

Remembering the collective memory of Maurice Halbwachs*

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The article analyzes the inter-war period work of the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs in two respects. His radical approach is interpreted as a campaigning for sociological reductionism in psychology, i.e., as an alternate route for social reduction, compared to G. H. Mead or Vygotsky, where interaction played a central role. In Halbwachs, the phenomenological analysis of the individual mind and historical phenomena constitute the basic arguments for a social epistemology. Other relevant aspects in the social theory of memory are also presented by Halbwachs. His work is analyzed as a combination of two traditions that are largely neglected in the modern self-understanding of psychology: the tradition of Bergson and that of Durkheim. Halbwachs gives a social reconsideration of higher order memory phenomena that were so important for his mentor, Bergson. The clue of meaningful memory for Halbwachs is the social stand: all of our memories are by necessity socially constructed. In this regard he tries to overcome any duality. The notion of collective memory as used by Halbwachs allows several interpretations. The essential rational moment that does not require any group-mind-like notion is the issue of intentionality in memory: our acts of remembering have a dual intentionality, according to Halbwachs, one that is related to our personal continuity, and another one that relates to group membership. Our memories are social to the extent that recall and access to them are mediated by group belongingness.

The issue of sociologism in psychology

The ideas of the French sociologist, philosopher, and theoretical psychologist Maurice Halbwachs (1877–1945) seem to be slowly integrated into the tradition of social sciences, after decades of forgetting. Following the publication of his posthumous main work in English (Halbwachs 1980) his name showed up in discussions about the social determination

of knowledge (Coser 1992a, Schwartz 1996), regarding the issue of how constructed our historical consciousness is, and how the professional study of history is related to the study of memory processes (Hutton 1993). He shows up in radical constructionist alternatives to social psychology as well. (See the volume edited by Middleton and Edwards 1990 and the paper by Hirst and Maner 1995.) The present article mainly intends to show how his approach is related to the problems of a radical sociological reduction in psychology.

There are two basic reasons for a historical reconsideration of Halbwachs. The first one has to do with a proper and broad consideration of social theories as explanatory models in psychology. The well-known models argue for a social model of the mind on the basis of socialization, development, and interaction (J. M. Baldwin, L. S. Vygotsky, H. Wallon, G. H. Mead), and are presented as such by the new constructionist movements (see Middleton and Edwards 1990). Halbwachs followed another path: for him, the phenomenological analysis of the individual mind and the analysis of the constructive processes in seemingly straightforward historical phenomena such as the pilgrimages to the Holy Land (see Halbwachs 1941, 1950, 1992) constitute the basic arguments and data for a social epistemology. This attitude to his data gives his work a recently rediscovered relevance regarding the methodical issues of history writing (Hutton 1993: 73–90).

The work of Halbwachs is related to the more general issues of social theories of knowledge as well. Regarding the communal or social externalist theories in science studies (Bloor 1983, 1991; Latour 1993; Shapin 1992), Halbwachs is full of interesting lessons. He shows that radical sociologism existed in the inter-war period not only for science but for human cognition at large. Schwartz (1996) even claims in his comparison of Karl Mannheim (1936) and Halbwachs, that both were reactions to the disruption of continuity in World War I. It is a non-trivial parallel between Halbwachs and the recent 'strong program' of science studies that the categorization theory proposed by Durkheim and Mauss (1903) is used by both of them as a starting point (Bloor 1982). The second relevance of Halbwachs comes from his treatment of the status of 'raw knowledge', and his relationships to two system theories in theoretical psychology of his time.

Sources of Halbwachs

Both the life and the work of Halbwachs is a combination of two traditions that are rather neglected in the modern self-consciousness of

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shwartz 1996), regarding the issue of how consciousness is, and how the professional study of memory processes (Hutton 1993). Reductionist alternatives to social psychology as proposed by Middleton and Edwards 1990 and the present article (p. 25.) The present article mainly intends to contribute to the problems of a radical sociological

arguments for a historical reconsideration of the mind with a proper and broad consideration of reductionist models in psychology. The well-known model of the mind on the basis of socialization, as proposed by J. M. Baldwin, L. S. Vygotsky, H. Wallon, and others, is replaced as such by the new constructionist movements (see Middleton and Edwards 1990). Halbwachs followed another sociological analysis of the individual mind and the social processes in seemingly straightforward terms. The pilgrimages to the Holy Land (see Halbwachs 1912) constitute the basic arguments and data for his theory. The inclusion of his data gives his work a recently renewed relevance and the methodical issues of history writing

related to the more general issues of social psychology. Regarding the communal or social externalization of memory (Bloor 1983, 1991; Latour 1993; Shapin and Schubert 1994) interesting lessons. He shows that radical changes in the inter-war period not only for science but for culture (see Halbwachs 1996) even claims in his comparison of the two world wars, that both were reactions to the world war I. It is a non-trivial parallel between the 'long program' of science studies that the model proposed by Durkheim and Mauss (1903) is used as a starting point (Bloor 1982). The second relevance of Halbwachs' treatment of the status of 'raw knowledge', and the implications of system theories in theoretical psychology of

of Halbwachs is a combination of two aspects reflected in the modern self-consciousness of

psychology: the tradition of the speculative holism of Bergson and the idea of social representations proposed by Durkheim. As Friedmann (1968) describes his life, Halbwachs was a student of Bergson at the prestigious Lycée Henri IV in Paris, and a student and follower of Durkheim in his mature career. He contributed to research on suicide and on social classes, besides his theory of collective memory (Halbwachs 1912, 1978). His entire theory of social memory could be characterized as a social interpretation of the duality proposed by Bergson (1896) between memory as a habit system, and real 'pure memory'. (For the impact of Bergson on Halbwachs, see Coseriu 1992b.) From Bergson he took over the dissatisfaction with early reductionist elementaristic psychology. But he turned this dissatisfaction into a general non-individualistic view of the mind, to an overall social reduction of psychology through an extension of the notion of social representations he took over from Durkheim (Halbwachs 1918).

Halbwachs was dissatisfied with this early version of the two system theories. In his view, there are no such things as 'raw memories': all memories are by necessity interpreted, and this interpretation is socially based. He is more radical than Bergson, but also more radical than Durkheim himself. Durkheim basically believed that social representations are powerful forces shaping the individual mind, but he still left a place both for individual factors in his view of social determination. Individual representations would somehow combine with social representations to form the individual's mind. This was radical enough compared to the trivial psychologism and individualism of most of his contemporaries.

Halbwachs and some of his contemporaries like Charles Blondel (1928) wanted to be even more radical. They claimed more than the primacy of social representations. According to the radical Durkheimians, the social moment penetrates all aspects of the mental. Our mind left to itself would be empty or at least disorganized. Blondel (1928) in his textbook-like treatise gives a reconstruction of the Durkheimian position starting from Durkheim and Mauss (1903). The organizing principles of rationality emerge out of social representations. Classification is first of all a classification of people; the notions of space and time originate in the practice of religious communities, and so on. Both the framework of rationality and its content or substance come from social representations.

In this regard Halbwachs represents an important type of minority approach to psychology like that of social reductionism: the individual is a clear carrier of the social, and there is nothing to it but a 'cross point' of social representations and rule following.

The notion of collective memory

Halbwachs elaborated the idea of the prominence and ubiquity of the social in a series of works centered around a key notion: collective memory (Halbwachs 1925, 1950, 1968, 1980, 1992, 1994). Halbwachs can be easily given a radical and at the same time irrational interpretation. Bartlett (1932) saw in him a proponent of the idea of a 'group mind', the belief in the reality of supra-individual mental phenomena. He can however be given an interpretation *à la* Dawkins (1976, 1982) as well. The same way as our body is only a means for the survival of our genes, individual minds might be seen as tools or fields of action for the survival of social representations. Individual memory would be a way of existence for the socially produced 'memes'. The real unit of representation would be social representation, and individuals would only be instances of its realization.

Halbwachs himself allows for this reading. 'We can say that the individual remembers from the standpoint of the group, while group memory would be realized and manifested through individual memories' (Halbwachs 1925: viii). This is of course far from being a reified theory of 'group mind'. It is an indication of a 'stance' duality.

In understanding Halbwachs it is important to emphasize that while he goes in a radical direction along the path indicated by Durkheim, his metaphors stop to treat social facts as *objects*. For Halbwachs, the social aspect is an issue of *intentionality*, an issue of the relationships between inner and outer objects. Duvignaud (1968) and Namer (1994), the French editors of his works, mention the influence of Husserl in this regard.

Social frames (*cadres* in French) of memory are contrasted by Halbwachs both with the views on memory presented by Bergson (1896) and by the psychoanalytic school. Both are important for him since they deal with the most intimate aspects of our inner world of memory. For Bergson, the personalized world of 'real memories' was an assurance for separating the realm of individuality from the world of the material. According to Bergson, humans live with a double standard of Ego (*Moi*). More important for Bergson is the real inner Ego, while the other is our life as constructed for society: our Ego as realized as an agent in the outer world. It is only natural that for Halbwachs the issue was to reduce the 'inner Ego' to the latter, social one.

Bergson's famous book on memory attempted to clarify the difference between adaptive mind and the 'Cartesian' inner mind. He differentiated between motor habits that would represent knowledge and adaptation, and image-like *memoirs-souvenirs* that would represent the detailed personal *souvenirs* of our Ego. The human brain would be a storehouse of habits, merely an access route to personal *souvenirs*. Representations

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French) of memory are contrasted by the social dimension on memory presented by Bergson (1896) as a tool. Both are important for him since they represent aspects of our inner world of memory. For Halbwachs, the world of 'real memories' was an assurance for the social individuality from the world of the material. Halbwachs live with a double standard of Ego (*Moi*). The real inner Ego, while the other is our life as the outer Ego as realized as an agent in the outer world. For Halbwachs the issue was to reduce the social dimension to one.

Halbwachs attempted to clarify the difference between the 'Cartesian' inner mind. He differentiated between social representations that could represent knowledge and adaptation, and *souvenirs* that would represent the detailed social content. The human brain would be a storehouse of social content to personal *souvenirs*. Representations

in the strict sense belong to an immaterial realm for Bergson. 'Our body is a tool for action, and merely that for action. To no extent, and in no sense and from no perspective does it serve to prepare a representation even less to explain one' (Bergson 1896: 253). Our intellect is realized in the continuous recontextualization of *souvenirs*; it keeps recreating our *souvenirs*. Its working mode is that of a continuous tension between motor habits and pure representation.

One could say following historiographers of psychology like Richards (1992) and sociologists of science (Bloor 1983), that the original Kantian notion of a priori categories is given new interpretations in our century. For some, it becomes a biologically interpreted frame (Lorenz 1941). For many, however, the Kantian a priori becomes a social schema. The idea of 'pure representation' in Bergson has a similar fate in the hands of Halbwachs. Rather than talking about social categories and the communal nature of research, he tries to provide a radical social interpretation of the everyday phenomena of memory.

Lacombe (1930) in his critical biography on Bergson as a psychologist, pointed out many inconsistencies in the dual system proposed by Bergson (dynamic and static, action and representation, episodic and categorial aspects are mixed up in the examples of Bergson). Bergson, being interested in the personal aspect of memories, was unable to deal with 'historical types' of memories, and with the issue of social constructionism at large. The notion of a specifically constructed *souvenir* was important for him only to show that persons are more than mere nervous systems.

Constructed memories are also needed by Halbwachs for something rather special. But while for Bergson they are 'proofs' of a disembodied Cartesian individual mind, for Halbwachs they are proofs for the apparent nature of our individuality. It is a mere illusion that we live our own life and dream our own dreams. Both Bergson and Halbwachs use memory as an instrument to overcome a materialist-positivist worldview. Their targets are different, however: one claims to prove the independence of individual consciousness, the other the primacy and force of collective representations.

Halbwachs (1925, 1992) in his original book on the social frames attempted to prove the primacy of the social through the analysis of the adult mind. Basically he wanted to prove that both the frames (*cadres*) and the content of memory are social. A crucial moment in this argumentation is to show that the seemingly most personal moments of our life, like our dreams, also have a social character.

The easier approach was to prove the social nature of memory contents. Even our most intimate memories are about *social contents*. Even our dreams — here he takes issue with Freud — are put into a social setting.

Our dreams and daydreams as well are full of social peers and interpersonal situations. Halbwachs criticizes his fellow Durkheimian, Charles Blondel (1928). According to Blondel, the material, or the 'residuum' of our memory, would be individual, and only its frames would be social. According to Halbwachs, however, in its intentionality, the material of remembering is also social. As Duvignaud (1968) points out, this social intentionality inspired by Husserl gives a chance for Halbwachs to overcome solutions of a 'group mind' type. The collective moment is the 'intentional object' of our cognition and not a separate level. 'Though collective memory obtains its force and content from the fact that it is a multitude of humans who support it, it is still only individuals who remember as members of groups' (Halbwachs 1968: 33).

Furthermore, our acts of remembering are always *reconstructions* corresponding to our actual social situation. Aphasic disturbances are, for example, not simply disturbances due to lack of word images, but disturbances of exteriorization. The basis of the disturbance is the fact that for recall

what is needed is taking up the same point of view by the individual concerned as the one taken up by the group asking him; in order to do that, he has to achieve distance from himself, his thought has to exteriorize which can only be accomplished through some symbolic mode of representation that is missing in aphasics. (Halbwachs 1925: 103)

'Memories' and 'frames' are not really separated in human memory (at this point he takes issue again with Bergson). The two are always intertwined, their only difference being related to the fact that one of them is more stable. Rationality itself originates in the group. As individuals, we hardly ever have mushy and uninterpreted experiences. This is due to the social moments, however, and not to the integrating power of the individual mind. Were we ever to be left on our own, we would indeed only have a buzzing-booming confusion. Rationality itself has its sources in the direct social moments (as the influence of our group-belongingness on recall) and in societal factors like language. In the situation of recall the group is present: we recall events according to our activated group membership.

Another part of the argumentation by Halbwachs analyzes memory in different groups rather than in the individual. We would characterize this effort today as an attempt to analyze the role of the practice of collective (joint) memory recall in the constant recreation of identity. On the basis of memory patterns in families, religious groups, and social classes he claims that in the process of tradition formation, the originally episodic memories become semantic ones, and get decontextualized. Social

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socially separated in human memory (at least according to Bergson). The two are always interrelated to the fact that one of them is always present in the group. As individuals, we have shared experiences. This is due to the social and the integrating power of the individual. On our own, we would indeed only

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memory as analyzed by Halbwachs analyzes memory as a social individual. We would characterize memory as the practice of the constant recreation of identity. On the level of families, religious groups, and social movements, tradition formation, the originally shared ones, and get decontextualized. Social

frames, however, are never empty schemata for him. They entail 'containers' and 'contents' at the same time, concepts and images, and therefore have simultaneously a conceptual and a chronological organization. This multiple articulation of dualities gives relevance to Halbwachs in contemporary research in memory, as well as for studies of the relationships between memory and history that was the main topic of his later works (Halbwachs 1941, 1950, 1992; Hutton 1993).

Evaluation of Halbwachs

Halbwachs claims a sociological determinism for individual mental phenomena. With his emphasis on the intentional moments, he opens up the way for constructive interpretations of the mind at large. There is a small but crucial difference between his views and the better known social constructivism of G. H. Mead, L. S. Vygotsky and others. While the latter ones base social determination on the notion of interaction, for Halbwachs, the impact and work of representations is crucial. Though he refers to the 'presence of the group' in recall, he rarely gives an interactive interpretation for this effect.

There is a further aspect of Halbwachs worth emphasizing: the relationship between his theories and social conservatism at large. Duvignaud (1968), one of his (re)publishers, emphasized that socialization for Halbwachs is not deindividuation, rather, it is the domain of becoming human out of the status of 'objecthood'. The conception of collective memory was intended among other things to strengthen the group consciousness of the working class.

Kristóf Nyíri (1992), the Hungarian philosopher, presented Halbwachs as a representative of the traditional communal principles. On the basis of an assumed communally based epistemology, Nyíri would even like to put Halbwachs into a line of conservative-traditionalistic European thought, together with people like Wittgenstein. The concept of collective memory did indeed serve an ideological function for Halbwachs but along other lines. For him, the important moment was not a return to an assumed 'original community'. Halbwachs proposed his theory in a society with a broken sense of temporal continuity, in the France after the Great War. He wanted to point out the tradition of an alliance between critical rationalism and socialist working class movements at a time when the French Communists broke this traditional alliance. Namer (1994) points out that the notion of collective memory for Halbwachs was an important conceptual tool to point out the continuity of a non-Communist left. It is not accidental that the most detailed treatment concerning the

impact of groups on memory is the one dealing with social class in his work.

Nyiri points out, on the other hand, a rather basic issue: Halbwachs and all the French sociologism represented by him tended to ignore the radical differences between oral societies and societies organized around writing. Writing introduced new ways to think about abstraction (new ways for decontextualization) and also new ways for memory organization (Donald 1991): an external field. In this way, I should add, a clearer differentiation appeared between the immediate social and the societal aspects regarding the impact of 'others' on our mental life. The recognition of that fact should have an impact on the balanced treatment of the relationships between the effects of society and the immediate social group on mental life. This aspect makes the study of Halbwachs relevant for present day discussions on the social determination of mental life.

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