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5. Halbwachs and the Social Properties of Memory

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In 1924, the French social scientist Maurice Halbwachs published *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (*On Collective Memory*).¹ Its publication was immediately seen by his contemporaries as a major event, its importance acknowledged even by those who did not fully share his theoretical views. Prophetically, the historian Marc Bloch saw the analyses presented by Halbwachs in this book as a major contribution to the developing discipline of social science. Halbwachs, in delineating the social and collective dimensions of individual memory, tracing their dialectical links in the process of elaboration and transformation, in addition to analyzing the mechanisms and modes of dissemination of collective memory, laid the theoretical foundations for a comprehensive approach to the study of the social sciences, providing an integrated perspective from which to conceptualize the historical, social, and individual components of human behavior. In his later writings, too—his posthumous volume on collective memory particularly—Halbwachs elaborates on these early themes.² In particular, he expands the scope of history beyond its traditionally narrow focus on facts and the feats of individuals. In placing collective memory at the very core of the historical development of humanity, Halbwachs brings an innovative approach to historical research, initiating a true paradigm shift in the dominant conception of the discipline.

Only two decades after their publication, however, his writings, despite their importance, had fallen into oblivion, their theoretical orientations and approaches ignored and unexplored for almost half a century, even within the social science community. Social psychologists, in particular, ignored the fundamental and seminal value of Halbwachs's analyses, even during the "crisis of social psychology" that profoundly unsettled the discipline in the 1970s,³ rendering the quest for alternative formulations especially urgent. Despite Halbwachs's analyses

offering the basis for such an alternative and facilitating the reorientation of the discipline toward a more integrated, complex, sociohistorical view, social psychologists have never made a genuine effort to revisit them. In sociology, a slowly developing interest in Halbwachs is limited by a view of his work that sees it as a simple and direct offspring of the Durkheimian tradition,⁴ when, in reality, his intellectual and personal bonds with the Durkheimian group notwithstanding, Halbwachs always had certain theoretical reservations about that tradition, seeing it from a somewhat unorthodox angle.

Today, among social scientists, it is the historians who have reestablished the strongest links with Halbwachs, acknowledging his seminal importance, so that he is currently regarded as a major inspiration. Yet even as late as the 1970s, when Pierre Nora first launched the history of mentalities,⁵ Nora was convinced that this new historical orientation sprang directly from contemporary intellectual preoccupations, and it is only relatively recently that he has been able to recognize and acknowledge the theoretical debts his own work owes to Halbwachs's conceptions of history as a historian of memory.

Halbwachs: A Scholar Shaped by Three Wars

Halbwachs was born in 1877 in Reims, into an unstable world undergoing deep social and political change. His Alsatian family had found refuge in the area when the Franco-Prussian war ended in 1871 and Alsace-Lorraine was annexed by Germany, obliging its inhabitants to choose between French and German citizenship. Halbwachs's family opted to retain its French citizenship, although remaining deeply committed to Germanic culture—his father, indeed, taught German—and, given the importance attributed at the time to patriotism and nationalistic sentiment, this must have led to the family feeling like expatriates in their own country, and to Halbwachs himself gaining early experience of geographical and cultural uprooting. This in turn sensitized him to the way one's personal life and sense of social integrity are influenced by changing geopolitical configurations, and affected his approach to the issue of memory. This was particularly so in regard to his insistence that the development of subjective memory carries the impression of external social relations.

After Halbwachs's family moved to Paris, where they settled in the cosmopolitan Montparnasse area, he spent his high school years at the prestigious Lycée Henri IV, studying literature and winning a place, in 1898, at the Ecole Normale Supérieure (ENS), coming in third in his group in the competitive entry examination. For the next three years he was exposed to the school's uniquely rich intellectual atmosphere; ENS remains to this day an exclusive educational institution, producing many members of the French intelligentsia and political elite, bonded for life by their experiences at the school. In Halbwachs's day, the school was predominantly socialist, strongly influenced by the charismatic Lucien Herr, the institution's librarian and a steadfast defender of Dreyfus. Halbwachs was an active member of the socialist students' group.

Another early influence on Halbwachs was the philosopher Henri Bergson. In the preface to Halbwachs's posthumous volume *La mémoire collective*, his brother-in-law, Jean-Michel Alexandre, recalls that Halbwachs was "subjugated by Bergson's teachings,"⁶ but in 1901, after graduating in philosophy, Halbwachs abandoned both it and metaphysics in favor of a more positivist orientation to social issues. This shift toward a social science perspective was determined in part by his encounter with the Durkheimian group, to whose journal, *L'Année Sociologique*, he became a regular contributor.

Students (*normaliens*) received a salary during the three years they spent at ENS; in return, they owed the state ten years' work as civil servants in public education. Halbwachs settled this debt by teaching in various *lycées* while preparing his doctoral dissertation to be presented as a *thèse d'état*, at the time an essential step, consisting of two pieces of original work, toward appointment as a full professor at a French university. The first of these theses concerned the expropriation and cost of land in Paris at the end of the nineteenth century, and it attracted the attention of the socialist politician Jean Jaurès. His second thesis was a study of social statistics, a kind of ethnographic essay on the standards of living of the working class. Both these topics—his concern with statistics and his ethnographic perspective—are clearly at odds with Durkheimian orthodoxy; despite his strong affinities with the Durkheimian group, he remained aloof from them philosophically, and his writings reflect this. The most recent generation of Durkheimians, revisiting Halbwachs's writings, tends to ignore this lack of orthodoxy and hence to deny the originality of Halbwachs's positions and their divergence from Durkheim's epistemological choices. In reality, however, Halbwachs's analyses are much closer to the social-psychological perspective strongly advocated by certain members of Durkheim's own group, such as Célestin Bouglé, Dominique Parodi, and Paul Lapie, but because Durkheim was strictly opposed to the development of an independent social psychology, these dissident scholars remained almost clandestine within the group;⁷ Halbwachs himself kept his distance.

In 1913, having successfully submitted his *thèse d'état*, Halbwachs became eligible for a university chair, but the outbreak of the First World War—even though he was exempt from military service because of weak eyesight—meant that his nomination was delayed. Accordingly, during the war years, he continued teaching in Nancy's high school and at the university there. His daily correspondence with his wife, Yvonne Basch—daughter of Victor Basch, the president of la Ligue des Droits de l'Homme—details his guilt at living such a sheltered life while so many of his acquaintances and colleagues faced the hardships of the front. Nancy was so close to the war's battlefields that Halbwachs was able to observe these conditions rather like an entomologist, although he never referred to these events in his writings. It is, nevertheless, difficult to escape the conclusion that these years played their part in the elaboration of his theoretical system and in the conceptions of memory and memorialization he was later to produce. Indeed the lack of direct reference

to the events he witnessed during these war years can perhaps be interpreted as attributable to his adherence to the values of rigorous, positively oriented scholarship.

At the end of the war, Halbwachs finally won his appointment—to the University of Strasbourg. France, having won the war, reclaimed Alsace and, German scholars having been obliged to surrender their chairs there, Alsatian scholars were encouraged to apply to fill the resulting vacancies in order that the repatriation process should be facilitated and that a certain sociohistorical continuity should be promoted in the region. In the attempt to ensure that French scholars were not overrepresented in this process (which could easily have been perceived as colonization), Alsatian scholars, Halbwachs and Marc Bloch among them, were favored. One consequence of the process was the removal of many old habits and paralyzing traditions; the university became open to fresh ideas and provided a stimulating intellectual environment from which a truly collective spirit emerged.⁸ Halbwachs was thus enabled to engage in pan-Germanic activities consistent with the profound beliefs he had inherited from his family.

While Halbwachs was appointed to the chair of sociology and pedagogy left vacant by the German social scientist Georg Simmel, Charles Blondel was nominated for Strasbourg's chair of psychology. It is instructive to examine the theoretical development of these two scholars, juxtaposed in this manner, because throughout their respective academic careers they were both deeply involved in theorizing the articulation between individual and collective behavior. The two men had been fellow students at the ENS, studying under and influenced by Bergson and subsequently redirected toward a more positivist perspective by Durkheim. Young, ambitious, and brilliant scholars, they were both naturally attracted to the newly emerging social sciences, particularly those questions of collective behavior that lay at the heart of contemporary social issues. Unlike their predecessors in this field, such as the criminologist Gabriel Tarde or the essayist Gustave Le Bon,⁹ Halbwachs and Blondel began to elaborate a fresh theoretical framework for understanding the underlying motives and sociological determinants of human social activity, with the aim of breaking away from the then dominant nature-oriented explanatory models. Each thus directly challenged current scientific orthodoxy and authority, which viewed these matters largely from a medical perspective.¹⁰

Over the years, however, the epistemological positions of these two men diverged, to the point where, eventually, they took up almost opposing stances. While Halbwachs consistently explored the dialectical relations between individual activity and sociohistorical dimensions, Blondel—while acknowledging the impact of society on human activity—paid only lip service to its influence, ultimately falling back into a more traditional explanation of human behavior based on innate disposition rather than social forces.

The divergent positions taken up by the two men on the question of suicide provide an illustration of this difference. Halbwachs set out to show how, given particular circumstances, external sociological factors—political upheavals, changes in social policy, and so on—can disrupt people's lives so profoundly that the resultant personal disturbance can

lead to suicide. Blondel recognised that such circumstances may indeed produce some personal imbalance, but, according to him, “normal” people resist such influence, and it is only when there is some kind of preexisting pathological disposition that people are driven to suicide. Deviant conduct, therefore, for him, is inherent in certain personalities. This more traditional explanation proffered by Blondel may be consequent upon his proximity, both ideological and strategic, to the mainstream, more conservative theoretical position held by the medical community. Halbwachs, given his more overtly socialist orientation, was more easily persuaded to adopt an explanation that emphasized the social rather than the personal, though his own experiences of uprooting may also have informed his emphasis on the sociohistorical.

While the two men’s theoretical and epistemological divergences increased over the years, however, their academic careers continued along parallel tracks, unfolding in similar ways: Halbwachs replaced the Durkheimian Célestin Bouglé in the chair of social economics in 1935; Blondel was given the chair of experimental psychology in 1937. In 1939 Halbwachs was granted the chair of epistemology, a year after Blondel had inherited the chair of psychopathology from Georges Dumas, and while Halbwachs was working on collective memory, Blondel published *La psychologie collective*. In addition, when, in the late 1930s, Halbwachs applied for an unoccupied chair at the prestigious Collège de France, he was in direct competition with both Blondel and the French sociologist and nephew of Durkheim, Marcel Mauss. This race involved competition between three related yet divergent conceptions of the social sciences. Blondel, the most conservative of the three, defended the biological model favored by the medical community; Mauss was regarded as the direct inheritor of Durkheim’s position; Halbwachs defended the social determinist viewpoint and proposed the adoption of an unorthodox social-psychological perspective. The outcome of this competition would thus have provided an interesting indicator of the epistemological preferences of the scientific community of the time; unfortunately, when the election took place, Blondel had just died and Mauss was prevented from remaining in the academic world by the Vichy anti-Jewish laws. Halbwachs was consequently left as the only contender for the chair; he was appointed but never occupied the post. Taken as a hostage as a result of his son’s Resistance activities, he was arrested, deported to Buchenwald, and died of exhaustion there in 1945. The writer Jorge Semprún, a former Spanish minister of culture who had been a student of Halbwachs at the Sorbonne, was himself an inmate of Buchenwald, and in his novel *L’écriture ou la vie*, he recalls the Sunday meetings of Halbwachs, the French sinologist Henri Maspero, and other intellectual inmates, and describes the last few hours of Halbwachs’s life.¹¹ Halbwachs therefore never taught at the Collège de France, nor did he have the opportunity to train students who might have taken up and expanded his propositions and analyses; his ideas, as a result, were never disseminated to a wide audience and rapidly fell into oblivion.

When, shortly after the Second World War, the social sciences, which had been slowly gestating throughout the first half of the twentieth century, finally gained recognition in academia,¹² Halbwachs was no longer alive and thus unable to defend his conception of them. Furthermore, the social sciences, directly reflecting the changing concerns of postwar society, took an altogether different theoretical turn: the race for progress that characterized the second half of the twentieth century implied a radical break from the traditions of the past. The words of the revolutionary song “The International,” which involved making the past a *tabula rasa*, became the rallying cry for a majority in the postwar generation, and the epistemological choices of the social sciences reflected this trend, conceptualizing a society unencumbered by the complexities of history, as if subjects evolved in a vacuum with no significant historical and genealogical inscription in the world.¹³ This new vision was less accommodating to the cultivation of the past implied by Halbwachs’s concerns with memory and sociohistorical perspective, and with no intellectual followers to investigate his theories and carry on his analyses, his ideas were quickly forgotten.

Now that memorializing is once more in vogue and has become an important part of the ethos of our times (for reasons that are outside the scope of this study),¹⁴ Halbwachs’s work is more relevant than ever, providing a theoretical framework able to make sense of phenomena that might otherwise challenge the capacities of the social sciences.

Contextualizing *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*

Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire was published in 1924 and was thus conceived, elaborated, and written in the wake of the First World War. Even though Halbwachs never explicitly mentions this major historical event in the book, we know from his correspondence with his wife how much thought he was devoting to it. He had witnessed its damaging repercussions and seen its physical casualties.

As he observed the difficulties experienced by war veterans on their return from the front—their struggle to restore “normal” social bonds, their problems in reestablishing communication in their home environments, their reluctance to recount their traumatic wartime experiences—Halbwachs could not fail to notice the long-term disruptive psychological effects of trauma on communication and hence to question the complex relations between uprooting, interpersonal exchanges, and the processes of memorization. Similarly, the state’s provision of various forms of commemoration, and their contribution to the establishment of official history, must have inspired Halbwachs to examine the way collective memory shapes the content of memory while safeguarding the integrity of each individual memory. Indeed much of Halbwachs’s analysis is devoted to the way in which memory as well as interpersonal bonds are constructed, mediated, and shaped in the context of broader, external sociohistorical factors. The geographical and cultural

uprooting he had personally undergone (and experienced vicariously, courtesy of his in-laws' immigration from Hungary), contributed to his understanding of the complexities involved in the process of memorialization and the dialectical relations existing between individual and collective memory:

The individual calls recollections to mind by relying on the framework of social memory. In other words, the various groups that compose society are capable at every moment of reconstructing their past. But, as we have seen, they most frequently distort that past in the act of reconstructing it. There are surely many facts, and many details of certain facts, that the individual would forget if others did not keep their memory alive for him. But, on the other hand, society can live only if there is sufficient unity of outlooks among the individuals and groups comprising it.¹⁵

The necessity by which people must enclose themselves in limited groups (families, religious groups, and social classes, to mention just these) . . . , is opposed to the social need for unity. . . . This is why society tends to erase from its memory all that might separate individuals, or that might distance groups from each other. It is also why society, in each period, rearranges its recollections in such a way as to adjust them to the various conditions of its equilibrium.¹⁶

His experiences were certainly important enough for Halbwachs to use them as a framework in presenting his analysis of memory. In introducing the problematics of memory, Halbwachs recounted the following anecdote: A century and a half before, a ten-year-old girl was found wandering through the woods near a small town in France. She could speak, but was unable to give any clear account of who she was and what had happened to her. She vaguely recalled having traveled across a wide expanse of water, and her story was eventually pieced together: she must have been a slave somewhere in the Caribbean colonies in the service of a woman whose husband later threw the girl out of the household. At an age when she would normally have had quite clear recollections of past events, this uprooted child was unable to remember distinctly her earlier life experiences. Halbwachs raises the following question—and as he does so, shifts attention from the Antillean girl to what he takes to be a more generic “he”: “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?”¹⁷ In other words, here he quite clearly indicates the heuristic importance he attributes to abnormal and extreme situations, such as enforced uprooting, as a means of unraveling and analyzing the normal processes of memory and memorialization as well as those of the construction of identity: “In order to retrieve . . . 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 milieu from which the child had been torn.”¹⁸

So far, this examination has restricted itself to the extent to which Halbwachs's conceptions of memory were influenced by events that he himself had witnessed, or that he himself had directly experienced. They are also to be viewed, however, in relation to the newly developing social sciences, which themselves have been shaped by the wider sociopolitical French milieu and the ongoing epistemological debates concerning nature and nurture and their respective effects on human activity. In other words, the social science issues are located at a meeting point of two contemporary preoccupations: on the one hand, the need to account for the "social disorders" disrupting French society; on the other, the concern of the medical community to find a relevant theoretical explanation for individual disorders and, more particularly, for the perplexing affliction of hysteria, a malady diagnosed mainly in women that had attracted the attention, in the mid-nineteenth century, of the French neurologist and professor of anatomical pathology at the Salpêtrière Hospital Jean-Martin Charcot (1825–93) and, a little later, of the Austrian neurologist and father of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud (1856–1939).¹⁹

Large migrations of populations from rural to urban settings, the consequence of industrialization, disrupted traditional social networks and limited their control over their members; in other words, as people moved away and were cut off from their communities and their territorial, cultural, and social roots, they began to exist as individuals, as separate autonomous entities. It therefore became increasingly urgent to study the changing relations between subjects and their environment.²⁰ Moreover, these ongoing social upheavals threatened the stability of society itself; finding new ways to manage socially uprooted individuals and controlling their behavior as they became erratic and formed "crowds" became the urgent social question of the late nineteenth century. Early social scientists such as Gustave Le Bon and the criminologist Gabriel Tarde began to address these issues.²¹ Halbwachs and Blondel inherited these concerns as they explored the social and collective determinants of individual activity. Halbwachs's systematic approach to these issues led to the modern formulation of the (social) psychological mechanisms of collective behavior.

Simultaneously, the scientific community was divided over the origins of hysteria: Was it attributable to innate disposition or was it socially induced? Heated debates took place between the "alienists"—a word used to designate the psychiatrists of the time—of the two major psychiatric schools: Charcot and the French physician and neurologist of the Nancy school, Hippolyte Bernheim (1840–1919). The medical community was, at this time, the major scientific authority, a body to whom early social scientists turned to find their explanatory models; the outcome of these debates was thus important to them as they tried to account for the unstable behavior of individuals when in a crowd. Le Bon, for instance, describes the activity of an individual in a crowd in terms of suggestibility, contagion, hypnosis, and irrationality, even though, in the alienists' debate, it was the social explanation of hysteria that eventually prevailed.

When Halbwachs and Blondel undertook to explore collective behavior, they both tried, initially, to break away from the view that reduces the individual to his personal determinants and attempted to trace the sociological determinants of human activity. Over time, however, Blondel grew to favor the idea that the individual was, in the main, responsible for his or her behavior, while Halbwachs continued to explore, in increasing depth and detail, the multilayered sociological, historical, and environmental determinants of human behavior.

The Social Conceptions of Halbwachs

At the heart of Halbwachs's thought is the idea that no one human being ever lives in total isolation; all human activity is socially determined or—to use contemporary terminology—socially constructed. For Halbwachs, social interchanges are existentially vital to who we are and to who we become, to the way in which we process our past and remember and evaluate our experiences. He would no doubt have agreed with the position of psychologist Guy Saunders, who claims that communication is so vital to sustaining one's sanity that to be deprived of a narrative context for the self can be even more harmful than sensory deprivation.²²

For Halbwachs, recollections (*les souvenirs*)—what we retain in memory of our past experiences—are not just simple imprints; they are truly active selections and reconstructions of this past. Individual experiences, even of the most private, personal, and intimate nature, are the result of an ongoing dynamic social process; they are inscribed in a given physical, sociohistorical environment, stored in memory and recollected through continuous interchanges with significant others or significant groups. Among these groups, the first with whom we are in contact are the members of our immediate family—“the greatest number of our memories come back to us when our parents, our friends, or other persons recall them to us”—but as we grow up, as we go to school, to church or to the workplace, we associate with other groups and take part in various friendships or participate in public life: “Yet it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories.”²³ In general, we are affiliated with several groups simultaneously, but the pattern of these affiliations changes over time.

Each of these groups has its own set of codes and customs, and its own history; in other words, it has its own particular collective memory, which serves as a reference to define what is important and meaningful for this particular group. This collective memory provides the frame within which (or against which) individuals try to make sense of their own personal experiences. Individual and collective memory are thus dialectically related; our experiences and private recollections are continuously evaluated and shaped by confrontations with collective memory, which confer legitimacy on our memory: “I have

shown that memory is a collective function. . . . If recollections reappear, this is because at each moment society possesses the necessary means to reproduce them."²⁴ What is important in one group may well be unimportant in another, so that individual memory must, to a certain extent, adjust to the sometimes contradictory demands of the various groups to which the subject is affiliated. Memory is, consequently, flexible and multilayered, a shifting terrain in which recollections' relative importance and position depend on changing group affiliations. This means that, in order to be kept alive, individual recollections must be shared at an interpersonal level:

All memories, however personal they may be and even if witnessed by only one person . . . are linked to ideas we share with many others, to people, groups, places, dates, words and linguistic forms, theories and ideas, that is, with the whole material and moral framework of the society of which we are part. A memory occurs to us . . . because we are surrounded by other memories that link to it. . . . These memories are reference points in space and time; they may be historical, geographical, bibliographic, or political notions or everyday experiences and familiar ways of seeing. These references enable us to determine with increasing precision the contours of a previously isolated past event.²⁵

This in turn implies that there cannot be too large a discrepancy between the conceptual background of one who tells the story and the one who listens to it; they must share a common background in order for the story to resonate for the listener.

A case in point is the attitude of political exiles from various countries of South America interviewed by my colleague Ana Vasquez. They hardly ever mentioned the torture and humiliations to which they had been subjected in Chilean or Argentinean jails.²⁶ When I later extended my work and explored the realities of dislocation of people caught in various forms of political disruption, who had faced massive violence or genocide such as the Holocaust, the Armenian massacres at the hands of the Turks in 1917, or the more recent Rwandan killings, I encountered the same reluctance—or, more properly, the inability—to recount these dreadful experiences unless there was some kind of state discourse that allowed people to couch their personal experiences within a collective narrative of events. For instance, it was only after it seemed possible that Chile's president, Augusto Pinochet, might be indicted for crimes against humanity that a number of Chilean exiles started to speak about their torture. Luis Vargas, a Chilean exile who escaped to France from Pinochet's jails in 1973, commented, after Pinochet's indictment: "It wasn't that I wanted to forget, but I didn't have the words to say this, neither in Spanish nor in French, to recount the torture to my kids. It is difficult to explain, in France, that one has been tortured."²⁷

Halbwachs claimed that if we were haunted by past events or by memories that cannot be shared because they are meaningless to others, we risk being thought to be

hallucinating: “Affective memories, which seemed the most important, were in reality only recovered and given value through a series of reflections that drew on shared points of reference (in space and time).”²⁸ There is, then, no alternative to forgetting, or—if this is impossible—to becoming silent and alienated from one’s own experience and environment. This claim, which Halbwachs develops in *On Collective Memory* (1925), is today more topical and accurate than ever. It perfectly captures the sense of alienation reported by survivors of mass violence and genocide, as well as by the victims of torture or sexual abuse each time they confront the reluctance or inability of people from “outside” to listen to what they have experienced; they are forced to bury the memory of their experiences, to exist in a no-man’s-land of silence characterized by a deep sense of dissociation between the individual’s private and public persona. A few years ago, Simone Weil, commenting on her experience in the death camps, said: “I have always been willing to speak, to bear witness, but no one was willing to listen. . . . And the foolishness of some of the questions, the doubt which sometimes met our narrations . . . led us to choose carefully our interlocutors.”²⁹ The legal theorist Martha Minow similarly observed that the clandestine nature of torture and abuses by repressive governments “doubles the pain of those experiences with the disbelief of the community and even jeopardy to the victim’s own memory and sanity.”³⁰

The rapport that must exist between narrator and audience in order to establish communication is further assessed and explored in Halbwachs’s posthumous volume *La mémoire collective*.³¹ Narrator and listener must share a common interest, and possibly even belong to the same space and time; in short, they must share the same social, physical, and historical frame of reference. Halbwachs goes even one step further than this when he insists on the necessity of an “emotional community” for successful communication to take place. The psychiatrist Dori Laub takes up this notion, considering it a necessary condition to ensure a meaningful exchange. Having collected narratives from Holocaust survivors, he stresses the importance of creating a proper relation between interviewer and interviewee, a climate that makes possible for the interviewee “something like a repossession of the act of witnessing.” “A dialogical process of exploration” is necessary in order to repossess one’s life story and to “reconcile two worlds . . . that are different and will always remain so.”³²

Communication cannot exist without language:

People living in society use words that they find intelligible: this is the precondition for collective thought. But each word [that is understood] is accompanied by recollections. There are no recollections to which words cannot be made to correspond. We speak of our recollections before calling them to mind. It is language, and the whole system of social conventions attached to it, that allows us at every moment to reconstruct our past.³³

Halbwachs stresses the determining role that must be given to language in his social interactive constructivist view of memory and identity. Language serves as the vehicle connecting collective memory to individual memory, but it is itself limited in what it can express to the extent that it is socially constructed, shaped by the collectivity, its norms and representations. He goes as far as to say that what cannot be expressed through language cannot be recalled. Remember the comment “I didn’t have the words to say this” of the Chilean exile Luis Vargas. Words, and the common frameworks “from the world of freedom” (to quote an expression from Primo Levi), are obviously inadequate to grasp and convey the full impact of those encounters with human behavior that are radically alien to our common beliefs about human conduct, ethics, and morality. And yet the act of fixing the facts in words, of naming them with precise images, is a first attempt to make sense of the illogic of a violence unassimilable by any normal human cognitive capacity.

Survivors of mass violence, such as Primo Levi or Jorge Semprún, convinced that it is their duty to bear witness to their experience of the death camps, or the African writer Boubacar Diop, writing about the Rwanda massacres,³⁴ have all come up against the same question: how to bear such witness, how to tell? Even the most rigorously documented narratives of historians “miss the essential truth of the experience,” according to Semprún.³⁵ On the other hand, a number of scholars, such as the specialist in comparative literature Cathy Caruth, claim that the existential pathos of such experiences can be conveyed only through a sophisticated form of literary elaboration that may, in surprising and indirect ways, help stimulate the imagination of an unimaginable reality.³⁶

To sum up: interpersonal proximity, in particular emotional proximity, is a necessary condition at the interpersonal level to make communication possible, to establish meaningful dialogue, one that helps subjects to process their experiences into living memory and facilitates the storage and retrieval, rather than the repression and forgetting, of their memories. When, in situations of uprooting, for example, there is a major gap between two cultural backgrounds, it is often difficult to communicate successfully across cultural divides and grasp the full meaning of personal experiences deeply rooted in one of those cultures. Take, for instance, the following passage from Romain Gary’s autobiographical novel *Promise at Dawn* (*Promesse de l’aube*): “I have known in my life . . . great moments of happiness. Ever since childhood . . . I have loved cucumbers, either the Russian, the Polish or the Jewish kosher type, which we call in France cucumbers *à la russe*. I often buy a pound at a time, then settle down somewhere in the sun, preferably on the ocean shore, or on the pavement, no matter where, and munch my cucumbers. Those are my only moments of bliss.”³⁷ Unless one belongs to an Eastern European background, or has been raised by a Polish grandmother whose kitchen shelves are full of homemade *ogurkis* (dill pickles, Gary’s cucumbers *à la russe*), it is difficult to grasp the moments of bliss experienced by the author as he eats; in Polish culture the word *ogurki* has a suggestive power similar to that conveyed by the *madeleine* in French culture.

Listening and hearing can take place only if certain conditions are met. First, the adequate language to convey experiences and recollections must be available: Hannah Arendt and Eva Hoffman convincingly illustrate the potentially destructive consequences of language's incommunicability.³⁸ Second, the content of that language must be consistent with society's accepted frames of reference. A narrative that runs counter to dominant politics or ideology will prove hard to communicate.

The historical memory of a society, to use Halbwachs's terminology, shapes its members' autobiographical memory. For him, as I've written elsewhere, "personal experience and private recollections need to be couched in, or voiced within a collective, public chronicle" to be heard in a context of broad social meaning.³⁹ In other words, our personal experiences gain their full meaning only within a broader social, cultural, or historical context. Public chronicles concerning the history of a given society and its official memorialization procedures determine what constitutes the legitimate content of traditions and social customs—the norms and limits within which the processing of memory and the construction of individual identity can most harmoniously take place. These official narratives, however, fluctuate over time as the result of what we call today the politics of memory.⁴⁰

We preserve memories of each epoch in our lives, and these are continually reproduced; through them, as by a continual relationship, a sense of identity is perpetuated. But precisely because these memories are repetitions, *because they are successively engaged in very different systems of notions, at different periods of our lives, they have lost the form and appearance they once had. . . . Any such reconstruction of the past can only be approximative.* The more written or oral accounts we have available the more this will be the case. [My italics.]⁴¹

Some examples may serve to illustrate these points. For many years, the official "silence" that prevailed in many countries about the fate of the Jews during the Second World War or about the Armenian massacres made it almost impossible for the survivors of these events to find a public forum in which to relate their experiences and to elicit the proper "echo" to help them work through the pain of their disrupted lives.⁴² The recent changes in France's politics of memory concerning the Holocaust, such as the recognition in 1995, by President Chirac, of France's responsibility for the deportation of its Jewish population, or the decision of Prime Minister Jospin in 2000 to give the official status of *orphelin de déportation* to the children of Jews who perished in the deportation from France, have been major steps toward restoring the personal integrity of those affected and raising their status from the demeaning category of "victim." The struggle of a part of the black population in the United States to provide legal status to those who suffered as a consequence of slavery shares the same goal. Helping the second and third generations of North African immigrants to find their place in French society is at the heart of

the recent debate that has polarized Parliament concerning the way French colonial history is presented in schoolbooks. The consequences of France's legal neglect of the Harkis population, the Algerians who fought alongside the French army, are superbly delineated by Zahia Rahmani in her recent novel *Musulman*, in which she describes how her own Algerian father ultimately committed suicide after being ignored and ostracized when he sought refuge in France at the end of the Algerian war.⁴³

What is at stake here are the functions that a politics of memory can perform at the individual level, the way in which it may allow or prevent the reinscription of one's personal experiences in the larger flow of history and, consequently, facilitate or hinder a person's shedding of the anonymity of victimhood and regain a sense of historicity.⁴⁴

Every time we situate a new impression in relation to the framework structuring our existing ideas the framework transforms the impression but the impression also in turn alters the framework. This creates a new moment, a new place, modifying our sense of time and space; it adds a new dimension to our group, which we now see in a different light. Hence the continual work of adaptation.⁴⁵

It is no accident that an increasing number of states emerging from terrorist or dictatorial regimes have found it necessary to address their past in order to lay the foundations of true democracy. The responses to the near-continuous chain of genocide, mass violence and gross violations of human rights—what Ruti Teitel calls transitional justice⁴⁶—have taken various legal forms. They may be geared primarily toward justice (as in the case of the Nuremberg trial or the Papon trial in France), or toward establishing truth (as in the various practices of the Truth and Reconciliation commissions); or they may, rather, aim at providing reparation or apology. Be that as it may, each of these various legal responses to collective violence provides an official narrative and a framework to account for past events. Public recognition of the facts legitimizes the social existence of victims; it provides the historical framework within which they feel entitled to speak up and to make their stories heard. What are today common legal practices at the highest international level, Halbwachs had already tackled, analyzed, and acknowledged as being factors decisive in the retrieval of a person's integrity.

To return to the anecdote that opens Halbwachs's explorations of memory in *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*: What exactly is he trying to demonstrate in depicting the amnesia of this ten-year-old Caribbean child, forcibly uprooted and separated from her physical environment? As he recounts her story, he makes sure that we are informed that the child is not mentally retarded, nor too young to accumulate memories. Her amnesia, her inability to recall what happened to her and where she comes from, Halbwachs suggests, is due not to a biological deficiency but rather to the child's sudden separation from her habitus and geographical environment, to the deprivation of familiar landmarks, to the disorientation consequent upon uprooting. The broader theoretical implication is

that the collective memory in which our personality is rooted has also, in part, physical foundations.

By means of this case, Halbwachs introduces yet another key concept, the notion of historical memory, to be named and developed in his posthumous work *La mémoire collective*, as well as in *La topographie légendaire des Évangiles en Terre sainte: Étude de mémoire collective*.⁴⁷ In both of these books, Halbwachs deals with the long-lasting traces remaining deeply and permanently engraved, often without our realizing it, in traditions, institutions, and cultural heritage, as well as in the physical environment itself. While the collective memory of a given community refers mainly to its traditions, customs, idiosyncratic modes of functioning—in short to its common cultural background—historical memory deals with the long-term foundations of memory; it introduces the notion of duration and continuity in the cultural components themselves. Traces of the past are omnipresent, pervading every aspect of our environment; they can be found in the institutions that rule our society as well as in our daily physical environment. In the chapter devoted to religious institutions, Halbwachs stresses how much religious rituals are based on past events and therefore bring, so to speak, the past permanently into our present. An example is the celebration of the Epiphany, which, we tend to forget, is taken from an earlier pagan celebration, in which a king was chosen from among the poor population for one day, during which he could use his power *ad libitum*. Or to take another example, it is interesting to highlight how many of the public holidays in France commemorate religious events, and how often we are thus reminded of the Catholic past of a country that claims to be a secular state, a state, moreover, where the separation between church and state in 1905 remains to this day a major historical landmark defining the nation's political and social practices.

History is traceable not only in our various institutions; it is equally deeply inscribed in space: in *La mémoire collective* Halbwachs devotes a chapter to the examination in the natural environment of the traces of a long-term collective past. He emphasizes the way in which, for example, the spatial disposition of cities carries the memory of successive periods of history.

For Halbwachs, each subject's autobiographical memory is dialectically related not only to the collective memories of the various groups to which he or she is affiliated, but also to the broader historical memory of the society in which he or she lives. The traces of this past constitute the background foundation of the construction of one's identity: they carry the notion of duration, stability, permanence, and a sense of rootedness vital to the maintenance of memory and identity. But the idea of permanence and duration contained in the notion of historical memory leads to a view of history different from that prevailing in Halbwachs's time. Opposing a strictly chronological approach to history, focused mainly on facts and dates, he argues in favor of a different conception of the discipline: Looking at the historical memory inscribed in landscapes, in stones, in a myriad of various indices of our environment, demonstrates the continuing importance

of the historical legacy in the present-day functioning of society. Halbwachs links history and geography, opening up new areas for historical investigation. As Marc Bloch emphasized in his reviews of Halbwachs's works, no society can develop without a historical consciousness, a collective memory of the past. In proposing this notion of historical memory, Halbwachs has pioneered a new method of studying history's objects; historians of memory are all in his debt for his groundbreaking vision.

. . .

Halbwachs's legacy reaches far beyond the mere issue of memory. His scrupulous and extensive exploration of the interpersonal dynamics of individual memory, as well as of its connections with the changing social and historical environment, is a plea for the social determination of human conduct. Human beings do not live in a social or environmental vacuum; they are subjected to broader social and historical constraints, such as traditions, rules, norms, as well as changing political imperatives. Loaded with long-term accumulated historical reminiscences—stones and landscapes retain the memory of historical pasts and ways of living—the physical environment itself contributes to the construction of each subject's identity as well as to their constructions of memory. Halbwachs provides us with the theoretical tools to comprehend the complexities and fluctuations of the social conduct of individuals:

We can remember the past only on condition of retrieving the position of past events that interest us from the frameworks of collective memory. A recollection is the richer when it reappears at the junction of a greater number of these frameworks, which in effect intersect each other and overlap in part. Forgetting is explained by the disappearance of these frameworks or of a part of them. . . . But forgetting, or the deformation of certain recollections, is also explained by the fact that these frameworks change from one period to another. Depending on its circumstances and point in time, society represents the past to itself in different ways.⁴⁸

As he proceeds with his systematic investigation he transcends sterile disciplinary divisions, paving the way toward an integrative view of the social sciences.