



HAL
open science

Memory and history at school: saving relevance and social responsibility

Lucas Graeff

► **To cite this version:**

Lucas Graeff. Memory and history at school: saving relevance and social responsibility. Digital Journal of Lasallian Research, 2019. halshs-02088694

HAL Id: halshs-02088694

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-02088694>

Submitted on 27 Apr 2019

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

MEMORY AND HISTORY AT SCHOOL: SAVING RELEVANCE AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Lucas Graeff
La Salle Canoas University, Brazil
lucas.graeff@unilasalle.edu.br

Introduction

This text responds to a request concerning the Lasallian school of the 21st century and the relevance of memory and history in the construction of a new citizenship, aiming at fostering universal peace and justice. To enter into this debate, it is necessary to clarify its terms. First of all, "21st century": this term defines our century, our time, *our present and our future*. Then, "Lasallian school": this is about education in general and pedagogy in particular, but, more than that, it is the adjective Lasallian which is important here: what is the Lasallian tradition, if not an educational dynamic rooted in the fraternity and values of Christian humanism? In this case, the one who speaks of tradition, implies the *past*. It is exactly by looking at the relationship between the past, the present and the future that we can introduce memory and history at school and in our life in society.

In the rest of this talk, I will try to define the role of memory and history in the context of the modern project in order to explain why these two concepts come together as an injunction - that is, to say, an imperative statement - consisting in expressing the relationship between "lessons from the past", control over the world and moral learning of individuals. To do this, I will rely on classical authors, such as Paul Ricœur (2000) and Jacques Le Goff (1988), but also on the recent book by Sarah Gensburger and Sandrine Lefranc (2017) on memory policies. Finally, following the general guidelines of this workshop, I will outline some milestones on the role of Lasallian pedagogy in building citizenship, fraternity and social responsibility. These milestones will of course be based on the discussions of the first two parts of this talk, but especially on the Lasallian tradition itself, with its ethical and pedagogical possibilities.

Memory and History: Between Past and Future

Using the past to understand the present and predict the future is a common process among us, modern people. Whether it is due to the scientific nature of historical studies or to memory policies circulating in our schools, museums and other places of commemoration, it is as if the past were a *source*. On the one hand, the past can be represented as an archive, that is to say, the set of documents, objects and testimonies from which the scientist or the memorialist take inspiration to build a history or memory which escapes them. On the other hand, the past can be imagined as something interior, such as a memory or a personal story, which would be a source in so far as it is thought of and imagined as the principle or the origin of the individual.

The past of modern people is above all this source, this origin, this bedrock on which the knowledge and progressive control of the world rests. At the same time, this source is thought of as infinite, because the modern world itself is not closed. I say this as I rely on the classic work of Alexander

Koyré (1962), who explains how modern Western society has made a deep revolution between the 16th and 17th centuries, consisting in the loss of an Aristotelian conception of a stable and limited world. Through the same process, which turned the universe into something unlimited and dynamic, the modern individual appeared, discovering himself to be free, autonomous and endowed with a unique psychological depth.

The past of modern people is part of this new vision of the world, a past which is not fixed, but that has always to be discovered and reinvented in the present. Memory and History bear witness to this: whether through a scientific method or an amateur practice, or even through the absence of any method, the past shapes our vision of the world - our present and our projects - because it educates us on facts and values that make sense to the person who draws them from the source. It is through the accumulation and collection of worldly, immanent knowledge that modern people build their disenchanted existence, or in other words, free from all external transcendence. It is through the accumulation and the collection of previous knowledge that modern people populate their world of knowledge and experimentation, which secularize life and where the eternal has no reason to be, to interfere.

Memory and history are essential for us, modern people, because they tell us about the past and because the past is said to be the root of our knowledge. However, this is not all: for modern people, remembering is the most basic form of knowing the world and existing in it. It is because we remember something that it belongs to us. It is because we remember ourselves that we recognize ourselves as persons and groups. Our relationship to time and identity involves the appropriation and the memory of this injunction: remember yourself of yourself. Every nation, society and individual thinks and presents himself through the mediation of his memories, by making them appear as knowhow and a knowledge in a palace of memory that would be (or should be) his own.

Recurring to the past through the mediation of memory and history reassures us against the unlimited, dynamic world that we have discovered together since the 16th and 17th centuries, because this limitless world is also an open world without direction. In fact, how can one be sure of the path to take when there is no more map? Rather, more precisely, when the map unfolds at each turn? The answer is memory and history, in other words, learning and knowledge from the past. In this way, memory, history and pedagogy come together in the modern world, in *our* world.

As an example to illustrate the point, here are two classic passages on pedagogy and education. Émile Durkheim (1968) describes the latter as "the action exercised by the adult generations on those who are not yet ripe for social life". The International League of New Education, in turn, proclaims that "Education is inseparable from social evolution" (Mialaret, 2011). The relationship between memory and pedagogy is there, at the core of a quest for the development of new generations and social progress. That is why I say that modern memory is not related to the past, but to the future, because it is by absorbing knowledge and notions of the past that we, modern people, draw our maps and give direction. *Memoria est magistra vitae*. And who are the masters and the mistresses of memory if not the teachers, those people whose job consists of "promoting the development as complete as possible of each person's skills, both as an individual and as a member of a society governed by solidarity" (Mialaret, 2011)?

Memory, History and Pedagogy: Uses of the Past and Moral Learning

As soon as we understand how, in the modern project, memory, history and pedagogy combine to deploy the knowhow and knowledge necessary to navigate an infinite world, it becomes clear why memory has become a sort of cure-all capable of illuminating the evil, childish or obscure spirits, by bringing them back to the right choices and path. In other words, why memory took this function of "moral duty", aiming at guiding the choices and responsibilities of city dwellers? Memory - being the set of knowledge and experiences, conquests and defeats – as we recall it in common, we build a shared memory and rebuild the basis of our living together. Each thing learned in common is a memory lesson; each memory lesson entails an agreement around the right choices to make and the responsibilities to take.

"A common memory to build a shared memory would be the prerequisite for the formation of tolerant citizens and the reconstruction of a life together", write Sarah Gensburger and Sandrine Lefranc (2017) in a book recently released in France, whose title is *A quoi servent les politiques de mémoire?* (What are memory policies for?) This title is provocative. What is in fact the memory for? Are we, modern people, on the right track with this idea of infinite collection and universal transmission of knowledge? Or rather: is passing lessons on and promoting shared memories at school enough to make peace possible or to bring justice for all?

Nothing is safer, unfortunately. For memory has its lessons that we modern people do not master. First lesson: memory may be a source, but it is not made of fixed representations. Representations are reconstructions that we make through our relationship to the present. They do not exist as items stored in a cupboard. If needed, it is not enough to give a lesson on a given knowledge or experience to fix it in our mind. Second lesson: memory is made of information of all kinds - sound, visual, tactile, semantic information - but it refers to the emotional dimension. This means that the memory processes of coding, consolidation, storage and recalling of information and experiences are "colored" with the emotional context in which they develop¹. We know that the emotional context is established by our network of social interdependencies. In other words: all that we keep from our experiences and learning and all that we are able to remember depends on our affective relationships. This is the reason why Sarah Gensburger and Sandrine Lefranc tell us, rightly, this:

Memory and its lessons are not received without filtering or scrambling when they are transmitted. At school, at the museum, in truth commissions, in court, but also on television and in the public space of commemoration, or confronted with memory tourism, individuals are citizens or future citizens. (...). But they are also sons or daughters, parents, mates, colleagues, peers, neighbors, believers or members of organizations, associations or political parties, etc. These multiple social positions represent so many filters through which the transmitted lessons acquire their meaning. The same is true of the past. (Gensburger and Lefranc, 2017, p. 111)

It will be now clear that recourse to memory is not the panacea for our moral or citizenship problems. At school or elsewhere, people do not behave in a given way only because they have been informed of the potential consequences of their actions based on lessons from the past or established

¹ There is certainly the classical opposition between episodic memory (situations and lived experiences) and semantic memory (facts, ideas, concepts) highlighting the hypothesis that the second is independent of an affective dimension. In particular, I see there only the survival of the traditional opposition between passion and reason, body and soul, and even immanence and transcendence.

scientific knowledge. Decision-making truly depends upon memory, whether it is considered as a source of information or as the source of our individuality, however memory is not a directory of knowledge unrelated to each person's affective relationships. Therefore, from the point of view of the starting issue of this document, the inconstancy of our memories and the relationship memory / affections / social relationships do not represent an obstacle to the humanist tradition of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. On the contrary: it is precisely because we are capable of conceiving memory in its affective, imaginary and creative dimensions that a range of opportunities opens up to our Lasallian teachers.

Memory, History and the Future: Some Milestones for Lasallian Schools in the 21st Century

Having figured out what, in the modern conception of memory, seemed important to me to recall about the relationship between school, citizenship, social and the humanist responsibility of the Lasallian tradition, let us now focus on the 21st century. Our century. Our time. A century that, like the one in which John Baptist de La Salle lived, is a century of crisis, break, transformation. Obviously, the terms of the crisis of our times are quite different from those of La Salle. Nowadays, it is no longer a matter of universalizing access to school for children and young people or of facilitating their development of skills for work and life. On the contrary: today, we wonder how to cope with the proliferation of media and information technologies, which upset not only the ways of learning, but the very meaning of the organization of an appropriate space and time for education, that of school. In addition, we ask ourselves questions about how to educate for peace and justice in a world of limited resources.

Indeed, our century is in a way a time of cultural convergence - that is to say, of intensification of the flow of information between cultures and of multiplication and transformation of media. It is however also a time of scarcity – population growth, the widespread improvement in the standard of living and changes in the pattern of consumption of natural and man-made resources are leading everyone, some more than others, to experience incompleteness and inadequacy. On the one hand, our time is that of plurality and of possibilities; on the other, of the choice of what is necessary when confronted to climate catastrophes and the risks of post-modern capitalism.

Like the first lay participants in the seminary for country schoolmasters at the time of La Salle, as planners of the Lasallian school in the 21st century, we face an uncertain future. Just like them in their time, we also have resources which have proved to survive time and crises: fraternity and the Lasallian charism. From a memorial or historical point of view, I am not sure if these resources are good because they have been tested by time and crisis or if they passed these tests because they were good. What I am sure of is that the fraternity and the Lasallian charism are traditions, things and ideas that went from one generation to the next. Just like history and memory, traditions are reconstructions made within the framework of our interdependencies. If such resources last, it is because they make sense to us, with a meaning that is both semantic and emotional.

The fraternity and the Lasallian charism are resources to be taken and used during each lesson, educational project or meeting with our students. The use of these resources is part of a common project, that of building a peaceful, humane society, which, in the end, will be just for all of us. A common project, not universal or identical, because what is common derives from dialogue, encounter, search for landmarks. This means we always have to go back to social, human and fraternal development; that this same development is not natural or necessary, but it depends on the faith, humanity, and effort of all and each one of us.

What should be done, for example, when it comes to choosing what is necessary? As the concept is not based only on scarcity, as opposed to abundance, it is possible to think of it as the *right choice*. However, this right choice is not to be determined by a general rule. It is the result of discussion, fraternal debate among the people who form the concerned community. In this sense, pedagogy and fraternity are necessary not only to avoid the catastrophe of individual interest or passion, but to establish dialogue, find common points of reference and rethink collective projects.

Here is a second example, in the context of cultural convergence and new communication and information technologies. Here in Europe as elsewhere, the offer of distance education increases either because of costs - we believe in economies of scale as if any human production could be turned into a "commodity", including services of common interest such as education - either to reduce inequalities in the access to higher education or even to democratize lifelong learning. Whatever basic reasons, it is up to us, Lasallian teachers, to promote fraternity, sensitivity and the Lasallian educational mission in the framework of networks of social interdependencies that are not necessarily created through face-to-face interactions. Because the issue of cultural convergence develops through these new forms of interaction, and not only through the criticism of media and multinational companies or safety and prevention rules which parents and teachers must teach to their children.

I have a problem in suggesting that it would be possible to overcome the challenge of distance education simply by investing more in means, but without seriously confronting teaching choices. In this respect, I sincerely believe in fraternity as the touchstone of any Lasallian "transmedia" educational project. By focusing only on means - audiovisual, video games, e-books, etc. - we simply risk falling back into instructional pedagogy. To put it differently, any attempt to educate for the 21st century seems destined to fail as long as we do not accept this basic premise that learning occurs in a community, within interdependent relationships and relying so much on knowledge as on emotions and living together.

References

- Durkheim, E. (1968). *Éducation et sociologie*. 2 ed. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968; *Education and Sociology*, Simon and Schuster, (1956).
- Gensburger, S.; Lefranc, S. (2017). *À quoi servent les politiques de mémoire ?* Paris: SciencesPo Les Presses.
- Koyré, A. (1962). *Du monde clos à l'univers infini*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France ; *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe*, Lanham : Start Publishing LLC, (2013).
- Le Goff, J. (1988). *Histoire et mémoire*. Paris : Gallimard, 1988. *History and Memory*, Columbia University Press, (1996).
- Mialaret, G. (2011). *Les sciences de l'éducation*. Paris : Presses Universitaires de France. *Introduction to the Educational Sciences*, Unipub (1986).
- Ricœur, P. (2000). *La Mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*. Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 2000; *Memory, History, Forgetting*, University of Chicago Press (2004),