

# Cultural memory and paradigms in the study of the past: philosophy, history, cultural studies

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**Abstract.** The study deals with the fundamental differences in understanding the past in the philosophy of history, in classical historical science, as well as in memory studies. The authors represent the features of the formation of a non-classical methodological paradigm in the interpretation of history by A. Warburg, in the German “historical school”, in the neo-Kantians of the Baden school and in the Annals school. The non-classical methodology in the study of the past is presented in the reversion from conscious personal choice to the mechanisms of the unconscious rallying of the collective in the concepts of cultural memory by M. Halbwachs and J. Assmann. The peculiarity of “mentality”, “identity” and “cultural memory” as concepts of modern non-classical discourse is revealed. It is concluded that the construction of mythological images of the past is a novation of the era of “managed democracy”, which carries elements of authoritarianism. The past, as demonstrated by memory studies, has once again become a myth that the media make good use of.

## 1 Introduction

Scientific analysis of memory as an individual ability is associated with the name of a German scientist of the second half of the 19th century Hermann Ebbinghaus, who in his work “Memory” presented the results of its experimental research as an object of psychological science. We are accustomed to the fact that the historical science, which has its own history and methodology, represents the collective memory of the past from an objectively scientific point of view. Reflection of the logic of development and methods of historical knowledge is a separate topic and the problem of the social sciences.

But in the twentieth century historical science was challenged. Historical science was opposed to the field of knowledge under the general name of “memory research” (memory research, memory studies). Moreover, these studies were gaining popularity in the 80 – 90s of the last century alongside with the postmodern themes in art and philosophy. Thus, in the study of the past there was a change in the methodological paradigm. This determines the relevance of the analysis of the uniqueness of the methodology of memory studies, and its prerequisites in the intellectual history of the 19–20th centuries. Equally relevant is the question of the shifts in cultural life that have determined the birth of this new field of knowledge, which contributes to new political technologies in a “controlled democracy”.

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As for the studies on cultural memory, this issue was entering the field of historical knowledge gradually, bringing new approaches and methodology to the analysis of the past.

## **2 Historical science in the framework of the classical methodological paradigm**

Historical knowledge essentially begins with historiography, where the Roman historians such as Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, Polybius, Livius, and Tacitus typically practice the description of events, facts and artifacts of the past with elements of geography and ethnography. However the interest in chronology in historical research appears much later. History as a science discovers the internal connection of facts, or their objective regularity.

Contrary to ordinary ideas about the past, historical science does not just recreate, but also understands the logic of what is happening individually or collectively. But there is a fundamental difference between history as a science and philosophy of history, which is commonly believed to be most clearly represented by G.W.F. Hegel [1]. Historiography and philosophy of history appear as extremes of empiricism and metaphysics, that historical research falls into, when empiricism opposes theory.

In the philosophy of history, while maintaining interest in the reliability of the facts, historical analysis can be directly subordinated to the moral principle. In this vein, we need to understand the words of the English enlightener Lord Henry Bolingbroke in *Letters on the Study and Benefits of History*, where he reproduces the thought of Dionysius of Halicarnassus in his own way: “History is a philosophy that teaches, through examples, how to behave in all circumstances of private and public life” [2].

Lord Henry Bolingbroke appreciated the truth of the facts. But reliable facts here prove to be an illustration of moral principles; therefore the logic of history is not reconstructed, but is initially given and essentially precedes the actual scientific analysis.

But already in the 19th century there were attempts to disengage from objective scientific knowledge about history. As a trend, this is already present in the German “historical school”, to which, first of all, L. von Ranke, A. Müller, W. von Humboldt, J. Grimm, J.G. Droysen refer. Indeed, L. von Ranke draws attention to the selfhood of an epoch, when it “should be viewed as something that is valuable in itself, and is highly worthy of consideration [3].

W.F.J. Schelling with his intuitive perception of a genius in the life of the spirit and historical background is sometimes referred to the German “historical school”. The idea of the dubious nature of the unambiguous reconstruction of history and the advantages of understanding as a methodology of historical knowledge, which is preceded by the hermeneutics of W. Dilthey, is explicitly presented in the “historical school”.

Nevertheless, at this stage in the study of history, the irrational “insight into the world” and direct understanding are not opposed to its rational knowledge, which means that the particular has not become the antithesis of the universal. Using the example of the neo-Kantians of the Baden school, where Kantianism turned into a “philosophy of culture”, we see that the universal still continues to balance the unique, since unique cultural artifacts mean something only in the light of the transcendental “kingdom of universal significance” or “reasonable values” in terminology of W. Windelband [4].

## **3 Iconography of A. Warburg and the Annals school: at the approaches to memory studies**

In the wake of a protest against the ideology of “modernity” with its cult of social progress, a “memorial boom” of the twentieth century arose. Various terms, such as “collective

memory”, “social memory”, “cultural memory”, “popular memory”, “public memory”, have been proposed to define this kind of research. Terminological diversity in this case indicates the breadth of interpretation and even ambiguity of this phenomenon. H.L. Rudeger and J. Wertsch write about this:

We believe that memory studies are too vast a field for any comprehensive theories to bring it to unity and try to explain all the vast number of phenomena of interest [5].

At the end of the 20th century memory studies became multidisciplinary knowledge, combining the efforts of not only historians and social (cultural) anthropologists, but also sociologists, psychologists, art historians, religious scholars, and even specialists in the field of mass communication theory. And in the most general form, cultural studies can be considered the formal framework of all this diversity.

When talking about the prerequisites of this direction, it is important to note a shift in emphasis from objective processes to the study of collective forms of consciousness. And among them the choice is made not in favor of a rational picture of the world in science, but in favor of irrational-symbolic forms from areas adjacent to art, as is the case with Aby Warburg. In this case at the turn of the 19–20th centuries German art historian Aby Warburg interpreted art precisely as “pictorial symbols” of culture. The same as with his younger contemporary O. Spengler, the content of symbols in Warburg is something like the collective soul of culture, which is able to manifest itself through them as a past, already presented today. The collection of such cross-cutting images of cultural memory Aby Warburg presented in his atlas “Mnemosyne”. The basis of his concept, as the researchers note, was the concepts of “culture”, “memory” and “symbolic form”, and therefore, Warburg proposed to expand the scope of art studies to *Kulturwissenschaft* – the science of culture [6].

In the light of the iconography of Warburg, it is already clear that the attitude to the past in this field of knowledge is presented not as its study, but as its interpretation. The peculiarities of what is called the “epistemological turn” of the twentieth century in historical science cannot be understood without the Annals school. It was on the basis of medieval studies in the Annals school that an attempt was made to create a “new historical science”, for which the so called “history-narration” was unacceptable. Thus, a historian no longer explored society in its socio-economic development, as it was in Marxist historical science, which was consciously avoided by the representatives of the Annals school. History, according to M. Bloch’s work “Man in Time”, is not an objective process, but a person himself, and therefore a historical event is viewed not “from the outside”, but “from the inside”. Highlighting the theme of historical time, Bloch gives the following definition: “The time of history is plasma, in which phenomena float; it is like an environment where they can be understood” [7].

The principle of distinction in the flow of historical time is more significant for Bloch than the general logic of events. But L. Febvre stated his opinion of this more definitely, suggesting that “our history is idealistic ... since economic facts, as well as all other social phenomena, arise from faith and beliefs” [8].

The question is about the same interdisciplinary synthesis of material evidence, texts, linguistic features and geographical information as “traces of the past”, that help to comprehend, through their unique connection, the mentality which integrates all aspects of social life. The French word *mentalité* means “mentality”, “mindset”, “collective beliefs”, “idiosyncrasy”. At the same time, J. Le Goff believed that “mentality” refers to the sphere of “implicit” and “diffusive” [9]. In the studies of M. Bloch the primary focus is on the “psychology of evidence”, which allows, through the reconstruction of the plan, to recreate the way of thinking and the life of the witness himself. The problem of scientific truth in this case is replaced by questions about subjective illusions, delusions and deliberate concealment of the truth by participants in past events. It is precisely in this context that the

ideas about historical memory in the Annals school were formed, where “mentality” is no longer a classical scientific concept, but a concept of non-classical theorizing on the basis of knowledge about history and culture.

Subsequently, the problem of mentality within the framework of historical science gained independence, which did not change its essence. Thus, G. Duby, an expert in the theory of mentalities, openly declared that he was “convinced of the unconditional subjectivity of historical research”, which he either invented, or not [10].

This is the way to blur the boundaries between scientific and non-scientific knowledge, when every historian has their own idea of the past.

## **4 Memory studies and features of the non-classical methodological paradigm**

The immediate creator of the concept of cultural memory is considered to be the Frenchman Maurice Halbwachs, who, among other things, introduced the specific concept of “identity”. His view that each group forms the memory of its past, which justifies its unique identity, continues to be the starting point for all research in this area.

The concepts of “mentality and” identity “, in our opinion, reveal the peculiarity of memory studies in the framework of cultural studies and the paradigmatic shift that occurred in knowledge of the past in the twentieth century. This explains why the idea of identity in modern science originates from the study of the consciousness of the patriarchal collective. Identification in this case becomes self-identification with the collective in a spontaneously direct form. As contrasted with the representatives of German classical philosophy, whose act of rational self-consciousness is the basis of the universe, modern ideas about identity are a return to what seemed to be left in the distant past. Through a sense of collective involvement we return from conscious personal choice to the mechanisms of unconscious rallying. As M. Halbwachs and J. Assmann show, they are modified at the level of religious consciousness. And in modern society an irrationally organized cultural memory comes to the fore. First and foremost, it is due to the fact that an irrational collective identity, unlike individual self-consciousness, is an effective form of manipulation. The mechanisms of the formation of the “mythology from above” are innovation of the era of managed democracy.

The past, as shown by memory studies, has once again become a myth that the media take advantage of. It is they who, in terms of political factors, strive to interpret and “reinterpret” images of the past not to clarify the truth, but to bolster their efforts in handling people. The images of cultural memory in this context are the core of collective identity at the level of feelings, mood, experiences and other display of mentality. And with this understanding of cultural memory, identity and mentality, history can no longer be an objective science.

## **5 Conclusion**

The “memorial boom” of the twentieth century resulted in memory studies as knowledge of the past, which made no pretense to understand the objective logic of history. The development of this field took place at a time of methodological shifts in science and culture on the way from the classical to the non-classical paradigm. Knowledge of the past in memory studies does not imply its allness and veracity. We are referring to the “images of the past”, in the reconstruction of which the emphasis is laid on subjective evidence, unique details and features, allowing not so much to understand as to “re-live” the past cultural reality. Typical ideas about “identity” and “mentality”, along with “cultural

memory”, are no longer scientific concepts, but act as non-classical concepts. At the same time, the above-mentioned mechanisms of forming “images of the past” are embedded in the practice of modern “managed democracy”, where irrational forms of collective consciousness turn out to be the flip side of new forms of authoritarianism.

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