Memory and the Construction of Personality

Remo Bodei

Abstract: The article proposes a kind of imaginary chess match in seven moves between memory and oblivion in which the construction of collective identity is at stake. Starting from the experience of unexpected changes, such as the collapse of political regimes, it aims to show how the failure to nourish established memory provokes oblivion. Memory and forgetting do not represent neutral territories, but actual battlefields in which identity – especially collective identity – is decided, molded, and legitimized. Moreover, every victorious power or faith has always organized a kind of “vertical forgetting” in the sense of superimposing itself literally on old beliefs in the places where these traditionally held their celebrations. However, the defense of memory’s preciseness also has an ethical dimension, that of protecting a more conscious – and therefore, freer – identity. The final move of this game consists in understanding the conflicting complicity of the logic of forgetting and the logic of remembering. Together, they operate according to the formula of “neither with you nor without you.” And despite their mutual bitterness, forgetting is just as indispensable to memory as memory is to forgetting.

1. Guests of Life

A premise: We are guests of life. We arrive without wanting to, in a specific time and place. Beyond our will and our consciousness, bodily functions are carried out that keep us alive: our blood circulates, our lungs inflate with air and deflate, millions of white blood cells sacrifice themselves for us when we have a minor infection (there should be a monument to the Unknown White Blood Cell). This happens not only with physiological functions, but with psychic ones as well – just think of dreaming or imagination. In dreams, we are at once director, theater and spectator. We cannot decide, as we do when we go to the movies, which dream we want to stage this evening. Moreover, we are, at the same time, the subjects of the dream and the objects of something that, within us, is foreign to our consciousness and our will.

The fact that we depend on unconscious powers or those greater than ourselves, operating without our consent and marking our destiny, does not
mean that they possess us completely or that we must surrender ourselves to them. Modernity is marked, above all, by the desire of human consciousness to be the center of attention, by its ability to plan, by its identity. At birth, each of us begins a new story, at the center of which we inevitably place ourselves. To situate ourselves in reality and to orient ourselves, we must retrace—in inevitable stages—stretches of the path traveled by our civilization. And so we master the language and the rules of living together; we become shaped by political and religious institutions; we seek to make sense of events in which our familial, work, social and political life is involved. We focus on the ideas that cross our minds; we shape the passions that permeate us; we devise and manage our own plans for life.

2. Personal Identity

Personal identity (a term coined by the philosopher John Locke in 1694) is heir to and surrogate for the Christian idea of the individual soul, indivisible and immortal, when its existence is no longer regarded as rationally demonstrable, but is acceptable only through faith. Personal identity develops over time, like a stream of consciousness whose continuity is guaranteed (with respect to the past) by memory and (with respect to the future) by concern, care, worry or planning. Once the substantiality of the soul is obscured or denied—on a theoretical level—the stable foundation of the ego, the unity of its streams of consciousness that should have extended themselves beyond the barriers of death, seem to fail. Separated from the prospect of the eternal, the individual finds himself progressively immersed in an irredeemable time of frailty.\(^1\) The reduction of conscious life to transient grains on the Shakespearean “bank and shoal of time,” with the consequent contraction of expectations of purely physical existence, reveals to us our own intrinsic fragility, our exposure to the ever-present danger of disintegration and the forgetting of self. This is a result that we try to avoid by attributing, to memory, the vicarious function of witnessing our unrepeatable journey in the world and by attributing, to man-made history, the redeeming mission of sensibly interweaving our actions with those of others.

I will address the topic of the relationship between memory and the construction of personality by describing some of the means through which collective memory—and individual memory as well—comes to be reformulated after the occurrence of traumatic events or, in any case, of elements of discontinuity in the history of peoples and of individuals.

3. A Game between Memory and Forgetting

I would like to propose a kind of rapid chess game between memory and forgetting, conducted in seven theoretical moves.

Let us begin with an observation. In the face of sudden and unexpected changes, in the face of collapsing regimes or vanishing ways of life, we are often amazed by the great number of men and women, intimately linked to these changes, who forget a substantial part of their history and modify the meaning of their pasts.

Of course, our memories are naturally exposed to dissolution and mutilation, and no form of identity can be preserved indefinitely through time without being transformed. These phenomena – too vast to be accidental, yet too widespread to be merely the result of individual bad faith – can cause us to experience that feeling of melancholy that arises when we contemplate the ruins of others’ memories and affections, or the heap of repudiated symbols that are left to bear witness to bygone lives, faiths and situations. We must ask: in the long course of human events, how many ideologies and beliefs have been erased; how many cities and languages have vanished, how many populations have been exterminated? How many existences have passed away, leaving behind only faded and indecipherable traces – or even no trace at all?

With the disintegration of the patrimony of memories inherited by exponents of vanquished cultures or obsolete mentalities (from the Last of the Mohicans to the belated defenders of the Ptolemaic doctrines), entire worlds are at risk of becoming extinguished or unintelligible, fragmentary.

4. Why Do Individuals Remember?

We thus return to our original question: why do individuals and communities suddenly renounce or forget their own pasts? In order to answer in an articulate manner, we must now begin our chess game.

The first move consists of inverting the question itself, asking not so much why individuals forget, as why they remember. My hypothesis is that – after any change that exceeds the normal threshold of tolerance inherent in a system – forgetfulness is not uniquely ascribable (in the negative sense) to hypocrisy, chameleon-like opportunism, and the desire to forget highly unpleasant experiences. This is not meant at all to exclude either the existence of men who are “good for all seasons,” nor the more-or-less conscious presence in all individuals of a propensity to adapt reality ad hoc to their desires.

Forgetfulness does not only represent a form of damnatio memoriae and amnesia-amnesty toward the past. It does not consist of an effective or sym-
bolistic “erasure” of names, dates or circumstances – as was practiced with ancient Roman epigraphs – or of a simple deprivation of memories. It also depends (in the positive sense) on the collapse of those energies that (actively) mold and promote historical memory and the sense of belonging to a community, and that (passively) maintain and preserve them.

Forgetfulness involves collective institutions, customs, festivities and shocks – not to mention the capillary and almost invisible forms of indoctrination and imposition of scales of values. Within these systems, individual experience is publicly calibrated in accord with the “monumental time” of commemoration, the solemn ceremonies of communal remembrance.

The existence of individuals is also articulated to the beat of “historical” rhythms and “watershed” events shared by relatively vast generational communities (i.e. the Kennedy assassination, “Black September,” the Fall of the Berlin Wall, September 11, 2001).

Forgetting is produced by the disappearance or retreat of forces that sustain, legitimize and transumi our shared memories and beliefs. Thus, at first glance, it seems to be a disturbance, confusion or loss of an official and public memory. In the final view, it is a factor in the production of meaning. To paraphrase Michelangelo, forgetting, as with statues, sculpts events by a process of “removal.”

We can compare collective memory to an old-fashioned steam engine, which only functions if you shovel coal into the boiler; in other words, if you do not continually feed memory, it fades. From this perspective, oblivion is either a temporary or permanent undernourishing of memory.

When traditions are interrupted or altered, even their most solid and consistent criteria of selection falter and collapse. But, if it is true that no one is able to live in a completely senseless reality, then, when only scattered fragments of the recent past remain, identity tends to renew itself by recomposing those fragments into fanciful figures or myths. Unfortunately, disinfecting the past of all its ghosts is an unattainable goal.

5. Mutability of the Past

The second move implies a double paradox: the recognition not only of the possibility of recovering the past, but also its effective mutability. This apparent anomaly can be explained in two ways.

Augustine, for instance, compared memory to love and forgiveness, as opposed to the Old Testament’s law of retaliation: “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.” Memory as love – without forgetting past events – cuts off the never-ending cycle of resentment and addiction to an unchangeable past. It
breaks this “double bind,” and re-writes the past with a single stroke, modifying its weight. If we can defuse the explosive charge of the past and distribute its potential energy into the interests of the living present – if, indeed, the individual ceases to be haunted by his or her own memory – then we can say we have redeemed the past.

The other kind of explanation is based on the following premise: We must admit that all events that are dense with meaning (be they traumatic or joyous) do not deliver this meaning all at once or only once, but continue to release it gradually over a long period, often in interminable processes. That is to say, experiences exist that cannot be reduced to the first interpretation given to them “in the heat of the moment,” precisely because they contain an excess – and not a deficit – of meaning.

6. Reformulation of the Past

Let us try to take the next step. An building on to the previous perspective, the third move invites us to consider the fact that it is not so much the exactitude of past events that is put into question, as much as their meaning and the possibility of its reformulation. In fact, memory and forgetting do not represent neutral territories, but true battlefields in which identity – especially collective identity – is decided, molded, and legitimized. Through a series of struggles, adversaries appropriate their share of symbolic inheritances; they ostracize or emphasize certain characteristics at the expense of others, composing a “chiaroscuro” that is relatively well suited to the most pressing needs of the moment.

Let us consider the simplest example. After every war, the past is transcribed and transfigured by the winners in a very different manner from that of the losers. Even this case is not without its symmetrical complicities – for instance, the complementary annulment of traumatic memories and related feelings of guilt, or the attribution of divergent criteria of relevance to accomplished actions. Thus, Americans commemorate December 7, 1941, the date of the attack on Pearl Harbor, as the “day that will live in infamy,” while ignoring or remembering only with much reluctance August 6, 1945, the date when the first atomic bomb was released over Hiroshima.

Moreover, every victorious power or faith has always organized a kind of “vertical forgetting” in the sense of superimposing itself literally on old beliefs, precisely in the places where these traditionally held their celebrations. Thus, the early Christians systematically constructed their churches on the ruins of pagan temples and the Spanish missionaries raised their shrines on the summits of Aztec pyramids.
One other form of vertical forgetting depends on disregarding reality and superposing prejudices that project an imaginary superiority over perception and rational inquiry. For example, in 1538 Mexico City was celebrating the peace in distant Europe between Charles V and Francis I. The chronicler Bernal Díaz del Castillo recounts that for the occasion, in the square where the Templo Mayor stood, and where, at its side, the Cathedral was being erected, an odd spectacle was staged. Thousands of trees were brought in to simulate a forest, which was then filled with hairy savages. This place was intended to represent the new kingdom conquered by Spain only fifteen years earlier. What is both striking and astounding is the following double incongruity: that one could imagine a forest in the metropolis, which was surrounded, according to reports by Cortez, by forty towers fifty meters high, i.e. higher than the Cathedral of Seville’s bell tower; that men with bodies of smooth hairless skin could be represented as covered in fur. How is it possible that reality was altered to the point of negating the evidence of the senses? Why is it, not only in the first case but also in the second, that old models and tell-tale prejudices were projected upon a new experience of alterity, not only endowing the conquerors with the monopoly of civilization, but representing savages according to the iconography of Saint Onuphrius [Saint Humphrey], the anchorite who let his hair grow while living in the desert?

Falsification of the past was tested on a grand scale by the totalitarian regimes of the last century, according to the formula made famous in Orwell’s 1984: “whoever controls the past, controls the present and future as well.” Among the most demanding tasks of the “Ministry of Truth” was in fact the incessant, propagandistic erasure and reconstruction of the past according to the will of Big Brother. Under the threat of terrible sanctions that are completely internalized by the majority, citizens are induced to forget the “reality” of the event and satisfy themselves with a short and hetero-directed memory. They convince themselves in the end that the final “truth” proclaimed by the authorities is absolutely identical to its opposite, which is tacitly declared to be nothing.

These phenomena appear to be both perverse and anachronistic. But can we, inhabitants of current democratic regimes, ensure our exemption from similar forms of complacent forgetting? Posing the problem in a more radical way, if we lack an endless selection of forms and contents worthy of focused

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Memory or vague forgetting, do personal or historical experiences exist that are capable of structuring themselves according to intelligible (or at least sensible and plausible) series of events?

It is not difficult to predict the alarmed reaction to the doubts I have just sketched. One could object that, by imposing the question in this way, by making the boundary between objective reconstruction and transfiguration of the past less distinct, I run the risk of approving any and all manipulations. Still, the decisive point consists precisely in avoiding the formation of a monopoly or oligopoly of memory and forgetting. To this end, we may also benefit from all the critical tools that have been elaborated over the course of millennia (from history to philology to public speaking) as an antidote to the authorized interpretations of events by official administrators of political or religious power. I should add that defense of the memory’s preciseness also has an ethical dimension, that of protecting a more conscious – and therefore, more free – individual and communal identity.

The victors take possession even of the dead. Those who were once maligned are now honored; those who were previously exalted are now cast aside. In a different context – that of safeguarding the past from the victors’ assault – Walter Benjamin was partially correct when he asserted in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* that “only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.”

7. The Past that Does Not Pass

Unfortunately, the “spark of hope” is not always that “messianic” one of the redemption of “all humanity.” Because of the plurality of adversaries and their objectives, forms of “disputed memory” can emerge in populations that maintain a still unresolved relationship with their past (we now perform the fourth move). However, situations of a contrasting nature also exist in which some conflicting elements of historical memory reappear, including memories that are less ambiguous or less contested in relation to the dead.

This occurs thanks to the past which, paradoxically, does not pass, thereby allowing an identity in the process of reformulation to be reintegrated into a

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latent continuity of memories with which, in certain circumstances, we may more strongly emphasize one aspect at the expense of another. This past can certainly be dismissed and obfuscated in large part. Nonetheless, it is regenerated through the “re-linking” of its residual traces, chemically recombining them according to rediscovered elective affinities, in figures that resemble (or that are believed to resemble) lost images. A nation or group thus appears capable of reawakening its own identity, even after a long interruption of oppression and of enemy attempts to erase, manipulate, falsify, and take command of its identity.

Some memories are preserved for a longer time, due to the resistance of a determined group of people against inclusion within another social system or another state. These factors in the production of identity often can only be compressed up to a certain point. When this point is reached (as B. Baczko has suggested about Poland in the post-communist era), they “explode.”

Still, from another perspective, once minorities have secured the rights to be protected and to develop, or re-establish, their own quarantined identity in an autonomous manner, the desire to turn back, to return to “roots,” to assume the stance of so-called “nativism,” almost inevitably implies calcification of the last traces of an archaic (or archaically immagine) tradition that, for many, has taken on an almost exclusively folkloristic value. The populations in question artificially revive these traces, and they either fall into the trap of nostalgia or welcome and glorify, as signs of authenticity, those deformed traditions inscribed by centuries of external and internal oppression.

8. The Past Does Not Flow Entirely into the Present

All these themes would appear more intelligible if we ceased to imagine that the past, deriving from infinite streams, flows entirely into the present, as if into the bed of a single river, directed toward the mouth of an estuary. On the contrary, we should decisively reject the idea that the past flows together as one body into the present (and this is precisely the fifth move). Staying for the moment with this analogy, it would be more useful to conceive of the present as a fluvial domain with very few tributaries, one that proceeds toward tortuous delta lands, where some branches turn out to be blocked by sand.

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No matter how complex or strange this hydrographic and orographic system might appear, one should not imagine that it is accidental. Of course, it does not derive from a single, linear cause that instantly unburdens its effects, but it is undoubtedly the result of a multiple, prolonged and discontinuous series of concomitant causes that are, in principle, re-constructible and intelligible.

Aside from metaphor, it now follows, first, that not all of the meaningful past is contained in the domain of the present — in other words, the present cannot be reduced to presence or actuality. Rather, it contains a great deal of latent or lost matter waiting for future selection and retrieval. Second, forms and contents dispersed in the past can grow back from seeds as tiny and overlooked as, in the language of the Gospels, a “mustard seed.” Third, the perception of new tasks introduces, between the recent past and the present, a gap in which we seek a kinship that is more distant and, therefore, less compromised. Thus, it happens that the broken threads are tied together again, often much too quickly. But it is precisely the deepest lacerations that should not be repaired in a hurry. Each hurried reconciliation risks becoming false and harmful over the long term, even for those who benefit from it at first. As Hegel suggested in his \textit{Jena Aphorisms}, “a darned sock is better than a torn sock, but this does not hold true for self-awareness.”

We are particularly made aware of the urgency of altering the past when the previous situation obviously collapses. At this point, we are forced to redraw our own mental and affective maps in order to venture onto new paths through territories unknown.

\textit{9. Transfiguration of the Past}

The sixth move establishes that the transfiguration of the past occurs not only through intellectual means, but also by way of the emotions. Schemes of reality and conceptual crystals are molded and solidified with a mortar of the imaginary and of desire.

Indeed, the process of fixing the shapes and places of memory and forgetting has an undeniably emotional and passionate tone (just as, symmetrically, emotions and passions can be remembered or forgotten, and can be tenuous or volatile). Once we have acknowledged the inseparability of symbolic elements and affective tensions, it becomes clearer why we forget and remember in such a rush. We are inspired both by the iconoclastic will to destroy internal and external images in which we no longer recognize ourselves, and by the frenzy

of reminiscence, the need to accumulate memories and stories. This interdependence of knowledge and affection helps us further understand how it is possible that, precisely in times of emergency, the structures of memory and forgetting can appear so provisional and fragile, seeming to pop up and sink so rapidly from the horizon of collective visibility. If we do not sift carefully through dates and procedures, if we do not re-establish our distance from the immediate facts, if we do not maintain a vigilant moral conscience, truth and legend begin to enter in the same process of decomposition and re-signification of the past that occurs in the grip of a blind and tyrannical present.

10. The Logic of Forgetting and the Logic of Remembering

The seventh and final move consists of understanding the conflicting complicity of a logic of forgetting and a logic of remembering. Together, they operate according to the formula of “neither with you nor without you.” And despite their mutual bitterness, forgetting is just as indispensable to memory as memory is to forgetting. In fact, the latter does not correspond merely to the emptiness which, in a mental universe of the Lucretian variety, would simply allow the atoms of memory to move and gather together freely. In its own way, even forgetting has substance and solidity; it is “full.”

Forgetting does not constitute a drama any more than is necessary. It does not always imply a melancholic state of mind. It does not, in itself, threaten deadly and irreparable loss. In this sense, we can appreciate the position of Nietzsche, who wrote, in On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life, while attacking both the Platonic theory of anamnesis (in which “knowing is remembering”) and modern historicism: “it is absolutely impossible to live without forgetting.” Further, this thesis does not imply the absolute domination of oblivion, since the optimal equilibrium depends “on one’s being able to forget at the right time as well as to remember at the right time; on discerning with strong instinctual feelings when there is need to experience historically and when unhistorically.” Again in reference to Nietzsche, but now the Nietzsche of the Genealogy of Morals, it appears quite probable that all ethical obligations have their remote origins in corporal punishments that have been forgotten and internalized, in the same way that repeatedly chopping off the hands of thieves would work to generate moral awareness of the commandment “thou shalt not steal” (which impresses the mark of conflict on us in the

form of an erased memory of a ban which now manifests itself in the nearly inexplicable anxiety that accompanies its violation).

Nonetheless, we must keep ourselves from exaggerating the role of forgetting and overstepping the mark in our legitimate defense against extremists of memory. To desire, as Nietzsche himself proposes, that man should be similar to the animal that lives “pegged to the moment” or to sustain, as Pessoa does in one of the first verses of Fausto, that “all that we have is forgetting” seem to be examples of polemical over-persuasion or poetic license. If the terrain of memory and forgetting constitutes, in effect, the field of an endless battle, then remembering – even if never completely safe – will fight tenaciously in order not to be defeated eternally (and vice versa).

11. The Memory of Emigrants

Now that I have gone through the seven proposed moves, there is nothing left but for me to respond briefly to the initial question, as it has been transformed in the course of the investigation. The past is thus forgotten and modified in accordance with: a) the failure of the institutional buttresses and “social frames of memory” that had supported it; b) the presence of an infinitely pliable past which does not pass; c) the selection performed on it to accommodate a present that can never entirely contain it; d) the emotional (and not only cognitive) investment continually performed on it; e) its nature as a contested terrain; f) its being (nevertheless, also and simultaneously) a place of paradoxical alliances between remembering and forgetting.

After every fracture within experience, one presumes to start over anew – searching (depending on the means at one’s disposal) for means of passage: temporary gangways or solid bridges that will link the two banks of the Old and New in the quickest and safest manner at the time.

The phenomenon is easily observable in the case of colonizers and emigrants. These groups of people baptize regions and countries that were previously unknown to them, with the reassuring names of their native lands: Nouvelle France, Nueva España, New York, Rome in Australia, Toledo in Latin America, Naples, Florida and (of course) Paris, Texas. In truth, these settlers were well aware of the difference between the old and the new, of the fact that the transplantation of civilizations (of individuals, animals, plants, ideas, faiths and habits) would give rise to unpredictable hybridization. But even the tenuous link instituted by the name renders more acceptable both the separation from the homeland and the adaptation to an unknown reality.

We are not all emigrants in geographic space, but we are all emigrants in time. We move from the known present toward a common unknown future. Every instant serves as a bridge and, at the same time, as a break with respect to what comes next. We need memory of the past as experience as well as the attention of a present aimed at simulating what is yet to come. But we also have an indestructible need to forget that allows us to think and to imagine the new and the possible.

It is in the contradictory and divided will to remember without discontinuities and to forget a past that is already lost, in the incessantly reproduced tension between continuity and discontinuity that the nucleus of the question lies hidden.

Remo Bodei
University of California, Los Angeles
bodei@humnet.ucla.edu