

# Thinking disaster through memory

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## Why disaster and memory?

If you are reading this, you presumably work on disasters in some way and you will probably have a particular memory for such events. Nevertheless, disasters, conflicts and large crises tend to be memorable events for most people, due to its extraordinariness and the losses involved. Or aren't they? What critical events do we recall, how and why do we remember them, and what are the implications of particular memories?

Disasters can be conceptualised as complex processes and extraordinary events at the same time. In both ways, disasters are totalising experiences, involving every aspect of human life. We know from the abundance of studies in the transdisciplinary field of disaster studies that such experiences give rise to intense processes of meaning making and reorganisation of life by individuals and societies alike; meanings, practices and policies that shape the present and orient the future. This sometimes leads to reproduction and repetition of the already known. At other times it leads to learning, adaptation and change. Many factors determine such effects. Experience, either personal or collective, of a disaster is often alleged to be key in order to reduce risk and enhance resilience in organisations and communities. In order to grasp the significance and role of experience for the production of risk, vulnerability and/or resilience to crises and disasters, it thus seems important is to scrutinise the processes that mediate experiences over time, that is, remembering and forgetting.

## So, what is memory?

The capability to remember and forget is a human feature that has long puzzled thinkers. There is abundant research on this topic, but what do we mean when we talk about memory? Memory is generally thought of as an individual, personal and cognitive feature and the object of study for psychologists, psychoanalysts and neuroscientists. Yet it is also well established within the human and social sciences that memory is equally a social phenomenon. As such it is often referred to as collective or social memory,<sup>1</sup> produced in social relations. This makes memory an intersubjective process in which individual and social remembering is made in interaction by way of articulation and/or contestation. Such interaction takes place at multiple scales in society, between individuals, between different social groups within a community, between local, national and international communities.

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<sup>1</sup> The French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs is generally credited with coining the concept of "collective memory." Other concepts used are "cultural memory," "institutional memory," "social remembering," "memory-work" and "oral history."

Memories can be said to have different temporalities in that they are both diachronic and synchronic. This means that memories have history and are path dependent, yet they are at the same time shaped by interests, values and perspectives in the present and forged in relation to expectations of the future. Some memories are written into history, while others dwell in the shadows of oblivion. Remembering is thus a selective process and what is remembered (and what is forgotten) is contingent on multiple structures and conjunctures in articulation. Memory and oblivion is, as all human phenomena, dynamic and situated in time and space, in particular contexts.

Most thinkers differentiate also between different modes of remembering. One is simple evocation, what Aristotle called "*mneme*." This refers to the memories that come to us without effort, that through our senses mediate experiences and memories of people and places. In contrast, there is what Aristotle called "*anamnesis*," which is the act of recalling something. This is related to the word amnesia, because without the effort and will to remember, the object is likely to be forgotten. The act of recalling (or *anamnesis*) can be differentiated in two modes, namely "commemoration" and "reminiscence." By commemoration is referred a regular pattern of remembrance. Commemoration is a ritual recall, which is often but not always, carried out in public settings. In contrast, reminiscence refers to the simple effort to recall something from the past, as during a conversation or in an interview. Normally, these three modes of remembering co-exist and intersect, yet sometimes one mode is dominant over another in a particular society at a particular point in time. So, how do we recognise any of these modes of memory when we see it?

How do we remember?

Memories can be expressed, mediated and socialised through many different forms. Storytelling, small talk, myths and official discourses are examples of narrative practices that are crucial for remembering, and in turn key in the making of human subjectivity, identity, and community. Memories are also spatial in that they are embedded in landscapes. Places serve as cues to memory. In a similar yet opposite way, localities are actually produced and reproduced through processes of remembering. Memory is often materialised through mnemonic tools. Museums, archives and memorials are examples of such commemorative devices, typically associated with the re/production of Nation States, yet ordinary everyday objects also remind us of the past. Objects are of course historical subjects in themselves, being crafted or produced at some point in time and living a social life. Archaeology as a science is based on material premises and analogous to historiography in that it constitutes a practice of memory in itself. Memory can also be materialised in the embodied sense. When it comes to embodied memory, many a social scientist have theorised around how past experience becomes internalised habit/us and lived past through everyday practices, biopolitics and performative rituals, challenging the notion of memory as merely a representation of the past. Practices of remembering can be said to not only be of memory but for memory. This becomes particularly clear in the wake of most contemporary disasters. Victims, emergency managers and decision makers share their memories with others during and after such an event, through face to face interaction or through different media, testifying how they remember the disaster in body and mind, long after the actual event has passed. Recurrent experiences from repeated disasters also create embodied knowledge and cultural meaning to critical events that can enhance coping capacities. Mass-media actors rally around the news flag as well as around the anniversaries, constructing narratives about the event. Official inquiries and social protest that are likely to take place configure processes of accountability, for which memory and oblivion becomes crucial

tools to involved actors. Memorials of the spontaneous popular kind are often set up in particular places almost immediately and official monuments are likely to be built. The making of such monuments often give rise to the politics of memory with contradicting views of their meaning and aesthetics. Space is often reconfigured due to the effects of a particular hazard, also constituting a cue to memory.

Disaster memory, so what?

So, where does all this leave us? Well, existing social science research on memory teach us that this not necessarily mediate experiences in a straightforward way, even if memory at the same time is constitutive of knowledge. Intersubjective and social processes of remembering are selective and subject to emotions, moralities, politics and historical, many times unequal, social relations.

But to what extent does memory really matter? A lot of relevant knowledge build on innovation, improvisation and non-experience anyway. Furthermore, there are hazards and risks that are unknown hitherto. Experience and memory from the past suddenly seems almost irrelevant. Yet contemporary disasters tend to be intensively and publicly remembered and scrutinised, perhaps more than ever before in history. Some would say that the present world is obsessed with memory and that this in itself is an expression of cultural amnesia. This can be related to another contemporary phenomenon called the politics of regret, that is, the public apologies offered by states to their own citizens for past atrocities. This is produced through intense memory work (often by civil society) and while victims are recognised as such, the effect of this politics is amnesty for the perpetrator (of the past) and eventually (future) amnesia about its' crime.

From all this, more questions than answers arise. Surely you will have more to add. If we want to take the idea of "community resilience" seriously, how can we ensure inclusion and equality in nurturing everybody's memories and eventually learn from all experiences, including those of the subalterns, if public memory tend to be selective? What relations need to be considered in the making of disaster memorials? Can disaster memory work actually work against resilience and instead produce vulnerability? If we turn to accountability as disaster memory, does this necessarily produce disclosure and improvement of existing practices, or does it, similar to the politics of transparency, promote evasive strategies and more or less status quo? Conversely, what happens to democracy, trust and community resilience in the long term if official memory is not scrutinised and allowed to be contested? Does memory matter? Well, if the past is to guide us through the challenges of the present and the uncertainties of the future, we must try to understand what it means to us properly.