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# Cultural Memory Studies

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## Maurice Halbwachs's *mémoire collective*

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Halbwachs, born in 1877, graduate of the Paris *Ecole Normale Supérieure* (where many of France's outstanding thinkers have studied and/or taught), holder of the *agrégation* in Philosophy (1901), and of doctorates in Law and the Arts, was influenced by both Henri Bergson and Emile Durkheim (see also Olick, this volume). The former was his philosophy teacher at the Lycée Henri IV (secondary school). He later distanced himself from Bergson, his first major book on collective psychology (*Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, 1925) being, in a sense, the formulation of his criticism. Halbwachs discovered the thinking of Emile Durkheim and joined the group around the *Année sociologique* periodical in 1904, through François Simiand. From then on he was one of the most faithful and at the same time one of the least conformist members of the "French school of sociology." Named professor of sociology in Strasburg in 1919, he went on to the Sorbonne in 1937 and was ultimately elected to the *Collège de France* in 1944, for a new chair in "Collective Psychology." The present text is devoted to a presentation of his collective psychology, focusing on the theme of memory.

In 1918, in "La doctrine d'Emile Durkheim," Halbwachs gives his interpretation of Durkheim's scientific project and suggests ways of making the most of this legacy. His answer is collective psychology. It is a new theory, indicated by the idea of the collective consciousness:

Collective consciousness is a spiritual reality. [...] Its action and extensions may indeed be followed into every region of each man's conscience; its influence on the soul is measured by the influence exerted on sensitive life by the higher faculties, which are the means of social thought. (410)

There are of course temperamental differences between individuals, which are the object of individual psychology. But temperaments are of little help in studying people's actions, for "their nature is entirely reworked and transformed by social life" (Halbwachs, *Esquisse* 209). Only collective psychology is able to show how motives, aspirations, emotional states, and reflective sensations are connected to collective representations stored in the memory, which is the focal point of the higher faculties of the mind (Halbwachs, "La psychologie collective").

Having reasserted the cogency of Durkheim's psychosociological theory, Halbwachs determines the cerebral mechanisms by which the collective consciousness acts on individual consciences. In 1898, in his famous article on "Individual and Collective Representations," Durkheim had

attempted to respond with the theory of collective representations, postulating an unconscious social memory affecting individuals automatically without their being aware of it, and developing a specific mental life in them (Mucchielli, *La découverte*, chap. 5). Halbwachs differs from Durkheim here, and turns toward a unique type of phenomenological sociology, with three main lines of thought:

1. the social construction of individual memory;
2. the development of collective memory in intermediary groups (family and social classes);
3. collective memory at the level of entire societies and civilizations.

### 1. The Social Construction of Individual Memory

There does not seem to have been any essential evolution in the psychology of memory since the two seminal books, one by Théodule Ribot (*Les maladies de la mémoire*, 1881) for psychophysiology and psychopathology, the other by Henri Bergson (*Matière et mémoire*, 1896) for introspective psychology. Halbwachs is an heir of the latter, for whom there are “dominant memories, on which other memories lean, as on supportive points” (*Matière et mémoire* 186). Ribot too thought that locations used “landmarks,” that is, states of consciousness serving to “measure other distances” according to their intensity. Halbwachs uses that argument to claim that those landmarks actually construct us as members of groups (*Les cadres sociaux* 125), since we try to locate memories using social frames built from our present identity. To demonstrate this, Halbwachs used several detailed examples, including dreams and language.

In *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (1925), Halbwachs experiments on himself. For over four years, he analyzes his dreams “to determine whether they contain complete scenes from our past” (3) and whether there is such a thing as strictly personal memories. He confronts Freud, for whom dreams reproduce fragments of the past, and wonders whether those fragments are authentic bits of recollections. The answer is negative, since memories are precise and dated, as opposed to the reminiscences discussed by Freud. Halbwachs contrasts those impressions, mixing past and present, with precise memories implying reasoning and comparison, which is to say dialogue with an other, for his point is that the past is not really preserved in the individual memory. “Fragments” persist there, but not complete recollections. What makes them true memories are collective representations. The collective memory is made of those “instruments”

used by the conscious individual to recompose a coherent image of the past.

Halbwachs also deals with the problem of aphasia, a speech disorder characterized by a loss of verbal recollections. Earlier research tended to identify neurological centers of ideation and to explain aphasia as a malfunctioning of that center. Now Halbwachs pointed out that physicians all consistently differentiate various types of aphasia, but are unable to formulate an exact classification. He first shows that aphasia, viewed by an outside observer, is characteristically the impossibility of communicating with other members of the social group. Secondly, disorders apparently similar to those produced by aphasia may be encountered in practically anyone in specific situations, as in the case of a person taking an examination who is nervous to the point of momentarily forgetting his words. At this point, one may postulate that aphasia definitely does not require the presence of brain damage, but that it is above all “a deep alteration in the relations between the individual and the group” (*Les cadres sociaux*: 69).

Halbwachs finds proof of this in the writings of Henry Head. Head, observing young soldiers with head wounds who had developed disorders of an aphasic type, showed that their inability to reproduce some words pronounced in their presence was not due to the absence of mental images or of the memories corresponding to those words, but to the forgetting of the words themselves. What aphasics suffer from, then, is definitely a loss of the conventional social markers:

All of these observations seem to indicate that what the aphasic patient lacks is not so much memories as the ability to situate them in a framework, the very frame which is provided by the social environment [...]. The loss of words [...] is only one specific manifestation of a more general incapacity: all conventional symbolism, the necessary basis of social intelligence, has become foreign to him. (Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux*: 76-77)

Dreams, aphasia—but also mental illness—are phenomena traditionally accounted for in purely individual and biological terms. Halbwachs's work shows that people act according to the *meaning* they ascribe to their own and other people's behavior. Now the content of those meanings is provided, originally, by the conventions of the community to which the individual belongs. Memory, intelligence, and identity are constructed by a learning process within a group. Subsequently, it is in an absent or disordered relationship to that group that the causes of any individual mental disorders should be sought, instead of launching into unverifiable conjectures as to the state of an individual's brain. As Durkheim had announced, sociology is “a new view of human nature,” destined to renew psychology by transcending the traditional neurobiological and psychiatric conceptions.

## 2. Collective Memory and Intermediate Groups

Having solved the problem of the fundamental human mechanisms of the collective memory, Halbwachs devoted his work to the main producers of that collective memory: the family, social classes, and religious communities.

A family is not merely a concatenation of individuals with shared feelings and kinship relations. Those individuals inherit a “broad conception of the family” (*Les cadres sociaux* 148), a number of social representations of *what a family should be*, and of their roles toward one another and toward their children. Those conceptions do not depend exclusively on their personal tastes and on their affectionate feelings:

No doubt, within a given family, feelings are not always in step with kinship relations. Sometimes one loves one’s grandparents as much or more than one’s father or mother [...]. But one barely admits this to oneself, and *the feelings expressed are nonetheless regulated by the structure of the family*: that is what matters [...] for the conservation of the group’s authority and cohesion. (Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux* 149, emphasis added)

To convince oneself of this, generally speaking, it suffices that we compare the different types of family structure. In ancient Roman society, it was thought normal for each individual to conclude an average of three or four marriages in a lifetime. The family was much more extended. In our modern societies, these representations are far less active. Nonetheless, the family still structures children’s memory through the roles they play in shared events, and which roles they continue to play in their parents’ eyes, even when they have become adults. Now this collective life, however minimal, has a memory, as is illustrated by the choice of first names, for instance, which are symbols: “[I]f they help differentiate members of a family, it is because they correspond to the group’s felt need to differentiate them for itself and to agree on that differentiation” (Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux* 165-66).

The psychology of social classes looks at the whole of the representations produced by a human group. As soon as a group is integrated in a social space, it develops a notion of its place in society, of the society itself and of what is required for its maintenance. For the constituent element of a group is an interest, an order of ideas and concerns, no doubt reflected in personalities, but still sufficiently general and impersonal to retain their meaning and portent for all (Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective*, chap. 3). This is what each person has in mind when deciphering his own and other people’s behavior.

For example, the collective working class memory is made of recollections that conform to an interpretation of the worker’s condition,

which may be assumed to revolve around the feeling of not participating in a dignified manner in collective life, of not participating in the establishment of its shared ideals (Halbwachs, *Esquisse* 132). Workers are not free to set the pace of their work, and are constantly subservient to the lifeless, often foul and even dangerous substances they fashion. Everything in their social life reminds them of this, including their crude lodgings, which are reminiscent of the workshop.

Nevertheless, those lodgings “harbor the family” viewed as a little society providing warm relations and in which the individual is judged according to his or her personal qualities, as opposed to the arbitrary depersonalization reigning in the world of the factory. Here originates a second idea, according to which the collective memory is also composed of what the group aspires to being or doing (in this case, retrieving some of the dignity denied it by society). This in turn explains the aspirations and modes of consumption of workers, translating the search for “increasing participation in the forms of modern civilization” (Halbwachs, *Esquisse* 182).

In *Morphologie sociale* (1938), Halbwachs states that for a group to have an idea of what it needs in order to persist, it must begin by developing as clear as possible a representation of itself. On this is based its special relation with the material forms embodying it: Their relative steadiness provides the group with tangible proof of its existence and with a basic tenet of stability. Once constructed, these spatial forms have a dynamic of their own. They change very gradually, so that while individuals live and die, society does not disappear with them. Generations go by, but villages and city neighborhoods persist.

The city neighborhood regulates the way its inhabitants get together, their movements across space, which influence tastes, needs, and customs. Similarly, economic activity, the directions in which exchanges flow, the intensity of business transactions, fluctuations in the prices of goods may all be viewed as the outcome of many collective aspirations. And, lastly, those aspirations depend on the location of markets and of places of production.

By a sort of to-and-fro movement, the social group comes into being through stable spatial images representing it. Thus, we may consider that material forms both reflect and shape the concerns of each individual inasmuch as he acts and thinks as a member of the group. In this sense, the material form of the group is the source of the “primordial” psychological life of its members. It is the spatial images which produce collectively constituted psychological states, and especially the collective representations connected with memories and stored in the collective memory.

It should be clearly understood that the material forms of society operate [...] through our awareness of them, which we acquire as members of a group who perceive its volume, physical structure and movements within space. This represents a sort of collective thought process or perception, that might be called an *immediate given of social consciousness*, and which contrasts with every other process. (*Morphologie sociale* 182-83; emphasis added)

The importance of social morphology is justified, for behind the material forms and distribution of the population there is a whole series of psychosocial factors in operation, tied to collective thoughts and trends. However, the psychology of intermediate groups comes up against one difficulty: the intertwined motives behind the action of members of a group. For instance, it is difficult to claim that workers' desire to consume new goods is exclusively due to their need to participate more completely in the forms of modern civilization. That desire also has to do with the hurried pace that urban life imposes on people. Collective psychology should therefore also view the population taken at the broadest level.

### 3. The Collective Memory of Societies and Civilizations

Halbwachs transposes the reasoning he applies to intermediate groups to society as a whole. It too develops "an intuitive, profound sense" of its identity (*Morphologie sociale* 176), through its hold on its body: the population. The broadest spatial structures (such as the entire national territory) express the spirit of the society and cannot be modified by specific activities, for the laws shaping the population do not change. This means that each and every social group is caught up in another current, determining the forms of the population.

Halbwachs, like Durkheim, views the density of human groups as one of the most important laws of population. Urban life is thus viewed as the most remarkable civilizational fact. In cities, collective life is more hectic; it is channeled into paths forming a circulation network of unparalleled intensity. This results in a mixture of material and mental representations causing social groups to tend more to be dissolved there. There are more occasions for people to experience extreme isolation, but also, at the same time, a more powerful collective feeling may develop, with the presence of apparently limitless masses of people. As situations are more complex, there are greater chances for individuals to be maladjusted (Halbwachs developed this idea in his work on suicide: *Les causes* 13-14).

To make the transition from material forms to an overall collective psychology, Halbwachs borrows the concept of "way of life" (*genre de vie*) from geographer Vidal de la Blache and from Simiand, defining it as "a set



of customs, beliefs and ways of being resulting from men's usual occupations and from the way these are established" (*Les causes* 502). The urban way of life is opposed to the rural way of life, just as modern life is opposed to the old way of life in which collective life was both very strong and highly simplified, since there was little separation. In urban society, the spatial fragmentation causes fragmentation of social life. But movements among people are faster paced, and a greater diversity of situations is concentrated in a given time frame.

The main resulting psychological states tend to limit births. This behavior is a sort of instinctive reaction to the shortage of space characteristic of the new urban population structure. For the city demands great efforts of its residents, whose integration requires that they change many of their habits and expend their energy to "defend their life" and "prolong it" (Halbwachs, *Morphologie sociale* 127).

The lower death rate should be seen as the outcome of the will to persist and to concern oneself with the value of the individual existence, ideas which are spurred by society in its members. As for the collective memory of urban society, it is composed of recollections tied to spatial representations reflecting the way it conceives and preserves itself. For example, a nation has borders it attempts to maintain and memories attached to that spatial structure, whence the commemoration of great military victories.

In the hypothesis that social change is an ongoing attempt on society's part to adjust to its environment, and that the collective memory tells us something about the nature of that society, we can attempt to discover the laws governing its evolution. This is what Halbwachs proposes to do by studying the collective memory of Christians.

The Gospel provides the Church with a broad framework enabling Christians to fortify their faith. Scenes found on stained-glass church windows, such as the path of suffering followed by the Christ on his way from Pontius Pilate to Calvary, fill this commemorative role (Halbwachs, *La topographie légendaire*). These memories are symbols of unity, supported by spatial and temporal frames. But the collective memory is not composed of just any old memories: It contains those which, in the views of living Christians, best express the substance of the group they form. In Jerusalem itself, with its long history of upheavals and transformations, it is of course impossible to certify that the locations revealed by the Gospel are the true ones. Yet, the memory of them is retained. Generally speaking, religious groups attempt to materialize the separation between the sacred and the profane.

Similarly, the collective memory of believers is based on a reconstructed time in which Christians locate the founding events: Easter, Ascension, Christmas, and so on. This discontinuous time is not clock time

or calendar time. It has evacuated some memories because the events it retains are those that best express the essence of the community of believers. This means that as members change, die, or disappear, as the spatial frames change and the concerns of the time replace past concerns, the collective memory is continually reinterpreted to fit those new conditions. It adjusts the image of old facts to the beliefs and spiritual needs of the moment. It is as if the collective memory empties itself a bit when it feels too full of differences: Some memories are evacuated as the community enters a new period of its life (Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective*, chap. 3). Conversely, new memories develop and acquire another reality because they henceforth provide individuals with the markers needed to situate themselves in the social environment of the time. For instance, Christians did not always pay attention to the path of suffering followed by Jesus on his way to crucifixion.

Halbwachs ends up defining two laws governing the evolution of the collective memory:

- *A law of fragmentation.* Occasionally several facts are located at the same place. A location may be split in two, or into fragments, or proliferate. In this case, it is as if the strength of religious devotion required several recipients into which to be poured without exhausting itself.
- *A (converse) law of concentration.* Facts that are not necessarily interrelated are located in the same or a very nearby place. Here, the concentration of locations provides believers with grand memories in some places.

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