MAURICE HALBWACHS

ON COLLECTIVE MEMORY

Edited, Translated, and with an Introduction by
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Maurice Halbwachs, born in Reims in 1877, became one of the most important proponents of the Durkheimian tradition in the interwar period and, working in France and Germany, wrote many influential sociological texts, including *The Causes of Suicide, Population and Society,* and *The Psychology of Social Classes.* He died in Buchenwald shortly before the end of World War II.

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Preface

Recently thumbing through an old volume of the *Magasin Pittoresque,* I came across an extraordinary story. It was the story of a young girl nine or ten years old who was found in the woods near Châlons in 1731. There was no way of finding out where she had been born or where she came from. She had kept no recollection of her childhood. In piecing together the details she provided concerning the various periods of her life, one came to suppose that she was born in the north of Europe, probably among the Eskimos, and that she had been transported first to the Antilles and then to France. She said that she had twice crossed large distances by sea, and she appeared moved when shown pictures of huts or boats from Eskimo country, seals, or sugar cane and other products of the Americas. She thought that she could recall rather clearly that she had belonged as a slave to a mistress who liked her very much, but that the master, who could not stand her, had her sent away.[1]

I reproduce this tale, which I do not know to be authentic, and which I have learned only at second hand, because it allows us to understand in what sense one may say that memory depends on the social environment. A child nine or ten years old possesses many recollections, both recent and fairly old. What will this child be able to retain if he is abruptly separated from his family, transported to a country where his language is not spoken, where neither the appearance of people and places, nor their customs, resemble in any way that which was familiar to him up to this moment? The child has left one

The preface, chapters 5, 6, 7, and the conclusion of *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* have been fully translated—with one very minor exception. The first four chapters, dealing respectively with (1) dreams and memory images, (2) language and memory, (3) the reconstruction of the past, and (4) the localization of memories, are largely preparatory for what is to come in the rest of the book. Only relatively brief central pages of these chapters have been translated here.

1. *Magasin pittoresque,* 1849, p. 18. As references, the author mentions: "There is an article written on this subject in the *Mercure de France,* September 173- [the last number is blank], and a little work from 1755 [of which he does not indicate the title] from which I have borrowed this tale."

society in order to pass into another. It seems that at the same time the child will have lost the ability to remember in the second society all that he did and all that impressed him, which he used to recall without difficulty, in the first. In order to retrieve some of these uncertain and incomplete memories it is necessary that the child, in the new society of which he is part, at least be shown images reconstructing for a moment the group and the milieu from which the child had been torn.

This example refers to an extreme case. But if we examine a little more closely how we recollect things, we will surely realize that the greatest number of memories come back to us when our parents, our friends, or other persons recall them to us. One is rather astonished when reading psychological treatises that deal with memory to find that people are considered there as isolated beings. These make it appear that to understand our mental operations, we need to stick to individuals and first of all, to divide all the bonds which attach individuals to the society of their fellows. Yet it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories. If we enumerate the number of recollections during one day that we have evoked upon the occasion of our direct and indirect relations with other people, we will see that, most frequently, we appeal to our memory only in order to answer questions which others have asked us, or that we suppose they could have asked us. We note, moreover, that in order to answer them, we place ourselves in their perspective and we consider ourselves as being part of the same group or groups as they. But why should what appears to be true in regard to a number of our recollections not also be the case for all of them? Most of the time, when I remember, it is others who spur me on; their memory comes to the aid of mine and mine relies on theirs. There is nothing mysterious about recall of memories in these cases at least. There is no point in seeking where they 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, upon condition, to be sure, that I turn toward them and adopt, at least for the moment, their way of thinking. But why should this not be so in all cases?

It is in this sense that there exists a collective memory and social frameworks for memory; it is to the degree that our individual thought places itself in these frameworks and participates in this memory that it is capable of the act of recollection. It will be clear why this study

opens with one or even two chapters on dreams[2] if one realizes that the person who sleeps finds himself during a certain period of time in a state of isolation which resembles, at least partially, the state in which he would live if he were in contact with no society. It is at this moment that he is no longer capable—nor has need—of relying on frames of collective memory. It is then possible to measure the operation of these frameworks by observing what becomes of individual memory when this operation is no longer present.

But if we explain in this manner the memory of an individual by the memory of others, are we not in danger of talking in circles? It would in effect be necessary in this case to explain how others remember, and the same problem would seem to come back again in the same terms.

If the past recurs, it seems of little importance to know whether it does so in my consciousness or in the consciousness of others. Why does it recur? Would it recur if it was not preserved? It is apparently not at all illogical that the classic theory of memory, after a study of the acquisition of memories, studies their preservation before giving an account of their recall. Now, if one does not want to explain the preservation of memories by cerebral processes (an explanation, by the way, which is rather obscure and gives rise to serious objections), it would seem that there is no alternative to admitting that memories as psychic states subsist in the mind in an unconscious state and that they can become conscious again when recollected. In this way, the past falls into ruin and vanishes only in appearance. Each individual mind would in this manner drag behind itself the whole array of its memories. One can now concede, if one so desires, that various capacities for memory aid each other and are of mutual assistance to each other. But what we call the collective framework of memory would then be only the result, or sum, or combination of individual recollections of many members of the same society. This framework might then serve to better classify them after the fact, to situate the recollections of some in relation to those of others. But this would not explain memory itself, since this framework supposes the existence of memory.

The study of dreams has already provided us with serious arguments against the thesis of the subsistence of memories in an unconscious state. But it is necessary to show that, outside of dreams, in reality the past does not recur as such, that everything seems to indi-

2. The first chapter, which was the point of departure for my research, appeared as an article almost identical to this chapter in *Revue philosophique,* January-February 1923.

cate that the past is not preserved but is reconstructed on the basis of the present.[3] It is necessary to show, besides, that the collective frameworks of memory are not constructed after the fact by the combination of individual recollections; nor are they empty forms where recollections coming from elsewhere would insert themselves. Collective frameworks are, to the contrary, precisely the instruments used by the collective memory to reconstruct an image of the past which is in accord, in each epoch, with the predominant thoughts of the society. The third and fourth chapters of this book, which deal with the reconstruction of the past and the localization of memories, are devoted to proof of this thesis.

After this study, largely critical in nature, where I nevertheless set out the bases for a sociological theory of memory, I turn to consider collective memory directly and in itself. It is not sufficient, in effect, to show that individuals always use social frameworks when they remember. It is necessary to place oneself in the perspective of the group or groups. The two problems, moreover, are not only related: they are in effect one. One may say that the individual remembers by placing himself in the perspective of the group, but one may also affirm that the memory of the group realizes and manifests itself in individual memories. That is why the last three chapters deal with collective memory as it manifests itself in the traditions of the family, of religious groups, and of social classes. There obviously exist other societies and other forms of social memory. But since I am obliged to limit myself, I focus on those social groups which appear most important to me, and which my previous research has allowed me to study in greater depth. This last reason explains why the chapter on social classes is longer than any of the others. I have used here some ideas expressed elsewhere and have attempted to extend this trend of thought in the present work.

3. Clearly, I do not in any way dispute that our impressions perdure for some time, in some cases for a long time, after they have been produced. But this "resonance" of impressions is not to be confused at all with the preservation of memories. This resonance varies from individual to individual, just as it undoubtedly does from type to type, completely aside from social influence. It relates to psycho-physiology, which has its domain, just as social psychology has its own.