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Collective Memory and Cultural History:
Problems of Method

ALON CONFINO

THE CONCEPT OF "CULTURE" HAS BECOME FOR HISTORIANS a compass of a sort that governs questions of interpretation, explanation, and method. And the notion of "memory" has taken its place now as a leading term, recently perhaps *the* leading term, in cultural history. Used with various degrees of sophistication, the notion of memory, more practiced than theorized, has been used to denote very different things, which nonetheless share a topical common denominator: the ways in which people construct a sense of the past.¹ It has been used to explore, first, the memory of people who actually experienced a given event, such as the memory of Holocaust survivors.² In addition, it has come to denote the representation of the past and the making of it into a shared cultural knowledge by successive generations in "vehicles of memory" such as books, films, museums, commemorations, and others.³ The richness of memory studies is undeniable. Perhaps collective memory has been so

I should like to thank Edward Ayers, Francesca Fiorani, and Sophia Rosenfeld for their insightful critical advice.

¹ Also in cases where the use of memory has been insignificant in terms of method and theory, the memory perspective itself has proved to be thought provoking. Take, for example, the recent debate on post-Zionism in Israel, where a group of scholars, called "the new historians," has questioned Zionist historiography's most cherished assumptions. The scholars have criticized, among others, the myth of the heroic birth of Israel, Zionism's repression of the Palestinian tragedy, and, more generally, the reduction of historical studies in Israel to an ideological and educational tool of Zionism. These and other claims opened a public debate by scholars and laypersons about the historical meaning of Zionism. At the center of the rethinking of Zionist history has been the term "memory." As Anita Shapira, a leading historian of Zionism and a critic of the "new historians" observed, "the debate is less about historiography than it is about collective memory." But the notion of memory has been used either perfunctorily or as a hollow metaphor defining memory as a monolith in expressions like "the collective memory of early statehood" or "Palestinian collective memory." In terms of method, the debate has centered on the actions, ideology, and motivation of institutions and leading figures, while a social and cultural history of memory's construction and reception has not been taken, as well as the interrelations among different memories within and between Israeli and Palestinian societies. These topics still await their historians. For a good introduction to the post-Zionist controversy, see *History and Memory* 7 (Spring/Summer 1995): "Special Issue on Israeli Historiography Revisited," especially Anita Shapira, "Politics and Collective Memory: The Debate over the 'New Historians' in Israel," 9-34; and Ilan Pappé, "Critique and Agenda: The Post-Zionist Scholars in Israel," 66-90. For a collection of essays about the recent historical disputes in Israel, see Robert Wistrich and David Ohana, eds., *The Shaping of Israeli Identity: Myth, Memory, and Trauma* (London, 1995).

² The literature is enormous. See, for example, Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven, Conn., 1991); Ronald Berger, *Constructing a Collective Memory of the Holocaust: A Life History of Two Brothers' Survival* (Niwot, 1995).

³ The term "vehicles of memory" is used by Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (New York, 1989). Pierre Nora's magisterial seven-volume collection *Les lieux de*

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