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Jeffrey K. Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi and Daniel Levy (eds.), *The Collective Memory Reader*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, 528 pp.

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## Book reviews

**Jeffrey K. Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi and Daniel Levy (eds.), *The Collective Memory Reader*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, 528 pp.**

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The main purpose of the editors is to look at the memory studies flourished at the end of the 1980s from a new historical and critical perspective, as it is also evident in the organization of the reader. Indeed, in the first section, devoted to the precursors of memory studies, the selected authors seem to enlarge the spectrum of the canonized founding fathers of such a research field. However, the matter is not to identify new progenitors but to trace out alternative (especially to Halbwachs) sources that also have contributed, or should be seen as contributing, to contemporary memory studies. The fact then that the editors are mostly interested in the social and collective nature of memory explain why both in the first and in the following sections sociological texts are predominant if compared with the historical, philosophical, anthropological and psychological ones.

Furthermore the reader highlights how, even if they had their origins at the end of the Nineteenth century, issues, questions and intuitions that determined the boom of memory studies have continued to exercise their influence for the whole Twentieth century. In other words, the editors aim to contrast the widespread belief that until the 1980s of the last century, with exclusion of the landmark works by Halbwachs [1925 and 1950], there was only a limited scientific interest in memory.

Within this new historical and critical frame, rather than an autonomous object of analysis collective memory is considered a “paradigm” that interlaces different theoretical perspectives in order to reflect upon (and to compare) the temporal, social and political organization of different societies from several point of views. It is not a case that in the introduction the editors underline the parallelism between two crucial moments of scientific (but not only) interest in collective memory: at the end of the Nineteenth century, during the phase of construction of national-states (and of nationalism in Europe), and at the end of the Twentieth century. In a phase of decline of national-states and national identities, corresponding to the end of utopian visions and, we can also say, of determined visions of future, tied to defined interpretations of modernity and modernism. Therefore, by proposing this parallelism the editors also criticize the usual way of reading the boom of memory studies as depending only on the boom of the memory industry and marketing.

The first section of the reader, which is devoted to the precursors and classics of memory studies (and it is probably the most interesting and innovating with respect to others compendiums on (collective) memory), presents some key concepts and issues that are also crucial for the contemporary memory studies, as it emerges in the following sections: the nexus between democracy and tradition [Tocqueville]; the idea of a critical memory antithetical to a mythical memory [Nietzsche]; the refuse of a naturalistic conception of national identity [Renan]; the role of commodities as media and source for forgetting [Marx]; the idea of common sense as irreflexive memory and of cultural heritage as experiential stratification [Mannheim]; the changing condition of temporality with the

shift from a narrative to an informative paradigm [Benjamin]; the iconographic function of memory [Gombrich]; the understanding of the past as a representation allowing a processual comprehension of the self [Mead]; the symbolic dimension of memory [Cooley]; the role of commemorative rites for reinforcing the social solidarity of a collectivity [Durkheim]; and the importance of the past as a source for class consciousness [Bloch]. The issue is drawn on in the third section by Samuel, Bodnar, Rosenzweig and Thelen.

The second section, *History, Memory and Identity*, deals with such main issues as the nexus between memory and historical truth and the idea of memory as a system of meanings that determines our sense of reality [Berger]. These two issues represent the starting points for developing and interconnecting various questions, tackled from different theoretical perspectives: the idea of memory as a condition of our being-with [Gadamer]; the importance of commemorative practices for identifying new forms of sociality [Case and Schwartz]; the reflexive features of cultural memory as concretization of identity [J. Assmann]; the normative dimension of remembering and forgetting [the first essay of Zerubavel]; the importance of memory for social cohesion [Bellah].

The third section, *Power, Politics and Contestation*, is also articulated around two issues, cultural trauma and counter-memories, converging upon a complex reflection on public memory and on what we mean with such a concept. With respect to cultural trauma, the main idea, suggested by Alexander and Eyerman, is that such an issue does not concern only collective memory, but it is paradigmatic of the contemporary society. The focus on counter-memory, and on popular memory, is instead oriented to its critical function towards political practices [Popular Memory group], the capitalist system [Sennett] and the motives and mechanisms of official memory [Hobsbawm].

The fourth section, *Media and Modes of Transmission*, which is maybe the more interdisciplinary and sectional part of the whole reader, is devoted to the transmission and externalization processes of memory, that is, two concepts that bring to light the problematic dialectic between discourse and praxis, mind and body, knowledge and experience. With respect to the first point, great attention is paid to the ways and instruments of intergenerational transmission [e.g. Welzer and Hirsch] and the processes of de-localization of tradition [Thompson]. The idea of externalized memory is instead developed along three lines: first, as embodied in practices [e.g. Connerton and Wagner-Pacifici]; second, as objectified in museums and archives – from the traditional archives which would enable the development of a historical consciousness [A. Assmann] to the more sophisticated, networked, archiving systems [Donald]; third, as an aesthetic product (Koselleck) which, on the one hand, makes possible new spaces of creativity (Lipsett) but, on the other, gives back a fragmented representation of the past of a collectivity that raises questions about the possibility of constructing a social solidarity (Vinitzky-Seroussi).

More than the others, the last section, *Memory, Justice and the Contemporary Epoch* mirrors the main purpose of the reader – that is, to show how memory studies can represent and offer a critical instrument of analysis for better illuminating the aporias [Gross] and transformations of contemporary globalized societies – by dealing with: the question of human rights and of democratization of suffering [e.g. Winter and Huyssen]; new forms of (positive) oblivion favored by mass culture [e.g. Huyssen]; the transformation of public memory as consequence of the acceleration of history [Nora]; the possibilities of building trust in the future [Maier] and an ethic for the future [Nora];

and the idea of a cosmopolitan memory which favors the mutual acknowledgment of the others, beyond their social, ethnic, religious or national identifications [Levy and Sznajders].

As a whole, the reader turns out to give a historical and critical reading of memory studies and to look at the issue of collective memory from various points of view and theoretical horizons. However, two questions remains insufficiently addressed, at the end. They are two crucial questions, which are also closely linked with an issue that is particularly emphasized in the introduction: the transformations in our understanding of time.

First of all, in their introduction the editors pay particular attention to the relation between the construction of the past and the interests of the present, neglecting instead to focus and more deeply reflect on the dimension of the future, even if in various essays we find several references to this issue. That is quite curious since the editors themselves note that the renovating interest for collective memory in contemporary societies depends on the lack of a clear orientation towards the future. Therefore stressing the interplay between the frames of the past and the frames of the future (as utopia, project or absent expectation) would be useful to better identify the breakpoints in the political, economic, social and symbolic organization of a defined human and historical context.

Secondly, only scarce attention is given to the spatial dimension. That does not simply mean to underline the role of physical and discursive places of memory, that is how memory is organized or stored in a place, but to consider the category of spatiality as essential for understanding the performative features of memory. The category of spatiality is indeed strictly interlaced with the category of temporality, which, in contemporary memory studies, is used in substitution to the more abstract category of time. Therefore, paying attention to the spatial-temporal organization of collective memories could be helpful to deal with the mutual influence between the structural organization of a society and its inter-subjective dimension, that is, how individuals and cultures give sense to the social life in a given context.

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