

'It would be wrong to conflate history and memory.' Discuss

The question of whether history and memory should be treated separately has fascinated historiographers since it began to arise popularly in the 1960s.¹ While memory can be defined as the representation of personal or collective recollection, what this contentious debate truly comes down to is how one should define the discipline of 'history'. On the one hand, history could be viewed as entirely separate from the essentially fallible memory, as memory cannot be relied upon to solicit a well-informed, factual understanding of the past. It can also be argued that conflating the two areas holds back critical analysis, which is at the heart of history, so cannot be practised. However, these arguments are not convincing when it is recognised that by incorporating memory into the study, one also brings a great deal of humanity back into history, which leads to a deeper understanding of the past. Moreover, when memory and history are brought together, it elicits both the most accessible and the most informed views. Ultimately, memory and history are intrinsically intertwined, so separating them is both counterintuitive and impractical. Together they keep up with the mutable nature of history, and so conflating the two areas is not wrong but rather, desirable.

The fallibility of human memory is an argument, although of little compulsion, against the conflation of the two concepts. Leading historian in this field Maurice Halbwachs developed the idea that memory and history are "antithetical", as "memory distorts the past, whereas the historian's obligation is to correct memory's inaccuracies".² If we accept that history is primarily the pursuit of facts, then memory cannot be incorporated into the study. In both personal and collective memory humans can embellish events, and therefore distance their version of reality from factual proceedings. For instance, the very name of Richard the Lionheart depicts the English King as a brave hero, to live on in history as a crusading icon. Yet, despite the collective memory that he was a glorious warrior fighting for his country, in reality Richard I had little interest in England, spending only 6 months of his life there, reportedly saying "I would have sold London itself if I could have found a rich enough buyer".³ The simplification of this 'hero's' nuanced character suggests that memory plays a deceptive role in the discipline of history, as the consciousness of a nation is unlikely to hold the whole truth. Collective memory cannot therefore be absolutely conducive to historical understanding. Personal memory also has flaws. The significance of events held in memory depends wholly upon who is asked. Ronald Green asserts that "Nostalgia imprints false memory that softens the hard edges".⁴ Rather than facing reality, humans are inclined to contort their memories into an idealised version of events. Clearly the aim of history is not to present the version of the past that we would simply like to hear, but rather one which resembles the truth. This attack of nostalgia is perceptible in the American Civil War, with novels such as *Gone with the Wind* perpetuating a romanticised view of this bloody conflict. Although it may be more palatable to reflect on the past in this way, it does not help historians form a factual understanding of events. *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee

¹ Hutton, "Recent Scholarship on Memory and History."

² Ibid.

³ Sutherland, <http://www.ancientpages.com/2017/05/29/richard-the-lionheart-famous-leader-warrior-and-military-mastermind-but-not-the-best-english-king/>

⁴ Green, *Time To Tell: A Look At The Way We Tick*.

Williams astutely confronts the insubstantial nature of recollection – “In memory everything seems set to music”. Memory can become a dream like portrayal of a past which no longer resembles reality. If history is the search for facts, giving memory influence can only be detrimental to historical progress. Of course, this is taking for granted that all history comes down to is pure evidence, which undermines this argument.

The conflation of history and memory has also been criticised, somewhat more convincingly, in that it holds back meaningful historical analysis. Memory is a source which is so deeply personal, yet history seeks to survey the bigger picture, and so mixing these two opposing forces hinders the purpose of history – to evaluate objectively. Tony Judt agrees with this view of the subject, arguing “memory cannot substitute for history”.⁵ This argument has some founding, as memory all too often focuses on minutia, when history should consider the whole scope of an issue. Without perspective and context, historians cannot fulfil their purpose in understanding the past. In addition, memory could be argued as unnecessary to understanding emotion – the hatred of the monarchy is evident from the passion of the revolutionaries on Bastille Day, and we do not need to delve into cloudy memory when the facts are enough. Moreover, memory seems to carry with it a sense that it cannot be challenged. David Lowenthal powerfully argues that “collective as well as personal memories likewise resist correction by others”.⁶ Memories have a sacred status as people do not want to offend a community or individual, and therefore historians can be reticent to question the validity of the view. This idea is furthered by Freud, who asserts the memory can become delusions “inaccessible to logical criticism and ... contradict reality”.⁷ As discussed, memory is always shaped by perception, individual or societal, yet paradoxically they are less likely to be challenged by historians who use them as sources. History is meaningless without evaluation. It is by challenging ideas and criticism that we gain a deeper understanding of history. If we cannot do this with memory, then it should not be treated as history. Although the view that history is a search for facts is partially true, it is more importantly a search for meaning, so therefore this argument is a more convincing reason not to conflate these two areas.

Despite the flaws in treating memory and history as one, ignoring their relationship is too narrow a view of the world. There are many more compelling reasons why it is not wrong to conflate the two, but in fact conducive to progress.

The combination of memory into history can bring humanity into the study, an approach which can have great reward. Whilst objectivity has analytical advantages, these are outweighed by the drawbacks of the inclination to view human issues as text-book facts. We cannot understand human actions if we look at society as a machine. It is clear that “a history of use is social as well as intellectual”,⁸ and discarding the human conception of events through their memory means historians will miss out on valuable insight into the sentiment of society, which is a crucial to the discipline. For example, it is easy to view the 19th century industrial revolution solely by its economic statistics, but this removes the basis

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Lowenthal, "History and Memory."

⁷ Freud, *Constructions in analysis*.

⁸ Cubitt, *History and Memory*.

of the subject – human experience. The sufferings of children and the labours of miners are brought forth through a collection of memoirs in *Human Documents of the Industrial Revolution in Britain*. E. Royston Pike here argues that “the rich red meat of human experience” is the key for a true understanding of the past. Without context, or the empathy memories bring, a historian cannot effectively establish meaning. Memoirs and primary sources bring the emotion back into history, which lets a modern historian analyse the past from an informed stance. Following from this, history is not simply the domain of academia. Where history and memory powerfully come together for good can be seen through acts of public remembrance. It is Stalin who said, rather hypocritically, that “One death is a tragedy, one million is a statistic”. The emotional distance with which historians approach history could become dangerous. It would be a tragedy if we were to forget the significance of soldiers’ sacrifice in the World Wars, and Remembrance Day in November is a time for communities to come together to commemorate history. Memory certainly plays a part in history, as through these acts of remembrance we humanise the past which could easily become a mere “statistic”. Moreover, the judgement ‘wrong’ implies that the conflation of history and memory is somewhat morally incorrect – this is certainly not the case. Memory in fact serves to *bring* a sense of morality into history. An emotional reading of history encourages us to learn from past atrocities and understand how to avoid them in our time. If we can understand the people of the past, we can understand the people of the present. Memory does not need to overpower historical evaluation, nor does it necessarily have to impose its views on historians if handled appropriately. If we question what conflation entails, it seems clear that memory should be a subset of history, an enabler of our comprehension. Memory plays a vital role in shaping our understanding of the human experience, and therefore should be conflated with history.

History is not an objective study, nor should it be reserved for professionals – combining history and memory is the most pertinent way to decipher the past. A most convincing view of what history is has been put forward by Pieter Geyl who writes that “History is an argument without end”.⁹ History is comprised of endless points of view, which differ due to memory and interpretation. The great intrigue of history is in its subjectivity, and therefore utilising memory can help historians form a clearer understanding of issues which are far from static. As memory plays such an important role in shaping our understanding of the past, it should be a component that makes up our definition of history. It is true that memory cannot *replace* history, but it must constitute a part of the study. History is more than memory alone, but certainly it would be very little without it. Yasmin Khan has embraced this concept, publishing works such as *The Raj at War: A People’s History*. By focusing her research on memory and personal accounts, the complex history of India is made more accessible and human. Individuals are a wealthy resource of information, and utilising their experience, when observed critically, can be extremely fruitful. Moreover, memory is a powerful way to relay history to the public. Many documentaries use memory as a medium through which to broadcast historical theories. Human accounts help break down intellectual barriers between the public and the distant past, and therefore helps bring history alive. Reuthe’s view that history is a “ruthless

⁹ Geyl, *Use and Abuse of History*.

adherence to evidential truth” is far too constricted,¹⁰ and fails to acknowledge the scope of emotion and understanding which it must encompass. Memory is a powerful tool and mixing the two can elicit a deeper connection to the past which is invaluable for the study of history.

Whilst emotion and accessibility are key reasons for keeping memory and history together, a more fundamental reality is the main reason why they should be conflated– the two are quite naturally related. Their forced separation would be far more controversial. The insight of primary sources is undoubtedly valuable in comprehending the impact of the past, and it is “scarcely possible to keep the notions of ‘transmission’ and ‘representation’ separate”.¹¹ All first-hand sources have some bias of memory interwoven into the fabric of their relation, be that in what information they choose to convey or their tone. Therefore, we cannot simply ‘remove’ memory from the study of history but must learn how to use it effectively. Indeed, even a historian’s own writing and interpretation is going to favour certain views over others. If history encourages interpretation, then it would be hypocritical to remove memory from the subject due to the differences in interpretation it solicits. The view that “History becomes an art of locating these memories”¹² is compelling, as we cannot ignore that presence of memory in the study of the past. Instead of resenting its influence, historians should take an interest in discovering what a memory reveals about a source or the event it recalls. The memory of a citizen in Romania that “In Ceausescu’s time, everybody had a job, a house, a decent vacation”,¹³ is clearly not factually accurate as cities suffered from overcrowding, and insufficient funds were given to building social housing.¹⁴ However, this still has value for the study of history as it shows us how the dictator was able to powerfully engender the support of his population for a time, and make them believe in his achievement even if they weren’t true. Disregarding this evidence due to the influence of nostalgia in its tone would be wasting a meaningful insight. Memory is clearly the foundation of historical study. Examining how a culture reflects on distant history can also be useful – in Britain, Guy Fawkes Night is still celebrated more than 400 years after the event. This method of commemoration shows the importance of both parliament and monarchy in British society. Furthermore, memory has been part of history since we first began relaying stories. Oral traditions of passing memories through generations have given rise to a variety of legends and myths unique to different cultures. The nature of these legends can give historians real insight into different cultures and so discarding them as purely works of inaccurate memory would be wasteful. Collective memory can be very revealing. The medieval Robin Hood shows the sentiment amongst the poor of England against the oppression of decadent monarchy; the anthropomorphic folklore of the Dahomey reveals the importance of the natural world to their survival. Fundamentally, “History... is memory written down”.¹⁵ Memory is a means by which historians can understand the past, as the two are inextricably related. The fact that memory is imperfect

¹⁰ Arnold, *History: A Very Short Introduction*

¹¹ Cubitt, *History and Memory*.

¹² Hutton, "Recent Scholarship on Memory and History."

¹³ Chiriac, <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/01/27/nostalgic-still-pay-homage-to-ceausescu-s-memory-01-26-2016/>

¹⁴ Crowther, *The political economy of Romanian socialism*.

¹⁵ Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance*

should not make it inadmissible – examining what is left out of a memory can be just as intriguing as what is explicitly said. It is certainly not wrong to conflate history and memory.

Ultimately, although there are certain limitations to memory in accuracy, this cannot discredit it entirely. History is not a search solely for facts – it is a search for meaning in a constantly evolving field of knowledge. Therefore, memory is an invaluable component of history, and the two should certainly be combined. Memory is not only the recollection of individuals and groups, which can divulge revealing information about the effects of a time on society; but it is also the act through which we relate to the past in the present day. Memory opens doors for analysis and evaluation rather than shutting them, as well as humanising history and making it widely appreciated. Understanding the people of before through their memories can help us understand the people of today. Our conception of the past is fundamentally shaped by recollection, and therefore “history” must encompass memory. The conflation of history and memory produces the fullest understanding of the past, and so historians should make sure the two areas are carefully combined.

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