

A Study of Social Memory and Forgetting by Paul Connerton: Mechanisms and Tools

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ABSTRACT

This research is dedicated to the phenomenon of social memory and its component, social amnesia, as revealed in the works of the British sociologist and philosopher Paul Connerton. The author explores the identified types of social forgetting in the researcher's concept, analyzes the factors that give rise to them, and the mechanisms and tools for including the phenomenon in the metaphysics of social being and reality. The study highlights the significant contribution of this renowned sociologist to the theoretical exploration of social memory, social time, and social amnesia as factors in historical processes and as sociocultural determinants of sociogenesis.) The process of reflection of societal forgetting is interpreted as a rejection or removal from social and cultural memory of a reliable social assessment of the significance of these phenomena and facts. Spontaneous manifestations of social amnesia are inevitable in history, periodically projecting in society the need to temporarily relieve itself of the weight of comprehensive historical memory and responsibility. In this case, it has a functional aspect, being one of the mechanisms of psychological self-defense of society. It has been shown how society and the state, driven by their own needs, utilize instruments of social preservation to structure and construct their memories, endowing them with new interpretations to address various objectives. Each generation independently reshapes collective memories of the past; some of these memories become prominent in the current generation's mentality, while others are suppressed and undergo amnesia. The study examines models of sociocultural reproduction, highlighting Paul Connerton's interpretation of the possibility of social forgetting in its contemporary forms. The author concludes that, whereas in ancient societies disruptions in social memory were primarily effected through the physical eradication of groups and the destruction of written records, the modern era's cultural framework inherently facilitates and necessitates discontinuities in social memory and social forgetting.

KEYWORDS

Paul Connerton, social memory, collective memory, historical memory, social forgetting, social time.

Introduction

The British social anthropologist, sociologist, and philosopher Paul Connerton poses a clear, dynamic, and compelling question to the scholarly community about whether societies can 'remember' anything at all. Or is memory solely an individual attribute? How is group memory maintained and transmitted to subsequent generations? In response, he introduces into the scientific discourse the definitions of social memory, social time, and social amnesia, and he identifies the structures of social memory, acts of memory transmission, and the bodily ceremonial of memory. His trilogy on social and bodily memory – *How Societies Remember* (1989), *How Modernity Forgets* (2009), and *The Spirit of Mourning: History, Memory and the Body* (2011) – has become a cornerstone for any study of the formation of social memory practices. The primary focus of these theoretical works is on the interplay of cognitive and non-cognitive processes that pre-

serve and create knowledge and images of the past, repeated habitual social practices, and the socially formed human body. (*Kastner ...*, 2020).

Studies by cultural anthropologists on historical memory, social memory, and collective memory span a vast period, from the 19th century to the present day. However, comprehensive and systematic studies in this field are only now emerging, influenced by a range of conceptual, economic, political, and other factors. Such a situation leads to the presence of certain crisis phenomena in the self-identification of nations and the lack of a holistic image of national history at the level of collective memory. The 19th century completed a full and exhaustive "historicization of being." Interest in how the past shapes ways of thinking, social formations, and organic structures materialized in the works of Comte, Hegel, Darwin, Spencer, and Marx. They all shared the idea that philosophies, nations, social systems, or living organisms become what they are as a result of progressive transformations over time, that

any contemporary form carries within itself the memory of its previous existence.

Perhaps it is difficult today to find a field of social and humanities research growing as rapidly as memory studies. The phenomenon of memory has been examined from various perspectives, including anthropology, education, literature, history, philosophy, and psychology.) The ideas of Henri Bergson in the 1920s and 1930s were continued by his student Maurice Halbwachs, who insisted that "space," "time," and "collective memory" are interconnected. He called his concept "social structures of collective memory." According to him, collective memory is rooted in concrete social experience and is therefore closely linked to temporal and spatial concepts. (Assmann, 2012:12).

Later, the English researcher Frances Yates, in her work *The Art of Memory*, analyzed ways of spatiality, that is, she emphasized the fact that memory is closely connected to space. Moreover, an excellent continuation of this direction - the theme of the spatiality of memory and its social structuring - is a multi-volume study under the general editorship of Pierre Nora, *Les Lieux de mémoire*.

In post-Soviet Ukraine, strong traditions have developed for the comprehensive study of historical, social, and collective memory. This includes the examination of key theories and concepts related to this field, with certain practices already well-established. Among domestic researchers, A. Kyrydon, L. Nahorna, T. Vasylevska, T. Bevz, N. Mozhova, and others have made significant contributions to this area.)

Research methods

The methodological foundation of this research is an interdisciplinary approach. From a philosophical and sociological perspective, we present the study of these issues as a singular component of the complex phenomenon of historical memory, focusing on the interaction between collective memory and historical time. Additionally, we examine the institutionalization of the phenomenon of social historical amnesia, which influences not only the development of society within a specific period but also its future trajectory. Historical-anthropological, societal, and psychological-structural strategies methodologically define the trajectory of changes in the mental historical basis of understanding the world, society, and the individual within it. Theoretical concepts and their practices serve as a rational presentation of reality, integrating and connecting various research methods to explore elements of historical memory, aspects of which have been elucidated in the author's previous studies (Kuprii, 2018; 2019). This approach enables an up-to-date presentation of the significance of concepts such as "social memory", "historical time," and "social amnesia." Through these methodological guidelines, it has been revealed that P. Connerton's theory presents and explains the implementation of different models of historical social forgetting in societies and countries. To achieve this objective, methods such as discourse analysis of types of social amnesia, content analysis, and logical-semantic synthesis of narratives on mentality and ethnic identification have been employed. To understand this structuring of worldview, retrospective and comparative methods have been used, allowing for historical descriptions and parallels in the analysis of social philosophy and sociology of identity.

Results and Discussion

The remarkable interest of historians, cultural anthropologists, and philosophers in the categories of the human past, as evidenced in Paul Connerton's first work of the trilogy (1989; 2004 - *Ukrainian translation*), has led to an analysis of concepts such as memory, social memory, public memory, and collective memory. The central idea is the concept of "habitual memory," through which we are invited to examine how memory becomes internalized, forming the basis of the socio-cultural and political unconscious. The British sociologist notes that the remark about "habitual memory" demonstrates nothing other than the inability to accurately grasp those characteristic acts of transmission, and thus, to properly consider not only the methods but also the context in which the memories of grandparents as a social group are transmitted to grandchildren as a social group. Connerton rightly points out, as noted by most contemporary researchers (Mozhova, 2021: 39), that memory is not necessarily knowledge, an image, or a narrative. Memory is also a skill, an ability, a habit of the body to act in a certain way.

Paul Connerton explored the processes of remembering and forgetting, and developed the concept of "remembering the absent: a history of forgetting and memory in the people," focusing specifically on memory, shared memory of the past, and the peculiar "mechanics" of its transmission. Memory – whether collective, social, or individual—makes us who we are, building our identity and determining our belonging to a certain community – group, community, city, nation, country (Connerton, 2004).

The researcher continued the theme of the vision of memory in the work *How Modernity Forgets* (Connerton, 2009: 31), emphasizing what he calls "memory of place," or memory that is dependent on topography, especially the topography that relates to the human body. P. Connerton argues that modernity is characterized by a special kind of forgetting, "linked to processes that separate social life from locality and human dimensions: superhuman speed, megacities that are so vast that they cannot be remembered; consumerism disconnected from the labor process, the short lifespan of urban architecture, the disappearance of pedestrian cities." (Connerton, 2009: 39).

Paul Connerton describes a the situation with the presence of a specific vision of the past, characteristic of a particular locality, in the following way: "And yet – and this is noteworthy – it is entirely possible to imagine a situation where members of two completely different groups can participate in the same event, even in such an all-consuming catastrophe as the Great War, but at the same time these two groups can be so incommensurable that their subsequent memories of this event, the memories and recollections that they will transmit to their children, are unlikely to appear as if they are talking about "the same" event." (Connerton, 2004: 57).

Connerton further illustrates this point with a vivid example of such a difference, describing the experience of the exiled doctor Carlo Levi in the village of Gagliano in Southern Italy. Despite the fact that a monument was erected in the village to commemorate the villagers who died in the First World War – about fifty individuals – the war was not recorded in the collective memory of the village. Although the events described took place in 1935, i.e., 17 years after the end of the war, it failed to occupy a significant place in people's memory, but at the same time, the inhabitants of this village quite often and extensively talked about and recalled the events of another war - the war of the bandits of 1865 (Connerton, 2004: 60). That is,

on the mental map of a resident of Gagliano, the event of local history was the central event in terms of significance and scale, while in the consciousness and on the mental map of the "average European" the traumatic experience of the Great War occupied an even more important place than all subsequent catastrophes, including the Second World War. This is an example of local memory, which is distributed only in a certain territory. It can be seen that what we call collective memory will change at every level, transforming into a collage or palimpsest. (*Shlipchenko, 2024*).

Social memory is a factor in the socio-political process that, in interpretations and assessments of events, generates real conflicts and divisions in society. From the perspective of P. Connerton, a temporary blocking of collective traumatic memories is necessary, as they legitimize the construction of the image of tragedy and actualize the victimization or self-victimization of certain communities and groups. It is precisely victimization (self-victimization) that allows these communities to publicly articulate the injustice of the existing social order. A certain taboo on their public discussion and evaluation blocks the realization of the principle of collective guilt. On the one hand, victimization creates the preconditions for such forms of cultural consumption that revitalize archaic social practices and their cultural forms. On the other hand, it can become the basis for the construction and conduct of a mythologized politics of memory. (*Anderson, 2001*).

How do we represent the past? If we draw a dividing line between the phenomenon of the past and history as an official version of memory, we can say that history will be a kind of "universal" tool for preserving and representing the past. The issue of the past, the representations of the past, fatigue and a certain oppression by the "long centuries," an almost physical feeling of how the past "clings" (E. Husserl), "bites into" (A. Bergson) or "flows into" (W. James) the present, contributed to the fact that at the beginning of the 20th century, memory acquired a medical dimension, turning into amnesia, paramnesia, hypermnesia, etc., and then gradually moved to the field of psychoanalysis. Therefore, preserved and reproduced memory appears as an important "body memory". How exactly do memory, forgetting, repressed memories or traumatic experiences influence the formation of collective identity and the social spaces in which this collective identity exists? Today, the world, and Ukraine in particular, is reassessing the paradigm of relations with neighboring countries, because past relations are history. Our society is reconsidering the practice of erasing, forced forgetting, and violent shifting of accents in the shared memory of the past. (*Vasylevska..., 2024*).

The nature of the settings of remembering/forgetting in the context of a specific collective memory is revealed in Paul Connerton's work *How Societies Remember* (1989; 2004 - Ukrainian translation). "If we look deeper, we base our specific experience on a prior context in order to make sense of it in general ... even before any experience, our mind is already pre-armed with a kind of cognitive schema, typical forms of objects. To perceive some act or object means to localize it within our system of expectations. (*Connerton, 2004: 65*).

Presenting forgetting from the perspective of the contemporary present, Connerton justifies it not only as a natural defense mechanism that allows one to adapt to a new situation, to suppress traumatic, erroneous or unnecessary information and to reconcile past events with the present. As noted by his contemporary Ukrainian interpreter Alla

Kyrydon, in connection with the construction of her model of collective memory, Connerton presented a vision of forgetting in the image of a typology of amnesia based on different normative value systems, having different actors and performing different social functions. (*Kyrydon, 2009: 115*).

By establishing a correlation between memory filters and layers of experience, the anthropologist identifies seven forms of social amnesia. The first form is **forgetting as repressive erasure**, where, in the words of the Czech-French playwright Milan Kundera, "the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting" (*Kundera, 2022*). Institutionally formalized and normatively legitimized physical or symbolic destruction of memory about historical figures or periods of national history, considered an ideological enemy in the current socio-political conditions. This is most severely manifested in totalitarian regimes, for which a consistent, linear narrative of historical events is an essential component of socialization and ideological indoctrination of individuals. Myth-creation, as the main component of this model, is passed from century to century with each new event, and new generations appear who completely forget the tragic events and take a non-critical attitude to the proposed version. The image was so strong that contemporaries do not notice, do not remember the real repressive events and tragedies of nations that have been erased from memory. The removal of an image or event from the public consciousness occurs through the complete deprivation of every artifact that reminds of this image or event, starting with the absence of news in newspapers and ending with a single state-controlled system of history textbooks. Collective memory is used to legitimize the regime.

The second form is **prescriptive forgetting**. Like erasure, it is structured by state actions, but differs from erasure in that it corresponds to the interests of all parties to the previous dispute and therefore can be publicly recognized. The practice of public forgetting of historical tragedies, political and international conflicts in order to overcome political and ideological divisions in society, normalize the socio-political situation and establish a social consensus on the vector of long-term development of the country. In attempts to unite society and legitimize itself, the government orders to forget unpleasant facts and rewrite history. Facts that, do not fit into the overall concept of building a "Leviathan" are curtailed and classified. Even traditional holidays and customary events fall into oblivion. Changing holidays is an act of planned forgetting. For example, in the USSR, it was ordered to forget about national uprisings, the Holodomor, deportations, chauvinism and other "inconvenient" events.

Forgetting, which is constitutive of the formation of a new identity, as a type of forgetting becomes not a loss, but a gain or acquisition when forgetting the past identity in order to continue living with a new one. A practice that is formed through the selective selection of historical facts relevant to the new socio-economic and institutional conditions, as well as the creation on this basis of new behavioral patterns and role models of behavior. For instance, the image of strong, confident, courageous, independent Germanic Teutons, formed for centuries their militancy and does not justify the modern balanced and diplomatic Germans. Conversely, the image of a weak, disadvantaged, suffering people who have no right to a voice and must always obey someone – the Jews "broke" in the second half of the 20th century – becoming one of the most resilient nations in the world. The state, through the instruments of

propaganda, reproduces once again the mythological yet effective narrative of "we are surrounded by enemies," forms a new identity of a patriot-hero-winner in controversy with the identity of an intellectual-liberal-pacifist. The substitution of concepts and terms, their change over time to diametrically opposite ones, occurs completely unnoticed by society. This process unfolds in a looking-glass country in Orwell's 1984. Can an authoritarian regime evolve into a formal "democracy"? We think that Ukraine's eastern neighbors can definitely prove this "truth".

The fourth type of forgetting is **structural amnesia**. By structural amnesia, we mean that a person tends to remember only those links in their genealogy that are socially significant. Structural amnesia, arising from a deficit of information, represents a type of forgetting in which events of little significance from the point of view of constituting the collective identity of society or individual groups are displaced to the periphery of social memory, while socially significant information forms a general picture of the world. When we assume that individuals remember only socially significant figures and place them in an environment that glorifies heroes – sometimes even mythologized ones – the selective nature of history becomes apparent. With falsification and under conditions of censorship of the press, which was obliged to report in Aesopian language only about positive news, there were no opportunities for preserving memory. Each subsequent ruler erased everything previous, former heroes were declared traitors. Historical figures were either idealized or demonized depending on the ideology. Yet the state pursued a heroized monumental policy, new heroes and new commemorative dates were minted on coins and printed on banknotes, and they quickly strengthened in consciousness, which cannot be said about "insignificant" events and people, from which, in fact, all of the remaining history is composed.

The next form is **forgetting as cancellation**. This type of forgetting arises from an overabundance of information. Products of media, socialization institutions, governance structures, corporations, and individuals are accumulated in institutions designed to preserve social memory (e.g., state archives, libraries, museums, and databases). However, due to their perceived lack of relevance, this information is removed from cultural circulation. Only a minimal amount of information remains accessible to the public. The state controls this access, often clashing with those seeking broader transparency. For example, in the USSR, there were few who wanted to fight for a complete picture of information. Moreover, the knowledge imposed by the state about other events displaced the memory of that history, which did not fit into the official narrative.

The sixth model of forgetting is **forgetting as planned obsolescence**. This type of forgetting stems from the systematic aging built into the lifecycle of objects, functioning as a final limitation on their practical use due to moral obsolescence or physical degradation. This ensures the uninterrupted production of mass consumption mechanisms, a vital component of market functionality. As an example, one can cite such a well-known fact: the cycle of war is usually two generations, about 70-75 years, and the further the event itself recedes, the more magnificently its anniversaries are celebrated. Thus, for the first 20 years after the Second World War, no one celebrated the victory in the USSR. With a change in leadership, the concept of commemorating victory transformed. The cult of the myth of the victorious people captured minds for decades, and the vision of the Soviet people's significant contribution to the victory acquired unprecedented scale. When few veterans

remained, a new slogan of collective memory emerged—only tangentially connected to the events of World War II, "*We can do it again!*"

The final form is forgetting as **humiliated silence**. This type of forgetting manifests itself in a widespread pattern of behavior in civil society, and it is of a hidden, unnoticed, and unrecognized nature. It represents morally and politically motivated forgetting, based on collective guilt for past wars or other crimes. This form of forgetting is embedded in the unspoken behavioral norms of civil society. A citizen of a totalitarian state feels most humiliated not before anyone else, but before any official in a state institution, or before a policeman who, on the contrary, is supposed to protect the interests of citizens. A culture of violence exploits this form of forgetting, as victims are blamed based on class, nationality, or gender, forcing them into silence. The suppression of memory regarding tragic political events is closely tied to this type of forgetting. Thus, in the USSR, there were numerous cases when people, out of fear, changed their nationalities, names, and surnames in their passports.

Three of the aforementioned examples (forgetting as repressive erasure, prescriptive forgetting, and forgetting as constitutive of forming a new identity) can be classified as positive practices of "successful forgetting." In contrast, the other four types (structural amnesia, forgetting as annulment, forgetting as planned obsolescence, and forgetting as humiliated silence) are negative. In some cases, combinations of two, three, or more types of forgetting can be observed simultaneously.)

The typology of forgetting proposed by the British researcher appears less as a structured classification and more as a phenomenology, lacking a unifying systematic principle. At the same time, the separate consideration of such sociomnemonic deficits as "planned obsolescence" and "annulment", for example, makes it difficult to reveal the existing systemic connection between them. Interestingly, V. Shnirelman (1996: 91) does not draw any conceptual distinction between the terms "amnesia" and "forgetting" when he writes about "seven different types of amnesia" that are allegedly distinguished by Connerton. In fact, the British scholar speaks of types of forgetting, among which only one is classified by him as structural amnesia. (Connerton, 2008).

According to P. Connerton, an important component of forgetting, which is part of the process of forming a new memory, is based not only on new shared memories but also on silences. In constitutive forgetting, certain details are excluded because they might hinder the formation of a new identity. For instance, memory of a previous marriage might impede certain relationships, while memory of a former religion might obstruct a neophyte's new faith. (Connerton, 2011: 73). Similarly, up to 75% of cited works in physics are from the past few decades, with the discoveries of once-prominent physicists relegated to the realm of science historians rather than practicing scientists.

P. Connerton views contemporary society through the prism of collective amnesia, caused by the interference of social dynamics and economic practices, characterized by intense rates and a total impact on the world of culture. He argued that "a powerful source of contemporary cultural amnesia [...] is linked to the nature and history of the life of material objects that people are usually surrounded by." P. Connerton's work *The Spirit of Mourning: History, Memory, and the Body* (2011) shows that historically social amnesia is both an inevitable and necessary condition

for the formation of identity and the search for the direction of future human progress. (Connerton, 2011: 112).

It should be noted that these ideas of P. Connerton were radically interpreted by David Rieff, who believes that mythologized versions of the historical process that cultivate cultural traumas and historical images not only hinder reconciliation but also impede the achievement of justice in a de facto divided society. Therefore, he argues that "while forgetting creates an injustice to the past, memory creates an injustice to the present." (Rieff, 2016: 121).

Conclusion

Understanding and awareness of one's attitude towards the past conceptualizes the process of structuring social memory. Cognitive and mnemonic practices associated with P. Connerton's social memory distinguish scientifically explained definitions of socio-constructive phenomena and processes. Both "figures of memory" and narratives of transformed social historical reality introduce societies into a state of illusion and substitute the desired for the real. Forgetting, as a subtle form of social amnesia, is strategic in the memorial practices of any state and leads to the adjustment or completely new creation of a social paradigm.

Thus, in the concept of the components of social memory, P. Connerton shows the functional purpose of forgetting in human life, explicates the sociocultural mechanisms of memory politics, and articulates the problems generated by commemorative practices in social development. The taxonomy of types of social amnesia developed by the researcher seems to have a certain heuristic potential and can be applied to the study of "memory wars" characteristic of the socio-political reality of a number of post-Soviet countries. Additionally, this taxonomy is valuable for exploring the sociocultural determinants of social genesis.

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Соціальна пам'ять та соціальне забуття Пола Коннертона: механізми та інструменти

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Наукова розвідка присвячена феномену соціальної пам'яті та її компоненту – соціальній амнезії – у їх розкритті у працях британського соціолога та філософа Пола Коннертона. Авторка досліджує виділені типи соціального забуття в концепції дослідника, аналізує фактори, що їх породжують, й механізми та інструменти включеності явища

у метафізиці соціального буття та реальності. Аспектно презентовано значний внесок відомого соціолога у теоретичну розробку проблематики соціальної пам'яті, соціального часу та соціальної амнезії як факторів історичного процесу та соціокультурних детермінантів соціогенезу. Процес відображення забуття суспільствами потрактовується як відторгнення або відхід із соціальної та культурної пам'яті достовірної соціальної оцінки значимості цих явищ та фактів. Спонтанні прояви соціальної амнезії неминучі в історії, проєктують періодично в суспільстві потреби тимчасово зняти з себе вагу повноти історичної пам'яті та відповідальності. У такому випадку вона має функціональний аспект, будучи одним із механізмів психологічного самозахисту суспільства.

Показано, як, виходячи із власної потреби, суспільство та держава через інструмент соціального збереження структурує та конструює свої спогади, наділяє їх новими інтерпретаціями, вирішує за їх допомогою різні завдання. Генерація, що живе самостійно, заново формує спогади колективного минулого. Деякі такі спогади актуалізуються в ментальності покоління, що живе, а деякі витісняються і зазнають амнезії. Розглянуто моделі соціокультурного відтворення: в інтерпретації Пола Коннертона прописується можливість соціального забуття у її сучасних формах. Авторка висноує: якщо в стародавніх суспільствах розриви соціальної пам'яті відтворювалися головним чином за допомогою фізичного знищення груп, як і її носії разом з письмовою інформацією про ці спільноти, то модерна епоха в самій своїй культурній матриці надає можливість та необхідність розривів на тлі соціальної пам'яті та соціального забуття.

Ключові слова: Пол Коннертон; соціальна пам'ять; колективна пам'ять, історична пам'ять, соціальне забуття, соціальний час.

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