

Research lines and the origin of the sociology of memory

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Abstract. It is now more than forty years that the study of memory has become a real sector of sociology with its paradigms and its research methodology. The paper outlines some lines of contemporary research starting from the legacy of what is commonly called the founding father of the sociology of memory: Maurice Halbwachs. For this epigon?(allievo) of Durkheim, in fact, memory is a social fact that takes shape in space and time and which is connected to the needs of the present. The analysis between dream and memory is significant for distancing his research from Bergson and from a subjectivistic cultural trend of memory.

Keywords: memory; sociology of memory; Maurice Halbwachs

The wide-encompassing title certainly doesn't have the presumption to be exhaustive on the topic, but aims to be an invitation to embark on a short journey across the land of memory, of which I would like to describe certain elements I consider core concepts, and certain actors. Above all, I would like to describe one protagonist of this branch of sociology that is certainly a niche category, but is nevertheless fertile and active. This vitality is certified by a strongly interdisciplinary interest, in fact the topic touches multiple fields. The topic of memory has been dealt with long before that of sociology; nevertheless, it may be – perhaps with the same confidence level – stated that an investigation on the subjects to which memories are attributed to has never performed, and the statement that memory is strictly personal has never been debated. It is hard to deny this statement by Ricoeur. (Ricoeur 2003). Despite the subjectivist radicality of the many and different perspectives on memory, it may be claimed that memory is not only the purely subjective and secret basis of our identity, but a social product that takes shape and structure, and mutates over time and across social spaces. (Sciolla, 2005). We usually relate the birth of sociology of memory to Maurice Halbwachs, one of Durkheim's most brilliant scholars. In fact, Durkheim never used the term "collective memory" explicitly; he spoke of memory in contraposition to the philosophers of the time, certainly within a social dimension. (Misztal, 2003). Collective memory was certainly not the core of his philosophy as it would be for Halbwachs, who placed the topic fully within sociology, considering recollection a social act, and memory its result, and above all he inserted memory within social frameworks. (Halbwachs, 1980). Despite the concept of collective memory is fully ascribable to Halbwachs, Durkheim had a deep intuition on the need for a relationship with the past marking a continuity with the present. (Misztal, 2003). The past creates identity, and memory is an elementary form of social life. Rituals and memorials are social and collective dimensions of the present, solidly anchored in the past. *The elementary forms of the religious life* perfectly highlights such link with the past in the section dedicated to representative and commemorative rites where the myth of the ancestor Thalaualla is performed. (Durkheim, 2005). Before we focus the discussion on he who is considered the father of sociology of memory – Maurice Halbwachs – I would like to preface the vitality of his heritage thanks to certain interpreters of his thought, although more often than not very critical, but who never disregard his writings and, instead, use them as a starting point or an element of comparison. I thus wish to outline just few of the research paths that appear to me as the most

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fertile and interesting today. They are only partial and geographically limited paths, but are nevertheless rather influential. In this scope, the reconstruction made by Cossu and Misztal on the lines of research of sociology of memory appears to be quite useful: some of such scholars, though building on Halbwachs' philosophy, criticized its excessive presentism or that which is considered as such. Sociology of memory has three main lines of research : a historic sociology involving a reconstruction of the past; a structuralist analysis; and a sociology of practice, whose research focuses on the search for the practices inscribed and incorporated in memory.(Cossu,2008) Of course, the barriers are not always so clear, and we often find works lying between the first and third line. In any case, such lines of research often begin with a critique of Halbwachs' assumption that there is a general prominence of the present in defining the past, and recalling the idea that the past may somehow be a constraint limiting an arbitrary construction of the present. There is a certain perplexity in accepting the idea that it is the present that makes up the past in its most radical versions, and all the various articulations are widely disputed. This is facilitated by the fact that Halbwachs – very intuitive and convincing in the individual parts of his discussion, even thanks to a high writing quality – is not at all a developer of rigorous systems. The idea that the present makes up the past is counterpoised (Olik, 1998) by the idea of memory as a process in a relational dimension. Upon ascertaining that research on memory is centreless, non-paradigmatic, and interdisciplinary, Olik reconstructs the sociological principles concerning statics and dynamics of social memory. Every memory of the past affects the subsequent memories, thus the memories stratify and create a sedimentary layer. In this game of past and present, a mythical dimension of the past is one where it has a strength and influence that does not allow the interests of the present to tarnish it. The opposite occurs when the present pushes to reconstruct the past. Despite its issues, presentism has been widely used in historical sociology of memory to understand the formation of memory throughout the different phases of history. I would thus focus research on difficult pasts or ones generating divided memories. In this context, it clearly stands out how memory is a complex process in which different memories may cohabit or collide in the public sphere. (Wagner-Pacifici, 1996) (Wagner –Pacifici-Swartz 1991). Cultural trauma studies represent a central current. (Alexander, 2004). Cultural trauma occurs when members of a community feel they have undergone an event leaving permanent scars on their group conscience. Trauma stains individual and collective memory. It is a concept that sheds a light on the ethical dimension of collective responsibility and explains connections that had not been considered before. (Alexander, 2004). In this scope, the reparation of trauma occurs through empathy and solidarity. Likewise, social groups may – and often do – refuse to acknowledge the existence of the suffering of others, or ascribe the responsibility to people other than themselves. Alexander thus investigates cultural trauma from the moment it occurs to when it is recognized, incorporated, and overcome, and of course even analyses its conveyance. Another context is that of research studies that have dealt with the topic of reconciliation. In *American Memories: Atrocities and the Law*, Savelsberg and King – referencing Halbwachs' research – analysed the role the institutions and laws can play in moulding collective memory of atrocities. Collective memory is strengthened in the cases where it is legitimized by institutions, and is weakened when institutions are bypassed. Institutions and the legislation may thus have a fundamental role in the prevention of mass atrocities and violence. (Savelsberg and King, 2007). The dynamic approach of memory sees the relationship between the past and present as a continuous argumentation, and the historical dimension is central. (Olick, 1998). The present does not only interact with the past, but even with the different interpretations of the past that have come in succession throughout history. The current of new structural memory insists in a greatly organized manner on the systemic relationship between events and reconstructions, focusing on the analysis of the recognizable form of the past. In addition, it concentrates on the cognitive mechanisms that regulate processes building such form. (Zerubavel, 2004). Zerubavel examines memory from a sociological perspective, focusing – in particular – on

impersonal, conventional, collective, and normative aspects of the memory process. Along with the social context of memory and traditions, Zerubavel examines the process of mnemonic socialization within the family, the working context, the ethnic group, and the nation. The politics of memory is key to comprehending public memory within a temporal organization. This setup has often been linked to the idea of tangibility of memory, which is a means to organize continuity and discontinuity between past and present: museum artefacts, monuments, remembrances, books, and names of places. (Schudson, 1994; Wagner-Pacifici, 1996). Such a setup makes memory autonomous and real. Nonetheless, it is a powerful methodological option, especially if one wishes to reconstruct an inventory of current objects of memory or ones possibly existing in a given society. Memory and representations of the past are organized in a system, and this system is of fundamental importance in making possible the organization and promotion of meanings related to the past assigning them specific signs. This structural vision is not well aware of the historical context and mechanisms. The social construction of collective memory calls into play both production processes of representations of the past and the way in which such representations are communicated to the various audiences. The latter are selective, and may in turn actively affect the representations by selecting which to use, which to reject, and which to transform by assigning them a new meaning.

The third line of research, certainly more aware of the practices of memory, is integrated in a general performative turning point in social theory. This line marks the return of the tangible individual as the subject of collective memory, and highlights the emotional features of memory. All three lines of research stand out for a multidimensionality in which the individual and society intertwine and compose the past, just like history and memory, mythical dimension and instrumentality fight a battle of meaning in the present to define their view towards the past.

Maurice Halbwachs

I shall return upon my steps in this unusual introduction which begins from the end, and start from Maurice Halbwachs again. Halbwachs was born in 1877. He was a student of Durkheim and is a classic actor in sociology. In the context of his school, he cooperated with Mauss and others to promote the magazine *Les annales sociologiques*. From 1919 to 1935 he taught at the University of Strasbourg, active and rich more than ever at the time. There, he met Marc Bloch, then he was hired by the Sorbonne. He spent time in the United States, in Chicago, studying with Park. He was close to the socialist environment, though he never became an active member, unlike his son who fought in the French Resistance. He was arrested by the Gestapo and taken to Buchenwald – the camp mostly for political deportees – where he died in 1945. He was an eclectic author, with his publications touching on economic and legal topics, as well as social morphology. He treated the sociological method with extreme flexibility, he did not have a systematic spirit and discussed urban sociology, Keynesian theory, suicide, and war in the social sense. Little-known at first, Halbwachs was rediscovered in the 1980s, following the re-edition of his works and a number of papers on him. He worked on the topic of memory for about 20 years, and radically debated the traditional internal perspective of memory. The belief that memory is strictly personal has remained untarnished for centuries, whether interpreted as an ability related to imagination, as a repository, or as a wax tablet. (Grande, Migliorati, 2016)

Halbwachs thus claimed this change of perspective. He stated that the memory of a group does not correspond to the sum of its individual memories. He therefore reverted the logical antecedence and asserted that in the process of memory formation, social conditioning has a preponderant role compared to personal experience. Men are not alone with their memory, because memories do not resurface from individual conscience. Memories form in a social context. His main argument was that memory – both at an individual level and at a collective level – is essentially composed of reconstruction processes: memory is supported by that of others, by their families, and by society.

Halbwachs described the independence of the social level from the psychological level in a field – that of memory – where sociology had yet to enter. The focus was thus to understand the link between individual memory and collective memory, identifying the conceptual – but even operative – bridge defining the notion of social frameworks of memory. *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* is the title of Halbwachs' first book dedicated to memory. The other two are *The Legendary Topography of the Holy Land*, published in 1941, and *The Collective Memory*, published posthumously in 1949.

Social frameworks and collective meaning frameworks are the languages of the collective representations of space and time. They are true mediators between individuals and the social context, and they allow people to share the meaning of the act of remembering.

Every memory, even the most personal, is mediated by a system of values, beliefs, and standards that make that circumstance worthy of being remembered.

Language as a value system is the social sharing tool that turns a thought into shared signs. Collective memory is thus not merely a means of storing the past: it is not a semantic memory, but it is the product of continuous and incessant reconstruction of the past that groups perform through frameworks of the present and functional to the future.

Halbwachs does not specifically and comprehensively dedicate a part of his work to memory and its definition. He rather discusses it in comparison with dreams and imagination in the first chapter of *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*.

Halbwachs claims that memory may be distinguished from imagination given that the event is consciously attributed to the past and the self.

Imagination and dreams are used as benchmarks to trace the limits and possibilities of memory: they promote the event and make it verifiable by an intersubjective community. In fact, Halbwachs wrote that the memory operation presupposes a constructive and rational ability of the mind, which the latter would be incapable of during a dream, thus when there doesn't exist an orderly, coherent social and natural environment of which we recognize the totality of every second. Every memory – even those we are mere witnesses of, even those of unexpressed thoughts and feelings – interrelates with other notions we own or with people, groups, places, dates, words, and language forms, or with thought processes and ideas: all the material and social life which we belong to or have belonged to in the past.”

As with other claims, the target is Bergson. As well as considering the past permanently available, unmodified, and unmodifiable, Bergson – pursuant to his concept of memory – rejects the incompatibility of memory and dream. Oppositely, he states that the very self of dreams may approach and correspond with the past as a whole, much more than the conscious self while awake.

Halbwachs, on the other hand, states that “dreams are composed of fragments of memory [...] mixed up with others” (Halbwachs, 1980, p. 46), whose parts slide over one another, or remain in balance by coincidence or as a gamble. Memories are “walls of an edifice maintained by a whole armature, supported and reinforced by neighboring edifices. The dream is based only upon itself, whereas our recollections depend on those of all our fellows, and on the great social frameworks of the memory” (Halbwachs, 1980 p. 47). A similar condition applies to language, disorderly and incoherent throughout a dream: the loss of language brings us back to a condition of incommunicability and isolation that, according to Halbwachs and opposing Bergson, makes us more incapable of remembering. Language represents the quintessential collective function of thought, thus – being only conceivable within a society as hypothesized by Durkheim – it can only appear in a state of consciousness and affect the set of connected functions including, indeed, memory.

The memory of an object requires a commitment to reality. It is only so that previous location, determination of form, attributing a name and reflecting on it, and the subsequent reconstruction of such data starting from the system of ideas and language adopted by society presents our intelligence, and our memory may come to grips with the past clearly and distinctly.

Therefore, Halbwachs views memory as the product of a constructive and rational action on the past, which occurs in the present and takes inspiration from it thanks to our intellectual abilities, and whose objectiveness and coherence shall be guaranteed at any time by the presence of a community of conscious subjects that have established frameworks among themselves. Halbwachs believes that the language, the calendar, and the images of space are forms in which the contents of individual memories sediment. They are always social categories and not universal preconceptions.

It is indeed in his references to space that Halbwachs' originality finds full expression. His analysis of the relationship between memory and localization – described in his research on the collective memory of Christians in the Holy Land – remains widely unknown or underestimated.

Nevertheless, the sociological importance of the dynamic relationship between memories and places cannot be explained through the study of “places of memory” alone. The work of memory needs spatialization: “It may well be difficult to evoke the event if we do not think about the place itself” (*The Collective Memory*, p. 136). A memory lacking localization runs the risk of not being attested as true, thus to get lost. The definition of that which has occurred in the past is thus the result of a cognitive process in which the past is no less preserved than it is constructed. Defining the past is in any case problematic for memory. B. believed that the past may be stored unchanged, while Halbwachs. believed that the past is accessible each time only by means of a reconstruction process. This reconstruction always occurs starting with the categories of thought in the present, and the feelings acting in the present. This is the essence of Halbwachs' contribution: the past that becomes present in the act of remembering is not a past returning, but its reconstruction; a different reformulation each time depending on the perspective of the present time or the various present times. Memory is dynamic, with continuous reformulations. Its function is not so much that of providing faithful images of the past, but to preserve the elements that provide subjects with a sense of their continuity and identity. Nonetheless, this setup of social frameworks of memory is considered problematic by Halbwachs himself in his posthumous book on collective memory – a book published after fierce criticism of *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*. Yet, while in *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*. Halbwachs often tends to underline the fact that every individual experience, as part of a social framework, becomes a collective memory, and that anyone could find them in another's perspective, in *The Collective Memory* he goes one step further: he does not deny the existence of an individual memory, but postulates it as an intersection of all memories in the social circles which the individual takes part in. The invincible symmetry there was in *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* is shattered in *The Collective Memory*. The reconstruction made by Grande appears to be useful: the social memory fragmentizes in a multiplicity of local collective memories, and the individual memory is the junction between different collective memories. Here, Halbwachs changes his perspective and introduces the concept of multiple memories. Each social group has its own collective memory. The more complex a society is, the more memories there are. In this view, the idea of a social memory is rather difficult to picture. Where it exists, it is the result of mediation between the various groups. Therefore, the author abandons the idea that there are abstract frameworks applicable to all, and the focus on content is not at all taken for granted: it may become a battle and negotiation ground; an arena of different meanings. This is where the memory of dominant classes comes into play, not to forget non-dominant classes. In line with Durkheim, Halbwachs states that collective memory and its practices have an integrating function, and it gains its power from “the affection” that the individual has for its group and vice versa. The end of an affective relationship with a group is responsible for the passage into oblivion of certain elements of that very memory. Thus, Halbwachs believed that individual memory is exercised as a selective authority of memory within the framework of interpretation and analytical structures of a social nature. Therefore we do not need to look inside our brains or souls or our conscience in its deepest states, in that we are reminded of memories from

outside. Collective memory is thus greater than and different to the sums of individual memories. Memory is a social process, and is not a re-emergence of the conscience of past images.

Memory is not remembrance, but works on the past. In our memories, we do not remember the past, but we interpret it in the present. This highlights the central role of communicability of memory. As Assmann states: without communication of memory, there is oblivion. Communicability explains collective memory on one hand and oblivion on the other. Oblivion may come about in two ways: for lack of interest, or for alteration of a structure. Lack of interest exists when a social group mutates in its form and structure, with the change also causing a mutation of memories. Structural alteration occurs when the group remembering disappears and memories lose their sense, because the subjects of memories no longer exist or deeply mutate. Halbwachs considers spatialization a central element of such process: a memory must be recognized and localized in order to be communicated. Thus memories are located within space and time coordinates. Localization has to do with that which is relevant for a group at a certain time. A memory may be individual, but localization has a collective nature. In fact, that which connects memories is not the time continuum – the series of events – but the belonging of those memories to a vision of the common world and to a common philosophy. In this sense, the memory concerns and reflects a group interest, and has a social value. To conclude the description of these lines of thought, we may state that with his first book – *les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* – Halbwachs broke with a tradition of thought that viewed memory as a prerogative of individuals, and introduced the topic of memory as a social experience to social science. In *The Collective Memory* Halbwachs honed, and partially even mutated, his discussion. He received strong criticism from the likes of Bloch and Blondel, which touched him deeply and led him to adjust some of his overly rigid positions or statements. Memory is thus a social aspect, and individual memory is at an intersection of collective memories. Collective memory thus does not require psychology to explain individual memory, which is fully embedded in the social dimension. Halbwachs always highlights the social core of the self, and erects it to current of thought, intended as a social thought full of individual and collective meaning. This was his response to the criticism by Blondel on the absence of the individual dimension of memory (Blondel 1926), which Halbwachs sees as dynamic and open to different perceptions. (Marcel 2001). In fact – as Halbwachs also explained in his article on the expression of emotions (1947) – belonging to a community exposes the individual to social current of thoughts that adjust and influence actions, memories, and passions: even when we are isolated, we act as if others were beside us. According to Halbwachs, affective states are locked inside currents of thought that reach our minds from the outside: they are in us because they belong to others. It is us who feel emotions, but the latter come about and develop in our relationships with others, who approve and acknowledge them. Society thus exerts a strong action on individual emotions and feelings that exist within a specific range of value. In conclusion, I would like to state that H. has doubtlessly been the pioneer of the sociological thought on memory, with all the merits and even the limitations this implies. The most interesting aspect is the idea of memory as a form of reconstruction, or the subject of such. He overturned the way in which common knowledge and even thought have viewed memory before him. The past is not an inheritance or a bequest, but is a projection of the present. I believe this new setup of the concept of memory has given prolific results in a field in which Halbwachs was actually rather deficient: public, institutional memory. In any case, this line of research gives much more space than that considered by Halbwachs to the threats that the structure of the past poses to its restorability. Such limits are in fact the context in which memory may manifest itself. Halbwachs has ignored such aspect, but it is indeed on this deficiency that subsequent sociology of memory has built its thesis on.

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