they also set in motion the exclusion of events from social memory that might disrupt hegemonic identities.

Alternatively, if one starts with questions of what forms of sociality do not yet exist that might be forged from various social practices of remembrance, the consequence is a very different form of inquiry in regard to the substance and possibilities of collective memory. The underlying problematic informs inquiries into how practices of remembrance that relate separate understandings of and attachments to traces of past events might open new possibilities for future human sociality. On such terms, collective memory is considered praxiological, not just reproductive. It is less a matter of how memory functions to maintain the continuity and coherence of a social unit and more a matter of the possible consequences of any given practice of remembrance in regard to if and how people might deem it necessary and/or desirous to alter their relations with one another. Here remembrance is not only a practice that instantiates social relations but possibly transforms them through the on-going interchange of thoughts and affects, opinions and beliefs, attachments and antipathies. On such terms, the social realm does not entirely pre-exist actual practices of remembering, but is in part constituted in the possibility of various modes and methods of remembrance always understood as forms of social praxis.

It is only minimally useful to conceive of collective memory as a social formation of those not present all at once, but nevertheless able to imagine themselves present to events institutionally defined as those of major historical significance. Such a formation corresponds to dynamics of spectacle that “unites what is separate, but it unites only in its separateness” linking spectators through “a one-way relationship to the very center that maintains their isolation from one another.” It is of course possible to conceptualize the televisual mediated images of the attacks of September 11th precisely on these terms arguing that the discourse of
the dominant media that has secured the hegemonic narratives of “September 11th” and its aftermath has functioned as an apparatus of state power that continues to inscribe “the event” within a serial, dread filled structure of feeling. In this regard, social remembrance is a form of spectacle that has defined and encapsulated this event within a very specific discursive currency regarding the substance, consequences, and origins of terrorism. If such a theorization was adequate we would indeed have an understanding of collective memory as a “blissful unification” achieved through consumption of the mediated image as well as a breakdown in the faculty of encounter so that “there is no place left where people can discuss the realities which concern them, because they can never free themselves from the crushing presence of media discourse and of the various forces organized to relay it.”

The limits of such a notion of collective memory is made clear by research such as the Oral History Narrative and Memory Project at Columbia University. This project has been interviewing a wide range of people over time in an attempt to understand the ways the September 11th attacks and the continuing threat of terrorism has transformed everyday life in the United States. In the first report on the initial interviews of this project, researchers found that the climate of fear that dominated the responses of those interviewed differed in ways that were not reflected in mainstream media accounts. In many of the interviews with immigrants of Middle Eastern or Latino descent, there was a return of the traumas produced by catastrophic violence which caused them to flee to the United States. The report concludes: “The impression created by the media that September 11 constituted a ‘loss of innocence’ did not apply to its most recent and prospective citizens who had sought refuge from previous trauma.” Even more prevalent was a dread that they would become victims of a retaliation mentality held by government, hate groups, or individuals. In addition it was reported that “those interviewees who experienced the most direct and traumatic aspects of the disaster, through either proximity or loss, often feared that the violence they lived through would spark greater violence.” A surprising number of people interviewed before October 7, 2001, the date of the first air strikes in Afghanistan, wanted to publically record their reluctance to pinpoint the enemy in a way that would rationalize an invasion in which civilian populations might accidentally or incidentally be attacked and falsely targeted.
Having initiated conversations which were themselves counter-hegemonic structures of remembrance, this study opens the question of what new formations might be emergent from various practices of remembrance of the attacks of September 11th, formations that might diverge from those reproductive of a singular national entity linked in a “war for civilisation” against a real, but not easily identified enemy. As Winter has shown in the context of his studies of local remembrance practices after World War I, there is often an impetus for new practices of collective memory in the context of the breakdown of social significance in the wake of war and disaster. In such circumstance people must find ways of supporting each other in relation to loss and the amelioration symbolic collapse. Social breakdown then often impels a communal activity of remembrance establishing relations within which new forms of publicity and formations of solidarity are possible. Hence the importance of the collective memory work being undertaken by the organization September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows. Comprised of people who had family members who were civilian casualties of terrorism and grieving their loss, they have been seized by the desire to spare other families in any part of the world the suffering they continue to experience. Just prior to the fifth anniversary of the September 11th attacks, this group organized an extraordinary gathering of terror victims from fifteen countries. The outcome of this meeting was the establishment of a global network comprised of people who lost loved ones to, or were directly affected by, war, nuclear weapons, terrorism, genocide, organized crime, and political violence. Their commitment is to work together to break the cycles of violence and revenge while honouring the memories of the victims and the dignity of the survivors. In this work, remembrance is not just enacted as the recall of devastation. Nor is remembrance the provision of a causal account (historical, theological, or otherwise) of the occurrence of violence. Rather remembrance here is a condition for an asymmetrical recognition of loss that has provoked people to work together to protest an unsustainable spiral of death and destruction, telling their stories and supporting each other as they attempt to explore the political possibilities of new forms civil society and counter-narratives to the hegemonic scripts of entrenched global antagonisms. While it would be naive to render such conversations as a singularly adequate response to the pervasive violence of fundamentalist ideologies and the structured inequities of global capital (enforced when
required by militarized nation states), one should not dismiss its importance. Collective memory in this instance is part mourning, part struggle for counter-narratives that contest the ideologies attempting to suture a pervasive spectacle culture.

At stake in the varying problematics which organize the study of collective memory is the relation of remembrance to the prospects of human futurity. In this respect, rather than only responding to the question of what we must remember in order to be, studies of collective memory need also ask what it means, in light of the experience of the past to be what we are now, and perhaps more significantly, how we might be in future.\footnote{Endnotes}

Endnotes


5 Collective memory and social frameworks exist “to the degree that our individual thought places itself in these frameworks and participates in this memory that is capable of the act of recollection.” Halbwachs, op. cit. p. 38.


17. http://www.peacefultomorrows.org/article.php?id=694