Memory

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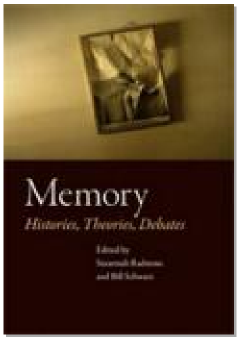

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3. Memory, Temporality, Modernity

Les lieux de mémoire

Bill Schwarz

> The traces left by past events never move in a straight line, but in a curve that can be extended into the future.
>
> Marc Bloch, *Strange Defeat*[1]

"She wanted to have no past." These words, with no hint of equivocation, come from D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*, first published in 1921. They tell us of the reveries of Ursula Brangwen, whom, at the start of the novel, the narrator portrays as a decidedly "modern girl," and who is later attired in canary-yellow stockings, thus proving the point. Lawrence continues:

> She wanted to have come down from the slopes of heaven to this place, with Birkin, not to have rolled out of the murk of her childhood and her upbringing, slowly, all soiled. She felt that memory was a dirty trick played upon her. What was this decree that she should "remember"! Why not a bath of pure oblivion, a new birth, without any recollection or blemish of past life.[2]

These are striking formulations, in which memory, far from functioning as a mental resource, is revealed to be only a "dirty trick." For sure, Lawrence was no fan of Proust. We find in the novel none of the complex, lyrical evocations of lost times that could be characterized as Proustian. Whether Ursula proves as single-minded in her quest for oblivion as this passage suggests is not my concern here. What is of interest, however, is the self-consciously declarative tone of the statement: "She wanted to have no past."

This passage can be read, and I assume mostly is read, as a reflection on a peculiarly modern sensibility, in which past and present are strictly differentiated, and in which the past functions as a burden on present and future. Ursula wishes to be free from both the past and its memories in order to fashion herself anew and to be able to live fully in the present. This desire to flee from the past, and to transcend the incubus of memory, has many correlatives in the aesthetic and philosophical imaginations of high modernism. On the other hand, though, there are many contrary manifestations in modernist thought in which memory, in a variety of conceptualizations, comes to be located as the means for salvation from a world in which no other access to the past exists and in which history has become the vehicle for pain and trauma, transmuting—as some believed, Joyce among them—into a nightmare. Writing retrospectively, this is the argument deployed by Andreas Huyssen whose purpose is to recuperate Baudelaire, Proust, Freud, and Benjamin in order to subvert, as he sees it, the amnesia of the postmodern present.[3] Yet if this polarity—memory as destruction, memory as salvation—has some heuristic value, the permutations we confront, thinker by thinker, text by text, are endlessly complex and subtle, as the chapters that follow demonstrate, so much so that the initial polarities turn out not to be as polarized after all.

With this in mind it may prove more fruitful, in addressing the capacities of modern memory, to turn attention away from these functional arguments and to position memory more specifically in terms of temporality. Put simply, my argument is that issues of temporality provide a necessary context for unraveling the enigmas of modern memory. For underwriting the great classics of modernist thought is a perception of temporal dislocation, in which the connections between past and present become a source, not of succor, but of heightened anxiety, and in which the sensation of the loss of the past predominates. Memory, for good or ill, has become the category, peculiarly overdetermined and difficult to disentangle, in which these anxieties meet and are condensed.

From this perspective it's less the functions of modern memory that prove critical than it is memory's perpetual dysfunctions.

History

To pose the question of the relations between memory and modernity or to offer (as we do in this volume) the familiar sequence "antiquity, medieval, early modern, modern," inescapably presents modern memory not only as a conceptual issue, but as one that is historical too. If modern memory represents a distinct formation—assuming, in other words, that people came to remember differently from hitherto, and that the great theorists of modern memory were in part reflecting on phenomena that themselves were historically new—this would be of great interest to historians. After all, the relations between past and present, memory, temporality itself all underwrite the processes of the historical imagination. In principle, it would seem, historians have much to offer on contemporary memory debates. This leaves open, though, the question of what kind of historical inquiry can best reach that which we, as historical actors, experience as the temporal dislocations of modern life, for which memory has come to function as the synecdoche.

When we invoke history two immediate difficulties appear. First, as an intellectual discipline history itself is a sign of the modern.[4] The temporal plotting we employ—antiquity, medieval, modern—attests to a sequential, future-driven conception of historical time that is itself a product of modernity. In its earliest theorizations, historical time was largely teleological; if it was felt that the past was slipping away, ever more difficult to reach, the grand narratives ordained by history promised, as recompense, a grander future.[5] The intellectual practice of history, in its emergent forms, was in part devised as a counter to the wayward, indeterminate workings of modern memory, striving to establish the principles of historical time as the definitive component of temporality. In this scheme of things, subjective time, the time of the everyday and of the self, memory included, could appear *only* as dysfunctional, working to interrupt the clear geometrical abstractions of the time of history. If the hope of history, as a peculiarly modern form of reasoning, was that it might rationalize the relationship between past and present, overcoming sentiment by recourse to science, it could only do so by excluding or trivializing the various temporalities that appeared as dysfunctions. History itself, as well as promising much, may also be part of the problem.

It's also apparent that, despite the claims made for the rational properties of histories, historians themselves were and are as much enmeshed in the temporal dislocations of modern times as anyone else. Formal historical inquiry represents, among other things, one way in which the imaginings of lost times are dramatized, debated and brought to life. In the rendezvous between history and memory, history is no innocent party. Indeed fixations with the past, obsessions with lost times and even, as a corollary, the belief that the enchantments of the past have been destroyed in the present are all occupational hazards for the historian. In this sense, historical knowledge can work as another means by which the temporal dislocations of modern life are mitigated in the imagination, acting as a kind of intellectual reparation.

Yet if in the founding grand narratives of the modern world memory can only be grasped as dysfunctional, dislocating the given patterns of history, from a contrary viewpoint it is precisely those forms that appear most dysfunctional that provide the most fruitful means for thinking the connections between historical time and the time of the interior life. It's for this reason, in current debates, that the high modernist moment is accorded a privileged role, for from the late nineteenth century a powerful motif in the aesthetic of modernism turned on conceptions of temporality that, in many different variations, sought to break with the teleologies of homogenized, linear time—or of "empty" time, as Benjamin has it—in which history was conceived simply as the means for the realization of modernity.[6] In many respects the encounter between history and memory brings us to the limit case of conceptions of historical time, and requires a profound reappraisal of the given protocols of historical knowledge.

The End of the Past, the End of History

My aim, here, is a deal more modest: simply to plot the ways in which the problem of temporal dislocation—and of its synecdoche, memory—have been worked through in three historical accounts of modernity. In doing so, I draw attention to the contrary elements that occur in these histories. On the one hand, in each, history appears as "the sign of the modern," and the impress of a sequential teleology is evident; on the other, interwoven into each account is a sense also of emotional or psychic loss, in which attachments to the past can no longer be sustained. I'll look briefly at J. H. Plumb and Carl Schorske, neither of whom is generally cited in the field of memory studies, and in more detail at Pierre Nora, whose work on memory is well known. These are historians, as readers who know their work will appreciate, of radically distinct temperaments. However, their varied intentions and politics notwithstanding, there occur unexpected formal affinities in the means by which they imagine the relations between past and present. We confront in each, respectively, the end of the past, the end of history, and the end of memory. Where does such interpretation leave us?

Plumb, a historian of Hanoverian England and a figure whose life was deeply institutionalized in the mores of ancient Cambridge, doesn't usually appear in contemporary reflections on the dispositions of the modern world. Yet in March 1968 he delivered a series of lectures a long way from his usual locale, in New York, which were published the following year as a book entitled *The Death of the Past*. The title conveys the basic thesis with admirable economy. Plumb draws a sharp distinction between "the past" and "history." "Man," he says, employing an anthropological terminology that even then was outmoded, "has used the past in a variety of ways." Principally the past, in the past, functioned as a daily "theatre of life," in which the hopes of the present were given sustenance by elaborate reconstructions of mythical pasts, where good and evil took on palpable, allegorical form. "The more literate and sophisticated the society becomes," Plumb contends, "the more complex and powerful becomes the uses to which the past is put." The earliest manifestations of written history and of genealogy were, he claims, ultimately conducted for instrumental ends, in order to further specific interests in the present.

The critical turning point in the making of a modern historiography appeared uniquely in "Western societies," as he has it, during the Renaissance, when the return to the past first began to evolve into the rational, falsifiable explanation of human action:

> From the Renaissance onwards there has been a growing determination to try and understand what happened, purely in its own terms and not in the service of religion or national destiny, or morality, or the sanctity of institutions; indeed to try and bring to the human story both the detachment and insight and intellectual comprehension that natural philosophers have brought to their study of the external world.

The force of these new powers of critical reasoning served, in turn, to dissolve the power of the past. Though this is not, in Plumb's view, the decisive factor in the destruction of the past—he identifies the deeper causes in the dynamics of an "industrial society" that possesses "no sanction in the past and no roots in it"—in intellectual terms these new modes of reappropriating the past, based on reason, were critical. When the past, displaced by the intellectual practice of history, comes to lose its authority it becomes, he tells us, merely "a matter of curiosity, of nostalgia, a sentimentality."

As much as any modernist who preceded him Plumb, despite his antiquarian instincts, was captivated by the ruins of the past, which he perceived to be all around him:

> The great Christian past, with its nineteenth-century variations—for they were no more than variations—on that old majestic theme of man's fall and salvation, has collapsed. Rubble, broken arches, monuments crumbling to dust, roofs open to the sky litter this world of thought and loom forebodingly against the horizon. A strange collection of men walk amidst the debris, some full of lamentation, calling for urgent repairs, for an immediate restoration of the old house of the intellect; others climb on to a prominent broken pillar and in self-confident voices explain it all away; others are blind and stumble over the ruins not knowing what has happened. . . . Can this litter of a dead past be cleared away?

All that can remain from this catastrophe, he concludes, is the resourcefulness of the individual, reasoning human mind.

These were urgent issues, he insisted, because men and women need to possess a temporal grasp of the worlds they inhabit. His privileging of a historical understanding of the past derived most of all from his conviction that history, as critical practice, serves no vested interests and thus carries with it, if not emancipatory possibilities, then—in his characteristically more tempered sensibility—a notion of what it "may be imprudent to do." Despite this overly genteel justification for the study of history, the death of the past, for Plumb, creates the conditions for a more deeply democratic civil society:

> The past is always a created ideology with a purpose, designed to control individuals, or motivate societies, or inspire classes . . . The future of history and historians is to cleanse the story of mankind from those deceiving visions of a purposeful past. The

> death of the past can only do good so long as history flourishes . . . The past has only served the few; perhaps history may serve the multitude.

It's instructive, looking back from our vantage today, that within this theoretical framework there is no explicit attention to memory. Yet it is evident that Plumb's conception of the past is, in part at least, a metonym for memory itself. "And for a past that lives," he asks, "what is time?—an irrelevance."[7] Memory in premodern times binds the past to the present (if we can employ these terms) and is, for Plumb omnipresent, a lived relation that requires no reflection or abstraction precisely because it is naturalized, imbricated in the very mentalities of everyday life. It—memory—is in this reading a function of peculiarly premodern societies, authentically organic as the modern relationship between past to present can never be.

Thus when he invokes "the past" what Plumb refers to is not the inchoate, protean accumulation of all that has ever happened, but more properly what Eric Hobsbawm, following a similar line of argument, calls "the social mechanisms that link one's contemporary experience to that of earlier generations."[8] With this in mind there can be no doubt that, following Plumb's model, if in the pre-Enlightenment epochs memory operates as the overriding "mechanism" by which "the past" enters the present, then memory can only be understood as the disreputable and damaging precursor to reasoned historical scholarship.

That Plumb's Cambridge refinement should find itself, providentially, translated into the universal expression of the ideal modern historian, levitating above the profanities of everyday life, is not a happy resolution. But still, I've always found *The Death of the Past* an unsettling polemic, whose images stay in the mind, and that anticipates—in its relaxed, self-consciously erudite manner—many later explorations whose theory is more heavily freighted.

Carl Schorske is a very different sort of historian: New World rather than Old, Jewish, committed to a peculiarly U.S. tough radical populism, and profoundly knowledgeable about the practices of high modernism, which have occupied his professional writings over the past half century. His most famous book, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, is a wonderfully illuminating, landmark study of the influence of modernism on the twentieth century. But it is in modernism, for Schorske, that what he identifies as the intellectual collapse of our own times can be located, for it was modernism that functioned as both cause and effect of the end of history.

Since the onset of the modernist period, "modern," he writes, works as a concept that "has come to distinguish our perception of our lives and times from all that has gone before, from history as a whole, as such. . . . The modern mind has been growing indifferent to history because history, conceived as a continuous nourishing tradition, has become useless to it." The initial perpetrator of this repudiation of history he takes to have been Nietzsche, to whom the world presented itself only as "ubiquitous fragmentation."

And for all Schorske's regard for, and understanding of, the great modernist figures of the early twentieth century, none appears to escape his censure, for the gravitational pull away from history was, he maintains, a collective one.[9]

In some fine pages he connects his own political biography to this larger prohibition to thinking historically. In the years following the Second World War, he explains, the optimism of his generation, which had lived through the New Deal and the defeat of fascism, fell apart. Just when faith in the historical imagination and, Schorske adds, in the Enlightenment principles that make it possible, were most needed, they were—across the intellectual culture as a whole—jettisoned. Liberals and radicals, "almost unconsciously . . . adapted their world-views to a revolution of falling political expectations," and we have since been living the consequences.[10] Thus in *Thinking with History*, effectively a sequel to *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, he argues that the "ahistorical" properties of modernism have continued to feed into the epoch of the postmodern: "Postmodernism, to be sure, has found uses for elements in the past in its own constructions and deconstructions. But even as it consigns modernism to the past, it reaffirms as its own modernism's rupture from history as a continuous process, as the platform of its own intellectual identity."[11]

The contention that we live in an ahistorical age is a common one, even though the shape of the argument shifts from protagonist to protagonist. Like Plumb, Schorske appears to address the matter of memory indirectly. Yet it is clear that though he was convinced that the intellectual authority of historical time was on the wane, this was due only to the fact that consciousness of internal, subjective time was moving to the fore. Or as he put this, there had occurred "the turn from Marx to Freud," from a temporality that was "public and sociological" to one that was "private and psychological."[12] Modern, or postmodern, time may have turned its back on history; but "private" or "psychological" time, the time of Freud and Proust, which today we would designate as memory, is deemed to be dominant.

In reading Plumb and Schorske together we can see some common patterns emerge. First, they both radically counterpoise memory to history, such that any conceivable coexistence between the two becomes difficult to imagine. For Plumb, when the-past-as-memory dies, history comes to life; while for Schorske, when history dies, memory comes to life. Neither contemplates the possibility that, for all the necessarily distinct, respective properties of memory and history, each can work with (or live with) the other.

Second, it's revealing the degree to which current debates on the identification of modern memory work from an evolutionary, sequential temporal plotting. This way of thinking is pronounced in Plumb. He conceives, for example, of the arrival of modernity as having imposed a radical, sequential break with prior forms, and implies too that there exists a teleology that stretches into the future, bringing with it, as he supposes, emancipation from unreason. But in so doing he imposes a strict notion of temporality that carries the imprint of the grand narratives of modernity, in which history, upper case, predominates and all alternative conceptions of temporality, mnemonic time included, disappear from view. If Schorske provides a mirror-image of this schema, it is also a deal more nuanced. Yet even so, the transformation he depicts is essentially an unambiguous reversal, from history to memory. For all the craft of his concrete case studies, the more general notion of dehistoricization operates at a high level of abstraction and works to totalize the transformations he identifies.

For both Plumb and Schorske the specifically modern experience of temporality is sharply distinguished from prior systems—though as both Mary Carruthers and Peter Sherlock suggest in the previous chapters in this volume, there is no reason to think that memory in premodern times ever existed free of mediation. For Plumb premodern subjects inhabited a world that was essentially timeless, where memory was barely differentiated from consciousness itself. For Schorske the coming of modernity separates humans "from history as a whole, as such," while history itself is no longer conceived as "a continuous nourishing tradition."

What is clear, however, is that whether optimistic or pessimistic, both sides in this debate acknowledge that modern life has broken attachments to the past and that new ways need to be invented to revivify what has been lost. How this basic theme is played out in theoretical discussion is confusing. The same presentiment can be ascribed, as Richard Terdiman has indicated, to there being too much memory, or too little; to there being too much history, or too little; to there being memory rather than history; or history rather than memory.[13] Whatever the take, though, the problem has a common provenance: the difficulties that prevent modern subjects from connecting with their pasts and inhabiting time in such a way that "life" itself (in Nietzsche's terms) is enhanced rather than diminished.

The End of Memory

In these terms, Pierre Nora's thesis on the end of memory is both important and revealing. As we shall see, his basic historical concepts are pitched at a high level of abstraction, and they are organized within a relatively uncomplicated narrative of modernization. At the same time he sees modernization above all else as a process of temporal dislocation, in which the past progressively disappears from the present, moving ever further away from human consciousness. The domain in which this occurs is what Nora categorizes as modern memory. Indeed, it seems as if the entire plight of contemporary life comes, in his depiction, to be signified by memory. Much of this I find unpersuasive. But Nora is an unusually self-conscious historian epistemologically and even when his historical conclusions are at their most extravagant he can be a nimble thinker, ducking and weaving when required: as an advocate for history, he knows well enough the artifice by which historical knowledge works.

Nora is perhaps the most celebrated historian of memory. Under his direction, between 1984 and 1992 there appeared, in the original French, seven volumes of his influential *Les lieux de mémoire*, comprising essays by a multitude of authors; when these were reprinted in three paperback volumes in 1997, the new edition comprised nearly five thousand pages. The planned English translation, in seven volumes (three under the title *Realms of Memory* and four as *Rethinking France*), which conceptually recasts the original, is still underway.[14] The initial publication itself was received as an intellectual media-event, drawing into its slipstream academics, public and political figures, and, through the press and television, the wider public, the very ambition of the project creating its own momentum. Nora, a man poised in the liberal-conservative center of the political spectrum, has been a well-connected figure of authority at the heart of the Parisian intellectual scene for many years: historian, publisher at Gallimard, founder and editor of *Le débat*, founder, with his brother-in-law, the historian François Furet, of the Saint-Simon Foundation, member of the Academy. Insofar as French intellectual culture has moved to the right over the past decades, in the view of one commentator at least, Nora's prominence not only illuminates this wider shift, but has been decisive in it—a transformation particularly evident in the national historiography, with both Nora and Furet in the van.[15] It was in Nora's role as an editor at Gallimard in the mid-1990s, for example, that he refused to publish Hobsbawm's *Age of Extremes* on the grounds that French public opinion had become too hostile to the traditions of Communism for the book to be well received.[16]

Various commentaries to the project have appeared in the Anglophone world, seeking to make sense of what is a vast, complex work, though there is little consensus about the major propositions.[17] More interestingly, perhaps, none has felt obliged to reflect on the provocations of Nora's prose: this is writing that is knowingly epistemological, delighting in aphorism and epigram; while drawn to paradox, it is punctuated by flamboyant declamation that, to the insular eye, is often as obscure as it is sweeping.[18] Public historians in the Anglophone tradition generally learn to hone their narrative skills. Nora doesn't do narrative, choosing instead a more analytical, synchronic approach. While its stylistic virtuosity is impressive, its explanatory power remains open to question. It is best read as a symptomatic text, bringing to the fore, for our own times, a modernist melancholia in which the degradation of memory is the defining feature of modern life. Indeed, for all the high-wire conceptual acrobatics of his work, it is the melancholia that registers most powerfully, for it is enmeshed in his historical method. It's not simply that the theme of loss runs through every page of his historical interpretation, explicitly and unapologetically. His is a perception of loss that carries with it no hint of acceptance or mitigation: whatever psychic properties this may entail, its political articulation can only be one of reaction.

The reputation of *Les lieux de mémoire* rests on its analysis of memory. However, the books are as much about the symbolic making of the French nation as they are about memory, understood more broadly. Essentially, the authors concern themselves with exploring different facets of the French past through the lens of memory. Such studies, by their nature, present a myriad of different phenomena, all of which they take to qualify as *lieux de mémoire*, which literally we can understand as the locations of memory. Alongside the monuments and the familiar symbols of French nationhood we find chapters devoted to historians, novelists, and painters; to songs and conversations; to forests, coastlines and the natural landscape; to the regions and to idea of the hexagon as an imaginative means for figuring the territory of the nation; to the Tour de France; to war memorials; to memoirs; to religion; to the concept of generation; and to much, much more. Whether in the colossal three-volume edition, or in the seven separate volumes, this is history in monumental mode and, notwithstanding Nora's own stated hope that it should be encountered as a multivocal history, the final result is far from being any kind of open text: the tight explanatory structures of Nora's own paratexts—his prefaces, general introductions, introductions, conclusions that punctuate the range of case-studies—set out to supply an uncompromisingly didactic means by which the whole project should be read.

Les lieux de mémoire is a work of classification, in the grand Durkheimian manner, elaborating a vast inventory of the symbolic systems that have generated the meanings of French national life, investigating the "unconscious organization of collective memory."[19] It relies on a method of working, tantalizingly close to variants of classical structuralism, that endeavors to uncover the categories of "intelligibility" that organize the symbolic field in the historical present.[20] In so doing, Nora sought also to develop what he termed "a general concept of memory within the field of historiography."[21] At various points through the volumes he set out to clarify his principles of classification in order to determine why certain phenomena had been included and others excluded and to explain the differing operations of *les lieux* ("internal" to memory or "exterior," "imposed" or "constructed," "dominant" or "dominated," material or non-material and so on). These work to greater or lesser effect, and some—despite numerous readings—I am still baffled by. But as Nora himself contends, the challenge that he and his collaborators faced derived not from their initial theoretical approach but from the intervention of what he believed to be a profound historical transformation that radically altered the very dispositions of memory itself.

The argument is this: during the 1970s, and in the years that followed when *Les lieux de mémoire* was being drafted and published, France itself, as a coherent historical entity, began to unravel. "The dissolution of the unifying framework of the nation-state has exploded the traditional system that was its concentrated symbolic expression." The "classical model" of France as a given network of memories collapsed. "There is no commemorative superego: the canon has vanished." Where once there had been "order and hierarchy," now there was simply an absence, lacking any "central organizing principle."

Memories of the nation, with no internal gravity to give them structure, had simply become "infinite."[22] In this situation memory no longer possessed the capacity to give life to the national past, and thus the present was sharply cut adrift from all that had preceded it. This argument is marshaled to greatest effect in Nora's *envoi*, published at the end of the final volume, where his tone becomes conspicuously more caustic.[23] It was not only, as he imagined it, that his historical method had become superseded by historical events, his neostructuralism unable to engage with a situation in which "no central organizing principle" pertained. It was also that his own *magnum opus*, in the moment of its public consumption, had undergone an unwelcome transubstantiation and, subject to the thrall of a new system of memory, had itself ceased to be received as history and had become *un lieu de mémoire*. It was subsumed by what it had set out to critique. In doing so it confirmed for Nora his conviction that in contemporary times the prospect of ever reaching the past had become all but a cognitive, intellectual impossibility.

In order to understand the import of this reading, and how Nora at this point is conceptualizing *les lieux*, we need to step back and review the larger thesis that his volumes propose, looking particularly at the issue of temporality.

The conceptual architecture of Nora's investigations derives from what he identifies as a single overarching paradox. In contemporary times memory is dead. But simultaneously, he believes, memory is omnipresent, the phenomenon of modern memory itself revealing the dominating episteme of the age. "Memory is constantly on our lips because it no longer exists."[24] How is this paradox to be explained?

In the narrative construction of a work of this scale, authored by many hands over a long period, there inevitably occur not only important shifts in argument and nuance, but also competing angles of vision, double-exposures, retakes and so on. There are, equally unsurprisingly, a number of shifting, ambiguous formulations in the contributions by Nora himself. Yet notwithstanding the complexity of these many volumes, the larger arguments depend on a relatively simple, and familiar, historical schema. Indeed, it's possible, without undue damage, to tabulate the basic temporal phases that underwrite Nora's reading of the evolution of modern memory (see Table 1). A tripartite temporal division is evident. The least investigated appears in the table as "Premodern," which, for the most part, precedes the Revolution of 1789. The operations of memory in the premodern epoch register, for Nora, as what he calls "real" memory: intimate and "spontaneous," imbricated in lived experience such that memory itself exists free from mediation.[25] It is, precisely, immediate with experience. It is essentially collective, most commonly based on rural custom. And it allows the past to be "inhabited" in the present.[26] Whether premodern formations of memory ever worked in this way remains in doubt, as I suggested earlier. The critical issue, however, is that, from this point on, modern memory, whether in actuality or in its potential, begins the process of turning inside-out the practices of "real" memory. Memory, real memory, dies at the outset of modernity. But in its place emerge new institutions devoted to recovering what has been lost, creating new, ersatz

TABLE 1. The temporalities of Pierre Nora's *Les lieux de mémoire*

	Premodern	*Modern*	*Postmodern*
Memory (1): Operations	"Real memory": "intimate," "spontaneous," environmental. "Dwelling" in memory.	"Vestiges" of real memory continue, with some life. Displacement of memory by history. Incipient collapse of the connection between signifier and signified, "between act and meaning." *Lieux de mémoire* I.	Memory finds "refuge" in an accumulation of specialized, consecrated sites. "The outbreak of memory," turning on signifier, but without a signified. Dissolution of memory as a *social* force. *Lieux de mémoire* II.
Memory (2): Articulations	Lived, unmediated.	Performed. Prosthetic/ mediated: archival, written.	Performed. Prosthetic/ mediated: retinal, televisual.
Memory (3): Institutions	Community, collective (peasant, rural, custom).	Nation, nation-state, collective: particularly, church, school, family, government.	Civil society, "minorities," the individual. Driven by the mass media.
Memory (4): Selfhood	Awareness of self through community.	Awareness of self through history.	Awareness of self through memory.
Past	Simultaneity of past and present; "inhabiting" the past.	Continuity of past-present; tradition lived and sustained. Acceleration of historical time.	"Disappearance of historical time." Past irretrievable; past-present discontinuous; the past no guarantee of the future; tradition as "unsettling." Only possible to "commune" with the past. Past becomes *only* the past.
History	Collective memory evolves into written record of the past.	Memory-history. Rise of critical history; scholarly construction of memory. History itself a means for the mediation of memory, and for the disenchantment of the world (*Annales* school). History prevails over memory.	Severing of history and memory; democratization of history. Emptying of historical knowledge. *Historian* becomes a *lieu de mémoire*. Memory prevails over history.
Nation	Slow evolution of *La France profonde*.	"Memory-nation": equilibrium between memory–history–nation. "Classical" commemoration.	Disintegration of "memory-nation": from national to "patrimonial" memory. The end of the French Revolution. Globalization; internal and external decolonization.

memory-forms—performed rather than lived, mediated rather than unmediated—that replicate, at varying removes, what had once been vital and replete.

It is these emergent institutions, in which modern memory accretes and crystallizes, that Nora dubs *les lieux de mémoire*. When I first came to read Nora I was, I expect like many readers, unsure about his evaluation of *les lieux*. Did these function only as simulations of prior forms that had been properly organic, representing the pains of loss and inducing the characteristic reflexes of disenchantment with the modern world? Or did they possess a more positive social role, enabling new relations of social solidarity to be created? The answer, for a time at least, was both.

Nora endeavors to convey the doubleness of modern memory, caught between life and death, in the following passage:

> *Lieux de mémoire* arise out of a sense that there is no such thing as spontaneous memory, hence that we must create archives, mark anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and authenticate documents because such things no longer happen as a matter of course. When certain minorities create protected enclaves as preserves of memory to be jealously safeguarded, they reveal what is true of all *lieux de mémoire*: that without commemorative vigilance, history would soon sweep them away. These bastions buttress our identities, but if what they defended were not threatened, there would be no need for them. If the remembrances they protect were truly living presences in our lives, they would be useless. Conversely, if history did not seize upon memories in order to distort and transform them, to mold them or turn them to stone, they would not turn into *lieux de mémoire*, which emerge in two stages: moments of history are plucked out of the flow of history, then returned to it—no longer quite alive but not yet entirely dead, like shells left on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded.

Or as he continues: "The *lieux* of which I speak are hybrid places, mutants in a sense, compounded of life and death, of the temporal and the eternal."[27]

Yet looking back from his own standpoint of the late twentieth century, the systems of memory inaugurated by the French Revolution, and consolidated during the Third Republic, attain for Nora—compared at least to the poverty of the present—a measure of authentic grandeur. When Bastille Day was declared a national holiday in 1890, for example, Nora claims that it became "an official" *lieu de mémoire*. But in terms of the everyday practices of memory it also represented what he calls "a genuine return to the source," reproducing something akin to a living memory.[28] The early years of the Third Republic occupy a key location in his larger analysis. During this period the memory of the nation's history became "the nerve of the social and political bond," generating an epic "grand narrative" that took on life as "an absorbing family saga starting with Vercingetorix." Indeed, the national story assumed a status he regards as "sacred."[29] This symbolized what he defines as "the classical model of national commemoration."[30] In sum, in a characteristically Norian construct, nineteenth-century France exemplifies the idea of the "memory-nation," in which the relation between past and present, though attenuated, could still be felt in the experiences of everyday life.[31] Following closely from Halbwachs at this point, he argues that the collective sense of the French past, reproduced in church, school, and family, operated as a unitary field-force in which social and political divisions—clerical and anticlerical, conservative and radical—were contained:

> At one time, the Third Republic seemed to draw together and crystallize, through history and around the concept of "the nation," one tradition of French memory. . . . Throughout this period, history, memory, and the nation enjoyed an unusually intimate communion, a symbiotic complementarity at every level—scientific and pedagogical, theoretical and practical.[32]

It's apparent that the memory that haunts the pages of *Les lieux de mémoire*, and that which the book mourns above all else, is that of old, centralized France, later evoked through those emblematic figures of provincial life, the postman and the schoolteacher, each indicative of the reach of the state into private life.

Behind these memories of the "memory-nation" lies too the sociological reality of an extensive peasant-rural sector that remained dominant well into the twentieth century, and that in turn functioned as the source for the strategic power of the idea of the *longue durée* in the imagining of the French nation and in the makings of its memories. "Think . . . of the irrevocable breach," Nora instructs his readers, "marked by the disappearance of peasant culture, that quintessential repository of collective memory."[33] That "irrevocable breach" represents in Nora's theorization of memory *the* foundational historical event from which all else follows.

In this depiction, the memory formations of nineteenth-century France simultaneously were rich in affect and contained as well the forces that were to bring about their undoing. The mediations by which modern memory was articulated—the dependence on the written word and its archives—worked to deepen the gap between memory and human experience: in consequence, he claims, memory was always in danger of losing any real connection to the past, driven instead exclusively by the concerns of the present. For Nora, memory in this period hovered on the brink of the collapse of the connection between signifier and signified, "between act and meaning," such that the past becomes *only* the past, with no effectivity on the present. In modern life the past was slipping away from the present.[34]

This is how Nora describes *les lieux* in formal terms. Alongside this he also supplies a more diachronic argument. In the modern epoch he indicates that these locations of memory were essentially contradictory, combining vestiges of "real" memory with simulacra that represented nothing more than themselves. Although generally implicit, there is evidence to suggest that his conception of modern France opens—following convention—with the Revolution and (less conventionally) comes to an end in the 1970s. Through these years, he argues, there existed a number of forces that worked to counter the components of "real" memory within each *lieu de mémoire* and to abet the dominance of their simulacra. In Nora's portrayal incremental, evolutionary, quantitative change turns into a transformation decidedly qualitative, in which *les lieux* lose any semblance of existing as institutions that carry even the remnants of spontaneous memory. They become merely instigators of what he names as "patrimonial" memory or, to use the common English equivalent, heritage. These quantitative shifts, he indicates, accumulated in particular moments: in the last third of the nineteenth century, in the 1930s and finally in the 1970s. For this reason, in Table 1, it's necessary not only to be aware of the contradictions internal to each *lieu*, but also of the fact that Nora proposes that there exists too a tendential historical process by which *les lieux de mémoire* become progressively emptied of "real" memory altogether. In Table 1, I've indicated this schematically by distinguishing between *lieux I* and *lieux II*. Thus the closer we come to the contemporary period the more that Nora is adamant that *les lieux* exist only in this second, degraded, meaning.

Nora doesn't choose to use the term *postmodern*. I've adopted this in the table only as a convenient tag. He is precise enough, though, to insist that 1975 marks the critical, defining moment when "real" memory finally dies and when a new "outbreak" of patrimonial memories was unleashed on the French nation, bringing its very existence into question.[35] He identifies three elements that composed this conjunctural transformation. The first was the oil crisis of 1974, which put an end to the thirty years of accelerated growth that France had undergone, but which signaled too the *coup de grâce* for the traditions of the rural nation. In 1945, he points out, some half of the population had still been engaged in agriculture; thirty years later, this fell for the first time to below ten per cent, "a fateful threshold," finally breaking the inherited components of "collective memory." This element in the conjuncture represented, as Nora sees it, the historic ending of the *longue durée* of peasant France.[36] Second, he views the arrival of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing at the Élysée Palace in 1974 as marking the termination of the Gaullist era—by which he means the period dominated by both the Gaullists themselves and the Communists—and also (due to Giscard's divorce from the imperatives of the "old France") as reinforcing what Nora chooses to call "the implantation of the imaginary."[37] And third, following closely in the footsteps of François Furet, he cites as critical the exhaustion of the revolutionary idea that required of the French that they remodel their collective relationship to the national past.[38]

These might not seem to be exactly commensurable historical events. But by braiding them together Nora creates a narrative in which the moment of the 1970s is truly overdetermined, a condensation of distinct historical times that, in their combination, produces a cataclysm within the nation. The vision is apocalyptic. Everything becomes unhinged.

Behind the conjuncture of the mid-seventies lie deeper, tectonic shifts. The consequences of decolonization had, he insists, undermined the rationality of the West, and spelled the end of European hegemony. The processes of "internal decolonization" had given voice to new social groups: to "minorities," whom, in a Borgesian summation, Nora names as "Jews, royalists, Bretons, Corsicans, women."[39] Led in the first instance by the ethnic minorities, each determined to press for recognition and to discover its own—particular—past, and as they did so, the universal authority of the nation corroded. Nora implies that much of what occurred in the seventies had been anticipated in 1968—even though he asserts that in '68 "nothing tangible or palpable occurred at all," that it was only "a mere symbolic resumé," celebrating nothing more than the end of revolution.[40] But since then the cataclysm has gathered pace. Everything now appears to be on the point of death: memory, history (both historical time and the practice of writing history), the past, the nation, Europe, revolution, politics, literature. The unexamined first person plural—denoting, I can only assume, an abstract collective of Frenchmen—have come to experience their past as "other": indeed, in this scenario they themselves—this abstract "us"—have been rendered "other."[41] As he concludes, the bitterness apparent, "we know" that the past "is no longer ours."[42]

The sign of this epistemic collapse is memory. It is in memory that the destruction of the cultural authority of France and Europe is to be located. From this point on all the deathly, ersatz qualities that had haunted *les lieux de mémoire* from the start come fully into their own. The properties of French nationhood, once there for all to see, have become dispersed, infinite and uncontrollable. Memory invades the social formation, dissolving the inherited structures of social solidarity; *this* memory is atomized, civic in provenance rather than that stipulated by the nation-state, and individual rather than collective. Precisely because the past has no hold on the present the compulsion to commemorate is everywhere. Memory itself generates only a vortex of empty signifiers in which nothing can be signified. The "fetishism of signs" is complete, and all are "enslaved to memory."[43]

In such extreme circumstances Nora invests great intellectual and moral value in a revamped historical practice that can counter the depredations of contemporary memory. This has to be a history that recognizes—he is explicit in his deference to Proust at this point—that modern life is formed by a "sense of loss, of tearing apart, and of permanent separation," and must work to create in the imagination a restorative harmony of a society otherwise ravaged by its disconnection to the past.[44] And as history is brought "back to life" so too—tenuously—is France, as a "nation without nationalism," and defined as a "reality that is entirely symbolic," thereby rejecting "any definition that would reduce it to phenomena of another order."[45]

"Phenomena of another order": this might seem an opaque formulation. Yet I read this as meaning a France that cannot be understood as an expression of a "partisan" politics, allied to either the historic Gaullist or Communist traditions. Undoubtedly, Nora's history is explicitly nationalist, envisaged as a means to resurrect the idea of French nationhood. But he is determined to represent the politics of his historiography as if it's entirely devoid of political investments and as if it's no longer encumbered by the detritus of past political battles. Paradoxically, the destruction of the old France that Nora proposes took place in the 1970s also brought with it, in his terms, an opportunity. *Les lieux de mémoire* is written on the back of Furet's maxim that "The French Revolution is over," and in the conviction that the political traditions of right and left have become extinct.[46] Politics, in this scheme of things, is—among much else—effectively dead. Nora's vision of a France resurrected, abetted by a suitably knowing history, is one in which affiliation to the nation transcends every conceivable social division. *La France est morte! Vive la France!*

Many readers will not be as exercised by the fate of the traditional nation-state as Nora; and many more, I imagine, will hardly be persuaded by a nationalist politics that masquerades as being no politics at all. But the principal issue lies less in his stated commitments than in the matter of location and perspective. What looks like a calamity from Nora's location, at the apex of the French cultural system where many privileges accrue, may elsewhere be welcomed. The weakening of European hegemony, internal decolonization and the increased political authority of those dubbed "minorities," the erosion of the centralizing powers of the French state, the democratization of history: to believe these signal a new nihilism is evidence only of a deep conservatism. Nora feels that his erstwhile possession of the past (*his* past) has been appropriated by others, and in the process he experiences himself as "other"—as "other," that is, from his old French self.

Nora tells a powerful story. His is the grandest of grand narratives—grander than any of the reflections to be found in Plumb or Schorske—in which an entire mental universe implodes in 1975, or thereabouts, when everything that he valued began to die. For all his coquetting with conjunctural explanation, his entire analytical procedure works at a high level of abstraction. In essence the triptych premodern–modern–postmodern, does the bulk of his theoretical work for him. In this schema modernity functions as a long interregnum, between the premodern (when past and present were lived as one) and the postmodern (when the relations between past and present are finally broken). His only hope, in the postmodern present, rests on a revivified historical practice that takes as its premise the disconnection between past and present and seeks to assemble a new national story capable of operating effectively in public life.

In the end, though, while *Les lieux de mémoire* is an analytical history it represents at the same time a compulsive, extended enactment of a familiar set of anxieties about the temporal dislocations of modern life. Even while Nora berates deracinated historical explanation, his own narrative relies on a one-dimensional, teleological account of modernization, which culminates in what was destined to occur long ago: the end of memory. His recourse to Proust, in the hope of fashioning a historical narrative that can repair the pains of loss and separation, is no more than gestural. Any sense of determinate levels of abstraction is abandoned in favor of the grandiose epigram, exemplifying not so much historical explanation as the author's irrepressible melancholia. Everything becomes memory, everything a *lieu de mémoire*, with no possibility for historical discrimination. The collapse of memory brings all else in its train. The misfortunes of France, as Nora believes them to be, become identified with the misfortunes of memory, *tout court*. It is in this sense that *Les lieux de mémoire* is indeed a symptom, demonstrating the degree to which memory still has to carry the burden of a historical practice incapable of engaging with what historians should be most qualified to understand: temporality itself.