**Monuments and National Memory Cultures
in France and Germany Since 1989**

**The 'Vél' d'Hiv'' in Paris and the
'Holocaust Monument' in Berlin**

Introduction

The impact of monuments and related rituals upon the development of collective memories of the Second World War has become a crucial political issue in several countries. Since 1989 in particular, leaders of former Allied and Axis countries staged a succession of fiftieth anniversary commemorations of the event, reappraised national histories in light of the end of the balance of power sustained during the Cold War, and sought to symbolically compensate the dwindling number of living witnesses and victims of the war period by ascribing increasing authority to public representations as a means of sustaining social memory of this period. But do representations ensure that future generations remember events of the past? And if so, do they take forms which are fitting for the events, and which do justice to victims, their relatives or even to states and societies in whose name they are created? In spite of the inherent ambiguity of monuments, which serve equally as catalysts for remembrance and forgetting, political strategists continue to delegate to monuments and commemorations the moral responsibility to guarantee remembrance. The symbolic, rhetorical and institutional foundations of these strategies is the theme of this work, which aims to define the singular role of artistic memorials in the negotiation of new national, yet unconventional historical identities. This study focuses more specifically on debates about monuments, on the moment of their production and appropriation in the public sphere, when historical information and interpretations, but also aesthetic forms and political and even psychological interests converge and conflict in the present. It therefore offers insight into the process by which public art and ritual foster an understanding of the past, and consequently become instruments of political representation.

Memory cultures in European countries flourished from the 1970s following numerous openings of museums, historical exhibitions and monuments, and came to a head in the 1990s with a series of fiftieth anniversary commemorations of the Second World War. As witnesses of the

contemporary "memory boom",[1] we are in a position to trace the process by which such historical artefacts emerge, involving individuals, institutions and lobbies which create them, public reactions to them, and their resultant political function. Two monuments in particular became the focus of nationwide debate in France and Germany: the "Vél' d'Hiv'" (Vélodrome d'Hiver: Winter Cycle Stadium) in Paris, and the "Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas" or "Holocaust Monument"[2] in Berlin. The first of these monuments was built in 1994 to mark the site of round-ups of Jews prior to deportation in 1942. The second will be built in 2001 as a central symbol of the genocide against Jews. Both have been categorised as "national" monuments, and are unique insofar as they both accord central symbolic significance to the memory of crimes of the Second World War.

In spite of historical discrepancies between the roles of France and Germany in the persecution of Jews during the Second World War, and between the specific sculptural and rhetorical forms with which these events are represented today, we may identify similarities between the political function of each monument. Both monuments accord central value to crimes of the nation, where appeals for "national reconciliation" in France and for "national consensus" in Germany provide unprecedented examples of the symbolic integration of the potentially subversive memory of criminal acts into each respective memory culture, resulting in non-conventional narratives of national heritage in each case. The international character of the Second World War also means that contemporary memories of this event are shared by several nations. However, the common supranational point of historical reference is remembered, interpreted and represented on the basis of national and local events. This event simultaneously unites and divides the citizens of formerly belligerent countries not because past enmity is remembered and still felt, but because each population experienced different events or the same event differently, and has since nourished local narratives, whether of Churchill, de Gaulle and Hitler, for example, or of exile, deportation and genocide. Although the two monuments examined here testify to the highly political, national, dimension in which states promote official memory cultures, one may hope that the very study of the mechanisms with which national memory cultures are upheld may be a first step towards breaking down or rendering them less impervious to one another.

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[1] Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories. Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia,* New York & London: Routledge 1995, p. 9.

[2] The term "Holocaust" is inappropriate. However, the fact that this title has been readily adopted by the media and the public is a reflection of the force of historical misrepresentation for public historical understanding. For a historical comparison of the terms *holocaust, shoah* and *genocide,* see Odon Vallet, "Des mots en politique: Les noms de l'innommable", in *Mots/Les langages du politique* 56, September 1998, pp. 138-141.

This study comprises three central chapters. Following an introductory chapter on theoretical foundations and the terminology of contemporary memory cultures, and a second chapter exploring the origins of the central monuments in France and Germany, the final chapter will strive to compare the two debates, analyse discursive codes of nationhood employed in each case, and outline an overarching methodology for understanding the elusive means of public representation in its historical, political and aesthetic dimensions. The first chapter outlines methodological foundations for a study of the combined aesthetic and political functions of monuments, and of relevant terminology. The particular status of monuments as a point of conflict between aesthetic forms and their equivocal political significance has given rise to public debate on many occasions. Monuments therefore merit particular attention as a form of "discursive formation"[3] in their own right. Prior to their material existence, the Vél' d'Hiv' and Holocaust Monument existed in the form of debates between people who advocated or contested their form and necessity. Petitions, conferences, speeches, public forums, press articles, parliamentary debates as well as architectural exhibitions and even everyday private conversations about monuments all constitute the discursive existence of such monuments. Thus rendered in the form of verbal narratives, monuments are subjected to varying degrees of institutional formalisation. In everyday communication, for example, they may foster error and limits in historical understanding, or indifference to the past when competing alongside information and advertising transmitted on billboards or in the mass media. The goal of Chapter I is therefore to outline the characteristically ambivalent function of monuments as artistic sources of historical or political information, to situate them with respect to current national memory cultures in France and Germany, and to offer a critique of existent analytical terminology used for the interpretation of memory cultures. Pierre Nora's notion of "site of memory" offers a particularly effective tool for the analysis of political symbols and will be explained in detail in relation to its implicit political assumptions. Although the primary aim of this study is to explain public discursive renderings of monuments prior to their construction, analytical terminology is also part of the commemorative process and must be subjected to the same scrutiny as the symbolic and commemorative events which it describes.

One of the premises of research on memory cultures is that shared memories are a condition for the cohesion of social communities. Paradoxically, not only praise but also criticism and even analytical critiques of the foundations of memory cultures inadvertently legitimate the

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[3] Stuart Hall, "The Work of Representation", in Hall (ed.), *Representation. Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices,* London, Thousand Oaks, New Dehli: Sage/ Open University Press, 1997, pp. 13-64, p. 44.

social force of memory merely by drawing attention to a shared past regardless of the specific nature of emotions associated with it. Even the common expression of weariness and aversion to the public preoccupation with memory is an integral aspect of memory cultures and does nothing to diminish this preoccupation.[4] I therefore attempt to explore the rhetorical and formal construction of monuments in conjunction with analytical terms of their interpretation. In order to answer the question "What role do new 'sites of memory' of the 1990s play in upholding national social cohesion?" and, more pertinently, "Is memory a legitimate basis for a political community?", I have combined an analysis of sites of memory with an analysis of the prevailing discourse *about* memory. Intellectual discourse, according to the linguist Siegfried Jäger, plays an equal role in the transference of knowledge by interacting with other discursive levels in politics, media, everyday life and education.[5] Terms such as "site of memory" or "memory politics" are themselves founded on political assumptions which require further examination. The empirical studies of monuments are therefore preceded here by a clarification and reappraisal of the terms in which we analyse monuments and memory cultures.

Chapter two examines two case studies of controversies over plans for the Vél' d'Hiv' commemorations in Paris and the Holocaust Monument in Berlin during the 1990s. These studies focus on the language of memory, history and nationhood employed during the debates. Since discussions in France lasted for over three years, and in Germany for over ten years, it is appropriate to analyse the media debates as a form of commemoration in their own right. These commemorations and monuments functioned as a catalyst of what James Young calls "memory-work", resulting from an *unresolved* memorial which "challenges visitors into a dialogue between themselves and their past".[6] Details of these new sites of memory will be examined systematically in both cases, in the following order: the architectural and urban context of the sites, and the chronology of their emergence as focal points of political controversy; the language of petitions and formal verbal responses by politicians including, in the case of the Holocaust Monument, sculptural responses by artists and architects on the basis of blueprints; the political expediency of these monuments in the 1990s; and the different propositions for "national reconciliation" over the Vél' d'Hiv' and "national consensus" over the Holocaust Monument. In this way, I explore how these sites of memory serve - via their monumental and rhetorical constructions - to incorporate the

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[4] An example of this is the book by Robert Hewison, *The Heritage Industry. Britain in a Climate of Decline,* London: Methuen 1987. The success of this book and the large number of critical responses to it served to promote academic literature on the subject of memory. Cf. Dirk Schümer, "Erlebnisraum Holocaust", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 11.11.94, p. 41.

[5] Jäger, *Kritische Diskursanalyse,* p. 183.

complex and disturbing memories of collaboration, deportation and genocide into a repertoire of national symbols.

The concluding chapter compares characteristics of the two debates in order to assess the political function of the monuments as a means to publicly negotiate rhetorical codes of national self-understanding in each country. Each monument provided a forum to participate in the construction of a medium of historical understanding in which forms of aesthetic and political representation interact. Monuments thus constitute a distinctive category of site of memory characterised as a dialogic, discursive event. The broader aim of this study is therefore to assess the status of these monuments as sites of memory while paying particular attention to their political expediency in relation to the language with which they are transmitted. Accordingly, the three issues broached in Chapter I - the aesthetic function of monuments, their political context and rhetorical transference - are reappraised in Chapter III on the basis of empirical findings in Chapter II.

By comparing these monuments I aim to explore how, despite the expansion of communications, travel and economies and political mergers such as European unification, which undermine the economic and political legitimacy of nation-states, memory cultures continue to be maintained on a national basis. The transfer of executive responsibilities to a European level appears to be evolving parallel to the maintenance of memory cultures at a national level. As the sociologist Anthony Cohen remarks, "the symbolic expression of community and its boundaries increases in importance as the actual geo-social boundaries of the community are undermined, blurred or otherwise weakened".[7] However, the Second World War provides a wealth of monuments, related debates and rituals which are simultaneously of local, national and international significance. Commemorations of this event therefore permit us to *compare* various forms of monuments and commemorations and their interaction in different countries. How, for example, do monuments erected in France and Germany during the 1990s each contribute to the appropriation of memories of the Second World War within distinct national memory cultures, and how does each state derive legitimation by erecting monuments recalling crimes of former dictatorships? This event is subject to a process which may be defined as the federalisation of memory cultures. It is remembered internationally, but sustained in unique ways in each nation and thus fosters a repertoire of international historical events which are nationally appropriated.

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[6] James Young, *The Texture of Memory,* New Haven & London: Yale, 1993, p. 90.

[7] Anthony Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community,* Chichester, London & New York: Ellis Horword & Tavistock Publishers, 1985, p. 50.

Following the First World War, cenotaphs or tombs of unknown soldiers, like flags, anthems, or trees and male or female icons, were standard symbols worldwide, while serving local or national memory cultures. Commemorations and monuments in remembrance of the Second World War likewise conform to a pattern of internationally recognised national types, where analogous symbolic *forms* are charged with dissimilar *political* significance.

Monuments as focal points of unresolved "dialogue"[8]?

Intense, creative energy has been invested in the design and definition of forms of monuments since the 1960s. "Ephemeral", "objectless", "undesirable", "counter-" and "anti-" monuments[9] are among some of the adjectives used to describe monumental forms. Common to all these concepts is their claim to define a marginal, alternative or untypical type of monument whose qualities are measured *against* the classical model of an ornamental, figurative sculptural monument. (By reversing the above criteria, as "enduring", "objective", "desirable" and "pro-", we obtain a succinct definition of conventional monuments traditionally erected since the nineteenth century.) Yet these criteria identify *norms* of production, form and reception, and each reduces the characteristics of a monument to a single factor. They do not, however, account for the large variety of existent monumental types, including countless conventional sculptural monuments which adorn and, in spite of artistic innovations, *continue* to be erected in public places as late as the 1990s. The aim of this study is to provide an analytical framework for monuments which differ radically in their form, but whose production and appropiation, that is, the social context in which they arose, reveal remarkable similarities. A fundamental assumption here is that monuments are focal points of a complex *dialogue* between past and present, between history, producers of monuments, and successive generations of spectators who inquire into the significance of the past on the basis of historical artefacts. At the same time, monuments are also focal points of dialogue between individuals, institutions and political parties in the present. Having enjoyed the privilege of witnessing the emergence of monuments in the flourishing memory cultures of France and

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[8] James Young, *The Texture of Memory,* New Haven & London: Yale, 1993, p. 90.

[9] Cf. Michael Diers (ed.), *Mon(u)mente. Formen und Funktionen ephemerer Denkmäler,* Berlin: Akademie Verlag 1993; Felix Reuße, *Das Denkmal an der Grenze seiner Sprachfähigkeit,* Stuttgart: Klett Cotta 1995; Walter Grasskamp (ed.), *Unerwünschte Monumente. Moderne Kunst im Stadtraum,* Munich: Verlag Silke Schreiber, 1992; James Young, "The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today", *Critical Inquiry* 2, 1992, pp. 267-286; Reinhard Koselleck, "Kriegerdenkmale als Identitätsstiftungen der Überlebenden", in O. Marquard & K. Stierle (eds), *Identität,* Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1979, pp. 255-276, p. 274.

Germany during the 1990s, I have attempted to trace the first stages of the dialogic process which *preceded* the creation of two monuments in particular – a process which was founded largely on rhetorical speculation over *how* to commemorate rather than on the interpretation of existent monumental forms.

Although issues of the debates over these monuments differed, focusing on the rhetoric of presidential speeches in the case of the Vél' d'Hiv' and on artistic form in the case of the Holocaust Monument, they were each the product of analogous political *procedure*. Both monuments occupy central urban sites in the capital cities Paris and Berlin. Their origins lay in the campaigning of citizens' action groups with petitions, leading to demands for national reconciliation in France and consensus in Germany, and to party political disputes during presidential and parliamentary election campaigns in 1995 and 1998. These monuments also provide insight into a unique process by which a nation's crimes are integrated symbolically into a repertoire of national commemorations. In contrast to conventional war memorials celebrating heroes or mourning victims lost in battle, the Vél' d'Hiv' and Holocaust Monument have challenged states to integrate the memory of innocent victims of the nation's *own* crimes into cohesive narratives of national history. The novelty, yet also the apparent incongruity, of these monuments therefore results from their use of a traditional national monumental form of commemoration in order to recall crimes of that same nation. Combined with auxiliary forms of commemorative ritual, including speeches, debates and conferences, they broke a national convention according to which ritual commemorations and monuments offer solace or support for the *positive* identification of citizens. They therefore challenge an understanding of national "identity"[10] founded on attachments to symbols or "sites of memory",[11] defined by Pierre Nora as "focal points of our national heritage".[12] Yet what is the nature of national heritage, as in France and Germany, which incorporates memories of war crimes?

The essays collected by Nora in *Les Lieux de mémoire* propose a conception of French history founded on sites of memory recalling distant historical moments, essentially from the nineteenth century, which today possess little immediate emotional appeal, but which are still shared with a degree of pride by members of the cultural community defined as "French": works of literature and history, geographical boundaries, architectural symbols, historical events or cultural

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[10] For a critique of the term "identity", see Richard Handler, "Is 'Identity' a Useful Concept?", in John Gillis (ed), *Commemorations. The Politics of National Identity,* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994, pp. 27-40.
[11] Cf. Pierre Nora (ed), *Les Lieux de mémoire* (7 vols), Paris: Gallimard, 1984-93.

traditions. In contrast, the debates over the Vél' d'Hiv' and Holocaust Monument have shown that the Second World War is a source of memory which still engages and *divides* witnesses, participants and victims, as well as younger generations which have no direct experience of the events. Partisan approaches to these monuments were not governed uniquely by conflicting interpretations of historical events in themselves, however, but by interpretations of the rhetoric or aesthetic *means* by which they should be represented and remembered. Conflict over historical memories and over their means of transmission is inherent to democratic memory cultures. This study of debates therefore provides insight into the process by which contemporary national symbols emerged out of conflict, how monuments were negotiated rhetorically in political and public spheres, and finally how negotiations appeased public emotions with respect to the issue of representation. In the aftermath of these debates, the commemorations, monuments and speeches subsist as ritual, aesthetic and rhetorical residues of a process of historicisation and therefore appear to fulfil the function of commemorations defined by Nora as the "regulation of conflicts".[13]

In the following study, a close analysis of language used in the debates will highlight the way in which the articulation of conflicting political interests prior to the emergence of the Vél' d'Hiv' and Holocaust Monument determined their final forms. In the case of the Vél' d'Hiv', the origin of the introduction of an annual national day of commemoration in 1993 and inauguration of a new monument in 1994 lay in public controversy over the rhetoric of presidential speeches. In the case of the Holocaust Monument, the eleven-year long debate over its form, site and purpose meant that the very substance of this long-term non-existent monument consisted purely in verbal speculation until erected in 2000. The material by which people experienced these monuments derived essentially from verbal or textual sources. For this reason, the rhetorical foundations of these monuments require closer analysis. For the empirical case studies in Chapter II, I have drawn extensively on source material such as press articles, political statements, interviews, ceremonial speeches, open letters, brochures of associations representing memorials, protocols of parliamentary debates, radio discussions with politicians and historians and, in Germany, on public conferences and forums involving representatives from political parties and associations, as well as journalists, historians and participating artists. When sculptural form became the object of political debate, as in the case of the Berlin monument, I also examined the proposed artistic forms as a type of formal artistic discourse within the context of the political debate. In this way, I have tried to

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[12] Pierre Nora, "Das Abenteuer der *Lieux de mémoire",* in Etienne François et al (eds), *Nation und Emotion,* Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995, pp. 83-92, p. 83.
[13] Pierre Nora, interview with Emmanuel de Roux, *Le Monde,* 29.11.94, p. 2.

give a comprehensive view of the function of two national symbols *as they emerged,* where symbolic form and political interests collide, expressed as monuments and as the rhetoric with which they are sanctioned in the public sphere.

The "discursive events"[14] associated with these monuments acquired significance within specific historical and political contexts, in relation to the motivations for and reactions to projects linking the past and present of France and Germany via representations of events of the 1940s in the 1990s. Newspapers and political parties each conveyed combinations of different individual opinions and perspectives on these issues; no form of media or institution in itself constitutes a coherent source of information with which to evaluate public opinion. Analysis of rhetorical codes and narrative strategies therefore offers a more structured insight into the interpretative process whereby information is transmitted in the public sphere. Historical memory is thus constructed narratively on the basis of groups of concepts such as "nation", "reconciliation" or "consensus". No monument is in reality "national". Rather, it is construed as such during the course of its planning, whether as a consequence of its central site in a capital city, state involvement, its emotional appeal to a broad section of society, or simply by being termed "national" by public officials in the media. In order to account for these factors in the emergence of the two monuments in France and Germany, I have focused on rhetorical codes and narrative strategies as the most influential elements in their national construction. "Dialogic" monuments, conceived as discursive events in their own right, are not the product of an anonymous or natural historical process, but constructed by political agents within a specific social context.

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[14] Siegfried Jäger, *Kritische Diskursanalyse,* Duisburg: Duisburger Institut für Sprach- und Sozialforschung, 1993, p. 157.