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The 'age of commemoration' as a narrative construct: a critique of the discourse on the contemporary crisis of memory in France

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ABSTRACT

Pierre Nora's account of the 'age of commemoration' has been extremely influential in shaping the way that memory is understood in France as well as in other countries. But what those who adopt Nora's historical account of the rise of memory often overlook, is that the story of the 'age of commemoration' is a narrative construct. This article argues that Nora's historical explanation of the rise of memory constitutes memory as an historical object, and explains it through emplotment. Nora has constructed a story of crisis in which individual memories stand as 'symptoms' of, and reactions to, the 'acceleration of history'. The significance of memory is supposed to lie in what it tells us about the times in which 'we' live. Memory is thus construed as a panicked reaction to historical changes, and the manifestation of an existential crisis in France. Nora's account of memory is widely referred to in academic as well as public discussions on the memories of minority groups in France. These memory movements are viewed in the historical context of the 'age of commemoration'. But this historicization functions to circumscribe their meaning: emplotted into the story of the 'age of commemoration' minority memories are rendered as symptoms of a macrocosmic malaise. The content of their discourse is thereby marginalized, ignored or deemed insignificant.

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> The influence of memory is so strong today that the commemorative bulimia of this epoch has absorbed even the attempt to master the phenomenon. (Nora 1997, 4687)

Have the tumultuous and dramatic changes that occurred during the twentieth century provoked a shift away from historical discourse? This is certainly a common claim in recent scholarship. For some, this shift constitutes nothing less than a serious challenge to what Ricoeur (2009, 351) has called history's

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'hegemony in the space of retrospection.' Or as Assman (2010, 39) has put it: 'The historian has lost his monopoly over defining and presenting the past. What is called the "memory boom" is the immediate effect of the loss of the historian's singular unrivalled authority.' The claim that history is being challenged seems to be a popular idea, even if scholars are divided on the question of whether this turn away from history is good news or bad and whether the demise of history is inevitable or if it is in need of rehabilitation or, rather, reinvention.

It is ironic that this account of the rise of memory and decline of history is itself an historical one. A series of historical events and developments are said to have provoked the growth in memory. Scholarly studies of memory have often sought to explain recent mnemonic phenomena within the historical context of the late twentieth century. In a reference to Nietzsche's critique of history, Andreas Huyssen has, for example, remarked that 'our age' is characterized by a 'hypertrophy of memory' and a 'crisis of history.' For Huyssen, the rise of memory needs to be explained 'historically,' as a response to the traumas of the twentieth century, the Holocaust, Stalinism, decolonization, and so on, and the rapid pace of change in society in general (Huyssen 2003, 11). The combined effect of these being that 'at the end of the millennium the coordinates of space and time structuring our lives are increasingly subjected to new kinds of pressures.' In order to gain 'continuity' in this troubling time, many have turned to memory. Thus, for Huyssen, memory's rise is a response to historical conditions:

> My hypothesis is that, in this prominence of academic mnemo-history as well, memory and musealization together are called upon to provide a bulwark against obsolescence and disappearance to counter our deep anxiety about the speed of change and the ever-shrinking horizons of time and space. (Huyssen 2003, 23)

Variations of this account are found in numerous works on memory studies, but also in history and political science (Garapon 2008; Klein 2000; Matsuda 1996; Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Levy 2011, 3; Torpey 2006).

Nowhere are such arguments about the rise of memory and the concomitant decline of history as widespread as in France, however, where memory is currently the subject of much suspicion. In scholarship and popular discourse it has become commonplace to say that memory culture has taken on 'excessive' proportions. This excess is almost always understood in historical terms, as a characteristic of the 'age' in which 'we' are said to be living. Pierre Nora has dubbed the current epoch the 'age of commemoration,' and his periodization of the present has proven popular, both inside and outside academia. For Nora, and for many influenced by his writing, memory is the 'symptom' of the tumultuous age in which 'we' are living: it is a reaction to a late-twentieth-century temporal 'acceleration' (Nora 1984). France, according to Nora, is the first country to have 'suffered' what has now become a 'global phenomenon':

the emergence of a 'memory wave' that is sweeping up the entire epoch in its powerful currents (Nora 2011a, 13).

Nora's account of memory has been extremely influential. Michael Rothberg has claimed that it would be 'impossible to overstate the influence' of Nora's work, both in the French context and beyond. Rothberg explains that 'although emerging from a commitment to the exceptionality of France's relation to its national past, the approach pioneered in [the three volumes of] *Les lieux de mémoire* has proven highly exportable as a model for the consideration of diverse memory cultures' (2010, 3). The story of the 'memory boom' or the 'age of commemoration' has certainly been widely adopted. It has become an influential grand narrative. But it has rarely been subjected to the same scrutiny as have other grand narratives. This represents yet another irony because 'incredulity to meta-narratives narratives' (Lyotard 1979, 7) is itself often cited as one of the main historical events that has triggered the turn to memory in the first place – a postmodern loss of faith in *grands récits* has apparently driven us to memory as *petits récits*.

My intention in this article, therefore, is to use a narratological approach to analyze the historical narrative of the late-twentieth-century rise of memory and, taking inspiration from Hayden White, to show the extent to which this discourse on memory has constituted the very object that it 'pretends only to describe realistically and analyze objectively' (White 1978, 2). Such a critique is warranted because, as I intend to argue, the 'age of commemoration' is, manifestly, a narrative construct: it is a story about the existential crisis of a central subject, namely the French nation. In this representation, a diversity of phenomena are figured as 'memory' and, through the metaphor of the 'symptom', are made to stand as visible evidence of the 'age of commemoration'. Memory is given a place in this account as, at once, the cause, the effect and the manifestation of a macrocosmic malaise.

I will argue that this historical account of memory has facilitated a particular interpretation of the relationship between memory, history and French society. After reviewing some of the most common criticisms of memory in France, I claim that 'memory' and 'history' have been loaded with supplementary socio-political meanings. Through a series of dubious associations history is rendered equivalent with the French Republic while memory becomes synonymous with what the French call 'communities'. In part as a consequence of this alignment, both the virtues of history and the French Republic, and the vices of memory and *communautarisme*, are greatly exaggerated. Memory/*communautarisme* is characterized as divisive, identity-obsessed and irrational, while history/the French Republic is viewed as universal, inclusive and rational. The rise of memory is then described as an 'obsession', a 'mania' or a 'pathology' that has overcome the body that is France. But, I argue, many of these characterizations of memory depend on what we could call – again echoing White – a particular 'historical encodation' of observable phenomena.

When memory is contextualized in the 'age of commemoration', it is explained by emplotment.

A close reading of the account of the 'age of commemoration' demonstrates that this *historical* narrative exhibits many of the same characteristics for which memory is criticized. The dichotomy that has been created between memory and history collapses in on itself. The historical account is highly concerned with French identity. It is Franco-centric even though it presents itself as a universally relevant periodization, and it is nostalgic in its yearning for a return to an older France. Moreover, this narrative's claim to universality and its much-vaunted inclusiveness are also problematic because, while it is true that this historical narrative does include the discourse of memory groups, this inclusion functions to circumscribe their meaning: no matter what the content of the discourse of those groups deemed to engage in memory may be, they are said to signify a crisis of French identity. To view mnemonic phenomena in the context of the 'age of commemoration' is to submit said phenomena to a specific emplotment of a story about a national existential crisis.

1. The age of commemoration as a narrative construct

The story of the 'age of commemoration' can be briefly summarized: several 'shocking' events that occurred in post-Second World War Europe and in particular in France, combined with technological, economic and social changes to produce a rapid 'acceleration of history'. This acceleration of history in turn effected a generalized transformation in the consciousness of people, the result of which is the growth in memory and commemoration (Nora 1997, 4687, 2002, 27). Pierre Nora claims that the acceleration of history has created a feeling of 'uprootedness' (*déracinement*) as people in society have apparently lost all their traditional points of reference. In response to this feeling, people began to turn to memory in order to cling on to the past and to try to maintain a sense of stability and continuity in the midst of the upheaval. Nora describes memory as a therapy of sorts: it gives us stability and security by reinforcing group identity and constructing a line of continuity with the past. 'In the enormous slippage in which France is losing its footing today, the turn to memory reestablishes continuity' (Nora 1997, 4715).

Pierre Nora's account of memory is plainly a narrative representation that has been created through the emplotment of very specific events that occurred in France. Nora constructs the story of the 'age of commemoration' using a range of literary devices and his story about the rise of memory has a clear plot structure as well as a central subject that suffers a transformation in this plot. In what follows, I will point out some of the devices that Nora employs to figure forth a historical moment caught up in a crisis.

Nora first described this temporal acceleration in the introduction to the first volume of the *Lieux de Mémoire* trilogy and has continued to discuss it in his

later writings. This trilogy is often referred to as one of the first important works on memory and is credited with being at the origin of the subsequent scholarly fascination with memory.[1] If we can indeed locate the origin of memory studies in the work of Nora, then it is interesting to observe that from the very first moment that memory was constituted as an object of academic inquiry it was also historicized: Nora's contributions to these volumes are replete with historical contextualizations of memory. It is significant that in the first paragraph of the first page of Volume One, Nora begins his account of memory by identifying the historical conditions that produced it, namely 'the acceleration of history', a phrase that Nora says is 'more than a metaphor' – it is a description of the really existing 'increasingly rapid slippage of the present into a historical past that is gone for good, a general perception that anything and everything may disappear …' (Nora 1989, 7). The paragraph ends with Nora's often cited and enigmatic phrase 'we speak so much of memory because there is so little of it left' (7).

Although Nora has often claimed that the rise of memory is a global phenomenon, his account of the 'age of commemoration' is as story that has a clearly identifiable central subject: France. It is France that suffers a change in state in this narrative. The series of 'shocks' that Nora claims provoked this temporal acceleration, which in turn set the stage for the sweeping of the 'wave of memory' across the world, are key events in the history of the French nation. For Nora, the origin of this new era can be traced to a precise moment in recent French history: the decade between 1970 and 1980, which was the decade that witnessed 'the most important national transformation since the revolutionary decade of 1789' (2011a, 13). What occurred during this pivotal decade was nothing less than the 'passage from one system of *identity* to another' (my emphasis). Certain political, economic and cultural developments combined to create this transformation. On the economic front in the 1970s, France was subjected to the global oil shock and the rapid rise of prices. Simultaneously, after two decades of growth, the economy began to slow. Meanwhile, by 1975, the French agricultural population had declined to 10% of what it had been before the war (2011a, 14). On the political front, Nora argues that the presidency of Valéry Giscard-d'Estaing marked a rupture with the Gaullist tradition and the embrace of a technocratic politics (15–16). The ideological struggles between Gaullism and Communism that had marked the previous period would decline over this decade. For Nora the publication of the French edition of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* can be seen as symbolically marking the decline of communist ideology in France, a 'demarxisation' of the intelligentsia and even the abandonment of the goal of revolution (17). In his view, these 'civilizational' events combined with the rapid pace of technological change, with the decline of agricultural 'peasant' society and with globalization, to produce the 'acceleration of history' (Nora 1997, 4699–4715, 2011a, 14).

Thus the memory phenomenon is linked to a crisis of identity, and specifically, a crisis of French identity. The acceleration of history provoked an existential crisis in France. As Nora says quite explicitly 'This problematic rested on an analysis of the era: the advent of a historical sentiment of the present, the *painful passage from one model of the nation to another*, the metamorphosis of a history henceforth lived as memory' (2011a, 7–8, my emphasis). It is important to note, as I have done in this last passage, that this *historical* account is laden with affective language and that it is deeply interested and implicated in French identity. Noting this is important because, as I will argue later, it is inconsistent with views expressed by Nora and other French scholars concerning the distinction between memory and history. Identity and affect are most often associated with the former, while the latter is held to be universal and rational.

But Nora has recently revealed that it was not only French identity that was at stake in his account, but also his own identity as a Frenchman. In *Présent, nation, mémoire,* which was published decades after the first volume of *Les Lieux de Mémoire* as a sort of retrospective introduction, Nora explains that certain life experiences led him to his 'analysis of the epoch', to the conclusion that the current age is one of memory:

> As a citizen, each one of these national twists and turns confronted me, brutally and with permanence, like all others in my generation, with a certain 'idea of France', to the enigma of French identity. When I was not even 10 years old, there was the war and the stupefying spectacle of national meltdown, the humiliation of the foreign occupation. And since I was Jewish: [I experienced] exclusion, being hunted, the discovery of unexpected solidarities and betrayals, and the experience of seeking refuge with the 'maquis du Vercors'. An adventure inscribed in the flesh of memory that sufficed to make you different from all the other young French people of your age. Afterwards, there was the post-war period, the agonizing struggle between Gaullism and communism, the two marching wings that came out of the Resistance. It is, without a doubt, difficult for the young French of today to understand how both of these could be seductive and repulsive to a young intellectual in the 1950s and how each had a profound national legitimacy. Two plausible versions, both of which were entitled to incarnate France, the true France … We should consider that two generations of French were dramatically confronted with the national and patriotic ideal …. (2011a, 8–9)

The story of Nora's personal anxiety as a historian, faced with challenges to the nation, is interwoven into the story of the prologue to the memory wave – and one cannot tell them apart. But Nora does not expect us to read his account as a transference of a personal conundrum onto an entire generation of imagined contemporaries. Rather, his own experience is supposed to be a barometer for the collective experience of French society. Nora presents himself as a perspicacious observer of the 'times' who was able to discern the emerging crisis.

The 'age of commemoration' is fundamentally a story about a crisis, and it is the plot that conveys this sense of crisis. The emplotment of select events in French history in Nora's work takes the form of an incomplete story: the author offers an exposition and rising action, but he leaves the closing of the

story in suspense. It is this incomplete plot, and the rising intensity towards an as-yet-unknown climax that conveys the sense of an 'explosion' of memory. The plot is propelled forward by the 'shocks' outlined above. With each passing decade the urgency of the 'memory boom' grows, new commemorations emerge, and the apex of the process seems more elusive. Nora is unable to predict where the 'avalanche' of memory will end. France, that 'nous' which is the main protagonist of the tale, cries out for a hero in increasing exasperation. The pressing question is whether France's saviour will take the form of a rejuvenated history or something else.

Meanwhile, in the years following the publication of *Les Lieux,* numerous new instances of 'memory' were identified by Nora – and described as yet another indication of the intensity of the temporal acceleration. In Nora's writing, the relationship between commemoration and temporal acceleration is circular since commemoration appears first as a result of the acceleration and later as a *symptom* through which that acceleration can be detected. Memory is the 'symptom' of the underlying malady that is imperceptible:

> All countries were brought, by the upheavals of the last century, to have an account to settle with their past. None is as uncomfortable as ours with its history, which is at once one of the most obvious *symptoms* and one of the most profound causes of the French malaise. No one has interiorized the memorial shock that has hit the entire world for the last thirty years more than the French who have had their historical *identity* shaken. (Nora 2006, 44)

Of course we cannot 'see' the 'age of commemoration', washing over us, we can only be told about it by Nora the author/narrator.[2] Only after knowing this story can we take commemorations as 'symptoms' of a macrocosmic malaise.

In short, for Nora, memory is to be understood historically, as a result of historical forces and as an answer to them. Memory is interesting, in his view, because of what it indicates about the time in which 'we' are living. What it reveals concerns 'our age', the presence of a crisis and the 'acceleration of history'. Discrete memories are said to be like 'symptoms' because they indicate the presence of an affliction.

2. 'Presentism' and the 'crisis' of history

Pierre Nora presents his account of the 'age of commemoration' as though it were a description of an objective, collective experience; a shared historical moment in which 'we' are all living. But this historical moment is actually a function of the narration of a selection of events, characters, and so on. Nora's periodization of memory, his historical account of the dawning of the 'age of commemoration', is what Frank Ankersmit would call a *narrative substance*.[3] The 'age of commemoration' names a narrative representation of a diversity of phenomena. It is a 'verbal fiction', as Hayden White has said of historical narratives (1978, 82).

Nevertheless, many have taken up Nora's account of the rise of memory in 'our age' as a periodization, and scholars have sought to explain discrete instances of 'memory' by placing them in the context of the 'memory wave'. Because it is understood as a periodization, the 'age of commemoration', is deemed to concern everything within a given chronological span, and this partly explains why, in France, the designation of a phenomenon as mnemonic or memorial has almost automatically come to imply historicizing it – that is to say, viewing it against the background of the 'age' that produced it.

But those who use Nora's periodization often seem to forget that the 'age of commemoration' is not an objective description of the signs of the times. Of course, the fact that the 'age of commemoration' is a narrative representation is not problematic in and of itself. But it should be noted that to insist on viewing memory in this particular frame, is really to insist on explaining memory by emplotment – to borrow a phrase form Hayden White. To view a given phenomenon in the historical context of the 'age of commemoration' is to emplot it within a story of the crisis of French identity. Problems arise when it is forgotten that because the 'age of commemoration' is a narrative entity, it ascribes a particular narrative meaning to what it emplots. A plot, as White and other narrative theorists of history explain, is not a neutral container: to emplot something in the narrative of the 'age of commemoration' is to give it a place in a syntagmatic arrangement in the story of a late twentieth-century existential crisis and thus to relate it to that crisis. It is therefore not surprising that when phenomena are viewed within the context of the 'age of commemoration', they are felt to indicate the presence of a crisis. Because it has become so common in France to see the issue of memory though this historical frame, each new mnemonic phenomenon is perceived as yet another example of the mounting 'memory wave', and thus as yet another indication of the crisis of identity that threatens France and even history itself.

Many scholars have adopted Nora's account of the rise of memory in 'our age'. For example, his history of memory lies at the heart of François Hartog's famous theory of 'presentism.' First published in 2003, Hartog's account often reads as a sweeping grand narrative in which a series of different regimes of historicity are delineated. A later edition of his book adds clarification and nuance to his project and sharpens his notions of 'regime of historicity' and 'presentism.'[4] 'Regimes of historicity' are not to be understood as historical epochs, but as akin to Weberian 'ideal types', tools that can help us to 'elucidate' the experiences of time in a given era and place (2012, 15). Hartog claims that his term 'regime of historicity' is only offering a method to understand, and to name, the way that the relationship between, past present and future has been 'articulated' in various times and places. Unlike Nora, Hartog readily admits that his regimes of historicity are 'constructed by the historian' and are not a 'given reality' (2012, 15). But Hartog's careful qualification of his own categories of analysis contrasts with his relatively uncritical adoption of Nora's historical

account of memory. Moreover, his category of presentism has certainly been received as a description of the contemporary *Zeitgeist*.

Hartog brings his tools to an analysis of 'our contemporary age' and finds that 'we' are currently undergoing a 'crisis of time.' Again, memory appears as the harbinger of this crisis. This is not an accident: the contemporary age is already prefigured in Hartog's account as the 'age of commemoration'. Hartog's account of the current 'crisis of time' can be read as a reiteration of Nora's work. Hartog refers to Nora on numerous occasions throughout his books, even describing Nora's writing – and the 'acceleration of history' he 'diagnosed' (Hartog 2012, 170, 2013, 42) – as evidence of 'fault lines' in time (Hartog 2012, 21). Hartog also wholeheartedly adopts Nora's view that there has been an 'acceleration' of time in the last decades: whereas Nora's account of the age of memory begins with a series of 'shocks', Hartog speaks of *brèches*, or breaches, between the space of experience and the horizon of expectation, two categories that Hartog borrows from Reinhart Koselleck and which he believes can be used to detect changes in the ways in which humans experience time or, in his vocabulary, in 'regimes of historicity' (2012, 21). Hartog claims that these breaches point to a new regime of historicity that he calls presentism: and this presentism is defined by the exact same characteristics as Nora's 'age of commemoration', namely by the generalized feeling of uprootedness that goes along with this temporal acceleration, the decline of the idea of the future as a source of legitimacy, the abandonment of utopian ideologies, and, finally, a loss of faith in history itself. In Hartog's account, memory appears as the symptom through which the 'crisis of time' can be detected. In his own words, memory is 'at once an expression and a response to this rise of the present' (2013, 40).

In both Hartog's and Nora's accounts of memory therefore, commemorations are understood to be epiphenomenal of a greater historical shift. A relationship is constructed between the individual phenomenon labelled as 'memory' and the broader 'age' for which it stands. In the work of Nora and Hartog this is often achieved by employing the metaphor of the 'symptom': commemorations are said to be 'symptoms' which signify a specific relationship to time. This is not a personal relationship to time, but a generalized one shared by contemporaries; it is 'our present' that is at stake (Hartog 2012, 270–271).

In Hartog's account, the relationship between the symptom and presentism is also circular. Hartog begins by looking for symptoms of a crisis of time, and then concludes that the symptoms he has found indicate the presence of presentism, which is of course simply his name for the contemporary crisis of time. This is clearly visible at the beginning of *Régimes d'historicité*, where Hartog states that his method consists of looking at certain phenomena in the world around him and asking what regime of historicity is behind them:

> I approached these phenomena laterally, asking myself what temporalities … arrange them. By which order of time are they supported? Which order

> do they convey or are they symptoms of? Of what order, of what crisis of time are they indications? (2013, 18).

Since his analysis is intended to reveal a collective experience of time, shared by contemporaries, the unfolding of Hartog's story of the crisis of time is viewed from the perspective of prominent Frenchmen who were shrewd enough to have observed the emergence of a new era. Perceiving the plot through the eyes of a character lends the impression that a collectivity of French people have observed the arrival of the 'crisis of time', and that it is the generalized experience of a generation. Thus Nora appears in Hartog's account, as a prophet, able to stand above the melee and perceive the emergence of the presentist regime by 'registering' the acceleration of time – again, like a 'seismograph'.[5] In his later book *Croire en l'Histoire*, Hartog speaks through Nora:

> At the same moment, Pierre Nora diagnosed that the 'present has become the category of our self-comprehension.' The historian 'must explain the present to the present.' He who positions himself 'between the blind question and the enlightened response, between public pressure and the solitary patience of the *laboratory*, between those who feel and those who know.' That was indeed the approach of the author of *Les Lieux de Mémoire*. (2013, 42, my emphasis)

Though the masses of French may 'feel' the present time, as a professional historian Nora can 'know' it. The trick is, of course, to identify the symptoms, which Nora could do only after retreating to the 'laboratory'. Nora's work is presented as a scientific process: he read the signs of the times that were all around and then explained them to us.

What the average French man or woman might see as simple commemoration, is better understood as a visible manifestation of temporal acceleration, according to Nora and Hartog. By figuring memory as a symptom, these scholars are able to assert that the significance of memory lies in what it indicates about the current time. In the work of both authors, memory is evidence of the presence of a crisis: a crisis of history and time in the case of Hartog, and a crisis of history and of French identity in the case of Nora.

3. The memory malady

It appears that Pierre Nora's diagnosis of the signs of the times has been widely heeded: It is remarkable to note how common it has become to speak of memory using the language of pathology: Henry Rousso famously proclaimed that France was suffering from the Vichy 'syndrome' (Rousso 1994, 2007, 3), but more recently Ferenczi (2002) has asked *La France est-elle malade de sa mémoire*? – 'is France sick from its memory?' Dosse (2010) has said that France is suffering from a *commémorite aiguë* or an 'acute commemoritis'. Joel Candau labels the same phenomenon *mnémotropisme* (1998, 2). The emergence of commemoration onto the scene is described in Nora's earlier work as though it were a sort of 'obsession' (1997, 4687). The figural and metaphorical language of the

'explosion' or the 'wave' of memory construes a collectivity falling victim to a mnemonic pathology. At one point Nora goes as far as referring to the 'bulimia' of commemoration (4687).

As this striking language indicates, the rise of memory in France has been the source of much disquiet for many intellectuals. More than 10 years ago, Sarah Gensburger and Marie-Claire Lavabre remarked that 'the denunciation of the notion of the "duty of memory" has little by little become a veritable paradigm of reflection on memory' in France (2005, 1). Warnings about the dangers posed by memory gained momentum in the 1990s when the issue of France's Vichy period was brought to the forefront of public attention during the trials of Klaus Barbie, Paul Touvier, and Maurice Papon, and during the concomitant reflection on French collaboration during the war. At this time, many began to criticize the popular phrase 'devoir de mémoire' or duty of memory, a neologism used in public discourse to designate the responsibility of the French state to recognize and commemorate its own misdeeds. The perception that memory had become a pressing political issue at the forefront of media attention made many scholars feel uneasy about what they perceived as a manipulation of the past for political ends. Thus, in the 1990s, Tzvetan Todorov and others began to write about the 'abuse of memory' (Todorov 2008). In *Memory, History Forgetting*, Paul Ricoeur felt the need to address these debates and – citing the work of Todorov, Henry Rousso and Pierre Nora – shared many of their reservations about the age of memory. Ricoeur argued, with characteristic caution, that when the duty of memory becomes an 'obsession' it is in danger of becoming an 'abuse' of memory, a 'manipulated memory' (2009, 89–91).

Criticisms of the contemporary memory culture grew even more pronounced in the first decade of the twenty-first century and became especially heated after 2005.[6] That year and the years following were marked by much furore around a number of issues, including the so-called *lois mémoirelles* or memory laws, the 50th anniversary of the Algerian war, the question of slavery in the French colonies and the establishment of a museum of immigration.[7] These are but a few of the phenomena that are taken as examples of a memory conflict in France – or even of 'memory wars', as one edited volume on the topic put it – and have led many to condemn the rise of memory (Blanchard and Veyrat-Masson 2008). In 2005, René Rémond and other historians, including Nora, formed a group to defend history against what they saw as an increasingly threatening memory culture in France. The group *Liberté Pour l'Histoire*, or Freedom for History (LPH), was formed after several historians wrote an appeal criticizing a series of laws – which they described as 'memory laws' – because of the threat they ostensibly posed to historians. In their appeal, they proclaim that 'history is not memory', extoll the virtues of the former, and demand the repeal of the 'memory laws' (L'appel du 12 décembre 2005). Since then, they have continued to condemn the rise of what they see as 'tyrannical memory' (Nora, 2005).[8] Nora and other influential historians of the LPH have

written numerous opinion pieces in the French newspapers on this issue and have also voiced their concerns about memory on the radio, TV, the Internet and in academic publications. Amongst them was the historian and theorist of history, François Dosse who began a polemical opinion piece in the news paper *Le Monde* by stating 'Yes, we are decidedly in the middle of what Pierre Nora has called "the age of commemoration"' (2010). Dosse took aim at what he perceived as a general culture of memory:

> Amongst the *symptoms* of our *pathologies*, we can point to the nasty habit of litigiousness that has pushed political powers to legislate memorial matters. We have witnessed an *acceleration* of this genre [of laws] since 2000. (Dosse 2010, my emphasis)

The critics mentioned above take issue with the memory culture of 'our time' more than with memory itself. Although it is commonly stated that memory has existed in all times and places, it is also pointed out that memory has only recently become so ubiquitous as to justify being characterized as an 'explosion' or an 'obsession'. In the last volume of his *Lieux de Mémoire* trilogy, Nora claimed that we have left behind the historical 'moment' of 'restrained memory' and that 'our age' is one caught up in an 'avalanche' of 'generalized memory' (1997, 4715). In French discussions of memory, memory is almost always historicized. The rise of memory is said to be the result of certain historical developments such as the collapse of future oriented ideologies and the traumatic events of the twentieth-century.

These academic critiques of memory have been very influential. Important voices in French society have formulated similar condemnations of the rise of memory culture in France. For example, the essayist Pascal Bruckner takes inspiration from Nora in his book *Tyranny of Repentance*, and describes the contemporary Western obsession with the duty of memory as a form of Nietzschean *ressentiment* (2006, 182).[9] But by far the most prominent critic of 'repentance' is, without a doubt, former president Nicolas Sarkozy. During the last months of his 2006 electoral campaign, he spoke out several times against what he saw as the growing culture of repentance: he continued to condemn it during his presidency using astonishingly strong language and claiming to 'hate' the culture of repentance and the 'shame' that it brought with it. Sarkozy insisted that it was wrong to force children to correct the 'supposed' faults of their parents (Sarkozy 2006). For Sarkozy the culture of memory and 'repentance' is nothing less than a *falsification of the history of France* (Sarkozy 2006 my emphasis).

In part, as a response to widespread claims that there is too much memory in France, the government set up a special commission – the so-called Accoyer commission – to study the 'memory laws' and rise of state-sanctioned commemorations in the country. In the context of this commission, historian André Kaspi produced a report that warned of the dangers of the current memorial culture, stating that 'it is not healthy that the number of commemorations

has doubled' (*Rapport de la Commission de Réflexion sur la Modernisation des Commémorations Publiques* 2008).

A number of political concerns underpin many of these condemnations of memory. Foremost amongst those concerns is the controversial issue of assimilation and *communautarisme*. Memory and *communautarisme* are often spoken of in the same breath. The Kaspi report, for example, warned of 'memorial *communautarisme*' (26). According to some, the competition among memories is really another manifestation of a divisive form of identity politics. Many are convinced that the French Republican model – which emphasizes a universal equality of citizenship without regard to gender, race or ethnicity – will be endangered if different groups are allowed to institutionalize their 'communities'. In other words, the multicultural model, associated by some with the United States and Great Britain, is to be avoided because it leads to exclusion, the crystallization of difference, and hence to the undermining of national cohesion as well as a growth of racism. State-led commemorations of the Holocaust, the slave trade, the Armenian genocide, and so on, are seen as attempts to cater to Jewish, Antillean and Armenian communities respectively. This is criticized as a desperate attempt to gain votes, often at the cost of sacrificing Republican values. Sarkozy, for example, says that the competition of memory is a threat to national unity:

> I hate this repentance that wants to prohibit us from being proud to be French, and which is the open door to a competition of memories that pits the French against one another based on their origins. It is an obstacle to integration because one rarely wants to integrate with something that one has learned to hate. (2006)

Of course Sarkozy's point about integration is a reference to immigration. Sarkozy links memory to French (immigrant) communities, and, as we will see, history is reserved for the nation.

The concepts of 'history' and 'memory' have taken on a supplementary socio-political meaning: memory is associated with community identities, and hence is deemed prone to particularism and division, while history is associated with the French Republic, inclusion and universalism. Memory and *communautarisme* and history and the Republic represent opposing pairs of analogical concepts in this discourse. This distinction between memory and history directly parallels a distinction that is often made between *communautarisme* and the Republic. Communities are said to be divisive while the Republic is universal and inclusive.[10] For Nora the same can be said of memory and history:

> memory arises from the group and brings the group together: which is to say that there are as many memories are there are groups; that [memory] is by nature, multiple, divisible, collective, plural and individualized. History on the contrary, belongs to everyone and no one, and this is what gives [history] its universal character. (Nora 1984, xix–xx)

The distinction between memory and history remains a question that is unresolved in scholarship.[11] But in France there is more of a consensus on the issue

of the boundaries between the two than in other countries. The French anthropologist Joel Candau sums up the 'radical' difference between memory and history as it is understood in much French scholarship:[12] Memory, he claims, serves group identity, but the historian does not write *une histoire sur mesure*, as Henry Rousso would say. For Candau both are representations of the past, but only history has the objective of 'exactitude' in representation – memory, meanwhile, is interested in the probable. History aims at 'clarifying' the past and is concerned with putting things 'in order', while memory is characterized by 'disorder' and 'passion', 'emotion' and 'affect.' History tries to put the past at a distance while memory tries to 'fuse' with it (1998, 127–128).

The linking of memory to 'identity', 'emotion' and 'affect' in the writings of many French scholars renders it irrational and prone to error. History, on the other hand, is considered to be scientific, rational and epistemologically superior, something that allows it to, in the words of Paul Ricoeur, 'exercise its corrective function with regard to memory' (2009, 269).

It is easy to see what these claims about the epistemological hierarchy between history and memory imply for the political debate about the respective merits of French Republican universalism and *communautarisme*: Republican universalism is credited not only with being politically more efficient than *communautarisme*, it is also epistemologically superior to it. The former is thought of as a calculated and rational polity while the latter is an emotional form of pseudo-politics and a pernicious form of retrospection. Olivier Lalieu, who has studied the emergence of the key phrase 'duty of memory' in France, claims that one of the main critiques of memory has sought to describe it as a "'new civic religion" that privileges emotion without any content, and which is politically inefficient' (2001, 83). History and French Republicanism, meanwhile, are presented in this same discourse as being efficient and rational.

Just as immigrants are encouraged to integrate into the French Republic, many believe that memories should be integrated into French history. Thus, for example, Pierre Nora reacted to the publication of a historical study of French colonialism by stating that the interest in colonialism is just the latest example of the memorial wave that is sweeping France: 'In a sense, the colonial question is nothing but the latest arrival of the memorial explosions'. He then went on to point out the problem posed by colonial memory:

> In reality the question goes much further, opposing those who think that the colonial part of our history only slightly affected the permanent features of our national identity and those who think it necessary to rethink the entirety of that national identity in post-colonial terms because national identity is not far from revealing its truth in the colonial oppression and in its denial. Thus it is no longer about finding a place for colonialism in the great record of national history but of rewriting this history against the dark light of colonization. (Nora 2011b)

The issue of national identity is thus of central importance to Nora, who claims that while it is acceptable for colonial memory to be integrated into French

history, we must not rewrite French history altogether around the issue of colonialism. For Nora, history is threatened when memorial groups try to limit what can be said about the past and impose their own 'particularistic' views on the historians, whose job should be to write a universal and inclusive history that takes into account different views. The excess of memory is also said to pose a danger to the past itself, as well as to history, which remains, according to many, the best tool available for accessing the past. Memory is said to look to the past in the service of present interests, and this is one of the reasons that it remains epistemologically suspect in comparison to history. The problem is that when one looks at the past with a present interest in mind – that is, according to this view, in a memorial rather than historical mode – one is prone to errors of representation, to manipulation of the historical record, to mendacity, and most of all, to anachronism.[13] Nora thus claims to defend history against memory. But because *communautarisme* and memory are so linked, his criticisms could just as easily be understood as a defence of French Republicanism and an attack on *communautarisme*.

This dubious association of memory with communities and history with France can in part be explained by the fact that memory is so often viewed against the background of the 'age of commemoration'. Memory is explained as a sort of panic reaction to historical forces. The rise of *communautariste* memory politics is said to be a direct result of the diminishing influence of future-oriented utopian and inclusive ideologies like French Republicanism and communism, or indeed the decline of grand historical narratives. In this way memory and *communautarisme* are set up in opposition to history and the French Republic. The decline of forward-thinking and inclusive projects apparently left no other options available except to embrace their opposite: backward looking exclusionary politics. As the French historian, and specialist on the Algerian war, Benjamin Stora, put it:

> This global memorial process must be related to the crisis of transnational and international ideologies. The growing memorial overflow thus appears as a *symptom*: confronted with a breakdown of political projects, one turns to the past of one's own group. (2008, 12, my emphasis)

Scholars outside of France have made similar claims about the rise of memory politics, its links to identity, and the abandonment of utopian politics: John Torpey, for example, described the same phenomenon with the phrase 'when the future collapses, the past rushes in' (2006, 24). The Belgian historian Pieter Lagrou, offers a similar assessment of the significance of memorial politics. Lagrou claims that the memorial groups that have sprung up around the holocaust, the Armenian genocide and slavery 'exploit' their memories in order to advance their own identity politics. He argues that this form of politics is the opposite of inclusive politics that aim to achieve an open society and he criticizes them as 'retrospective' without any vision for the future (2013, 112). A

recent *Collective Memory Reader* underlined just how common this explanation of the rise of memory has become:

> The story goes something like this: following the decline of postwar modernist narratives of progressive improvement … nation-states turned to the past as a basis for shoring up their legitimacy. The decline of utopian visions supposedly redirected our gaze to collective pasts, which served as a repository of inspiration for repressed identities and unfulfilled claims. Without unifying collective aspirations, identity politics proliferated. (Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Levy 2011, 3)

Because memory has been construed as a reaction to, or side-effect of, massive historical changes, the diversity of phenomena labelled as 'memory' in this discourse are portrayed not as calculated and rational undertakings but as a cynical and reactive fad. Moreover, attention is drawn from the individual 'memory' in question to the broader crisis that lurks beneath it and of which it is supposed to be a 'symptom'.

4. Conclusion

Rothberg's claim, cited at the beginning of this article, is correct: Nora's account of memory has been widely taken up and subscribed to. The 'age of commemoration' has proven an especially popular way to contextualize, and hence to explain, phenomena labelled as memory. Perhaps more than any other discussion of memory, Nora's 'age of commemoration' has shaped the way in which the significance of memory in contemporary societies is viewed.

Nora's historical explanation of the rise of memory constitutes memory as an historical object, and explains it through emplotment. Nora has constructed a story of crisis in which individual memories stand as symptoms of, and reactions to, the 'acceleration of history'. The significance of memory is supposed to lie in what it tells us about the times in which 'we' live. It construes memory as a panicked reaction to historical changes, as well as the manifestation of an existential crisis in France. To view the memories of minority groups in the historical context of the 'age of commemoration' is to emplot them into this narrative. The speech of those deemed to be engaged in 'memory' is then read allegorically: no matter what so-called memorial groups say, they signify only a crisis of French identity. Rendered as symptoms of a macrocosmic malaise, the content of their discourse is marginalized, ignored and deemed insignificant.

The influence of Nora's account of the rise of memory can, in part, be explained by the fact that he presents his narrative as an objective description of the age in which we are living: a periodization of the present. The question that remains unaddressed throughout Nora's work, however, is what exactly sets his historical account of the rise of memory apart from the memorial approaches that he criticizes? It is impossible to determine what particular methods Nora is employing that would render his approach epistemologically superior to those who, for example, look to French colonial history in order to

understand the racism they suffer today. Nora seems to see no incongruity in lambasting others for wallowing in their own victimhood, even as he agonizes over the drama of French national identity. There is, at the very least, a double standard at play in Nora's claim that 'in France we have a national history and group memories' (2007). Moreover, if, as Nora claims, 'the emancipation of memories is a powerful corrosive of history, which was at the centre of French identity,' it is because from the very first moment that memory was constituted as an object of study, it was emplotted into a story of the crisis of French identity.

Notes

1. Maurice Halbwachs is often credited with bringing up the issue of collective memory much earlier. But many scholars view the contemporary fascination with memory in academia as being traceable to a number of works that appeared in the 1980s including the work of Nora, but also *Zakhor* by Yerushalmi (2012).
2. Kalle Pihlainen has argued that in historical narratives, the distinction between the narrator and the author is hard to draw (Pihlainen 2002, 53).
3. 'Sometimes such "images" or "pictures" of the past even get names of their own. For instance, terms like "Renaissance", "Enlightenment", "early modern European capitalism" or the "decline of the Church" are in fact names given to the "images" or "pictures" of the past proposed by historians attempting to come to grips with the past: the connotations given to these terms always embody specific historiographical interpretations of the past. (I hasten to add that it would be more accurate to speak of "Renaissances", "Enlightenment", "early modern European capitalisms", and so on because there are as many of them as we have historiographical narratives on these subjects.) This does not mean, of course, that "images" or "pictures" of the past are not proposed when such generally accepted terms are not in use.' (Ankersmit 1983, 92).
4. I thank Chris Lorenz for drawing my attention to these passages in the English version of Hartog's book.
5. Writing about the publication of *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, Hartog (2003,142) says the book 'registered it like a seismograph and reflected it like a mirror.'.
6. Stefan Dufoix claims that 2005 is a turning point in the debates about memory in France and lists the following key events of that year which pushed the issue of memory to the forefront of public attention: First, an announcement by J. P. Raffarin on 8 July 2004 of the opening of the 'Cité nationlale de l'historie de l'immigration in the Porte Dorée, which was formerly the Museum of the Colonies.' Second, on 19 January 2005, the website *TouTEsEgaux.net* published an *appel* called 'Nous sommes les indigenes de la République' which condemned what it described as a persistent colonial logic in France. This produced numerous responses in the media, which in turn were responded to on 24 February 2005. Third, on 25 March 2005, *Le Monde* published a text by historians protesting the Mekachera law. Fourth, on 12 April 2005, the Comité pour la mémoire d'esclavage delivered its first report to the prime minister (Dufoix 2005, 137–138).
7. 'Memory laws' is the name used by the group *Liberté Pour l'Histoire* (LPH) to designate a number of laws including the Gayssot law, the Taubira law, the Law recognizing the Armenian genocide and the Mekachera law.

8. Most of their public interventions are archived on the website of the organization http://www.lph-asso.fr/ (Liberté pour l'Histoire 2016).
9. According to Tin (2013, 50) the most notable critics of repentance are mainly conservative politicians like Christian Vanneste and Jean-Marie Le Pen as well as media pundits like Alain Finkelkraut, Eric Zemmour and Ivan Rioufol.
10. Anthropologist Alain Bertho explains that the concept of the Republic is understood as follows 'Republic: magic of political symbols. For two centuries the Republic has demonstrated its capacity to unite: from the left to the right, from the officer to the Jew, and from the Bourgeois to the socialist worker …' (2005, 14–18).
11. See, for example, Klein (2000) and Kansteiner (2002). Erll (2008, 7) proposes to dissolve this distinction in favour of different modes of memory.
12. Of course, several scholars such as Pierre Vidal-Naquet, Phillipe Joutard and Paul Ricoeur soften this distinction.
13. Marc Bloch described anachronism as 'the most egregious of all sins against the science of time' (Bloch and Le Goff 1997, 98).

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