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Introduction

We generally think of memory as an individual faculty. None the less, there are a number of thinkers who concur in believing that there is some such thing as a collective or social memory.[1] I share that assumption, but tend to diverge over the question as to where this phenomenon, social memory, can be found to be most crucially operative.

Accordingly, the question to which this book is addressed is: how is the memory of groups conveyed and sustained? The term group is here being used in a generously capacious sense and with some flexibility of meaning, to include both small face-to-face societies (such as villages and clubs) and territorially extensive societies most of whose members cannot know each other personally (such as nation-states and world religions).

Readers might reasonably expect that the question thus posed – how is the memory of groups conveyed and sustained? – might lead to a consideration, either of social memory as a dimension of political power, or of the unconscious elements in social memory, or both. In what follows these issues are occasionally touched upon, but they are intentionally not addressed in an explicit and systematic way. The value of addressing such issues, I take it, can hardly be doubted. For it is surely the case that control of a society's memory largely conditions the hierarchy of power; so that, for example, the storage of present-day information technologies, and hence the organisation of collective memory through the use of data-processing machines, is not merely a technical matter but one directly bearing on legitimation, the question of the control and ownership of information being a crucial political issue.[2] Again, the fact that we no longer believe in the great 'subjects' of history – the proletariat, the party, the West – means, not the disappearance of these great master-narratives, but rather their continuing unconscious effectiveness as ways of thinking about and acting in our contemporary situation: their persistence, in other words, as unconscious collective memories.[3]

If neither the politics nor the unconsciousness of memory is explicitly

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addressed in this book, that is not, therefore, because of any doubts entertained by the author as to their importance, but because what is here being advanced is a different argument: an argument that is not incompatible with holding the positions just indicated, but one which is susceptible of independent investigation. What that investigation intends can perhaps best be indicated by noting at the outset two points that are taken as axiomatic. One concerns memory as such, the other concerns social memory in particular.

Concerning memory as such, we may note that our experience of the present very largely depends upon our knowledge of the past. We experience our present world in a context which is causally connected with past events and objects, and hence with reference to events and objects which we are not experiencing when we are experiencing the present. And we will experience our present differently in accordance with the different pasts to which we are able to connect that present. Hence the difficulty of extracting our past from our present: not simply because present factors tend to influence – some might want to say distort – our recollections of the past, but also because past factors tend to influence, or distort, our experience of the present. This process, it should be stressed, reaches into the most minute and everyday details of our lives. Thus Proust shows us how Marcel's memories of seeing Swann's face were freighted with further memories. For the Swann who in Marcel's youth was a familiar figure in all the fashionable clubs of those days differed largely from the Swann created by Marcel's great-aunt – and hence 'seen' by Marcel – when he appeared in the evenings at Combray; Swann, who was elsewhere in those days so sought after, was treated by Marcel's great-aunt with the rough simplicity of a child who will play with a collector's piece with no more circumspection than if it were some cheap object. From the Swann that Marcel's family had constructed for themselves they had left out, in their ignorance, many details of his life at that time in the fashionable world, details which led other people, when they met him, to see all the graces enshrined in his face. Into this face divested of all glamour Marcel's family implanted a lingering residue made up of their leisurely and companionable hours spent together. Swann's face, his 'corporal envelope', had been so well filled out with this residue of reminiscence that 'their own special Swann' had become to Marcel's family a 'complete and living creature'. Thus even so seemingly simple an act as that which we describe as 'seeing someone we know', Proust reminds us, is to some extent an intellectual process; for we pack the physical outline of the person we see with all the notions we have already formed about them, and in the total picture of them which we compose in our minds those notions have the principal place. In the end 'they come to fill out so completely the curve of his cheeks, to follow so

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exactly the line of his nose, they blend so harmoniously in the sound of his voice as if it were no more than a transparent envelope, that each time we see the face or hear the voice it is these notions which we recognise and to which we listen'.[4]

Concerning social memory in particular, we may note that images of the past commonly legitimate a present social order. It is an implicit rule that participants in any social order must presuppose a shared memory. To the extent that their memories of a society's past diverge, to that extent its members can share neither experiences nor assumptions. The effect is seen perhaps most obviously when communication across generations is impeded by different sets of memories. Across generations, different sets of memories, frequently in the shape of implicit background narratives, will encounter each other; so that, although physically present to one another in a particular setting, the different generations may remain mentally and emotionally insulated, the memories of one generation locked irretrievably, as it were, in the brains and bodies of that generation. Proust shows us the disconcerting alienation-effect, the sense of a mental jolt, that results from the intersection of incommensurable memories. He shows this in the experience of Marcel, when he returns to fashionable society after a long absence and tries to engage for the first time in conversation with a young American woman who had heard a lot about him from the Duchesse de Guermantes, and who was regarded as one of the most fashionable women of the day but whose name was entirely unknown to Marcel. Conversation with her was agreeable, but for Marcel rendered difficult by the novelty to his ears of the names of most of the people she talked about, although these were the very people who formed the core of polite society at that time. And the converse was also true: at her request Marcel narrated many anecdotes of the past, and many of the names which he pronounced meant nothing to her, she had for the most part never even heard of them. This was not merely because she was young; because she had not lived in France for long and when she first arrived had known nobody, she had only begun to move in fashionable society some years after Marcel had withdrawn from it. Their conversation was unintelligible because the two of them had lived in the same social world but with an interval of twenty-five years. Thus although for ordinary speech she and Marcel used the same language, when it came to names – when it came, we might say, to their seeking to exchange a socially legitimate currency of memories – their vocabularies had nothing in common.[5]

Thus we may say that our experiences of the present largely depend upon our knowledge of the past, and that our images of the past commonly serve to legitimate a present social order. And yet these points, though true, are as they stand insufficient when thus put. For images of

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the past and recollected knowledge of the past, I want to argue, are conveyed and sustained by (more or less ritual) performances.

In seeking to show how this is the case I shall begin by considering a paradoxical example: that of the French Revolution. It is a paradoxical case because if there is anywhere you would not expect to find social memory at work it must surely be in times of great revolutions. But one thing that tends to get forgotten about the French Revolution is that like all beginnings it involved recollection. Another is that it involved the severing of a head and a change in the clothes people wore. I believe that there is a connection between these two things, and that what we can say about that connection is generalisable beyond the particular instance. I believe, further, that the solution to the question posed above – how is the memory of groups conveyed and sustained? – involves bringing these two things (recollection and bodies) together in a way that we might not have thought of doing.

One might not have thought of doing that because, when recollection has been treated as a cultural rather than as an individual activity, it has tended to be seen as the recollection of a cultural tradition; and such a tradition, in turn, has tended to be thought of as something that is inscribed. More than two millennia – indeed, the whole history of explicit hermeneutic activity – operates in favour of this presupposition. It is true that, for a long time now, the unity of hermeneutics has been seen as residing in the unity of a procedure which is in principle applicable to any object and any practice capable of bearing a meaning. Legal and theological texts, works of art, ritual acts, bodily expressions – all are possible objects of interpretative activity. Yet, although bodily practices are in principle included as possible objects of hermeneutic inquiry, in practice hermeneutics has taken inscription as its privileged object. It arose from and in the course of its history it has constantly returned to the kind of relationship with tradition which focusses on the transmission of what has been inscribed, on texts, or, at the very least, on documentary evidence which is held to have a status comparable to texts, to be constituted, as it were, in the image and likeness of a text.

It is against this antithetical context that I shall seek to give an account of how practices of a non-inscribed kind are transmitted, in and as a tradition. The reader should perhaps be warned as to how this end will be approached. What follows is cast not so much in the form of a treatise as rather in that of an analytical quest; the method is cumulative. Despite the variety of topics that will be discussed, a close logical connection obtains among them. That connection can be expressed by saying that it involved a progressive narrowing of focus. If there is such a thing as social memory, I shall argue, we are likely to find it in commemorative cer-

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emonies; but commemorative ceremonies prove to be commemorative only in so far as they are performative; performativity cannot be thought without a concept of habit; and habit cannot be thought without a notion of bodily automatisms. In this way I shall seek to show that there is an inertia in social structures that is not adequately explained by any of the current orthodoxies of what a social structure is.

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1

Social memory

1

All beginnings contain an element of recollection. This is particularly so when a social group makes a concerted effort to begin with a wholly new start. There is a measure of complete arbitrariness in the very nature of any such attempted beginning. The beginning has nothing whatsoever to hold on to; it is as if it came out of nowhere. For a moment, the moment of beginning, it is as if the beginners had abolished the sequence of temporality itself and were thrown out of the continuity of the temporal order. Indeed the actors often register their sense of this fact by inaugurating a new calendar. But the absolutely new is inconceivable. It is not just that it is very difficult to begin with a wholly new start, that too many old loyalties and habits inhibit the substitution of a novel enterprise for an old and established one. More fundamentally, it is that in all modes of experience we always base our particular experiences on a prior context in order to ensure that they are intelligible at all; that prior to any single experience, our mind is already predisposed with a framework of outlines, of typical shapes of experienced objects. To perceive an object or act upon it is to locate it within this system of expectations. The world of the percipient, defined in terms of temporal experience, is an organised body of expectations based on recollection.

In imagining what a historic beginning might be like, the modern imagination has turned back again and again to the events of the French Revolution. This historic rupture, more than any other, has assumed for us the status of a modern myth. It took on that status very quickly. All reflection on history on the continent of Europe throughout the nineteenth century looks behind it to the moment of that revolution in which the meaning of revolution itself was transformed from a circularity of movement to the advent of the new.[1] For those who came after, the present was seen as a time of fall into the ennui of a post-heroic age, or as a permanent

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state of crisis, the anticipation, whether hoped for or feared, of a recurrent eruption.[2] Revolutionary imagining reached beyond the European heartland; since the late nineteenth century we have lived the myth of the Revolution much as the first Christian generations lived the myth of the End of the World. As early as 1798, Kant remarked that a phenomenon of this kind can never again be forgotten.[3]

Yet this beginning, which provides us with our myth of a historic beginning, serves also, and all the more starkly, to bring into relief the moment of recollection in all apparent beginnings. The work of recollection operated in many ways, explicitly and implicitly, and at many different levels of experience; but I mean to single out here for specific comment the way in which recollection was at work in two distinct areas of social activity: in *commemorative ceremonies* and in *bodily practices*.

2

The beginning which was sought in the trial and execution of Louis XVI of France exhibits this circumstance in a peculiarly dramatic way. The leaders of the Revolution who sat in judgement on Louis faced a problem that was not unique to themselves; it was a problem that confronts any regime, for instance that inaugurated by the Nuremberg Trials, which seeks to establish in a definitive manner the total and complete substitution of a new social order. The regicide of 1793 may be seen as an instance of a more general phenomenon: the trial by fiat of a successor regime. This is unlike any other type of trial. It is different in kind from those that take place under the authority of a long-established regime. It is not like those acts of justice which reinforce a system of retribution by setting its governing principles once more into motion or by modifying the details of their application; it is not a further link in a sequence of settlements through which a regime either achieves greater solidity or moves towards its ultimate disintegration. Those who adhere most resolutely to the principles of the new regime and those who have suffered most severely at the hands of the old regime want not only revenge for particular wrongs and a rectification of particular iniquities. The settlement they seek is one in which the continuing struggle between the new order and the old will be definitively terminated, because the legitimacy of the victors will be validated once and for all. A barrier is to be erected against future transgression. The present is to be separated from what preceded it by an act of unequivocal demarcation. The trial by fiat of a successor regime is like the construction of a wall, unmistakable and permanent, between the new beginnings and the old tyranny. To pass judgement on the practices of the old regime is the constitutive act of the new order.[4]

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The trial and execution of Louis XVI was not the murder of a ruler but the revocation of a ruling principle: the principle according to which the dynastic realm was the only imaginable political system. It had indeed been possible to envisage regicide within the terms of that system. For centuries kings had been killed by would-be kings; by private assassins in the pay of would-be kings; or, more rarely, by religious fanatics like the murderers of Henri III and Henri IV of France. But whatever fate might befall individual kings, the principle of dynastic succession remained intact. Whether they died through natural causes or through foul play, the death of kings and the coronation of their successors were comprehensible episodes in the continuum of lineage. Why did the murder of kings leave the institution of kingship untouched? Because, as Camus succinctly put it, none of the murderers ever imagined that the throne might remain empty.[5] No new rulers, that is to say, had ever thought it to be in their interests that the institution of monarchy should be called into question; once crowned, they sought to preserve for themselves the royal authority of the person whose death they had instigated. This form of regicide left the dynastic system unchallenged: the benchmarks of time were still the phases of dynastic rule. The death of a king registered a break in that public time: between one king and another time stood still. There was a gap in it – an interregnum – which people sought to keep as brief as possible. When Louis XVIII of France dated his accession to the throne from the execution of his predecessor, it was to this dynastic principle that he remained true; he was thinking of regicide as it has always been thinkable within the context of the dynastic realm, a context in which assassinations could always be accommodated as episodes within the narrative of dynastic continuity, a context indeed in which assassination was not so much a threat to the power of dynasty as rather an implicit homage to it. Assassination left the principle of the dynastic realm intact because it left unviolated the king as a public person.

The whole point of Louis' trial and execution lay in its ceremonial publicity; it was this that killed him in his public capacity by denying his status as king. The dynastic principle was destroyed not by assassination nor by imprisonment or banishment but by putting Louis, as the embodiment of kingship, to death in such a way that official public abhorrence of the institution of kingship was actually expressed and witnessed.[6] The revolutionaries needed to find some ritual process through which the aura of inviolability surrounding kingship could be explicitly repudiated. What they thus repudiated was not only an institution but the political theology that legitimated that institution.[7] That political theology, the belief that the king united in one person his natural body as an individual and his representative body as the king, was most clearly expressed in the coro-

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nation ceremony. It was expressed not in the act of crowning alone but also in the anointing by a bishop of the church, with the all-important phrase announcing that the anointed king rules 'by the grace of God'. It was this double component that gave the coronation rite its quasi-sacramental character. For a thousand years the kings of France had received at their coronation the holy oil as well as the crown upon their heads, after the manner of the apostles' successors. The effect was to transform the enemies of royalty into apparently sacrilegious persons. This was the effect that the public regicide of Louis sought to undo. Here was the oxymoronic element of this regicide: Louis was to be given a royal funeral to end all royal funerals. The ceremony of his trial and execution was intended to exorcise the memory of a prior ceremony. The anointed head was decapitated and the rite of coronation ceremonially revoked. Not simply the natural body of the king but also and above all his political body was killed. In this the actions of the revolutionaries borrowed from the language of the sacred which for so long the dynastic realm had appropriated as its own. Their victim well understood that this was an event in the demise of political theology; Louis XVI, like Charles I of England, explicitly identified himself with the God who died when he spoke of his defeat as a Passion.[8] The proceedings at the trial and execution ceremonially dismantled the sense of sacrilege that had surrounded the murder of kings. One rite revoked another.

A rite revoking an institution only makes sense by invertedly recalling the other rites that hitherto confirmed that institution. The ritual ending of kingship was a settling of accounts with and giving of an account of what it repudiated. The rejection of the principle of the dynastic realm, in this case the ritual enactment of that rejection, was still an account of, and a recalling of, the superseded dynastic realm. The problem here is similar to that which arises over the question of the institution of property. Some people steal from others or defraud them or seize their product. In all these ways they may acquire possessions by means not sanctioned by the prevailing principles of justice in regard to possessions. The existence of past injustice and the continued memory of that injustice raises the question of the rectification of injustices. For if past injustice has shaped the structure of a society's present arrangements for holding property in various ways – or analogously if it is held that past injustice has shaped the structure of a society's arrangements for founding its sovereignty – the question arises as to what now, if anything, ought to be done to rectify these injustices. What kind of criminal blame and what obligations do the performers of past injustice have towards those whose position is worse than it would have been had the injustice not been perpetrated? How far back must you go in taking account of the memory of past injustice, in

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wiping clean the historical record of illegitimate acts? To construct a barrier between the new beginning and the old tyranny is to recollect the old tyranny.

The styles of clothing characteristic of the revolutionary period celebrated, if not so definitive a beginning, then at least a temporary liberation from the practices of the established order. They mark the attempt to establish a new set of typical *bodily practices*. The participants in the revolution exhibited a form of behaviour that was not unique to themselves: behaviour that is to be found in all carnivals which mark the suspension of hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions.[9] Styles of clothing in Paris passed through two phases during the revolutionary period. During the first, which dominated the years 1791–4, clothes became uniforms. The culotte of simple cut and the absence of adornments were emblematic of the desire to eliminate social barriers in the striving for equality: by making the body neutral, citizens were to be free to deal with one another without the intrusion of differences in social status. During the second phase, which dominated the years of Thermidor beginning in 1795, liberty of dress came to mean free bodily movement. People now began to dress in such a way as to expose their bodies to one another on the street and to display the motions of the body. The *merveilleuse*, the woman of fashion, wore light muslin drapery which revealed the shape of the breasts fully and covered neither the arms nor the legs below the knees, while the muslin showed the movement of the limbs when the body changed position. Her male counterpart, the *incroyable*, was a man dressed in the form of a cone with its tip on the ground; very tight trousers led up to short coats and ended in high and exaggerated collars, brightly coloured cravats and hair worn dishevelled or cut close in the style of Roman slaves. While the style of the *merveilleuse* was intended as a liberation in fashion, that of the *incroyable* was meant as sartorial parody; the *incroyable* parodied the Macaronis, stylish dressers of the 1750s, by using lorgnettes and walking with mincing steps. This was a moment in the history of Paris when inhibitory rules were suspended; when, as in all carnival, the people acted out their awareness that established authority was, in reality, a matter of local prescription.[10]

If the revolutionaries rejected the practices of bodily behaviour dominant under the *ancien régime*, that was because they knew that a habit of servitude is incorporated in the behaviour of the servile group by way of their own habits of bodily deportment. This was the point that the deputies of the Third Estate were making when in May 1789 they remonstrated, first at their humiliating official costume, and then, when that had been changed, at the very idea of a costume distinguishing them from the deputies of the nobility. In a pamphlet of 2 May 1789 they attacked the

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