Reader Response 1

Memory is the new soul, a powerful tool in politics that is lent credibility by the science of memory and therefore accepted in our modern secular society. Ian Hacking, Maurice Halbwachs and Daniel Schacter all write about the power, origin, and social context of memory but focus on separate aspects of its understanding and use. Specifically, these writers concern themselves with the political structure that supports and uses memory, the social framework that generates and recalls memories, and the bitter debates over false and repressed memories that tear families and professionals apart. The three authors contributions on the subject convey a high level frustration with memory; unhappy that something so important to our personal and social existence, is malleable, faulty and prone to manipulation.

Memory is a powerful tool that attracts attention from the public and political groups. In his book *Searching for Memory*, Daniel L. Schacter cautiously outlines a case against repressed memory, a topic that attracted "bitter debate... among professionals in the fields of mental health, medicine, and law." Schacter focuses on memories, true or false, that stem from childhood trauma like sexual abuse or Satanic Ritual Abuse. In the 1990's, cases where therapists and patients had discovered repressed memories of abuse and trauma from childhood started to gain national attention. In some cases, patients remembered repressed memories of abuse and challenged their perpetrators, often family members, in court. The frequency of such accusations split public opinion into supporters of victims of repressed memories and skeptics who consider them false memories uncorroborated by fact. Schacter makes his skepticism of repressed memories clear when he talks about "suggestive", "toxic", and "risky" therapy sessions—involving hypnosis and

social pressure—which he criticizes for potentially implanting false memories. Schacter describes multiple scientific studies that concern repressed, retracted, and false memories to conclude that most repressed memories are likely fabricated by interaction with a therapist or caused by pyschological illness rather than hidden away for decades by some unknown repression mechanism.

Maurice Halbwachs argues that memories are formed, recalled, and adjusted through social interactions and cannot exist without other humans. Halbwachs describes the affect of "social frameworks for memory" by considering dreams, the only time when humans are free from social pressure and reinforcement. Halbwachs states that "our dreams are composed of fragments of memory too mutilated and mixed up with others to allows us to recognize them." He claims that dreams do not form coherent memories because they are formed in the absence of society, a normalizing force. He goes on to compare dreaming with aphasia. In the former, the dreamer can experience any aspect of society properly but cannot piece together the larger whole, and in the latter the aphasic retains knowledge of his past and understands that there is society around him, but doesn't have the tools to interact with it properly. Halbwachs goes on to discuss how social interactions shape the memory of the past. He argues that the elderly reminisce about the past because those fond memories where formed when they were of peak value to that society, and therefore recall it as frequently as possible, fullfilling the tribal goal of passing down collective knowledge. Halbwachs concludes by describing the societal pressure on memory as a constraint, but one that forces us to aritificially improve our memories of the past and "give them a prestige that reality did not possess."

Ian Hacking argues in his book *Memoro-Politics* that memory is the secular soul, a new tool that was enabled by the science of memory and continues in the tradition of psychological phenomenon being exploited by politics. Hacking introduces and defines personal and communal politics of memory before focusing on the personal, a "struggle built around knowledge, or claims to knowledge." Hacking describes personal politics of memory as facts and opinions being thrown around while borrowing legitimacy from pyschological and biological science. He details how hysteria, shell-shock and sexual abuse have been co-opted by political forces across the last century, agreeing with Halbwachs on the social framework of memory and Schacter that social pressure can implant memory. After religion lost political power in Europe and the science of memory became statistical in nature, memory became the new way to control large groups of people and rally countries tipping on the brink of what would have been called moral bankruptcy. Moral questions of subjective good and bad, were redirected towards scientific questions about forgetting and remembering.

Questions:

1. How does Schacter subtly introduce his position against repressed memories while trying to stay grounded in the science? Is there enough science to confirm his opinion?

2. Halbwach claims that memories of the past are not useful because they were formed during a different society, one that no longer exists. Do you agree that we in the present don't value the past?

3. Ian Hacking claims that the introduction of the science of memory has legitimized the subject and made it more factual when being debated. Does this seem consistent with Schacter's description of "bitter debate"?

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