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The Veil of Memory
Anthropological Problems
When Considering the Past

by

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Sheba, a pretty girl chimpanzee, was learning to count and add up. She was six years old and a gifted pupil who had learned to solve increasingly difficult problems. What she had to do now was to register up to four oranges which had been distributed in two out of three covered feeding bowls and then, at her 'work place', pull out the card with the right total on it. Two here, nothing there, two pieces of fruit there – she needed card 'four'. The first bowl was empty, there was one in the second and two in the third - this meant card 'three'. Empty, empty again, and finally two – card 'two': and so on, 89 times. Even though the chimp did not like oranges at all she performed her task brilliantly. She got the right answer in 75 of her 89 attempts. Sheba is not an isolated case. Reports about successful learning by chimpanzees have been circulating for a long time in the educated human world.¹ There is no doubt that chimpanzees can remember (small) quantities, can combine diverse recollections with one another and draw conclusions from this. Admittedly, Sheba's performance resulted from a combination of 'nature' and 'culture', from co-operation with human trainers. In the wild the chimp would have little use for calculations of this sort. But still, the feat of memory on which her sums were based is an ability that she could apply anywhere, even in the wild. For memory responds to a given situation, it acts situatively.

On the human level John Dean, a smart American, acquired a certain renown amongst psychologists and memory-researchers.² He was former President Nixon's advisor and accomplice in the stormy seas of Watergate. At the Senate committee hearings to investigate the criminal activities involved in Nixon's selection campaign, which at that time, in 1972 and 1973, stirred up emotions in the USA and beyond, John Dean played a key role. Looking firm and determined, he claimed 'I have a good memory',

and indeed he amazed the Senators by his precise recollections, with all their exact details.³ In one case the conversation with Nixon in question had taken place three months earlier, in the other, nine. But still, the passage of time did not seem to have had any effect on Dean's mnemonic abilities. The press applauded his memory, which seemed as good as tape-recorded minutes. It brought Nixon down prematurely; the President was forced to resign, his assistants were carted off to prison. In a word: Dean was the ideal witness. If ever there were victims of memory in the history of the world it was here.

The conversations in question were also taped and later on, in 1974, the tapes were released by Nixon for publication as evidence against Dean. So now the bare facts, what actually happened, could be compared with Dean's memory. The outcome in no way exonerated the President – he was too deeply involved in the whole business. But it did discredit John Dean and exposed the many contradictory layers in his recollections. Henceforth it was not the lawyers who turned their attention to him, but the psychologists. None of his cross-examinations – and he had been subjected to several – had been able to produce any hint of the errors and mistakes in what this witness doggedly claimed had happened or had been said. There can be no doubt that his memory deceived him – whether after nine months or after only three. However, the President's former advisor did nonetheless actually manage to reproduce the essence of those conversations as far as the general gist is concerned: that is, that Nixon knew about the criminal activities and had been instrumental in hushing them up. Dean did so in a strangely selective, and at the same time distorting way.

Dean had forgotten numerous details of what had happened during the conversations. They had become

misplaced in his memory, were wrongly interpreted, were embellished and up-graded to his own advantage. Dean had muddled up various encounters, referred to situations which he would like to have come about, but which never actually did. He had emphasized his own role at the time more strongly than it deserved, and had claimed to be more 'in the know' than he really was. He had told his own story, not the one recorded on the tapes. The only parts he got right were episodes and words that could be orientated towards well-known narrative *models* or which had become established through *repetition* – two factors that have proved to be of great significance in memory-research. For all that, one of the main participants, in other words John Dean, did not describe '.... the encounter ... but the product of his imagination, the encounter as it should have been'.⁴ Yet in his autobiography published three years later Dean was still convinced of the incontrovertible accuracy of his statements, so sure was he of his memory.⁵ He thus provides us with a third general working component of memory which, along with adaptation to models and repetition, also recurs regularly – what I call the *certainty syndrome*: memory, of itself, is not aware that it has made a mistake or of the degree to which it has gone wrong. It cannot keep check on itself.

Chimpanzees who remember, combine recollections and draw conclusions, and humans who remember accurate details in the wrong context, or with essential accuracy, but the wrong details – there are hundreds of examples of both. They provide the material for various scientific disciplines concerned with investigating memory, and thus with the conditions of knowledge. Why does an ape remember human calculation? Why was John Dean strangely so wrong and so accurate, both at the same time? Memory's tendency to distort may strike more quickly and more penetratingly, or less quickly and less

deeply than appears to have happened in Dean's case, but the phenomenon as such never disappears.⁶ However much memory's deviations can be corrected by the memory-analyst using numerous parallel sources, every testimony at his disposal ultimately leads to the borderline between aided and unaided recall and thus to the threshold where distortion takes over from the three components mentioned before: narrative model, repetition, certainty syndrome.

And what about the historian? Doesn't the example of John Dean, his memory's inclination to distort, pose major problems for the historian too, as well as for politicians and judges? After all, wherever he turns the historian encounters statements produced by anamnesis operating in the same sort of way. And the more he has to rely on oral, or recently recorded oral tradition, and the further he steps back into the Middle Ages or Antiquity, the more he is at its mercy. What is more, recollection is ineluctably bound up with perceptual processes, with the whole personality of the perceiver and the balance of his or her emotions. A happy person perceives things differently from a sad person; someone devoid of emotion sees things differently from someone loaded with it; their memory bends with their moods like a reed in the wind. Yet the professional historian takes little notice of such fluctuations. It is as if memory and the genetically-determined ability to remember, and its results, are nothing to do with him. If it comes to it, he might admire Sheba, the animal, but only in the zoo. What does her learning have in common with his fields of research? An ape should remain an ape and not sit at the historian's desk.

Now the urgent question – why does the ape remember and why does human memory distort? How do these phenomena occur? How are they bound together? How far back into the past does memory go, and with what

reliability, if nine, even three months of episodic and semantic memory already expose knowledge to the forces of distortion?⁷ How, and in what direction does it change? How regularly and permanently? What effect does all this have on life? On social and cultural knowledge and on images of the past? On memory-dependent historical research, especially into those far-off times for which we have only one single recall testimony? What feats of memory can a society possibly perform if it has no tape-recorders, let alone if it is non-literate? What effect does this have on the data that society leaves behind, from which the historian must acquire his knowledge? Are not the same questions as to recollection, memory and forgetting that exercise the cognitive sciences also implicit in historical research wherever it encounters this anamnesis?⁸ Shouldn't it look to them for an answer? So how does the historian react to this challenge?

The answer is both sobering and shameful. It reveals – with very few exceptions – a frightening backwardness among historians as far as questions of memory are concerned.⁹ The answer has been established for over a century without ever having been adequately discussed and without historical science as a whole ever having bothered about memory-research. It has, after all, been offering relevant studies since the beginning of the twentieth century.¹⁰ The answer, as formulated in his day by Johann Gustav Droysen, an outstanding historical theoretician, goes like this: 'There is no recall in nature ... Only that which has been stamped, formed or touched by the human spirit or the human hand is recalled'.¹¹ Elsewhere it has been said that nature is, so to speak, in opposition to culture, history a deviation from nature.¹² So culture would be a leap away from nature. To quote the old master Droysen once again: 'Even if, behind the sum of natural things, and in their midst, there is an eternal reason, an

ultimate will, if nature's history is in God, from a human point of view the individual aspects of nature are without history'.¹³ But the human brain and its neural behaviour, and therefore memory, are they not 'natural things' too? They have never been formed by human hand, even if they are changed by use. So, no leap away from nature; instead correction of a concept of history still dominated by Droysen?

This last factor, of course, alteration of memory through usage, also applies to rats or to primates. Research on primates has revealed that they not only recognize a hierarchy and social order, but also that they remember them, that they can pursue a sort of social policy and social strategy. They prefer to engage in dominance-relationships (that is, in alliances initiated by an individual from a clan of lowlier status which lead to a clan of higher status) and they try by such means to stabilize the social order of their group, not merely to destroy it by fighting.¹⁴ If this is the case, if the interrelations between the individuals are not, or not only, a matter of instinct, but of nascent self-awareness, of memory and intention, then the chimpanzee group has a real history, which is individual, group and social history, and which includes politics, as well as a vague knowledge of the current state of affairs. Only the temporal dimensions of a given constellation, their extension to the past, remain inaccessible to the individuals involved. Does this mean that all human trace is lost in the naturalness of Man's memory? In Sheba's calculating achievements? In recall without history? This gives rise to doubts about the credo of historical science as formulated by Droysen and practised by others. More attention – and a different sort of attention – should be paid to remembering and forgetting than historians have generally done so far; and, in various ways, this could affect historical knowledge.

Indeed, largely unnoticed by historians, the last two decades have shattered historical science's basis of belief.¹⁵ Characteristically the most recent surveys of 'historical anthropology' produce all sorts of lists: history of the body, history of sexuality, gender history, the history of life-phases, nutritional research, environmental research, conflict research and such like. But – with very few exceptions – they say nothing about recollection and memory, even though these are the very basis of all history.¹⁶ Behavioural research, psychology, neurology, the up-and-coming cognitive sciences undermine the working basis of a discipline which for a very long time sought to learn about past reality by rejecting and opposing the 'exact' natural sciences, without settling for mere combinations of handed-down texts and other relics,¹⁷ and the vast bulk of whose source material – be it annals, commercial records or birth registers – is created by processes of memory with their susceptibility to distortion. So the most urgent need is this: not, as has been the case so far, to assume the reliability of the sources in question and to accept them as factually accurate until proved otherwise, but to do exactly the opposite, that is: only to accept what has been proved to be accurate. In other words, exercise blind mistrust of our sources rather than blind faith.

There may be those who will accuse me of wanting to reduce the historian to the level of an ape. Of course, I don't. But I refer to research on primates and their behaviour, so far as I can as a mere layman, in an attempt to understand the conditions governing the faculty of memory, which, though they certainly constitute human society, are also a prerequisite of all culture. Indeed, memory evolved. It did not make a sudden leap away from nature into culture, but gradually slipped over into it; and it is creative. That is the double message of the

cognitive sciences, relevant even for historians.¹⁸ Memory always carries around its evolutionary past, right up to the present day, into the evolved civilizations of the twentieth century. The animal kingdom also knows recollection and a culture determined by it, however modest the two might be. Furthermore, memory – from its first and most modest expressions in song-birds, or rats, or even smaller brains – is not merely a storage space where certain data are randomly deposited and can be retrieved, even if the storage process does play a certain role. Rather it is a highly active and dynamic process, a learning process, a more or less constructive, and associative, and, what is more, creative process, whose results have to be brought forth again and again;¹⁹ for example, by neural ‘connecting’ within the brain activated from case to case and from time to time, over which the human has only limited influence, if any at all.

What is unclear and in need of further research is the degree to which the memory engages in constructive activity. Also, how constructiveness of this sort can be more precisely pin-pointed amidst the wealth of memory data, what circumstances set it off and what the consequences of this might be. Strict, hard-line constructivists, who like to see all feats of memory as a neural construct with little storing of facts, are at odds here with partial constructivists who attach greater significance to the storage process. So far, no answer has been found that is acceptable all round.²⁰ Construction has already taken place if something only partially forgotten or wrongly remembered is built into a context from which conclusions are drawn.²¹

However that may be, every act of construction requires an appropriate disposition of body and soul, neural ‘action’ and internalized behavioural patterns, not language and concepts. Remembering takes place with-

out words, even if words are concerned. It manifests itself in life, in an implicit knowledge,²² and it organizes itself in a constant process of adapting to its environment, wherever animal or human life exists. It is not until memory seeks to convey itself to others that it needs 'symbols', a language that is socially transmitted, that constantly adapts to changes in the cultural context and which – in its turn – can continuously re-alienate memory. Here again the boundaries once postulated – by Droysen and others – disintegrate. Thus, for example, it has recently been claimed that cats have at least two concepts which they impart to their kittens: one, the harmless, dainty 'mouse', the other, the dangerous 'rat'.²³ Chimpanzees' vocabulary consists of about one hundred terms, ranging from the menu to social contacts. Thus memory that is determined by language, and what is transmitted culturally by way of language, develop in the course of evolution. The fact that memory is articulated in this way and not differently is predetermined by the biological and cultural articulatory framework which memory must use in order to express itself, even if the two conditions of historical knowledge, the biological-evolutionary and the cultural, can be separated analytically and the effects of each described. Here we are not so much interested in the enunciation of what has been remembered, but in the memory's constructive effects and how they influence what is enunciated, namely the 'sources' which historians have to exhaust if they want to know something about the past.

Not only what has been experienced and its specific context, but also the moment and circumstances, the general conditions of its activation in the memory – Sheba's training room, Dean's hearing in front of a shocked public – determine the content and form of what is remembered and can be re-activated.²⁴ The influence of such circumstances, carried away by the flow of time, changes the

composition of information contained within the memory again and again and, as numerous studies demonstrate, constantly transforms the recollections. To pick a random example, would the recollections of Gregory of Tours about the christening of the Frankish king Clovis have more to do with Sheba's adding-up skills than historiographers usually realize? Yet the critical historian of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, overwhelmed by the uniqueness of every past event, wants to disentangle what happened in earlier times from the manipulative power of later memory, as Thucydides put it, to 'objectivize' it and to conceive of it as a metamnetic reality, as history as it really happened. Such a historian even believes that he or she can reconstruct the factual *Quis?*, *Quid?* *Ubi?* *Quibus auxiliis?* *Cur?* *Quomodo?* *Quando?* of past eras without memory-research and examination of the recall processes.

Social history, structural history, history of mentalities – these new perspectives connected with the journal *Annales* have not changed all this, Maurice Halbwachs notwithstanding.²⁵ Jacques LeGoff's *Histoire et mémoire* is about cultural memory, not the factuality of memory, its conditions and its effects on the historian's sources.²⁶ Edmund Husserl did, admittedly, formulate a theory of memory, which regards what is remembered not as something that has been stored, but as something reproduced.²⁷ And radical constructivists developed yet another concept by inverting the relationship between memory and the past. According to them an objectively existing past no longer constitutes memory; rather, memory creates the past as a sphere of reality.²⁸

'Experience is the cause, the world the effect', to quote, for example, Heinz von Foerster, a quite well-known German constructivist.²⁹ But it can certainly not be maintained that approaches of this sort have been generally

accepted by historical science, or even seriously considered, let alone that they have resulted in phenomenological or constructivist handling of sources or a historical methodology. Not even historical behavioural research has ever paid any attention to memory, even though memory is articulated as behaviour, directs behaviour and no behaviour is possible without recourse to memory.³⁰

Instead, a real nightmare haunts the historian: human memory is not the one-off in nature it was once thought to be. It emerges as the mere continuation of an evolutionary strand with numerous qualitative stages, genetic leaps, various off-shoots leading elsewhere. From protozoa, which can remember for one second, to the ganglion systems of worms, to the learning skills of chimpanzees, to capuchin monkeys and 'intelligent' dolphins, right up to the transmission of culture by hominids and humans – this is a process of evolutionary development and improvement of memory, step by step, culminating in conscious recollection. Conscious remembering and wanting to remember are just further advances in memory itself. In principle, the human brain and its activities participate in the 'big bang', in the unfolding of the cosmos, in the same way as the most remote Milky Way. This is (possibly, or probably) why it is able to enter into an exchange of knowledge with its environment. We are able to remember, because remembering is essential for life, life that has developed in this world, not in any other, in all its variety and certainly not only to shape a higher culture. It is creation itself which, through memory, is retrieved. Yet memory does not have to rely exclusively on genetically acquired abilities. Living together in groups increases the potential for memory, and helps in the development of collective transmission of cultural and community values, of knowledge, for example about food production, the cultivation of animals and plants, the use of tools; and

this leads to systems of abstraction and presentation such as language (which presupposes a voice-box), and their further elaboration, to cultural memory supported by the written word and exogenous memory banks, mechanical and electronic memory and the data bases used by historians today. Yet memory still relies on its constructive abilities and cannot rid itself of those elements mentioned at the beginning: the narrative model, stabilization through repetition, and the certainty syndrome.

All this has considerable consequences for historians, who cannot avoid anthropological issues if they are convinced of the unity of the world. Even an approach to history that is geared towards questions of this sort is, like all history, based on memory, recollection and forgetting.³¹ Yet it does not regard these capacities merely as cultural phenomena. Rather, they are seen to exhibit physical and mental, biological and genetic components, and also behaviour-determined and collective ones. These must be acknowledged and examined in greater detail when researching the past if historians are to be more than just well-read story-tellers. Researchers must pay more attention to the genetic, mental and ethnologically definable basis of remembering if the discipline is to retain any significance in the *melée* of human sciences; and, in return, the historian would be able to offer his findings to psychology or ethnology, to the cognitive sciences. In short: historians need to understand how remembering and memory 'function', so that they can take account of how these affect their source material. Basically this material includes everything that transports knowledge in any way and which therefore implies anamnestic abilities. For the 'how' of remembering also regulates 'what' is remembered. Thus, before any explanation and commitment to paper, the neural connections or the mental processes determine what is preserved and remembered,

and thus all knowledge and all history. The same applies to forgetting. The veil of memory, the river of oblivion is constantly in flow between the historian and his object, between Man and his knowledge of the world. What I am saying here is intended to provoke more detailed observation of the products of memory, more research in the field of memory analysis when dealing with sources and subjecting images of the past to critical assessment of memory, and more scepticism towards knowledge of the past that depends upon memory.

I am not interested here in the constitution of meaning or sense through memory, or in cultural tradition as the transmission of sense, identity or legitimacy,³² or even in 'communicative memory' as such, namely memory of the recent past (as Jan Assmann puts it). What needs to be examined are the premises and conditions of remembering, the individual and collective capacity for memory, its receptive and constructive activities, the perceptual and mnemonic basis of knowledge of the past, which is formed by genetically determined cultural factors like articulate-ness, communication and personality. It is also a question of their effect on communicative and cultural memory, indeed on historical sources and historical research. It is about real, practical memory of previous times. For cultural memory articulates itself differently from practical memory (in which, of course, it participates). This is precisely what Y. H. Yerushalmi has pointed out elsewhere.³³ So we have to distinguish quite clearly between cultural and communicative memory on the one hand, and historical research on the other. After all, the first two, communicative and cultural memory, are also a subject of historical research (just as historical research, for its part, is by no means untouched by them). But historians must make sure of all their conditions, not least the evolutionary premises of their knowledge.

There are, of course, no 'objective' occurrences. Nonetheless, the historian wants to know the 'bruta facta', 'how things really were'. It is important to hang on to this; for knowledge is based on truth, even if truth is never free of the cultural and social context in which and for which it is enunciated.³⁴ Everything that happens is linked to the person who observes it, nothing can exist without being experienced. However, the unity of what happened and what is experienced, a unity which must be manifested in recollections and narratives if the historian is to grasp it, is not rigidly fixed in one original form – quite apart from the effect of explanatory traditions on what is recorded; it also changes in the course of time. What usually happens is that only one late stage of a perception of events can be gleaned from the sources. So what chance is there for the historian to catch earlier stages, let alone the first impulse that set off the process of memory? What obstacles have to be overcome in order to do this? The case of John Dean revealed certain elements that are more resistant to time than others. The individual remembers things in a different way from the collective. A memory that relies purely on its own physical abilities produces different results from an externalized memory that can also use exogenous social or technical aids. Elaborate forms of articulation – rhythms, verses, the incantation of magic formulae and such like – are recalled differently from prose, imagery and simple, everyday language. Memoria supported by the written word look quite different from non-written ones; memories recorded in encyclopaedias and libraries quite different from those that make only sporadic use of writing; those that are electronically networked quite different from the non-computerized. The expressions and heritage of every culture reflect the ways in which it remembers, with considerable consequences for what is remembered. Historians have to be sure about all this

when they assess their source material and turn their attention to those two great fields, the communicative and cultural memory of past times. Of course, all modes of remembrance are culturally determined and formed in some way, but not exclusively. Historians have to recognize the biological and mental levels at which the veil of memory absorbs and breaks, the way Lethe flows, if they are ever to reach the past.

Thus historians face all sorts of difficulties, some of them paradoxical. For example, they have to trace the constructive activity of the memory right back to those impulses that originally set it off, or they have to understand and assess oral testimony articulated in former times, and its effects, through written, institutional or object testimonies that have been transmitted. It is like a trial based on circumstantial evidence in which it is clear from the start that the examining judge will never get a confession. No Charlemagne, Philippe Auguste or John Lackland will ever confirm for the historian: yes, that is exactly how it was. And no medieval scribe who has recorded what happened will call out to him: yes, that is exactly what I meant! This imposes complex methodological requirements which cannot, as historians have supposed for so long, be met simply by philology and textual comparison, files and statistics, however valuable what they have to tell us might be for the history of transmission and textual exegesis. Moreover, historiography that does not control its empirical basis, in other words, that does not know what foundation it is building upon, is naive and unscientific; it runs the risk of failing in its own intention, of taking mere memories for reality. Historians must learn to assess the temporal and factual scope of memory, and the cultural influences on it. For memory is what we live on.

It quickly becomes apparent that the fathers of modern historiography in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries really did ignore, either completely or to a great extent, crucial aspects of their discipline. Amongst these are remembering and forgetting, articulation and literacy and the interplay between them, as well as the consequences for memory, knowledge, images of the past and their social dimensions. No historian has really looked systematically at the question of memory, even though many have used oral reminiscences as sources of knowledge.³⁵ Even the techniques and experiences of modern 'oral history' have so far not been drawn together in a general theory of sources, despite Paul Thompson's justified demand that 'oral history' be made the basic discipline of all research.³⁶ However relevant its experiences and findings regarding memory and remembrance might be, they are only relevant within the narrow framework of the restricted issues it addresses and that special discipline.³⁷ Nonetheless the vast majority of medieval sources, right down to the narrative passages in documents, are subject to conditions of this sort, since they were dependent upon articulateness and practical memory.³⁸ Wherever memory dictated their sources, scholars produced versions of the past that were more like John Dean's distortions and phantasies than the taped conversations which that advisor had with his President. Thus the suspicion arises that numerous topics have not been suitably dealt with.

For example, illiterate or barely literate cultures that have only just started to make use of the written word, find themselves judged by criteria more appropriate to highly developed literate cultures. In this view Charlemagne and those recording the annals of his empire are seen to have thought and behaved like parliamentary protocolists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The most important topics were discriminated against and marginalized, or even eliminated from historiography altogether. Rather trivial matters were made the focus of attention while the most important thing, human memory, was banished. Heraldry and sphragistics, every palaeographical variant, whether an 'f' was formed by two, three or four strokes, the need for just this textual emendation, the auxiliary historical disciplines enjoyed greater attention and were the subject of more passionate analysis than the human body and its memory,³⁹ than learning, perceiving, remembering, behaving, than the psyche or gender relationships. As if these were not a more comprehensive and effective manifestation of the ways in which memory transfers knowledge, right up to cultural memory, than all those coats of arms and seals or palaeography. Yet they were proscribed, some of them to this day.

The moral world, its emergence, its rise, its fall, its transformation – this is what was to be looked at. Historians thought they could write the history of free will. Entire world histories were based on this belief.⁴⁰ But not a single one of them examined the empirical experience of will, the psychological conditions of morality, the processes of group dynamics that are the root of what occurred, the situative, mental, even the genetic constraints on will, how it is dependent upon memory, remembering and forgetting – and all this despite many a desperate human asking how it is possible to exercise will. History was contracted, reduced more and more to mere classical studies, obsessed with detail, well-read, saturated with education, hairsplitting and quick to pass judgement, sometimes even amusing. And yet it was trapped in a nirvana between yesterday and today, a murky mixture of Deanesque phantoms and scraps of preserved reality.

This state of affairs is not without a certain piquant irony and a touch of tragedy. For decades, especially in

Germany, there were disputes as to whether the humanities (with history at the forefront) used the same methods of research as the natural sciences. Most people said they did not. The former, the 'inexact sciences', so they said, found things out by 'understanding', the latter, the 'exact sciences', by 'explaining'.⁴¹ Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Dilthey were agreed in this. Only recently has it been admitted that this distinction is nonsense.⁴² And yet the very area where common ground between the two sorts of science might have been found, that is memory-research, the psychology of knowledge and a world whose orientation is determined by evolution, the forms and workings of memory and the effects of this on historical sources – that was not investigated.⁴³ Yet memory is a factor in the construction of reality whose conditions the historian must know if he wants to reconstruct past realities and not just repeat earlier memories. As I said, he or she must have fundamental and radical doubts about the accuracy of remembered knowledge before he dares to accept it. And he must search for methods that allow critique of memory even when no other control sources are available to him, and even when what he reads in the sources sounds plausible.

There is hardly a historian of any stature who is interested in the human ability to perceive and remember, or in the constructive techniques of memory. Life had taught them all that mere remembering can be deceptive. And that was that. Yet at the same time each was convinced that he could be sure of his own experiences – 'I know what I have experienced – and that eye-witnesses, if they are generally honest people, remember correctly. Thus Leopold Ranke's view,⁴⁴ which is amazingly similar to John Dean's certainty: 'I do have a memory that I think is good'.⁴⁵ The historian shared with witnesses whose memory was subject to considerable distortion belief in

the undistortability of memory, a belief seriously questioned by memory-research of today. Still, in recent years historians have started to take account of perception, eyewitness testimony as a factor that influences their narrative sources, though of course without, so far, checking the connection between perception and recollection. The dark shadow cast by the notion of a nature without memory has prevented them from grasping the nature of memory and integrating this into historical work. They have relied on the John Deans of world history with a naive faith in their memory. They have clung to an attitude unchanged since people first started to think historically in Greece and to refer to eyewitnesses, an attitude that is actually quite naive. For, according to the American psychologist Robert Backhout: 'The ideal observer does not exist'.⁴⁶

So how does memory work? This is the crucial question for historians. Which memories remain, which are wiped out? Of course some memories are powerful, unforgettable, for example, the memory of torture. 'Torture never leaves the tortured, never, never in their whole life' (as Ruth Klüger, one of the survivors of Auschwitz put it).⁴⁷ It is like a text or a number that is engraved or stamped on to the body and which, either consciously or unconsciously, constantly influences one's 'reading' of the world. Or, to put it another way, the possibility exists of faulty neural connections caused by torture. But even if it remains, this memory, too, is subject to change, as Ruth Klüger also admits. Every process of remembering involves the present, actual reality of a person, an individual, or a group. Like them and with them remembered events change. How, with the passage of time, does memory select from the abundance of perceptions it encounters? How does it cooperate with its cultural environment? What does it change, distort and construct during

such processes of connection and in what way? When and why does it give the illusion of certainty, and when is it really certain? It is possible to tell? How can the historian, condemned to work with sources that are based on recollections, on precisely these techniques of memory that select, distort, construct, and also store and retrieve, how can the historian see through all this memory-activity without losing sight of what he set out to do – that is, to show what, when, where, by whom, to what end and by what means things were done, suffered, thought and desired?

It seems to me to be irrefutable that in order to answer these and related questions ultimately those 'exact' methods must be applied (though of course not exclusively) that are used by the natural sciences and have so far been rejected as far as 'inexact' historical science is concerned: anthropological empiricism, the psychological and ethnological experiment that can be repeated and checked, and the processes of statistical evaluation and such like associated with it. Or even more, that somehow Sheba should become the historian's teacher, if not perhaps the only one. Otherwise historical science, leaving aside for a moment the questions it poses, will remain little more than a discipline that links texts together, occasionally taking account of artefacts and value judgements determined by the prevailing circumstances of their time. History would be merely what texts teach. The living human (both remembered and remembering) would, despite all protests, play a subordinate role in it. The worlds of the texts would allow themselves to be subjected to strict methods of linkage, to rules; but this would not reveal what happened beyond the texts and how this, in turn affected the texts. I do not intend to belittle the achievements of this sort of historical research; they are significant – in the philological and philosophical fields.

But its judgements rest or sway on a basis of naivety as far as the theory of memory goes.

So, to sum up, my unorthodox remarks lead into both the past and the present, and at the same time into areas that are generally alien to historians, and therefore full of perils, traps and pitfalls. The danger of error is admittedly high, and the need to collaborate with other sciences accordingly vital. It is impossible to say anything conclusive at this stage. On the contrary, we are more or less at the beginning of historical research that is critical of memory. But this does not mean that we should not keep trying. For the subject matter of historical science is the living, whole human being with all his expressions, his behaviour, his achievements, his failures and everything that causes them, including consciousness and memory. History is anthropology in its most comprehensive sense.

References

- ¹ On Sheba and other counting chimpanzees cf. Sarah T. Boysen and Gary G. Berntson, 'The Development of Numerical Skills in the Chimpanzee (*Pan troglodytes*)', in: Sue Taylor Parker and Kathleen Rita Gibson (eds), *"Language" and Intelligence in Monkeys and Apes: Comparative Developmental Perspectives* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 435-50, esp. p. 442. For further discussion of primates' and other apes' learning patterns, see the other contributions in the same volume. For a general introduction see Frans de Waal, *Der gute Affe. Der Ursprung von Recht und Unrecht bei Menschen und Tieren* (Munich and Vienna, 1997, 1st edn USA, 1996).
- ² On the following: Ulric Neisser, 'John Dean's Memory: A Case Study', *Cognition* 9 (1981), pp. 1-22; certain restrictions are formulated by William F. Brewer, 'What is Autobiographical Memory?' in David C. Rubin (ed.), *Autobiographical Memory* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 25-49. Brewer makes a clear distinction between 'conversational memory' and 'personal memory'; for further information see id., 'Memory for Randomly Sampled Autobiographical Events', in Ulric Neisser and Eugene Winograd (eds), *Remembering Reconsidered: Ecological and Traditional Approaches to the Study of Memory* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 21-90.
- ³ Quoted in Neisser, 'John Dean's Memory' (note 2), p. 5.
- ⁴ Ibid., p. 10.
- ⁵ 'I have included detail, texture, tone, to make this history more vivid - though, I trust, no prettier ... I have also, of course, relied on my memory ... and while I do not claim to report the dialogues verbatim, I vouch for their essential accuracy': John Dean, *Blind Ambition* (New York, 1976), quoted from the paperback edn, Manchester 1977, p. 5.
- ⁶ Cf. the objections put forward by Brewer, 'What is Autobiographical Memory?' (note 2), to Neisser's interpretation of Dean's testimony, 'John Dean's Memory' (note 2); see also note 20 below. Groundbreaking on the psychology of testimony is Arne Trankell, *Der Realitätsgehalt von Zeugenaussagen. Methodik der Aussagenpsychologie* (Göttingen, 1971).

- ⁷ The term was coined by Endel Tulving, 'Episodic and Semantic Memory', in Endel Tulving and Wayne Donaldson (eds), *Organisation of Memory* (New York and London, 1972), pp. 381-403; it was broadened by the notion of procedural memory in ead., 'How Many Memory Systems are There?', *American Psychologist* 40 (1985), pp. 385-98.
- ⁸ For initial information see Wolfgang Prinz and Gerhard Stube, 'Kognitionswissenschaften', in Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, *Perspektiven der Forschung und ihrer Förderung. Aufgaben und Finanzierung 1997-2001* (Weinheim, 1997), pp. 141-62.
- ⁹ Groundbreaking is David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge, 1985); id., *Possessed by the Past: The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (New York etc., 1996); James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory: New Perspectives on the Past* (Oxford and Cambridge/Mass., 1992); Patrick J. Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance. Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium* (Princeton/NJ, 1994); an exemplary essay is: Guy P. Marchal, 'Memoria, Fama, Mos Maiorum. Vergangenheit in mündlicher Überlieferung im Mittelalter, unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Zeugenaussagen von Arezzo von 1170/80', in Jürgen von Ungern-Sternberg and Hansjörg Reinau (eds), *Vergangenheit in mündlicher Überlieferung, Colloquium Rauricum*, 1 (Stuttgart, 1988), pp. 289-327. History has not yet been discovered as a field of research by psychologists of memory.
- ¹⁰ See, for example, Wilhelm Stern, 'Wirklichkeitsversuche', *Beiträge zur Psychologie der Aussage* 2 (1904), pp. 1-31; cf. further Clara and William Stern, *Erinnerung, Aussage und Lüge* (Leipzig, 1907; 4th edn 1931). For a long time historians hardly took any notice of the highly relevant works by Maurice Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (Paris, 1925) and id., *La mémoire collective* (Paris, 1950). Even in the circles of the *Annales*, to which Halbwachs himself belonged, no critical check was made of knowledge of the past based on oral memory. Halbwachs himself was more concerned with the collectivity of memory than with its distortion.

- ¹¹ Johann Gustav Droysen, *Historik. Rekonstruktion der ersten vollständigen Fassung der Vorlesungen* (1857). *Grundriß der Historik in der ersten handschriftlichen* (1857/1858) *und in der letzten gedruckten Fassung* (1882), ed. by Peter Leyh (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 1977), p. 397.
- ¹² Lothar Gall, *Natur und Geschichte – eine spezifische Antinomie des 20. Jahrhunderts?*, *Heidelberger Universitätsreden*, 11 (Heidelberg, 1996). For a highly influential example see Wilhelm Dilthey, *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften*, *Gesammelte Schriften*, I (Leipzig and Berlin, 1923), p. 36f.: 'Die Natur ist uns stumm ... Die Natur ist uns fremd ... Die Gesellschaft ist unsere Welt.'
- ¹³ Droysen, *Historik* (note 11), p. 13. On the consequences of Droysen's concept of history, which does not reflect upon the influences of memory, cf. Clemens Wischermann, 'Geschichte als Wissen, Gedächtnis oder Erinnerung? Bedeutsamkeit und Sinnlosigkeit in Vergangenheitskonzeptionen der Wissenschaften vom Menschen, in id. (ed.), *Die Legitimität der Erinnerung und die Geschichtswissenschaft*, *Studien zur Geschichte des Alltags*, 15 (Stuttgart, 1996), pp. 55-85.
- ¹⁴ De Waal, *Der gute Affe* (note 1), p. 126ff.
- ¹⁵ 'Oral history', a special field of contemporary history, is only partly an exception. The insight that oral remembrance always constitutes the first basis for historical tradition (cf. Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past. Oral History*, 2nd edn, Oxford and New York, 1988, esp. pp. vii-viii), and that therefore 'oral history' is a fundamental discipline of all historical science, has so far not been widely disseminated. Cf. Aleida Assmann and Dietrich Harth (eds), *Mnemosyne. Formen und Funktionen der kulturellen Erinnerung* (Frankfurt/M., 1991). Cf. also note 32 below. It should be noted that in the German discussion the term 'oral history' is not exclusively, and not even mainly, used for 'oral historical remembrance', but for the whole field of subjective experience for which, apart from oral sources, all kinds of written sources can be available. The term is therefore not used for 'oral history' in the literal sense. Cf. Alexander von Plato, 'Oral History als Erfahrungswissenschaft. Zum Stand der

- “mündlichen Geschichte” in Deutschland’, *Bios* 4 (1991), pp. 97-119. The following remarks are guided by Thompson.
- 16 See, for example, Hans-Henning Kortüm, *Menschen und Mentalitäten. Einführungen in Vorstellungswelten des Mittelalters* (Berlin, 1996); Gert Dressel, *Historische Anthropologie. Eine Einführung. Mit einem Vorwort von Michael Mitterauer* (Vienna etc., 1996); Heinz-D. Heimann, *Einführung in die Geschichte des Mittelalters* (Stuttgart, 1997) [despite pp. 182-203!].
 - 17 For a first general idea (even if from the perspective of quite different theoretical scientific positions): Wolfgang Prinz and Gerhard Stube, *Lernen und Gedächtnis*, Grundriß der Psychologie, 10 (Stuttgart etc., 1991); for a useful development of the complex of problems facing theoreticians of narration and historians, see: Siegfried J. Schmidt, ‘Gedächtnis – Erzählen – Identität’ in Assmann and Harth (eds), *Mnemosyne* (note 15), pp. 378-96.
 - 18 For more information see Ulric Neisser, *Memory Observed: Remembering in Natural Contexts* (San Francisco, 1982); Howard Gardner, *Dem Denken auf dem Spur. Der Weg der Kognitionswissenschaft*, (Stuttgart, 1989, 1st edn USA, 1985); F. Klix and H. Hagendorf (eds), *Human Memory and Cognitive Capabilities. Mechanisms and Performances. Symposium in memoriam Hermann Ebbinghaus*, 2 vols (Amsterdam etc., 1986); Siegfried J. Schmidt (ed.), *Gedächtnis. Probleme und Perspektiven der interdisziplinären Gedächtnisforschung* (Frankfurt/M., 1996, 1st edn 1991); Daniel L. Alkon, *Gedächtnisspur. Auf der Suche nach der Erinnerung* (Stuttgart, 1995; Engl. edn 1992); Rainer Oesterreich, *Das Netz erinnerbaren Handelns. Ein Gedächtnismodell* (Heidelberg, 1994); Daniel L. Schacter, *Searching for Memory. The Brain, the Mind and the Past* (New York, 1996).
 - 19 Cf. Jean Piaget and Bärbel Inhelder, *Gedächtnis und Intelligenz* (Olten and Freiburg i. Br., 1974); Daniel L. Schacter, ‘Memory Distortion: History and Current Status’, in id. (ed.), *Memory Distortion: How Minds, Brains and Societies Reconstruct the Past* (Cambridge/Mass. and London, 1995), pp. 1-43, offers a good review of research.

- 20 On this discussion cf. Brewer, 'Randomly Sampled Autobiographical Events' (note 2). A representative of hard-line constructivism in Germany is Gebhard Rusch, *Erkenntnis, Wissenschaft, Geschichte. Von einem konstruktivistischen Standpunkt* (Frankfurt/M., 1987); he does not, incidentally, refer to Brewer's work.
- 21 This is not considered sufficiently by Brewer, 'Randomly Sampled Autobiographical Events' (note 2).
- 22 I use the term following Michael Polanyi, *Implizites Wissen* (Frankfurt/M., 1985; 1st Engl. edn., 1966).
- 23 Cf. Paul Leyhausen, *Die Katzensseele* (Stuttgart, 1996).
- 24 Endel Tulving and Shirley Osler, 'Effectiveness of Retrieval Cues in Memory for Words', *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 77/4 (1968), pp. 593-601.
- 25 In their various ways, these research approaches seek to grasp 'reality'. Nor indeed does 'structural history' intend to produce 'images of structures' comparable to those produced by memory, but 'real', 'objective' structures, even though it uses numerous sources for this that are determined by memory. At best, the pure, objective source, free of memory, exists in the field of 'nature'. Nor can 'narrative theory' neutralize or eliminate the intention of the historian who wants to know how it really was. But it can illustrate a number of difficulties which are an obstacle to this aim. The same applies to the question as to the extent to which language is able to represent reality.
- 26 Jacques LeGoff, *Geschichte und Gedächtnis* (Frankfurt/M. and New York, 1992; 1st Ital. edn, 1977).
- 27 Edmund Husserl, *Zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewusstseins* (1892-1917), ed. by Rudolf Boehm, *Gesammelte Werke*, 10 (The Hague, 1966); for the use of biography, see Gabriele Rosenthal, *Erlebte und erzählte Lebensgeschichte. Gestalt und Struktur biographischer Selbstbeschreibungen* (Frankfurt/M. and New York, 1995), here pp. 70ff.
- 28 See Humberto R. Maturana, *Erkennen. Die Organisation und Verkörperung von Wirklichkeit*, 2nd edn (Brunswick and Wiesbaden, 1985); Heinz von Foerster, *Sicht und Einsicht. Versuche zu einer operativen Erkenntnistheorie* (Brunswick and Wiesbaden, 1985); Ernst von Glasersfeld, *Wissen, Sprache*

- und Wirklichkeit. *Arbeiten zum radikalen Konstruktivismus* (Brunswick and Wiesbaden, 1987); Rusch, *Erkenntnis, Wissenschaft, Geschichte* (note 20); id., 'Erinnerungen aus der Gegenwart', in Schmidt (ed.), *Gedächtnis* (note 18), pp. 267-92, esp. p. 275.
- ²⁹ Heinz von Foerster, 'Das Gleichnis vom blinden Fleck. Über das Sehen im allgemeinen', in Gerhard Johann Lischka (ed.), *Der entfesselte Blick* (Berne, 1993), pp. 14-47, quotation p. 46 (quoted by S. J. Schmidt, *Kognitive Autonomie und soziale Orientierung. Konstruktivistische Bemerkungen zum Zusammenhang von Kognition, Kommunikation, Medien und Kultur* (Frankfurt/M., 1994), pp. 14).
- ³⁰ August Nitschke, *Historische Verhaltensforschung. Analysen gesellschaftlicher Verhaltensweisen. Ein Arbeitsbuch* (Stuttgart, 1981).
- ³¹ Thomas S. Kuhn, *Die Struktur wissenschaftlicher Revolutionen*, 2nd edn, revised and enlarged by the postscript of 1969 (Frankfurt/M., 1976), pp. 147-54, has pointed to the 'invisibility of scientific revolutions' that vanish and will be forgotten because later textbooks, orientated to contemporary paradigms, ignore the earlier contexts of questions, arguments and solutions which have been made outdated by the revolution. Cf. Paul Hoyningen-Huene, *Die Wissenschaftsphilosophie Thomas S. Kuhns. Mit einem Geleitwort von Thomas S. Kuhn*, *Wissenschaftstheorie. Wissenschaft und Philosophie*, 27 (Brunswick, 1989), pp. 253-4; Lorenz Krüger, 'Vorwort des Herausgebers', in Thomas S. Kuhn, *Die Entstehung des Neuen. Studien zur Struktur der Wissenschaftsgeschichte*, 5th edn (Frankfurt/M., 1997), pp. 15-6.
- ³² Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor. Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, foreword by Harold Boom, with a new preface and postscript by the author (New York, 1989), esp. pp. 5-26; groundbreaking for the Latin Middle Ages: Karl Schmid and Joachim Wollasch (eds), *Memoria. Der geschichtliche Zeugniswert des liturgischen Gedenkens im Mittelalter*, Münstersche Mittelalterschriften, 48 (Munich, 1984); Karl Schmid (ed.), *Gedächtnis, das Gemeinschaft stiftet* (Freiburg i. Br., 1985); see also Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen*

- Hochkulturen* (Munich, 1992), esp. pp. 29-160; id., 'Kulturelles Gedächtnis als normative Erinnerung. Das Prinzip 'Kanon' in der Erinnerungskultur Ägyptens und Israels', in Otto Gerhard Oexle (ed.), *Memoria als Kultur*, Veröffentlichungen des Max-Planck-Instituts für Geschichte, 121 (Göttingen, 1995), pp. 94-114; see also the extensive introductory essay by Otto Gerhard Oexle, 'Memoria als Kultur', *ibid.*, pp. 9-78.
- ³³ Yerushalmi, *Zakhor* (note 32).
- ³⁴ Summing up the problem: Krüger, 'Vorwort des Herausgebers' (note 31), pp. 7-14.
- ³⁵ For a general idea of the current research see Thompson, *Voice of the Past* (note 15), pp. 22-71.
- ³⁶ Cf. note 15. See also Lutz Niethammer (ed.), "*Die Jahre weiß man nicht, wo man die heute hinsetzen soll*". *Faschismus-Erfahrungen im Ruhrgebiet. Lebensgeschichte und Sozialkultur im Ruhrgebiet 1930 bis 1960*, vol. 1 (Berlin and Bonn, 1983), editor's introduction, pp. 7-29, esp. pp. 19-20.
- ³⁷ See, for example, Rosenthal, *Erlebte und erzählte Lebensgeschichte* (note 27), *passim*.
- ³⁸ The document of Pope Gregor VII of the Aragonese bishopric Jaca-Huesca offers a particularly illustrative example, cf. Johannes Fried, *Der päpstliche Schutz für Laienfürsten. Die politische Geschichte des päpstlichen Schutzprivilegs für Laien (11.-13. Jh.)*, Abhandlungen der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften. Phil.-Hist. Klasse 1980, 1 (Heidelberg, 1980), pp. 63-4, n. 2. Cf. also Ernst Pitz, *Papstreskript und Kaiserreskript im Mittelalter*, Bibliothek des Deutschen Historischen Instituts Rom, 36 (Tübingen, 1971).
- ³⁹ Droysen, *Historik* (note 11), pp. 13-4: 'Wir sagten, jeder einzelne sei ein historisches Ereignis. Ich meine nicht nach seiner kreatürlichen Seite hin, denn diese fällt der Naturgeschichte usw. anheim.' It is remarkable that no specialized memory research for historical science or critique of sources proceeded from Alfred Heuss, *Verlust der Geschichte* (Göttingen, 1959), even though he makes a number of important observations (cf. esp. Chap. II "Geschichte als 'Erinnerung'").
- ⁴⁰ Cf. Rüdiger Bubner, *Geschichtsprozesse und Handlungsnormen. Untersuchungen zur praktischen Philosophie* (Frankfurt/M., 1984).

- ⁴¹ The question goes back to a lecture delivered by Jacob Grimm at the first *Germanistenversammlung* in Frankfurt am Main in 1846, cf. *Verhandlungen der Germanisten zu Frankfurt am Main am 24., 25. und 26. September 1846* (Frankfurt/M., 1847), pp. 58-62. The crucial historical scientific thesis on 'understanding' and 'explaining' is Wilhelm Dilthey, 'Ideen über eine beschreibende und zergliedernde Psychologie' (1894), in: id., *Die Geistige Welt. Eine Einleitung in die Philosophie des Lebens. Erste Hälfte*, ed. by Georg Misch, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 5 (Leipzig and Berlin, 1924), pp. 139-240; on its reception by historical science cf. most recently Volker Sellin, *Einführung in die Geschichtswissenschaft* (Göttingen, 1995), pp. 98ff. Psychology did not support Dilthey's rejection of the analytical method or the holistic approach to the human mind he advocated. In any case, Dilthey's category of the 'important' ('des Bedeutsamen') is not sufficient to explain the rejection of remembrance and the constructivism of memory, even if it remains an effective fact. For a comparison of Dilthey's thesis with that of S. Freud, cf. Alice Kohli-Kunz, *Erinnern und Vergessen. Das Gegenwärtigsein des Vergangenen als Grundproblem historischer Wissenschaft* (Berlin, 1973); Wischermann, *Geschichte als Wissen* (note 13), pp. 71-5.
- ⁴² Wolfgang Stegmüller, 'Walther von der Vogelweides Lied von der Traumliebe und Quasar 3 C 273: Beobachtungen zum sogenannten Zirkel des Verstehens und der sogenannten Theoriebeladenheit der Beobachtung', in id., *Rationale Rekonstruktion von Wissenschaft und ihrem Wandel* (Stuttgart, 1979), pp. 27-86; Thomas Hausmann, *Erklären und Verstehen: Zur Theorie und Pragmatik der Geschichtswissenschaft. Mit einer Fallstudie über die Geschichtsschreibung zum deutschen Kaiserreich 1871-1919* (Frankfurt/M., 1991).
- ⁴³ Ernst Bernheim, *Lehrbuch der Historischen Methode und der Geschichtsphilosophie*, 2nd edn (Leipzig, 1903; 1st edn 1889), pp. 600-29; Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (note 10); Frederic Bartlett, *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology. With a new introduction by Walter Kinsch* (Cambridge, 1995; 1st edn 1932).

- ⁴⁴ Leopold von Ranke, *Serbien und die Türkei im 19. Jahrhundert*, Sämtliche Werke, 43/4 (Leipzig, 1879), p. XI. Summing up the problem: Robert Buckhout, 'Eyewitness Testimony', *Scientific American* 231/6 (1974), pp. 23-31; John Kotre, *Weisse Handschuhe. Wie das Gedächtnis Lebensgeschichten schreibt* (Munich and Vienna, 1996; American edn 1996).
- ⁴⁵ Quoted in Neisser, 'John Dean's Memory' (note 2), p. 5.
- ⁴⁶ Buckhout, 'Eyewitness Testimony' (note 44), p. 24.
- ⁴⁷ Ruth Klüger, *Weiter leben. Eine Jugend* (Munich, 1994; 1st edn 1992), p. 11.

Translated by Jane Rafferty