

## Preface

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During the last 15-20 years the question of memory has got a prominent place on the agenda of the social sciences and humanities. One might even say that the period since the 1970s has seen a growing interest in the issue of collective memory. The 1970s was a period of great confusion and disorientation in the Western nation states. The expectations invested in them as managers of the economies and providers of welfare evaporated in the 1970s with the breakdown of the international order established after 1945 (the dollar collapse, the oil price shock and the recurrence of mass unemployment, for instance). These expectations had been built up in a remarkably short time after the Second World War, where the bonanza years of the 1950s and the 1960s were seen as the standard with promises of an ever better future. From the 1970s onwards, the answer to the question of who we are was no longer as self-evident as it had been during the brief period of belief in security and progress.

The concept of identity became a key concept in academic reflection and political debate, although the term had not played a major role until then. It was a concept used in ancient Greek philosophy and mathematics and did hardly play any role outside this field. In the 1880s the concept was incorporated in psychoanalytical theory. However, it remained a term in a rather restricted sphere until the 1970s. In 1973 the European Council decided to establish a European identity and from the 1980s followed what can be described as an academic obsession with the term.

The language of identity was soon connected to an emerging memory discourse. Maurice Halbwachs' concept of collective memory from the 1920s was revitalised and supported the identity discourse. Although Halbwachs was clear about the ideological dimension of the term collective memory, the concept soon took on essential characteristics. Collective memory became a property which a group of human beings had or owned and shared. Images of collective identity and collective memory reinforced each other in this process of essentialisation.

During recent years steps have been taken in the academic self-reflection to prevent such essentialisation. The constructed as well as the contentious dimension when we remember the past has been emphasised. Remembrance is a discourse on the past.

In this emerging 'softer' conceptualisation, collective memory has been replaced by terms like remembrance and commemoration. Instead of collective memory as a fixed category, there is talk about public remembrance, public commemoration, and the politics and practices of remembrance and commemoration. The images of the past are in no sense shared in a unified way but they emerge rather through social bargaining and contention, and social work on coming to terms with the past. They are seen as preliminary and open to future revision.

The growing interest in how to remember the past since the 1970s accelerated in the 1990s with the end of the Cold War. The need for new interpretative frameworks was obvious after the loss of the clear panorama established in 1945, where black and white, evil and good were sharp and relatively uncontested categories. The heroes of the Second World War were seen in less heroic terms and the boundaries in time – 1945 as a zero hour – and space – East and West – became more problematic to maintain. Also what we forget and repress in a Freudian sense attracted increasing attention. The developments in the Balkan emphasised in new forms socio-psychological concepts like trauma and *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, coming to terms with the past.

This book is a reflection of this development towards a more complex understanding of memory in its usage as a social category. I like very much the variety of topics which all contribute to new understandings of how the processes of remembrance and commemoration work in politics and practices. British remembrance and commemoration of the Great War, the Hungarian memories of the humiliating peace after that war and their connections to the later experiences of Holocaust, the Finnish remembrance of the wars 1939-44, Irish nationalism through memory construction and Swedish politics and ethics of remembrance of the Second World War are among the contributions that provide the richness of this volume. The focus is not only on the politics and practices of commemoration and remembrance, public forgetting and oblivion, but also – with reference to Avishai Margalit – on the *ethics* of remembrance and – with reference to Paul Ricoeur – on the ethics of *forgiving and forgetting*. The contributions of this volume demonstrate that the research front has moved during recent years from earlier iconographic points of reference such as Maurice Halbwachs' collective memory and Pierre Nora's *lieux de mémoire* to more fluid, discursive and contextual conceptualisations of the past.