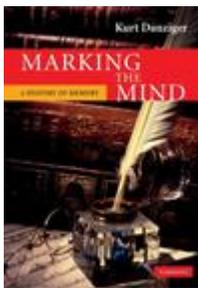


Memory Writ Large

A review of



Marking the Mind: A History of Memory

by Kurt Danziger

Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 305 pp. ISBN 978-0-521-89815-7 (hardcover); ISBN 978-0-521-72641-2 (paperback). \$108.00, hardcover; \$42.00, paperback



Reviewed by

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When one agrees to review a book, the request comes without much information. So the potential reviewer must decide on the basis of the title, the author's name, and perhaps a few sentences about the book from the front matter or the publisher (and a quick look at Amazon). In the case of *Marking the Mind: A History of Memory*, I used the subtitle and inferred that the book was probably about the history of experimental memory research. Because I have spent nearly 40 years as an experimental psychologist studying memory, I agreed to review the book to learn about this history.

My assumption about the book's content turned out to be largely mistaken. Yes, there is some history of academic research by experimentalists (Chapter 5 is titled "An Experimental Science of Memory"), but the author, Kurt Danziger, had much loftier ambitions. The subtitle is to be taken literally—the "history of memory in Western civilization" might be an expanded subtitle. This book is wide in scope and impressive in its scholarship and erudition.

This is a wonderful book, a success on all levels. Danziger manages to cover a huge range of topics, large and small, from the distant past to nearly the present. Interesting points abound. Consider just the book's first page, which begins with the critical role of memory in cultures before writing was invented (and even after, when writing was mostly on stone tablets or valuable parchment). How was the problem of remembering information solved? What devices did the ancients use? We learn that

ancient Greece had the institution of the *mnemon*, a person whose job it was to remember religious or legal matters relevant to decision-making and jurisprudence. Roman politicians and lawyers were known to own *graeculi*, "little Greeks," who were intellectually trained slaves that were also required to memorize social and technical information so that they could prompt their masters during court sessions and political or social events. (p. 1)

Who knew? Nowadays we have various computing devices to serve as our slaves and to hold our information, although sometimes one wonders if the relationship might not be reversed, with us enslaved by our various memory-enabling devices (event planners, address registers, phone directories, and so on).

The book is composed of nine chapters and has a general historical ordering from old to new, but one that winds around a bit, too. The chapters could be read as independent essays, and I often found myself dipping ahead and then back as I found items of special interest. The contents are wide ranging.

There is an excellent chapter on metaphors of memory from the Greeks to today's latest inventions. The chapter on the experimental science of memory is fine, making the usual contrast between approaches pioneered by Ebbinghaus and those by Bartlett and tripping lightly forward in time until the recent past, albeit while painting with a broad brush. (I would still like to see a history of the scientific study of memory in all, or at least some, of its various modes—experimental psychology, neuropsychology, behavioral neuroscience, and so on.)

The chapter on truth in memory takes up some of the cases in which reconstruction with plausible inference is just not good enough. Most of the issues covered revolve around witness testimony in court cases or bring back the memory wars of the 1990s, with the debates over the validity (or lack thereof) of recovered memories.

Marking the Mind is long and this review is short, so let me just comment on some general themes that repeatedly appear in the book (and in this whole field of study). One has to do with the whole idea of "studying" memory. In a section heading in one chapter, Danziger asks, "Is memory a scientific category?" On the one hand, the answer would obviously be *yes* because many people who call themselves scientists claim this topic as their object of study.

However, Danziger points out that such a state of affairs is not inevitable in all conceptions of psychology. At the beginning of scientific psychology, he notes that "the first

edition of Wundt's famous compendium, the *Principles of Physiological Psychology*, did not mention memory at all in the body of its nearly 900 pages of text" (p. 126). Of course, in the intervening years, biological psychologists have made up for this lack; whole armies of researchers have studied biological bases of memory using techniques ranging from molecular analysis to neuroimaging, with many levels in between (e.g., the approach from "physiological psychology" of tinkering with an animal's nervous system to discern what effects ensue on learning and memory).

The modern danger now may be creation of too many scientific categories from the term *memory* because it is used in so many ways. A few years back, Endel Tulving (2007) wrote a chapter titled "Are There 256 Different Kinds of Memory?" Journals today are filled with research on different types of memory: autobiographical memory, working memory, episodic memory, false memory, semantic memory, and many more. The issues of how to conceive of memory and for what purpose still vex the modern researcher. For example, one recent edited volume presents short, spirited debates about the very meaning of the terms *learning* and *memory* (Roediger, Dudai, & Fitzpatrick, 2008).

Toward the end of the book, Danziger has an optimistic section, Faculty Psychology and Its Demise. I wonder about the demise. Nearly every introductory psychology text I know has the standard chapters on sensation, perception, learning, memory, and thinking, as though these were separate topics (faculties?) that do not much interact. We know, in our better moments, that it is just not so. What we remember depends on what we perceive and what we think while we perceive, but often our experiments and our theories (as well as our textbooks) pretend otherwise. All the different categories of memory (working, episodic, etc.) seem to break the broad faculty of memory into smaller ones, each with its own little job to do in mental life.

Another theme running through the book is whether memory is, or should be, about literal truth. It is fashionable to read these days that remembering merely need be "good enough" and that literal reproduction or precise knowledge is rather beside the point, *passé* even. Remembering is reconstructive, right? So why be precise? However, my telephone stubbornly refuses to call the correct person when I approximate a phone number, reversing just two digits, and my various pin numbers, logins, and passwords are similarly balky. I would venture to guess that neurosurgical patients might prefer that their surgeon know exactly where their tumor is and not be guessing. Often approximate knowledge is just not good enough.

Our critical reliance on precise knowledge is probably not of recent origin, and indeed some types of birds show feats of prodigious recall of food sources. If our ancestors 100,000 years ago drank water from one source and not another close by, life or death might have hung in the balance. Although in years past psychologists may have placed too great a premium on measuring the accuracy of remembering, some today seem to argue that "pretty good" is good enough and that remembering hardly ever needs to be precise. The pendulum

seems to be swinging too far in the other direction. Yes, memory may be reconstructive, but accuracy and truth still matter in many contexts (even if not in relating a story to a friend).

The last point brings up another tension in considering the study of memory: the extent to which it is an individual or social activity. Psychologists, following in the Western philosophical tradition, have often written about memory as occurring within an individual mind. Anyone reading this review knows this sense to be true; we can recollect our high school graduation and many other events—the mental time travel that is the hallmark of episodic memory. But remembering is also a social activity, and other people influence even our individual memories. You recall an event differently if you are telling it to your mother rather than to your friend, and others' memories for an event can help to reshape your own.

We also have shared, public celebrations of memory, such as (for Americans) Memorial Day; the Fourth of July; Martin Luther King, Jr. Day; September 11, 2001; and December 7, 1941 (the day that lives in infamy). Many Commonwealth countries have Remembrance Day to commemorate their citizens who died in war, although it sometimes goes by different names (ANZAC Day in Australia and New Zealand). Most countries also build public memorials, retrieval cues to the past (Holocaust museums in various cities; monuments to Washington, Lincoln, and the battle for Iwo Jima, among many others, in the United States).

The topic of collective memory—how a defined group remembers its past—is a booming field in social sciences and the humanities. The group may be small (a family) or large (an ethnic group or even a whole country, such as the national narrative of a people; Wertsch, 2002). The term *collective memory* is used only a few times in *Marking the Mind*, but Danziger covers many topics that are of interest to this relatively new area of inquiry loosely called “memory studies” (see Boyer & Wertsch, 2009).

Marking the Mind is essential reading for anyone with a strong interest in the study of memory, from any of its many possible perspectives. Rarely have I been so glad to have read a book.

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