

**Jean Kempf. Proposition pour le débat. Journée M. Kammen,
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**Historian of Paradox(es). Michael Kammen and the History of
Memory in *Mystic Chords of Memory*.**

Michael Kammen likes paradoxes. Nay, he thrives on them ; they have guided his historical œuvre since the publication of his first book, and I would contend that despite, or maybe because of, his apparently gentle and balanced approach, they form the most central and stimulating aspect of his long line of interpretations of American history.

He chose George Washington's famous oxymoron as the title of his first book (*A Rope of Sand*, 1968), published his (Pulitzer prize winner) « Inquiry concerning the Origins of American Civilization » under the title of *People of Paradox*, and then described the Constitution as *A Machine that Would Go of Itself*¹. When defining — and defending — his historical method he accumulated, with evident rhetorical pleasure more oxymorons, more paradoxes, more conundrums, speaking of « disciplined subjectivity », of the « thin line between acuity and vacuity » and eventually even asking the reader—in much more than a rhetorical phrase—to display « a critical but compassionate acuity » toward his research.²

At a more structural level, he adressed one of his central preoccupations as cultural historian—the constitution of American society—from the « problem »—read the formal incompatibility—of tradition vs democracy, and declared his fascination—his core *problématique* — for « a society becoming its own historian ».³ Finally, in an historiographical context of heavy deconstruction, of generalized fragmentation, and of extreme conceptualization and theorizing, Kammen unashamedly wrote in 1972 about American « Civilization » (a term that seemed to have disappeared from mainstream history since Max Lerner's famous book in 1957⁴) and in 1991 published a massive, avowedly comprehensive (if not all-encompassing), history of memory in American culture.

It takes some guts to write extensively (Kammen must be one of the most prolific contemporary historians) against the grain. But here

1 One could even add, in a different field, the title of a volume of historiographical essays he compiled in 1980 : *The Past Before Us*.

2 « Introduction to the 1980 Edition », *People of Paradox*, xvi.

3 The phrase is borrowed from Harry Levin, see *Mystic Chords*, n1, 787.

4 The few books that have used « American Civilization » in their titles since 1957 seem to be for the most part either anthologies and/or textbooks, and were mostly published in the 1960s and early 70s.

again, in a paradoxical way. His books rely heavily on secondary sources more than on direct archival research. But in handling sources he displays a truly amazing deftness and erudition, giving them an entirely new dimension. His own view of American history is thoroughly informed by the work of all American historians of the moment and not only that of his own persuasion or field. In fact, he must be, with John Higham (to whom *Mystic Chords* is dedicated) one of the best informed student of American historiography, a fact also attested by his numerous articles on the topic (the best of which could very well be « An Americanist's reprise » on the « *histoire problème* »⁵), by his many reviews, as well as his compiling for the American Historical Association of a collection of essays on historical writing in the United States and his authoring of a thick authoritative introduction;⁶ and eventually, no less significantly, his presiding the OAH.

Kammen goes on, teaching but not preaching, questioning but never dismissing, and simultaneously gently agitating « prolegomenons », « codas » and « syzygies » in the face of « intextuating », « emplotting » and « essentializing ».⁷ I believe that nowhere is this more visible and significant than in his work on memory, and particularly in *Mystic Chords*, a book which encompasses all his favorite questions and allows us best to see what he can teach us as regards American history.

I — Michael Kammen and the Memory moment in American historiography. A central outsider

The modern concern for memory, in American and generally in Western European historiography, literally burst in the early 1980s. Before that date there had been a few landmark works but they remained mostly outside the field of history. The first author to displace the concept of « memory » from the field of psychology (and/or philosophy) and its attendant anatomic-physiologic topicality, was Maurice Halbwachs (1925, 1950) with his sociological concept of « mémoire collective », identifying in fact a « mémoire sociale ». Then came the anthropologists, and particularly the structural anthropologists (Levi-Strauss) and the cultural ones (Geertz). As the scholars of antiquity (Moses Finley) they

5 Michael Kammen, « An Americanist's Reprise : The Pervasive Role of *Histoire Problème* in Historical Scholarship concerning the United States since the 1960's », in *The Challenge of American History*, edited by Louis P. Masur (Baltimore : The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 1-25, originally published as the March 1998 issue of *Reviews in American History*.

6 See note 1. « The Historian's Vocation and the State of the Discipline in the United States », 19-46.

7 See « An Americanist's Reprise », 1 and *People of Paradox*, 89.

interrogated memory as part of the myth of the origin, and placed it in direct relation with the formation of identity. The first historian after Finley to really study memory in medieval and classical Europe was Francis Yates with his *Art of Memory* (1960). The anthropological model was thus applied to a diachronic reading in which memory formed a functional/structuring element in the social fabric. It appeared as a « forming » practice, but remained limited in its definition to memorization, oral transmission and *in fine* to the perpetuation of the social order — a sociological perspective — more than to the creative possibilities of evolution.

The new wave of historical concern for memory was much more ambitious and more ambiguous as well. It was both a reaction to the explosion of « patrimonial » concern, commemorating frenzy and « heritage fever » in Europe and the United States, and an internal reaction, in the field of professional history, to the advent of cultural history as the new overarching paradigm of historical studies. The emergence of a conception of history as « history of representations » is too well known to be repeated here.⁸ Suffice it to say that as the concept of « invention » became prevalent (if not invasive), the technical shifts in the field of historical practice (oral history, minority studies, social history, cultural geography) combined with social demands (and *crises* : political, generational, racial, etc.) broadened the meaning of memory to a whole array of practices, ranging from education to commemoration and to collection. This mouvement gave birth to countless studies of « memorial » activity whose volume soared after 1983, just as *new* concerns about the place of minorities in American society appeared and as a revision (or at least a revisit) of German and Japanese war past took place, new debates took place about the Holocaust, when the land-which-invented-its-own-history (the USSR) was beginning to thaw.⁹

The largest body of works on American memory—and the best—is concerned with conflicts of memory, or more broadly put with the « politics of memory ».¹⁰ They approach it from the perspective of commemoration (the public display of memory), « narrative » (under the influence of anthropology) and the construction of identity in specific groups. Needless to say the Civil War and ethnic groups are their favorite *topoi*, and their concern is—in a post-foucauldian and often more efficient

8 As Jean-Pierre Rioux states quite cogently in « La mémoire collective », *Pour une histoire culturelle* (Paris : Seuil, 1997), 325-53.

9 See Natalie Zemon Davis and Randolph Starn, « Introduction », *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 6, and *Mystic Chords*, 710-13.

10 For instance, John Bodnar, *Remaking America. Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1992).

way—the uncovering of the underlying discursive structures of power.

Michael Kammen's book, although conceived in the late 70s if we are to believe its author (*Mystic Chords* 705) takes stock of this deep movement in American historiography, participates in it and at the same time cannot be assimilated to it.

For one, Kammen, although starting like most of his colleagues from a contemporary social question, locates the debate in a discrepancy between a « true past » constructed by historians in a post-rankian model (his is only « truer ») and a false (fallacious) popular perception, essentially a nostalgic one.¹¹ In that respect he could be assimilated with the other historiographies of memory, considering, as David Thelen wrote, that « the debate over 'American memory' is finally about audiences for American history ».¹² *Mystic Chords* could thus be read as the *narrative*, the *report* of the growing realization that truth is *in fine* less important than belief. But in his development of what is, after all, a traditional opposition between history and memory, Kammen complexifies the picture so much that all versions of facile dichotomies blur and that even his own attempt at categorizing does not resist the infinite layers of contradictory meanings and evidence ; in the end both are sent back to back, as beauty is in the eyes of the beholder.¹³ He is, despite his strong opinions that he does not hesitate to put forward, a methodological empiricist, a point he makes in his « preface to the 1980 edition » of *People of Paradox* and so plunges even deeper into complexities.¹⁴

As an empiricist, he needs large bodies of facts, huge series along something approaching *la longue durée*. In *Mystic Chords*—as in many of his other books only much more so—, Kammen embraces at least a century and a half of American history—a rather broad scope with many complex phenomena at play—and declares his object to be « American culture » at a time when most historians—except maybe Foner—wrote about sub-cultures and sub-groups, narrowly focussing on a *topoi* or a topic. Kammen does not ignore them, but yet sees them as part of a larger plot. This is what I read in his quoting from Robert Penn Warren (« ...to be an American is not . . . a matter of blood ; it is a matter of an idea ») and eventually from *Hamlet* (« I have some rights of memory in this kingdom »).¹⁵ Concerned with the making of an American, with the *acquisition* of a « *birth* »right (one more paradox of Americanness), he reoccupies the fields of Tocqueville, Turner, Hartz, Boorstin, and so

11 « An Americanist's Reprise », 20. *Mystic Chords*, 38-39.

12 *Mystic Chords*, 703-04.

13 *Mystic Chords*, 703-04.

14 He speaks of his « intuitive and eclectic methodology » (*People of Paradox*, xv).

15 *Mystic Chords*, 11.

doing relentlessly explores the *E Pluribus Unum*, except that now his *Unum* is not monolithic but pluralistic, not fused but cooperating in an extraordinary, almost baroque but functional *bricolage* called the Nation. Hence his title: Lincoln's vibrant words, at the close of a rather uncompromising oration on the theme of the strayed sheep and the stern shepherd, evoke this unity in diversity (the *chord*) but definitely place it on the level of a mystery, some sort of alchemical formula that no scientist can ever hope to explain. We are ushered in the realm of revelation, a world that merely requires belief, or at least recording.

II — Michael Kammen's revision of exceptionnalism

Stating that Michael Kammen is interested in continuities is hardly the greatest academic scoop of the decade. Memory, as he reminds us is essentially about the « past-present relation » (*Mystic Chords*, 5), and what he chooses to define as tradition is very similar to the meaning given to the word by Eric Hobsbawm.¹⁶

His definitely anti-theoretical stance, however, makes his point less clear than it actually is, and his definitions of his « word-concepts » hardly help. The main problem comes from his use of « myth » which takes several meanings despite the attempt at clarification through « the big beige book ». Barthes (quoted in a footnote) would be more in order here, or — but is it really necessary ?— Levi-Strauss. By choosing to do away with the meaning of myth as fallacy, one can escape the (original) debate of a learned truth counterbalancing a popular fallacy, or to be even more comprehensive, the truth of today redressing the fallacies of the past. Calling them « a different perspective » does not solve the ethical debate. On the contrary, limiting (after Barthes) *myth* to « the discourse of origins » greatly simplifies our inquiry. Traditions are thus seen as social practices (whether physical or discursive) validated by being handed down from the past and thus demanding repetition (Hobsbawm, 4), and — I believe this point is paramount — legitimized by their *naturality* : the generational transmission being probably the most central paradigm in the cultural uses of the physical world. It requires a process of formalization and/or ritualization which takes places as needed, and which is — paradoxically — permanently undergoing transformation. And what Kammen shows meticulously is how central to American society this inter-generational *portage* was (to use pioneer vocabulary), and how contentious, in a fundamentally dispersed more than pluralistic

¹⁶ Eric Hobsbawm, « Inventing Traditions » in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1-4

world. After all, the fathers of the Constitution anticipated the « past-is-prologue » motto, by stating — in a well-calculated rhetorical twist — that the aim of the new system of government they were devising was « to secure the blessings of prosperity to ourselves and our posterity».

The intellectual thread running throughout the book is once again a paradoxical one : how, in the face of so many different differences and variables, is it still possible to maintain the idea of an American difference and define an American dynamics of memory (*Mystic Chords*, 700) ? For Kammen is fascinated by the idea of exceptionalism¹⁷ while at the same time knowing that the question is not operative any more.

In *Mystic Chords*, a large amount of the comparative chapters, of the introductory pieces and of the partial syntheses that punctate the work are precisely devoted to showing the deep parallels with other nations. In his introduction, he displays his broad knowledge of European historiography and history to reach a conclusion opposite to the neo-exceptionalists of the consensus school. They looked abroad — when they did — only to see American experience as irreducible, and protective. Theirs was of course a different context and when Louis Hartz wrote *The Liberal Tradition in America* (1955) or Arthur Schlesinger *The Vital Center* (1949), or even Daniel Boorstin *The Genius of American Politics* (1953), liberalism appeared as a dynamic and vital alternative to the tragic failures of European ideologies. Kammen, on the contrary, first quietly but surely gets rid of a huge staple argument of historical comparatism in one page when he states that one must take into account a time lag phenomenon of about two generations between Europe and the United States.¹⁸

By displacing in his memory studies the focus from polity to society, he then reaches the conclusion that America is not exceptional because of the type of ideology it did (or did not) develop, nor because of *what* is remembered or *how* it is remembered — those processes are fairly similar in many societies — but by the fact that it combined in a peculiar way the sphere of the private and that of the public. His conclusions are very close to that of Michael Walzer in *What it means to be an American*, especially when he places the « immigrant experience » as vitally constitutive of any « Americanness », which in the end is — *should be* for Walzer — a pluralist nation.¹⁹ Both Kammen and Walzer have read Horace Kallen, but they may have retained different parts. In the end, however, I believe that *Culture and Democracy* (that Kammen does not

17 Michael Kammen, « The Problem of American Exceptionalism: A Reconsideration », *American Quarterly* 45 (March 1993): 1-43.

18 See his « comparisons » at the end of each major part, especially pp. 283-296.

19 Michael Walzer, *What It Means to Be an American. Essays on the American Experience* (New York : Marsilio, 1992)

quote), and Kallen's concept of « anonymity » perfectly fit his horizon : the reconciliation between tradition and democracy that he wishes to see in the history of American memory.²⁰ His long list of practices, from genealogy to family reunions, his study of group memories in the 1920s and 1930s, his reference to scholarship on slavery, all point to possibly the central meaning of American identity : the privatization of heritage and the collectivization of destiny, both united in the conceptual synthesis of memory, looking as much behind as forward, being in fact retrospective *because* prospective.

This sharing — in fact, ontological separation — of roles has been mirrored in the First Amendment and the status of « the individual » since well before the appearance of the « liberal tradition ». It is also most interestingly and tellingly at work in the construction of personal legacies and the generalized practice of genealogy (Kammen remarks that the only really American religion, Mormonism, is one which defines its idea of salvation on the construction of lineage).²¹ To risk a facile comparison, being an American is partaking of this other « dual citizenship » which might constitute the true originality of American experience.

Such conceptualization might even work as a possible subsumation of the 4 modes in which he distributes his investigation about « the dynamics of tradition and the role of collective memory in American culture ». ²² Indeed the debate between tradition and progress, the ambivalence of Americans (they are not the only nation to know such interrogations) towards change and their repeated bouts of nostalgia, as well as « the extent to which historical issues are publicly contested », all fit within this dichotomy, as they all remain part of the private sphere, or to put it more bluntly of a formless market.

What Kammen's inventory shows is that American government (broadly construed), even in its most extreme phases of interventionism, even in the perennial reashing of a few stock myths in public speeches and the compulsory appeal to the « promises of baptism » that form the core of political rhetoric, seem to be ontologically concerned with the management of the future. Which leaves it to communities and families, collectors and maecenas, poets and historians, and today to the media, the role of shaping memories. The United States, in that respect, would appear as different from other democracies which have steadily displaced inheritance — the major source of inequality — from the domain of the private to that of the public, through systems of redistribution.²³ That

20 Walzer, 25ff.

21 David Lowenthal concurs with his stimulating remarks on « personal legacies » in *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (New York : Viking, 1996), 34, 56.

22 *Mystic Chords*, 700.

23 This may also be seen in the American conception of the land / the landscape

might very well make America special, as if it had not undergone the sacralization of the nation-state that took place in 19th-century Europe. Or rather, it would make it the perfect child of the Reformation and the Enlightenment, the Reformation secularizing the whole world as John Gillis interestingly suggests,²⁴ the Enlightenment establishing the figure of the « mobile individual » (a notion that caused Halbwachs in *Les Cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, to worry about the future cohesion of society).

Michael Kammen, however, is not as concerned as Halbwachs was about a lack of memory, or even the adoption of substitute, fake, sham, superficial memories on the part of certain segments of society (Halbwachs was concerned about the working class). It is not even clear whether the opposition he dwells upon in his opening chapter, by redrawing the Tocquevillian question of the paradox of democracy, is really his main preoccupation. For clearly, his empirical sense and pragmatic philosophy tell him that democracy and tradition do work together and that the willful forgetfulness or re-writing of history are more totalitarian habits than democratic ones ; or rather that what makes democracy is precisely the plurality of cycles of forgetting and re-writing simultaneously going on, making the citizen a partaker of many different strata of memory. What does worry him, however, is the existence of anything close to one (united) « collective » memory in the United States. He never states the question in so many words but each beam and rafter of his huge complex frame point at that possible aporia. In other words, while writing a general history of American memory, Michael Kammen wonders if such a project is possible.

III — Kammen and the paradox of the historian

A good paradoxical start would be Kammen's own comments about his prose style.²⁵ Answering criticisms made at his *People of Paradox*, he claimed a highly personal approach to the writing of history. Those who have read him know the rich — albeit sometimes convoluted — forms of a style which is often more expositional than expository. His references are obvious — Carl Becker, but also perhaps Bancroft and Jefferson. The « Prologomenons » and « codas » that he loves so much, could make him pass for a dispenser of truths and systems. Even his strong authorial pose, permanently integrating the reader in his text by outlining the parts in a rather didactic way, as well as the multiplication of proleptic marks to guide him/her might well make him appear as a

which has remained a major source of memorial transmission in Europe.

24 Gillis, 18-19.

25 *People of Paradox*, xv.

revealer, almost the equivalent of a developer for photographic images.

Despite his rich (to say the least) documentation and his use of anecdote, he is not a story-teller either. « [G]eneralizations are hazardous and ambiguities abound » (493) seems to be more his leitmotif. His « comparisons » are balanced, his hesitations numerous. He is fascinated by the detail, the idiosyncrasy, and most of all the change of focal perspective, to the point that a (French) colleague once said to me: « But what does Kammen *mean* ? ». I first found the question rather disturbing but it made me realize that one might miss the point of *Mystic Chords* (to take our example of the day) by not reading it as a « work in the making » or rather as the *novel* of a work in the making. Such reading would perfectly tie in with its author's persistent interest in iconography and in art, as well as his aesthetic stance. If the comparison was not so overbearing I would not hesitate to place him alongside the Henry James of *The Ambassadors*. The numerous reprises, qualifications, even the rhythmic patterns of some sentences, unveil the fight between « the obsession with the other thing »²⁶ and the will to « take things as they come », which is the way by which James thematizes the tensions between Europe and America, or rather between the Old and the New worlds. Kammen invites us on a journey of self-discovery, in the deep meanders of uncertainty, misgivings, doubts : history, despite the fact that it is a operation of the mind, is never what you make it / want it to be, and it escapes all possible teleologies, even those of the beholder.

Does it make, however, Michael Kammen more « readable » ? I would argue that it places him in a different paradigm, one in which the historian is less in charge of producing the all-embracing equation of American development — as Frederick Jackson Turner — than a writer entrusted with the duty to carry on a morality. He notes it himself when analyzing the historical production of the mid-nineteenth century, with Bancroft or Parkman : history for them, he wrote, had become « an appropriate surrogate for religion because they believed in the centrality of moral progress over time » (70). With Kammen, it is certainly not a question of moralizing the past, nor even of finding a moral in it, but of (merely ?) being aware of its existence, as a redemptive force.

Redeemer, or simply custodian of the past : the historian comes in when something has been lost : the sense of change, a sense that makes him close to Pierre Nora who opens his *Lieux de mémoire* with two literary pages of eulogy on the defunct memory.²⁷ Both indeed write in a

26 Strether in chapter 1 of *The Ambassadors* says : « I'm always considering something else ; something else, I mean, than the thing of the moment. The obsession of the other thing is the terror. »

27 Pierre Nora, « Entre mémoire et histoire. La problématique des lieux » in Pierre Nora (ed.), *Les Lieux de mémoire* (Paris : Gallimard, Bibliothèque illustrée des

sometimes lyrical mode under the influence of the great 19th century historians, both operate from a « certain idea » of their nation to paraphrase the Gaullian epithet ; which makes their theories less exegetic than hermeneutic. Kammen may hesitate as to his « word-concepts » to narrow down the meaning of (narrative) uses of « the past » in the present, and Nora may get caught in the Moebius ring of his definition of his *lieux de mémoire* when trying to hold in check the possibly infinite inventory of the *lieux*. Both assert that memory is not about remembering (or forgetting²⁸) but about the struggle between progress and decline. As Nora himself showed, the theme of decline is at the core of all American history.²⁹ The very definition of American time holds the perspective of decay³⁰, which makes destinarian rhetoric and even the various, and sometimes subtle forms of racial/racist discourse in the United States, more a real manifestation of terror than one of superiority.

Progress as a concept, however, is recurrently present in Kammen's study of American « memory », but more often than not sideways, although it clearly *is* the real object of his investigation. John Bodnar in a long review essay of the American translation of *Les Lieux de mémoire*, compares the two works at length and reaches the same conclusion, in different terms :

Imbued with the faith of the Enlightenment in human reason and potential, these new states in places such as France and America took up the highly romantic project to make the future better than the past (951) . . . To extrapolate from the work of Nora, Kammen, and Giddens [A. Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right : The Future of Radical Politics* (Stanford, 1994)], we can say that under the nation-state there as a sense of the transcendent in cultural politics that helped conservatism and democracy get along and that fostered a belief system that seemed both eternal and loftier than either conservative visions of authority or leftist dreams of mass democracy. In a sense the impulses to democratize and to reassert tradition needed each other. Democracy pushed outward for greater personal freedom ; tradition worked to constrain the individual and to maintain the collective (959)³¹

But Bodnar makes democracy once again the anti-thesis of

histoires, 1984), xvii-xix

28 Which makes the study of the « trous de mémoire » interesting but, *in fine*, self-defeating. Is it a real historical question, ie one which does not hold its own answer ? I would contend that it is not.

29 Pierre Nora, « Le 'Fardeau de l'histoire' aux États-Unis », in *Mélanges Pierre Renouvin : études d'histoire des relations internationales* (Paris : P.U.F., 1966), 51-74.

30 I find Kammen's quoting T.S. Eliot (*Mystic Chords*, 14) quite significant of that metaphysics of the historical venture.

31 John Bodnar, « Pierre Nora, National Memory, and Democracy : A Review », *Journal of American History* 87 n° 3 (december 2000) : 951-63.

tradition and refocuses the debate on politics, as he reads *Mystic Chords* as pointing at a (contemporary) time where « a mythical nation [is] drained of politics and inequality where people [are] free to pursue a myriad of personal pleasures and leisure-time fantasies. » (957) In other words the commodification of all social relations as a result of the loss of debate between contending forces over the usability of the past, and its replacement with precisely a vague plastic commodity.

The key words here are « debate » and « contending ». Nostalgia and progress are probably the fundamental concepts — that are necessarily present in a dialectic way in a given society, American or other, — to make the present possible. Or rather to make the present more than a « tale . . . full of sound and fury, signifying nothing ».

Nostalgia and Progress are feelings, sentiments, in other words modalizations which define uses of the past (and do not oppose them to burdens). They generate objects and narratives but are not part of them. They are the form of content as semiologists say, already interpretations of the world, compasses in the ocean of time. They integrate all forms of social productions into a significant whole ; more they serve one another — progress feeds on nostalgia which is generated by progress. They are necessary objects of our historical operations, which Michael Kammen, because he is a paradoxical historian, has allowed us to see.

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