Translated by: Marc Roudebush

[...]

Memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear now to be in fundamental opposition. Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past. Memory, insofar as it is affective and magical, only accommodates those facts that suit it; it nourishes recollections that maybe out of focus or telescopic, global or detached, particular or symbolic--responsive to each avenue of conveyance or phenomenal screen, to every censorship or projection. History, because it is an intellectual and secular production, calls for analysis and criticism. Memory installs remembrance within the sacred; history, always prosaic, releases it again. Memory is blind to all but the group it binds--which is to say, as Maurice Halbwachs has said, that there are as many memories as there are groups, that memory is by nature multiple and yet specific; collective, plural, and yet individual. History, on the other hand, belongs to everyone and to no one, whence its claim to universal authority. Memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects; history binds itself strictly to temporal continuities, to progressions and to relations between things. Memory is absolute, while history can only conceive the relative.
At the heart of history is a critical discourse that is antithetical to spontaneous memory. History is perpetually suspicious of memory, and its true mission is to suppress and destroy it. At the horizon of historical societies, at the limits of the completely historicized world, there would occur a permanent secularization. History's goal and ambition is not to exalt but to annihilate what has in reality taken place. A generalized critical history would no doubt preserve some museums, some medallions and monuments--that is to say, the materials necessary for its work--but it would empty them of what, to us, would make them lieux de mémoire. In the end, a society living wholly under the sign of history could not, any more than could a traditional society, conceive such sites for anchoring its memory.

[...]

The study of lieux de mémoires, then, lies at the intersection of two developments that in France today give it meaning: one a purely historiographical movement, the reflexive turning of history upon itself, the other a movement that is, properly speaking, historical: the end of a tradition of memory. The moment of lieux de mémoire occurs at the same time that an immense and intimate fund of memory disappears, surviving only as a reconstituted object beneath the gaze of critical history. This period sees, on the one hand, the decisive deepening of historical study and, on the other hand, a heritage consolidated. The critical principle follows an internal dynamic: our intellectual, political, historical frameworks are exhausted but remain powerful enough not to leave us indifferent; whatever vitality they retain impresses us only in their most spectacular symbols. Combined, these two movements send us at once to history's most elementary tools and to the most symbolic objects of our memory: to the archives as well as to the
tricolor; to the libraries, dictionaries, and museums as well as to commemorations, celebrations, the Pantheon, and the Arc de Triomphe; to the *Dictionnaire Larousse* as well as to the Wall of the Federes, where the last defenders of the Paris commune were massacred in 1870.

These *lieux de memoire* are fundamentally remains, the ultimate embodiments of a memorial consciousness that has barely survived in a historical age that calls out for memory because it has abandoned it. They make their appearance by virtue of the deritualization of our world—producing, manifesting, establishing, constructing, decreeing, and maintaining by artifice and by will a society deeply absorbed in its own transformation and renewal, one that inherently values the new over the ancient, the young over the old, the future over the past. Museums, archives, cemeteries, festivals, anniversaries, treaties, depositions, monuments, sanctuaries, fraternal orders—these are the boundary stones of another age, illusions of eternity. It is the nostalgic dimension of these devotional institutions that makes them seem beleaguered and cold—they mark the rituals of a society without ritual; integral particularities in a society that levels particularity; signs of distinction and of group membership in a society that tends to recognize individuals only as identical and equal.

*Lieux de memoire* originate with the sense that there is no spontaneous memory, that we must deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and notarize bills because such activities no longer occur naturally. The defense, by certain minorities, of a privileged memory that has retreated to jealously protected enclaves in this sense intensely illuminates the truth of *lieux de memoire*—that without commemorative vigilance, history would soon sweep them away. We buttress
our identities upon such bastions, but if what they defended were not threatened, there
would be no need to build them. Conversely, if the memories that they enclosed were to
be set free they would be useless; if history did not besiege memory, deforming and
transforming it, penetrating and petrifying it, there would be no lieux de memoire.
Indeed, it is this very push and pull that produces lieux de memoire—moments of history
torn away from the movement of history, then returned; no longer quite life, not yet
death, like shells on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded.

**Memory Seized by History**

What we call memory today is therefore not memory but already history. What we take
to be flare-ups of memory are in fact its final consumption in the flames of history. The
quest for memory is the search for one's history.

Of course, we still cannot do without the word, but we should be aware of the difference
between true memory, which has taken refuge in gestures and habits, in skills passed
down by unspoken traditions, in the body's inherent self-knowledge, in unstudied reflexes
and ingrained memories, and memory transformed by its passage through history, which
is nearly the opposite: voluntary and deliberate, experienced as a duty, no longer
spontaneous; psychological, individual, and subjective; but never social, collective, or all
encompassing. How did we move from the first memory, which is immediate, to the
second, which is indirect? We may approach the question of this contemporary
metamorphosis from the perspective of its outcome.

Modern memory is, above all, archival. It relies entirely on the materiality of the trace,
the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image. What began as writing ends
as high fidelity and tape recording. The less memory is experienced from the inside the more it exists only through its exterior scaffolding and outward signs--hence the obsession with the archive that marks our age, attempting at once the complete conservation of the present as well as the total preservation of the past…

[...] The imperative of our epoch is not only to keep everything, to preserve every indicator of memory--even when we are not sure which memory is being indicated--but also to produce archives. The French Social Security archives are a troubling example: an unparalleled quantity of documents, they represent today three hundred linear kilometers. Ideally, the computerized evaluation of this mass of raw memory would provide a reading of the sum total of the normal and the pathological in society, from diets to lifestyles, by region and by profession; yet even its preservation and plausible implementation call for drastic and impossible choices. Record as much as you can, something will remain. This is, to take another telling example, the conclusion implied by the proliferation of oral histories. There are currently in France more than three hundred teams employed in gathering "the voices that come to us from the past" (Philippe Joutard). But these are not ordinary archives, if we consider that to produce them requires thirty-six hours for each hour of recording time and that they can never be used piecemeal, because they only have meaning when heard in their entirety. Whose will to remember do they ultimately reflect, that of the interviewer or that of the interviewed? No longer living memory's more or less intended remainder, the archive has become the deliberate and calculated secretion of lost memory. It adds to life—itself often a function of its own recording--a secondary memory, a prosthesis-memory. The indiscriminate
production of archives is the acute effect of a new consciousness, the clearest expression of the terrorism of historicized memory.

[...]

Les Lieux de Memoire: Another History

*Lieux de memoire* are simple and ambiguous, natural and artificial, at once immediately available in concrete sensual experience and susceptible to the most abstract elaboration. Indeed, they are *lieux* in three senses of the word—material, symbolic, and functional. Even an apparently purely material site, like an archive, becomes a *lieu de memoire* only if the imagination invests it with a symbolic aura. A purely functional site, like a classroom manual, a testament, or a veterans' reunion belongs to the category only inasmuch as it is also the object of a ritual. And the observance of a commemorative minute of silence, an extreme example of a strictly symbolic action, serves as a concentrated appeal to memory by literally breaking a temporal continuity. Moreover, the three aspects always coexist. Take, for example, the notion of a historical generation: it is material by its demographic content and supposedly functional--since memories are crystallized and transmitted from one generation to the next--but it is also symbolic, since it characterizes, by referring to events or experiences shared by a small minority, a larger group that may not have participated in them.

*Lieux de memoire* are created by a play of memory and history, an interaction of two factors that results in their reciprocal overdetermination. To begin with, there must be a will to remember. If we were to abandon this criterion, we would quickly drift into admitting virtually everything as worthy of remembrance. One is reminded of the
prudent rules of old-fashioned historical criticism, which distinguished between "direct sources," intentionally produced by society with a view to their future reproduction--a law or a work of art, for example--and the indiscriminate mass of "indirect sources," comprising all the testimony an epoch inadvertently leaves to historians. Without the intention to remember, *lieux de memoire* would be indistinguishable from *lieux d'histoire*.

On the other hand, it is clear that without the intervention of history, time, and change, we would content ourselves with simply a schematic outline of the objects of memory. The *lieux* we speak of, then, are mixed, hybrid, mutant, bound intimately with life and death, with time and eternity; enveloped in a Mobius strip of the collective and the individual, the sacred and the profane, the immutable and the mobile. For if we accept that the most fundamental purpose of the *lieu de memoire* is to stop time, to block the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things, to immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial--just as if gold were the only memory of money--all of this in order to capture a maximum of meaning in the fewest of signs, it is also clear that *lieux de memoire* only exist because of their capacity for metamorphosis, an endless recycling of their meaning and an unpredictable proliferation of their ramifications.

Let us take two very different examples. First, the Revolutionary calendar, which was very much a *lieu de memoire* since, as a calendar, it was designed to provide the a priori frame of reference for all possible memory while, as a revolutionary document, through its nomenclature and symbolism, it was supposed to "open a new book to history,” as its principal author ambitiously put it, or to "return Frenchmen entirely to themselves,” according to another of its advocates. The function of the calendar, it was thought, would be to halt history at the hour of the Revolution by indexing future months, days,
centuries, and years to the Revolutionary epic. Yet, to our eyes, what further qualifies the revolutionary calendar as a lieu de memoire is its apparently inevitable failure to have become what its founders hoped. If we still lived today according to its rhythm, it would have become as familiar to us as the Gregorian calendar and would consequently have lost its interest as a lieu de memoire. It would have melted into our memorial landscape, serving only to date every other conceivable memorial site. As it turns out, its failure has not been complete; key dates still emerge from it to which it will always remain attached: Vendemiaire, Thermidor, Brumaire. Just so, the lieu de memoire turns in on itself—an arabesque in the deforming mirror that is its truth.

[...]

It is this principle of double identity that enables us to map, within the indefinite multiplicity of sites, a hierarchy, a set of limits, a repertoire of ranges. This principle is crucial because, if one keeps in mind the broad categories of the genre—anything pertaining to the cult of the dead, anything relating to the patrimony, anything administering the presence of the past within the present—it is clear that some seemingly improbable objects can be legitimately considered lieux de memoire while, conversely, many that seem to fit by definition should in fact be excluded. What makes certain prehistoric, geographical, archaeological locations important as sites is often precisely what ought to exclude them from being lieu de memoire: the absolute absence of a will to remember and, by way of compensation, the crushing weight imposed on them by time, science, and the dreams of men. On the other hand, not every border marking has the credentials of the Rhine or the Finistere, that "Land's End" at the tip of Brittany ennobled in the pages of Michelet. Every constitution, every diplomatic treaty is a lieu
de memoire, although the constitution of 1793 lays a different claim than that of 1791, given the foundational status of the Declaration of the Rights of Man; and the peace of Nimwegen has a different status than, at both ends of the history of Europe, the Verdun compromise and the Yalta conference.

[...]

Within the category, however, nothing prevents us from imagining every possible distribution and necessary classification, from such natural, concretely experienced lieux de memoire as cemeteries, museums, and anniversaries; to the most intellectually elaborate ones--not only notions such as generation, lineage, local memory, but also those of the formal divisions of inherited property (partages), on which every perception of French space is founded, or of the "landscape as a painting" that comes to mind when one thinks of Corot or of Cezanne's Mont Sainte-Victoire. Should we stress the lieu de memoire’s material aspects, they would readily display themselves in a vast gradation. There are portable lieux, of which the people of memory, the Jews, have given a major example in the Tablets of the Law; there are the topographical ones, which owe everything to the specificity of their location and to being rooted in the ground--so, for example, the conjunction of sites of tourism and centers of historical scholarship, the Bibliotheque nationale on the site of the Hotel Mazarin, the Archives nationales in the Hotel Soubise. Then there are the monumental memory-sites, not to be confused with architectural sites alone. Statues or monuments to the dead, for instance, owe their meaning to their intrinsic existence; even though their location is far from arbitrary, one could justify relocating them without altering their meaning. Such is not the case with ensembles constructed over time, which draw their meaning from the complex relations
between their elements: such are mirrors of a world or a period, like the cathedral of Chartres or the palace of Versailles.

If, on the other hand, we were to stress the functional element, an array of *lieux de memoire* would display themselves, ranging from those dedicated to preserving an incommunicable experience that would disappear along with those who shared it--such as the veterans' associations--to those whose purpose is pedagogical, as the manuals, dictionaries, testaments, and memoranda drafted by heads of families in the early modern period for the edification of their descendants.

If, finally, we were most concerned with the symbolic element, we might oppose, for example, dominant and dominated *lieux de memoire*. The first, spectacular and triumphant, imposing and, generally, imposed--either by a national authority or by an established interest, but always from above--characteristically have the coldness and solemnity of official ceremonies. One attends them rather than visits them. The second are places of refuge, sanctuaries of spontaneous devotion and silent pilgrimage, where one finds the living heart of memory. On the one hand, the Sacre-Coeur or the national obsequies of Paul Valery; on the other, the popular pilgrimage of Lourdes or the burial of Jean-Paul Sartre; here de Gaulle's funeral at Notre-Dame, there the cemetery of Colombey.

These classifications could be refined ad infinitum. One could oppose public sites of memory and private ones; pure sites, exhaustive of their commemorative function--such as funeral eulogies, the battlefield of Douaumont or the Wall of the Federes--and those composite sites in which the commemorative element is only one amid many symbolic
meanings, such as the national flag, festival itineraries, pilgrimages, and so on. The value of a first attempt at a typology would lie not in its rigor or comprehensiveness, not even in its evocative power, but in the fact that it is possible. For the very possibility of a history of *lieux de memoire* demonstrates the existence of an invisible thread linking apparently unconnected objects. It suggests that the comparison of the cemetery of Pere-Lachaise and the Statistique generale de la France is not the same as the surrealist encounter of the umbrella and the sewing machine. There is a differentiated network to which all of these separate identities belong, an unconscious organization of collective memory that it is our responsibility to bring to consciousness. The national history of France today traverses this network.

One simple but decisive trait of *lieux de memoire* sets them apart from every type of history to which we have become accustomed, ancient or modern. Every previous historical or scientific approach to memory, whether national or social, has concerned itself with *realia*, with things in themselves and in their immediate reality. Contrary to historical objects, however, *lieux de memoire* have no referent in reality; or, rather, they are their own referent: pure, exclusively self-referential signs. This is not to say that they are without content, physical presence, or history; it is to suggest that what makes them *lieux de memoire* is precisely that by which they escape from history. In this sense, the *lieu de memoire* is double: a site of excess closed upon itself, concentrated in its own name, but also forever open to the full range of its possible significations.