Absent Memories

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"The map of an Irish hell" lamented *The Irish Times* on May 21st 2009, referring to the report of an official commission, led by the high court judge Seán Ryan and installed by the Irish government, to inquire child abuse from 1936 onwards. "It is a land of pain and shame, of savage cruelty and callous indifference."[1] Rape, sexual molestation, beatings and humiliation were "endemic" in Irish Catholic church-run orphanages and other institutions, according to the 2,600-page final report. It was published after nine years of investigations and drew on testimony from thousands of former inmates and officials from more than 250 church-run institutions. The commission concluded that Catholic priests and nuns had terrorized thousands of boys and girls for decades and that government inspectors had failed to stop the physical and psychological terror.[2]

The outcome of the Irish investigations—and these of similar agencies in other countries, such as the *John Jay Report* in the U.S. (2004) and the *Report of the Deetman Commission* in The Netherlands (2011)—poses serious questions with regard to the functioning of "social memory" and "social forgetting." Considering the scale and the enormity of the abusive practices one may wonder why memories of these did not come to light before. Was it the power of the Church that prevented victims to speak, as one may conclude from the words of the abbot of Glenstal Abbey? The Church, according to the leader of the Benedictine Community in the county of Limerick, "made this island into a concentration camp where they could control everything (...) and the control was really all about sex."[3] The Church appeared to have the spiritual power to actually silence individual memories.

To explain the massive silence that reigned so long, others pointed to the traumatic nature of sexual abuse, whether occurred within a church institution, a family or another more or less closed community. Analogously to the symptoms individuals may develop after being exposed to traumatic experience, public silence with regard to the widespread abuse should be interpreted as "social amnesia," caused by a collective trauma.

Both explanations of the thorough obmutescence with regard to the psychological and physical terror exerted by priests and nuns, for many long decades, in Ireland as well as in other countries—a case to which I will return later—seamlessly fit into what may be designated as the dominant paradigms of social silence or forgetfulness: the *paradigm of hegemonic memory* and the *paradigm of traumatic memory*. The issue at stake here is whether or not these paradigms suffice to understand these and other phenomena related to social forgetting.

Paradigms of "social forgetting"

To address the latter question, it is necessary to get a better grip upon the concepts and patterns that underlie these phenomena—and this is what this contribution is about. Its form is not that of a closing argument, but an exploration into the nature of "social memory" and

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"social forgetting." Such an explorative work should not be considered to be a redundant exercise, since there are reasons to be worried, or even annoyed, about the way various concepts and patterns regarding memory are currently being deployed. Along with the growing popularity of memory studies with scholars and students, the number of studies lacking originality and quality has also been rising, based upon research that suffers from a certain degree of repetition as well as empirical weakness, losing itself into a kind of self-referring theoretical exercises, or a rather naive, oral history based storytelling. Both remembering and forgetting are conceived and applied in an almost mechanistic way, as an *explanans* instead of an *explanandum*. However, to get a better understanding of complex processes and multifaceted phenomena like "social memory" and "social forgetting," a far more nuanced approach is needed, questioning established ideas and arguments, and, if necessary, uprooting them.

Looking back into the history of memory studies it appears that most authors dealing with social forgetting, silencing and amnesia focus on what may be called "distortions of memory," cases in which forgetfulness is dysfunctional, contrary to what is perceived as the "natural process of forgetting." After all, forgetting is a fully natural or even necessary phenomenon, for the individual as well as for society, as Marc Augé (1998, 7) argues. Even our autobiographical memory is, as psychologist and historian Douwe Draaisma puts it in his fascinating book *Why Life Speeds Up as You Get Older: How Memory Shapes Our Past*, a diary and a book of forgetting in one, governed by its own enigmatic laws (Draaisma 2004, 1). But in the case of distortions of memory, "forgetting" may turn into "all the types of amnesia with which clinical literature abounds," as Paul Ricoeur argues: "It is against this forgetting that we conduct the work of memory (*oeuvre de mémoire*) in order to slow down its course, even to hold it at bay" (Ricoeur 2004, 426-427).

Such notions of "distortion" and "dysfunctionality" of forgetting appeared tailored for use within the social and historical domain. Two, only partly related lines of thinking, appeared to be predominant, lines to which I already referred to as *paradigms*. The first—and oldest—of these has been identified as the *paradigm of hegemonic memory*, the second as the *paradigm of traumatic memory*. The first line, that of hegemonic memory, found its most rude and cynical expression in George Orwell's novel *1984*, which basically centers around the politics of history as a way of controlling the present through the past. The Ministry of Truth, where the book's hero, Winston Smith, works, is first and for all rewriting history, having people and events disappearing into "memory holes." Thus conceived "social forgetting" belongs to the realm of politics and power relations, being a dominant discourse, produced by deliberate repression and other forms of hegemony.

Memory, as a product of the politics of memory, serves ideological needs, to start with national unity, as expressed, for example, by Ernest Renan in his seminal essay *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation—What Is a Nation?*, published in 1882. "Forgetting," according to the French philosopher and writer,

> is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation. (...) The essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common and also that they have forgotten many things,

adding, a bit further, that

> every French citizen has to have forgotten the massacre of Saint Barthélemy, or the massacres that took place in the Midi in the thirteenth century.

The notion of a national forgetting in Renan's essay, however, is rather problematic, as Benedict Anderson has pointed out in his famous work *Imagined Communities*. Zeroing in on the original French phrase, that the French citizen *"doit avoir oublié"*, meaning: that he or she "has to have forgotten" ancient tragedies—instead of just "has to forget" them—Anderson argues that forgetting is conceived by Renan as a prime contemporary civic duty (Anderson, 1991, 200). Renan's readers were being told that they *should have already forgotten*, what Renan's own words assumed that they naturally still remembered. Anderson accounts for this paradox by arguing that the citizens of modern nations must undergo "a deep reshaping of the imagination", a process over which the state itself has barely any substantial control (*ibid*, 201). This reshaping requires a forgetting in order to reconfigure the bloody events of the past, such as civil war and all kinds of bitter disputes and internal conflicts, thus contributing to the conception of the nation as an extended family, according to Anderson.

Along these and similar lines, "social forgetting" has been conceived as belonging to the realm of politics and power relations, as a result of deliberate repression or less visible mechanisms of political and cultural hegemony. This may be the reason why, as Ann Rigney has indicated,

> "memory" has tended in practice to become synonymous with "counter-memory", defined in opposition to hegemonic views of the past and associated with groups who have been "left out", as it were, of mainstream history. The study of such memories has been based on a belief in the importance and possibility of "recovering" memories which were once there and which have since been "lost" or "hidden" (Rigney 2005, 13).

According to Rigney, this "recovery project" is in various ways linked to contemporary identity politics of particular groups, searching to profile their common identity by claiming distinct roots in a particular historical experience. "Memory" may even be considered here to be the opposite of "history", as the official recitation of distant events, recorded by archival documents, artifacts and testimonies.

The second guiding line, or paradigm, fostering the notion of "social forgetting", developed only in the late Twentieth century, and is closely connected to the idea of trauma: forgetting, or silencing, as a psychological or even social-psychological phenomenon, brought about by experiencing severe repression, sexual and physical violence, humiliation and other—I would even say: a growing number of other—degrading acts and extremely painful situations. One may say that the emergence of trauma as a paradigmatic discourse itself is a mark of our time, as Ana Douglass and Thomas Vogler have argued: the rise of the discourse of trauma—originally emanating from postwar philosophical reflections on Auschwitz—

for defining the catastrophic, calamitous, or otherwise injurious may be seen as a metaphor for characterizing the historical epoch of the present (Vogler 2003). Cathy Caruth, one of the founding theorists of trauma theory, has pushed this idea even further, claiming history to be inherently traumatic, and trauma as an overwhelming experience that resists integration and expression; similar thoughts were expressed by two other early theorists, Shoshana Felman en Dori Laub, in their path-breaking volume *Testimony—Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992).[4]

From the 1980's on historians—particularly in the field of oral history—and scholars of literary, cultural and memory studies adopted not only trauma as a key concept for understanding individual as well as social memory, but also the language of psychology. Thus the field of individual and social memories was so to say "booby trapped" with so-called "pathogenic secrets" or "trauma stories" that had to be unraveled—memories that were supposed to have been silenced, repressed or even totally lost in amnesia. However, just as psychologists have seriously questioned the concept of traumatic memories and the therapies related to it, historians have increasingly raised doubts regarding trauma in relation to *collective* entities—social groups, let alone nations—beyond its metaphorical usage and apart from its symbolic meaning, expressing the ethos of compassion and the demand for justice, characteristic of our time (Stone 2014; cf. Fassin & Rechtman 2009). Studies on cultural trauma, the German historian Wulf Kansteiner argues, often display a disturbing lack of historical and moral precision, while aestheticizing violence and conflating the real experiences of victims, perpetrators and spectators of traumatic events (Kansteiner 2004, 193-221).

It is obvious that, in order to understand social forgetting, we cannot content our selves with the approaches stemming, in one way or another, from these two paradigms. What we need is a deeper, more layered view of social forgetting as a dynamic process, by introducing a variety of motives and factors leading to forgetting or silencing of past experiences, as Karine Varley has also pointed out in her contribution to this issue.

On the Plasticity of Memory

To understand the complex nature of social forgetting, it may be worthwhile to focus a while on the relationship and—above all—the interaction between individual memories and social memories. Following cultural theorist Aleida Assmann, personal memories should be defined as subjective, often fragmented, episodic memories, referring to one's own past experiences, which are embodied in our brains and body, while social memories refer to the past as experienced and communicated within communities.[5] Social memories are, similar to personal memories, embodied in living people—as members of a family, a peer group or any other community, including a nation—but, unlike the first, communicative and performative *by their very nature*. Defining individual memories as being located in the individual brain, however, does not imply that they are *void* of social qualities—in contrary.

Empirical research in psychology strongly underlines the idea that individual memories are molded by social,

communicative processes, even in cases they are not expressed in words, silence or body language. And when we use the word "molded," we do so to refer to a variety of factors, determining not only the linguistic, visual and narrative *forms* of these individual memories, but also their durability and—what we may call—their "content," or "objects," *i.e.* the experiences these memories refer to. In other words, personal memories may be completely unspoken, buried in the individual's brain, but nevertheless they have an undisputedly social dimension, particularly in modern society, in which experiences are increasingly mediated, as Augé argues, in the form of collective stories, images, music and tropes, posing a threat to the "integrity" of personal narratives (Augé 1998).

In this sense personal memories are not stable, as they change under the influence of social life, re-shaping the narrative and mental representations, again and again, by adding, omitting, inserting and absorbing elements. Or personal memories may even been completely invented, as Elisabeth Loftus and others have convincingly proven (Loftus & Ketcham 1994). On these grounds, some theorists have concluded memory to be "a fundamentally defective system." However, its defects may also be seen as "the by-products of otherwise adaptive features of memory, a price we pay for processes and function that serve us well in many respects," as Daniel Schacter (2001, 184) puts it.

The conclusion that episodic, individual memories are subject to a high degree of plasticity, is extremely relevant for memory studies, since it sheds a clear light upon the relationship and the interaction between individual and social memories, and consequently upon "social forgetting" as a dynamic process. As mentioned before, recent psychological research may help us to understand the mechanisms of interaction, showing, for example, how individual memories are deeply affected by conversation, with effects lingering long after the conversations themselves are only a distant memory. The effects, however, may differ greatly depending on someone's position in the conversation: so "listeners" may find their memory substantially altered and reshaped by a conversation, while the same conversation may merely serve to reinforce speakers' pre-existing memories. On the other hand, speakers tend to adjust their memories to their audience, in order to create what is called "a shared reality": a process of "mnemonic tuning" which does indeed appear to affect their own memories as well. This results into what psychologists call a process of "mnemonic convergence" (Koppel & Hirst 2011, 89-104).

From this experimental laboratory research we may learn how individual memories may be reshaped, by mnemonic tuning and the transmission of recollections from speakers to listeners, leading to what is labeled "social contagion" (that is: implanting new memories with the listeners) and "induced forgetting" (that is: conversation causing the listeners to partially or even wholly forget memories). Remarkably, research indicates that to have specific memories completely to be forgotten, the optimal strategy for speakers would not be *not* to refer to the situation or information, but only to exclude the specific elements they wish to be forgotten. To give a simple example: if a wife wishes her husband to forget a painful incident during their va-

cation, she might be more successful by discussing the vacation without referring to that specific incident than just not mentioning the vacation at all.

Absent memories

Quite obviously, empirical findings like these from psychological experiments are extremely relevant for our understanding of the dynamics of social remembrance and forgetting, and, in particular, the role of articulation and communication. It may offer a sound explanation why, for example, memories might be virtually absent in public discourse at a specific moment in time, and to emerge at another.

Take, for example, the almost complete silence, during the first decades after 1945, virtually all over Europe, on the victims of the Nazi extermination policies, as was apparent from the lack of public monuments, historical works, ceremonies and other expressions of public attention. In the East, as well as the West, killed Jews were not commemorated as victims of the German anti-Semitic, genocidal policy of *Endlösung*, but primarily as "compatriots" fallen in an atrocious war between nations and ideologies. A striking expression of this tendency is constituted by Nathan Rapoport's famous Warsaw Ghetto Monument. Erected under socialist-communist rule in 1948, it was first of all meant to commemorate the martyrdom and solidarity against the "class-based" Nazi terror, not Jewish victimhood.

Likewise, at the other side of the Iron Curtain, in the Netherlands, various efforts to create a memorial for its deported and killed Jewish compatriots remained fruitless as well, apart from a few monuments highlighting national resistance and other acts of support against the Nazi persecution of the Jews. And when finally the Hollandsche Schouwburg, the Amsterdam theatre where tens of thousands of Dutch Jews had been imprisoned before being deported to the annihilation camps in the East, was installed as a site of commemoration, in 1963, the sign on the wall read: *"memorial for the Jewish compatriots fallen 1940-1945"*—fully in line with the current dominant discourse of remembrance, which was basically nationalist and oriented at future reconstruction (Hijink 2011; Van Vree, 1995; Lagrou, 2000).

It would be too easy to reduce the lack of public attention for the persecution and extermination of the Jews—in Poland, the Netherlands or France—to a deliberate effort to repress painful memories of widespread passiveness of bystanders and collaboration by non-Jews. The reasons were manifold, to start with a general, deeply felt search for continuity and reconstruction, falling back on traditional ideology and stressing the idea that all this suffering had not been in vain. Within such a mental framework there was hardly any room for victims other than political prisoners, military and resistance fighters. Anti-Semitism may definitely have played a role too, but the same goes for the argument that in a "truly national" commemoration culture no group should get a special treatment—for exactly such distinctions had underlain Nazi policies. At the same time there was, of course, also a genuine lack of interest for the recent past, amidst the widespread misery, despair and destruction, feelings against which trusted ideologies, heading for a new future, served well.

The limited visibility[6] of the Jewish victims in the national memory cultures, at least till the 1960's, may thus be seen as a natural outcome of a rather specific cul-

ture of remembrance, build around traditional ideologies, which were ubiquitous in post-war politics as well. The silence was part of a commemorative discourse, which indeed appears to have led to "induced forgetting", also among the Jewish communities themselves, during the first decades after 1945. "Many former prisoners had managed to find a place in life again and didn't want to be occupied by the past, neither as a researcher nor as a subject of research" wrote Eddy de Wind, a Dutch psychiatrist and survivor of Auschwitz himself (De Wind 1993, 25). In these years Dutch Jews, according to historian Selma Leydesdorff, appeared to have internalized the dominant nationalist view of the recent past, often contrary to their own experience (Leydesdorff 1992, 79). It was not before radical changes in the dominant memory culture—in the Netherlands marked by the publication, in 1965, of *Ondergang,* Jacques Presser's impressive and critical two volume work on the destruction of the Dutch Jews—that radically different memories could be inscribed into the public realm. One may put it differently: the dynamics of the commemorative discourse gave way to a continuing re(dis)covery and reshaping of individual and collective memories, also with regard to the post-war years of silence (Van Vree 1995, 102).[7]

In many respects, the "shattering of the silence" (Leydesdorff) around the history of the Nazi genocide and the memories of its survivors, as part of a changing commemorative culture—a phenomenon which, in a sense, challenges the very idea of "collective trauma"—parallels the rupture of the decades-lasting obmutescence with regard to the psychological and physical terror within the Catholic Church, in Ireland as well as in other countries. In both cases, there was virtually no room for personal memories to be publicly communicated, due to the lack of what in social studies has been termed "frames" in perception as well as in communication.[8] Following Goffman's classic (1974) definition, frames are to be conceived as basic cognitive structures, guiding our perception and representation of reality. As schemes of interpretation, understood as more or less coherent collections of narratives, representations and values, unconsciously adopted in the course of communicative processes, frames function as mental "filters" in understanding and responding to the world around us; in this sense frames create meaning, by ordering and excluding information and experiences.

The concept of framing, though ambiguous and defined and used in many disparate ways (Entman 1993; Vreese 2005), has proven to be very fruitful over the last years, in psychology as well as communication and media studies, so it may be useful and productive in the field of memory as well. After all, framing, according to Goffman, is an innate property of all social processes and indispensable for communication. From this perspective "social forgetting" may be understood as a deliberate or non-deliberate exclusion or dilution of memories through framing, or, even, because of the very *lack* of proper frames. After all, for personal, episodic memories to become a subject of conversation—or, better: to become social memories—they "need a frame," so to speak, they need a social, discursive place, in an open narrative structure, that gives them shape and meaning, to make them exchangeable and debatable, open for transformation. If not, these private

memories are deemed to stay absent—absent to be understood as "not present," lacking a social space, not socially communicated nor circulating as cultural or political memories.

The concept of framing may thus enable us to get a better understanding of the fluent, inherently communicative nature of memory and the numerous factors—including power relations—that may play a role in the emanation of memories in public discourse, their prevalence and interrelationship, as well as their plasticity and multilayered nature. Such an approach opens up a more subtle and dynamic perspective on social memory than the rather flat or even mechanistic concepts connected to the paradigms of traumatic and hegemonic memory.

Absent memories may live a life-time and still fall out of the actual frames of social and cultural memory, although they may circulate in a very limited, protected sphere, among partners or close friends, be it often in concealed terms, or in the form of allusions. This was the case within Jewish families in the Netherlands in the first decades after 1945, but also, for example, among former students of Catholic seminaries—as I know from personal experience. But in the case of the systematic terror and sexual abuse by catholic nuns and priests in Ireland there was simply no opportunity to communicate these memories in the public realm. Of course the spiritual power of the Church played a role, as did the traumatic nature of their experience prevent individuals to speak up, but it was also the lack of a proper frame, or public discourse, that would enable victims to speak out, a lack that was due to fact that such a frame was fully incompatible with everything the Church in Ireland stood for. In other words: the victims of sexual abuse were literally left alone with their memories of this bitter experience, because the scandal as such was virtually unimaginable and thus non-representable; they were in a sense like the survivors of the Nazi concentration camps, returning home as "travelers poor of words," as the Dutch novelist Durlacher, a former inmate himself, put it (Durlacher 1985, 87).

Of course the lack of proper frames, resulting into social forgetting, may be elicited by their potential incompatibility with dominant political or cultural discourses, as was the case with the Armenian genocide, the bombing of German cities by the Allies during the Second World War, or the—almost completely forgotten—widespread atrocities committed by allied soldiers at the Pacific front in the same years. These are all clear instances of politically incompatible memories, often fragmented and isolated but persisting under the surface of public memory—at least for a certain period of time, thus facilitating the creation of more powerful, coherent narratives of the past.

However, memories may also be absent from the public realm for less obvious causes. Proper frames might not evolve if memories mainly arouse feelings of *shame* and *embarrassment*, for the individual as well as for social groups. This was the case with the painful memories of the 110,000 Japanese Americans who were detained in dozens of internment camps, mainly along the Pacific Coast, in the wake of Imperial Japan's attack on Pearl Harbour in 1942. They had to stay there for years, in barbed-wire-surrounded enclaves, all in remote, desolate areas far from population centers, in

barracks with unpartitioned toilets and cots for beds, and armed guards around them (Ng 2002). Apart from the physical, psychological and material hardships and the sometimes vehement racism they confronted, the internees—all American citizens—must have felt deeply humiliated. After the war, however, speaking up would possibly bring all these painful feelings back—so the whole issue was put aside for decades. It took more than twenty-five years before the silence was really broken, mostly by their children, seeking reparation and redress.

Shame, embarrassment—the origins of social forgetting are manifold, and not straightforward related to or deductible from the paradigms of hegemonic or traumatic memory. Loyalty may also be such a motive, loyalty to a liberating army, a community or a nation. Such motives, grounds and situations may—at least temporarily—hamper proper frames to evolve; memories may be too painful, while openly testifying might inflict or even reinforce once again feelings like shame and embarrassment.

Social forgetting may even be inescapable in order to take up the thread of life, not only for individuals, as Dutch psychiatrist de Wind noticed with regard to former survivors in the after war decades, but also for communities and institutions, as in the case of the nursing centers for mentally and physically handicapped in Germany and Austria. During half a century these institutions preserved a complete silence on the killing of more than 200,000 mentally and physically disabled people, psychiatric patients and so-called *a-soziale Elemente* and other *nutzlose Esser* ("useless mouths") between 1938 and 1945. These mass killings, euphemistically called "euthanasia", by deliberate starvation, poisoning and gassing, constitute one of the most shocking crimes committed under Nazi rule, although the project was certainly not an exclusively Nazi undertaking, in contrary. Nevertheless it lasted until the last decade of the century before the health institutions involved, most of them still in function, began to commemorate the victims, with booklets, exhibitions and historical studies.[9] To explain this startling case of "social forgetting," we may think of "shame" and "guilt" as significant motives, since neither the institutions nor its personnel had done much to stop the killings; in contrary, they had often been sheer accomplices. Relatives of the victims, on the other hand, may have felt guilty as well, from the sense that they had failed, or, even worse, that by supporting the Nazi regime, they were in fact accomplices as well.

There is no doubt that shame and guilt have indeed played an important role in preserving silence, but apart from these motives, health institutions virtually had no other choice than to forget: how could they possibly have continued to function otherwise, after the end of Nazi rule, and to develop a trustful relation with their new patients, than through silencing the atrocities and horrors of the recent past? In other words: in this case "forgetting," understood as the absence of memories that are not forgotten, was a *conditio sine qua non* for survival, not only for individuals, but for groups and institutions as well—just as Renan said.

For a long time notions of "social forgetting" and "social amnesia" depended heavily on theories of hegemonic and traumatic memory. This is not to say

that social forgetting, in specific circumstances, may not be a consequence or an aspect of a repressive, hegemonic commemorative discourse; but to understand the mechanisms of social forgetting and the absence of specific memories in the public realm, we should be aware of the multiple factors influencing the relations between personal and social memories as well as the way they interact and reshape each other. Considering the fact that communication, be it in words, images or gestures, is crucial, not only for the way episodic, personal memories are molded and evolve, but even more for these memories to be shared and to become social memories, whether of a family, a small community or of a nation as a whole, social forgetting should also be understood from a communicative perspective.

Thus the absence of specific—extremely painful—memories in the public realm at a certain moment in time, may be explained with the help of a concept like "framing", as I have tried to argue in this explorative essay. To speak up, to communicate one's experiences, to turn personal memories into meaningful stories, there has to be a proper frame, to make these memories understandable for others.

The reasons why specific frames are lacking may be manifold and the same goes for the question why and how they evolve. Shifts in the political structure, cultural developments and the rise of a new generation may act as agents of change, and the same applies to novels, history books, films, novels, songs and other artefacts of popular culture, transcending traditional cultural, political and national boundaries. Also in that respect both the history of the memory of the Nazi genocide and the case of the widespread abuse within the Catholic Church, may be considered to be exemplary.

Notes

[1] "The savage reality of our darkest days", *The Irish Times*, 21 May 2009.

[2] *Final Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse* (20 May 2009), at www.childabusecommission.ie/publications

[3] Abbot Dom Mark Patrick Hederman interviewed in "The Irish Affliction", *The New York Times Magazine*, February 9, 2011.

[4] Caruth, 1996; Felman & Laub, 1992; Alphen 1999: 24-38. For an assessment of trauma theory, see a.o. Craps 2012; Buelens, Durrant Eaglestone 2013; Kilby Rowland 2014.

[5] For a brief version of her theoretical position: Assmann 2010: 35-50.

[6] With some notable exceptions, such as the films and monuments made during the artistic Polish Spring in the 1950's: see Van Vree 2006.

[7] For a concise historographic overview see Haan 2008. Cf. Bossenbroek 2001; Kristel 1998.

[8] The term "frame" was already introduced by Maurice Halbwachs in his basic work *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (1925). However, "cadre" or framework is used to designate the mental sphere of a specific social group, thus constituting social memory.

[9] *Cf. e.g. Nationalsozialistische Euthanasieverbrechen. Beiträge zur Aufarbeitung ihrer Geschichte in Sachsen* 2004 ; Rotzoll 2010.

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Awkward Memories and the Role of Silence: A Commentary on Frank van Vree's Concept of "Absent Memories"

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It is usually taken for granted that memory studies is a branch of research that focuses on the why and how and when of remembering. However, further insights reveal that remembering must be complemented by forgetting. It is now generally agreed that our knowledge of remembering stays incomplete if we are not able to study the dynamics of remembering against forgetting, of remembering intertwined with forgetting and, indeed, sometimes as well, of remembering as a form of forgetting. With the introduction of his notion of "absent memories" Frank Van Vree has shown, however, that this is not enough. Forgetting is an umbrella term that is in need of further differentiation. Van Vree offers us another vantage point, which makes it possible to address topics that had so far been largely overlooked in memory studies. The author attributes this blind spot to the dominance of two sweeping theories that blocked the access to these phenomena. On the one hand, the theory focusing on political hegemony of memory suggests that the memory of a society can be brought under the will and control of power by forms of state censorship; the trauma theory of memory, on the other hand, contends that memory breaks down altogether or is radically deformed under the pressure of devastating events. The term "absent memory" points to something else: to the presence of memories that are unspeakable, to the ban on communication of what is available as shared knowledge, to a stifling silence that is reinforced and perpetuated by strong social taboos.

Van Vree thus takes us from politics of memory and the dynamics of individual memory into the complex and largely implicit realm of the social as the important third dimension within which the dynamics of memory evolve and are played out. Silence is indeed an important additional concept for memory studies, situated in the vague space between remembering and forgetting, forms of knowing and not knowing. The Israeli psychotherapist Dan Bar-On made an important contribution to this topic in the 1990s when he spoke about Holocaust testimonies being confronted with "a double wall of silence."[1] The first wall of silence refers to the self-imposed restriction of the victim who for various reasons does not choose to speak about his or her experiences. The second wall of silence refers to the attitude of a society that does not want to listen. Before a wider communication about shocking, painful and embarrassing experiences becomes possible, both walls have to come down.

As his most conspicuous example, van Vree refers to recent discussions of sexual child abuse. This turned out to be a transnational memory event, developing an energy that transcended European borders. The tide hit Germany in 2010. Throughout that year, we witnessed the fall of the second wall of silence as charges were brought against the institution of private schools and the Catholic Church and were publicly discussed in the media.

Charges had been voiced by the victims before, however the information had not been passed on but hushed up in order to protect the officials and the respective institution. Those responsible reacted invariably by trivializing, postponing or ignoring the charges. They were confident that by turning a blind eye, this shameful problem could be made to automatically disappear. Such complicit forgetting is reinforced by the pressure of social taboos; it involves three forms of silence which mutually reinforce each other:

1. A symptomatic silence on the part of the traumatized victims
2. A defensive silence on the part of the perpetrators and
3. Acomplicit silence on the part of society.

When these three forms of silence reinforce each other, crimes can remain concealed for a long time. Nothing will really change as long as the victims are the only ones ready to break their silence and to claim their rights. It is the collective will of society alone which can change the situation and turn the tables. Only then will the voice of the witnesses be heard and, by gaining the support of the public media, be acknowledged as a "testimony." In a similar way a change of values connected with the introduction of a new political notion of human rights in the 1980s had created a new sensibility for the suffering of the victims of such traumatic histories of violence as the Holocaust, slavery, colonialism and dictatorships. After this global change of orientation, the response of the population was gradually transformed from a protection shield for the perpetrators to a sounding board for the victims.

The important theoretical concept that is re-introduced by Van Vree's paper is that of the "frame." I say "re-introduced" because it is not an entirely new tool in this field. Maurice Halbwachs, who is today recognized as one of the the pioneers of memory studies, published a book about the "Social Frames of Memory" (*Les cadres sociaux de la Mémoire*) already in 1925. As a sociologist, he emphasized the role of society in the construction of individual memories. This concept however, has remained something of an absent memory in memory studies itself. It was accessible, it was referred to frequently, but it was seldom taken up and developed as a practical tool to come to grips with new problems. The introduction of the term silence into memory studies brings these frames back to our attention.

Silence is imposed by a society on its members to dispose of awkward and embarrassing truths that are part of common knowledge but are not circulated or addressed because they undermine the consensus of a given frame and threaten to destabilize institutions. In the context of social communication, silence can serve different functions. If connected to tact and the rules of politeness it can be a means of strengthening the ties between individuals, whilst promoting social coherence. If connected to strong social taboos, however, the tacit imposition to de-thematize certain topics met with a willing acceptance to ban such topics from conversation blocks the circulation of knowledge, and is thus a repressive syndrome that paralyzes social consciousness.

It is an important insight that Van Vree's article presents, namely, that oppressive silences have their expiration dates. As they are backed up by social

frames, these frames can suddenly break up with the change of values, losing their normative power and guiding orientation. Another important point is the social co-production of memories. A social memory does not arise automatically from spoken or printed information. It always takes two: a voice that is speaking and an ear that is listening, heeding and responding in one way or another. Without this dimension of reception and a living response in the presence we may have stores filled with information and digital archives replete with data within almost everybody's reach, but not a communal, social or cultural memory.

Notes

[1] Bar-On, Dan. *Die Last des Schweigens. Gespräche mit Kindern von Nazi-Tätern*. Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 1993.

Reframing “Absent Memories”

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I am grateful to Frank van Vree for bringing the process of “social forgetting” into focus and for attempting to forge a capacious theoretical language with which to analyze this widespread phenomenon. This is an especially urgent question now, at the moment in which we observe the anniversaries of the Rwandan and the Armenian genocides that still suffer from very different yet powerful forms of silence and denial.

Finding that social forgetting has been seen as due either to the powers of hegemonic remembrance or of traumatic repression or dissociation, Van Vree searches for a model of memory that better calibrates the relationship of individual to social memory than either the political model of power and hegemony or the psychoanalytic model of trauma can do. These popular models both show social forgetting to be dysfunctional and the work of memory to be corrective, he argues. Instead, following Halbwachs and Goffman, the essay proposes the idea of the frame as a means by which to conceptualize the absence of certain memories from public view at one moment in time, and the means by which they can become known, acknowledged and integrated into social self-understanding at another. Frames, the essay argues, allow us to see how this form of “forgetting,” or occlusion, can at times be enabling, even necessary, for citizens of modern states who wish to move forward rather than remaining subject to painful and paralyzing past histories. Framing allows us to understand social forgetting as either deliberate or non-deliberate. And it helps account for the malleable and communicative character of memory, and the complex negotiations that produce a certain shared image of the past while rejecting conflicting versions.

“The reasons why specific frames are lacking may be manifold and the same goes for the question why and how they evolve,” Van Vree writes and this, to me, is the key question raised by the essay. The examples on which the essay bases its inquiry—sexual abuse in the Irish Catholic church, the Nazi Holocaust, and the Nazi euthanasia program – would actually seem to point back to the political and psychoanalytic motivations the essay wants to surpass. Van Vree specifically names shame, embarrassment and guilt as emotions explaining why some of the stories have remained outside the available frames, and what he terms “forgetting” at times looks quite explicitly like denial or projection; that is, psychological defense mechanisms which could be transferable from the individual to the social realm. And when Van Vree writes that a frame that would render the sexual abuse in the church visible “was fully incompatible with everything the Catholic Church in Ireland stood for,” is he not invoking a notion of hegemonic power to screen certain acts and events of the past from view? Perhaps these memory models are not so different from one another after all. Perhaps we need to bring them together to get to the fascinating question the essay raises, the questions of what allows frames to shift, and absent memories eventually to become present.

The metaphor of the frame is certainly useful in conceptualizing visibility and invisibility, but I wonder what might get lost by looking at memory uniquely through a spatial/visual model. What if we spoke of certain available scenarios or scripts that might explain why some acts remain offstage? Or what if we thought about memory as operating according to a set of available narratives or tropes that would also explain why some stories that did not correspond to these would remain untold? These models from theater or narrative seem to me as useful, or as useless, as the idea of the frame. None of these models ultimately explain how frames can be shattered, scenarios restaged or narratives rewritten. And yet we know that they can and we know how powerfully transformative that process can be. And we know that they often aren't leaving many images, scenarios and stories unseen and untold, and many lives unrecognizable and unrecognized.