Contested memories and the early medieval resoruces of the past: an introduction

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Where should an introduction into the problems of 'contested memory' and into the uses of the concept of memory in contemporary historiography start? A brief survey of available theory could start in the 1930s, with the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who represented, as Gérard Namer writes, "la gauche durkheimienne".[1] He is remarkable for a complete reversal of the enlightenment idea of history. For generations, historians had tried to establish the superiority of their discipline vs. naive, unscholarly attempts to write, or narrate history. Historical memory should go through an ever-refined set of filters to ensure that nothing could pass as historical truth that did not correspond to the methodological standards of the discipline. "Die deutsche historische Schule" of the 19th century was in a sense the apotheosis of the epistemological optimism that professional historians could say "how it had really been", "wie es wirklich gewesen ist", as Leopold Ranke famously put it. 20th-century thinkers about historical method were more cautious about such claims. But Halbwachs went much further. He distinguished between collective memory and historical memory. The first is spontaneous, natural memory and very selective, while historical memory aims for a much more inclusive, broader picture, but in a much more self-reflective and therefore manipulative manner. The historical background of his work was the ascent of totalitarianism, against which Halbwachs found a remedy in popular, 'democratic' memory. History, he claimed, strips the past of its magic. It is worth noting that the founding father of the theories of 'collective memory' current in historical research to our day came close to asserting that history ruined the spontaneous memory that a society kept from its past. It is a paradox inheritance for us historians to work with.

The same holds true for second, perhaps even better-known prophet of collective memory. In the 1980s, Pierre Nora edited the three-volume series

[1] Maurice Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective* (Paris 1939); id., *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (Paris 1925) ; Gérard Namer, Le contretemps démocratique chez Halbwachs, In: Hermann Krapoth/Denise Laborde, Erinnerung und Gesellschaft. jahrbuch für Sozialgeschiichte (Wiesbaden) 1995, 57.

"Les lieux de mémoire" about the French 'places of memory'.[2] The concept had a spectacular success and acquired wide currency, so that today we can call almost everything linked to memory a 'lieu de memoire'; not only physical spaces such as the the Pantheon or the Louvre, but also cultural artefacts like the Marseillaise or the Diary of Anne Frank, imaginary figures such as King Arthur or the Hobbit, events such as the voyage of the Mayflower or the year 1968. For my taste, it seems a bit odd that a year could be a lieu, a place of memory. In any case, Nora elaborated the distinction that Halbwachs had made: the original form of collective memory thrives in the milieus de memoire, "genuine, social and untouched memory". But these cultures of memory disappear with modernity and with professional historiography, which leads to the "ever faster fall into an irrecuperably dead past, to an indistinctive perception of all things as disappeared". Memory is delegated to specific spaces, museums, archives or memorials, in short, the "lieux de memoire". The warmth of tradition is transformed into the cold gaze of the unconcerned observer.

As historians, we may regard Pierre Nora's model as a warning not to take our own, professional perception of the past for granted. Invariably, we loose the heat of the moment, the immediacy of the living memory. Where we seem to be moving close to it we may just be loosing the safe grounding in historical method. We may not want to share the rather irrationalist preference for the spontaneous warmth of tradition. But however that may be, Nora's distinction obscures one rather essential point. Professional history has not terminated popular social memory. Neither is it simply its contrary. 20th-century intellectuals were obsessed with the futility of their social interventions. History, as many similar intellectual enterprises, seemed infinitely removed from the realms where history was made. "History teaches. But she has no pupils", as the Austrian post-war writer Ingeborg Bachmann once wrote. Or to quote Fernand Braudel: "Far away from us and our daily trouble, history is being made…" And the Czech historian František Graus wrote an article called

[2] Pierre Nora (ed.), *Les Lieux de mémoire* (Paris 1984–1992); English translation: *Rethinking France: Les Lieux de mémoire, Volume 1: The State* (Chicago 1999) ; *Volume 2: Space* (Chicago 2006) ; *Volume 3: Legacies* (Chicago 2009) ; *Volume 4: Histories and Memories* (Chicago 2010).

"Die Ohnmacht der Wissenschaft gegen Geschichtsmythen".[3] Most of us may feel that way most of the time. But in the long run, history does count, especially where it helps to create, not to undermine historical myths. The conflicts and wars in South-Eastern and Eastern Central Europe after 1989 are a case in point. In the late 1980s, the Yugoslav Academy of Sciences issued a statement calling for a renaissance of the glory of the medieval Serbian empire. We now know what followed: a series of fatal wars that had many losers and few winners. Contested memories, indeed.

The milieus de memoire are still alive, the may provide explosive political potential, and historians are often part of them. There are few topics in medieval history that have not gone through several filters of modern uses and misuses of the past. My own research topic, the migration period and the early medieval processes of identity formation, are a case in point. We still rather get too much live wire with these subjects and too little cold, disinterested gaze. Inj the 2000s, a major ESF project about National Histories compared the perceptions of history in more than 20 European countries. It is time to move away from such national perceptions of history and arrive at a 'histoire croisée' of our common past, not only the European past, but the global one. Joep Leerssen's Spinoza project is one important step into this direction. His research is centered on the decades around 1800 when a cosmopolitan network of European intellectuals began to compete for better information about their national past, finding manuscripts, creating ambitious historical models and inventing traditions.[4] It was the time when history as a scholarly discipline, as a began, in close conjunction with the surrounding 'milieus de memoire'. And that has not changed fundamentally, although we tend to be more aware of it.

Much more could be said about the modern uses of the medieval past, but let us return to the contested memories in the early middle ages. Patrick Geary has proposed a distinction between two branches of the study of memory. One is

[3] František Graus, Die Ohnmacht der Wissenschaft gegenüber Geschichtsmythen, in ders., Ausgewählte Aufsätze (1959-1989), ed. by Hans_Jörg Gilomen, Pter Moraw and Rainer Christoph Schwinges (Stuttgart 2002) 50-64.
[4] See JoepLeerssen, National Thought in Europe: A Cultural History (Amsterdam 2006).

what he calls „memory for something“, which concerns the question of the social and cultural uses of memory. The other question is "What things are good to remember with?", and deals with techniques of memory. Memory was an art, as admirably demonstrated in Mary Carruthers' books. It also concerns the question of oral and written memory.[5] Here in Utrecht Marco Mostert has been dealing with literacy and its many facets for many years. But I cannot leave the topic aside without mentioning Patrick Geary's book about the "Phantoms of Remembrance". This book, which appeared in 1994, introduced the "creative process of reforming the relationship between past and present" to early medieval studies.[6] Taking as an example forged Merovingian charters on papyrus, the Chronicle of Novalesa or the memories of Pannonian dragons by Arnold of St. Emmeram in Regensburg, he laid the stress on the way in which memories could be transformed in the context of the manuscript transmission of a text. His observation was that around 1000, many earlier texts were selected, copied or reworked, and thus, our memory of the earlier period is reshaped. We will return to this point and see that an even more important junction for the transmission of texts was the Carolingian period. In any case, written transmission of a text does not necessarily codify a text, on the contrary: by copying it, it is constantly modified. Oral transmission, generally believed to be much more liable to constant modification, may be bound by strategies of codification, so as to preserve the features of a text over the generations. Coran schools do just that until today: they ensure that the pupils learn the text by heart (although it is available in writing). Learning by heart: at least in the English language, the heart can be an organ of memory. Therefore, memories can also be discordant – or, of course, contested.

Memory is a strange phenomenon. Some of us remember totally spurious details of things that will predictably be useless for the rest of our lives. That may make us believe that memory comes naturally. But oblivion is the stronger force. Pat Geary has underlined "the inadequacy of memory". This is a point that Johannes Fried also makes in his book "Die Schleier der Erinnerung", on the basis of a 100-page summary of the "neurocultural basis of

[5] Jack Goody, Brian Stock
[6] p. 9.

historiography". We were not born as historians, he concludes, with an accurate memory of the facts. We remember what our cultural matrix induces us to select and transform from an almost infinite range of things-to-remember. The problem is not simply forgetting, but remembering things differently because they seem to make sense that way. As historians, we may see that as a problem. None of the written sources that we have from the middle ages offer an accurate representation of 'things as they really happened'. In fact, we might have guessed that, even without neurocultural reflections. But what is the methodological bottom line? One could subscribe to a sombre epistemological scepticism. We will never know what really happened. Johannes Fried goes a long way in that direction too. His view of the early Middle Ages is that people had no idea what was happening around them anyway. But Fried finds a way out of the dilemma. Taking the example of Canossa: disregard Bonizo of Sutri, his perception is obscured by his papal orientiation. And forget the pro-imperial chroniclers, their view is equally biased. Take the Northern Italian historiography instead, they had no reason to take sides, and therefore we may believe them. But in fact, we have already known this way out before memorics. Sure it is important to analyze level of knowledge, involvement of the events, intention and bias in our texts, and traditional source criticism is well equipped to do so. But perhaps there is more about Canossa than knowing what really happened. Did Henry IV have to wait out there in the snow for three days? Maybe it is more interesting to know who told that story when and why, who believed it and who did not, what the things were that were considered suitable or unsuitable for an emperor and a pope, and who won the contest for memory.

To know what a delicate and fallible instrument memory is does not make our job any less interesting. On the contrary, it opens many new doors and approaches. Memory does not simply mean that some people know better or less well what really happened, and we have to find out whom to rely on. Doing research on cultural memory means finding out more about cultural codes and narrative models, about transfer of knowledge and refusal to believe, about explicit judgements and implicit taboos. Aleyda Assmann has distinguished 'cultural memory' as the culturally fashioned form of remembering from 'social

memory' and 'collective memory' as being less determined by cultural codes.[7] In that sense, as medievalists we almost invariably deal with cultural memory. Writing down memories, and rewriting them, is a process that is detectably shaped by a cultural matrix that determines the selection of contents, the exclusion of the unsaid or the unsayable, and the production of meaning in the things that are being said. Foucault's concept of 'discourse' and 'discourse formation' can help to understand how all that is said and remembered is governed by certain rules of what can be said and how. These rules are rarely ever made explicit, although they have tremendous influence on a society. How do we remember a miracle? As something that really happened or as something that must have been an illusion? The study of cultural momory can give us a rare access to the cultural codes that determine how things can be remembered, and how things remembered can be written down.

But these cultural codes do not at all mean that there would only be one way to write about certain things, like you might have to do in a totalitarian regime. To the contrary. To take the example of the miracle once again: medieval Christian discourse made it possible to believe that miracles really happened, and that they were a way in which God would give signs to people, or intervene in their affairs as a result of their prayers. Some people in fact still believe that today. For instance, on the 1st of May 2010, an Italian impresarion announced the miracle of an apparition of Mary in Southern Austria, and hundreds of people came – although most of them were not convinced by what happened. But the medieval Christian mindset also ascribed supernatural powers to the devil and the demons, which they exercised to draw human beings into illusion and sin. This opened up a wide range of possible interpretation of events, and impinged heavily on memories of miraculous events. Were they real miracles?

Merovingian bishops, for instance, often had a hard time to control and deligitimate spurious holy men. It all depended on the perception and interpretation of subtle signs. We may look out for clues to natural phenomena instead if we witness events that we cannot explain. But medieval hagiography is full of such contested memories, for instance, Gregory the Great's Dialogues.

[7] Aleida Assmann: *Erinnerungsräume. Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*. München 1999.

He makes it clear that miracles can often be ambiguous. To take one example, during an epidemy in Rome, a servant who has already fallen ill has a vision of heaven in which he perceive who else in the household will have to die alongside with him. But nobody believes him so he enhances his credibility by demonstrating a gift that he has miraculously acquired during his vision: speaking in tongues. He speaks Greek with his master and Bulgarian with a Bulgarian officer who happens to be present, "as if he had been born from that people". But the vision does not help his own quiet passing away: before his death, he bites deep wounds into his own arms, which could be interpreted as a sign of possession by the devil. Gregory's partner in the Dialogues comments: „It is very terrible that one who has merited such a gift also has to suffer such a punishment after that." (*Valde terribile est ut qui tale donum percipere meruit, tali etiam post hoc poena plecteretur*.) But Gregory the Great only comments: „We need to fear rather than discuss". (*Timere magis quam discutere debemus*.)[8] It is one of the relatively rare occasions in which the ambiguity of a miracle is acknowledged (interestingly, it often happens with people speaking in tongues). Gregory's partner in the Dialogues finds this contradiction *valde terribilis*. But the pope instists that we should not presume to judge, just fear God.

He does not raise the question how memory judges without even realizing that it does; even individual memory does so. (It also happened to the spectators of the apparition of Mary in Austria). It does so by applying cultural codes to certain elements, and then possibly finding others that fit the same picture. The multi-lingual servant biting into his own arm might easily have been perceived as tempted and then possessed by demons. Many stories, in hagiography or elsewhere, had been decided in that way long before they were written up, and we might not even have a trace of dissent in our evidence. That makes it so interesting if there is. Many medieval texts still represent a considerable polyphony. "Many memories vie for power" in all complex societies,[9] and that certainly includes the Carolingian empire. The HERA project "Cultural

[8] Gregorius I, Dialogi IV, 27, ed. de Vogüé vol. 3, 94.
[9] Alon Confino, Collective memory and cultural history, in: American Historical review 102 (1997) 1386-1403, at 1398.

Memory and the Uses of the Past" has a wide field of contested memories to explore.