

Historical Culture

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DOI:10.5040/9781350970854.056

Publisher: Bloomsbury Publishing

Identifier: b-9781350970854-056

FULL ARTICLE

Introduction

All past and present cultures and societies somehow relate to their pasts. This is not specific to modern society. In 1929, Johan Huizinga stressed that throughout the ages people have given meaning to the past. Hence, he defined history as the intellectual form in which a culture or community renders account of its past (Huizinga 1929: 156). However, labeling this phenomenon with the concept historical culture is definitively new. The concept generally encompasses the various ways in which groups of people and larger communities perceive and perform the past, involving both popular and academic culture, material and immaterial articulations. While there are differences in interpretation and appraisal—both theoretical and empirical—the concept historical culture broadly aims to understand the dynamic interaction between human agency, traditions, institutions, performances of memory, and other historical representations, conceptions of history, and the circulation of knowledge (Demantowsky 2005; Füssmann, Grütter, and Rösen 1994; Grever 2009; Grever and Adriaansen 2017; Ribbens 2007; Schönemann 2000; Thünemann 2018; Woolf 2003).

The rise of this inclusive concept can be located in the late 1970s. A first incentive was the cultural turn in the humanities, meaning a turn away from the dominant social sciences approach to history as practiced in the 1960s and 1970s (Kocka 2010), with its focus on structures and processes, and the application of quantifying and comparative methods. The humanities concentrated more and more on discourse, memory, and representation (A. Assmann 1999; J. Assmann 1992; Ray and Sayer 1991) and somewhat later also on performativity (Austin 1962; Winter 2010). A second development took place in history education research around the same time. Historians and educators started to investigate the construction of historical knowledge and the various forms of knowledge transmission and acquisition, issues that gave way to history didactics as an academic subdiscipline of historiography (e.g., Husbands 1996; Jeismann 1977; Lee and Ashby 2000; Macdonald 2000; Shemilt 1987; Toebe 1987; Ziegler 2017). History didactics adopted a social constructivist scope with a wide range of themes and contexts that reached beyond the classroom, for instance museums and heritage sites (Grever, De Bruijn, and Van Boxtel 2012; Stoddard 2018). The attempt to include the extracurricular engagement with the past (Pandel 1987) also stimulated the collaboration with the emerging field of public history (Cauvin 2016; De Groot 2009).

The Concept over Time

In the 1970s, several experts in academic historiography (Blaas 1978; Pocock [1971] 1989) pointed to the close relationship of historical consciousness and the growth of critical historical scholarship. Historical consciousness was conceived as an awareness of the fundamentally historical character of human behavior and the construction of historical knowledge, including one's own subject position (e.g., Koselleck [1979] 2004; Rüsen 1989; Seixas 2004: 8–9). It was within this context that French and German scholars coined the concept of historical culture: *culture historique* (Guenée 1980), *Geschichtskultur* (Pellens et al. 1984). Pellens explained *Geschichtskultur* as a notion that designated the historical political dimensions of identity constructions on various (local, national, and international) levels (Pellens et al. 1984: 7). Yet a decisive impact came from the memory boom as part of the cultural turn.

Inspired by the *Annales* historian Maurice Halbwachs (1992, 1980), historians and anthropologists rediscovered the significance of (collective) memory and its potential impact on people's historical consciousness. For instance, Herman Lübbe (1977) pointed to the musealization in modern society and the obsession with memory, the tendency to collect and to expose all kinds of "authentic" artifacts in museums and to preserve historical buildings. His compensation thesis pointed toward the current need of people to minimize the effects of social transformations in the globalizing world through the creation of historic anchorages. Meanwhile, postmodernism and poststructuralism further paved the way for the cultural turn. Whereas debunking national myths has become a popular activity for historians, for example leading, to influential publications on the invention of tradition and the imaginative character of the nation (Anderson 1983; Hobsbawm 1983), of vital importance for the development of historical culture was the publication of the multivolume *Les Lieux de Mémoire* (Sites of Memory) ([1984–92] 1996–8) edited by Pierre Nora.

Nora's deconstruction of the symbolical mnemonic universe of the French nation spurred research on social or collective memory throughout Western historiography. Initiatives to map national sites of memory and discussions about the concept took place, for instance, in Germany, Italy, Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands, Australia, and Latin America. The Egyptologist Jan Assmann elaborated the concept of collective memory with his distinction between two main forms of memory: communicative memory (memories communicated directly to [grand]children, relatives, eyewitnesses, or survivors, lasting for about three generations) and cultural memory (transmitted memories expressed in monuments, statues, artifacts, exhibitions, annual commemorations, textbooks) (J. Assmann 1995; see also A. Assmann 1999). In his book *The Mind of Egypt* (2002), J. Assmann explains that history is a cultural form that "changes in accordance with the semantic framework society places it in" (J. Assmann 2002: viii). His mnemohistory of ancient Egypt focuses not so much on the remembering of history but on the history of memory and its fabrications: in other words, how the Egyptians related to their own past and established meaning by organizing memories and experiences. Thus, the concept of collective memory was widened with a culturalization approach, on the one hand, and historicized as a process of giving meaning to the past, on the other, in such a way that its connotation conflated with the content of the emerging concept of historical culture.

The cultural turn also evoked a reappraisal of the importance of Romanticism on the history of historiography and historical consciousness. The contributions of the volume *Romanticism and Historical Culture* (1996) not only acknowledged new themes (the study of novels, couleur

locale, paintings, monuments, pagans, traditions, and rituals) but also historical approaches in which genres and stylistic tools from science, literature, visual art, and theatre were combined with each other (Tollebeek, Ankersmit, and Verschaffel 1996).

Nora's work, however, had created a rift between academic historiography and collective memory—a distinction further exacerbated by the work of David Lowenthal who stressed in his classic *The Heritage Crusade* that history as a reflective and critical science and the “uncontrollable” memory expressed in superficial “routes to the past” (1998: x–xi). Several historians and other experts resisted this oversimplified distinction, pointed to the overlapping and interactive practices and the value of heritage and sites of memory (Grever et al. 2012; Ribbens 2007; Rusu 2013: 262). They conceived academic historiography as one of the institutions that co-shape society's historical imagination but that was in its turn influenced by society and the emergence of new media. Historiography and memory were therefore regarded as intrinsic and mutually constitutive parts of any historical culture.

A similar development took place with public history. In the late 1970s, this field was gradually acknowledged as a historical subdiscipline, albeit often with the less prestigious image of amateurism (Cauvin 2016). Scholars also researched the meaning of the past in ordinary people's daily life (Rosenzweig and Thelen 1998). In the course of time, academic historians were called upon to assume a role of responsibility in society at large; for instance, to advise producers of historical films, musicals, and video games about historical representations; or to participate in public debates about sensitive pasts. In the 1990s, we notice the rise of several state sponsored historical expert commissions, truth commissions and tribunals around the world that served to account for the past in the public sphere, often created after violent transitions of nation-states or when governments are confronted with sensitive historical issues (e.g., the involvement of western states in the transatlantic slave trade, the transition to the post-apartheid regime in South Africa, the investigation of the Srebrenica massacre) (Bevernage and Wouters 2018). The direct and indirect interventions of nation-states and international organizations in the construction of public memory gave the field of public history an extra boost. Hence public history not only became institutionalized with the founding of graduate programs, specific journals, and associations (Cauvin 2016; Grever and Van Nieuwenhuysse 2020) but also was increasingly considered an influential field of how states and international organizations conceived and used the past.

With regard to history education research, it took until the 1990s before historical culture became a central category within that field of research, a concept with its own developing methodology (Schönemann 2006: 183). The main proponent of the concept was Jörn Rüsen, who concluded in a 1990 lecture in honor of Jeismann that historical learning has an outer and an inner side. The inner side refers to historical consciousness, which is individual (personal) and cognitive, whereas the outer side—historical culture—includes the institutions and organizations that form the infrastructure of historical learning, enabling the collective instruction for the acquisition of general and specialized historical knowledge (A. Assmann 2010: 37; Rüsen 1991: 17). Rüsen defined historical culture as “the complete range of activities of historical consciousness” (1997: 38). The concept historical culture caught on rather quickly after its introduction, resulting in numerous publications in Germany (Demantowsky 2005; Hasberg 2004; Schönemann 2000, 2006) as well as in its neighboring countries (Aronsson 2000; Erdmann and Hasberg 2011; Grever 2009; Loew 2003; Ribbens 2007). Next to Rüsen's chair in general history and historical culture at the University of Witten/Herdecke, in 2004 a chair of history didactics with special emphasis on historical culture was established at the

Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster, Germany. In 2006, the Center for Historical Culture was founded at Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands; two years later, in 2008, the center also established an endowed chair in “Historical Culture and Education.”

In sum, since the 1990s the concept of historical culture denoted the historicization of academic historiography, popular historical renditions, traditions and rituals—embedded in formal and informal infrastructures (e.g., history chairs at universities, history curricula in schools, archives, truth commissions, memory laws, museums, heritage institutes, local groups, neighborhood initiatives, reenactments)—which enable people to understand, criticize, and perform a specific past, including the meaning of the past in everyday life. Henceforth historians aimed to study “the historical culture” of a country, a civilization, a period, or a community (e.g., Carretero, Berger, and Grever 2017; Hubbard et al. 1995; Ribbens 2007; Schmidt-Glintzer, Mittag, and Rösen 2004; Tollebeek, Ankersmit, and Verschaffel 1996; Woolf 2003).

Interpretations

Most historians who have resorted to the concept since the 1990s have adopted a constructivist approach, viewing historical culture from the perspective of socialization, as a form of *histoire des mentalités* (Raulff 1993), or the making of a national historiography and its infrastructure (Hubbard et al. 1995), or simply as a form of cultural history (Sabrow 1997).

Many perspectives came to be discussed, but over the past two decades the debate particularly concentrated on various layers of historical culture subdivided into different cultural domains. Rösen (1994), for example, promoted a subdivision of historical culture into three ideal-typical dimensions in which historical consciousness creates meaningful orientations in the life-world: an aesthetic, a cognitive, and a political one. These dimensions allude to different historical phenomena that cannot be reduced to each other: the aesthetic dimension is linked with art, the cognitive with science, and the political with politics. According to Rösen, these are the fields in which historical memory expresses itself culturally.

The weakness of this tendency to subdivide historical culture into different cultural fields is that it shifts the focus from the genesis of historical knowledge to representations of historical knowledge. These categories indicate that memory is a collective and a cultural practice, but give few clues on how this practice functions. One of the main problems of the current state of both historical culture and memory studies is the emphasis on “collectivism” in these fields of study. Ever since the popularization of Halbwachs’s works (Halbwachs 1980, 1992), the adage that all memory is collective memory, as even the most personal memories are mediated by social mnemonic patterns, has become the core axiom of memory studies (J. Assmann 1995) and consequently of historical culture. This type of reasoning leads to a perception of cultural memory and historical knowledge that keeps floating on a collective level. This is obvious as Halbwachs was strongly influenced by Durkheim’s interpretation of society as an organism—one might even recognize the Durkheimian idea of a conscience collective in the notion of collective memory—but by focusing on the rhetoric of community, Halbwachs failed to notice “how individual memories can come together to form a group memory through the medium of actual social interaction—as, for example, in the telling of stories, the exchange of recollections between individuals” (Cappelletto 2003: 242).

Kansteiner (2002) points to the problem with the field of memory studies that it has become a discourse that focuses too much on the mnemonic representations of specific events within specific social groups, thereby disregarding the production, performance, and dissemination of memories in communicative interaction between people, groups, and institutions (see also Winter 2010: 15). For example, every historian knows what lieux de mémoire are, and can give plenty of examples, but the question is how such mnemonic commonplaces become commonplaces in the first place. Hence, Grever and Adriaansen (2017) propose a revised theory of historical culture that counters this narrow focus on historical representations, offering possibilities to study them within the broader cultural context in which they are generated. They criticize the argument of German scholars that historical consciousness and historical culture are intrinsically related in the sense that historical consciousness as an individual and mental process is expressed in the construction of a shared, collective historical culture (Rüsen 1997, 2017: 168; Triepke 2011). The issue is that if one interprets historical culture as an expression of historical consciousness, one assumes historical consciousness to exist outside of historical culture providing it with an essentialist and ahistorical meaning (Grever and Adriaansen 2019; for a critique related to the didactics of history, see Ziegler 2017: 6).

To overcome this essentialist approach historical culture can be better defined as a holistic concept that historicizes the different ways in which people give meaning to the past, including historical consciousness. Although all cultures have an understanding of the three temporal dimensions of past, present, and future, the meaning cultures attribute to these temporal dimensions is historically and culturally variable. For this reason, Grever and Adriaansen (2017) have defined historical culture as an inclusive concept that tries to avoid a prioritization of a modern Western or Eurocentric understanding of history, as had been the case in many history didactics studies (for a critical approach, see Seixas 2016: 429). This concept encompasses not only the specific contents of collective memory and historical imagination but also the ways in which relationships to the past are established in a dynamic interaction between human agency, tradition, performance of memory, historical representations and their dissemination as well as conceptions of history, namely, the presumptions about what exactly constitutes history. For that reason, they have distinguished three mutually dependent and interactive levels of analysis in the study of historical culture: (1) historical narratives and performances of the past; (2) mnemonic infrastructures; and (3) conceptions of history.

The first level refers to telling specific stories about the past or expressing historical experiences, which is both describing and (re)creating what happened, it is both narrating and performing the past (Winter 2010: 11). This process includes the production, (re)mediation, appropriation, dissemination, and transmission of substantive interpretative frameworks by people who share in the present specific human experiences of the past. These substantive interpretations are articulated in, for instance, myths, historiography, texts in history schoolbooks, travel guides, recounted memories but also staged reenactments and rituals that relate past and present in various configurations. The term "configuration" refers to the process of narrative emplotment. In the dynamic process of assigning different meanings to the past by individuals and mnemonic communities, such as families, religious communities, college fraternities, or generations, they articulate (perceived) shared experiences in rituals, commemorations, and reunions. Here emphasis is placed on identity formation and emotion

(Cornelissen et al. 2003), acquiring a social identity and familiarizing members of a specific community with that past to assimilate them (Zerubavel 2003: 3). These articulations assume at least some kind of organization: a mnemonic infrastructure.

The second level, material and immaterial mnemonic infrastructures, enables people to express their memories and historical experiences. These infrastructures, located in time and space, include, for example, annual ceremonies, national calendars, mnemonic sites and landscapes, heritage organizations, museums, archives, schools and other institutions. At a given location and at certain times people in the present commemorate events from the past. According to Zerubavel (2003: 11–12) these commemorative actions are patterned and highly structured, resulting in a mnemonic synchronization and socialization of the members of any community. In other words, mnemonic infrastructures enable a mediation between past and present, and between personal and collective memory. The study of, for example, the historical culture of a nation-state—one of the prime frameworks of collective identity since the nineteenth century—could clarify the ways in which mnemonic infrastructures carry and define specific articulations of the past. Within a historical culture different memory cultures (groups and communities) can be distinguished that have a characteristic way of dealing with a shared past. The status and differences of both concepts and its applications have been discussed extensively, yet without decided outcomes (Demantowsky 2005; Hasberg 2004). Following J. Assmann (2012: 15–69), a memory culture primarily articulates the identity of a community. Frequently, personal and collective memories can conflict with each other, and different memory cultures can overlap or compete with each other. For instance, in the Netherlands after 1945, communist community memories of the Second World War were decidedly different from those of the Orthodox Protestant community. The main difference between historical culture and memory culture seem to be the scope, although the boundaries between the two concepts are rather fluid. The concept of historical culture particularly involves the making of large formal and informal infrastructures, having a long history.

According to Nora, the rise of modernity and industrialization have caused the demise of what he called *milieux de mémoire* (environments of memory)—social environments such as the church or the peasant village in which memory was transmitted more or less naturally via living traditions and customs (Nora 1989: 7). In contrast, as the natural transmission of memory waned under the influence of the acceleration of history, and people became increasingly aware that the past essentially differs from the present, modern societies deliberately invented infrastructures to maintain a sense of historical continuity and to preserve the past. Consequently, modern societies, and especially nation-states, tend to fixate memory in certain mental or physical “sites,” which Nora called *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory), to counter oblivion and to generate collective, national identities. The emergence of history as a compulsory school subject in the nineteenth century, demonstrated the increasing need of nation-states for social cohesion and justification by constructing a shared—often glorified—past (Grever and Van der Vlies 2017). These modern ways of remembering resulted in the ossification of the contents of historical memory in sites of memory as well. Large-scale projects discerning these physical or mental *lieux de mémoire* of various nations have studied, for example, Charlemagne, the fairytales of the Grimm brothers and the Berlin Wall for Germany (François and Schulze 2001); Vichy, Joan of Arc, and the cathedral for France (Nora 1996–8); or Garibaldi, the mafia, and the eighth of September for Italy (Isnenghi 2013).

The two abovementioned levels of analysis—historical narratives/performances of the past and mnemonic infrastructures—are constituted by conceptions of history and can in turn alter conceptions of history. Historical cultures always presume a certain, often implicit, conception of history—an idea of what history is (Adriaansen 2015: 4). A conception of history is a specific interpretation of the relationship between the three temporal dimensions past, present, and future that determines, on the one hand, a degree of human agency and, on the other hand, the epistemological (im)possibilities to know the past.

François Hartog, for example, discerns three regimes of historicity, which can be understood as articulations of conceptions of history (Hartog 2015: 15–19). First, there is a “passeist” regime of historicity in which the past determined the present and the future. Here, the past serves as a storehouse for moral lessons to guide future-oriented actions in the present. In this regime—which dated from Homer to Romanticism—the past functions as a guide for life, as captured in the Ciceronian dictum *historia magistra vitae*. Second, in a “futurist” regime of historicity the present is not defined by the past but by the future. With Reinhart Koselleck (2004), Hartog states that in this conception of history, the past no longer serves as a model but provides meaning in reference to expectations of the future. The experience of an acceleration of history during the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution resulted in the experience of a rupture between past and present. In the period 1750–1850 a new conception of history developed in the West, which was rooted in modern historical consciousness—the awareness that the past is essentially different from the present. To bridge the gap between past and present, historical narratives of progress and development were generated—narratives that tie the distant past and the unknown future together in a single explanatory framework. The future—imagined for example as liberal freedom, as the realization of a nation’s special mission or as a classless society—now defined history as a progressive chain linked through rational human action conceived as development. Third, Hartog defines a “presentist” regime of historicity. In Hartog’s understanding of presentism, the present defines both past and future. Hartog explicitly links the rise of presentism to the bankruptcy of grand narratives in the postmodern condition, and the consequential loss of the sense of a larger meaning in the historical process. What man is left with is memory. It is no coincidence that Hartog sees the rising popularity of heritage and memory over the last decades as indicative for the rise of a presentist regime of historicity (Hartog 2015: 195).

Using historical culture as a dynamic and inclusive concept of these three, mutually dependent and interactive levels of analysis can support research in cultural history, memory studies, public history, and history education research.

Conclusion

The concept of historical culture arose in the 1980s and 1990s to study how people and communities deal with the past and what constitutes historical knowledge and its dissemination. Here—according to Rüsen—historical culture works as a synthesizing concept, involving material and immaterial articulations, academic and popular culture, linking places of memory to functions of memory. The concept gained extra relevance in the wake of the cultural turn and the memory boom as a holistic, meta-historical concept that enables the integral study of past-relationships in societies. The rising popularity of social constructivism and memory studies has introduced its own problems.

First, scholars became increasingly occupied with the issue of defining the relationship between the concept historical culture and concepts from memory studies such as memory culture. Second, the classification schemes that were devised to show which cultural domains interacted within historical cultures provided few tools to study the actual genesis and perception of historical (re)presentations. Third, the perceived connection of historical culture to historical consciousness obstructed the study of premodern, non-Western, and postcolonial relations to the past, which may invoke other conceptions of history and often rely on other means than representation to establish past-relationships.

To counter these issues, an inclusive concept of historical culture, including three levels of analysis, has been formulated that enables the study of heterogeneous and dynamic relationships to the past. First, the level of actual historical narratives and performances—from popular to academic—through which the past gains meaning through emplotment and affection, namely, substantive historical interpretations in the form of myths, historiography, schoolbooks, travel guides, recounted memories but also staged reenactments and rituals. Second, these literal or symbolic articulations of relationships with the past rely on and in turn (re)define mnemonic infrastructures. These structures—from material to immaterial—in turn rely on historical (re)presentations to underline their social relevance through, for example, the suggestion of its historic continuity. Third, all historical cultures depend on specific conceptions of history—axiomatic understandings of how past, present, and future are related to each other, including forms of (modern) historical consciousness.

Related Articles

See also: Johan Huizinga, Reinhart Koselleck, Agency, Class, Epistemology, Experience, Heritage, Narrative, Public History, Representation, Slave Narratives, Time

Further Reading and Online Resources

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