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Collective Memory: The Voices of Remembering and the Silences of Forgetting

San Francisco, California, April 4, 2011



"To be a member of any human community," wrote the venerated historian Eric Hobsbawm, "is to situate oneself with regard to one's [its] past." In this somewhat disjointed statement, Hobsbawm seems to suggest that individuals, and the communities in which they reside, come together as singular units under an overarching 'past' that informs the essence of an internally exclusive, yet mutually constituted social identity. From this perspective, the 'community' itself contains a 'past' that is, for all intents and purposes, knowable, and in order for individuals to become active participants in their respective communities they must orient their consciousness to some objective notion of the past. Implicit within Hobsbawm's statement is the idea that the 'past' is somehow formalized -- that is, people actively remember the past while simultaneously orienting themselves to the institutionalized and symbolic structures that bind the 'community' together. Building this collective consciousness often requires memorializing the particular people and events that ostensibly constructed present social conditions. A 'sense' of collective memory, therefore, appears in both formal and abstract phenomenon, ultimately providing political, economic, and cultural institutions with legitimacy while also containing the spread of dissent. Yet social and technological innovations have often disrupted the delicate balances that stabilized the borders of these re-collected collective memories. In these circumstances, continuity becomes the enemy of change. The formal structures of institutional memory are frequently abandoned and altogether silenced by new regimes that seek to redefine the social order. A new pattern of orientation emerges out of these changes and the necessary condition of situating 'oneself with regard' to a collective 'past' is slightly transformed, but what remains the same is the codependent relationship between the production and distribution of memory and its ability to influence the contours of history (historical change).

The primary goal of the History Students Association's upcoming conference on collective memory is to facilitate a discussion that explores the ongoing production of collective memory and the historical contingencies that influence the manner by which it is organized and allocated. The questions guiding our conversation will not only emphasize the processes and systems that bring about the idea of a unified past, but will also take into consideration the notion that individual and collective consciousness operate both within and outside of these formalized and often prefabricated frameworks. As such, our interests are not limited to understanding the political and economic issues surrounding the idea of collective memory, but also include the discontinuities and silences that often characterize the construction and circulation of memory across space and time. By taking this broad approach to examining the form, function, and content of collective memory and its impact on historical change, we hope to touch on a wide array of topics spanning national and cultural borders, thereby giving participants the opportunity to engage with all facets of this rich and informative topic of academic inquiry. Brian Griffith (HSA President), San Francisco State University, 1600 Holloway Ave., San Francisco, CA 94132, Phone: (415) 236-0HSA (0472), E-mail: hsa@mail.sfsu.edu, griffitb@mail.sfsu.edu, visit the website at http://userwww.sfsu.edu/~hsa/activities/collective_memory_conference/