“REINVENTING” THE PAST TO IMAGINE BETTER FUTURES

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History, as it is usually understood, is everything but creative: it represents, at best, the academically vetted story of our past and, at worst, the narratives imposed by those in positions of power. Yet, when faced with an uncertain future, where else can we turn if not towards our past? Where we come from does not only teach us lessons about the consequences of our actions and those of others – that letting populist discourses flourish, for instance, can open the door to authoritarian regimes – but it also has much to teach us about who we are. Are human beings, by essence, belligerent? Or are we, on the contrary, driven by a constant need to improve ourselves and the conditions in which we live? The literature on collective memory – how we represent history – and its relations to imagination has shown that, indeed, how we understand the past shapes what we believe about the present and the way we imagine our collective future. However, this does not mean that we are trapped by a history that defines a limited set of paths we may take: Collective memory is an open construction, where the complex reality of what happened can perpetually be reinvented and re-interpreted to guide not only what we think might be possible in the future, but where we believe we ought to go and how to get there.

In this chapter, I briefly review the literature on collective memory and imagination. I first look at the role of our representations of history in how we imagine the future, examining in particular how past events help us frame the situation, provide us with examples of how things may unfold, and allow us to generalise about human behaviours and societies. Second, I discuss how our representations of the past are themselves reconstructions guided by our desire to give meaning to what happened, and by how we understand the present. This leads me to argue, in the final section of this chapter, that developing new narratives about history – grounded in facts but guided as well by a critical understanding of our present and by our ideals for the future – is not only possible but can also help us create better futures for ourselves and the generations to come.

The role of the past in imagining the future

How we – as non-historians – represent history has been studied in humanities and in the social sciences as “collective memory,” a slightly misleading term given that it often concerns events we have no direct experiences of, and in consequence of which we have no memories.
Yet, it bears much resemblance with how we remember our personal pasts, that is, with our autobiographical memory. Just as our own histories help us construct a sense of who we are, what values may be important to us, and give meaning to our present lives, collective memories participate with our collective identities and the meaning we give to the groups in which we belong. Indeed, our life stories and, more fundamentally, the significance we give to them are at the heart of who we believe we are as human beings. By organising our pasts into meaningful stories, we can develop a sense of continuity in spite of life’s ever-changing circumstances, identify who and what matters most to us, and derive a sense of direction for the future (Fivush, 2011). Similarly, how we represent the history of our social groups shapes our collective identities (Liu & Hilton, 2005). It serves as an illustration of what the essence of its members might be, what values the group stands for, and who may become a member.

As such, collective memory is a deeply social and political issue. For example, understanding the history of France as marked by the development of humanist ideals (starting with the Enlightenment) and their defence (best exemplified by the Resistance during World War II) presents French people as Human Rights champions, not afraid to rebel against authority to defend their ideals. This version of French history is the nutshell account of what can sometimes be found in political discourses and education curriculums in France (de Saint Laurent, 2020). It disregards, most blatantly, the role France played not only in brutally colonising a multitude of countries but also in developing theories that would support such actions and dehumanise their victims. This self-serving representation of history, for as caricatural as it may seem, is unfortunately quite the norm when it comes to collective memory. Indeed, lay representations of history are often characterised by one-sided discourses that present one’s group in the best of light and downplay less flattering events. As a result, they are often leveraged by politicians wishing to create a sense of national pride or nostalgia over a glorified past, in order to defend a certain representation of the present and of where the future might lead us. For instance, far-right politicians in France have used the narrative presented above to present immigrants as occupants to be resisted, because they supposedly do not share the humanist and democratic ideals that are essential to the country, and are therefore seen as a threat.

By helping us define who we are – or would like to believe we are – collective memory is thus essential for collective imagination (Szpunar & Szpunar, 2016). This role, however, is not limited to identity but is also cognitive and symbolic, and could be the central neurological function of memory (Schacter et al., 2007). Indeed, our representations of the past provide us with three key elements without which imagining the future would not be possible (de Saint Laurent, 2018). These include: (1) frames of reference to understand current events and future challenges; (2) examples from which to draw to evaluate what may be possible and how; and (3) generalisations about what drives history and characterises human nature.

First, collective memory provides us with frames that define what actors, issues, and events have mattered in the past and should thus be considered when imagining the future. These frames are, most often, the result of the unquestioned assumptions we make about the world, on the basis of what we believe has always been the case. Nation-states, for instance, have become such prominent actors in modern history that they are pervasive, both in how we represent events that predate them and in how we imagine the future as dominated by the actions of specific countries as they exist today. Yet, they are relatively recent constructs. Remembering how the idea of the nation-state emerged only in the 15th century encourages us, on the contrary, to imagine what may come after them and what actors could replace them, by changing the frame we use to understand societies and how they evolve. Indeed, if, for the most part, these frames remain invisible to us, changing historical perspectives
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can transform or altogether shatter them. This is, for instance, where much of the power of Foucault’s genealogical method resides: By deconstructing how societies came to be as they are, we can deconstruct what we take for granted in the present and open up new possibilities for the future.

Second, collective memory provides us with a wealth of examples, offering us illustrations of what may be possible or desirable, and what is not. In particular, historical events can serve as resources to draw analogies between what happened in the past and what is happening now. By mapping out past events into current issues, we can attempt to predict what may ensue. Increases in populist or racist discourses, for instance, lead unfailingly to comparisons with the years preceding World War II, while open conflicts often result in comparisons with the war itself. This is in part because although we are quite good at mapping out analogies, we have more difficulty in identifying potential ones (Spellman & Holyoak, 1992). The historical analogies we have become familiar with thus guide what we imagine for the future by providing us with possible conclusions for unfolding events.

Third, collective memory can be used as a resource to construct generalisations about humanity. Looking at our past as a succession of wars, for instance, can lead us to conclude that we are primarily a violent species, incapable of peacefully living together for extended periods of time. From this perspective, war is inevitable, and our future will necessarily be characterised by violence. At the other end of the spectrum, however, one can look at our history as the perpetual attempt to better ourselves and our living conditions, and be hopeful for the future. Many ideologies, in fact, have their roots in these kinds of generalisations, for instance, by positing that progress is inevitable – as is the case with positivism – or that we are determined by our material circumstances – as in Marx’s materialism. These generalisations about human nature and societies do, in turn, guide what we believe to be possible or likely for the future, and what we ought to do about it – for instance, invest in scientific research in the hope that future discoveries will solve our most pressing challenges, or fight for the redistribution of wealth in order to create a more just society.

Collective memory as a reconstruction

The paramount importance of historical representations for how we understand the present and imagine the future has long made them a political issue. By controlling what people believe about the past, we can potentially control what they believe about the present and what they consider as possible for the future, an idea well understood by many authoritarian regimes. The USSR, for example, regularly rewrote its history to fit its varying political needs, with questionable success. While its population learnt to accept the latest account in public, it also gave rise to the aphorism that “nothing is as unpredictable as Russia’s past” (Wertsch, 2002). Without necessarily going as far as doctoring photographs, most countries do indeed attempt to shape the collective memory of their citizens, even if it means sometimes bending the truth or omitting less glorious aspects of their past. Many French politicians, for instance, have insisted on the “positive” aspects of colonisation and minimised the extent and significance of France’s crimes, often to defend anti-immigration programmes (de Saint Laurent, 2018).

Does this central role of collective memory for imagination mean that we are limited by our past, or the biased representations we may have of it? Do historical representations so unilaterally determine how we understand the present and imagine the future? In other words, by controlling the past, do we really control the future? Fortunately, the answer is a
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resounding no. Beyond the fact that one can never police what is thought about history – as the USSR’s failed attempts show – this is because memory is, by essence, reconstructive. The ways in which we represent the past are, in a large part, guided by the demands of the present and our need to make sense of what happened (Bartlett, 1932). Indeed, rote memorisation is rarely useful in everyday life. On the contrary, what matters is to be able to flexibly apply what has been learnt from past experiences to the challenges faced in the present. In this regard, memory and imagination are not opposite or even fully distinct phenomena, an idea supported by neurological research.1

The open-endedness of our past does not mean, however, that any and every account is equally defensible. Of course, many have tried, with varying levels of success, to rewrite history and the blurred lines between re-interpretation and fabulation have led some memory researchers to abandon the distinction altogether.2 But we have seen, over the past decade, the limits of absolute relativism: Reality lends itself to a multitude of interpretations and perspectives, but dismissing facts both fractures societies by creating alternative and incompatible epistemic universes and ensures that, down the line, reality will come back to bite us. Misrepresentations of the Spanish Flu as an extremely deadly virus, for instance, led some to dismiss the risks of COVID-19, given its relatively low mortality rate. We know now, of course, that infection rates are a crucial part of the equation. More generally, if a central function of memory is to help us adapt to the present by flexibly reconstructing the past, representations of the past that bear no resemblance with what happened are of little use.

Proposing new historical narratives does sometimes rely on the discovery of new facts or the admission of wrongdoings that had so far been denied. But, most often, re-interpretations of history are the product of the emergence of new values and concerns that change the value we give to past events, what some have called presentism.3 For Hartog, who proposed the notion, presentism is problematic because it traps us in historical representations that flatter our collective identities in the present instead of helping us learn from the past to imagine the future. Yet, re-interpreting the past in light of the current concerns can be extremely useful. Narratives of unstoppable and salutary scientific and technological progress, for instance, have been questioned in view of the tremendous levels of pollutions we now face. Developing critical perspectives of the past, that take into account the voices silenced by existing narratives – such as those of local communities directly hit by the climate emergency – can help us create a different future by allowing us to identify where and how we may have gone wrong, and what we ought to do about it.

“Inventing” a new past for a better future

In understanding our past, hindsight is, indeed, a very powerful tool. This is because, most often, our thinking is not bound by time.4 We can jump from historical period to historical period, not just reversing but completely disregarding the course of time, to compare unfolding events with incidents that took place hundreds of years ago. Our logic, however, is often dependent on the irreversible flow of time – without it, causes and consequences would have no meaning – and we tend to follow a certain chronological order in communication and argumentation. That is, we give more weight to arguments that describe the present as the consequence of the past and dismiss retrospective interpretations. Yet, there is much to be gained by openly reversing the course of time and letting the present “change” history.

First, current values and concerns can be leveraged to uncover perspectives and voices that have historically been silenced and yet could change how we represent the world. The perspectives of women, for instance, that tend to be overlooked by traditional historical
accounts, could help us understand the role of care, its historical development, and how to foster it. Similarly, looking at how minorities’ cultures have often been appropriated by dominant ones can change how their contributions to society today are recognised and valued, and may be celebrated in the future.

Second, present challenges can guide critical appraisals of the past, by making us reflect on the roots of current issues and question what we take for granted. Looking at the present effects of modern technologies, for example, can lead us to deconstruct how we have come to give them so much value, and to defend a form of degrowth – a reduction of global consumption to attain a more sustainable level of production. Or it can, on the contrary, remind us that examples of progress we take for granted – such as modern medicine – have not always been here and lead us to adopt a more nuanced perspective on technological development and where it may take us.

Finally, we can look at the past not as the unavoidable series of events that led us to the present and determines our future, but as an inexhaustible resource to imagine what could be or might be. Most of our history, as it is written, is dominated by wars and conflicts. Yet, human history is also full of examples of people coming together to defend ideals of justice and kindness. Reflecting on what worked, what did not, and why can help us imagine and create a better future for ourselves and for others. We may not be able to change the past – what happened – but by reinventing how we look at it, we can change where it will lead us and the story it will tell future generations.

Notes

References

