

# Turning Points and Myths of German Memory

Jeffrey K. Olick

## 1. From the Memory Boom to Memory Studies

One speaks glibly of a memory boom that began sometime in the late 1970s or early 1980s. The story goes something like this: Following the decline of post-war modernist narratives of progressive improvement through an ever expanding welfare state, nation-states turned to the past as a basis for shoring up their legitimacy. The decline of utopian visions redirected our gaze to collective pasts, which served as a repository of inspiration for repressed identities and unfulfilled claims. Without unifying collective aspirations, identity politics proliferated. And most often, these identities nursed a wound and harbored a grudge. The memory boom thus unleashed a culture of trauma and regret, and states are now judged on how well they atone for their past misdeeds rather than on how well they meet their fiscal obligations and inspire future projects. In the commercial sphere, these transformations in political legitimation were matched by a commodification of nostalgia, a popularisation of history, and an interest in 'memory', both individual and collective. Both of the latter – individual memory and collective memory – were seen to be at risk, the former by neurological decay and sensory overload, the latter by dying generations and official denial.

A central focus in these putative transnational epochal transformations, of course, is the case of Germany, which has served as something of a prism, a sort of epicentre of these developments and avant-garde model for others. After all, the Holocaust is said to have been a civilisational rupture that pushed beyond the limits of representation, after which one could no longer accept even the most refined faith in the Enlightenment project. The atrocious destruction of the European Jews – to say nothing of the millions of others who were destroyed with more conventional means and justifications – at the hands of Europe's most 'advanced' culture signaled nothing less than the end of the future. How Germany confronted its destitution has thus been a crucible for political morality ever since, and a testing ground for strategies of moral reconstruction and theories of memory alike. In the myth of the memory boom, Germany then is something of a tragic hero who has come to terms with his hubris, and who has taken the consequences standing up, and as such is a model for others. Of course, many see the issue otherwise, namely that Germany has been a sacrificial lamb on the altar of regret or the obligatory performer of an empty ritual of repentance.

I call this story a myth not because it is wrong, though it is certainly overly simplified, as well as told from a particular perspective; the memory boom is not a single thing, nor is it as dominant as this kind of an account implies. I call it a myth because it is a story with which many of us seek to understand and justify our contemporary efforts.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, a further aspect of this mythology is that an ‘industry’ of ‘memory studies’ – both German and otherwise – has arisen to explicate, theorise, respond to, and indeed participate in this memory boom from academic and intellectual quarters.<sup>2</sup> And to be sure, there is a great deal of boundary blurring: much of what passes for scholarship is really indistinguishable except in form and language from the celebration – or lamentation or merely highlighting – of memory in public and private life. Intellectuals curate exhibits, judge memorial competitions, advise politicians, and otherwise seek to give their work a public import and timeliness that scholarship rarely achieves. Furthermore, public debates often refer to and adopt the language of academic theory – the proliferation of the sociological term ‘collective memory’ throughout the discourse of journalists and politicians is just one example. The question is what it has contributed.

Certainly, a great deal of the academic interest in memory is a reaction to the so-called memory boom. But, before exploring contemporary myths of memory and the role the focus on memory has played in contemporary German politics – my principal goal for this essay – we must take care not to reduce the former to the latter; we must not reduce, that is, the proliferation of serious memory scholarship – or at least its conceptual and substantive results – to the memory boom, whatever its actual contours; doing so is a common move for those who see the proliferation of memory politics as a negative emergence. For in the last thirty or so years, as the memory boom has waxed and waned, diffused and concentrated, spread from one centre to another, a body of durable theories, concepts, and empirical results about the workings of memory, individual and collective, have emerged and been solidified, if not yet with paradigmatic rigor.<sup>3</sup> These more timeless contributions must be distinguished, to the extent possible, from the more timely, opportunistic interventions into the memory boom.

There are at least two towering figures of contemporary memory studies. The more obvious is Sigmund Freud, whose interest in, and theories of, trauma

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Charles Maier, A Surfeit of Memory? Reflections on History, Melancholy, and Denial, in: *History & Memory* 5 (1993) issue 2, pp. 136-152; Kerwin Lee Klein, On the Emergence of *Memory* in Historical Discourse, in: *Representations* 69 (2000), pp. 127-150; Jay Winter, The Generation of Memory: Reflections on the ‘Memory Boom’ in Contemporary Historical Studies, in: *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute* (Washington) 27 (2000), pp. 69-92.

<sup>2</sup> See Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, A Looming Crash or a Soft Landing? Forecasting the Future of the Memory ‘Industry’, in: *Journal of Modern History* 81 (2009), pp. 122-158.

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey K. Olick/Joyce Robbins, From ‘Collective Memory’ to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices, in: *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (1998), pp. 105-140.

have supplied much of the lingua franca for the so-called memory boom. We now supposedly live in a traumatised culture that understands itself through Freudian categories – that is, our lives seem suffused with the reverberating remains of useless suffering and the symbols of un-assimilable atrocity, which we in turn try to come to terms with through the pervasive lay theory of trauma, with its emphasis on repression, latency, and return and its propensity to place the experience of suffering at the centre of the self-interpretation of cultures and identities.

Freud and trauma are indeed constitutive figures in the memory boom. Nevertheless, Freud also provided concepts, or at least challenges, that are of some use to more dispassionate scholarship in understanding the rise of trauma culture and its operation. In the first place, serious neo-Freudians like Philip Rieff have worked with Freud against some of his legacies to differentiate the ‘triumph of the therapeutic’ in lay trauma culture from a more challenging effort to ‘work through’ the past (*Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit*), a theme taken up not least in Theodor W. Adorno’s famous lectures of 1959-60 and arguably more authentic to Freud’s theories.<sup>4</sup> Why trauma culture, and why now, moreover? These are central concerns, though it is often difficult to separate the empirical from the normative, in the writings – often in the gray zone between studies and boom – that address these issues. Explaining the rise of trauma culture is an important theme for contemporary theories of late or post-modernity.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the centrality of the Holocaust to German debates and its supposed ‘globalisation’ beyond Germany, we now know that the foundations of trauma culture are both older and broader than the Holocaust. Trauma had its origins not even in the First World War, but in the railway accidents of the late nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> Walter Benjamin asked, moreover, ‘Wasn’t it noticeable at the end of the [First World W]ar that men who returned from the battlefield had grown silent – not richer but poorer in communicable experience?’<sup>7</sup> In this regard, the causal logic of the globalisation argument does not seem quite right: Is it the Holocaust that has been globalised, or is the Holocaust simply a metonym or synecdoche for a more general, longer-term process? Trauma theory as social theory must also address the latency of the memory boom, if it is indeed

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<sup>4</sup> Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic. Uses of Faith after Freud*, Chicago 1987; Theodor W. Adorno, Was bedeutet: *Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit?* [1959], in: Adorno, *Erziehung zur Mündigkeit*, ed. by Gerd Kadelbach, Frankfurt a.M. 1972, pp. 10-28.

<sup>5</sup> Ruth Leys, *Trauma. A Genealogy*, Chicago 2000; Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Baltimore 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey. The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century*, Berkeley 1986.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Benjamin, The Storyteller [1936], in: Benjamin, *Illuminations*, New York 1968, pp. 143-144.

to be seen as an outgrowth principally of the Holocaust: Why did it take so long?

The second major figure of more scholarly memory studies – in contrast to the diversely constructed and over-determined memory boom in contemporary culture – is Maurice Halbwachs. At least in part in reaction to Freud, Halbwachs developed the concept of ‘collective memory’ first in 1925.<sup>8</sup> A student of Emile Durkheim, Halbwachs repudiated individualist approaches to highlight the social dimensions of remembering, in the process founding a field of scholarly inquiry, though one that was not picked up more than sporadically until many years later. To be sure, Halbwachs uses his term ‘collective memory’ to refer to a number of different phenomena:

- First, the ways in which individuals’ memories are shaped by and with narrative means, and in response to cues, provided by the groups of which they are members; the ways we use socially provided means and materials and forms for narrating our own pasts: namely, *the social frameworks of individual memory*.
- Second, the ways in which individuals articulate their own pasts in relation to the history of their collectivities and see the history of their groups as parts of their own histories, and vice versa: namely, *historical consciousness*.
- Third, the processes – including rituals, commemorations, story-telling, reminiscence, and the like – through which the previous two sets of phenomena are activated, reproduced, and transmitted: namely, *social remembering*.
- And, finally, the collective representations – the actual stories, images, terms, monuments, materials, and institutions – that form the shared inheritance of groups or societies (although these in turn can be conceptualised as hidden generative structures or as the manifest stocks of iconography and representations): namely, *Collective Memory sui generis*.

At different times – and sometimes at the same time – Halbwachs and the scholarship that pays homage to his foundational work employ each, some, or all of these meanings of ‘collective memory’. The challenge has thus been to articulate the ways in which these different forms and products of retrospection combine and recombine in and through particular historical conjunctures, rather than to identify one or the other as the master topic or as a political demiurge. Recognising this, as we will see, works against many of the most noteworthy public declarations about ‘memory’ in contemporary Germany, which so often trade in the coin of over-totalisation.

As a result of the conceptual muddle in the term’s reference, contemporary scholars have proffered alternative concepts and frameworks. Most prominent

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<sup>8</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *Les Cadres Sociaux de la mémoire*, Paris 1925. See also Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, ed. by Mary Douglas, New York 1980.

among these come from the work of Jan and Aleida Assmann, who have distinguished among 'material', 'mimetic', 'communicative', and 'cultural' memory, placing greatest weight on the last two, which articulate, in their account, the difference between the traditions transmitted in face to face communication over the course of about three generations and the deeper sediment of past cultural materials of which we might not even be aware. In turn, the Assmanns have emphasised the different material technologies of communicative and cultural memory: in the first case, canon and oral transmission, and in the second the archive and iconography.<sup>9</sup> These latter point out that the structures of contemporary debates are much more embedded than most of their participants acknowledge. This also implies that Holocaust consciousness is not necessarily as dependent on the reminiscences of first-hand witnesses as we might assume, as well as that the disappearance of victims and perpetrators is not the only relevant consideration, whether one worries about this disappearance or looks forward to it.

Beyond the distinctions introduced by the Assmanns, others (myself included) have distinguished between an approach that sees social memory as the aggregation of what individuals know about the historical past ('collected memory') and an approach that, following Durkheim, takes collective representations as phenomena sui generis ('collective memory') – in other words, as heritage or patrimony or culture that remains relevant without direct regard to how many people share it at a particular moment.<sup>10</sup> Scholars have also distinguished different types of memory according to their institutional locations and referents, for instance between 'official' and 'vernacular' memory, public and private memory, political and family memory, historical and social memory, etc. And again, these conceptual and theoretical discourses in sociology and historiography about 'collective memory' have proceeded alongside, and sometimes entangled with, more psychological elaborations surrounding the concept of 'trauma' (individual or collective) and all the complexities that discourse has entailed. As a whole, however, these more scholarly debates work against a clear judgment of a culture as a whole. From this perspective, then, and despite the usual coin of political debate, no unified hypotheses about the role of 'memory' in German society, whether positive or negative, are warranted; the realities are much more complex.

It is, of course, no surprise that both 'collective memory' and the 'memory boom' have had their dissenters even in academic as well as political discourse.

<sup>9</sup> Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume. Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*, Munich 1999; Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian. The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism*, Cambridge 1998; Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*, Munich 1992.

<sup>10</sup> Jeffrey K. Olick, 'Collective Memory: The Two Cultures', in: *Sociological Theory* 17 (1999), pp. 333-348.

In the first place, historians who stake their discipline's identity on an epistemological claim about their enterprise have often disparaged the value of memory, which operates by very different rules and for very different purposes than historiography: Where history aims at truth, memory aims at authenticity; as a result, history and memory are often in conflict, and good historiography is necessarily sceptical about the evidence of memory. Nevertheless, as we will see, perhaps the single most important contribution of memory scholarship is to rein in not just the distortions of memory, but the more politicised claims about how memory works, both in general and in particular contexts. In this way, memory scholarship can perform an analogous function toward political polemic as history often performs toward memory.

In the second place, however, as already mentioned, there are many who reject the moral and political claims of memory – for instance, those who favor Nietzsche's warning that too much history can be the gravedigger of the present over Santayana's dictum that those who forget history are condemned to repeat it. In the German context, these sceptics can be found mostly on the right, despite the fact that any conservative argument against historical consciousness requires some significant contortions, though perhaps no more than progressive arguments in favour of memory: In the *Historikerstreit* and the years after, for instance, it often seemed as if the right wanted identity without history while the left wanted history without identity. Either way, many critics have been wary of the distortions of nostalgia, and ascribe the rise of interest in memory to a decline in utopian visions of the future; where one stands on those developments, of course, depends on how one evaluated such future-directed thinking – and the ideological and political programmes built on it – in the first place. But even apart from politics, the historical sociology of memory helps us understand the epochal setting for these debates: one can take a position on the current issues, but one cannot deny that these are indeed the issues of the epoch. This is one way in which a more scholarly approach can contribute to our understanding of contemporary disagreements: by accounting for their structure rather than by taking a position within them.

## 2. The Absent Memory of Memory

In the following pages, I explore more substantively what a scholarly approach to memory can add and has added to our understanding of German political culture and the centrality of Holocaust memory in it. In particular, I explore how memory studies responds to some of the central mythologies of German memory, including the belief that the 1950s were a period of silence or repression of the past, that the 1960s changed this, and that the 'change' (*die Wende*) of 1989 merely replaced, rather than sublated, existing oppositions. In the process, I assess the assessments of Germany's memory politics that have appeared

in a positive light under the label 'globalisation of the Holocaust' and from the more critical side under the label of 'more and more' memory.

Perhaps a useful place to begin is with the *Historikerstreit* (historians' dispute) of the mid-1980s, which at the time seemed to represent a crucial epochal turning point. More than twenty years after the fact, on the other side of world-historical transformations, it is perhaps difficult to remember how galvanising so many found the *Historikerstreit*. The debate, in so many ways, seemed defining not only for political culture, but for scholarly agendas as well – intimations of a memory boom not yet really begun, or perhaps its inaugural event! Even more difficult to remember, however, is the nature of the debate and the thin scholarship on which it actually rested. It was often pointed out that no new historical knowledge about the Nazi period was at stake in the debate. But more than that, the claims made within the *Historikerstreit* could not really depend on any significant historical knowledge about the ways in which that past had been represented in the years since 1945 either. Taken for granted by the left was that there had been a 'silence' or 'repression' of the Nazi past in the 1950s, and by the right that the late sixties and early seventies had been a period of national 'self-flagellation'. But the evidence adduced to support these claims was impressionistic, often personal/biographical, and insufficiently specified (on all sides). The *Historikerstreit* was thus fought principally through anecdote and as polemic, in large part because that was all there was available. For instance, Jürgen Habermas' charge that a neo-conservative conspiracy to rework the foundations of West German identity was underway rested on a conviction (mostly, though not completely, accurate) that something had changed.<sup>11</sup> But at the time there was very little in the way of systematic historical research about what had come before in German memory that could underwrite Habermas', or anyone else's, claims.

In my opinion, perhaps the greatest contribution of the memory discourse – in addition to the ways in which it has sensitised us to multiplicity – has been the way it highlights the contingencies of historical consciousness. The literature on collective memory draws not only on the sociological work of Maurice Halbwachs but also on philosophical perspectives like the active philosophy of Henri Bergson, the dynamic presentism of George Herbert Mead, as well as hermeneutics and other interpretivist paradigms emphasising that memory is always an ongoing work of the present.<sup>12</sup> One of the most important results of recent theorising about collective memory is thus that memory involves fundamentally recursive processes: Images of the past do not just follow one after another, distinct relations between past and present appropriate to present exi-

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<sup>11</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The New Conservatism. Cultural Criticism and the Historians' Dispute*, Cambridge 1989.

<sup>12</sup> Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, New York 1990; George Herbert Mead, *The Philosophy of the Present*, Chicago 1981; Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Boston 1989.

gencies; instead, remembering is an on-going dialogue, in which what is recalled is filtered by the entire history of previous such recollections. As Jan Assmann put it, memory is an 'ongoing work of reconstructive imagination'. In my own work, I have highlighted what I call 'the memory of memory' – the ways in which every version of the past is shaped not just by the event it recalls, nor merely by the needs of the present, but by the entire history of intervening representations; the dialogue of memory is thus not just one between past and present (as various debunking interest theories have characterised it) but one with everything that came in between; we remember not just the Nazi past, but the previous ways in which we have remembered the Nazi past, and our mnemonic practices are as much comments on earlier practices as on the event itself.<sup>13</sup> Such a perspective works against a discontinuist account of history, and makes the scholar rightly sceptical of the epochal ruptures announced by participants in the debates, and of the vast changes ascribed to them. There is thus very little entirely new under the sun, and antagonists often share more assumptions than differences.

Just prior to the *Historikerstreit*, for instance, the conservative philosopher Hermann Lübbe published a controversial essay claiming that the silence of the 1950s was 'communicative', signalling tacit agreement that difficult associations would not be dredged up in exchange for supporting the new state and its venerable leader, Konrad Adenauer.<sup>14</sup> The *Historikerstreit* was thus well-prepared, as were, indeed, Lübbe's earlier statements. Since at least 1959, when Adorno wrote that he was more concerned with the dangers of fascism within West German democracy than outside it, the left had attacked what it saw as the costs of Adenauer's approach, which included an end to denazification, broad amnesties for those already punished and for those not yet convicted, demands for early release of condemned war criminals, and reintegration of discredited civil servants, among other measures; such efforts, critics charged, were part of intentionally repressing the past, an attempt to purchase short-term stability by allowing tainted elements to persist. Adenauer, the left had long believed, was well aware that 'too much memory' would jeopardise his position by undermining support from discredited segments of the population and their sympathisers, who did not want to be blamed; his choices, from this perspective, were especially cynical. In contrast, many on the right, like Lübbe, had long defended Adenauer's policies by arguing that they resulted from his clear recognition of the trade-offs between 'justice' and 'legitimacy'. Anything else, they said, would have been irresponsible of him, risking long-term insta-

<sup>13</sup> Jeffrey K. Olick, Genre Memories and Memory Genres: A Dialogical Analysis of May 8, 1945 Commemorations in the Federal Republic of Germany, in: *American Sociological Review* 64 (1999), pp. 381-402.

<sup>14</sup> Hermann Lübbe, Der Nationalsozialismus im deutschen Nachkriegsbewußtsein, in: *Historische Zeitschrift* 236 (1983), pp. 579-599.

bility; Adenauer did what had to be done to secure legitimacy for what has turned out to be a solid democracy: The proof is in the pudding. These two positions were merely replayed in the *Historikerstreit*.

While the *Historikerstreit*'s antagonists evaluated Lübke's claimed silence differently, however – some agreeing with Lübke that it was 'communicative' while others viewed it as shameful – both sides agreed that there had in fact been a silence, and that it had had something to do with solidifying legitimacy for the new state. While the left thus disparaged Adenauer's choice for legitimacy over justice and the right praised it, they both shared the view that the choice inhered in the novel initial condition of the Federal Republic as a state. In doing so, however, they both underplayed the degree to which early governmental policies were matters of conviction and perception as much as of strategy. A more dynamic approach to memory provides a rather different view, namely that Adenauer and his cohort – with widespread support across the political spectrum – attempted to draw a line under the past because that is how they had understood their responsibility to the past, not, or at least not only, because they felt compelled to do so by the threat of political failure.<sup>15</sup> The reason for the error is that antagonists and scholars alike accepted uncritically the institutional rupture of 1949, as if what came before was mere prelude, rather than prolegomenon, and then took positions on these issues as if the debate had not been ongoing.

From the perspective of memory studies, moreover, this discussion shows why the *Historikerstreit* is such an interesting case in the history of memory: Clearly what was at stake was not just the past being referred to (the Nazi period) but the previous forty years of remembering that past; the *Historikerstreit* was not just about the appropriate verdict on or assessment of the Nazis (about which there was not all too much disagreement) but about assessing the appropriateness of how that verdict had been operative in the intervening years. Indeed, that the *Historikerstreit* was but a moment in a long-standing (though always changing) discourse about the Nazi past is precisely what those of us of the post-68 generation did not know very well at the time of the dispute because we were new to the issues, though to be sure we were encouraged by both sides to accept that the debate was radically new, that a significant change was afoot, for better or worse. The debate, of course, had many foreshadowings, and was as much a response to earlier moments (not just proximate ones, but many others as well, reaching all the way back to before the end of the war, when Allied planners theorised about the causes of National Socialism and about the appropriate ways to rebuild Germany) as it was to the geopolitics of the Reagan era and the neo-conservative programme of the Kohl government.

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<sup>15</sup> Jeffrey K. Olick, *In the House of the Hangman. The Agonies of German Defeat, 1943–1949*, Chicago 2005.

### 3. The New Historiography of Memory

How, then, has the rise of interest in memory – collective or otherwise – improved our understanding of the issues raised so powerfully in the *Historikerstreit*? In the first place, the new discourse has made clear that memory itself has a history. In contrast to historical epistemologies that deride memory as an inferior form of evidence about the past, the new discourse on memory encourages us to see memory itself as historical. In other words, while commemorative events are of a different kind than, say, battles or institutional decisions, they are events nonetheless and can be studied historically in their own right. A focus on memory thus does not entail accepting the problematic historical validity claims of memory or commemoration and using memory as evidence of what happened; rather, it merely recognises that a commemoration is an event just as what it commemorates was an event. How the Nazi past was represented at any particular point in the history of Germany is thus an empirical historical question; and the history of German memory is a vast subject.

Indeed, in the years since the *Historikerstreit* a new wave of mostly younger scholars has sought to avoid the more egregious exaggerations and distortions of the *Historikerstreit's* polemics by studying the history of German memory with impressive historical rigour. Was there, for instance, really a pervasive silence about the past in the 1950s? Before venturing this kind of claim, these scholars argue, one must examine in fine detail who said what, where, when, and why.<sup>16</sup>

It turns out that, technically speaking, there was in fact no ‘silence’ about the Nazi past in the 1950s, during which time West Germany’s political leaders were significantly preoccupied with the residues of National Socialism and, in particular, with the purgative measures imposed by the occupation authorities in the immediate aftermath of the war. The discourse – as well as policymaking – regarding National Socialism was enormous in those years. Of course, just as silence can speak volumes, speaking volumes can be a silence of sorts, so the matter is complex indeed. But the new historiography, in contrast to a long line of polemic, has sought to ground such interpretive complexities in unimpeachable, systematic empirical research. And it is surprising how much of that history had not yet been examined in detail or woven into coherent narra-

<sup>16</sup> This literature is enormous and growing. Examples include Ulrich Brochhagen, *Nach Nürnberg. Vergangenheitsbewältigung und Westintegration in der Ära Adenauer*, Hamburg 1994; Norbert Frei, *Adenauer's Germany and the Nazi Past. The Politics of Amnesty and Integration*, New York 2002; Jeffrey Herf, *Divided Memory. The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys*, Cambridge 1997; Jan-Holger Kirsch, „Wir haben aus der Geschichte gelernt“. *Der 8. Mai als politischer Gedenktag in Deutschland*, Köln 1999; Robert G. Moeller, *War Stories. The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany*, Berkeley 2001; Frank Stern, *The Whitewashing of the Yellow Badge. Antisemitism and Philosemitism in Postwar Germany*, Oxford 1992.

tives by the mid-1980s. In the twenty or so years since, our knowledge particularly of the 1950s has grown enormously, leading to more subtle interpretations and to the refinement of older clichés. This has not yet been as true of decades subsequent to the 1950s, though exciting work is emerging.

Second, however, as already mentioned, the new memory studies highlight the ways in which images of earlier memory feed into, and form objects for, subsequent mnemonic discourse. Theory suggests, for instance, that earlier moments of memory are profoundly important for subsequent trajectories because collective memory – like many other social processes – is ‘path-dependent’. Order, and particularly starting points, matter a great deal (though they are not the only things that matter) for subsequent trajectories. Furthermore, we know from narrative theory that in stories one thing does not simply come after another willy-nilly, but reacts to it. If the origins of the discourse of German memory were particularly important because they set terms and initiated trajectories, they also became motivators for subsequent narrative claims. In particular, clichés about memory in the 1950s served as animating forces for the self-conception of the younger generation of the 1960s and 1970s, for whom *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* was not just about mastering the Nazi past, but about mastering what was seen as the failed memory of that past in the 1950s. By the 1980s, as already hinted, a clear dialectical metanarrative was at work, in which the thesis of the 1950s was seen to have given rise to the antithesis of the 1960s, which required a synthesis of the 1980s (though in fact that effort of synthesis was apparently premature, given the resistance with which it was met).

The main point here, however, is that none of this historical and reflexive complexity seemed to have been on the table in the *Historikerstreit*. Habermas’ claim that a conspiracy was afoot to rework the foundations of West German identity was in fact overly optimistic about the prevalence of the culture that he believed was being threatened. Jan-Werner Mueller, a participant in the wave of new historiography, has characterised the myth as follows: ‘Two cultures opposed each other in early postwar Germany. On the one side, there was an official public culture of guilt and democratic humanism, sanctioned by the Allies through the licensed journals, and centered on emigrants and liberals such as [Karl] Jaspers. On the other side stood an obstinate culture of silence, in which honour was preserved through taboos. The culture of guilt and communication, not surprisingly, dominated in public, but the counterculture of silence became more characteristic for the private and semi-private life of the young republic.’<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Jan-Werner Mueller, *Another Country. German Intellectuals, Unification and National Identity*, New Haven 2000, p. 31.

In the same vein, the German-Israeli historian Dan Diner has argued that 'Jaspers's discussion of the theme [of German guilt] of 1945-46 reads like a founding text for the new (West) German collective identity. [...] Jaspers's [...] confessional text', Diner claims, 'acquired quasi-normative significance for the old Federal Republic.'<sup>18</sup> In my own work I have challenged the clarity of this verdict on Jaspers, but it is exactly this belief in the 'quasi-normative' status of Jaspers' position, and admiration of it (which I largely share), that underlay Habermas' arguments in the *Historikerstreit*.<sup>19</sup> In some distinction, however, the literary critic Helmut Lethen wrote a decade later that 'the distinction between shame and guilt cultures is instructive as a myth, the reality of a wish projection that was persuasive to a generation of critical intellectuals.'<sup>20</sup> The point here, however, is that our portrait of memory, and resultantly of the cultural underpinnings of the contemporary Federal Republic, has become substantially more solid and complex through the new memory studies that took off from the *Historikerstreit* and analysed these issues and discourses in rigorous detail.

#### 4. Déjà Vu All Over Again

In light of the foregoing, it seems clear that despite our distance from the *Historikerstreit*, and despite the very significant changes rendered by 1989 and the reunification of Germany, contemporary debates are well prepared. Claims made about the new epoch of memory thus carry great risk of overstating the degree to which everything has changed. What are these claims?

First, there is the general theory that the Holocaust has been 'globalised' in some sense, particularly in the last decade or two, when the referents of Holocaust discourse lost at least some of their German specificity and become a matter of, and model for, the entire world.<sup>21</sup> To be sure, there are better and worse versions of this thesis, some tracing the origins of this globalisation of memory at least as far back as the idea of world war, and even to a period before the Holocaust, emphasising the advent of the mass media and the rise of the 'global village'. By the same token, many commentators assert a new phase in this globalisation process, one in which more and more European countries now acknowledge Holocaust pasts, and one in which more and more countries

<sup>18</sup> Dan Diner, *Beyond the Conceivable. Studies on Germany, Nazism, and the Holocaust*, Berkeley 2000, p. 219.

<sup>19</sup> Olick, *In the House of the Hangman* (fn. 15).

<sup>20</sup> Helmut Lethen, *Cool Conduct. The Culture of Distance in Weimar Germany*, Berkeley 2002, pp. 173-174.

<sup>21</sup> While the discourse on globalisation is wide, perhaps the most prominent text is Daniel Levy/Natan Sznajder, *Erinnerung om globalen Zeitalter: Der Holocaust*, Frankfurt a.M. 2001.

within and outside Europe use the model of Holocaust consciousness to confront legacies of other difficult pasts and to highlight a sensitivity to trauma overall. This is the so-called new regime of human rights, which certainly had its start in the aftermath of World War Two, if not earlier, but which did not triumph until the end of the Cold War. (Whether it is the Holocaust, rather than, for instance, Hiroshima, that is the symbol of this globalisation, of course, depends on where one sits.)

For many theorists who share the perceptions of trauma culture and who seek a collective memory founded not on the celebration of heroic deeds but on the commemoration of atrocious misdeeds, nevertheless, this is a salutary development, something new in history. The past, in this light, serves as a warning rather than as a model, and can thus limit the more egregious excesses of power and demands a response, individual and collective, to atrocity. Whether that has in fact been the case or not, of course, is debated: It took us a very long time to respond to Kosovo, and the possibility of a unified response to the Rwandan crisis has been mired in politically-loaded semantic debates about whether or not the term genocide applies. But by and large, from a certain perspective, whatever the limitations, an awareness of history, an imperative to atone for it, and a commandment that such things should happen 'never again', is good and appropriate, and we can work towards, and hope for, the model to spread to the holdouts, for instance Turkey and Japan. It is worth noting here in passing that this positive assessment of what I have elsewhere called 'the politics of regret' was a central commitment of the German left of the 1960s, which asserted a kind of repentance pride: We went through the process of atoning for the past, and thus we can now show the rest of the world how it is done.<sup>22</sup> This attitude even earned its own sarcastic name: *Sühnestolz*.

There is, however, a very different assessment of the politics of regret, already alluded to above under the Nietzschean banner. A representative example of this is the journalist Michael Jeismann, who reported on the January 2000 Stockholm Holocaust conference, attended by governmental leaders from all over Europe.<sup>23</sup> For Jeismann, the charade was absurd. In his essay, Jeismann asserts that a transformation had occurred in which it was no longer adequate for the leader of a nation to assert his nation's innocence of crimes: '[...] dass mit dem Hinweis auf die eigene moralische Tadellosigkeit in der Zeit des Zweiten Weltkriegs seit den neunziger Jahren politisch nichts zu gewinnen war.' Instead, one now had to join in the rush of announcing minor failings. We have moved, Jeismann implied, from a competition of the victims to a perverse

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<sup>22</sup> Jeffrey K. Olick, *The Politics of Regret. On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility*, New York 2007.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Jeismann, Schuld – der neue Gründungsmythos Europas? Die Internationale Holocaust-Konferenz von Stockholm (26.-28. Januar 2000) und eine Moral, die nach hinten losgeht, in: *Historische Anthropologie* 8 (2000), pp. 454-458, the following quotations pp. 454-455.

competition of the perpetrators over who can offer the best apology. (This theme was even captured in a satirical novel by Jay Rayner called 'The Apologist', about a restaurant critic who apologises for a bad review, and is so good at apologising that he becomes 'apologiser-in-chief' for the United Nations.<sup>24</sup>)

To be sure, there is something to the charge that our rituals of repentance sometimes devolve into if not quite silliness, than at least uselessness. This concern is shared by the avatars of regret as well, who worry that acknowledgments of the past have lost their meaning because they have become empty and overly-ritualised. And, as Jeismann's case shows, ritualisation can lead to relativisation, though one senses that Jeismann is less concerned with relativisation than with conspicuous displays of repentance, which do not strike him as a good idea. A similar position can be found in the novelist Martin Walser's public debate with Ignatz Bubis, when he accused advocates of regret of using the Holocaust as a sort of 'moral cudgel'.<sup>25</sup> The same attitude is apparent in Jeismann's argument, especially when he attributes such rituals to 'die jüdische Interessenvertretung vor allem in den Vereinigten Staaten, die sich jetzt mehr und mehr Gehör und Einfluss verschaffen konnte'. While Jeismann's 'mehr und mehr' clearly refers to the power of Jewish interest groups – a vulgar enough slur that should really be perceived as quite tiresome by this point – his broader implication is the politics of regret, which he and many others seem to see as a liability.

What, then, can the new scholarship of memory contribute to understanding these debates – over the globalisation thesis and the assertion of a distateful increase in the politics of regret? In the first place, just like historiography, they can hold such claims to factual reality. How would one in fact determine objectively whether there has been an increase in rituals of repentance? It is not, moreover, merely a matter of frequency or numbers, but a qualitative assessment. Just as the participants in the *Historikerstreit* worked with only anecdotal assessments of the history of memory, so too the contemporary disputants rest their arguments on examples of rituals they like or dislike, rather than on an objective assessment of what has in fact changed.

In the second place, however, just as we saw with the antagonists of the *Historikerstreit*, it is fairly clear that both the positive evaluators of the globalisation of the Holocaust as well as its critics share an assessment of the ruptures of 1989. To be sure, 1989 did mark significant ruptures. But comparing present debates to the *Historikerstreit*, and the *Historikerstreit* to earlier debates shows that as much has stayed the same as has changed, perhaps even more: As Marx wrote so famously of the French revolutionaries, 'precisely in epochs of revolu-

<sup>24</sup> Jay Rayner, *The Apologist*, New York 2005. An earlier version was titled *Eating Crow. A Novel*, New York 2004.

<sup>25</sup> Frank Schirrmacher (ed.), *Die Walser-Bubis-Debatte. Eine Dokumentation*, Frankfurt a.M. 1999.

tionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honored disguise and borrowed language'. We have heard much of all this before, which calls into question claims that something has changed radically.

Finally, however, scholarly memory studies remind us again and again of how complex these processes are, how different they are in different social sectors, how different individual, communicative, and cultural processes are from each other, and that we really know very little so far about how they interact. To be sure, we cannot draw the line too sharply between the memory boom and memory studies; but we do need to keep in mind their different objectives, and to resist the temptation to allow polemic to be mistaken as established fact.

Prof. Jeffrey K. Olick Ph.D., University of Virginia, Department of Sociology, 530 Cabell Hall, PO Box 400766, Charlottesville, VA 22904, USA, E-Mail: [jko3k@virginia.edu](mailto:jko3k@virginia.edu)