

Pre-Workshop comment

PAUL CONNERTON

- In *How Societies Remember* (1989) I argued that most studies of memory – and, on the whole, this remains true – focus on inscribed, or written, transmissions of memories, whereas I wished to focus on incorporated, or bodily, practices, and so I questioned the then currently dominant idea that literary texts may be taken as a metaphor for social practices generally. Against this current of thought, I argued that images of the past and recollected knowledge of the past are conveyed and sustained by ritual performances and that performative memory is bodily. Bodily social memory, I concluded, is an essential aspect of social memory, but it is an aspect which had until then been badly neglected.

In *How Modernity Forgets* (2009), I take my starting point from Frances Yates' classic work, *The Art of Memory*, which traced the history of a Western rhetorical tradition that viewed memory as being dependent on the stability of place; and I then go on to argue that today's world is so full of change, at multiple levels, that forgetting becomes increasingly characteristic of contemporary society.

I argue this along two lines. First, I distinguish different categories of temporality, where by temporality I mean institutionalised and organised time schedules which crucially structure a person's experience of time. The different temporalities are: the time of the labour process; the time of consumption; the time of career structures; and the time of information and media production. I suggest that the specific types of modern temporality entail an abbreviation of history, and that each particular temporality reinforces the others to precipitate a reciprocally interlocking cascade of temporalities.

Secondly, I distinguish three features of human settlement, which are inextricably intertwined, the investigation of which will help us to understand how contemporary topographies generate a condition of cultural forgetting. The first is the scale of human settlement; the second is the production of speed; the third is the repeated intentional destruction of the built environment.

I have just completed writing a volume of essays; although they could be read as free-standing articles, they are all in fact concerned with aspects of cultural memory. They fall into two groups: one group concerning the relationship between aspects of narrative and cultural memory; and the second group concerning the relationship between features of the human body and cultural memory.

In the immediately foreseeable future, my plan is to write a book which seeks to explain the obsession with memory so evident in the past three decades. Provisionally, I am inclined to think that this can be explained, perhaps in ascending order of importance, by: the modern proliferation of media; the effects of decolonisation on both the previously colonising powers and the previously colonised peoples; and the fact that a number of governments have found themselves in the last two decades having to take up a position on the question of transitional justice, following their move from authoritarian or totalitarian governments to (hopefully) more democratic forms of government.

- The truth of memory
 - (a) A particularly interesting feature of this topic arises out of the practice of oral history. Here, it could be argued that there is no sense in talking of 'false' or 'true' statements, since what the oral historian wants to reach is the subjective experience of his/her interviewee, and all statements elicited, whether factually correct or not, convey 'the truth' about the latter's attitude to the narratives about the past being told.
 - (b) On the other hand, the recent proliferation of truth commissions – some twenty in the last two decades – is rather ironic when set against the background of postmodern doubts about the very possibility of truth.
- Regimes of memory

Spaces

Much writing has been done on spaces in relation to memory, the best known of course being the multi-authored volumes edited by Pierre Nora, *Lieux de Memoire*. But most of this literature sets out to write about places that are explicitly commemorative. In *How Modernity Forgets* I seek to distinguish between two ways in which spaces may be said to be connected with memory. In the first, the memorial (eg street names, pilgrimages) memory is explicitly invoked; in the second, the

locus (eg street networks, housing designs) memory works implicitly as an aide-mémoire.

Bodies

In *How Societies Remember* I wrote about habit bodily memory but not about traumatic bodily memory. Attention should be paid in this context to Edward Casey's important but unjustly neglected book, *Remembering*, which speaks of both types of bodily memory. In this connection I should also mention M. Kleinman's important article, 'How Bodies Remember', *New Literary History* (1993), which makes the general point that bodily memory should be related to the iconography of a culture and the specific point that many people suffering from the effects of the Chinese cultural revolution experienced vertigo, and that this may have been related to the great insistence, specific to Chinese civilisation, of the centrality of balance.

- The politics and ethics of memory

Because much recent preoccupation with memory may be accounted for by the attempt to undo the effects wrought by totalitarian governments' attempts to efface people's memories, we may say that there was an ethics of memory at the end of the twentieth century, in the sense that there had not been an ethics of memory at the end of the nineteenth or eighteenth or seventeenth centuries. This casts a shadow over the debate on memory, in the shape of the view, general if not universal, that remembering is usually a virtue and forgetting is necessarily a failing. Yet forgetting can be a success in establishing and enhancing social bonds:

- i. Prescriptive forgetting is precipitated by an act of state and is believed to be in the interests of all parties to the previous dispute; it can therefore be acknowledged publicly.
- ii. Forgetting may be constitutive in the formation of a new identity.
- iii. Forgetting as annulment is a possible response to a surfeit of information.

Position paper

Silences and Memory

I would like to suggest some thoughts about silences and remembering/forgetting. I say silences because silence is not a unitary phenomenon; there are a multiplicity of silences. Specifically, I would distinguish between, on the one hand, intentional silences (as exemplified in alternate sign languages, monastic retreats, and tact) and, on the other hand, imposed silences. The same distinction could be made by contrasting silence and silencing. These are ideal types; we may therefore expect to encounter hybrid or mixed forms in reality.

Imposed silences are likely to have more important implications for remembering/forgetting, and I shall therefore concentrate on this type. I give three main examples.

First, traumatised silences. These are painful and profound because a crucial feature of them is the element of delay. They retard us; it takes time, sometimes an immense amount of time, to digest them. In *The Burden of Our Time* (1951), Hannah Arendt wrote that understanding genocide was the burden bequeathed to the twentieth century. Her argument began to be acknowledged only much later; before monuments of memory were built to the Shoah, a long period of silence had to be lived through. In this connection one might think of how Kenzaburo Oe, in his notes on the city of Hiroshima written in 1965, says that even twenty years after the bomb fell, many of those he interviewed were unable to speak of what happened on that day.

Second: closely related to traumatised silences are others, sometimes difficult to discriminate from them, in the sense that they originate in deeply shocking and painful experiences. We might call them narrative silences, since they signify the refusal or inability to recount certain narratives. Great secrecy remained in Russia as late as the 1990s about whether there were copies of oral history material collected by the organisation 'Memorial' in one person's house, and duplicates somewhere else; and when approached by oral history interviewers, it often transpired that Russians had not had any opportunity to speak openly about their experiences for more than fifty years, and even then they were sometimes unwilling or unable to take the opportunity. Again, although the late 1940s saw in Germany the production of many films set in cities reduced to rubble, no German writer, with the exception of Nossack, put precise facts down on paper about the progress and repercussions of the gigantic campaign of aerial destruction; and, even fifty years later, German historians had not openly discussed whether the bombing campaign could be strategically or morally justified.

Third: the refusal or inability to recount certain narrations often leaves its mark in what might be called terminological silencing. In Russia the denial of the fact of mass death during the Stalin period meant that the word 'starvation' was banned in 1932. The French never referred to the campaign between 1954 and 1962 to retain Algeria as a war but referred to it as an 'operation to maintain public order'. The documents assembled by the British government in India refused to ascribe conscious will and design to the subaltern Indian groups, but assimilated revolts to natural phenomena, which were said to break out like thunderstorms, to heave like earthquakes, to spread like wildfires. In the United States it is almost heresy to describe the nation as an empire. In Germany in the 1950s and 1960s, whenever Germans referred to the period of the third Reich, they acknowledged its existence only elliptically, by referring to it as 'damals' (then).