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From Collective Memory to the Sociology of Mnemonic Practices and Products

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1. Introduction

Like sociology in general, a sociology of retrospection is concerned with how what we say and do—as individuals and together—is shaped by a not often obvious—and always changing—combination of traditions, fantasies, interests, and opportunities. One problem, however, has been finding useful concepts that do not deny important distinctions among kinds of retrospection, whether these distinctions are epistemological, institutional, or substantive. Intellectual frameworks and their attendant concepts have proliferated in recent years. In France, for instance, the “history of mentalities” has pursued a “collective psychology” approach to cultural history. Its aim—which it formulates in distinction to the high-mindedness of intellectual history and the economic and demographic foci of social history—is to grasp “the imaginary and collective perceptions of human activities as they vary from one historical period to another” (Chartier 27-30). Commemoration and historical imagery, in this approach, are parts of “the whole complex of ideas, aspirations, and feelings which links together the members of a social group” (Goldmann, qtd. in Chartier 32) and are thus important topics for investigation.

In Germany, many historians and social scientists have revived an older, philosophical concept of “historical consciousness” (*Geschichtsbewusstsein*) to guide analysis (the most important contemporary figure being Jörn Rüsen). In some versions—particularly those steeped in Hegelian abstractions about historical spirits and cultural essences unfolding in history—“historical consciousness” is nearly synonymous with collective identity per se. In other versions, “historical consciousness” refers more narrowly to the production of, and debate over, images of the past in political processes (cf. Lukacs). Here “historical consciousness” is often linked to the label “the politics of history” (*Geschichtspolitik*), which indicates both the role of history in politics and the role of politics in history (see, for example, Wolfrum; see also Meyer, this volume).

Yet another camp employs the awkward yet useful term “mnemohistory,” which “[u]nlike history proper [...] is concerned not with the past as such, but only with the past as it is remembered” (Assmann 8-9). Mnemohistory calls for a theory of cultural transmission, one that helps us understand history not as “one damned thing after another,” as Arthur

Lovejoy put it, nor as a series of objective stages, but as an active process of meaning-making through time, “the ongoing work of reconstructive imagination” (Assmann 14). Indeed, according to the term’s inventor, “it is only through mnemohistorical reflection that history [...] becomes aware of its own function as a form of remembering” (Assmann 21). Other terms include “political myth” (Tudor), “tradition” (Shils), “public history” (Porter Benson, Brier, and Rosenzweig), “oral history” (Passerini; Thompson), and “heritage” (Lowenthal), among others. Each of these terms has its own inflection of the issue, and several label distinct scholarly literatures. While many authors using these terms have adopted “collective memory” as a more general term or label for an area of concern, others have objected that collective memory’s conceptual contribution is not positive. Gedi and Elam (30), for instance, call its use “an act of intrusion [...] forcing itself like a molten rock into an earlier formation [...] unavoidably obliterating fine distinctions.” As we will see, I agree with the charge that collective memory over-totalizes a variety of retrospective products, practices, and processes. Nevertheless, as a sensitizing rather than operational concept, I believe it raises useful questions when taken as a starting point for inquiry rather than as an end point.

Despite this array of different concepts and traditions—all useful in their ways—the overwhelming majority of discussions in recent years has proceeded under the rubric of “collective memory.” Like “mentality,” “historical consciousness,” “mnemohistory” and other terms, “collective memory”—or, alternatively, collective or social remembering—directs our attention to issues at the heart of contemporary political and social life, including the foundations of group allegiance and the ways we make sense of collective experience in time. But it does so, I think, in particularly salutary ways, perhaps paradoxically because of its very breadth and imprecision. Because of its general sensitizing powers, I use “collective memory” as the guiding concept for my own work (e.g., “Collective Memory”; *In the House of the Hangman*). However, it is important to spend some time exploring what kinds of sensitivities “collective memory” creates, and why.

2. From Individual to Collective Memory

Memory, our common sense tells us, is a fundamentally individual phenomenon. What could be more individual than remembering, which we seem to do in the solitary world of our own heads as much as in conversation with others? Even when we “reminisce,” we often experience this as a process of offering up to the external world the images of the past

locked away in the recesses of our own minds. We can remember by ourselves in the dark at night, as we drive alone along the highway, or as we half-listen to a conversation about something else. By the same token, lesions of the brain—caused perhaps by Alzheimer’s disease or physical injury—are surely internal rather than social defects preventing us as individuals from remembering. Memory—and by extension forgetting—thus seems not just fundamentally individual, but quintessentially so, as primal and lonely as pain. What can we possibly mean, then, when we refer to social or collective memory?

Contemporary use of the term collective memory is traceable largely to the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who published his landmark *Social Frameworks of Memory* (*Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*) in 1925. Halbwachs’s interest in memory combined insights from two important figures in late-nineteenth-century France, philosopher Henri Bergson and sociologist Emile Durkheim, both of whom were concerned—though in very different ways—with “advances” of European “civilization.” Halbwachs’s Strasbourg colleague, historian Marc Bloch, also used the term collective memory in 1925 as well as in a later book on feudal society. Memory, of course, has been a major preoccupation for social thinkers since the Greeks (see especially Coleman). Yet it was not until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that a distinctively social perspective on memory became prominent. The first explicit use of the term I have ever seen was by Hugo von Hofmannsthal in 1902, who referred to “the damned up force of our mysterious ancestors within us” and “piled up layers of accumulated collective memory” (qtd. in Schieder 2), though this was a poetic allusion rather than the seed of a sociological theory of memory.

In the late nineteenth century, powerful forces were pushing to overcome subjectivity, judgment, and variability in the name of science, organization, and control. Political and commercial elites, for instance, viewed the diversity of local times as a growing problem: Like different gauge railroad tracks, the diversity of times was an impediment to increasingly complex and widespread commerce and political power (see especially Kern). As a result, elites worked hard to standardize time in terms of homogeneous criteria. One good example was the establishment of time zones and Greenwich Mean Time. Scientific advances—which discovered regularities behind apparent variations—lent support to these unifying and standardizing projects. The philosophical tradition, moreover, had long favored objectivist accounts, in which empirical variety is a mere illusion behind which lie perfect conceptual unities.

Influenced in part by Romantic perceptions that this new conceptual universe was somehow sterile, the philosopher Henri Bergson rejected

objectivist accounts, arguing that subjectivity is the only source of true philosophical knowledge. Like many other thinkers of the time, Bergson was concerned with increasing rationalization and the unifying force of science. Writers like Proust and Freud, for instance, became preoccupied with memory because it seemed to them that precisely in an age in which history, biography, and other forms of record keeping were ordering history in an increasingly objective and complete manner, meaningful connections to our pasts, personal or shared, seemed to be waning (see Bergson; Terdiman; Kern). As a result, Bergson undertook a radical philosophical analysis of the *experience* of time, highlighting memory as its central feature. Against accounts of memory as passive storage, he characterized remembering as active engagement. Against accounts of memory as the objective reproduction of the past, he characterized remembering as fluid and changing. Bergson thus posed the problem of memory in particularly potent ways for Halbwachs and other later theorists. His work on memory drew Halbwachs's attention to the difference between objective and subjective apprehensions of the past: Whereas new forms of record keeping measured time and recorded history in increasingly uniform and standardized ways, individual memory was still highly variable, sometimes recording short periods in intense detail and long periods in only the vaguest outline. More recently, however, Eviatar Zerubavel has demonstrated that this variable attention span characterizes social memory as well. Following Bergson, the variable *experience* of memory was for Halbwachs the real point of interest.

Like Bergson, Durkheim too considered objectivist accounts of time and space unjustified. Unlike Bergson, however, Durkheim located the variability of perceptual categories not in the vagaries of subjective experience, but in differences among forms of social organization. Where Bergson rejected objectivist and materialist accounts of time in favor of the variability of *individual* experience, Durkheim rejected such accounts by attending to the ways different *societies* produce different concepts of time: Forms of time, like other basic categories, derive neither from transcendental truths nor from material realities, but are social facts, varying not according to subjective experience but according to the changing forms of social structure. Standardization and objectivism, according to Durkheim, were central ways modernizing societies were responding to increasing levels of differentiation and individuation. By connecting cognitive order (time perception) with social order (division of labor), Durkheim thus provided for Halbwachs a *sociological* framework for studying the variability of memory raised by Bergson.

3. Halbwachs's Legacies

In his seminal work on collective memory, Halbwachs drew from Bergson's problematization of time and memory, but addressed the issue through Durkheim's sociological lens (see also Marcel and Mucchielli, this volume). Of course, there are other paths to the contemporary interest in collective or social remembering. Important examples include Russian behaviorist psychology from the early twentieth century, including the work of Vygotsky and Pavlov, among others (see Bakhurst), and the work of the British social psychologist Fredrick Bartlett (see Douglas), to name just a few.

Memory, for Halbwachs, is first of all framed in the present as much as in the past, variable rather than constant. Studying memory, as a result, is not a matter of reflecting philosophically on inherent properties of the subjective mind but of identifying its shifting social frames. Moreover, for Halbwachs memory is a matter of how minds work together in society, how their operations are not simply mediated but are structured by social arrangements: "[I]t is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories" (*On Collective Memory* 38). The forms memory take vary according to social organization, and the groups to which any individual belongs are primary even in the most apparently individual remembering. But memory, following Bergson, is also a central part of social and psychic life, not just an interesting aspect of social structure.

There are, nevertheless, a number of distinct aspects of collective remembering in Halbwachs, and different kinds of collective memory research since then have emphasized various of these (see Olick, "Collective Memory"; Olick and Robbins). First, Halbwachs argued that it is impossible for individuals to remember in any coherent and persistent fashion outside of their *group contexts*; these are the necessary *social frameworks* of memory (see also Irwin-Zarecka). His favorite examples include the impossibility of being certain of any particular childhood memory: As adults, it is impossible to say whether the memory of a childhood experience is more the result of stored features of the original moment or some kind of compilation out of stored fragments, other people's retellings, and intervening experiences. The social frameworks in which we are called on to recall are inevitably tied up with what and how we recall. Groups provide us the stimulus or opportunity to recall, they shape the ways in which we do so, and often provide the materials. Following this argument, the very distinction between the individual and social components of remembering ceases to make absolute sense: "There is no point," Halbwachs argued, "in seeking where [...] [memories] are preserved in my brain or in some nook

of my mind to which I alone have access: for they are recalled to me externally, and the groups of which I am a part at any time give me the means to reconstruct them [...]" (*On Collective Memory* 38). All individual remembering, that is, takes place with social materials, within social contexts, and in response to social cues. Even when we do it alone, we do so as social beings with reference to our social identities.

If all individual memory is socially framed by groups, however, groups themselves also share *publicly articulated images of collective pasts*. For this reason, Halbwachs distinguished between "autobiographical memory" and "historical memory." The former concerns the events of one's own life that one remembers because they were experienced directly. The latter refers to residues of events by virtue of which groups claim a continuous identity through time. "Historical memory" of the Civil War, for instance, is part of what it means to be an American, and is part of the collective narrative of the United States. But nobody still has "autobiographical memory" of the event. This is the more authentically Durkheimian moment in Halbwachs's theory: Durkheim developed a sociological approach to what he called "collective representations," symbols or meanings that are properties of the group whether or not any particular individual or even particular number of individuals shares them. In this sense, very few people may be able to identify key figures or events of the Civil War, but those figures or events may nonetheless be important elements of American collective memory. Whereas survey researchers may conclude that a particular image or event not remembered by very many people is no longer a part of the collective memory, for a true Durkheimian culture is not reducible to what is in people's heads.

Representations themselves, from this analytical perspective, are not to be evaluated in terms of their origins, resonance, or distribution in any particular population. Collective memory, in this sense, has a life of its own, though this need not be as metaphysical as it sounds: Work emphasizing the genuinely collective nature of social memory has demonstrated that there are long-term structures to what societies remember or commemorate that are stubbornly impervious to the efforts of individuals to escape them; powerful institutions, moreover, clearly support some histories more than others, provide narrative patterns and exemplars of how individuals can and should remember, and stimulate public memory in ways and for reasons that have little to do with the individual or aggregate neurological records. Without such a collectivist perspective, after all, it is difficult to provide good explanations of mythology, tradition, and heritage, among other long-term symbolic patterns.

Durkheimian approaches are often accused—and often rightly so—of being radically anti-individualist, conceptualizing society in disembodied

terms, as an entity existing in and of itself, over and above the individuals who comprise it. Another important feature of Durkheimian sociology can be an unjustified assumption that these societies—constituted by collective representations which individuals may or may not share—are unitary. A Durkheimian approach to collective memory, thus, can lead us to attribute one collective memory or set of memories to entire, well-bounded societies. (Like all such critiques, these are based on something of a straw man version of Durkheim's positions.) While not usually—though sometimes—articulated in terms of Durkheimian theory, many contemporary political discussions about cultural heritage share such assumptions: Commemoration of certain historical events is essential, so the argument goes, to our sense of national unity; without substantial consensus on the past, social solidarity is in danger. There is either a "deep structure" or stored up legacy of shared culture which binds us together; without its pervasive influence, there is no "us" to bind.

Halbwachs was in many ways more careful than his great mentor, placing most of his emphasis on the multiple social frameworks of individual memories (see Coser). He characterized collective memory as plural, showing that shared memories can be effective markers of social differentiation. Nevertheless, Halbwachs did lay the groundwork for a genuinely collective, in addition to socially framed individualist, approach to memory. In some contrast to his discussion in which what individuals remember is determined by their group memberships but still takes place in their own minds, Halbwachs also focused on publicly available commemorative symbols, rituals, and technologies. As I just noted, some later theorists treat these symbols and representations as a vast cultural storehouse; this is a wise move, since the items in a cultural storehouse are real. Others, however, take an additional step and hypothesize a deep cultural structure, a set of rules, patterns, and resources, that generates any particular representation. In even more extreme versions, the structure of collective meanings is treated as not as *conscience collective*, but as a "collective unconscious," which does indeed have mystical overtones (cites to Jung). One need not become a metaphysician, however, to believe there is a dimension of collective remembering that is organized without direct reference to individuals.

4. From Collective Memory to the Sociology of Mnemonic Practices and Products

Perhaps the solution is to recognize that all of these factors are in play at all times: collective representations (publicly available symbols, meanings,

narratives, and rituals), deep cultural structures (generative systems of rules or patterns for producing representations), social frameworks (groups and patterns of interaction), and culturally and socially framed individual memories. The kinds of questions one asks when looking at collective representations as collective representations, after all, are distinct from those one asks when looking at the individual reception of such representations or at their production. Cognitive storage processes, moreover, are pretty obviously different from official story-telling. And different theories have shown how cultural patterns (e.g., time consciousness) produce social structures (e.g., strong national identities), though other theories show just as well exactly the opposite, that social structures produce cultural patterns (e.g., memory is structured generationally).

But are individual memory, social and cultural frameworks, and collective representations really separate things? The term collective memory—with its sometimes more, sometimes less clear contrast to individual memory—seems to imply just that! But only if we forget that collective memory is merely a broad, sensitizing umbrella, and not a precise operational definition. For upon closer examination, collective memory really refers to a wide variety of *mnemonic products and practices*, often quite different from one another. The former (products) include stories, rituals, books, statues, presentations, speeches, images, pictures, records, historical studies, surveys, etc.; the latter (practices) include reminiscence, recall, representation, commemoration, celebration, regret, renunciation, disavowal, denial, rationalization, excuse, acknowledgment, and many others. Mnemonic practices—though occurring in an infinity of contexts and through a shifting multiplicity of media—are always simultaneously individual and social. And no matter how concrete mnemonic products may be, they gain their reality only by being used, interpreted, and reproduced or changed. To focus on collective memory as *a variety of products and practices* is thus to reframe the antagonism between individualist and collectivist approaches to memory more productively as a matter of moments in a dynamic process. This, to me, is the real message of Halbwachs's diverse insights.

5. Three Principles for the Analysis of Collective Memory

The foregoing excursus on Halbwachs and the origins of the collective memory concept may appear rather abstract, but it leaves us with quite concrete principles about what to look for in the diverse landscapes of memory, and about how to treat the materials we find there. First, despite the penchant of many politicians, commentators, and scholars for invok-

ing *the* collective memory of an entire society, collective memory is far from monolithic. Collective remembering is a highly complex process, involving numerous different people, practices, materials, and themes. One need be careful, therefore, not to presume at the outset that every society has one collective memory or that it is obvious and unproblematic how (and which) public memories will be produced. It is important to remember the different demands on participants in different discursive fields, such as politics or journalism, religion or the arts, and to appreciate subtleties of context and inflection. Doing so, of course, makes it difficult to judge a whole epoch or a whole society. For me, this is no loss.

Second, the concept of collective memory often encourages us to see memory either as the authentic residue of the past or as an entirely malleable construction in the present (see especially Schwartz; Schudson). "Traditionalist" models, for instance, assimilate collective memory to heritage, patrimony, national character, and the like, and view collective memory as a bedrock for the continuity of identities. They often ask how collective memory shapes or constrains contemporary action. On the other hand, "Presentist" models assimilate collective memory to manipulation and deception, a mere tool in the arsenal of power. They ask how contemporary interests shape what images of the past are deployed in contemporary contexts and see memory as highly variable. Neither of these views, however, is a particularly insightful way to understand the complexities of remembering, which is always a fluid negotiation between the desires of the present and the legacies of the past. What parts past and present, history and memory, respectively play in this negotiation—and how they are related—is as much an empirical question as it is a theoretical one. As Barry Schwartz puts it: "Sharp opposition between history and collective memory has been our Achilles Heel, causing us to assert unwillingly, and often despite ourselves, that what is not historical must be 'invented' or 'constructed'—which transforms collective memory study into a kind of cynical muckraking" (personal communication).

And third—though this may just be another way of stating the first two principles—we must remember that memory is a process and not a thing, a faculty rather than a place. Collective memory is something—or rather many things—we *do*, not something—or many things—we *have*. We therefore need analytical tools sensitive to its varieties, contradictions, and dynamism. How are representations of and activities concerning the past organized socially and culturally? When and why do they change? How can we begin to untangle the diverse processes, products, and practices through which societies confront and represent aspects of their pasts?

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