

# **The Value of Memory for a Society**

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## **Abstract**

Our aim is to focus and enhance the significance of the collective memory related to the identity formation of a society. From its vast thematic, we selected the ‘collective memory’ and introduced photography as its important tool. We linked memory traces to ‘oblivion’ and history science, as a representation of the past. Our paper does not draw final conclusions; on the contrary it is subject to further interdisciplinary inoculations.

## **Preamble: Individual and Collective Memory**

Recollection is the sire of all arts and sciences, among which history as well. Kleio was one of her daughters. <sup>1</sup> The science of reminiscence, the mnemonic, which is ascribed to Simonides of Ceos, constitutes the foundation of the educational process. Aristotle assigned her a privileged position at the fields of thought. He distinguished the conscious from the unconscious memory. Besides, according to ancient Greeks, memory constituted a prerequisite of human thinking. <sup>2</sup>

For the researcher of a society, present or past, memory constitutes an instrument and research field as well, i.e. the means and object of his study. Even individual memory is not merely a personal memory.<sup>3</sup> Memories which structure our identity and provide us with a frame for our thought and action are not only ours· we

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have learned, borrowed and, in a way, inherited them from our families, communities and cultural traditions.

History itself constitutes the product and source of social memory. The attempt to define the role of social memory with regard to the reform and apprehension of the past is an insistent occupation, similar to someone's vain effort to illustrate a figure utilizing quicksilver or paint his portrait in a room surrounded by mirrors at all its levels.<sup>4</sup>

Maurice Halbwachs, who – as an adherent of the Emile Durkheim School – attributed great importance to social consciousness' collective nature, is considered to be the first theorist of 'collective memory'.<sup>5</sup> He overlooked, however, the problem of how individual consciousnesses can be affiliated with collectivities, which consist of individuals.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, this leads to the formulation of a collective consciousness concept which is oddly separated from the real thinking processes of each individual. Thus, when we refer to the term 'social memory' we will mean 'collective memory'.

Collective memory has been subjected to great alterations after the social sciences' formation and is radical for the interdisciplinary characteristics dynamically developed within them.<sup>7</sup>

The kinds of common memories which people share are the ones related to a social group's members, whether these memory structures are 'timeproof' (family, village community, group of tobacco workers etc) or informal and probably temporary structures (a group of people dining together, a group of a café habitues).

Halbwachs rightly maintained that social groups compose their own images for the world, devising a concert version of the past and insisted that these versions are crystallized via communication and not private memory. Indeed, a person's individual memories and the memory cognitive process as well, extensively include

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elements with social origins, such as military service, scouting or classes' attendance.<sup>8</sup>

### 1. Memory as Cognitive Object

Memory is an immense thematic area and its spherical study would cover a wide spectrum from psychology to philosophy and neurology to modern history, and would be definitely embellished by various but probably eccentric references. Collective ideas, i.e. ideas which are embraced by many people, constitute 'social events' and as such they arise as social and a consequence of historical and social forces. And memory consist a *societal* fact.<sup>9</sup>

Besides, memory can be neither recorded by questionnaires nor hunted by a butterfly net.<sup>10</sup> Memory's definition as an 'object' derives from its objective management.

At this paper I do not refer to whether memory acquires such an 'objective' character, but to the fact that there are material datum lines within a civil area, its history and tradition, which 'objectify' these mnemonic traces in various ways. To name but one example, this occurs through oral history researchers' preference to refer to memory in terms of 'records' and 'oral documents', which signifies a way of memory reference which one the one hand 'objectifies' it and on the other transcribes it to text.

This memory's 'textual model' itself imprints modern and academic education's wide inclination to define knowledge in lingual terms or as sentences in a rational and scientific codification.<sup>11</sup> The importance of this knowledge management is that it renders it a kind of 'object' a mental substance in our mind. Philosophical orthodoxy sustains that knowledge is not an intellectual situation. When one maintains that one knows something, this is not a reference to an individual experience. When one says that one knows something it means that one claim the verity of his/her statement.<sup>12</sup>

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In contrast with knowledge, memory appears self-evidently like a mental state. If we ponder about the term 'know' primarily as a reference to the knowledge of facts which are objectively true, then, since most of the things we remember have the form of emotional, sensual and imaginary memories or sensory images; it is indeed possible to remember without having any objective knowledge of our recollections.<sup>13</sup>

## 2. The Transmission of Social Memory

A society's ability to transmit its social memory in a rational and articulate, i.e. an expressed, form does not merely depend on its written records. The issue is much more complicated. The transmission of rational memory depends, according to a wider perspective, on how a culture represents language to itself. It depends on the extent which a society can conceive its language as an expression and communication mean which is independent from its direct social context.

It also depends on how a group acquires the mnemonic knowledge: is it stored as images or texts under examination or merely as subsequent sonic shapes which will accede to the memory sphere; All these possibilities significantly vary among different groups (and moreover, among different people).<sup>14</sup>

A memory is considered to be *social* only when it can be transmitted; and in order to be transmitted it must first be rendered 'articulate'. We transmit prowesses (i.e. professional) indicating how we do something, rather than explaining it with words. Nevertheless, the lingual expression's importance ascribes a privileged position to speech.<sup>15</sup>

The communication significance probably means that social memory is more important than personal, individual memory. Besides, it is easier to 'communicate' a semiotic message than a sensory image.<sup>16</sup> Thus, we do not constrain social

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memory within the speech context. In any case, a higher semiotic level for social memory is demanded, which renders the use of ideas necessary.<sup>17</sup> Images cannot be socially transmitted unless they become conventional and simplified.<sup>18</sup>

### **3. An Instrument of Memory Transmission: Photography**

The French novelist Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850) derived the power of his descriptions from his belief that a whole social environment spirit can be revealed by a single material detail, even if it is minimal or arbitrary. When at the following century communication began to concern us at a scientific level, the Canadian communication specialist Marshal Mac Luhan (1911-1980) wrote that media itself substituted the earlier world, the world of the past.<sup>19</sup>

Even if we desired to restore this earlier world this would be possible only through a strenuous study of how media have devoured it. One can use photography as an 'aggressive' communication vehicle. In social studies (i.e. of civil countries) one can utilise many photographs which originate from old carte postal and published albums.<sup>20</sup>

One should not select idealising images. Iconographic elements constitute something more than photographs or the 'immortalisation' of a profession of that era or the uncertainty of Balkan resident's look at the late Ottoman empire period. They shape (and sometimes colour) time or at least some of its subjective versions, as they faintly appear, lazily pass and fade in a fog of a cruel era.<sup>21</sup>

Old photographs and optical evidence constitute historic sources, such as records and oral confessions.<sup>22</sup> Photographs' historiographic value varies according to our ability to combine available sources with the certain object.

In the Balkan history case, while research may be inferior, the variety of optical evidence in private mainly collections and elsewhere (stores etc) conduced to a mass

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publication, despite the absence of ‘other’ sources, i.e. the scientific ones, which would structurally contribute to the frame’s identification.<sup>23</sup>

Susan Sontag (1933-2004) endorsed that collecting photographs is like collecting the world.<sup>24</sup> Humanity stagnates in Plato’s cave still enjoying with simple images of the truth. Being educated by photographs is different from being educated by ancient images, because there are a lot more moments around us deserving our attention. Photographic recording began in 1839 and since then almost everything has been photographed.<sup>25</sup> The greediness of photographic eye alters the constraint terms of Plato’s cave, our own world. Photographs teach us a new optical code, change and enlarge our opinion of what deserves to be seen and what we are allowed to observe. Photography as a fine art or as a technical instrument constitutes a code, a grammar and optical ethics. It gives us the impression that we are able to fit the whole world in our head like a pictures’ anthology.<sup>26</sup>

Photography constitutes a part of our everyday life, has been utterly embedded in social life and one of its prominent features is its acceptance by every social class.<sup>27</sup> Its power to accurately reproduce external reality, a power inherent to its technique, ascribe to it an evidential character and accent it as the most genuine and objective instrument of social life’s representation. This is its major political significance. Photography constitutes the typical means of expression and the instrument of a rational society which has been constructed in the technocratic civilisation and structured according to the professions’ hierarchy.<sup>28</sup> Thus, her significance resides in the fact that it constitutes one of the most effective means which formulate our ideas and influence our behaviour.

Philosophers, since Plato’s era, tried to rupture our dependence on images suggesting a way of apprehending the real, which would not include images. In other words, the interpretation of reality was made through optical references. When, at the

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mid of 19<sup>th</sup> century, philosophers' attempt came to fruition, the retreat of the old religious and political illusions before the rise of humanist and scientific thought did not cause significant cracks to the real. On the contrary, the new era of suspicion enforced the faith in images.<sup>29</sup> Pictures have the power to usurp reality, because a photograph primarily constitutes an interpretation of the real and is not merely a picture. Besides, it constitutes an impression as well, a trace which has been cut off from the 'real'.<sup>30</sup> This does not mean that photograph distorts reality but that it has captured a unique moment of reality's past and has revealed to the observer a material detail in which sometimes the spirit of a whole social environment is compacted.<sup>31</sup>

#### **4. Photography as an Instrument Against Oblivion**

We should not disregard at all that apart from memory, oblivion constitutes an equally normal function. Oblivion sometimes makes us feel socially uncomfortable, but, on the contrary, 'non-forgetfulness' constitutes a major problem exhausting man.<sup>32</sup> If someone shows us an old photo unexpectedly, we would probably be surprised by the changes brought to people and structured civic environment.

We are unable to detect the ongoing changes generally, not merely because these changes are imperceptible from day to day or too small in order to be consciously recorded by an observer. The everyday little changes constitute a part of a common procedure which covers the 'memories' of the previous one. Unless a certain occasion or relation -which will challenge the focus of our memory to something special- mediates or emerges, we may not be able to recall, i.e. to remember, ourselves looking at a mirror before a month, a year or a decade ago.<sup>33</sup>

Whatever applies to people's memory, applies to social memory as well. There are many examples of fairy tales' distortion, which -while they remain alive as oral tradition from one generation to another- they are subjected to successive

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modifications.<sup>34</sup> Nonetheless, this process may be unnoticed by the oral society itself. Without written records which would have crystallized a narration version in a certain transmission period, we do not have a base of comparison. Shortly, we do not comprehend the alteration process because this process erases its own traces.<sup>35</sup>

However, photography constitutes the linchpin between memory and oblivion and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century's desire to modernise photography through picture left within Time many mnemonic traces. We can detect such samples to civil scenes of various cities across the world.

## 5. Memory and History: a Dialectic Relation

Thus, through photography and certainly other memory traces, such as the so-called 'historical monuments', we can sense that memory has a direct relation with the way in which we examine and refer to history. The historic dimension of the social reality co-shapes its content and supplements our opinion or view about it.

Pierre Nora (1931-) notes that collective memory, defined as "the thing that remains from the past within the context of group experience" or as "the thing that groups create with their past", may, at first light, contradict with historical memory, such as *emotional* memory contradicted with *intellectual* memory in the past. History and memory are bewildered and history appears to have been developed upon the pattern of memory, reminiscence and memorisation.<sup>36</sup>

Memory refers to past and history. The past of the structured area constitutes a 'material reference', which is revealed to us as indirect knowledge via the everlasting monuments. In a multinational civil environment we can examine how cultures and traditions are developed by exploring the material dimension of this civil culture.<sup>37</sup>

If we accept that history constitutes a selective knowledge mechanism, we will also acknowledge that this mechanism has a functional relation with memory. But

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history and memory are not synonyms. They rather seem to be in fundamental contrast. To name but one example the confrontation about the sixth grade's history book amongst scientists, journalists, intellectuals and common people is a particularly vivid example of this formulation. Maybe because history is largely 'invented'. But memory is life, a creation of live societies which are shaped in the name of memory.<sup>38</sup>

Memory continuously evolves; a system open to the dialectic between memory and oblivion, which is not conscious of the successive deformations due to its vulnerability to usurpations and abuses or periods of hibernation or periodic revival. History constitutes the, always problematic and incomplete, reconstruction of what no longer exists.

A history, as Pierre Nora supports, can be realized on the base of the collective memory area's study: *topographic* areas, such as records, libraries and museums; *monumental* areas, such as cemeteries and architecture; *symbolic* areas, such as national fetes, adorations, anniversaries, emblems; *functional* area, such as texts, autobiographies or unions: these monuments have their history.<sup>39</sup>

Memory constitutes a perpetually current issue; a bond which connects us with the eternal present. History constitutes a representation of the past. Memory, as far as it is emotional and seductive, adjusts within its own context only the appropriate events.<sup>40</sup>

But, history requires analysis and critical consideration, since it constitutes a perception and secularisation derivative. Thus, while memory establishes memory in the sphere of respect, the, always common and earthbound, history detaches it from this establishment.

In short, memory as a modern mechanism continues to leave its traces in postmodern societies as well. I consider that my contribution is indicative and susceptible of inoculations,<sup>41</sup> in order to be enriched and continue to annotate the

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significance of mnemonic mechanisms and traces in societies during all historical periods.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Memory, goddess of reminiscence, was goddess of wisdom as well, mother of muses, whose father was Zeus at the time he was staying the night at Elikona.

<sup>2</sup> See the preface of Raphael Samuel in: Raphael Samuel, 1994, *Theatres of Memory, vol. 1, Past and Present in Contemporary Culture*, London-New York: Verso, pp. vii.

<sup>3</sup> See R.I. Moore, (ed.) “Editor’s Preface” στο Fentress J. and Wickham Chris, 1992, *Social Memory*, Oxford UK & Cambridge USA: Blackwell, pp. viii.

<sup>4</sup> See R.I. Moore, 1992, pp. viii.

<sup>5</sup> Classical texts which refer to social memory are the books of Maurice Halbwachs: *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (Paris PUF, 1925) and *La Mémoire Collective* (Paris PUF, 1950). Some of the philosophical grounds for the development of the modern theory about memory can be traced in the following books: Sorabji R., 1972, *Aristotle on Memory*, London- Warnock Mary, 1987, *Memory*, London και Connerton P, 1989, *How Societies Remember*, Cambridge.

<sup>6</sup> “Much memory is attached to membership of social groups” see Fentress J. and Wickham C., 1992, pp. ix.

<sup>7</sup> Sociology, as in the case of time as well, constituted a motive for the exploration of this new concept. In 1950, Maurice Halbwachs published the *On Collective memory. Social psychology contributes as a science to this book. Anthropology, as far as the term memory provide an intellectual instrument better adjusted to the “savage” societies’ conditions which it studies, mainly in the national-historic content, or differently the historical anthropology content, which constitutes one of the most interesting developments in social history.* See, Jacques Le Goff, 1998, *History and Memory*, translated by G. Koubourlis, Athens: Nefeli, pp. 139. In Marxist philosophy, social consciousness is the set of people’s presentations, attitudes, ideas, knowledge and beliefs which reflects their social being, the intellectual life as the reflection of material life. According to, collective consciousness is the set of convictions and emotions which the members of a society have, the consciousness of the social whole, as it is expressed through the consciousness of its members, which it forms as well

<sup>8</sup> See Fentress J. and Wickham C., 1992, p.p. x.

<sup>9</sup> This is the basic argument of Fentress J. and Wickham C., 1992, ch. 1. “Remembering”, pp. 1-40, who commence from Emil Durkheim’s relevant doctrine.

<sup>10</sup> Βλ. Fentress J. and Wickham C., 1992, p.p. 2-3.

<sup>11</sup> The classical formation of the concept about knowledge, which we mentioned, is J. L. Austin’s, 1946, “Other Minds”, στο *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supp. XX. P.p. 148-187. for the typology of the knowledge categories see R. Rorty, 1980, ch. 3, στο *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. We prefer to distinguish knowledge in three wide categories: periphrastic knowledge (or knowledge around things), sensory and material knowledge (or knowledge directly from things) and ability knowledge (or knowledge of adeptness to do things). Among these, usually only the first is perceived as knowledge with its complete meaning.

<sup>12</sup> Thus, knowledge resembles a property piece on which we can claim ownership (justly or not) rather

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- than a notion which we feel and attempt to describe. Warnock, 1987, *Memory*, London, pp. 39.
13. See Fentress J. and Wickham C., 1992, chapter 2.: 'Ordering and Transmission of Social Memory', pp. 45.
14. Certain oral societies, such as Greek and Polynesian, before the alphabetism era, societies, or some northwestern European Celtic tribes at the time of their roman conquest, disposed a highly developed acoustic (auditive) perception. These societies were able to accomplish remarkable mnemonic achievements. Hence, the haute development of poetic traditions in these societies frame is not coincidental. See Fentress J. and Wickham C., 1992, p.p. 45, but the whole second chapter as well "Ordering and Transmission of Social Memory", p.p. 41-86.
15. For a social memory to be 'articulate' does not exclusively mean that it has been rendered 'discourse'. See Fentress J. and Wickham C., 1992, pp. 47.
16. The need for communication does not reduce social memory's sensory quality. An oral poet's memory for a poem as sense, that is while he narrates a particular story, is not separated from his memory for the poem as sound. See Fentress J. and Wickham C., 1992, pp. 47-51.
17. The highest articulation level which is necessary for social memory does not render it more important than individual memory. However, it renders it more conceptual. See Fentress J. and Wickham C., 1992, pp. 47.
18. Conventional, because image needs to mean something to a whole social body, and simplified, because, in order to have a meaning and be communicable, image's complexity have to be restrained. Individual memories include personal experiences' reminiscences, most of which cannot be easily described with words. Thus, individual memory images would be more enriched than collective images, which would be more figural in comparison. See Fentress J. and Wickham C., 1992, pp. 48.
19. Here past means tradition. See, Marshall Mc-Luhan, 1964 *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*; 1st ed. McGraw Hill, NY; reissued by Gingko Press, 2003.
20. Photographs provide us with evidence. A photograph proves something for which we doubt or do not have a clear picture. See, Susan Sontag, 1973, "In Plato's cave" in: *On Photography*, [Greek publication *Περί Φωτογραφίας*, 1993, translated by Iraklis Papaioannou, Athens, publications journal *ΦΩΤΟΓράφος*, pp. 17.
21. See, Aleksandra Gerolumpou, 2000, "Thessaloniki in 1913 and 1918, Balkan concurrencies", in: *Thessaloniki, the first coloured photographs*, Athens: Olkos & Boulogne: Musee Albert-Kahn, p.p. 89.
22. Besides, historical sources do not compete with each other according to their value, but complete one each other and contribute to the data's intersection. For pictures' value, see E. Hekimoglou- E. Danacioğlu, 1998, "Introduction: Pictures and Sources" in: *Thessaloniki 100 years ago*, p.p. 11.
23. We have to admit that pictures themselves are inadequate. E. Hekimoglou- E. Danacioğlu, 1998, p.p.12. A photograph, however, provokes emotional reactions and bears questions.
24. See Susan Sontag's book 'On Photography' and William H. Gass, 1977, <http://www.nytimes.com/1977/12/18/books/booksspecial/sontag-photo.html>.
25. On Monday 19 August 1839 at a festive session of French Science Academy, the deputy of Perinea, scholar and votary of the arts, Francois Arago, acting on behalf of his friend Louis J. M. Daguerre, presented the invention of photograph. This first form of photograph, constituted the completion of Joseph Nicephore Niepce's (1765-1833) long research. It came to Greece early enough. Two months after the public presentation of the new invention foreign tourists "wrote" the first plates in Athens. See Dimitris Tzimas, "Photography, this new invention", in: Alkis Ksanthakis, 1990, *Filippos Margaritis, The first Greek photographer*, Athens: Publications journal *PHOTOgrapher*.
26. See, Susan Sontag, 1973/1993, p.p. 13-33.
27. Today photography plays a crucial role. There is no human activity which does not utilise it in one
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or another way. Photography constitutes a necessary element of science and industry. See Gisele Freund, 1996, "Preface" in *Photography and Society*, translated by Eua Mauroeidi, Athens: publications journal PHOTOgrapher, pp. 9-11.

28. See, Gisele Freund, 1996, p.p. 10.

29. The German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) at the preface of his book 'The essence of Christianity' (in 1840, shortly after camera's invention), in which he discusses the real knowledge on God as a unity of consciousness and human essence, notes that our era (19<sup>th</sup> century) prefers the image rather than the object, the copy rather than the original, the picture rather than reality, the presentation rather than the existence. In 20<sup>th</sup> century, a broad consent dominated, i.e. that a society becomes modern when one of its main activities is the picture production and their consumption; when pictures have the extravagant power to determine our requirements from reality and become necessary for the economy health, the political stability and the individual happiness accomplishment. Then pictures become themselves greedy substitutes of direct experience. See also Susan Sontag, 1973/1993, "The world-picture", pp. 143-167.

30. The concept of reality as an endless series of situations which reflect each other, the analogy of different things, connotes the expectation of the characteristic concept which is attracted by photographic pictures. Reality itself has begun to be conceivable as a writing form which has to be decoded. Niepce has named "iliographia" the process through which picture appeared on the plate. See Susan Sontag, 1973/1993, p.p. 150.

31. Rafael Samuel, however, aptly underlines that there may be a negative dialectic between a 'face' photograph and an area's spirit. Sometimes the memorials for dead people seem to be far more appreciated than the living bonds with the present. That is why 'topographic' carte postales in baskets or in exchanges between collectors (these are called true photographs in London) increase their price according to the size of the scene's change. See, R. Samuel, 1994, *Thetars of Memory*, vol. 1, p.p. 355.

32. For example, the Russian psychologist A.R. Luria, in his book "The Mind of a Mnemonist" (London, 1975) vividly presents how painful and exhausting for human organism is the process of never forgetting.

33. See Fentress J. and Wickham C., 1992, p.p. 39.

34. There has been developed a whole science which studies this 'orality', records the distortions, measures and interpret the deviations etc. It is not constrained to fairy tales but focuses on medieval epic novels, minstrels etc.

35. See Fentress J. and Wickham C., 1992, p.p. 40

36. The so-called new history which strives to create a scientific history on the grounds of collective memory can be interpreted as a memory revolution which forces history to complete a shift around fundamental pivots: an openly modern issue. . . and a decisively reversible movement, "the renouncement of a linear temporalite" to various lived years' account at the levels where individual roots in social and collective" (philology, demography, economy, biology, intellectual culture)". See Jacques Le Goff, 1998, p.p. 140.

37. The work of the historian Fernand Braudel (1902-1985) was a guide in this research. Braudel was member of Annales of Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes and established a new concept of history in his three volume work "Mediterranean and the Mediterranean world at Spanish Filippus B era", Paris, 1949-1979, (Athens, 1997). The historian Kostis Moskof is one of his adherents.

38. Nora, Pierre, 1989, *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire* [πρωτ. Έκδ. 1984]. Representations 26, Spring 1989, 7-25. The exhibition which took place in Paris (Jeux de Pommes, 2007) entitled "The fact, pictures as history factors" (L'Evenement, les images comme acteurs de l'histoire) constitutes an "artistic" example of the contradiction between history and memory. Due to the

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exhibition, a catalogue-book (ed. Hazan, Paris, January 2007) which constitutes an extension of remarkable speculations, that supplied the idea of the exhibition has been published. The French historian of modern art Michel Poivert (1965-) was the exhibition and publication's commissary.

39. "We should not forget, however, the real areas of history, where we should inquire not elaboration or production, but the creators, the rulers of collective memory: states, social and political environments, historical communities or generations which have come to make their records in juncture with the different uses of memory", see Jacques Le Goff, 1998, p.p. 140, which is referred in the project of Pierre Nora, 1984, *Les Lieux de memoire*, Paris: Gallimard [in three volumes 1. La Republique, 2. La nation, 3. La France], which constitutes the milestone of French historiography.

40. I reiterate Nora's concept of memory and history, in: Pierre Nora, 1989, *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire, Representations*, Spring 1989, nr. 26, Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 7-25.

41. This article's thoughts were born within the context of a thorough study, which concern Thessaloniki's civil area, which is under publication by the publishing house University Studio Press entitled "Space and memory. Community-Identity-Civil essence: Thessaloniki 15<sup>th</sup> -20<sup>th</sup> century". I myself have made some useful modifications to this publication, which arised from the journal's scrupulous editorial board.