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What Is Social Memory?

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

What Is Social Memory? Scot A. French In planning our conference on social memory and southern history, one question arose again and again: What is social memory? Good question. Social memory is a concept used by historians and others to explore the connection between social identity and historical memory. It asks how and why diverse peoples come to think of themselves as members of a group with a shared (though not necessarily agreed upon) past: Hatfields and McCoys, southerners and northerners, blacks and whites, natives and immigrants, Americans all. Some historians use the term "collective memory," placing the emphasis on the internalization of group identities. I prefer the term "social memory" because it calls attention to the social contexts in which people shape their group identities and debate their conflicting perceptions of the past. The concept of social memory is relatively new to the historical profession. It builds on recent theoretical developments in sociology, anthropology, literary criticism, and psychology. In 1989, the *Journal of American History* devoted an entire issue to the theme of "Memory and American History," noting the recent surge of scholarly interest in the subject. After surveying the literature in other

disciplines, editor David Thelen laid out a research agenda for historians. "The historical study of memory," he wrote, "would be the study of how families, larger gatherings of people, and formal organizations selected and interpreted identifying memories to serve changing needs. It would explore how people together searched for common memories to meet present needs, how they first recognized such a memory and then agreed, disagreed, or negotiated over its meaning, and finally how they preserved and absorbed that meaning into their ongoing concerns." Thelen saw the study of memory opening new fields of inquiry for historians. For too long historians had dismissed memory as a poor substitute for history, a partial or distorted version of what had really happened. The study of memory would reacquaint historians with the ways in which nonhistorians thought about the past, the ways in which they talked about history and used it to make sense of the world around them.¹ Alón Confino, a University of Virginia historian who is studying the commercialization of memory in modern Germany, attributes the rise of scholarly interest in memory to several factors: the decline of the historian's traditional role as guardian of a singular national identity; the proliferation of "counter-memories" among groups searching for their historical origins; and the role of the mass media in turning an ever-growing number of collective memories into marketable commodities. Geopolitically, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia have focused international attention on the role of memory in forging new national identities and fueling ethnic conflict.² Some historians draw a sharp distinction between history and memory. For them history is a "discipline built on evidence," whereas memory is "a malleable guide to the past." While I agree that historians are guided by a strict set of rules and conventions for writing about the past, I would argue that the stories they tell have much in common with the stories told by nonhistorians. In my view, history is a genre of memory, not just the detached arbiter of it. As professional historians, we tend to favor history over less "disciplined" forms of memory such as fiction, folklore, and autobiography. Yet history is no less malleable than other guides to the past; new sources, methodologies, and social concerns allow for constant revision of the stories we tell. By the same token, Hollywood filmmakers and Disney Imagineers look to history for inspiration and legitimation while adhering to their own sets of rules and conventions. History feeds off other forms of memory, just as they feed off of history. I hope the papers presented in this volume will shed some light on the similarities and differences between history and other genres of memory. We conceived of this national graduate student conference as a way to look at southern history from a new perspective. And yet, a skeptic might legitimately ask: Is this perspective really new? The study of changing historical interpretations sounds much like professional historiography, which first evolved into...

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Alon Corfino, a University of Virginia historian who is studying the com-



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