

Are museums sites of memory?

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The aim of this paper is to explore the museum as possible *lieu de mémoire* (or site/realm of memory) as articulated in the writings of French historian, Pierre Nora (1989, 1996). My effort lies in how to debate, from a theoretical perspective, issues on history, past, memory and their ongoing construction in cultural institutions. In order to do this I will briefly account for the creation and transformation of the modern museum, then I will concisely discuss the exhibition *New York Divided: Slavery and the Civil War* as an attempt to illustrate with concrete examples the main exploration of this paper. The exhibitions and displays alluded to in this work are mainly of historical character since the museum as part of a historical process and its connections to past, memory, and present are the central issues addressed here.

I will continue by presenting Nora's conceptual development in relation to sociologist Maurice Halbwachs's theoretical perspectives on collective memory (1980, 1992). By engaging with Nora and Halbwach's writings and discussing other scholars' analysis on the relationship between museums, history, and memory (Crane, 1997; Dubin, 1999; Wagner-Pacifici, 1996), I will conclude that museums can be creative entities that open up the possibility of dialogue between past and present: a meeting point between history and memory.

Museums as exhibiting spaces have gone under qualitative transformations in the past two centuries. One could point to the *cabinets of curiosity*, found in Europe and in America, as predecessor of the modern museum, in which all sorts of objects (from animals to plants, stones and artifacts) were displayed. These 'private museums' were common in the 16th and 17th centuries (Pomian, 1991) and they usually served to illustrate the wealth, education, and social status of the owner, as well as to put together objects that would not be side by side in any other context. The cabinets and their organizations implied ways of understanding the world and categorizing its truths. In a sense, they can be understood as spaces where objects of past and present met without hierarchy.

The modern museum, as a 19th century European creation, was developed in part by the rise of secular states and the expansion of civic entities that in the midst of deep cultural and socio-political transformations helped to generate discourses about history and nationalism. In this sense, museums are *inscribed in* and *inscribers of*

collective and individual memory, identity, and practices. As public sites of culture, museums became first temples and later forums for the essence of nations, in this sense "museums, and the museumizing imagination, are both profoundly political" (Anderson, 1991, p. 178). Which means that, as scholars like Eric Hobsbawm (1983) and Benedict Anderson (1991) have argued, cultural institutions such as museums have played a central role in the construction of a coherent historical national discourse that reinforce a sense of collective identity and social cohesion through common understandings of order, aesthetics, and symbols.

Museums, as social organizations, are not fixed structures but flexible entities capable of adapting to their surrounding context and social needs. Thus, when one encounters a museum (and/or an exhibition) of historical character, one can ask: Does "looking back" at the past inevitably entail a reconstruction of what is considered historically valid in a specific context? In other words, how is the construction or reconstruction of history affected by its social, political, cultural, and institutional context? Is the desire to remember, to bring something to light a part of history, of collective memory, or of the past? If they were sites of curiosities, sites of creating (and recreating) a collective identity through national cultural discourses, are museums sites of memory?

One can think for example about the 2007 exhibition *New York Divided: Slavery and the Civil War* at the New York Historical Society, a follow-up to their 2005 *Slavery in New York*, which presented "not the American history most of us grew up learning,"¹ but a display that re-examines past historical accounts of the same phenomenon and which ultimately questions the character of slavery and race relationships in New York City. It becomes unavoidable to reflect on the powerful relationship between past and present. The exhibition produces a challenge: the history taught in schools that tell the story of an abolitionist north and a pro-slavery south transforms into a mythic construction of the past

¹https://www.nyhistory.org/web/default.php?section=exhibits_collections&page=exhibit_detail&id=7606362

that needs to be re-evaluated.

The documents, photographs, and presentation of the display allude not only to the importance of going back to established institutionalized history but to the need of “facing up” to the blind spots in a national history and its discursive paradigms. By choosing an event and a specific reconstruction of that event, a historical display is what Robin Wagner-Pacifici (1996) would call in “Memories in the making: the shapes of things that went” an embodiment *of* and *in* cultural form, which allows both for the *uncertainty* of the memory and the *provisionality* of the meaning without stripping it from its truthfulness. As meaning and content are shaped by the form of the remembering /accounting, the relevance of a specific event or period and its function as a marker and established discourse signals the importance of the way that event or period is framed in collective memory or historical narrative.

Both the exhibitions and their web pages suggest that by looking at the past a history account that is more appropriate to the present can be constructed. In this sense the museum works as a site to open a conversation about historical truth: the display of information not traditionally associated with the city and its notion of itself.

By putting into question the past actions of the region and its’ population, the exhibition removes a sense of historical certainty about New York’s role in a difficult period of American history and offers an alternative narrative for the emergence of a new collective memory and account of the past. *New York Divided* relies not only on the same historical discourse which is trying to revise but in the past efforts of other scholars to retell the story of slavery and race relations in New York. It also relies on the fact that a collective understanding already exists in order for history (as fact) to be revised.

When one revisits a historical phenomenon as problematic and contentious as slavery², many questions arise: are we revising or revisiting the past? Is there a difference? What is appropriate? Who should be articulating the facts (or new findings)? All these are unavoidable issues that take precedence when referencing the past and that will hardly have a clear and definitive answer. A dialogical relationship between representation and explanation is established: how to narrate a past that can involve pain or resen-

ment, but that can (in part) account for the present condition of a certain population – from marginalized communities to massive patterns of migration.

The setting is complicated when the historical phenomenon is displayed in a cultural institution such as a museum or a gallery instead of in a written text such as a book or an article. The construction of an exhibition in a cultural institution implies, on one hand, the display of objects, from texts to photographs that are able to convey the desired narrative, and on the other hand the necessity of appealing to and engaging specialists and non-specialists alike.

History and Memory: How to revisit the past?

Pierre Nora argues for what he calls *lieux de mémoire*, created because memory is no longer a real part of everyday life; for him a residual sense of continuity remains. These ‘sites’ are “embodiments of a commemorative conscious that survives in a history” (1996, p. 6) where the creation of archives or markers, for example, articulate the past. For Nora, this occurs because history, as organization of the past has substituted the role of memory and its capacity to stop time and be alive. He argues that memory, in opposition to history (which is reconstruction), is in constant evolution, always embodied in living societies and subject to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting. What makes the *lieux de mémoire* is the intent to remember, each one is its own referent (1989). Nora argues that memory is by nature multiple, collective and plural (yet individual), rooted in the concrete (space, images, gestures) and a phenomenon of the present.

I think it is important to point out that when Nora elaborated his concept he was not talking about museums or cultural institutions *per se*; he illustrated his theory through an analysis of the French Revolutionary calendar and the book *Tour de la France par deux enfants*, both instances in the construction of French national culture.

For Nora, as he states in “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*,” modernity has brought about a “conquest and eradication of memory by history” (1989, p. 8). And therefore *history* as process and as representation of that process separates life from *memory* transforming the account of the past into a stagnant one that is marked by the distance and the mediation of that

² One could actually ask: which historical phenomenon does not become contentious with the passing of time?

past (1989). This is why sites of memory are needed and created.

The term *lieux de mémoire* has been critiqued as nostalgic, “underdefined and overworked” (Englund, 1992, p. 304). Nonetheless, and understanding its shortcoming and critiques, I consider this concept useful to think about the differences and connections between history, past, and memory. Nora argues that memory and history should be understood as opposites. On one hand, memory is defined as: alive, absolute, in permanent evolution, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, capable of installing remembrance within the sacred, multiple yet specific, a bond tying us to the eternal present. On the other hand, history is defined as: a representation of the past, an intellectual and secular production, claims universal authority, antithetical to spontaneous memory, belongs to everyone and to no one and binds itself strictly to temporal continuities, to progressions and to relations between things (1989).

These distinctions are helpful as they are deep reflections of how we deal socially with the past. Nora’s preoccupation with the meaning and value of historical knowledge is profound but at the same time taints the concept of *history* with rigidity and maintains a clear-cut separation with the concept of *memory* and how they both relate to the *past*. I think that, although Maurice Halbwachs’ writings are prior to Nora’s, his understanding of collective memory and history can balance Nora’s rigid idea of history.

As pointed out by Lewis Coser (1992) in his introduction to Halbwachs’s *On Collective Memory*, his work was in great part a response to the approach that emphasized memory, and its constitutive elements, as an individual phenomenon inserted in the psychic scheme of mental processes, as described by psychology and Freud.³ He developed a systematized approach to memory as a sociological phenomenon of collective character.

The social character of memory and remembrance was central for Halbwachs’ theoretical proposal. In it he developed different types of memory and remembrance devices, as well as approaching what he considered two main elements

in the understanding of memory: time and space.

Halbwachs, as part of the Durkheimian School of sociology, explored other concepts that were central to the school’s theoretical developments, such as the collective character of representations, collective consciousness, and the importance of each individual incorporating those representations in order to integrate social life. In other words, it is the collective quality that allows each person to identify with the larger social entity. Thus, collective memory bounds individuals to groups and groups to each other.

Groups or collectivities are of various types and sizes, from families to schools, from towns to nations. Belonging to such a group can only happen when memories are shared and established as such; in this sense they are dialogical and discursive, anchored in the collective character that helps us access them. Thus, the past and its account through historical narratives are relevant only as they are able to be shared.

But for Halbwachs (1980), there are different types of memories: childhood memories, adult memories, collective memories, historical memories. They all have temporal and spatial references, contexts that connect us to specific events that we may or may not have experienced, such as the case of autobiographical vs. historical memory (internal or external memory). In every case the individual needs the collectivity to remember by enabling the individual’s recollection and ‘ensuring’ the integrity of the memories.

This contextualization is what Halbwachs calls ‘social frames of memory,’ one can only recall within these social ‘*cadres*’ or structures, mainly because individual memory is fragmentary and can only be ‘completed’ by the script provided by the collectivity one belongs to (i.e. these social frames shape our memory). It is individuals as group members who remember. Since the past is accessed through collective social frames that are part of the present, for Halbwachs, the past and its recollection is reconstructed on the basis of the present with the support of a group delimited in space and time. One could argue that the way in which an exhibition like *New York Divided* is constructed is directly related by the way social changes have affected how race relations, slavery and their place in history are understood. As if *history* (as account) is catching up to *memory* by transforming how and what we remember.

In this sense one can connect Halbwachs’ ideas of collective memory to better understand

³ In this sense Halbwachs was also responding to the philosophical context and Henri Bergson’s notion of time as intuitive and subjective perception. Bergson called this notion “duration” or the intuitive perception of ‘inner-time’ which was a source of knowledge about the self and the world, and could unravel the questions of human existence (Coser, 1992).

Nora's more elusive (and very abstract) notion of memory. For Halbwachs, memories and remembrance are always framed: it is this lack of frame that Nora sees as a problem in modern societies and which produces a need to create sites of memory.

Halbwachs (1980) states in "Historical Memory and Collective Memory:" "By the term 'history' we must understand, then, not a chronological sequence of events and dates, but whatever distinguishes one period from all others, something of which books and narratives generally give us only a very schematic and incomplete picture" (p. 57). Here one can see the similarities with Nora's critical view of history as a stagnant partial representation of the past. One could argue that it is precisely because history as account of the past is schematic and partial that we relate to it through the present and that our understanding of specific phenomena is able to change. For example, one of the arguments that justify the exhibition *New York Divided* is the fact that "[E]xciting new discoveries and new questions asked by recent generations of scholars have upended our understanding of the national past."⁴ In other words, because our recollection of the facts is partial we are able to revisit the past and even reconstruct its narrative.

Nora's concept of the *lieu de mémoire* becomes a unique realm as a site of *in between* where the halt that constitutes history is suspended and allows for animation. In "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," he writes: "It is this very push and pull that produces *lieux de mémoire* – moments of history torn away from the movement of history, then returned; no longer quite life, not yet death, like the shells on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded" (1989, p. 12). But for him one of the central qualities of these sites are what he refers to as the will to remember, where the site is created for and by that will's possibility of becoming a self-referential realm in its desire to exist. It exists because it remembers and forgets itself, because that dialogical relationship between representation and explanation and between memory and history is established.

If what Nora argues about the *lieu de mémoire*, that what constitutes it is the intent to remember is true, where does the intent lie in a social institution like a museum? Is it in the articulation of a past? If one sees how a historical account is questioned with "new" information in an exhibi-

tion like *New York Divided*, it is possible to see how life enters history and creates a site of memory, a space where recollection is allowed movement. But then, is the past constructed in a specific exhibition its own referent? Outside that site (the museum and the academic-scholarly discourse) what does *New York Divided* mean? Approaching a past to which several social groups have a claim create expectations, thus the creation of new meaning and recollection about a past invites an encounter between the different accounts of that past.

Reconciling Nora's and Halbwachs' notions of both *history* and *memory*, it seems that the site of memory described by Nora (1989) as material, symbolic, and functional offers the opportunity to allude to the imagination, the ritual, and the breaking of a temporal continuity. The *lieu de mémoire* as meeting point of history and memory is a new possibility to look at history as it was constructed in the past and can be reconstructed in the present.

Throughout this text I have argued that one can understand museums as potential *lieux de mémoire*. Certainly, the fact that the concept itself is 'unstable' makes my argument somewhat complicated; on one hand, I have been tracing how a specific theoretical development can be as contentious as the phenomenon is trying to account for; on the other hand, I think that understanding museums as potential sites of memory enables us to see how history (as process and narrative) can have a flexible relationship to collective memory that is framed from the present.

The past: Who wants to remember it as it was?

The museum and the exhibition serve as mediating instances between past and present. If the present always "frames" the past (in Halbwachs' sense), it's more than logical that all reconstructions and representations of that past are articulated with the present as constitutive factor. But one cannot (or should not) forget that *history* and *collective memory* sometimes differ. Then I have to ask: is the attempt to recover or rewrite history some sort of conciliatory effort in these types of exhibitions? *Collective memory* and *past* are often "healed" not only by re-examining factors or facts that were once marginalized but also by creating another historical record that repairs the failings of a nation, a state, or a historical period. By dealing with traumas or difficult

⁴<http://nyslavery.somethingdigital.com/AboutExhibit/>

and painful facts, museums open the possibility of different versions of history, as they are often identified with collective memory more than with historical consciousness or the totality of truth. It becomes harder to make an absolute claim. For example, slavery existed and was an intrinsic part of the United State's *history* but what that fact *means* may differ for an African-American community in New York vis-à-vis a white Ku Klux Klan group in the South. How would each group "visit" an exhibition like *New York divided*?

Sociologist Steven Dubin's (1999) work *Displays of Power* explores through several case-studies how by situating historical revisions in the museum context, the past seems to come to life (as memory would for Nora), interrupting the symbolic function of *history* and becoming part of the present. Then, as part of the present another operation occurs, that which, according to Dubin, transforms the museum into a site of contestation where strategies and arguments about what represents a specific institution and how to represent *a past* have become central issues to the struggles that are played out in the specific context.

Are museum exhibits of historical character an attempt to normalize the past, history, or collective memory? What would be the difference? One way of unraveling these questions when this type of exhibition takes place would be to look at how these displays differ from official or more conventional accounts of the same phenomenon. As Steven Dubin (1999) argues, facts can have diverse meanings to different groups, thus they entail action and reaction, articulating how conflicting the relationship is between a society and its *history*. When an exhibition about WW II, the Holocaust, or slavery is put together, is the historical consensus being deconstructed or reconstructed? As *past* and *collective memory* are increasingly used to contest accepted or conventional historical accounts, it seems that exhibition narratives work like story-telling devices, which allow us to see the museum as a medium. The role of the narrative (wall texts, web sites, catalogs) and the object exhibited (airplanes, clothes, photographs) become constitutive of the institution as they are doing the mediating work between history, past, and collective memory.

In the text "Memory, Distortion, and History in the Museum," Diane Crane (1997) writes: "What effect does this distortion [or new historical account] have on the experience of history, of

knowledge about the past in its effect on the present, for the visitor in the museum? At stake is the trustworthiness of the museum as a memory institution" (p. 45). Thus, museums as spaces that undertake the dialogue between explanation and representation are created by the experience the visitor is able to extract and retain.

Crane (1997) argues for what she calls the 'distortion of expectation' that refers to the memory of museum-goers, who not only possess knowledge about what is being displayed but also contain prior museum-based experience that frames *what* to expect when one goes to a specific exhibition. For example, as institutions of education, museums can present information that will introduce or enhance certain areas of knowledge contextualized by the effort of the institution itself.

I think that Crane's argument about the usefulness of actually emphasizing the contradictory processes that create memory instead of focusing on its truthfulness is very acute because it explores the importance of memory's fluidity and its flexible relationship to the past and its accounts.

Memory always implies a selection, part of a narrative that may be discursive or image-based, but how are these selection processes related to 'social frames,' in Halbwachs' sense? One of the interesting contributions that the field of the sociology of memory has made is its study of how acts of remembrance, memorializing and history-making are inserted in intricate (formal and informal) webs of signification that relate power, social institutions, and social groups to specific projects, strategies of memory-making, and the dialectic of remembering-forgetting within specific communities, cultures, and social or institutional contexts. The exploration of how events are shared or articulated through symbolic and literal modes of memory-making or history-making processes, by being contested or accepted, has revealed how the past is utilized for the present and the future.

Realizing the fluid and flexible relationship between past, collective memory, and history is perhaps the most fruitful way to look at the way an exhibition of historical character fully utilizes a museum. Museums have always had a direct relationship with history; they have been at the center of their development, especially in relation to the arts, and they offer the possibility of animating the past. Remembering through a variety of triggers that frame our recollection is the possibility of consent and dissent.

Creating spaces that work as sites or realms of memory is problematic only if the reflection on the meaning of what is displayed ceases to be a practiced. Thus, museums can be understood as a type of social "process" in which the totality of truth only exists in the manner the institution itself allows. When a historical account or an exhibition is contested its sense of total coherence disappears, as alternative voices disrupt that coherence. If there is no disturbance, the narrative will continue, maybe not unchanged but unchallenged. Contestation and alternative ways of remembering infuse motion into history and open up the dialogue between past and memory. A real site of memory exists as a question-creating practice that produces thoughtful reflection and that invites the past into the present and collective memory into history.

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