

Objects of Political Desire VI: Memory Over Time

Article by Rui Tavares

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This article is the second part of a digression on memory and economic relationships. The first part is a short story about your dearest memory and the money you did not know it was worth

From the beginning and until the end, we are memory over time. That is the only way we can even start to make sense of ourselves – even more fundamental than that: this is the only way we can even think of an “I” or a “we”. I know that I am someone because – and only as long as – I wake up today aware of being the same entity I was yesterday. Because I have a memory of being myself yesterday, I can imagine being myself tomorrow.

Memory is then at the basis of imagination, and therefore the attribution of meaning, identity, and agency. Memory is not only about the past, and there is nothing reactionary or conservative about valuing memory as the cornerstone of human culture and social organisation. “Historians imagine the past”, once wrote a great historian, Lewis Namier, “to remember the future”. But this is true of every single one of us. My memory is a retroactive imagination of myself, my imagination is an anticipated memory of myself. I know that I am a bit different than I was yesterday, and that tomorrow I will be different than today, but that, in a very deep sense, I remain the same person. Because my memories are my own and form the core of who I am.

Memory tends to be overlooked by economic and social theorists with their language about wages and costs, loss and profit – the alleged building blocks of the economy, and the economy the supposed infrastructure of all the rest. Beliefs, feelings, identities, imagination, fear, anxiety, dreams – all that is supposed to be hazy and fuzzy stuff, the “superstructure”, the “epiphenomena”.

What if it were the other way around? What if our true infrastructure lies in our cognitive retention capability and our social and economic interrelations arise out of memory and its offspring – meaning, identity and imagination?

To find out, let’s head to Late Antiquity, and ask someone who produced the deepest and most complete explorations of the self until, at least, the Romantic period. A young Berber man, educated in a strange new religion, Manichaeism, decides to switch to another even stranger and newer religion, Christianity. His name is Augustine. From Hippo in present-day Algeria, he is more known today to millions of believers as Saint Augustine. His *Confessions* are not only a significant theological text but the most detailed document we have about the course of a life and personal development from the 4th and 5th centuries, anywhere in the world.

The first 10 books of the *Confessions* tell of Augustine’s upbringing, his doubts and mistakes, his penchant for carnal sin and his wish for spiritual improvement, including the famous “God, make me chaste, but not yet” (*da mihi castitatem et continentiam, sed noli modo*) in Book VIII. It gets even more interesting.

In Book X, Augustine realises that whatever he has been telling us, he has been telling from *memory*. That means memory must be an object of inquiry in itself. For without memory, there is no Augustine sense of himself as both an agent or a subject of interest, nor is there the Augustine search for God. For all the miracles of God, the most miraculous of all must therefore be our capacity to remember:

“Great is this force of memory, excessive great, O my God; a large and boundless chamber! who ever sounded the bottom thereof? ... men go abroad to admire the heights of mountains, the mighty billows of the sea, the broad tides of rivers, the compass of the ocean, and the circuits of the stars, and pass themselves by; nor wonder that when I spake of all these things, I did not see them with mine eyes, yet could not have spoken of them, unless I then actually saw the mountains, billows, rivers, stars which I had seen, and that ocean which I believe to be, inwardly in my memory, and that, with the same vast spaces between, as if I saw them abroad. Yet did not I by seeing draw them into myself, when with mine eyes I beheld them; nor are they themselves with me, but their images only. And I know by what sense of the body each was impressed upon me.”

Augustine is arriving at the most fundamental of fundamentals: how we are aware of our own existence and of our interrelation with the world. Not only do we know that “I am myself” because we remember, but we can only distinguish between ourselves and the world outside, and relate to it, because memory is there to organise our experience. What to fear, what gives us pleasure, what to avoid, what to repeat: memory is the mediator between ourselves and the world.

But Augustine is not finished yet. For if memory is a retentive capability at the basis of our cognition, that retention can only be possible over time. So Augustine writes another book of his *Confessions*, the XI, on time itself, which includes what is probably his most famous quote:

What then is time? ... I know not: yet I say boldly that I know, that if nothing passed away, time past were not; and if nothing were coming, a time to come were not; and if nothing were, time present were not.

Here he explains how we are memory over time. Because without memory, there is no personhood, no agency, no possibility for us to be subjects of history.

In my [last column](#), I speculated on what would happen if memory was money – if we could give personal memories as collateral on a bank loan, and lose the emotional sense of them being ours when we defaulted. If this were possible, if personal memories could be encapsulated and exchanged, they would

become tradable goods, thus overcoming the last barrier to commodifying human dignity itself.

In this dystopia, the poor and indebted would lose their most precious memories and the rich would buy them up. The sensation of the first kiss, of diving into the ocean to fish for pearls, of having been at the front of a battle or having won an Olympic marathon could be bought and sold. We can be sure that there would be a market for them

That hasn't happened – or at least, not fully, not yet. But even if memory is not money and if it is not entirely true that “time is money”, as the platitude goes, the opposite does hold true. Money is time. We use it to buy things produced with other people's time and to save ourselves the time of doing something. Think of all the professional transactions, from lawyers to dentists, that are counted and invoiced by the minute or hour.

Money is memory too: a crude way of recording a transaction, where the symbol replaces the thing exchanged. As money ceases to be represented by coins and notes, it is increasingly explicit that it is just memory, an entry in an accountant's ledger or a line of code stored on a server. With the emergence of electronic currencies, be they crypto or central bank-backed, money carries an information chain recording all transactions that have been made in the past, thus becoming an increasingly sophisticated form of memory.

Beyond that, the economy of money, work and consumption runs on the infrastructure of memory to a much greater extent than we usually think. On a more immediate level, advertising for holidays and experiences or for cameras and smartphones is very direct and frank with us: buy memories, we are told, have this experience and record it so you can keep it and say you did it. If consumption is fleeting, the memory of that consumption crystallises it. Sure, we work to earn money to meet our basic needs. But from there on, we work to have time to do things we remember, or to do nothing and have the memory of that leisure – *otium et negotium*, as the Latins used to say. Memory is thus key to the permanent hamster wheel that makes the economy turn.

The analysis runs even further. We now know that we live in an attention economy – and there is no attention without memory. Advertisers, cultural creators, and journalists say they compete for eyeballs. But eyeballs are useless without the memory capacity behind them.

This attention economy is also at the basis of today's politics. When we say that populists offer a “politics of resentment”, we have to recognise that resentment depends on the memory – real or constructed – of an injury. Progressives would be wrong to want to counter a politics anchored in memory with another grounded in supposedly more “rational” interests. Memory itself, as I said at the outset, has nothing inherently reactionary or conservative about it. We use memory to imagine what we want to be; we use memory to remember past solidarities and victories; we use memory to construct a narrative of progress and explain to each other where we come from and where we can go.

Progressives struggle with the attention economy because of their mistaken notion – founded in both Marxian as well as neoliberal thought – that people should first think of themselves as economic agents. To again talk to people in a meaningful way, to inspire and mobilise, to counter the reactionaries' capability to exercise anger and resentment, we too need to re-evaluate the foundational role that memory, identity and imagination play in human individuals, societies, and the species as a whole.



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