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The Lay Historian: How Ordinary People Think about History

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Abstract
Social psychology has mainly studied collective memory as a collectively shared content i.e., as a social representation. By contrast, cognitive psychology appraises memory with little interest in its content and at a generally individual level. In this chapter, I suggest a middle ground between these two approaches by presenting a new metaphor of how ordinary folks think about history: the "lay historian". I consider how historians' approaches to the past may find parallels in ordinary people's construction of historical representations. In order to do so, I borrow from Paul Ricoeur's (2000) distinction between three steps involved in historical research: documentary, explanatory and representational. I show that these steps can find parallels in cognitive analyses of memory: The first process can be approached in terms of source memory; the second in terms of causal attribution and the third in terms of social psychological models of communication. A special focus is placed on the interaction between these processes as they occur both in historical research and in the elaboration of historical memory. These parallels also highlight novel paths to future research. In turn, this metaphor may be used as a heuristic tool for comparing historians' and ordinary people's appraisals of the past.

Keywords
History; Collective Memory; Social Cognition; Hindsight Bias; Explanation; Narration

> «We capture from the past only what, in it, has been necessary and sufficient to produce what, today, is reality» (Raymond Aron, 1969)[1]

When we reflect on history – and when I say "we", I refer to those of us who do not hold a degree in history – we do not just passively retrieve representations of the past that are stored in memory. Rather, we craft new ones, building on the store of knowledge accumulated during our existence. Thus, the historian does not hold a monopoly on thinking about the past. Her knowledge is actually germane to psychology if, like Marc Bloch (1947/1993), we view history as the «science of men of the past».

This is particularly blatant for a parent. Once, my then 6-year old daughter asked me "why did Hitler become mean?" Responding to this question demanded to recollect disparate bits of knowledge about the Führer's existence. I could select different types

[1] Cited by Leduc (2010, p. 712), my translation.

of causes: psychological (his education? jealousy towards his jewish peers?), sociological (anti-semitism in Germany? reactions towards the Versailles treaty?), economical (the great depression?). I then had to elaborate a coherent narrative, which would be understandable for a child of this age.

More generally, we are all regularly faced with the task of explaining historical events or commenting the account provided by others. This role we then play, that of a "handyman" of the past, I will call the "Lay Historian". To appraise the cognitive processes governing this figure, I will attempt to establish parallels with the "real", academic, historian by delving into writings in the philosophy of history. I am well aware that my limited level of expertise in this field makes this enterprise perilous. Hence, this chapter should be understood as a preliminary attempt which, hopefully, will lead to novel and productive research ideas.

As we shall see, considering how people make sense of the past is a crucial issue that transcends academic curiosity. People use their understanding of the past to appraise the present and act on it. For example, how people understand the Holocaust (e.g, as a «singular event» or as an instance of the more general categories of «genocide») influences how they react to subsequent massacres (cf. Novick, 2001). The relevance of history to society is often justified in terms of drawing lessons from the past. Society, one is regularly told, needs to *learn from the past* to, hopefully, act in a more virtuous or efficacious way in the future. To appraise whether such learning is possible, we first need to know how people understand and make sense of the past: This demands to adopt a cognitive perspective as learning is inherently a cognitive process (Houghton, 1998). As a second step, we may be interested to consider whether and how these understandings are applied to the present.

Why rely on a metaphor? In psychology, a metaphor is useful if it allows to generate new research questions or to appraise old ones in a new light. Its function is not to describe but to elicit new hypotheses and consider problems from a novel perspective. Tetlock (2002) has developed three metaphors for how people think about the social world (the «intuitive theologian», the «intuitive politician» and the «intuitive prosecutor»). These metaphors refer to the *functions* fulfilled by such thought. For example, people may process information differently depending on whether they are accountable to others. Such processing may respond to the necessity to please «key constituencies», somewhat like a politician. Thus, understanding the functions fulfilled by judgment, we can better investigate the processes associated with it.

My purpose in selecting the «lay historian» as my metaphor of choice was somewhat different. I was guided by two motivations. First, I believe that this analogy allows us to integrate perspectives developed in a variety of subfields of psychology: consider e.g., research on autobiographical memory, on the perception of testimonies, on narration or on causal attribution. These fields have evolved relatively independently and have not specifically concerned themselves with history. Historical events are just one type of content on which general cognitive processes can operate.

Thus, how psychological processes conflate to generate lay accounts of history remains a largely unanswered question. The bulk of social psychological research on collective memory does not help much in this respect as it focuses mainly on the content of memory without considering the cognitive processes underlying the elaboration of such memory.

Second, the metaphor I suggest may also help us shed a different light on the "real" historian's work. Being all too human, the latter may function in many ways like his more naive counterpart.

After this introduction, let us first define the historian's activity. To do so, I will use the approach the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (2004) proposes. Based on de Certeau (1975), Ricoeur considers 3 main activities:

- *Archival*: Access to knowledge, some of which, that are considered relevant, will be selected for a later stage.
- *Explanatory*: The elaboration of causal reasoning about past events.
- *Representational*: The elaboration of a representation, often in the form of a narrative, adapted to the audience.

Ricoeur repeatedly mentions that these activities are not necessarily sequential but are intertwined in the historian's activity. In this text, I will consider each of these stages sequentially but if, as we shall see, the mutual interdependence between these stages also characterizes the lay historian's judgment on the past.

The archival stage

The archival phase concerns access to sources and their selection. One of the specificities of history, as compared to memory, is that it is based on material documents as close to the (temporally) original event or phenomena as possible. Adopting a critical approach, the historian seeks to select and interpret documents as a function of their proximity to the original events.

In this respect, Paul Ricoeur accords a crucial role to the testimony of the direct witness and to his or her perception of the facts. As we all know, witnesses may be unreliable: They may lack information, they may fall prey to cognitive biases (e.g., faulty memory) or they may distort facts to suit their motivations and interests. To extract a truthful account of events, a good historian may need to be a good psychologist.

By contrast, the lay historian may generally be much lazier. When s/he tries to elaborate an explanation for a historical fact, s/he rarely builds upon firsthand sources. Before responding to my daughter, I did not consult the German Federal Archives to seek accurate information on Hitler's life. I did not even seek a second hand source or a biography of Hitler. Rather, I relied on my own imperfect memory, which contained bits of third or even fourth-hand information, amassed in the course of my secondary education, or via books, films, etc.

It appears from this example that for the lay historian, and not only for me, memory can be compared to an archive. This archive includes a vast amount of information that can be retrieved before being submitted to the filtering process that will lead to an explanation of the past.

However, memory is not only a content. It is also a process. When I select memories or representations in memory, I can also appraise them with a critical eye. I can for example

evaluate whether they reflect "reality" or rather are the product of my imagination, a fantasy or a fabrication. For example, if I ask you to account for the 9/11 terrorist bombings, you may retrieve the conspiracy theory that these attacks were implemented by the Bush government to justify the invasion of Iraq. However, you may still discard such a representation as delirious. Thus, we are capable of behaving like critics of our own memory.

This form of «self-criticism» has been the focus of a vast amount of research. Regularly, people are faced with the task of determining whether a stored representation should be attributed to a real experience or not. A stored representation may have been just a product of one's imagination or suggested by others. Think of childhood memories of sexual abuse for example. When an adult remembers instances of such abuse dozen of years after the facts, does such a recollection reflect an actual experience or could it be a reconstruction as a result of later experiences, such as a psychotherapy (for a discussion, see McNally & Geeraerts, 2009)?

According to the *source monitoring* framework (Johnson, Hashtroudi, & Lindsay, 1993), memories can be distinguished as a function of their source. Thus, experienced memories tend to be more vivid, more detailed and contain more contextual and emotional features. Johnson's model, which is the reference in this field, considers that two types of processes are involved in source monitoring.

- First, what she calls heuristic processes, cognitive shortcuts based on directly accessible cues. For example, familiarity with a visual representation may be used to access whether this representation depicts an actually experienced event.
- Second, a systematic, process can be triggered. It involves assessing the reliability of the memory based on its content. For example, its internal consistency can be used to estimate its truthfulness.

But it does not always work. For example, work on "implanted memories" (Loftus, 1997) involves instigating in the subjects the belief that they actually experienced a fictional event. In a study by Wade, Garry, Read, and Lindsay (2002), participants viewed childhood photographs, one of which had been modified via an image editing software: The participant viewed him or herself with his parents in the nacelle of a hot air balloon. Actually, this was a fictional image: The subjects' figure had been cut and pasted on the photograph of the balloon. During two weeks, participants saw the pictures three times. At the end of this period, 50 % "remembered" this balloon trip and described their experience. Source monitoring is clearly deficient here.

This approach shows that people can be poor judges of their autobiographical memory.

This type of work is however limited to the opposition between lived and imagined experiences. When trying to evaluate how people appraise historical events, the distinction between "experienced" and "imagined" events becomes less relevant. Indeed, in the course of their life, people rarely witness historical events directly. But they can witness them indirectly e.g., via the media or through second hand account. For example, many people witnessed 9/11 by watching television. A third category of events involves those that

were experienced outside of the person's life. In this respect, a stimulating research question concerns whether these three types of memories are phenomenologically distinct. For example, they may differ in terms of vividness, level of detail, visual imagery or emotional intensity. Preliminary work on this issue has been implemented by William Hirst and his colleagues (cf. Hirst & Manier, 2002; Manier & Hirst, 2008). I shall consider two examples of research addressing this issue.

The first one (Johnson, Bush, & Mitshell, 1998) bears on testimonies. When hearing a testimony, how do we determine whether this testimony reflects a real or an imagined experience? To answer this question, Johnson *et al.* crafted fictional testimonies that they manipulated on several dimensions. Subjects were then asked to evaluate the credibility of the testimony. The researchers found that a testimony including many details or emotional aspects was perceived as more likely to reflect an actual experience than a testimony devoid of these aspects. However, in a second study, they found that this depended on the source's credibility. When a source is perceived as unreliable, including these elements reduced the perceived truthfulness of the testimony. This suggests that depending on whether the source is reliable or not, people either adopt a heuristic (*e.g.,* «there are many emotions, it must be true») or a more systematic («the details were added to convey an appearance of credibility») strategy. This distinction proves particularly worthwhile when considering historical criticism: Depending on whether the lay historian adopts a critical posture or not, different cognitive processes seem to come into play and lead to divergent interpretations of the same features of the testimony.

A second example concerns the influence of photographs. A great part of historical memory is conveyed through photos or images. These can actually be a very efficient vehicle of false memories because they often appear "truer" than language. Our lay historian may therefore behave less critically towards photos than towards texts. As if photos could not be falsified. Thus, a study conducted in the US (Kelly & Nace, 1994) revealed that articles, but not photos, published in the *New York Times* are perceived as more credible than those of a tabloid newspaper (*The National Enquirer*). Yet, the inclusion of a photograph transforms our memory of the adjoining text. Garry *et al.* (2005) asked their subjects to adopt the role of a newspaper editor. They were asked to read a variety of articles describing a hurricane that hit a coastal town. In one study, a photo describing the town *before* the hurricane was included. In another, a picture of the town *after* the passage of the hurricane was included. To induce participants to pay attention to the photos, they were asked to select the location where they would place the photograph inside the article. A few weeks later, they were administered a memory test: They were presented a list of statements and asked whether they were part of the original text or not. Participants in the "after" condition remembered having seen excerpts describing injuries experienced by the town's inhabitants although the story only referred to material damages. But, of course, this hurricane never took place.

But what happens when people have actually *indirectly* experienced the events (in Hirst's sense) that are depicted in the photograph? This is the question Sacchi, Agnoli and Loftus (2007) addressed: These authors doctored photographs of widely known historical events that happened during the participants' life. Exposition to these photos changed their

memory for the events. For example, adding spectators to the famous picture of the lone Chinese student facing the tank on Tien Anmen square led participants to «remember» that the number of «rebels» was higher (compared to a control condition in which the real photograph was shown).

This is important because photos, and by extension videos, are one of the chief ways through which we can access the past. They contribute to defining our view of this bygone world. It is therefore particularly stimulating to focus on the different memory process that are triggered depending on whether representations of the past come to us through verbal or visual channels.

Another important aspect of the lay historian's appraisal of the past resides in the updating of his or her knowledge about the past. We are regularly confronted with new information about known events that are stored in memory. For example, the existence of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in Iraq in early 2000 proved false. How does our «lay historians» deal with this necessity to update his or her knowledge? Research by Lewandowsky, Strtizke, Oberauer, and Morales (2005) suggests that they often do not. In this study, Americans' exposure to information showing that there was actually no WMD in a specific location in Iraq did not affect their belief in the presence of WMD there although the original information came from the source that had previously attested their presence. However, and once, again, skepticism may be an antidote to such a failure to correct misinformation. Indeed, in the same study, German subjects, who were generally more skeptical of the existence of WMDs in Iraq, did correct their initial beliefs when presented with the new information.

In summary, we see that the source monitoring framework, as well as work on knowledge updating, may be thought of as cognitive analogy to the form of historical criticism implemented by a «professional» historian. Considering how these processes affect the perception of historical events, especially «indirectly experienced» and «not experienced» ones, that have been little studied in memory research, may prove particularly fruitful.

The Explanatory Phase

The second stage in Ricoeur's analysis is the explanatory phase. Once events are selected, how shall we elaborate an explanation? To address this issue, I will consider several more specific questions.

What deserves an explanation?

A primary question concerns the object of explanation. Some events may not demand an explanation. But why do we choose to explain some and not others? From the perspective of a historian, a historical event will be accorded special attention if it has affected a future course of events[2]. Adopting this criterion, one approach to this problem involves identifying the events that are considered most important by our lay historians. In this respect, Liu *et al.* (2005, 2009) have made an inventory of the most important historical

2 See, however, Leduc (2010) for debates on this issue.

events in world history as they are perceived from the vantage points of a variety of cultures. Their analyses show a recency effect: The most frequently mentioned events, such as World War II, are with few exceptions relatively frequent (i.e., 100 years old or less). These are generally negative events. One possible explanation for this finding is that the consequences of these proximal events on the present are much easier to identify than those of more ancient events.

Another explanation may be that earlier events are considered as «taken for granted» context for later ones. Thus, experiments have shown that, when presented with a series of population statistics taken at different times (e.g., the number of Norwegian immigrants to the US in 1880 and 1890), people do not seek to explain the first data point but rather those that occur later and deviate from it (Teigen, 2004). Deviations from these earlier events are what needs to be explained even if the «outlier» is actually the first data in the series.

In a similar vein, Hegarty and Brückmuller (in press) have reviewed studies considering how people explain differences between social groups. They found that, in doing so, they tended to focus on properties of the lower status group as if the high status group represented an established norm. This form of explanation tends to reinforce the view that the lower status group is «deviant» or «powerless» compared to the high status group (cf. Bruckmuller & Abele, 2012). Similarly, in their accounts of historical events, lay, but also professional, historians may tend to be influenced by implicit beliefs about what constitutes the «norm». This has been a central debate in «minority histories» of Western History, which have sought to deviate from traditional accounts of the past told from a «white male» perspective. Brückmuller's work even highlights the importance of how historians may frame questions (i.e., before explanation comes in). Often questions presume an implicit norm: For example, asking why women have been more likely to be homemakers than men suggests that men's activities (not being homemakers) is the norm and that there is something special about women that makes then likely to become homemakers. Brückmuller and Abele (2012) have shown that such linguistic framing tends to implicitly encourage perceptions of status differences between men and women (see also, Brückmuller *et al*., 2012).

Besides consequentiality, another factor that may lead people to seek to explain an event is their unexpectedness. Thus people may seek to explain an event to the extent that it does not follow the «normal» course of history (cf. Hilton & Slugoski, 1986).

However, research on causal attribution (e.g., Bohner, Bless, Schwarz, & Strack, 1988) suggests that this factor may be confounded with unpleasantness (i.e., unpleasant events being more rare). People are more likely to explain negative than positive events. Bohner *et al.* suggest that this may be due to the impact of negative mood on cognitive processing: people may be more likely to engage in systematic, more thorough, processing when the unpleasantness of the events puts them in a negative mood. It is unclear, however, whether this type of account holds for historical events that may bear little self-relevance (contrary to the manipulation used by Bohner *et al*., which involves feedback on an intelligence test).

Time and chronology

How can we explain? To tackle this question, it is useful to consider the most basic level of explanation: chronology. How does the lay historian "time" events? Based on the work by Kryztof Romian (1984), Ricoeur identifies several types of time:

- *Chronometrical* time refers to simply cyclical time periods (such as days, months year).
- *Chronological* time orders events as a function of specific dates. It divides time in subdivided eras that can be marked on a calendar.
- *Chronographical* time involves considering events, not with respect to an objective calendar, but in relation to each other. For example «this happened before my wedding».
- Finally, *chronosophical* time, that is, time imbued with a meaning (such as progress or decline)

Ricoeur suggests, that in spite of their aspiration at scientific objectivity (which should lead them to focus on chronology), historians cannot totally forego a chronosophical approach. Thus, historians' political aspirations may lead them to envision the past as the prelude to a brighter period or as explaining a «decline».

From a «chronographical», perspective, it is legitimate to wonder whether the way an individual appraises history is associated with his or her own experience of the evolution of his life. Perceptions of history may be inherently linked with the direction taken by the individual's existence. For example, people who have experienced a personal reversal of fortune (in the negative direction) may be most nostalgic about the historical events that occurred in their earlier, more joyful, life and embellish them.

It is also legitimate to reflect on the time categories people routinely use to appraise history and how such a categorization affects perceptions of continuity. In a study by Krueger and Clement (1994), people were asked to estimate the average temperature on given days of several months. They estimated between-days differences as higher if the days overlapped two consecutive months. The difference in average temperatures between March 31 and April 1st is perceived as larger than the difference between April1st and April 2nd. Do we have the same tendency when perceiving larger historical periods? The tendency to divide time in "eras" and "periods", or "centuries" may, in the very same way, elicit a tendency to exaggerate the differences between successive periods while viewing these periods as homogeneous. For example, people may have a stereotypical view of the «Middle Ages» as a unitary period whereas specialists on this period highlight the important transitions that took place during these centuries.

Explanation

Beyond chronology, we can consider explanation *per se*. Thus, social psychology has attempted to study how people explain others' behaviours, or "causal attribution" (for reviews, see: Gilbert, 1998, Hewstone, 1989). Indeed, explaining individual or collective behaviour is

often one of the purposes of historical research. When considering the social psychological literature on causal attribution, it appears that the most prevalent model, Kelley's ANOVA model (Kelley, 1973), relies on and inductive, statistical, approach.

Such an approach seeks to explain when people adopt an "internal" (i.e., acto-entered) vs. an external (e.g., situational) explanation for an interpersonal behavior (e.g., John laughs when watching the comedian). To identify the cause of this behavior (e.g., John's sense of humour, the comedian's skills or the good weather), people have to engage in what resembles a statistical analysis. For example, they may try to determine whether John laughs often, whether other people laugh as well when viewing this movie, etc. This is akin to the form of causality typically sought in experimental sciences trying to explain large categories of events (e.g., «Flu X is cased by Virus Y», «High interest rates provoke inflation»).

However, this *nomological* approach may be inappropriate to appraise singular events, which, by definition, do not lend themselves well to statistics (Hilton, 2005)**.** To explain such events, one needs to adopt a more mechanistic approach to causality: Rather than describing statistically plausible causes, one needs to describe a plausible sequence of events. As the legal scholars Hart and Honoré (1959) have suggested:

> "The lawyer and the historian are both primarily concerned to make causal statements about *particulars*, to establish on some particular occasion some particular occurrence was the effect or consequence of some other particular occurrence. The causal statements characteristic of these disciplines are of the form 'this man's death was caused by this blow'. Their characteristic concern with causation is not to discover connexions between types of events, and so not to *formulate* laws or generalizations, but is often to *apply* generalizations, which are already known or accepted, as true and even platitudinous, to particular cases" (pp. 9-10).

In which respects does this perspective differ from the nomological approach? One of its crucial features resides in the role of counterfactuals, i.e. what could have been but did not happen (Hilton, 2005). For example, what would have happened to the French Revolution if Louis XVI had not been recognized by a postmaster as he fled from his kingdom in 1791? If one postulates a causal mechanism based on a prior antecedent, it necessarily implies that in the absence of this antecedent, the focal event would not have taken place. It is therefore legitimate to wonder how individuals elaborate causal chains to explain singular events, an issue that has, bizarrely, attracted very little attention in research on causal attribution. I will consider three research avenues that appear promising in this respect.

Appraising chance

An initial issue concerns the perception of chance. In his famous definition, the mathematician Henri Cournot wrote: "Randomness is but the encounter between independent causal series" (our translation). Similarly, the great English historian James Seelye addresses historians' tendency to underestimate randomness:

> «It is an illusion to suppose that great public events, because they are on a grander scale, have something more fatally necessary about them than ordinary private ones, and this illusion enslaves the judgment.» (Seeley, cited by Schuyler, 1930, p. 274)

Research in cognitive psychology shows that people tend to appraise a contingency between two phenomena as the product of a design or as a form of determinism rather than as the fortuitous outcome of chance. We often behave like the XVIIth century French philosopher Bossuet, who wrote

> «Let us stop talking about chance or fortune; or just as a name we use to conceal our ignorance: What is chance for our uncertain foresight, is a concerted design to a higher foresight, that is, to the eternal foresight which encompasses all causes and affects in a single plan» (Bossuet, cited by Riley, 1990, pp. XXVIII).

Of course, the deity to which Bossuet alludes can be replaced by «destiny» or by «history» (in the marxist sense) depending on one's philosophical inclinations. Historiographers have much debated about the threats posed by determinism (cf. Leduc, 2010). Research on the "conjunction fallacy" (Tversky & Kahneman, 1983) may provide one of the reasons why people are so keen to adopt such deterministic explanations of the past. In research on this cognitive bias, subjects are presented an outcome and two prior events that may explain it. For example, if the outcome is "John had a car accident" and the two antecedents are "it rained on that day" and "he lost control of his car", they may estimate the joint probability of the two antecedents as higher than that of each event considered separately, which violates the law of probability (the joint probability of two events cannot be higher than the probability of any of these events considered separately).

Recent studies precisely suggest that inferring a single mechanism accounting for the two outcomes ("The accident is due to the rain obscuring his view, which his wearing eyeglasses could not compensate") is responsible for this conjunction fallacy and leads us to underestimate the role of chance (Ahn & Bailenson, 1996). Everything seems linked. This is particularly conspicuous when considering accounts of 9/11 in which disparate facts ("The FBI was uninformed", "Rumsfeld was not at the Pentagon", …) can be combined to make the whole event appear to be part of a conspiratorial scheme.

Besides, some events (e.g., weather patterns) can be more readily appraised as fortuitous than others. The conjunction fallacy reflects an intuitive causal explanation. It would be particularly promising to consider how this fallacy affects our perception of historical events, possibly leading us to exaggerate the role of foresight and intentionality in the occurrence of disparate events.

The hindsight bias

One of the distinctive aspects of the historians' position resides in their knowledge of the outcome of the phenomena they investigate. It is very difficult to put oneself in the shoes of the «men of the past» (to borrow Bloch's expression) who did not yet know this outcome. Ignoring outcome knowledge is an arduous task indeed and may lead us to view the past as more foreseeable than it was. When describing the Munich agreements of 1938, contemporary historians know that Daladier and Chamberlain's concessions did not prevent WWII. In addition, the historian is strongly motivated to explain how and why the war occurred in spite of (or thanks to) these agreements. In doing so, he may fall prey to the

famous "retrospective illusion of fatality" (Aron, cited by Leduc, 2010), or "hindsight bias": believing that an event is «more predictable after it becomes known that it was before it became known» (Roese & Vohs, 2012, p. 411). After the fact, the war may seem more predictable than it was then.

Thus historian Florovsky writes:

> «The tendency toward determinism is somehow implied in the method of retrospection itself. In retrospect, we seem to perceive the logic of the events which unfold themselves in a regular or linear fashion according to a recognizable pattern with an alleged inner necessity. So that we get the impression that it really could not have happened otherwise" (cited by Fischhoff, 1975, p. 369).

The hindsight bias was initially studied by Fischhoff (1975). Participants in one of his first studies on this topic read the description of an obscure war between the British and the Nepalese Ghurka in the XIX century. Fischoff then manipulated the outcome of this war by presenting the victor as either the British, the Ghurka, or neither (stalemate). In a control condition, the outcome was not disclosed. Knowing the outcome of the war led participants to perceive this outcome as predictable not only for themselves but for others or for the actual parties engaged in the war. This was true regardless of the ending that was presented to participants. However, after this pioneering study, the role of the hindsight bias in the appraisal of historical events has been somewhat neglected[3] (although it has been applied to many other fields: for a list, see Roese & Vohs, 2012).

When considering series of successive events, the mere postulation of a causal theory seems to generate, or at least facilitate, the occurrence of a hindsight bias (Nario & Branscombe, 1995). When aware of the outcome of the war, one tries to explain it. To do so, one is likely to elaborate a causal chain accounting for it. This leads us to isolate the antecedents that fit in this causal scheme and to neglect the others, which may rapidly disappear from our memory (cf. Blank & Nestler, 2007). In turn, this further contributes to making the outcome appear more necessary than it was. For example, knowing that the British have won against the Ghurka, I may infer that the inadequate weaponry of the latter accounts for this outcome. Conversely, had the Ghurka prevailed, I may have postulated that their superior knowledge of the field had rendered their victory foreseeable. As a consequence, I may better remember information that coheres with my favored explanation. Having forgotten alternate accounts, my prediction of what «should have happened» may be biased: I may then overestimate the role of the factors I have managed to keep in mind (e.g., weaponry, knowledge of the field).

In research on the hindsight bias, antecedents are often pretested in such a way that they predict a specific ending. However, this may not always be the case: depending on how it is interpreted, a same antecedent can be construed as predicting an outcome or its opposite. For example, for the British, having Nepalese guides may be viewed as a «strength» or as a «weakness» depending on whether one assumes that the guides have good or bad intentions towards the British. After the facts, such ambiguous antecedents may be interpreted in line with the ending. In a study by Klein *et al.* (2010), people read the diary of a barman

3 For an early exception, see Fischhoff (1980). See also: Rudmin (2012)

in occupied Belgium during World War II. In one version of the story, the barman eventually saved Jews who came knocking on his door. In another, he denounced them to the Gestapo. And in a third, no outcome was provided. Participants estimated that an ambiguous behaviour such as learning German was meant to spy on the Nazis in the former case but that the barman did so to better collaborate with them in the latter.

Thus, poor memory for the antecedents than do not fit well in the causal chain and outcome-consistent elaboration of the ambiguous ones seem to contribute to the hindsight bias. This is an example of how the explanatory phase may interact with the «archival» phase.

The hindsight bias may have two correlates when considering individuals and groups respectively.

With respect to the memory for individual figures, the hindsight bias may play an important role in «heroization», a phenomena studied by cultural historians (e.g., van Ypersele, 2006a): At the individual level, the tendency to "personalize" history, to see it as produced by "Great Men" (or women) is a mode of explanation that may facilitate the occurrence of the hindsight bias. This is because individual behaviour tends to be preferentially attributed to inner dispositions as opposed to situational factors (Gilbert & Malone, 1995). For example, the behaviour of the Belgian King Albert I during WWI led to his celebration as a hero. This involved portraying him in terms of (stable) personality traits that have characterized him since he was in the crib (van Ypersele, 2006b). However, these traits were inferred from the knowledge of his heroic behaviour during WWI. This becomes a vicious circle when one uses these personality traits to predict his behaviour during WWI.

History is not only made by individuals but, more often, by groups or collectives. Another mechanism facilitating the hindsight bias involves group essentialization (Haslam, Rotschild, & Ernst, 2000). This amounts to attributing stable underlying properties to the given group. When a historical event is considered as the outcome of deep properties of a group, such as its «genes» or its «culture», it becomes subjectively predictable. If the Germans are considered as being inherently anti-semitic (cf. Goldhagen, 1997) prior to World War II, the Holocaust may seem doomed to have happened.

The hindsight bias and misperceptions of chance often go hand in hand: Events that seem more determined than they were may also appear more predictable. But recent research (Nestler, Blank, & Egloff, 2010; Roese & Vohs, 2012) suggests that these components (inevitability and predictability) are distinct and are predicted by different variables. Thus, people may judge the past as predictable not only because they view it as determined. They may also do so out of impression management concerns for example. Highlighting that one has been able to predict important events may project a desirable image of sagacity or control over one's destiny. People may also do so to live up to their status as «experts». Paradoxically, this suggests that professional historians may sometimes (e.g., when their professional self-image is threatened) be more prone to overestimating the predictability of the past than lay historians.

What are the consequences of the hindsight bias on historical explanation? Among other influences, it may lead us to consider people of the past as "naive" and to denigrate

them by portraying one's contemporaries as more prescient than they were (cf. Fischhoff, 1980). This bias also influences our capacity to appraise the indeterminacy of the future: It shows that we underestimate our own ignorance. If viewing the past as predictable may be reassuring, this comfort may have a price in the form of our impaired ability to confront the future. Hence, addressing how ordinary people understand the past may provide us valuable insight as to how they envision the future.

Causal chains and the conspiracy myth

Certain modes or explanation facilitate a deterministic mentality. One of those is the "conspiracy myth" according to which conspiracies have shaped, are shaping and will shape history i.e., are the key to understand history. According to such a mode of thinking, "any historical fact can be reduced to an intention or a subjective volition" (Furet, 1985, p. 91, our translation). Such a conspiratorial mentality is often decried as irrational and paranoid (cf. Klein & Van der Linden, 2010). However, the portrayal of Man in cognitive psychology quite conforms to this picture. Rosset (2008) showed that, by default, people rely on intentional explanations to explain human behaviours. The role of intentions in explanations of the past is echoed in historiography as well. For example, the historiography of the Holocaust has been dominate by an opposition between «intentionalists» and «functionalists» (Mason, 1981). The former argue that Hitler had a master plan to exterminate all European Jews whereas the latter consider that the Holocaust was a consequence of the functioning of the Third Reich's bureaucracy, which was somewhat carried away by its own logic.

McClure, Hilton and Sutton (2007) have considered the role of intentionality in explaining causal chains of events. To do so they created simple chains involving two subsequent antecedents causing an outcome. One of the "causes" was manipulated to be intentional or not. Thus, in one such chain, a man (A) throws a cigarette butt in a forest; another man (B) fans the small flames produced by the butt, which generates a forest fire. McClure *et al.* (2007) have created modified versions of the story in which A is replaced by the reflection of the sun on a mirror and B by the wind. Participants in this study are asked to identify the main cause of the fire. McClure *et al.* found that they select the most proximal cause (i.e., the last one in the chain) involving an intention. Thus, for example, if A throws a cigarette butt and the sun fans the flames, A's behaviour will be the preferred cause. But if A throws a cigarette and B fans the flames, B's behaviour will consider most influential.

This line of work suggests that we may have "conspiratorial" view of history: We overestimate the role of conscious intentions in producing events. In such a narrative, counterfactuals and imagination may be left little space.

Analogy

When faced with the task of explaining events that are relatively unknown or unfamiliar, lay historians may reason by analogy to events with which they are very familiar. For example, in a classic study (Gilovich, 1981), political science students were asked to evaluate a fictitious conflict between two countries (one having invaded the other). The description

of the war had been modified to include cues that were reminiscent of World War II (e.g., blitzkrieg) or Vietnam (e.g., Chinook helicopters). Participants made more interventionists recommendations in the former than in the latter case. Each analogy carries with itself a set of preferred explanations (e.g., liberation vs. greed). Thus, here, the subject does not need to elaborate a completely novel and original explanation but can utilize the interpretational frameworks that he associates with these more famous events. This is of course where the «lay historian» may become a «politician» as his understanding of the past, and the analogies he draws between the past and the present, may inform his decisions and choices *hic et nunc*.

Why explain

Another way to approach this issue involves comparing the functions fulfilled by explanation in academic history compared with those it fulfils for our lay historian. The academic historian is probably more preoccupied with truth and accuracy than the lay historian. Often, the latter will seek to respond to negative emotions, to demand compensation for past injustices that he or his group experienced or to maintain a positive identity (Sahdra & Ross, 2007; Licata & Klein, 2010). He may also do so to achieve a sense of controllability over past events (Marchal *et al.*, in press).

In this regard, McClure *et al*. have found that our preference for intentional explorations in causal chains (such as the example of the forest fire mentioned above) could respond to a function of social regulation: By attributing the fire to intentions, I can symbolically punish and ostracize those who disrupt the social order by causing forest fires. This confers to the lay historian a position that is analogous to that of a prosecutor (in line with Tetlock's metaphor, cf. supra). The analogy between the historian and the judge is often mentioned by scholars such as Ricoeur or Hart and Honoré but we find a concrete empirical demonstration of it in McClure *et al*'s work.

Of course, this approach opens a variety of theoretical predictions.

- The preference for intentional explanation should be stronger when explaining behaviours that threaten the community or violate social taboos.
- When the lay historian is endowed with the role of a judge in the community, or occupies a position of authority. One can however consider other motivations:
    - Preserving or enhancing a sense of control on one's fate (if the past can be explained, the future may be predictable;
    - identifying the culpable;
    - obtaining a reparation;
    - mobilizing in support of a political project;
    - impression management: "I can explain the past or could have predicted it" (Hawkins & Hastie, 1990).

Each of these motivations may be associated with specific explanatory modes and may affect memory in distinct ways.

The Representational Phase

Contrary to memory, history is produced to be told, often in narrative form (Ricoeur, 2004). We can consider at least two functions fulfilled by such a narrative: first an entertainment function (the narrative must be pleasing) and second, what I will call a "rhetorical" function. One needs to convince the audience that the proposed explanation is the correct one, a purpose that has guided historians in varying ways across time: Whereas telling history used to be akin to literature (Burrow, 2008), literary history is often decried as «unscientific» today. There exist several constrains as to the way history can and must be told. This aspect is to my knowledge neglected in research on collective memory (with the notable exception of work by Laszlo, 2008). Yet, the narrative is a specific form of expression, characterized by specific conventions. Ricoeur suggests that historical narratives function like a plot:

> «Narrative coherence brings what I have called a synthesis of the heterogeneous, in order to speak of the coordination between multiple events, or between causes, intentions, and also accidents within a meaningful single entity. The plot is the literary form of this coordination» (Ricoeur, 2000, p. 243).

Thus, the plot, as a narrative form, also constitutes a form of *explanation* (cf. Hart & Honoré's quote above), rendering the distinction between the explanatory and the representational stage quite permeable (see also Burrow, 2008; Delacroix, 2010).

Besides, there may be specific conventions as to which type of explanation is acceptable depending on the event that must be explained. For example, when Jared Diamond (1997) explains the «conquest» of America by the "horizontal" structure of Eurasia compared to the "vertical" (North-South) structure of America (which did not allow germs to spread across the continent and immunize its inhabitants), this may appear like an illegitimate explanation from the perspective of an orthodox historian. More generally, people may adopt preferred modes of explanation, which may in part be a function of culture. For example, Paez, Bobowik, Basabe & Hanke (2011) have identified 8 forms of lay historiography (e.g., «history is produced by Great Men», «history is cyclical», «history is drawn by a superior design», etc.) and found that adhesion to each of these modes of explanation differed across cultures. Besides, these predicted the willingness to fight on behalf of one's country. This should come as no surprise: If, e.g., one believes that history is a purely random process in which luck plays a dominant role, fighting to change the course of history makes less sense than if one believes that it is driven by Great Men. These findings point out at the importance of considering the «top-down» influences of culture on the lay historian's chosen modes of explanation and, in turn, their memory for the past.

Precisely, the focus on narration, which involves telling a story *to* someone, appears all the more important when one considers its impact on memory. Variables that are specific to the communicational context influence memory for the object of narration. For example, people remember a stranger differently depending on whether they have described this stranger to someone who liked or disliked him. This is called the "saying-is-believing" effect (Higgins & Rholes, 1978; for a review, see Echterhoff, Higgins, & Levine, 2009). What and how we talk to others shapes our memory. Other illustrations of such interactions are found in the work by Marsh (2007): The rhetorical intention associated with a message influences

memory for the facts on which it is based. For example, when people are presented with information about a person and asked to praise this person, they later remember more positive traits of the target than those who, on the basis of the same information, were invited to complain about this person.

Hence, we see that the content of our mnemonic archives is partially determined by communicational factors affecting the representational phase.

Similarly, explanation is a function of the audience's characteristics. We have highlighted that, due to its narrative form, historical explanation must often invoke counterfactuals. What the lay historian may consider as a valid explanation for a phenomenon may depend on what he considers' as «abnormal» as opposed to «background knowledge». For example, to explain a car accident, I will probably accord little attention to the fact that the car drove at 60 km/hour. Rather, I will emphasize that the driver was ebriated. However, what is "normal" or "abnormal" depends on one's audience.

> «Causal explanation is first and foremost a form of social interaction. One speaks *of giving* causal explanations, but not attributions, perceptions, comprehensions, categorizations, or memories. The verb *to explain* is a three-place predicate: *Someone* explains *something* to *someone*. Causal explanation takes the form of conversation and is thus subject to the rules of conversation. Causal explanation is therefore different from causal attribution, which does not involve an interpersonal exchange.» (Hilton,1995, p. 65)

What may be habitual for an eskimo fisherman may differ from what seems normal to a Japanese politician. In support of this assumption, Norenzayan and Schwarz (1999) have found that participants in a study provided more dispositional than situational explanations of a mass murder when addressing a personality psychologist. The reverse occurred when the researcher was a social scientist (the identity of the audience was cued by manipulating the letterhead of the questionnaire). Again, we see that the distinction between the explanatory and the representational phase is moot.

Thus, in explaining the past to an audience, people build on a set of mutually accessible knowledge (what the audience knows, what I know that she knows, etc.), which allows him or her to provide a relevant and meaningful account of events. This form of knowledge is called common ground (Clark, 1996) and the process through which it is updated «grounding» (Clark & Brennan, 1991; Kashima, Klein, Clark, 2007). Norenzayan and Schwarz' subjects were not necessarily untruthful. They were not just trying to please the researcher by providing information consistent with the latter's worldview. Rather, they were probably seeking to offer an account that would cohere well with the accepted purpose of their interaction with the researcher: Providing an account of mass murder for the consumption of the researcher's disciplinary colleagues.

In conclusion, it seems particularly worthwhile to consider the communicational goals that ordinary individuals pursue when they narrate the past and how these goals influence the two steps we have mentioned previously. This demands to appraise the communicational processes, such as grounding, through which people develop shared understanding of the past with their audiences.

Limitations

The approach I have presented here is not devoid of limitations.

The first and most obvious one is my treatment of the lay historian as a lone figure, isolated from its peers (at least in the two initial stages). Certainly, lay history, like memory, is often a social endeavor. Memory research has often been criticized for its reliance on an excessively individualistic paradigm (cf. e.g., Rajaram & Pereira-Parasin, 2010). Recent research suggests, by contrast, that shared activities shape individual memory processes (see, e.g., Hirst & Manier, 2010).

Second, our view of the «historian» may seem somewhat rigid and limited. As a psychologist, I may myself have a stereotypical view of the historian's activity. Historiography shows that history has been made and told in many different ways depending on cultural and historical factors (Burrow, 2008). Thus, Herodotus, Michelet and Hume certainly did not follow the same conventions. Even contemporary history can vary deeply between highly narrative accounts of events and more «static» description of cultural patterns in a specific period and location. Similarly, the purposes fulfilled by historical scholarship have been very diverse, between accounts of a ruler's achievement, justification of a nation's deep roots or dry scientific quests for accuracy. Rather than rejecting our metaphor as too fuzzy, it may however be worth considering whether the variations we witness in real historians' approach to the past are also present among lay historians' and whether they impact on their own memories and actions.

Third, the present perspectives focus exclusively on cognitive, and to a lesser extent, on motivational factors, ignoring completely the role of emotions. This is justified in part by my lack of expertise in this field. Obviously, given the role of emotions in remembering, expanding the metaphor put forward here would demand to incorporate this aspect as well.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have tried to put forward a possible framework for appraising the lay understanding of history. This framework is based on the three stages of Historical activity identified by Ricoeur. The metaphor of the lay historian does not only translate existing accounts of memory but may help devise new hypotheses with respect to our relation to the past. This perspective is not devoid of interest for collective memory research given that a memory, be it "collective", is built upon intra-individual cognitive processes. Just as cognitive theory must be compatible with biological constraints, a theory of collective memory needs to consider intra-individual cognitive processes, even if it primarily invokes social or collective factors.

More generally, I hope that the reader is convinced of the interest of this metaphor, not only for understanding how people understand the past, but also for appraising how they act on it in the present.

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