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Sites and Non-Sites of Memory

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Researching sites of memory has recently become popular among scholars, particularly among historians and sociologists. Kornelia Kończal points to dozens of significant research projects, including international endeavors, focusing on the issue.¹ While the interest itself in social, cultural and political aspects of living history (as sites of memory are nothing other than living history²) could be seen as something perfectly obvious, the international career of the term “sites of memory,” applied today to almost all forms of the past tangibly felt in the present, is intriguing indeed and should become subject to deeper reflection.

This article consists of two integrally related parts: the first one is an overview of how “sites of memory” tend to be defined and researched today. The second part includes a hypothesis claiming that the career of the term can be traced to the fact that it resonates well with a particular sensitivity of contemporary culture, including present-day historical culture, to the spatial and the visual.

1 Kornelia Kończal, „Europejskie debaty na temat «miejsz pamięci»” (Berlin: Centrum Badań Historycznych PAN, 2007), [manuscript in possession of the author].

2 A term introduced several years ago by Nina Assorodobraj-Kula in “Żywa historia,” *Studia Socjologiczne* 2 (1963).

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The study of “sites of memory” began with Pierre Nora. In an article entitled *Mémoire collective* published in the early 1970s, he postulates the need for research into “sites of memory.” Nora never defines the term, but it seems that he used it primarily to refer to institutionalized forms of collective memories of the past. Consequently, for Nora, a “site of memory” refers both to a historical archive and a monument, as well as to a private apartment where combatants would gather to celebrate some anniversary of importance to them. Nora speaks of the “site” in its literal meaning, one where a community such as a nation, an ethnic group or a party deposits its memories or considers the site to be an integral part of its identity.³

As I have already mentioned, Nora never defined precisely the notion of *lieux de mémoire*, nor was it his primary goal. He rather wanted to raise the awareness of the wealth of research strategies which can be used to investigate the diverse forms of the past’s continued existence in the present.

To capture the specificity of Nora’s proposals formulated in his early writings (in the beginning of the 1970s), *lieux de mémoire* should be translated rather into “sites of remembering” or “sites of memories,” or perhaps better yet as “sites where one remembers,” and not as “places of memory.” The concept of those “sites of remembering” or “sites of memory” is strongly rooted in two traditions. The first one is Maurice Halbwachs’s tradition of researching the social frames of collective memory. The investigation of “places of memories,” as outlined by Nora in the above mentioned article, is an analysis of the institutional frames of creating, upholding and transmitting the memory of the past. It is assumed here that specific shapes which the remembered past may take and its functions (social, cultural, political) depend largely upon the nature and the organization of groups, institutions and authorities become guides in the attempts to awaken it. In Nora’s earlier writings, one may also note a trace of a concept formulated explicitly some time later - I am referring here to the distinction between the “culture of memory” and the “culture of history.”⁴ The former, usually labeled in anthropology as “traditional cultures,” are characterized by spontaneous, superficial references to the past. The past is present in them naturally in a way, although it is not recognized as such because they lack categories allowing to distinguish the past from the present; in “cultures of memory,” the past and the

3 Pierre Nora, „Mémoire collective,” in *Faire de l’histoire*, ed. Jacques Le Goff and Pierre Nora (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 401.

4 Nora’s distinction between the “culture of memory” and “culture of history” overlaps in its general outline with the distinction between the traditional and modern societies functioning in the theories of modernization.

present merge into one, ageless “now.” Nora contrasts “cultures of memory” with “cultures of history.” In the latter, the past is felt to be something decidedly different from the present. Cultures of history are characterized by a significant development dynamic and as such they pose a constant danger to the past. However, only the latter culture, Nora claims, can evaluate the past and only in those cultures can the past be subjected to the special techniques of commemoration. In one of Nora’s later works,⁵ places of memory refer to all practices (objects, organizations) whose main goal is to uphold (stimulate) the memory of the past. There has not been a serious continuation of this fascinating line of research on the memory of the past, as far as I am aware.

The second tradition consists of mnemonics employed by the ancient and medieval rhetoricians recalled by Frances Yates in *The Art of Memory*⁶, published in the 1960s. It is a book that Nora directly refers to, as he does to the ancient and medieval traditions it describes. Yates writes about the forgotten art of memory, common in antiquity and the Middle Ages. In the most general sense, it relied on imagining and remembering a certain layout of places, the architectural layout being one used most frequently for that purpose, although not the only one. Next, chosen and laid out elements of space (columns, capitals etc.) were assigned appropriate images which awoke in the memory certain facts whenever the need arose, Yates writes while referring to the writings of Quintilian. This applies to all places (*loci*) and regards them as custodians, capable of producing appropriate “deposits” (*imagines*)⁷. Propagating the art of memory, the ancients assumed that “the most complete pictures are formed in our minds of things that have been conveyed to them and imprinted to them by the senses, but the keenest of all our senses is the sense of sight, and consequently perceptions received by the ears or by reflection can be most easily retained in the mind if they are also conveyed to our minds by the mediation of the eyes.”⁸

However, the theory on the “art of remembering” is not of great importance in the context of my investigation. I would like to simply point out that the old mnemonic practices of *imagines* and *loci* were independent from each other. Initially, the choice of particular “sites of memory” (*loci*) and locating within them particular images (*imagines*) was a matter of individual choice. The art

5 Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History. Les lieux de mémoire,” *Representation* 26 (1989).

6 Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966).

7 *Ibid.*, 2.

8 Yates, *Art of Memory*, 4, after the Loeb edition: Cicero, *De oratore*, II, lxxxvii, 357.

of memory was, as a result, nothing other than a technique used to improve remembering. In this initial phase (in ancient and medieval culture) the concept of “sites of memory” had little to do with any kind of historical culture (social/collective memory), as we cannot speak here of any culturally regulated referencing of the past.

We can speak of “sites of memory” as elements of historical culture only when the association of *loci* with particular elemental content (*imagines*) becomes culturally regulated, in other words when particular *loci* are associated only with some and not with any content elements (*imagines*). The degree of interpretative discipline may vary, in any case, depending on the broader cultural context: from a strict codification of contents ascribed to a particular place to situations when the only codified interpretative principle states that the place in question is a trace of the past.

“Sites of memory” can function only in those cultures which respect the notion that a certain object (to paraphrase Paul Ricoeur) has “something to say to us” about the past. Put a little differently, acquiring the status of being a “place of memory” due to its compositional makeup results in a principle stating that in a given culture, the past is conveyed only through the accounts of eyewitnesses but also indirectly, through signs and symbols.

One could posit that in the light of the second tradition, the category of “sites of memory” can be understood as nothing other than symbols of a sort.⁹ Their specificity is related to at least two matters: the materiality of the media and the field (the past) they refer to. In the former case, the metaphorical “site of memory” accentuates the p l a c e, and in the latter, the p a s t. The plentitude and diversity of research practices concerning sites of memory is rooted in the fact that some scholars tend to focus more on the referenced object (t h e p a s t), while others focus on the way it is given to us (t h e s i t e). Let us take a closer look at these two positions.

Few have noted the striking resemblance between the closing part of “Presentation” in the first volume of *Les lieux de mémoire* and the project of

9 I would like to stress that the interpretation of places of memory located within this tradition does not concern the one discussed before; in this case - in contrast to the former, no statement is made on the intentionality of commemoration. For Nora, this discrepancy is of no great importance. What results from his distinction into the “culture (epoch) of memory” and the “culture (epoch) of history” is an a priori assumption that in the 20th and 21st century culture, all references to the past are intentionally organized. It seems to be an assumption not only too far reaching but also heuristically unproductive, as it does not allow to capture the differences between decidedly diverse forms of intentional commemoration. I will return to this issue towards the end of this article.

iconology formulated several decades earlier by Erwin Panofsky.¹⁰ Nora proposes a program for analyzing various “sites of memory” understood as depositories of the past, researched with the method Panofsky suggests for examining works of art (at the level of iconological analysis). The editor of *Les lieux de mémoire* intended to sensitize scholars to the existence of numerous, usually overlooked depositories (sites) of the past. Simply using our imagination allows us to notice in chronicles and legal acts, not to mention language, art or poetry, the depositories (sites) of memory.

It is easy to notice that in this case the materiality of “sites” becomes an attribute of secondary importance. The “sites” in question can be understood metaphorically, as all sorts of signs and symbols attract attention as potential depositories of the past. I believe that such broadened use of the term “sites of memory” is justified if only for the fact that both the real (i.e. museums, statues, archives, temples, etc.) and the metaphorical “sites of memory” manifest the same properties: they are the property of particular social groups and they contain some or other values (ideas, norms, behavior patterns) important from the perspective of that group. The difference lies in the fact that for the former, “ownership” can be understood literally and entails the possibility of visiting such places, while in the latter case, people refer to metaphorical sites of memory as to one’s past.

Metaphorical “sites,” connoting spatiality, are poignant here. These, in the names of people (such as the Margrave of Greater Poland), events (September 1939) and cultural artifacts (The Last Supper), can become - like archeological sites - a source of never ending search, continuously revealing new, overlooked or underappreciated aspects of the past. This broad interpretation of “sites of memory” can be found in Nora’s later writing. This is also how in the early 1980s the author of this essay first encountered “sites of memory.”¹¹ However, such interpretation has its drawbacks too: its range becomes identical to that of notions such as the remembered past, collective memory, social memory, and so on. To avoid the unnecessary proliferation of terminology, I suggest that we use “sites of memory” only when events, people and cultural artifacts are seen in collective memory as depositories (symbols) of not one particular value, but of matters important to the community in general, as a “site” where one finds and can continue finding diverse values.

10 Pierre Nora, *Les lieux de mémoire*, ed. Jacques Le Goff and Pierre Nora (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), Vol. 1, XIX-XXI.

11 Andrzej Szpociński, “Kanon historyczny,” *Studia Socjologiczne* 4 (1983): 129-146. See also Andrzej Szpociński, *Pzemiany obrazu przeszłości Polski. Analiza słuchowisk historycznych dla szkół podstawowych 1951-1984* (Warszawa: Instytut Socjologii UW, 1989).

Such interpretation of “sites of memory” assumes that they are fundamentally based on intergenerational bonds. Practices related to “re-visiting” (recollection can be viewed as a specific form of visitation) become then a form of remaining true to one’s ancestors and saving for future generations important values, ideas and behavioral patterns. To avoid a misunderstanding, let us stress that “staying true to one’s ancestors” does not have to (at least theoretically) be identical to respecting any element of their heritage in the contemporary world. “Staying true” and “in the memory of” may also signify the presence of this heritage as a context that co-creates the meaning of products and events in contemporary culture.

Factors leading to the transformation of “ordinary” events into “sites of memory” and the way these “sites” function have a historical character, being tied to a particular time and culture. A way of referencing the past discussed a moment ago is inevitably related to the culture of modernity, of “great narratives,” one dominated by a sense of linear time - that is time where the present is stretched between the past and the future, and all three elements are viewed as linked in one chain connected by causality. This culture of modernity is ceasing (or has already ceased) to dominate discussion in contemporary culture, although this remains debatable. Zygmunt Bauman, seen by some to be an unquestionable authority on the matters of culture, believes the disappearance of continuity to be an important feature of contemporary culture. “As the whole disperses into a series of ephemeral, randomly appearing and shifting islands, its temporality cannot be described with the category of linearity.” The category of *longue durée*, used as a temporal frame of reference for constructing “life projects,” both in the individual and collective dimension, ceases to be a useful tool.

One may disagree with Bauman’s radical theses but he does manage to capture (as others also do, in fact) an important aspect of contemporary culture: the shrinking of areas governed by a linear sense of time. The discontinuous nature and liquidity of social constructs; the temporary, mercurial character of all associations, groups and communities that individuals may belong to throughout their life; and finally the randomness of the identity shaping processes that from the start assume its temporariness and impermanence all stimulate the emergence of a culture where intergenerational bonds grow weaker and consequently disappear.

How is one to reconcile this observation (from which clearly follows that “sites of memory,” understood as intergenerational, lose their significance in contemporary culture) with the incredible popularity of research devoted to “sites of memory” among historians? The paradox of the situation is that this sudden surge coincides with the incontestability of tendencies undermining the cultural foundations upon which “sites of memory”

operate as “depositories” of the collective past (whether national, regional or supranational).

I believe a solution to this mystery can be found in the emergence, within the last twenty-five years or so, of new phenomena in culture, not to mention historical culture, and consequent shift in understanding of what “sites of memory” are. What I have in mind is the visualization and theatricalization of culture as well as cultural history, and the resulting visualization and theatricalization of “sites of memory.” All these phenomena emphasize, much more distinctly than older forms of interacting with the past, the spatial character of contemporary culture, and I would like to dwell on this issue a little longer.

By theatricalization I mean the ever increasing role of various kinds of happenings and performances in contemporary culture, and in historical culture in particular;¹² and by visualization, the phenomenon of domination by visual experience in the processes of transmitting and perceiving the past. Visualization and theatricalization of general culture have taken place mostly due to the improvements and expansion of visual technologies and tools. But apart from technological factors, the phenomenon was and is stimulated by equally important factors of a “purely” cultural nature. I would like to discuss those now in more detail.

Among the new tendencies of contemporary culture, one finds a phenomenon that I will refer to, for lack of a better term, as the *historization* of space. To characterize it, I must refer to the concept of the historical background conceptualized by Kazimierz Dobrowolski who defines it as a set of cultural artifacts from all fields of human activity which influences the behavior of the current generation.¹³ In everyday life, according to Dobrowolski, we rely on routine and habit. Consequently, we do not distinguish between the historical elements of background and the contemporary elements of the foreground.¹⁴ Their existence, function and influence can be discovered only by a professional equipped with appropriate knowledge - a historian, sociologist or an anthropologist. A historicized space can potentially function in opposition to its historical background, where the age of the elements

12 See Ewa Domańska, “«Zwrot performatywny» we współczesnej humanistyce,” *Teksty Drugie* 5 (2007): 48-61.

13 For certain reasons, it is convenient to speak in such cases of the dominating role of “visual events” understood as all visual experiences where the consumers search for information, meaning or pleasure (see Konrad Chmielecki, “Przedmiot - Światło - Powierzchnia,” *Kultura i Społeczeństwo* 4/50 (2006): 134.

14 Kazimierz Dobrowolski, *Studia z pogranicza historii i socjologii* (Wrocław - Warszawa - Kraków: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1967), 9-10.

constituting the historical background, whether of great or little value, is communicated ostentatiously.

Generally speaking, the goal of the professional is to reveal (and communicate) the temporal dimension of reality by the appropriate management of space. In everyday existence, spatiality (i.e. the spatial dimension of reality) is experienced without much interference, unlike temporality. In the latter dimension, there is no ordering principle. This can be seen most clearly looking at information conveyed by various media: the presented reality is a set of unrelated moments. In audiovisual transmissions (especially in news broadcasts) our attention focuses on events for just a moment and then shifts to something equally important or non-important. There is a strict dependence between the structure of time and the capacity (or lack thereof) to view certain states of things as important. One could posit that these are, in fact, two sides of the same phenomenon. A culture that operates only on the basis of a “short timeframe” – understood as a sequence of consecutive unrelated moments, even if it allows for distinguishing between what is more or less significant – allows for only a short-sighted perspective on what is “important” for a moment, “important” in relation to other ongoing phenomena, if at all. This relation works also the other way around (an assumption that must be made if one also assumes that the categories which organize our perception of the world are not an innate quality of our minds, but are cultural in character): culture that can offer only goods destined for quick consumption allows for the disintegration of the concept of time based on *longue durée*. This connection between the dissolution of the latter conception of time and the saturation of contemporary culture with products destined for “quick consumption” was aptly captured by Jean Baudrillard who rightly relates this phenomenon to the popularization of audiovisual mass communication:

The development of the media is precisely this fascinating format [...] which finally suspends meaning in limbo [...] Events no longer have their own space-time; they are immediately captured in universal diffusion, and there they lose their meanings, they lose their references and their time-space so that they are neutralized. And from this point on, all that is left is a kind of ‘neutered’ passion, a stupefaction in front of the sequences, the events, the messages, etc.¹⁵

A moment later he observes that society is no longer interested in the production of things: “it’s a society where we are haunted and fascinated by the

15 Jean Baudrillard, *Baudrillard Live. Selected Interviews*, ed. Mike Gane (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 85.

disappearance.”¹⁶ Historicization of space is a practice oriented at the opposite direction, a resistance to the phenomena described by the author of *Simulacra and Simulation*.

One could posit that the discussed “artifacts of no importance” – old wall pieces, cobblestones, street signs – becoming depositories of the past, serve one more important cultural and social function. Their very presence invokes a sense of the past, continuing and passing, while at the same time stimulating emotions resulting from a sense of connection with those who used to live here, who walked the same streets, touched the same door knobs, read the same signs, with people who are long gone and who we know nothing else about. The protagonist of Wiesław Myśliwski’s novel confesses:

Come to think of it, what a multitude of human looks, sighs, heartbeats, touches, moments of sadness and [...] exhilaration and joy must all those furniture pieces, all those objects contain [...] Or all their words, just think about it. All of it gone now. But is it really gone? Take a mortar and pestle [...] they spoke to me when I touched them. I just couldn’t hear it.

A community created around such defined “sites of memory” is special, requiring no mass conformism from its members; no authorization is necessary to enter or leave it and neither act is threatened with a sanction; and a community of that kind resembling the nomadic ones described by Bauman, however fleeting, may be the only kind of community that a citizen of the globalized world wants (or can) be seriously part of.

Happenings and performances serve a similar function – that of creating nomadic communities. Historical culture of almost the entire 20th century was an intellectual culture in the sense that it consisted of the past locked in legends, stories and books, that is in signs that needed to be somehow interpreted. Experiencing the past was largely an act of reading the meanings (values, ideas, behavioral patterns) pertaining to events, objects and people. This type of historical sensitivity, even if not entirely gone, competes today with an experience of the past where it is the senses and not the intellect that play an important role. The past experienced through happenings (in contrast to the past experienced intellectually) cannot be clearly translated to behavioral patterns or norms in the contemporary world. Its basic function – apart from providing aesthetic experiences – is to enable participation in a community, particularly the community of those who participate in the happening performance. Happenings can also, to a degree, create a sense of

¹⁶ Ibid., 85.

connection to those whose stories they tell, although this does not seem to be a necessary condition.

One can conclude that visualization and theatricalization of historical culture are stimulated not only by the development of technology and devices registering and transmitting information, but also through strong, inherently cultural factors. I believe (to return to something mentioned at the beginning of this article) that both the incredible popularity of research described as investigating “sites of memory” and the popularity of the term itself have the same source. Twenty-five years ago, when I presented the concept of “sites of memory” (related to Nora’s), the article provoked criticism from Antonina Kłoskowska who had not only expert knowledge but also an excellent sense for scholarly debate. Kłoskowska, along with several other academics objected to the spatial connotation of the term, which was why no one wrote on sites of memory at the time - what was investigated instead was “historical awareness,” “collective” or “social memory,” “memory of the past,” and the like. Several significant changes needed to take place in culture for the investigation of various forms of collective memory to be labeled “sites of memory.” Considering the factors discussed above, the term perfectly corresponds to the conscious (and frequently only anticipated) hopes and fears of not only the academic community, but the broader reading audience.

Undertaking research on “collective memory,” the anthropologist or the sociologist is often under an obligation to justify the need for such research. Employing the term “sites of memory” instead to label such research, with its clearly spatial connotations, would forego the need for justification, as its merits would be obvious to both academic circles and the broader reading audience. All of this reveals the degree to which the everyday has been dominated by an exposure to the spatial aspect of culture.

Translation: Anna Warso