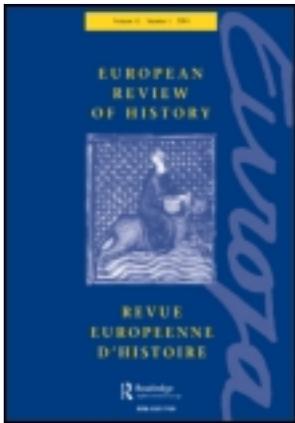


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Holocaust memory in the twenty-first century: between national reshaping and globalisation

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This article explores the meanings of ‘commemoration’ and ‘memory’ in the context of a Holocaust memory that is often described as global or globalised, or indeed of Holocaust commemoration. The authors examine the ‘globalised’ as well as the rather national aspects of some emblematic recent events in this context including the Stockholm Declaration and the first Holocaust Memorial Day in Britain and discuss some of the classical sociological theory of ‘collective memory’ (Halbwachs) as well as some more recent theoretical contributions (Nora; Levy/Sznaider). They ask in particular who the agents and the carriers of memory and commemoration are.

Keywords: commemoration; memory; Holocaust; Auschwitz; Theodore W. Adorno; Maurice Halbwachs; Pierre Nora; globalisation; cosmopolitanism; collective memory

Holocaust commemoration becoming multilateral: questioning the globalisation of memory

In the last 10 years, a number of major diplomatic events took place in Europe, Israel and the United States, where diplomats and heads of states and governments gathered to commemorate the Holocaust. The first of these took place in London in December 1997 and dealt with the gold that had been looted by Nazis and recuperated by Allied troops from 1945 on, put in the so called ‘gold pool’ and kept in the safe of the Bank of England.¹ Growing scandal about what was being called the ‘Holocaust-era looted assets’² had led to the reconsideration of the fate of these properties and it had been made clear that some of this gold (valued at £46 million) had not been given back to owners and was kept, virtually forgotten, in London.³ While most of the looted gold was monetary gold, taken from national banks of occupied countries, it was decided at the London conference that the remaining gold should be considered as having been looted from Jews and that it should be sold immediately. The money from the sale was to be used to finance different projects on Holocaust memory.⁴ The contrast between the insider negotiations at the conference (meant to counter three dozen pending class actions in Europe against European companies and governments) and the official proceedings, stressing the need for a common framework for Holocaust education, is striking. The final report on the new fund lists hundreds of projects on Holocaust memory and education across Europe and also demonstrates that Holocaust memory is far from homogeneous, as these projects were decided on at nation-state level.⁵

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The Washington conference on Holocaust-era looted assets was convened in 1998 and took place at the State Department. Representatives of more than 30 countries discussed the necessity for restitution or compensation.⁶ The most impressive of the three events was the Stockholm conference of January 2000, when heads of state or government gathered to discuss the necessity of teaching about the Holocaust in order to fight prejudice.⁷ It has been argued that support of the final declaration of the conference was a condition for former Eastern Bloc countries to enter the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).⁸

In 2005, two major gatherings occurred: the commemoration in Auschwitz on 27 January, 60 years after Soviet troops entered the camp complex, and in April the inauguration of the new museum in Yad Vashem. On both occasions, heads of state were present to emphasise the necessity of remembering. The United Nations General Assembly also, for the first time, commemorated the Holocaust and voted for a declaration condemning Holocaust denial. Other international bodies, such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in Vienna, the Council of Europe in Strasbourg and the European Parliament in Brussels conducted ceremonies, gatherings and a conference on the Holocaust (and on anti-Semitism). These ceremonies of goodwill and remembrance, where sometimes survivors were given a place, if not a say, appear to prove that Holocaust memory has become a common and non-partisan issue on the international arena, one of very few that all countries can unite towards.

Do these events, successes in the raising of the consciousness of the Holocaust, mean, though, that an international Holocaust memory has developed in the last 10 or 15 years? Is there a globalised Holocaust memory, or at least a tendency towards one? Does the common reference to the Holocaust mean a coming to terms with, and a genuine understanding of the catastrophe, or is it a mere ritual? Also the term 'globalised' needs to be problematised. Although originally it referred to an economic process, it tends today to denote – together with an enormously increased circulation of goods, capital, people and information – the homogenisation of ways of life, culture and thought. This notion, that seems to suggest a more or less parallel movement of economic, political and cultural processes, has been criticised⁹ as well as significantly relativised by Roland Robertson's apt neologism of the 'glocalisation'.¹⁰ In this article, we will go back to the first sociological theory of memory, that by Maurice Halbwachs, and will argue, following Halbwachs, that memory always needs to be understood in a specific framework. The question can thus be restated as, whether 'the global' can in any meaningful sense of the word provide in the present period the 'social framework' of (Holocaust) memory, which would make it a global one. Starting from the diplomatic arena and the multilateral exchanges between states, diplomats and governments to address the question of Holocaust memory in the twenty-first century, we will throw up the question of who or what the agencies of memory, the carriers of a common narrative, are. We propose to consider memory as circulating between different groups and communities, organisations of victims, administrations, local authorities and others, rather than primarily something that can be imposed from above, the level of high politics, down to national and transnational publics. While Holocaust memory and commemoration clearly play a role at the inter-state level, we suggest that this does not necessarily amount to its globalisation, and that this role might even be found to be rather superficial. The textures of memory are complex, and they do not appear to be very globalised at all. The local, the national and the communal remain, so we argue, the most relevant levels, at which memory operates.

Social memory, the loss of memory and anti-memory

The more we remember the more we forget, and the more we become aware of all we forget the harder we struggle to remember, to the effect that we forget even more: memory engenders as well as is the product of its anti-memory. This is the basic proposition explored in the writings of the French historian Pierre Nora, the editor of the seven-volume *Les lieux de mémoire*, a celebrated work of French historiography containing 130 essays by over 100 different authors,¹¹ and seems a good starting point for our attempt to get a theoretical grasp of Holocaust memory. The title of the book, *Memory Places*, in English, is explained as follows:

Lieux de mémoire originate with the sense that there is no spontaneous memory, that we must deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organise celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and notarize bills, because such activities no longer occur naturally.¹²

Irrespective of the question whether memory ever was 'natural', Nora rightly distinguishes traditional or 'true' memory from modern memory, a form of memory that is not really one: 'What we call memory today is... not memory but already history.'¹³ What remains of 'true memory' today 'subsists only in gestures and habits, unspoken craft traditions, intimate physical knowledge, ingrained reminiscences, and spontaneous reflexes'. It exists alongside of, and potentially in contradiction with, 'memory transformed by its passage through history' which is 'wilful and deliberate, experienced as a duty rather than as spontaneous; psychological, individual and subjective, rather than social, collective and all-embracing'. It depends on 'external props and tangible reminders of that which no longer exists except qua memory'. Nora points to a paradoxical situation in which 'hypertrophy of memory' is 'inextricably interlinked with our sense of memory's loss and concomitant industrialisation'.¹⁴ It commands 'Thou shall remember', linking the social-political and the individual-psychological.¹⁵ It is important to ask whether the highly acclaimed concept of memory developed by Nora can be applied to Holocaust memory in a 'globalised' framework. The memory described in *Les Lieux de mémoire* is national, very often promoted by the (French) State and its agencies. It is often a 'noble memory' (in fact, a middle-class one, like the tourists' guidebooks) and very stable over time. Interestingly, the multi-volume work hardly considers the Holocaust. In the entry 'Vichy' (by Philippe Burrin),¹⁶ one page is dedicated to the difficult memory of the persecution. In the entry 'Grégoire, Dreyfus, Drancy et Copernic' (by Pierre Birnbaum),¹⁷ Holocaust memory is described as a 'black hole around which a specific memory is structured'.¹⁸

The modern concept of memory does not simply replace the traditional one but both coexist in a curious dialectic that is related to a similarly dialectical and specifically modern sense of time.

What does Nora's argument do for a theorisation of Holocaust memory? It seems to suggest, first of all, that for most of those alive today (basically merely exempting the generation of the survivors) Holocaust commemoration is not based on ('true') memory at all; second, the 'staged' forms of commemoration that we practise refer us to the discontinuity rather a continuity of memory.

The original theory of memory in society: Maurice Halbwachs

This first result leads us to the theoretical foundation on which all subsequent theorisations of memory rest, that by Maurice Halbwachs. Our argument here is that the notion of a globalised Holocaust memory would need to be based on the demonstration of a globalised version of what Halbwachs defined as the 'social framework of memory'.

Halbwachs was prompted by the strong and, as he thought, one-sided concern with the individual in the writings of Bergson and Freud to writing his seminal study of 1925, *The Social Frameworks of Memory*.¹⁹ This book is generally seen as the founding text of a sociology of memory (together with posthumously published material that Halbwachs never prepared for publication.)²⁰ Halbwachs – who is currently being discovered as the sociologist who invented ‘social constructivism’ *avant la lettre*²¹ – asserted that ‘people acquire or construct memory... as members of a society’ due to their ‘direct and indirect relations with other people’.²²

The pivot of Halbwachs’s concept of the memory is that ‘in the same moment that we see objects we represent to ourselves the manner in which others would look at them’.²³ As our perceptions depend on categories and concepts that are constituted socially, in perceiving objects we recollect relations we have or have had with others. In Halbwachs’s understanding,

the personalised aspect of memory, the sense that my memory is unique and different from yours, was derived from the social fact that each individual is positioned not in one but in several social groups – for example in relation to class, gender, kinship and so on. In this sense, what appears as an individual’s unique world of memory is in fact nothing other than the uniqueness of the layering of social memories.²⁴

The experience of recollection is distinguished, on the one hand, from sense perception of present reality insofar as it is experienced as *past*, on the other hand, from dreaming insofar as it is experienced as *real*: it is only because memory depends on collective forms of perception (discursive language, ideas, concepts; ‘time, space, and the order of physical and social events as they are established and recognised by the members of our group’) that the individual is prevented from becoming ‘fused with the past’, that is, from believing s/he was reliving what she or he actually merely remembers.²⁵ At the same time, the memory’s dependence on societal forms of perception also creates that ‘feeling of reality’ that distinguishes a memory from a dream.²⁶

It is against this background of a literature that tends to diagnose a petrification and indeed loss of memory that the sociologists Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider posited their entirely optimistic account of the ‘cosmopolitisation’ of Holocaust memory in their book *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age*.²⁷ Their account confidently rejects the, as it were, ‘romantic’ undertone of the tradition coming from Halbwachs, that is most obvious perhaps in Nora, and celebrate what would be ‘untrue memory’ for Nora as adequately and laudably ‘cosmopolitan’. Although their discussion only relates to Israel, Germany and the USA, Levy and Sznaider point to what they call, apparently as synonyms, ‘cosmopolitan’, ‘transnational’ or ‘global memory cultures’, which they suggest could provide the cultural foundations for ‘global human-rights politics’.²⁸ They refer to the memory of the Holocaust as a ‘global collective memory’,²⁹ leaving unclear though, which ‘collective’ they see as being the carrier of this memory. Levy and Sznaider claim that ‘[r]ather than discarding the concept of collective memory, we are transposing it from the confines of its formerly national context to a broader global one’.³⁰ They claim that ‘critics of global culture seem almost unanimous in maintaining’ that ‘the nation is the basis for authentic feelings and collective memory’,³¹ and similarly argue that

Nora’s view essentially restates the late-nineteenth-century opposition of *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft*, which placed the new, nationwide political and economic structures in opposition to those of local communities. It claimed the larger structures were soulless.³²

The rejection of (methodological) nationalism and nationalistic or communitarian anti-globalisation sentiments appears to be the starting point of their argument, from which

they develop an affirmative conception of 'global culture' and its allegedly 'abstract' concomitants.

In Levy and Sznajder's account, abstractness is indeed the most characteristic quality of 'cosmopolitan memory', and for them that is a good thing, too. 'In an age of ideological uncertainty' (since Comte, a classical opening phrase of sociological arguments) 'it is precisely the abstract nature of "good and evil" that symbolises the Holocaust, which contributes to the extraterritorial quality of cosmopolitan memory'. By the 1990s the Holocaust had become a 'decontextualised' symbol of absolute evil that helped articulate 'a new rights culture'. Levy and Sznajder do not say much about the specific content of this 'rights culture', nor what produced it; they merely state that 'globalisation' takes place by inscribing itself into, and thus transforming, the local ('glocalisation' in Roland Robertson's term). The

universal nature of evil associated with the Holocaust . . . fuels its metaphorical power and allows it to be appropriated in referring to human-rights abuses that bear little resemblance to the original event.³³

From the perspective of the earlier accounts of this process, as discussed in the previous section, and against Levy and Sznajder, the question arises whether such 'decontextualised memory' is not a contradiction in terms, and whether it could be a good thing.

Levy and Sznajder develop two different arguments that aim to account for the historical circumstances that brought forth the 'global collective memory' of the Holocaust. 'When the uniting interests and values of anticommunism vanished, international cooperation had to be reorganized on a new basis.'³⁴ This necessity of replacing a dated ideology by a new one allowed for the 'cosmopolitanisation of Holocaust memories'. It produced 'an unquestioned moral value on which all people supposedly can agree', this value being, so it is implied, not to commit genocides.³⁵

The need for a moral touchstone in an age of uncertainty and the absence of master ideological narratives have pushed the Holocaust to prominence in public thinking. The Holocaust has become a moral certainty that now stretches across national borders and unites Europe and other parts of the world.

The second strand of Levy and Sznajder's argument refers specifically to modern Jewish history: 'In Jewish experience, life outside the nation-state is nothing new. This is precisely why the Jewish genocide has become the central theme in the mnemonic structure of Second Modernity', whereby 'First Modernity' is being understood as the time when a majority of people defined themselves exclusively through the nation or through ethnic belonging. The 'condition of diaspora' forced Jews 'to live in a tension between universalism and particularism that is increasingly becoming the norm for all nations'.³⁶ As the state of people seeing themselves 'both as citizens of a country and as cosmopolites' has 'increasingly become the norm in Western democracies' and has thereby transformed homogeneous culture into mixed culture, 'one can see how the newly emerging cosmopolitan culture is becoming "Jewish". This [is] why remembering the Holocaust plays such a crucial role today'. 'Identification with the Jewish victims of the Holocaust allows cosmopolitanism to rise to a new level'.

In terms of critique, it seems that while the first strand of Levy and Sznajder's account is rather plausible (the increasingly global appropriation of the memory of the Holocaust has helped fill a void left by the end of the cold war), the second strand is rather unfounded: the present period is hardly the first to see large-scale migration (the history of the USA would be a good illustration of this point), nor does migration in and of itself produce 'globalised' or 'cosmopolitan consciousness' (often quite to the contrary, as also the

example of the supposedly ‘rootless’, but in reality in the modern period ordinarily nationalistic, Jews shows). Furthermore, recently growing migration is counter-balanced by increasingly strict border regimes and concomitant racisms and nationalisms. Still, most people in the contemporary world do not live in a diasporic or migrant positioning, and to construe this (allegedly universal) condition as somehow ‘Jewish’ is rather adventurous: it might well play into the hands of those who want to blame the contemporary ‘globalised’ condition – which many, for good or bad reasons, indeed disdain – on ‘the Jews’.

Mnemosyne in a political world

Our exploration of Halbwachs’s sociology of memory, so we suggest, corroborates the more critical voices in the contemporary discourse on memory. The realisation how strongly memory depends on its ‘social framework’ especially should make one hesitate to postulate too easily that globalisation is able in the present period to constitute a global social framework for a global memory. The degrees of interaction between the agents of Holocaust memory (actually, mostly commemoration) and between the general public in Europe and the United States (let alone beyond) is far from sufficient to create a global Holocaust memory. Judging from the few comparative studies extant, it seems that the closer one looks at the few tropes of Holocaust memory that seem truly globalised, the more nationally specific they reveal themselves to be. A recent book on the ‘Righteous among the Nations’ shows how gentiles who risked their lives to save Jews are ‘remembered’ in different ways, with very different significations, from one country to another.³⁷

What looks like memory might actually turn out to be anti-memory. ‘Let not one life sacrificed in the Holocaust be in vain’, said the British then-Prime Minister, Tony Blair, on the occasion of the televised 2001 inaugural ceremony of the British Holocaust Memorial Day.³⁸ The use of the word ‘sacrificed’ can point us here to a highly problematic aspect that seems intrinsic to the contemporary process of (state as well as inter-state driven) Holocaust commemoration: what does it mean when a politician suggests that a ‘life’ that was ‘sacrificed’ in the Holocaust may or may not have been ‘in vain’? Did the Prime Minister want to suggest that the Jews ‘were sacrificed’, or perhaps sacrificed themselves, for the higher purpose of giving greater urgency to the promotion of multiculturalism? The rhetoric of ‘sacrifice’ has a fixed place in the context of war memorials where it serves to dispel the sense of meaninglessness and helplessness that is connected to dying in warfare: following a Christian trope, it attaches meaning, purpose and the hope of redemption to death. On the battlefield, fighting for one’s nation, one is supposed to have sacrificed oneself for a higher purpose. Blatantly violating an unspoken convention, the Prime Minister transferred this particular rhetoric to the Holocaust context and gave thereby a striking illustration of what happens when memory is transformed into state-driven, politically motivated commemoration. The national and local reinforcement of what superficially looks like the globalisation of Holocaust memory can actually counteract its globalisation.

In her analysis of the inauguration event of the British Holocaust Memorial Day the cultural anthropologist Sharon Macdonald argues that it ‘articulates a reconfigured vision of national identity, legitimated through reference to the past and the iconic evil of modern times’.³⁹ In the process, it is not at all clear whether engaging with the Holocaust makes more ‘ordinary’ instances of discrimination, racism and exclusion look relatively good (that is, like lesser evils) or bad (that is, like the beginnings of what could turn out to be another Holocaust).

The British government stated clearly that Holocaust Memorial Day was about 'articulating a particular vision of Britishness'.⁴⁰ It was created to articulate the government's vision of 'multi-cultural Britain' by reminding of 'the evils of prejudice and racism'.⁴¹ It seems that Dan Stone was not too far off the mark when he predicted, before the event, that Holocaust Memorial Day will be 'a day of fatuous ceremonies when the great and the good will congratulate themselves for not being Nazis' while also 'reliev[ing] the community of the burden of memory'.⁴² In this perspective at least, the British Holocaust Memorial day can be seen as evidence for, as well as against, the emergence of a globalised Holocaust memory. Likewise, national Holocaust-era assets commissions, although created under the same international framework, ultimately fulfilled nationally very different functions.⁴³

'The Holocaust (Shoah) fundamentally challenged the foundations of civilisation', as the Stockholm declaration quite rightly states. Nothing, however, in the document hints at what the 'challenge to the foundations of civilisation' actually means. Rather than allowing civilisation to be challenged, there is a tendency that the memory of the Holocaust is put to service for the assertion and promotion of a European cultural identity and set of values, which is very much part of the civilisation that, having allowed Auschwitz to happen, allegedly was fundamentally shattered by it.⁴⁴ In the reality of state- and inter-state organised commemoration, said civilisation is actually assumed to have survived just fine. The declaration promises thus to do exactly what Adorno and others warned must not be done: after the Holocaust to go back and start again where civilisation (allegedly) left off in 1933, in exactly the same mould, to rebuild the same civilisation rather than to found a new, better one.⁴⁵

In this article, we argued that a globalised Holocaust memory only superficially exists, and that it exists predominantly in the form of quasi-rituals and de-historicised narratives. Recourse to the classic sociological theory of memory (Halbwachs in particular) permits us to better conceptualise the framework and the texture of memory and to contradict, if not refute, the claim that there is a global memory of the Jewish catastrophe. Where the existence of such a global memory is argued, we tend to detect a highly problematic tendency of wishful thinking that deflects from acknowledging a reality that is still organised largely along national lines, especially in the cultural realm of which memory discourses and practices of commemoration are a part. The memory of the Holocaust is used, by and large, in the service of efforts to defend or reinvigorate a (global) liberal civilisation one of whose principal blemishes is that it failed to prevent (or else, arguably, that it made possible) the Holocaust. Most importantly, though, we would like to remind that no theory can really address the core value of Holocaust memory in its true sense: the duty to remember the victims, in and for themselves, not as a prop for whichever political agenda, be it 'globalised' or national.

Notes

1. On this agreement, see: Tripartite Commission, *Exchange of Letters*.
2. For a complete description of this scandal, see: Eizenstat, *Imperfect Justice*; Surmann, 'Zwischen Restitution und Erinnerung.'
3. For an inside view of the preparation for the conference, see: Centre des archives diplomatiques, La Courneuve, France, Commission tripartite de l'or, dossier 9, procès verbaux définitifs, n°221-251, 23/06/95-28/08/98; Archives Nationales, Paris, F/60Mli: Archives de la Mission d'étude sur la spoliation des Juifs de France, dossier 207, Télégrammes diplomatiques.
4. HMSO, *Nazi Gold*.
5. Ministère des Affaires étrangères, Paris, Rapport final du Fonds d'aide aux victimes du national-socialisme, avril 2002. Unpublished.

6. State Department, *Proceedings*.
7. Surmann, 'Zwischen Restitution und Erinnerung,' 135.
8. Kroh, 'Erinnerungskultureller Akteur und geschichtspolitisches Netzwerk,' 163.
9. Rosenberg, *The Follies of Globalization Theory*; Rupert, *Ideologies of Globalization*.
10. Robertson, *Glocalization*.
11. Carrier, 'Places, Politics and the Archiving of Contemporary Memory,' 37.
12. Quoted *ibid.*, 53.
13. Nora, 'Paper Memory,' in Fleckner, *Treasure Chests*, 296.
14. *Ibid.*, 298 ff.
15. *Ibid.*, 300.
16. Nora, *Les Lieux de mémoires*, ii, 2467–85.
17. *Ibid.*, 2679–721.
18. *Ibid.*, 2714.
19. Weissberg, 'Introduction,' 13.
20. This has been published under the title *Collective Memory*.
21. Niethammer, *Kollektive Identität*, 348.
22. Quoted in Weissberg, 'Introduction,' 13. Halbwachs's main theoretical study on memory from 1925, *Les cadeaux* was criticised by contemporaries for being overstretched and one-sidedly anti-individualist (Niethammer, *Kollektive Identität*, 356).
23. Halbwachs, 'Woodfloats', 222.
24. Papoulias, 'Agora', 116.
25. Halbwachs, 'Woodfloats', 224.
26. *Ibid.*, 228.
27. Levy and Sznajder, *Global Age*.
28. *ibid.*, 4. Of course, Holocaust memory in those three countries could be seen as 'internally globalised', which potentially makes the evaluation of Levy and Sznajder's book slightly more complex. Levy and Sznajder consider these three countries to be players on the world stage (*ibid.*, 3). However, even though Germany, at least, is a world economic power, this does not mean that its cultural industry, let alone the state, manages to impose its products all over the world, as that of the United States does.
29. *Ibid.*, 13.
30. *Ibid.*, 25.
31. *Ibid.*, 33.
32. *Ibid.*, 32.
33. *Ibid.*, 4–6.
34. *Ibid.*, 17.
35. Levy and Sznajder point out that one of the first derivatives from this new 'moral value' and its concomitant 'culture' was the 'military humanism' of the 1998 NATO intervention in the Kosovo conflict (*Ibid.*, 18).
36. *Ibid.*, 49.
37. Gensburger, *Les Justes de France*. On the 'nationalisation' of the concept, from Israel to France, see pp. 118–24.
38. Macdonald, *Commemorating the Holocaust*, 63. The ceremony is described on pages 62–5. See Blair, 'Speech on the Holocaust.'
39. *Ibid.*, 49.
40. *Ibid.*, 60.
41. Home Office, 61.
42. Stone, *Day of Remembrance*, 56–7.
43. For two examples, see: Dreyfus and Ludi, *Historians*.
44. The term 'challenge to the foundations of civilisation' seems to reflect the concept of the *Zivilisationsbruch*, the breaking up of civilisation as coined by Dan Diner for the title of his edited volume of 1988.
45. Adorno 1966, 359.

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