

Concerning mental pivots and civilizations of memory

David Graeber

2015

Fritz Saxl used to say that Warburg, in each of his articles, would write an introduction to a science that would never see the light of day. (p. 38)

[E]very technique for remembering is also a technique of the imagination. (p. 199)

It's hard to deny, these days, that many fields of anthropology have been reduced to a desultory state. These include some of those that, traditionally, have been most vital, such as the study of kinship. But nowhere is it more true than for the study of myth, ritual, cosmology—all those endeavors through which anthropologists once aspired to contribute to a broader, comparative science of meaning. It is very hard to imagine any contemporary anthropologist producing an analysis of a mythic cycle, a sacrificial ritual, or even, say, temple architecture with the richness and density we used to expect regularly from figures like Claude Lévi-Strauss, Nancy Munn, or Victor Turner.¹ The irony is not because there have been no advances in our understandings of such matters over the last several decades. To the contrary: it's precisely because there have been.

The dilemma is, as cognitive science has demonstrated, that the entire apparatus of assumptions about the nature of language, meaning, and thought on which those analyses was founded is simply false, but it has not yet provided us with the tools to create nearly as sophisticated analyses on a more sound basis. We know now that symbolic thought is not structured like a language. We understand that no synthesis of Prague school phonemics and Schleiermachian hermeneutics will ever get us even remotely close to understanding what is really happening when a man in Borneo recites a prayer over the disinterred bones of his ancestor, or a woman in Burundi tells a funny story while embroidering a piece of cloth. We know the tools we had been using were wildly inadequate. But any new tools we have are still extraordinarily crude. Cognitive science (let alone neuroscience, or allied branches of philosophy) has not come anywhere close to providing us with means to build analytical structures that could rival something like, say, Jean-Pierre Vernant's (1980) analysis of the myth of Prometheus, Lévi-Strauss' *The raw and the cooked* ([1964] 1983), let alone, to take just one example, the kind of richly beautiful ethnographic analysis we find in a book like Catherine Hugh-Jones' *From the Milk River* (1978) or Stephen Hugh-Jones' *The palm and the Pleiades* (1979).

¹ Or, if someone did, of anyone taking them seriously or paying much attention to them.

We have, therefore, the promise of a new science of thought in front of us. We know it will someday exist. But we still don't know what it will ultimately look like.

True, the situation has, admittedly, played itself out quite differently in the English-speaking world than on the Continent. Anglophone social theorists have reacted mainly by abandoning any pretense that what they are doing has much to do with science in the first place. It's rare even to hear the term "social science" anymore, except from rational choice theorists and similar positivists. Instead, the project has been redefined as "social theory," and "theory" now refers not to hypotheses that can be tested in some way, but to ideas culled from the tradition of Continental philosophy, starting with Spinoza and ending, perhaps, with Derrida, Agamben, or Badiou. In contrast, French, German, and Italian social theorists have been reluctant to accept such a division. Many are much more willing to try to incorporate the results of cognitive science with the (largely Anglo-American) tradition of analytic philosophy that has engaged with it. They have, in other words, at least begun to undertake the painstaking and often decidedly unglamorous work of rebuilding everything from scratch.²

Carlo Severi's *The chimera principle* is, it seems to me, the first work in that latter tradition that affords us a glimpse of what this new, fully evolved science of meaning—one that does not simply do violence to what we know now about the human mind and human communication, but one that also is capable of genuinely engaging with all the big questions of myth, magic, art, ritual—might eventually look like. This is why its publication in English can be considered a landmark.

Granted, it is a first effort, a series of explorations, a throwing open of windows, each vista opening the way to another even more sweeping vision of some body of inquiry that may someday come to exist. But this is only half its charm and power. It is a work that reminds us of futures long forgotten, of days when it seemed self-evident to those drawn to the discipline that anthropology would, eventually, unlock the secrets of the human soul. Fittingly, Severi draws here on a great tradition of other such unrealized or half-realized intellectual projects from those early days: Augustus Pitt-Rivers' biology of images, Aby Warburg's Atlas of Memory, Gregory Bateson's sketch for an ethnography of the materiality of Iatmul thought, Frances Yates' (1966) work on the Medieval arts of memory and the literature that has followed in its wake.

Yates' book is an excellent example of such frustrated promises—or perhaps it just seems that way to me because I'm old enough to remember when it was (re)discovered in the anthropology department in Chicago in the 1980s. I well remember, as a graduate student, the excitement with which many of us felt, especially as we compared it with A. R. Luria's *The mind of mnemonist* (republished in 1987), and Jonathan Spence's *The memory palace of Matteo Ricci* (1985). We were convinced that something important was happening—or should be; that a new sub-discipline dedicated to the comparative study of mnemotechnics was in the process of formation. But it never ultimately happened. Apart from a couple pioneering, but largely ignored, works by David Napier (1987, 1996), the anticipated field failed to materialize, and everyone moved on to other

² It is not of course entirely confined to the Continent—my own department, at LSE, has a significant cognitive tradition as well. But it is somewhat exceptional in this regard, and there are direct links—especially via Maurice Bloch—to the tradition of Dan Sperber and Pascal Boyer in France.

things.³ Perhaps now, in retrospect, we can understand why: the field just wasn't ready to absorb this kind of material; the intellectual tools at our disposal were simply inadequate. Now, with this book, a quarter century later, the moment seems to have finally arrived.

It is as a book about the arts of memory, one imagines, that *The chimera principle* is most likely to make its mark. Perhaps this is understandable: it certainly makes a very provocative intervention in this regard. Much of what we have considered “primitive art,” the author argues, were not meant as self-contained objects in their own right, or even as elements in some larger performance, but as memory cues to texts—usually to be performed in some sort of ritual context—whose exact nature is, often as not, entirely lost to us. These images were never meant to exist apart from words. Yet those words were a form of artistry in and of themselves. The conclusion immediately shatters half a dozen complacent assumptions we normally bring, unthinkingly, to any analysis of comparative aesthetics: the assumption of a simple distinction between “orality” and “literacy,” for example; the notion of “picture-writing”; most of our assumptions about the relationship between icon, ritual, and text. And that shattering of assumptions, in turn, proves endlessly productive. Over the course of the book it allows Severi to raise a whole series of further questions about magic, knowledge, trauma, and imagination to create a fresh technical terminology (e.g., the song-form, *nachleben*, objective and subjective parallelism, chimera-objects, projective belief), and thus to cast even more complacent assumptions into doubt.

Still, it would be a shame if *The chimera principle* ends up being remembered simply as a book about memory techniques. True, even if that's all it were, its publication would be a landmark. But its aims are in fact much more ambitious. Severi not only builds on imaginary sciences, he also lays the groundwork for a veritable science of the imagination. It is not memory but the nature of the human imagination that the author is ultimately trying to understand. The matter is rarely stated quite as explicitly as it might be. Sometimes one almost has the sense the author feels if he were to name his quarry too explicitly, it would take heed and slip away. Still this ultimate purpose shapes every aspect of the argument: from the early evocation of Vischer and Löwy on memory images to the startling analyses of messianic and penitential cult movements with which *The chimera principle* comes to a close. The premise of the book is that there is always, everywhere, an intrinsic relation between the means by which we store and classify knowledge, and what would otherwise seem to be its opposite, “evocation, ideation, and poetic imagination,” the inner resources that enable us to leap beyond the received order of things to create something radically new.

Hence the “chimera principle” itself. The central argument is that imagination is a social phenomenon, dialogic even, but crucially one that typically works itself out through the mediation of objects that are at once paradoxical, startling (in such a way as to become *imagines agentes*, “active” in the Yatesian sense), but also—and this is the crucial element others have largely ignored—to some degree unfinished, teasingly schematic in such a way as to, almost perforce, mobilize the imaginative powers of the recipient to fill in the blanks. Even what we are accustomed to thinking of as religious or magical “belief,” Severi argues, is largely to be accounted for through the

³ One particularly poignant memory I have from Chicago in the 1980s was Napier delivering a Monday seminar, in which he outlined the possibility of a Yatesian anthropology of memory; then, watching as he stood awkwardly about the wine and cheese table and not a single faculty member approached him to ask any questions about it. I desperately wanted to approach him, but couldn't figure out quite what to ask.

workings of this unstable, inherently ambiguous, endlessly imaginative process of paradox and imaginative projection.

A science of imagination. It's hard to imagine an intellectual project more ambitious. As much as anything that has been written in recent decades, this book really is an attempt to use the tools of anthropology to unfathom secrets of the human soul.

How then to celebrate a book of such ambitions? Perhaps best by simply pausing to reflect on some of the vistas it opens up. Consider, for a moment, the question of history. It was always clear that the ancient and medieval systems of “artificial memory” described by Yates (1964), Carruthers ([1990] 2008), and the rest, based on the arrangement of striking images in sequence within a fixed imaginary space, had to be rooted—however idiosyncratic they seemed—in some kind of universal human capacity. How else, for instance, could Luria's twentieth-century Russian mnemonist have come up with almost exactly the same system with, apparently, absolutely no awareness that he was doing so? So: are the various lost arts of memory described in this book also independent inventions, historically unconnected? Actually, there is one surprising piece of evidence that suggests that they are not.

For Severi, the “chimera principle” goes well beyond the mere creation of “chimera objects” such as Warburg's lightning-serpent, or actual gorgons and chimeras—that is, images created by schematizing and formalizing parts of animal or human bodies and recombining them in striking and unexpected ways. It is a much more general principle which lies at the heart of human imaginative practices everywhere. Still, it is helpful to focus for a moment on monstrous images of this sort. Because they do seem to have a specific history. They did not always exist. As archeologist David Wengrow painstakingly demonstrates in his recent monograph *The origins of monsters* (2013), in the Pleistocene, and on through the Neolithic, such figures were either extraordinarily rare or entirely nonexistent. The habit of breaking creatures up into abstract component elements and then reassembling them into strange—and usually terrifying—forms has a specific historical origin: it is the product of what he calls “the first age of mechanical reproduction,” roughly corresponding to the creation of the first bureaucratic systems of governance in Mesopotamia and Egypt, whose administrative cadres were also responsible for the systematic development of systems of math and writing, and who, generally, specialized in this sort of schematization and rearrangement of aspects of the world. Odd though it may sound, chimeras were originally a bureaucratic invention.

In other words, for much of our history, some of the features we are used to identifying most closely with “primitive art” simply did not exist. At best, hybrid creatures might have popped up here and there as isolated flights of fancy, but there was nothing remotely like the systematic elaboration we've come to associate with, say, Sepik River societies of Melanesia, the Northwest coast of North America, or the nomadic kingdoms of Central Asia. And when they did appear in the bureaucratic environments of Egypt or Mesopotamia, they do not seem to have had anything to do with the kind of mnemotechnics that Severi describes. True, once they existed, the “cognitive catch” that made such images so potentially easy to fix in memory did, gradually, have its

effect. Eventually, images of composite creatures spread almost everywhere, and took on a new life and new meaning as they did. Yet how this happened, and why, is something historians have hardly begun to piece together.

We don't know what really happened, but, since this is a book about imagination, perhaps it would be fitting to apply some and try to envision one possible scenario. Let us say, perhaps, there came to be a certain band of civilization, existing alongside, in opposition to, yet also intimately related to the bureaucratic urban civilizations with their writing systems. These have been referred to as heroic societies (Chadwick 1926, Wengrow 2011, Graeber 2013), but they could just as easily be referred to as "civilizations of heroic memory." Both the bureaucratic and commercial cities of the valleys, and the heroic societies of the hills, deserts, and steppes surrounding them, came to define themselves against one another. Where one valued order and administrative regularity, the other created an endlessly fluctuating world of heroic aristocrats, boasting, dueling, vying with one another in every sort of spectacular potlatch or sacrifice. Where one was held together by registers, ledgers, and accounts, the other rejected writing systems altogether, substituting either the kind of elaborate systems of oral composition that Parry (1930) and Lord ([1960] 2000) so famously described (which almost invariably were used to extemporize heroic epics that celebrated precisely this sort of heroic society), or, we can now add, the kinds of iconographic memory systems Carlo Severi documents.

Could these arts of memory have formed originally not as an alternative but as a defiant response to urbanization and written script? It's possible. In fact, in the case of the Old World, it fits the evidence quite nicely. Still, the case of the Americas renders this picture infinitely more complex. It is by no means entirely clear what relation, say, the Hopi or Bellacoola had to the large urban civilizations of the Mississippi Valley or Central Mexico. And those urban civilizations themselves had an extremely ambivalent relationship with writing. We would have to ask why the evolution of bureaucratic systems of tallies and accounts, which ultimately led to the development of Mesopotamian cuneiform and Egyptian hieroglyphics, took such a different course in the Andes—where the tallies did not lead to the emergence of a script—and Central America, where writing emerged only among the Maya and was not adopted by any of their neighbors.

In fact, it has always struck me that the latter is one of the great historical mysteries that almost no one has really attempted to explain. Mesopotamian cuneiform was widely adopted by neighboring urban civilizations, and in the process simplified into Ugaritic, and then into the Phoenician alphabet, which became the basis for an endless series of different scripts. Nothing like this happened in the Americas. Why was the Maya syllabic system never adopted by any of their neighbors? Why did the urban civilizations of Oaxaca, for example—who obviously would have known about it—instead continue to write codices using the sort of memory systems Severi describes?

Once we throw off the evolutionary shackles that still implicitly dominate our thinking on such matters, and realize that politics has always existed, such questions become far easier to address. After all, what is politics, in the final analysis, but a collection of quarrels over contrasting conceptions of what is valuable in human life? Perhaps the balance of forces in the Americas simply came out the other way. In Eurasia and Africa, bureaucratic civilization proved resilient and enduring, and heroic systems of memory were either pushed to the margins, or, as in the classical and medieval European worlds, were maintained as a kind of subculture in the shadow of the written word. Could it be that early systems of writing did emerge in a remote historical past

we are now unable to reconstruct—perhaps not just in the Maya lowlands but elsewhere? And that a similar dynamic of schismogenetic mutual definition did take place, but that the political balance in this case tipped the other way? After all, if, say, the Olmecs had produced thousands of barkcloth codices, how would we really know? Perhaps the complex of values that came to be ranged against the urban, bureaucratic systems simply proved more resilient, and even in the cities, scribes came to adopt the alternative memory systems instead.

This is pure speculation. We really do not know. It's possible we never could know. Still, I think the notion of “civilizations of heroic memory” might provide a helpful starting point for a larger historical analysis— even if one that will probably have to be discarded once we develop a more nuanced understanding. If nothing else, many of the techniques described in this book seem designed to lend themselves to ostentatiously heroic feats of recall. One need think only of the extraordinary capacities of Iatmul men of knowledge, each bearing in his head lists of up to tens of thousands of totemic names. The Iatmul seem a perfect example of a society in which heroic values have been, as it were, democratized: where instead of a mass of retainers shifting allegiance between a collection of boastful feuding aristocrats, and an elite of bards or priests or druids—masters of complex, unwritten arcane lore—*all* adult males are expected to be either “men of violence” or “men of discretion,” boastful warriors or guardians of totemic lore. Surely, in the endless heated men's house debates that mark Iatmul political life, feats of memory are meant to directly parallel heroic feats in war. Here, memory itself becomes an exploit.

Yet it is also—as in just about every example recounted in the book— a memory *of* exploits as well.

In no case, among the many cases Severi assembles, do we encounter the kind of lists, inventories, and accounting procedures that appear to have led to the development of writing in Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Indus Valley, or China. Math is minimal. Even the Iatmul lists of names, which might seem to bear the closest resemblance to what we have come to think of as bureaucratic procedures, really encode moments in a mythic journey that led to the gradual creation of the material and social universe. In every case the narratives these arts of memory seek to preserve involve travels, either in physical or conceptual space; almost invariably, too, these travels are punctuated by heroic feats of creation or destruction. They are memories of hunts, shamanic journeys, or military expeditions. The form, and content, of the systems of memory appears to bear a constant homology, one which itself suggests a structure of value inherently opposed to those embodied in writing as administrative technique.⁴

One legacy of that complex of values that has historically surrounded and supported techniques of writing is the notion of the “text.” Ideally, a text, once created, is seen as floating entirely free of any concrete context of its creation or, not to mention, as a purely linguistic abstraction in no way dependent on any particularly visual element (typeface, illustrations, size, shape, design, etc.) through which it might, at any moment, be embodied or conveyed. This is the conception of text that lay behind the most influential works of interpretive anthropology (the Balinese cockfight being, of course, the most famous example)— much to the disadvantage of the hermeneutic

⁴ All of this leads to equally interesting questions about shamanism, which we are used to imagining as the primordial form of religion, again, on tacitly evolutionist grounds. Is it possible that shamanism—at least in the form we currently know it—was also a historical innovation that did not exist before a specific, identifiable point in time? Imagining such a thing seems particularly daunting.

project as a whole. But of course, this conception of text itself represents a kind of utopian ideal, in which the imaginative genius of a single, unique artist is seen to create an equally unique object destined to transcend space and time to endure forever.

That complex of values that has supported the various arts of memory has entirely different implications. In many of the cases examined in this book, the “texts,” such as they are, are precisely what we no longer have. But in a way, this is a minor absence, since texts in anything like that utopian sense clearly do not exist and no one really imagines that they ought to. We are confronted instead with a series of material technologies that externalize the process of memory and imagination, making that process something intrinsically dialogic and contextual. Everything turns on a tacit complicity, whereby the author leaves the work, in effect, half-finished so as to “capture the imagination” of the interpreter. This clearly has powerful implications for any theory of human creativity.

It seems to me it has important implications for our most basic understanding of human thought as well.

Let me conclude by explaining what I mean by this. In recent years, two philosophers of mind, Andy Clark and David Chalmers (1998), have created a great deal of stir both among analytical philosophers and cognitive scientists by challenging the assumption that the human mind must necessarily be coextensive with the brain. The assumption seems to be contradicted even by the most ordinary everyday experience. Consider, they propose, two people: one is trying to remember a colleague’s name and calls it up from their memory; the other has a bad memory and turns just as automatically to their address book. Or perhaps one is doing a problem of long division in her head, and the other is working it out with a pencil and paper. If so, why is the notebook, or the pencil and paper, not, at that moment, part of that person’s mind? If mind is a process of thinking, then surely the notebook, or the pencil and paper, play exactly the same role in the process as the part of their brain would have done and which otherwise would have been activated. It would be completely arbitrary to insist that the part of the woman’s brain in which one is working out the long division is part of one’s mind, during the moment when she is solving the problem, but that the pencil and paper is not.

This would indeed seem to be common sense; but it has enormous implications. Clark and Chalmers are more interested in human beings’ relations to technology than in their relations to one another, so they devote a great deal of energy to fobbing off what any anthropologist would (I hope) consider the obvious next question: if this is true of the dynamic relation between human brains and physical technologies (abacuses, computers, rooms arranged in such a way to act as astrological calendars, etc.), then what about the relationship between brains and other brains? Cognitive science reveals that fully self-conscious thought is remarkably fleeting. Unless one practices some form of artificial mental discipline like meditation, conscious reflection rarely lasts more than a few seconds. Or, this is true of *solitary* reflection. It’s obviously not the case when one is engaged in intense conversation with someone else. (This is presumably the reason so many people engage in imaginary dialogues when trying to work out a problem.) But if so, self-conscious thought generally tends to occur precisely when the difference between one mind and another is least apparent, when it might make just as much sense to speak of a single, dialogic consciousness.

The extended mind hypothesis, as it has come to be called, is one of the more dramatic philosophical breakthroughs of recent years. Yet it is riddled with gaps, contradictions, and conceptual blind spots. Its best-known exponents have almost nothing to say about creativity, cultural mean-

ing, or social relations; sometimes they write as if they were actually unaware of them. Yet a book like this is precisely what's required to begin to turn all this around.

But consider the perspective such an approach opens up. Severi cites Vischer, Löwy, Warburg, and ultimately Boas to make a compelling case that what was then described as “primitive art” is not a crude attempt to represent the world as it reveals itself to human vision, but, rather, is a representation of mental space, of objects of memory and imagination as they reveal themselves to the human mind. Yet if he is right about the role so many of these objects played in arts of memory, and if the extended mind hypothesis is right, then we can go much further. When an archeologist unearths a series of ancient chimera-objects, she is not simply discovering a representation of the inside of an ancient mind, she is holding in her hand an object that actually *was* part of a human mind. Indeed, insofar as we think through our physical environment, we are surrounded by objects that are, in certain contexts, forms of consciousness, though merely background noise in others. But if so, the images discussed in this book are of a class of objects that plays a particularly important role in human thought because, by mobilizing imagination in such a way to link different brains, at least momentarily, contextually, into one unified process of thinking, they become pivots around which—through which—new forms of dialogic consciousness—new minds—come into being.

Armed with this understanding, would it not be possible to return to some of the foundational issues of classical social theory—e.g., Marx's fetishes, Durkheim's ritual effervescence—and see them in an entirely different light? But this time, return to them armed with a conceptual apparatus that actually reflects the findings of contemporary science? It is exciting to imagine that we are finally living in times when such things have become possible again.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



David Graeber
Concerning mental pivots and civilizations of memory
2015

Foreword to *The Chimera Principle: An Anthropology of Memory and Imagination* by Carlo Severi, pp. xi-xxiii

Available online at haubooks.org (open access). | See also: David Graeber Institute
<https://davidgraeber.institute/> & <https://davidgraeber.org/>

theanarchistlibrary.org