I thought I would take a post to give you a taste of one of my early chapters in my book on Memory. It is in very rough draft, so don’t expect much. But this passage deals with the topic of my last post, “collective” memory. Here I use the example of how we remember, or misremember, the life and views of Abraham Lincoln.

In 2014 a poll was taken of 162 members of the American Political Science Association, asking them to rank all the past presidents of the United States, from best to worst.[1] Probably to no one’s great surprise, the top-ranked president was Abraham Lincoln. Most of us – though certainly not all of us! – remember Lincoln as a truly great and noble man who did remarkable things for his country. But it was not always that way. In his own day, Lincoln in fact was not seen as a great president – and not only in the southern states, whose inhabitants, as a rule, truly despised him and what he stood for. But even among his supporters he was not wildly popular. As social historian Barry Schwartz indicates, in his pivotal book *Abraham Lincoln and the Fore of National Memory,* “When Abraham Lincoln awoke on the last day of his life, almost everyone could find something about him to dislike.” [2]

Schwartz’s book tries to show that Lincoln did not come to be considered “great” until after his death, and even then his fortunes in memory rose and fell depending on what was happening more broadly in the country as a whole. Every turning point in American history led to a revised image of Lincoln, both who he was as a human being and what he tried to accomplish (and did accomplish).

I think it is fair to say that most of us today remember Lincoln as one of the first great heroes of civil rights, as one who aggressively promoted the idea that “all people are created equal,” that whites and blacks deserve to be treated the same before the law, that black slaves should be set free and allowed to have the same rights and freedoms as their white owners.

It turns out that even though this is how Lincoln is widely remembered today, it is not true, historically.

THE REST OF THIS POST IS FOR MEMBERS ONLY. If you don’t belong yet, C’MON!! JOIN!!! It doesn’t cost much and every penny goes to charity!

Lincoln was not in favor of civil rights. His idea was that blacks should be set free and then deported to a colony. He did not think that blacks should have the right to vote or to serve on juries or to enjoy the privileges and responsibilities of the whites in society. He was explicitly opposed to the idea of racial equality, in no small measure because he believed (in his words) that there was a “physical difference” between blacks and whites that would make it impossible.

That seems incredible to us today, but it is easy to document from Lincoln’s own speeches and writings. As he says quite plainly, and somewhat shockingly, in one place:

I am not, nor ever have been, favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races...and I will say in addition to this that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will forever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality.” [3]
If Lincoln had such views – which would be seen as hideously racist by us today – why is he so widely seen today as a champion of civil rights? As Schwartz demonstrates, it is because during the civil rights movement in the early 1960s, Lincoln was latched onto as a voice from the past who could provide a rationale and moral justification for the push to provide full equality under the law for African Americans, a push that almost all of us realize came many, many years too late.

When we remember the past, whether we are thinking simply our individual thoughts or when we are reconstructing our previous history as a collective whole, as a society, we do so, always and necessarily, in light of our present situation. The past is not a fixed entity back there in time. It is always being transformed in our minds, depending what our minds are occupied with in the here and now. As Schwartz claims, the somewhat ironic portrayal of Abraham Lincoln as a civil rights prophet “demonstrates the malleability of the past and justifies Maurice Halbwachs’s claim that ‘collective memory is essentially a reconstruction of the past that adapts the image of historical facts to the beliefs and spiritual needs of the present.’”[4]

The Maurice Halbwachs that Schwartz invokes here is one of the truly great pioneers in the study of memory – specifically, memory as held by social groups, “collective memory.” We will meet him again in chapter 6. Halbwachs had a rather extreme view of how we remember. He thought that literally all of our memories are social memories, that we can’t actually have any personal, private memories, but that every memory we have is necessarily influenced by, shaped, and provided by our various social contexts. Not everyone agrees with that view, but on one point there is much wider consensus. We – whether as individuals or as members of a collective – “remember” the past because of its value in the present. Otherwise we have no reason even to think about the past – whether it is our own past lives and experiences or the lives and experiences of our society. And (this is the key point I am trying to make), sometimes, often, or always our memories of the past are distorted precisely because of the demands of the present.

Schwartz in particular wants to emphasize that this reality of memory does not mean that what we remember about our past – as individuals or as social groups – is simply fabricated and unreliable. On the contrary, most of what we remember is accurate and historical. But the way we remember it is highly selective and sometimes distorted by the reasons we choose to remember in the first place. Our memories relish and celebrate the past, but do so in ways that are highly selective. In Schwartz’s words, our modern way of remembering Lincoln “valuates history by lifting the morally significant elements of Lincoln’s life above the mundane.”[5]


preceding note.


**Sketch of My Memory Book**
**Different Kinds of Memory**