Benoît Majerus

The “lieux de mémoire”:
a place of remembrance for European historians?

During the last 30 years, "lieux de mémoire" has evolved into one of the most popular terms in European historiography. It was coined by the French historian Pierre Nora in the late 1970s. Initially established with the aim of providing new ways for relating national history, the “lieux de mémoire” spread quickly all over Western Europe. The concept certainly belongs to the most successful transfers in European historiography of the last decades, independently of the occasionally fundamental criticism given to Pierre Nora’s seven-volume work or to similar projects elsewhere. The paradigm not only crossed language borders without any apparent problem, it also left its primary academic frame: today the term “lieux de mémoire” is used in academia as well as in tourism.

Table 1 – Number of mentions in WorldCat (request 10 December 2012)

The reasons for this success are multifaceted. Without any doubt, the “lieux de mémoire” proved to be a meaningful code for historians who wanted to partake in the memorial turn. Whereas the linguistic turn vanished quite quickly into thin air, memory studies were institutionalised rather fast and successfully so: handbooks,

1 I refer to the general concept of the idea when written with inverted commas, I use italics when referring to the books edited by Pierre Nora.

2 In 1991, there was an early double recognition of the term, both linguistic and legal. “Lieux de mémoire” was added to the French dictionary Le Grand Robert de la langue française. In the loi du 8 janvier 1993 pour l’aspect paysager, the “lieu de mémoire” became a legal category for heritage preservation.

3 WorldCat (www.worldcat.org) is the world’s biggest bibliographical data base, with more than 72,000 participating libraries. "WorldCat", in: Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. 2013.
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National Realms of Memory

Pierre Nora's project grew within the national frame of French historiography, itself closely bound to the birth of the French nation-state in the nineteenth century. Its aim was to tell the 'history of France'. The Lieux de mémoire got somehow stuck halfway. On the one hand, Pierre Nora tried to overcome the classic master narrative of the nation. From the 1960s, narrating and remembering slowly became his main interests. Hints of this can be detected in his manner of writing history – as in his studies on Ernest Lavisse and his work as the editor for humanities at the French publisher Gallimard – e.g. in the series Archives or in books such as Georges Duby's Dimanche de Bousines or Philippe Joutard's La légende des Camisards, which were in some way forerunners of the Lieux de mémoire.11 Without being committed to cultural history, Pierre Nora belonged to a circle of historians who rejected the classic social history promoted by the Annales movement, trying instead to write a new (political) history. On the other hand, Nora stood in the tradition of nineteenth-century French historiography, represented inter alia by Ernest Lavisse, to whom Nora dedicated an article in the Lieux de mémoire. One of his colleagues, Jacques Revel, even called him the "Lavisse des temps nouveaux".12 Starting from a rather pessimist stance – the disappearance of Remembrance in French society – Pierre Nora not only wanted to save the past from being forgotten by creating an inventory. He also put forward a new grand narrative for France, on the basis of three major categories: La République, La Nation, Les France. Though Nora had a good grasp of the latest developments in Anglophone scholarship,13 he remained deeply rooted in a French pattern. He based his project on the theory on collective memory by the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs. Pierre Nora wrote from within the French nation. Phrasings such as "notre mémoire nationale", show Nora's strong identification with his object.

The structural trichotomy, which was strongly marked by the Troisième République, provoked numerous critiques. The omission of colonial history, migration, women, peripheral regions (such as Corsica or Brittany), social groups (such as peasants and workers) was criticised as contributing to a narrative that celebrated


11 François Dosse: Pierre Nora.

12 Ibid., p. 657.

13 A tripartite division is a typical feature of French history writing. Until today, "dissertations" written by French history students consist of three parts.

14 He himself wrote several articles about the United States and contributed a lot to the French reception of American and English anthropology and sociology as editor of Gallimard: François Dosse: Pierre Nora.
French history as a coherent unity, unconcerned by processes of exclusion. The "Nation" had not been undermined, but reinforced. Although this critique pointed mainly at the content of the book, its proponents seem partly to have taken issue with the authors of the seven-volume series, who were mainly male, French, historians, and who had a position at a Paris university or research institution. The authors represented the French historiographical establishment.

The French project very soon saw a double transfer: a translation into other languages, and a transfer of its approach. At a first stage, parts of the *Lieux de mémoire* were translated into German and English. Tilmann Robbe showed how important — and equally delusive — the German reception of Nora had been during the first years, partly due to an 'exacerbating' translation by Wagenbach. Zwischen Geschichte und Gedächtnis contained articles from Nora that he wrote in and about the *Lieux de mémoire*. But Wagenbach's translated articles were published in 1990 two years before the last volume of the *Lieux de mémoire*. This booklet depicted a very conservative Nora, an image that endures in Germany until today. In many succeeding German projects, the translation by Wagenbach tended to be quoted rather than the original texts. They did not do justice to many of Nora's contributions in the early 1990s, which carried an entirely different tone than those of the 1980s. Thus, a "Nora imaginaire" was created, whose changes of tone over the ages were ignored, while Nora himself altered his positions considerably on several points during the eight years of the *Lieux de mémoire* project: in 1984, he regretted the disappearance of remembrance, in 1992 he regretted the bullimia of remembrance.

In the United States, several chapters of the *Lieux de mémoire* were published in 1996. The three-volume edition — *Conflicts and Divisions, Traditions, Symbols* — was supervised by Lawrence Kritzman, one of the most influential American professors in French literature. It contained mainly articles of *Les France*. The collection tried to find a balance between the theoretical texts and those that matched how North Americans imagined France (e.g. *cog gaulois, Tour de France*). Later, translations were made i.a. into Japanese, Czech, Hungarian, Russian, Polish, Portuguese ... At a second stage, Nora's approach was transferred to different European national contexts. For some time, Pierre Nora observed this transfer critically. In an article from 1993, entitled *La notion de "lieu de mémoire" est-elle exportable?*, he put forward several arguments, pleading against a translation from one historiographical culture to another. First of all, the word "lieu de mémoire" itself, an adaptation of Cicero's *locus memoriae*, could not be translated into English, German or Spanish, according to Nora. Second, he was convinced that his undertaking was born in a specific French context, marked by a transition from history to memory. In no other country would historians have played such an important role in the nation-building process. Finally, the structure of the undertaking was genuinely French. In no other country would the three-fold distinction make any sense. Even if Pierre Nora's opposition weakened over the following years, his scepticism remained. In 1994, he pleaded for a compared history of memory and concluded that "en matière de mémoire, il n'y a pas d'exception française". [There is no 'French exception' in terms of memory.] But only a few pages further, he spoke of a "surdétermination mémorielle" (over-determination by memory) that would be specific for the French model. By 2001, his opposition had further weakened: the differences between Germany and France were no longer considered to be of a conceptual nature but rather related to the contents. The numerous national projects differed from each other in their specific approaches, they did have several things in common. The inspiration they took from Nora was generally acknowledged: their aim was to question the national master narrative and to write the history of that narrative. Thus, as with the *Lieux de mémoire*, the starting point of these projects is the reflection on national narratives. They belonged to a wider wave of historiography, that told the national tradition through cultural history ("als Kulturgeschichte der nationalen Tradition"). Most of the projects were dedicated to the metaphoric use of the term "lieu", defined as a projection screen for identities, being either of immaterial or material nature. Most, however, were also in favour of telling less coherent narratives. Étienne François and Hagen Schulze, 22 Pierre Nora: *La notion de "lieu de mémoire" est-elle exportable?*, in Pim den Boer/Willem Frijhoff (eds.): *Lieux de mémoire et identités nationales*, Amsterdam 1993, pp. 3–10.
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In conclusion of its first volume, Mario Isenghi, editor of the Italian project, wrote: "La prima (...) dalle stimolazioni venue dal grande progetto portato a termine de Pierre Nora a dai suoi collaboratori inventando e divulgando anche il concetto dei "lieux de mémoire"."30 Nora's project was thus explicitly pointed out as meaningful. At the same time, Pierre Nora felt deceived. He felt so for methodological reasons, as the Italian project was not a "histoire au second degré". The Luoghi della memoria offensively took the side of the nation state in the dispute between central state and regions.31 Furthermore, Nora was disappointed that he had not been involved in the project. He had plans to launch himself a collection of Italian "lieux de mémoire", which he cancelled once the Isenghi project had been published. This clash revealed two problems. First, the Lieux de mémoire quickly became an editorial stake. Second, it raised the question of who owns the 'copyright' of the concept.32

This first wave of transfer of the 1990s and early 2000s was coined by the adoption of this national point of view, especially in Western Europe. Indeed, the former Iron Curtain played a considerable role for the (non-)reception of the Lieux de mémoire. Pierre Nora's seven-volume work were to be found in all Western European national libraries, but were absent from most in Eastern Europe. All the national projects were carried out in Western Europe.

Regional realms of memory

In the first decade of the new millennium, this changed with the first regional projects appearing on the market.33 The transfer from the nation to the region had different reasons. On a historiographical level, regions appeared as an attractive alternative to the national level. On a political level, there has been a revaluation of regional identities over the last 30 years, going together with a strengthening of regional centres of decision.34 These direct political reasons were important for

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29 Jan and Aleida Assmann had been aware of Pierre Nora's project from an early date and included it in their analysis, thus actively contributing to both paradigms being seen as connected: Jan Assmann: Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen, Munich 1992; Aleida Assmann: Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses, Munich 1999.
establishing most regional projects, to the point that studies of regional "lieux de mémoire" can often be linked to a region-building process quite similar to the nation-building process of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. History appears—once more—as a 'legitimating science' for new political spaces.

Mémoire et lieux de mémoire en Lorraine, edited by two professors of the University of Nancy, is a good example in this regard. First, the editors demonstrated that smaller social groups had their own "lieux de mémoire" and that these can construct their identity in similar ways. Second, one of the editors, Philippe Martin, made two important contributions that have often been overlooked. He introduced a scale (based on the number of people who can relate to a lieu) by distinguishing between "le lieu de souvenir, le lieu d'identité [et] le lieu de mémoire" (site of remembrance, site of identity and site of memory). Moreover, he also made some pertinent remarks about the events, people, and places that had never become or ceased to be "lieux de mémoire". Both aspects had been overlooked in Nora's Lieux de mémoire, whose vision was clouded by the national approach and which did not take into account the variation in scale. At the same time, the Lorraine project was being politically used by the elite of the region. In France, regions have gained a greater importance as administrative units since the onset of decentralisation in the 1980s and when conseillers régionaux (regional councilors) were elected directly by their constituents. In his introduction to the Lorraine volume, the president of the regional council voiced a political agenda: "j'ai pu mesurer combien la Lorraine avait été dépossédée de ses lieux de mémoire par l'évidente nécessité, pour la République, de constituer une cohésion. (...) Ce concept de carrefour culturel, profondément ancré dans l'histoire et la réalité lorraine, la Troisième République nous en a dépossédé en partie. Aujourd'hui, la Lorraine retrouve grâce à la construction européenne, nous fait l'impérieux devoir de reconstruire nos lieux de mémoire... la région Lorraine est naturellement, et de toujours, un espace de rencontre."

The Baden-Württemberg project, published on the 60th anniversary of the federal state's foundation, similarly appears as part of regional identity-building. In Baden-Württemberg, the lack of a common regional identity caused an acrimony argument between Baden and Württemberg in the early 1950s, at the time patrimonial projects are increasingly blurred. The writing of history was often closely intertwined with debates on memory politics.

Transnational realms of memory

The movement away from national historiography and towards other levels gained speed by the growing number of projects on transnational "lieux de mémoire", especially during the first decade of the new millennium. Today, this type of projects dominates. The transnational trend comes with three characteristics. The first of these is a geographical shift: Central and Eastern Europe, until then hardly studied, came to the fore. In these regions, nation-building processes started later and have repeatedly been interrupted. Many transnational projects developed at a time of strong nationalisation in that part of Europe, with the war in former Yugoslavia seeing its climax. In this context, "lieux de mémoire" did not necessarily represent a possible deconstruction of national discourse, instead they were seen as means to construct positively connoted European narratives, in opposition to negatively connoted national(ist) narratives. The transnational space appeared as a potential solution to national constriction. Most of the scholars involved defined the analysed sites by their transnational character, to which a national approach seemed to be impossible. Matthias Weber describes Eastern Central Europa as a "zerrissenen, dezentralen Raum" and its ethnic, religious, and social jaggedness seemingly so conspicuous that homogeneous cultures of remembrance could never establish themselves as they have in Western Europe. We observe partly an inversion of Pierre Nora's original idea: instead of questioning the existing images, the central objective was to invent new ones and to solidify these. In some cases,

38 Jacques Le Rider/Moritz Cäky/Monica Sommer: Vorwort, in: idem (eds.); Transnationale Gedächtnisorte in Zentraleuropa, pp. 7-11.
the editorial principle of "lieux de mémoire" even appeared as an explicit project for a "tragfähige politische Identität" in Europe, as proposed by Claus Leggewie, a request that would be incompatible with the political agenda of many regional or national projects.40

Second, the point of view was no longer one from the inside, but historians were now writing on spaces they did not necessarily belong to. A remarkable example for this is the Vienna based project on Central Europe. Ten of the eleven articles are written by Western European scholars.41 In the national "lieux de mémoire" projects, the analysed space was normatively configured by the nation-state's current borders. The question what space or community was actually analysed could be left unaddressed. In transnational projects, this is far less evident. What is Eastern Europe? What Central Europe? What about Eastern Central Europe? And what is Europe in the first place? In choosing a certain space, the historian interfered directly with the normative definition of the particular "lieux de mémoire". This became especially clear in the European "lieux de mémoire" project of the Leibniz Institute of European History in Mainz. In the backdrop of a polarised debate on the borders of the European Union, the editors deliberately chose a wide definition: Russia was integrated with an article on the "third Rome", Turkey with an article on Istanbul.42 While Nora's concept of "lieu de mémoire" was at the base, the idea of deconstruction was far less present. The authors' position emerged most clearly in the project on Christianity: "Auszugspunkt aller Überlegungen ist dabei jeweils das Verständnis eines Erinnerungsortes hier, im deutschsprachigen Raum, und heute."43 A quick glance at the scholars who wrote transnational Lieux de mémoire proves as interesting as for the national projects. The Mainz project was mainly written by German (70%), male (74%) (despite its wide conception of Europe). Thus, one can wonder to what degree these European "lieux de mémoire" are not actually German. This 'colonial' point of view is overcome only sporadically in transnational projects. In most cases, they reflect the view of Western European academics on Eastern Europe. An exception is the German-Polish project by the Center for Historical Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Berlin and the Carl von Ossietzky University in Oldenburg, which included authors from both countries and aimed at an histoire croisée, not only in theory, but also in practice.

Third, the link between the geographic frame and identity was broken. Although the "lieux de mémoire" were intended from the beginning to refer to more than material places, the analysed identities were defined in spatial terms (Belgium, Schleswig-Holstein, Eastern Europe etc.) In this - so far final - phase, religious, periodical or political categories have come more and more to the foreground. Pierre Nora has argued that "lieux de mémoire" could be found for any identity: "Lieu de mémoire, donc: toute unité significative, d'ordre matériel ou idéal, dont la volonté des hommes ou le travail du temps a fait un élément symbole du patrimoine mémoriel d'une quelconque communauté."44 In the French project, political, generational, or religious identities were occasionally discussed, but the national identity remained decisive. In projects on Christianity, Antiquity or the German Social Democrat Party, this link between identity and space was opened up. For the first time, the contrast between the specific projects and Nora's paradigm was openly discussed.45 In their introduction, Christoph Markschie und Hubert Wölf mentioned that: "Der hier vorgelegte Band Erinnerungsorte des Christentums erscheint zwar unter dem von Pierre Nora geprägten und vergleichbaren Bänden aufgegriffenen Titel. Allerdings ist das hier zugrunde gelegte Konzept der memoria, des Gedächtnisses und der Erinnerung, ein genuin christliches, denn das Christentum als Offenbarungsreligion ist nicht anders denn als Erinnerungsreligion zu denken."46 In another 'transnational' project, the transfer of "lieux de mémoire" from an academic context to a successful mediation tool was also acknowledged.47 The editors of Erinnerungsorte der Antike justified their project with the following words: 'Dass daher Publikationen zum 'kulturellen Gedächtnis' einerseits und zur griechisch-römischen Geschichte andererseits gefragt sind, die in zugänglicher Weise und ohne (überflüssigen) Jargon, aber präzise und differenziert den Stand der kultur- und altertumswissenschaftlichen Forschung widerspiegeln, bedarf angesichts der anhaltenden Nachfrage keiner weiteren Begründung.'48 In another project dedicated to Antiquity, the "lieux de mémoire" were explicitly not limited to (post)modern (i.e. nineteenth to twenty-first century). Instead, the authors asked which sanctuaries represented "lieux de mémoire" from archaic to Hellenist times.49 We here observe a decisive shift from the initial paradigm. Nora's Lieux de mémoire were not only 'nationally' bound, but also 'temporality', as a concept

40 Claus Leggewie: Der Kampf um die europäische Erinnerung. Ein Schlachtfeld wird besiegt, that should contribute to a corporate feeling. In 2010, 60 of these places where chosen across
41 Le Rider/Cały/Sommer (eds.): Transnationaler Gedächtnisraum in Zentraleuropa
43 Erinnerungsorte, in: idem (eds.): Erinnerungsorte des Christentums, p. 35

46 In Germany, the publisher Beck distinguished itself as editor of the Erinnerungsorte, with projects about Germany, the GDR, Christianity and Antiquity.
50 Haake/Jung (eds.): Geschichte Heiligtümer als Erinnerungsorte. Only one article of Jacquesmin deals with the question, whether to accept this concept, created for (post)modern societies, can also be applied to ancient societies. Recently, another research project found a conclusion close to the project of Haake/Jung: Anne Gangloff: Mémoires et lieux de mémoire dans l'Antiquité grecque-romaine, in: idem (ed.): Lieux de mémoire en Orient ancien à l'époque impériale, pp. 1–32.
cept focusing on periods characterised by a caesura with the past: "Lieux de mémoire are fundamentally vestiges, the ultimate embodiments of a commemorative consciousness that survives in a history which, having renounced memory, cries out for it. The notion has emerged because society has banished ritual. It is a notion produced, defined, established, constructed, decreed, and maintained by the artifice and desire of a society fundamentally absorbed by its own transformation and renewal."51 But in this project, this caesura did not exist: extremely ritualised societies across the ages appeared in most articles. Michael Jung commented on this wider temporal scope, stating that a determining factor was that "die Erinnerung auch in traditionellen Gesellschaften ebenso Ausdruck einer Identitätsbestimmung und Selbstdefinition wie in der Moderne [ist]."52

Finally, the 'transnationalisation' of "lieux de mémoire" has shown the enormous resonance this originally French concept has received in German-speaking countries. 12 of 16 transnational projects were published in German.53 Three reasons for this success may be put forward. First, nobody continued Pierre Nora's work in France, where his central and hegemonic position proved a hindrance; in Germany, the project leaders Franz and Schulze never had the same function. Second, research on Central and Eastern is more widespread in Germany than in France. The Eastern European space seems particularly adapted for the transnational approach, especially with respect to the culture of remembrance, thus becoming a successful playground for German Eastern European studies. Third, this 'histoire au deuxième degré' seems more appropriate to emphasise breaks and discontinuities than the previous national narratives of a more teleological type; again this seems more suited to a Germany marked by World War Two and the subsequent two German states. While primarily created to analyse the centralised state of France, the concept has in the long term been deemed more fitting for telling the history of disappeared (e.g. GDR), disappearing (e.g. Belgium), or becoming (e.g. European Union) states.

Conclusions

This article did not answer the question whether one could speak of a "gesamteuropäische Erinnerungskultur"54. It asked instead how the term "lieu de mémoire" developed into a pan-European historiographical concept. It certainly represents one of the most successful concepts in European historiography of the last 30 years. Hardly any other catchword has seen a similar spread, a phenomenon accelerating over the past ten years.

Table 3 - Academic "lieux de mémoire" projects

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Few other concepts have been adopted across so many different European languages and cultures, becoming one of the few terms that are well known to the majority of (Western) European historians. It could thus be seen as a sign for the development of a common European communication area between historians.55 "Lieux de mémoire" have themselves developed into a "lieu de mémoire" for historians. The different national, regional, and transnational projects led to important methodological and political controversies. Few other works have been so massively reviewed in journals and newspaper supplements over the last decades, as seen with the Lieux de mémoire in France, the Erinnerungsorte in Germany or the Lieux de mémoire au Luxembourg in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. So far, the history of "lieux de mémoire" has been a Streitgeschichte.56

Intended as a programmatic deconstruction of national narratives, the concept developed primarily, yet paradoxically, within those same national frames, both with respect to the content of projects — the areas discussed — and with respect to practice — French historians writing on France, Italian historians on Italy etc. But, over the past ten years, there has been a considerable change.

The many "lieux de mémoire" projects point at wider developments in historiography on three levels:

European historiography struggles to overcome the separations created by the Cold War. The "lieux de mémoire" had for a long time remained an exclusively Western European product, almost like a relic of the Cold War. Most Western European countries had a "lieux de mémoire" project — with the notable exception of Great Britain.57 If the concept has been adopted in Eastern Europe,58 it happened mostly as a result of Western initiatives, e.g. the German Eastern European institutes. An exception to this is the German-Polish project, in which Polish historians have taken the lead. Maciej Górný and Kornelia Kocztal put this thesis

53 All in all, 20 of 33 reviewed projects are written in German.
55 Though Nora's concept was received and discussed in other continents, there has not yet been a mature project in America, Africa, Asia or Australia.
57 Whether this exception should be understood as deficient integration of Great Britain in Europe or as a hint to another culture of remembrance, remains to be analysed.
58 Maciej Górný and Kornelia Kocztal refer well-founded on the fact that there has not been any large-scale lieux de mémoire project in Eastern Europe as well as in Scandinavia: Maciej Górný/ Kornelia Kocztal: The (non)-travelling concept of les lieux de mémoire. Central and Eastern European perspectives.
into perspective by analysing how Nora’s texts were translated into Czech, Polish and Russian in the late 1990s. At the same time they also talk of a “Nicht-Reise” of the concept to Eastern Europe.59

The different “lieux de mémoire” projects reflect the current crisis of national historiography. The national editorial successes have demonstrated the existing demand for national narratives. And yet, the concept of “lieux de mémoire” failed to fulfill two of its objectives. First, all projects were repeatedly accused of not questioning the nation, but consolidating it. Paul Zahlen’s critique of the Luxembourgish Lieux de mémoire has been iterated in similar terms in many other European countries: “Les promoteurs du projet font des pieds et des mains (...) pour sortir de cette logique (de l’impasse) ‘nationaliste’... sans grand succès.”60 Second, the term “lieu de mémoire” quickly left academia to be used by the heritage movement. Pierre Nora himself has described this development in critically terms: “Étrange destinée de ces Lieux de mémoire: ils se sont voulus, par leur démarche, leur méthode et leur titre même, une histoire de type contre-commémoratif, mais la commémoration les a rattrapés. (...) Mais si fort pourtant est aujourd’hui l’emprise de la mémoire que la boulifamie commémorative d’époque a absorbé jusqu’à la tentative destinée à maîtriser le phénomène; et que, aussitôt lancé l’expression ‘lieu de mémoire’, l’outil forgé pour la mise en lumière de la distance critique est devenu l’instrument par excellence de la commémoration.”61 Travel guides, coffee table books, advertisement brochures avidly took up the term.62 Credited by the academic world, “lieu de mémoire” has become a selling point for tourism.

To get out of the national dilemma, and because Western Europe stands no longer in the centre of interest, there has been an adjustment of the analysed levels of the Lieux de mémoire in the last years. Now, regional and transnational frames are in the focus. The topography of ‘lieux de mémoire’ has fundamentally changed.63 The Lieux de mémoire thus illustrate a wider development of the European historiography that embraces the transnational paradigm in the last 20 years.64

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59 Ibid.

Kornelia Kończal
Realms of Memory beyond the Nation:
What can happen to an old Concept in new Surroundings?

The international career of the category of lieu de mémoire, coined in the 1980s by Pierre Nora, French historian and series editor at Gallimard, was all but predictable. Nora’s intention was to create a new tool that would be useful for rethinking the history of France. In the beginning, the originator and editor of the seven volumes of “Les Lieux de mémoire” (1984–1992) was even convinced that his concept could be applied only to the French past. Having completed his long-term project, Nora nonetheless adjusted his conviction regarding the French ‘exclusiveness’ of his category:

What began as an empirical, experimental, almost playful attempt to track down lieux de mémoire would thus open up infinitely more exciting new vistas: a notion improvised for the needs of the moment would then become a category in terms of which contemporary history could be made intelligible, or perhaps even more than a category, a ‘concept’ – a thing quite rare in history.1

The last 20 years have proved that the concept of realms of memory – to use the problematic English translation of les lieux de mémoire preferred by Nora himself – can be applied with success in a variety of geographical and temporal settings. Consequently, there can be no talk of French ‘exclusiveness’ of Nora’s notion, if only because from the mid-1990s onwards historians from many Western European countries have been conceptualising large-scale research projects inspired by Nora’s idea. While nationally designed approaches still dominate the landscape of memory studies conducted by historians, some attempts have already been made in a bid to combine the history of memory with regional, comparative and transnational perspectives.2

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