



Cultural Memory: Script, Recollection, and Political Identity in  
Early Civilizations

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Translated from German by Ursula Ballin

Keywords:

Memory; history; historiography; identity.

Abstract:

This is the first chapter of Jan Assmann's book on "Cultural Memory, Script, Recollection, and Political Identity in Early Civilizations" (so far only available in German) in which the author develops a theory of collective memory in related to examples from early high cultures. The author stresses that the culture of recollection is a form of social obligation determining the identity and self-assessment of a group. It is a universal phenomenon, as every collective needs to define itself with the help of memory and thus brings about communion. The culture of recollection pertains to staking out social horizons of meaning and time. It is in one's memory that one reconstructs the Past, and it is the culture of recollection that supplies us with different forms and means of relating to the Past. Death is the most basic form of a break with the past, a break that provokes the necessity to relate to the past and stands therefore at

the beginning of the culture of recollection. While the word tradition only stresses continuity, progression, and resumption, Jan Assmann introduces the notion of “cultural memory” characterized by emotive attachment as well as a deliberate reference to the past that overcomes the breach by allowing for both: memory and oblivion.

Based on the writings of the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, Jan Assmann discusses the possibility of collective memory as opposed to individual memory. While individuals are the carriers of memory, the memory of individuals cannot exist without the social frames a given collective defines. Recollections, even of the most intimate kind, are formed solely through communication and interaction within the scope of a social group. This implies that the individual can only remember what fits into the social frames of his or her present. Thus every historical fact is transposed into a memory figure to be substantiated by a specific place and a specific time. This form of collective memory testifies to their group membership for those who share in it. A social group that constitutes itself as a memory communion will safeguard its past mainly under two aspects: its unique character, and its duration. It will, in its self-image, emphasize external distinctions while playing down internal ones. At the very point where the past is no longer remembered, history sets in. Historiography starts where memory ends. History as the product of historiography is abstract, and the opposite of memory which is always collective, i.e. group-specific and identity-concrete.

關鍵字：

記憶，歷史，史學自我認同。

摘要：

艾斯曼的《遠古文明的文化記憶，文獻，回想，與政治認同》只有得文版，現在把該書的第一章翻譯成英文以（飡）讀者。文中艾斯曼從遠古文明中找出證據，建立一套群體記憶理論。他強調人類的集體回想其實是一種社會意識，表達一個群體的自我認同與自我批判，也是人類已回憶往事去建立群體精神的普遍行為。

艾斯曼認為集體回憶的背後是包含一套社會觀。它不單將前（尘）往事與新生物連貫起來，而且給社會上出現的分崩離析提共合理的解釋。因此他提出“文化記憶”這個觀念，意思是說在集體之中，一個群體找到辦法與往事建立起感性和理性的聯繫。

艾斯曼的“文化記憶”是法國學者 Maurice Halbwachs 社會學理論的一個發揮。主要的觀點是人在個人記憶之外，必須要建立群體記憶。換句話說，記憶活動雖然是從個人出發，但是必定要通過一個群體架構才有意義。就算是個人私隱，記憶活動之所以產生也是日常生活中人群交往的一種反（响）。這就意味者每一個人的記憶都必然是從社群出發，背後都有一個群體架構。

這樣，“文化記憶”的重要任務就是界定群體。當一個群體在共同事物上建立集體記憶，“文化記憶”維繫這個群體，使其中成員產生群體意識與社會認同。因此，每一個社會 都需要“文化記憶”，一方面回顧過去去瞭解自己的獨特性與發展過程，另一方面繼往開來去建立人我之別。正因如此，史學扮演一個重要的角色。史學的建立和發展，正式個人記憶提升為“文化記憶”的一個反映。史學所強調的，就是特定的群體亦是與社會認同。故此，要深入研究“文化記憶”，我們必須要從使學入手。

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## First Chapter

## The Culture of Recollection

## Foreword

*The Art of Memory and the Culture of Recollection*

The “art of memory” (*ars memoriae*, or *memorativa*) is firmly embodied in Occidental tradition. It is thought to have been invented by the Greek poet Simonides who flourished in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. The Romans codified the art as one of the five branches of rhetoric, handing it down to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The principle underlying this mnemonic technique has been described as “appointing certain places and, forming mental pictures of any objects one wishes to retain in one’s mind, depositing these at the places chosen. The sequence of places will then retain the layout of one’s material while the pictures will designate the objects themselves”<sup>1</sup>. The author of the most significant ancient text on the art of memory, *Rhetorica ad Herennium* of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, distinguishes between “natural” and “artificial memory”. To the latter, the art of memory is fundamental. Supported by it, an individual may collect an unusual amount of information and keep it ready, e.g. for rhetorical argumentation. That tradition remained powerful well into the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It was organized by the British culture-studies scholar Frances Yates into her now classical book, which served as a point of departure for a number of subsequent and recent works.<sup>2</sup> However, the concept we wish to subsume under the epithet “culture of recollection” has little in common with the art of memory. This art is relevant to the individual, providing him/her with techniques for memory training, i.e. to the cultivation of an individual capacity. The culture of recollection, on the other hand, pertains to the observation of social obligations, thus being relevant to the group. In its context, the

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<sup>1</sup> Cicero, *De Oratore* II 86: 351-354.

<sup>2</sup> Yates 1966; Blum 1969; Eickelmann 1978; A.Assmann and Harth (eds.) 1991, particularly part II, „Kunst des Gedächtnisses – Gedächtnis der Kunst“; Haverkamp and Lachmann 1991.

question to be asked will have to be, “What are we not allowed to forget?” This question forms, more or less explicitly, more or less centrally, part of every group. So far as it plays a central part, determining the identity and self-assessment of a group, one might speak of “memory communities” (P. Nora). Recollection culture deals with “memory that brings about communion”. Unlike the art of memory as an invention of antiquity, although certainly not exclusively occidental, the culture of recollection is a universal phenomenon. It is simply not possible to conceive of social groupings without any traits of a recollection culture, no matter how faint. For this reason, too, its history cannot be written along the lines that enabled Frances Yates to tackle the art of memory. We are able merely to point at some general aspects, demonstrating them by rather arbitrary examples. Still, in spite of the universality of the phenomenon, one might be tempted to concede to one particular people a similar place in the history of the culture of recollection as one does to the Greeks for the art of memory, viz. the Israelites. With them, the culture of recollection assumed a new dimension, subsequently proving at least as decisive as the ancient art of memory. As a people, Israel established and perpetuated itself under the imperative, “Retain and remember!”<sup>3</sup> Thus, it grew, in a very new and emphatic sense, into a people, into the prototype of a nation. In contradistinction to the spirit of his era, Max Weber had a clear eye for what was “believed” or, as we should say today, *imagined* in connection with the term, “*Volk*”. He wrote, “Behind all ‘ethnic’ antagonism lies, quite naturally somehow, the idea of a ‘chosen people’”<sup>4</sup>, expressing his insight that among Israel the principle of ethnic contrast evolved into a pattern that can serve as a model, or “ideal type”. Any people who perceive themselves as such, and as distinct from others, imagine themselves “somehow” as chosen. Weber’s notion, written down during the prime of [German, U.B.] nationalism, is only now becoming evident in its full bearing. The assumption of pre-ordained choice leads to the principle of recollection. After all, such an election means nothing less than a complex load of obligations of the highest liability that must on no account fall into oblivion. Accordingly, Israel worked out an intensified mode of the culture of recollection, conceivable as downright “artificial” in the sense of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*.

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<sup>3</sup> „Shamor ve zakhor be-dibur echad“, „Remember and retain, in a single commandment“ as the Sabbath song *Lekha Dodi* has it.

<sup>4</sup> Weber 1947: 221.

*Reference to the Past*

What space is to the art of memory, time is to the culture of recollection. Possibly, one may even take a step further by suggesting that, just as the art of memory pertains to learning, so does the culture of recollection to planning and hope, i.e. to staking out social horizons of meaning and time. The culture of recollection rests mainly, although by no means exclusively, on modes of reference to the past. Now, the Past – and this is our thesis – is indeed formed solely by referring to it. At first sight, that statement is bound to sound odd. Nothing seems more natural than the formation of the past: it emerges by the passage of time. This is why Today will tomorrow “belong to the past”. It will have turned into Yesterday. Societies, however, can maintain quite diverse attitudes towards that natural process. They may simply “live for the day” as Cicero claimed of the “barbarians”, letting Today slip into the past, which in this case spells disappearance and oblivion; while others may make every conceivable effort to perpetuate Today, for instance by designing all their plans for eternity, like Cicero’s Romans<sup>5</sup> or by “directing one’s gaze towards Tomorrow” and “setting one’s heart on the concerns of eternity” like the Egyptian ruler. Anyone who turns towards “Tomorrow” in this fashion while still inhabiting “Today” must seek to guard “Yesterday” from vanishing, adhering to it by means of recollection. It is in one’s memory that one reconstructs the Past. This is meant by our proposition of the past being formed through reference to it. With these two terms, *culture of recollection* and *reference to the past*, we wish to delineate the scope of our survey, contrasting it against all that may be assigned to the complex known as the “art of memory”.

In order to be able to refer to it, one must grow an awareness of the past as such. This presupposes the following two factors:

- a) The past must not have vanished altogether, there ought to exist testimony;
- b) Such testimony has to show significant *variance* from “Today”.

The first assumption is self-evident. As to the second, it may best be realized by the phenomenon of language mutation. One of the natural conditions of linguistic life is change. No natural living language exists without it. But the

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<sup>5</sup> Cicero, *De Oratore* II 40: 169.

shift takes place “furtively”, i.e. speakers are usually unaware of it, since the rhythms in which it materializes are too slow. It enters consciousness only at the time when bygone linguistic stages are preserved under certain conditions, such as special linguistic usage in cults, or the diction of certain traditional texts handed down *verbatim* from one generation to the next, e.g. sacred scriptures; at a time, that is, when the *difference* between the retained stage and the vernacular has grown large enough to regard the former as a separate language, not merely as a variant of the accustomed idiom. Occasionally, such dissociations can even be observed in oral tradition. Typically, however, they occur in literate civilizations where comprehension of the diction of sacred and/or classical texts will have to be specially acquired through school-teaching.<sup>6</sup>

Certainly, one can grow aware of the difference between the Old and the New through many other factors, and on planes other than the linguistic one. Any profound breach in continuity and tradition may lead to the formation of a “Past”, notably at times when, following such a breach, attempts at a new beginning are made. Recommencements, renaissances, restorations will always revert to the past. To the same extent as they make the future accessible, they produce, reconstruct, discover the Past. One may set up as an example the earliest “renaissance” known to human history, namely the programmatical “neo-Sumerian” re-connection of Ur-III time with Sumerian tradition, following the Akkadian interlude of the Sargonide kings. To the Egyptologist, however, the only slightly later instance of the Middle Kingdom suggests itself, being so peculiarly significant in that it does understand itself explicitly as a “renaissance”. After all, Amenemhet I, founder of the 12<sup>th</sup> dynasty, assumes the programmatical name – suggesting a governmental device – of *whm mswt*, “Reiterator of Births”, which means, precisely, “renaissance”.<sup>7</sup> The kings of the 12<sup>th</sup> dynasty re-employ features of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> dynasties,<sup>8</sup> establish cults of royal predecessors,<sup>9</sup> codify the literary heritage of the past,<sup>10</sup> and adopt as

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<sup>6</sup> I have demonstrated this for Egypt, cf. J. Assmann 1985.

<sup>7</sup> Franke (1994) provides detailed and convincing evidence for this interpretation of the Horus name of Amenemhet I.

<sup>8</sup> It were, notably, Dieter Arnold’s excavations at the court cemetery of Lisht that brought to light the “archaism” of the 12<sup>th</sup> dynasty.

<sup>9</sup> Redford 1986: 151 ff.

<sup>10</sup> J. Assmann 1990, 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter.

their model the person of King Snofru of the early 4<sup>th</sup> dynasty.<sup>11</sup> In this way they create the “Old Kingdom” as a Past whose commemoration promotes communality, legitimacy, authority, and confidence. In their architectural epigraphs, those kings reveal that pathos of eternity we have already mentioned above.

The most basic manifestation, the primordial experience, as it were, of that breach between Yesterday and Today is Death. Only in view of its end, its radical finality, life adopts a notion of the past on which recollection culture can be built. One might indeed call it the “original scenario” of the culture of recollection. The significantly *cultural* element of collective memory, however, reveals itself in face of the difference between the natural (as well as technically established or implemented) reminiscing of an individual recalling his past life in his old age, and the commemoration of his days on earth by posterity after his death. We say that the deceased “lives on” in the memory of posterity, as though it were an almost natural existence brought about under his own strength. Actually, of course, the deceased owes this act of revival to the firm resolution of the group not to abandon him to oblivion, but to keep him as a member of the community on the strength of recollection, taking him along with them into the progressive present.

A most eloquent demonstration of that kind of recollection culture is the custom of Roman patricians to carry along their ancestors in family processions in the guise of a portrait or mask (in Latin, *persona* – the deceased as a “person”).<sup>12</sup> Since it is obvious that this form of recollection culture can only be bestowed upon the deceased by posterity in a deliberate attempt at bridging the gap caused by Death, the Egyptian custom to accomplish this oneself while still among the living appears particularly odd. The Egyptian official himself sets up his own grave and has his own biography recorded in it, not, however, in the sense of a “memoir”, but as a forestalled obituary.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, commemoration of the dead as the original and most common form of a culture of recollection obviously indicates that we are dealing with

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<sup>11</sup> Graefe 1990.

<sup>12</sup> In Egypt, following the Old Kingdom, a strikingly similar custom evolved, cf. Kees 1941, 253 ff. On major feasts, wooden statues of important ancestors would join in processions.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. J. Assmann 1983, 1987.



phenomena we cannot adequately subsume under the concept of “tradition”. That notion conceals the breach leading to the formation of the Past, emphasizing instead the idea of continuity, progression, and resumption. It is true that some of the features we here describe as pertaining to the *culture of recollection* or *cultural memory* may well belong to tradition or convention. However, those terms deprive the phenomenon of its aspect of reception, of reference across the breach, as well as concealing its negative appearance, viz. oblivion and suppression. What we need, therefore, is a concept that embraces both aspects. The dead, or their commemoration, are not “traded” in the sense of tradition. One’s remembrance of them is a matter of emotive attachment, of civilized polish, in short: of a deliberate reference to the past that overcomes the breach. These very elements constitute that which we call cultural memory, elevating it above the business of convention.

#### *I. The Social Construction of the Past: Maurice Halbwachs*

In the 1920ies, the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs outlined his concept of a *mémoire collective*, expounding it chiefly in the following three books: *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (1994),<sup>14</sup> *La topographie légendaire des évangiles en terre sainte. Étude de mémoire collective* (1941), and *La mémoire collective* (1997, a posthumous work mainly written in the 1930s).<sup>15</sup> At the Lycée Henri IV, Halbwachs had been a pupil of Bergson in whose philosophical thought “memory” assumes a central place.<sup>16</sup> Later he studied with Durkheim whose notion of a collective consciousness would lay the groundwork for Halbwachs’ attempt at overcoming Bergsonian subjectivism, leading to an interpretation of memory as a social phenomenon. Halbwachs went on to teach sociology, first at Strasbourg, then at the Sorbonne. In 1944, coinciding with his appointment to the Collège de France, he was deported by the Germans and murdered at the concentration camp of Buchenwald on the 16 March, 1945.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> For a detailed assessment of Halbwachs’ theory of memory cf. Namer 1987.

<sup>15</sup> For a bibliography of Halbwachs’ writings cf. Bernsdorf (ed.) 1959: 204.

<sup>16</sup> Bergson 1896.

<sup>17</sup> For a biography of Maurice Halbwachs see Karady 1972.

### 1. *Individual and Collective Memory*

Throughout his works, Halbwachs upholds as a focal thesis the social conditionality of memory. Disregarding altogether its physical, i.e. neuronal and cerebro-physiological conditions,<sup>18</sup> he emphasizes social frames of reference without which, he claims, no individual recollection can constitute and maintain itself. “There is no possible memory outside those frames of reference which human beings, living in society, employ in order to secure their recollections and revert to them”.<sup>19</sup> An individual who grew up in perfect solitude – as his thesis indicates, even if he never puts it in words quite as explicitly – should have no memory at all. Memory will be accrued to humans in the course of their socialization. Although it is always the individual who “has” recollections, they are collectively shaped. Accordingly, the term “collective memory” must not be misunderstood as a metaphor. Collectives certainly “have” no recollections, but they determine those of their members. Recollections, even of the most intimate kind, are formed solely through communication and interaction within the scope of a social group. We do not merely recall that which we experience with others, but also that which they tell us, as well as that which others confirm, reflect, and return to us as significant. Above all, we already “live through” our experience with regard to others, within the context of a socially given frame of significance. Because “there is no memory without perception”.<sup>20</sup>

The notion of “social frames” (*cadres sociaux*), introduced by Halbwachs, corresponds strikingly with E. Goffman’s theory of “frame analysis” by which he examines the socially preconditioned structure, or “organization”, of everyday experience.<sup>21</sup> Halbwachs actually carries out<sup>22</sup> a “frame analysis” of remembrance – analogous to Goffman’s analysis of experience. He even employs the same terminology, since those *cadres* which, according to Halbwachs, constitute and secure memory correspond with the “frames” which, in Goffman, organize everyday experience. Halbwachs goes as far as defining the collective group as the subject of memory and recollection, coining terms

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<sup>18</sup> That is, the Bergsonian mind-body dualism, cf. Bergson 1896.

<sup>19</sup> Halbwachs 1994: 79.

<sup>20</sup> Halbwachs 1994: 275.

<sup>21</sup> Goffman 1974.

<sup>22</sup> Halbwachs 1994.

such as “group memory” and “national memory”. Here, memory does turn into a metaphorical notion.<sup>23</sup> We need not follow him quite this far. The subject of memory and recollection will of course always remain the individual, as dependent as he/she may be on the “frame” that organizes them. Still, Halbwachs’ theory has the advantage of being able to explain not only recollection, but also oblivion. If an individual – and a society – are merely capable, within the frame of reference given at their respective present, of recalling that which is reconstructable as the past, they will forget everything that no longer pertains to any frame of reference at that present.

In other words, individual recollections are built-up in the mind of a given person by virtue of his/her participation in communicative processes. It is a function of his/her ties to various social groupings, from family to religious and national units. Memory survives through communication. If this is severed; if, that is, the frames of reference of communicated reality disappear or change, the result is oblivion.<sup>24</sup> We remember only that which we communicate and may localize within the frames of reference of the collective memory.<sup>25</sup> Viewed from the perspective of the individual, memory presents itself as an agglomeration, derived from one’s participation in a multitude of group memories; viewed from the perspective of the group, it appears as a problem of distribution – as knowledge it has to allocate among itself, i.e. among its members. In each case, memory forms an “independent system” whose elements support and qualify each other, in the individual as well as within the group. Therefore, Halbwachs thinks it momentous to distinguish between individual and collective memory, the fact that individual memory is *co ipso* a social phenomenon notwithstanding. Memory is individual in that it forms combinations, each of them unique, of collective memories, being the locus of various group-related collective memories and their specific combinations.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> In spite of his similar approach, Bartlett (1932) vigorously opposed this terminology.

<sup>24</sup> “Oblivion derives from the disappearance of those frames, or of some part of them, either because we have been unable to fasten our attention onto them, or because it was directed elsewhere ... However, oblivion, or deformation of certain recollections, can also derive from the fact that those frames change from one epoch to the next” (Halbwachs 1994: 279). It follows that oblivion too, just as memory, is a social phenomenon.

<sup>25</sup> Halbwachs 1994, ch. 4: “La localisation des souvenirs”.

<sup>26</sup> Halbwachs 1997: 89.

But only emotions are, in a strict sense, individual while memory is not, because “emotions are closely linked to our bodies” whereas memory necessarily “has its origin in the ideas of the various groups we join”.

## 2. *Memory Figures*

As much as thought may deal with abstractions, memory proceeds along the concrete. Ideas have to be sensualized before they can enter memory as objects of recollection. This leads to a tight amalgamation of notions and images. “In order for a truth to be moored in the memory of a group, it must present itself in the guise of an event, a person, a place”.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, an event also needs to be charged with meaningful truth. “At their very entry into that memory, each personality, each historical fact will be transposed into a doctrine, a notion, a symbol; they obtain significance, turning into elements of a society’s system of ideas”.<sup>28</sup> From such an interplay of notions and experience<sup>29</sup> evolves that which we should like to term “memory figures”.<sup>30</sup> Their characteristics may be specified under the following three criteria: concrete reference to time and space; concrete reference to a group; and reconstructivity, as an independent procedure.

### a) *Reference to Space and Time*

In order to be substantiated, recollection figures need a specific place. In order to be actualized, they need a specific time. At all events, they are spatially and temporally concrete, if not always in a strictly geographical or historical sense. Due to its dependence on concrete orientation, collective memory creates crystallization points. It contains time by adhering to primordial or outstanding events, and also in the periodic rhythm of remembered reference. Thus, collectively experienced time is reflected in the festival

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<sup>27</sup> Halbwachs 1941: 154.

<sup>28</sup> Halbwachs 1994: 296.

<sup>29</sup> The pair certainly calls to mind Kant’s *Begriff* and *Anschauung*.

<sup>30</sup> Halbwachs himself speaks of „memory images“, cf. partic. 1994, 1-39. What we mean by “memory figures”, however, are culturally formed, socially obliging “images of recollection”; we prefer the notion of a “figure” to that of an “image” for the plain reason that it refers not merely to iconic manifestations but also to, say, narrative ones.

calendar, be it of the civil, ecclesiastical, rural, or military year. In the same way, memory is established in inhabited space. What the house is to the family, the village or valley is to the rustic, the city to the burgher, a district or area to compatriotic unions: they are spatial frames of recollection, retained in retrospect as “home” even *in absentia*, or rather just then. To space also belongs the world of material objects around a person, the *entourage matériel* that appertains to him or her, supporting his/her Self. This material world – tools, furniture, rooms and their specific layout “providing us with an image of permanence and stability”<sup>31</sup> – is of social import, too: an object’s value, its price, its significance as a status symbol, are social factors<sup>32</sup>. Any kind of human association fosters such propensity for localization. Each of them, eager to consolidate themselves as a group, will strive to create for themselves specific places that are not merely arenas of their interactions, but symbols of their identity and reference points for their recollections. Memory requires places, it tends towards localization.<sup>33</sup> Halbwachs elucidates this point, quoting as an example the “legendary topography of the Holy Land”. Group and space form a symbolical yet substantial communion. Even if separated from their original place, a group will adhere to it by symbolically reproducing the sacred localities.

*b) Reference to the Group*

Collective memory holds on to its supports and cannot be arbitrarily transferred. Those who share in it thus testify to their group membership. It is, therefore, not only spatially and temporally concrete but also *identity-concrete*, as it were, meaning that it exclusively pertains to the standpoint of a real, living group. Spatial and temporal notions of collective memory are linked to the communicative modes of the respective group by a vital nexus charged with emotive and valuing associations. Those notions appear in memory as

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<sup>31</sup> Halbwachs 1997: 193; according to Auguste Comte. See also the term *Aussenhalt* (“external support”) introduced by Gehlen 1956: 25 f. *et passim*.

<sup>32</sup> Apparudai 1986.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Cicero who already observed, „tanta vis admonitionis inest in locis, ut non sine causa ex iis memoriae ducta sit disciplina.” (*De finibus* 5, 1-2: “Places have such power of recollection that it is not without cause that the mnemonic techniques were derived from them”; following Cancik and Mohr 1990: 312.) P.Nora (1984, 1986, 1992) elaborates on those approaches.

home and biography, full of meaning and significance as to the group's self-assessment and objectives. Figures of recollection "are, simultaneously, models, examples and some forms of didactic theorems. Through them, the general attitude of the group is expressed; not only will they reproduce its past, but they will define its character, qualities, and weaknesses".<sup>34</sup> Halbwachs exemplifies the interrelation of collective memory, self-assessment of a group, and social function by quoting the hierarchy of the medieval feudal system. Its array of coats-of-arms and titles symbolizes a claim to rights and privileges. Here, then, a family's rank is to a large extent "determined by that which they themselves, as well as other families, know of their past".<sup>35</sup> They have to "make an appeal to the memory of society in order to obtain obedience, which they will subsequently demand, referring to the benefit of services rendered, or to the competence of their civil servants and officers".<sup>36</sup>

A social group that constitutes itself as a memory communion will safeguard its past mainly under two aspects: its unique character, and its duration. It will, in its self-image, emphasize external distinctions while playing down internal ones. It will, moreover, establish "a consciousness of its own identity down the ages", selecting, and putting in perspective, remembered facts for their analogies, similarities, and continuities. At the very instant when a group were to realize a distinctive change, it would cease to exist as a group, clearing the way for a new one. But since every group strives for its own continuation, it will always do its utmost to suppress changes, perceiving history as immutable duration.

#### *c) Reconstructivity*

Closely linked up with the group-relatedness of collective memory is another feature: its reconstructivity. This implies that no memory is capable of preserving the past as such, but that it will maintain only those remnants of it "which society can reconstruct at each epoch within the respective frame of reference".<sup>37</sup> There exist simply no pure facts of memory.

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<sup>34</sup> Halbwachs 1994: 151.

<sup>35</sup> Halbwachs 1994: 231.

<sup>36</sup> Halbwachs 1994: 224.

<sup>37</sup> Halbwachs 1994: 296.

Nothing reveals more impressively the ingeniousness and versatility of Halbwachsian thought than the fact that he, as a philosopher and sociologist, explains this concept by means of such out-of-the-way material as the sacred sees of Christendom in Palestine. Christian topography is sheer fiction. Its holy places are certainly not reminiscent of facts secured by contemporary witnesses, but articles of faith that only took root “afterwards”.<sup>38</sup> The authentic collective memory, based on live company, of the group of disciples as a *communauté affective* – today we might call it the Jesus Movement<sup>39</sup> – shows the characteristic bias of affective perplexity in that it was reduced to the Master’s maxims, parables, dictums, and doctrines. Biographical elaboration on the memory image only sets in later, subsequent to the waning of an immediate apocalyptic expectation. What was required then was the incorporation of those remembered maxims into biographical episodes, positioning them within time and space. Since no places existed where memory was originally sustained, it was fixed to certain localities afterwards, around 100 BC, by experts of Galilean geography. With the appearance of Paul, however, the gist of memory shifts from Galilee to Jerusalem where “no authentic recollections” exist at all, since the Passion of Christ and his execution are likely to have taken place in the absence of his disciples. Still, Jerusalem now moves into the centre, as the life of Jesus is being rearranged, under a new theological emphasis, around his Passion and resurrection as focal events, whereas his entire activity in Galilee is pushed into the background as mere preparatory antecedent.

The new concept, gaining acceptance as authoritative at the Council of Nicaea, is the absolution of the world through the expiatory death of God incarnate. With the narrative of the Passion, the concept gains memorable shape, turning into a “memory figure”. Recollections of Jesus are being reconstructed from the perspective of the Cross and resurrection, while Jerusalem is set up as commemorative space. The new doctrine, along with those new recollections of Jesus representing it, takes on tangible features through a *système de localisation*, furnishing it with spatial guidelines such as churches, chapels, holy places, memorial tablets, calvary mounts, etc. They will, pal-

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<sup>38</sup> Halbwachs 1941: 157.

<sup>39</sup> Theißen 1977.

impetuously, be built over and amplified by later localization systems representative of the changes of the Christian doctrine.

Memory, therefore, proceeds reconstructively. The past as such cannot be contained within it. It will constantly be reorganized by the changing frames of reference of a progressing present. Even the New will forever emerge in the guise of a reconstructed past. Traditions can only be exchanged for traditions, past only for another past.<sup>40</sup> Society does not receive new ideas by replacing its own past for them, but by taking possession of the past of groups other than those which hitherto determined it. "In this sense, no social concept exists that were not, at the same time, memory of society".<sup>41</sup> Collective memory, therefore, operates in both directions: backwards and forwards. It reconstructs not only the past, but organizes the experience of the present as well as the future. Hence, it should be quite senseless to contrast the "principle of memory" with the "principle of hope": they condition each other, and neither is conceivable without the other.<sup>42</sup>

### 3. *Memory versus History*

According to Halbwachs, a group relates to its own past in such a way that all change is excluded. In this respect, the characteristics of societies termed by C. Lévi-Strauss as "cold" suggest themselves.<sup>43</sup> Suppression of change does, indeed, play so focal a role in Halbwachs' concept of collective memory that he feels justified to contrast this concept, all-inclusively, with "history". "History", says Halbwachs, proceeds exactly opposite to collective memory. Just as the latter looks only for similarities and continuities, so the former perceives nothing but differences and discontinuities. While collective memory views the group "inwards", aiming at presenting it with a picture of its past it can recognize at every stage, therefore eliminating any profound changes, "history", for its part, debars such immutable periods from its table as "empty"

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<sup>40</sup> Halbwachs 1994: 292.

<sup>41</sup> Halbwachs 1994: 296.

<sup>42</sup> Ritschl 1967.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Lévi-Strauss 1962: 309-10; 1973. In the light of those distinctions, to which we shall return in another context, we are faced with the question whether there do not exist groups – "hot" societies, as it were – that do build an awareness of their own changes and are able to reconcile them with their self-image.



intervals, accepting as historical fact only that which, as process or event, indicates change. As we have already mentioned, group memory underscores the differentiation of its own history and, based on that, its distinctiveness from all other collective memories, whereas history will level off all such varieties, reorganizing its facts within a perfectly homogenous historical space where nothing is unique, everything comparable to everything else, each individual history attachable to others and, above all, everything is equally important and significant.<sup>44</sup> There are indeed many collective memories while there is only one single history that has relinquished each and any reference to any group, identity, or specific point of reference, reconstructing the past on an “identity-abstract” plane where everything is, as Ranke has it, “equally immediate towards God”, i.e. “independent on any group assessment” that will always assume a profile of self-related partiality. The historian, being free from such loyalties and affections, will “tend towards objectivity and impartiality”.<sup>45</sup>

For Halbwachs, it follows, history is not memory, as there exists no universal recollection. Memory is always collective, i.e. group-specific, “identity-concrete”: “Each collective memory is supported by a spatially and temporally limited group. One can only arrange all events in a single tableau provided one will disconnect them from the group memory that sustains recollection of them; provided, that is, one unfastens the bonds that tie them

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<sup>44</sup> Halbwachs 1950: 75: «Malgré la variété des lieux et de temps, l'histoire réduit les événements à des termes apparemment comparables, ce qui lui permet des les relier les uns aux autres, comme des variations sur un ou quelques thèmes.»

<sup>45</sup> Halbwachs 1997: 136. Halbwachs obviously upholds a positivist notion of history that has been abandoned by more recent scholars. All historiography is subject to its own era as well as to the interests of its authors or their patrons. Therefore, such a distinction between “memory” and “history” (i.e. historiography) as drawn by Halbwachs should no longer be underwritten today. Rather, historiography might be defined as a specific mode of social memory, as suggested by Burke 1991: 289 ff. Thereby, however, an important category is none the less lost: the neutrality of scholarly historiography as to identity. After all, time- and interest-related dependencies notwithstanding, there does exist, ever since Herodotus, a concern with the past based on “theoretical curiosity” and pure thirst for knowledge. It obviously differs from those references to the past we call culture of recollection, since these are always related to the group that remembers. In the sense of an extended differentiation, scholarly historiography appears as a form of “cold” memory.

to the mental life of the social milieu wherein they took place, retaining of them merely the chronological and spatial schema".<sup>46</sup>

On one side, then, we find that multitude of stories wherein just as many groups settle their recollections and their self-image; on the other, one single history in which historians settle facts deduced from those multiple stories. But these facts are mere abstractions that do not mean a thing to anyone, because nobody remembers them, and because they have been purged of any reference to identity and memory. Particularly abstract is the time wherein history inserts its data. Historical time is *durée artificielle* that can never be experienced or remembered by any group as *durée*. Hence, Halbwachs stations it outside reality. It is an artefact devoid of function, detached from those bonds and connections that are tied by life itself – namely social, spatially and temporally concrete life.

In Halbwachs' view, the relation of memory to history is one of succession. At the very point where the past is no longer remembered, history sets in. "Generally speaking, history opens at the juncture where tradition expires and social memory dissolves." The historian's domain begins where the past is no longer "inhabited", no longer claimed by the collective memory of living groups. "To history, the past, in the strict sense of the term, is that which is no longer comprised within the range of thought of actual groups. Apparently, history must wait until the old groups have vanished and both their thought and memory have expired, in order for it to be able to determine the picture, and succession of facts, that it alone can maintain".<sup>47</sup>

According to Halbwachs, collective memory must not only be distinguished from history, but from all organized forms of objectified memory he subsumes under "tradition". To him, tradition is not a form, but a deformation of memory. At this juncture, we fail to agree with him. The demarcation lines between *mémoire* and *tradition* may indeed be so pervious that a constitution of precise terminological distinctions does not appear altogether sensible. We therefore employ "(collective) memory" as our generic term under which

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<sup>46</sup> Halbwachs 1997: 137.

<sup>47</sup> Halbwachs 1997: 166. It was precisely for this necessity to temporize that Ernst Nolte coined the relevant term, „*Nicht-vergehen-Wollen*“ (disinclination to pass by) of the past. He touched a sore spot in view of the constant confusion of memory and history in the so-called *Historikerstreit* (dispute of historians) [in Germany in the 1980s, U.B.].

we define “communicative” and “cultural” memories. That subdivision will be expounded in the second chapter where we shall also revert to the Halbwachsian concept of tradition.

#### 4. Summary

It is of a certain fateful irony that the theoretician of social memory himself is nearly forgotten.<sup>48</sup> Even though his name may now be better known than it used to be, this is certainly not true for his oeuvre. In spite of the great store we set by Halbwachs’ work, however, we cannot fail to notice certain shortcomings. They, too, must inevitably come out in a review such as this one. He does, for instance, fall short of terminological precision that might render his suggestions truly transferable.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, it must surprise us today that Halbwachs nowhere systematically, or even in any coherent context, mentions writing, nor the role it plays in the formation of collective memory. Rather, he appears to remain largely under the spell of Bergsonian charms such as “life” or “reality”. Like many of his contemporaries, Halbwachs was fascinated by a sociology supposed to unveil the secret of a vivacious nexus with a *temps vécu* (as opposed to *temps conçu* and *durée artificielle*).

All this, naturally, points to Nietzsche. It is the more surprising that his name rarely appears in Halbwachs (e.g. in quite another context in 1994: 222). Yet, in contradistinction to Nietzsche, Halbwachs is no critic of culture. He will not automatically denounce all that exceeds the format or context of organic life as artefact devoid of function, or even hostile to life. His interest remains analytical. As for the basic structures of collective memory, he is mainly concerned with them as a social psychologist. His pioneering discovery of a collective memory is based on the coordination of memory with the

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<sup>48</sup> Meanwhile – as the above was written in September 1986 – Namer 1987 is in print, a work exclusively dedicated to the Halbwachsian memory thesis.

<sup>49</sup> This is particularly true of his treatment of “religion” in 1994 (ch. 6), amounting to the assumption that religion as such – and he means: every religion – is a kind of institutionalized memory that “aims at sustaining, all down the ages, recollections of a time long past, untouched and free from any additions by later memories” (1994: 193). At this juncture, his distinction between “culture” and “religion” waxes questionable while the necessity to differentiate between different types of religion inevitably presents itself. In this study, we shall therefore abstain from elaborating on Halbwachs’ theoretical reflections on religion in 1994.

group. By countless examples he is able to illustrate how group memory and group identity are inseparably interconnected and mutually dependent. (Halbwachs uses the term “identity” sparingly; the notion of a “We-identity”, developed by Georges Gurvitch, his closest colleague at Paris in the 1930s and 40s, is not to be found in Halbwachs at all. The matter itself is of course omnipresent.)

As a social psychologist, Halbwachs halted at the bounds of the group. Apparently, he never considered a generalized elaboration of his memory theory towards a theory of culture. Another perspective he ignored is that of cultural evolution. Nevertheless, the basic structures he worked out remain fundamental, particularly for the analysis of culture. They are, after all, to a large extent pertinent to mechanisms of cultural transmission in general. Of course, the transition from live, communicated recollection to institutionalized, commemorated memory will have to be elaborated in greater depth. One will also, above all, have to consider, carefully but deliberately, the (r)evolutionary achievement of writing.

Very likely, Halbwachs himself should have regarded the turn towards culture – a highly complex system comprising a multitude of memories and groups – as an illicit shift towards metaphor. On the other hand, he may have held the expansion of his socio-psychological insights into the realm of culture studies and the theory of culture in reserve for later works. Let us not forget that his project remained fragmentary. His comprehensive *opus magnum* was posthumously edited by his daughter Jeanne Alexandre, based on his literary estate, while his book on the legendary topography of the Holy Land, where he does undertake such an expansion, must be seen as his latest work within this scope.

Halbwachs has been most fiercely reproached with his application of the notion of memory to socio-psychological phenomena. It has been rejected as an inadmissible “individual metaphor”, since, as his critics claimed, it conceals “the specific way in which the past is contained in human culture and communication”.<sup>50</sup> Now, in Halbwachs’ view the concept of collective memory is anything *but* metaphorical. It is of importance to him to show that individual recollections, too, are a social phenomenon. The fact that only

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<sup>50</sup> Canik and Mohr 1990: 311.

individuals, due to their neuronal equipment, can have them does not depreciate his insight that such individual memories are dependent on their social “frame”. One must not confound his understanding of the collective with theories of a collective unconscious, such as the Jungian concept of archetypes, since this is diametrically opposed to Halbwachs’ theory of memory. In Jung’s view, collective memory is 1. biologically inheritable, and 2. a *mémoire involontaire*, manifest, for instance, in dreams. Halbwachs, on the other hand, operates within the range of memory distributed communicatively, not via biological heredity. Thus, he maintains a *mémoire volontaire*. In our opinion, it is not the socio-constructivist expansion of the memory concept that conceals the specific forms of communicative and cultural realization of the past, but, to the contrary, it is the individuo-psychological contraction of it. Groups as well as individuals “inhabit” their past, deriving from it elements of their self-image. Challenge cups, trophies, and medals adorn the lounge of a sports club just as they do the sideboard of an individual champion – it seems fairly nonsensical to call the one thing “tradition” and the other, “memory”.

We should like to receive from Halbwachs a concept of the past one might call “socio-constructivist”. That which P.L. Berger and Th. Luckmann have shown for reality as a whole, Halbwachs has in fact, 40 years earlier, stated for the past: it is a social construction the characteristics of which result from the quest for meaning and the frames of reference of the respective presents. The Past does not naturally accrue to us – it is a cultural creation.

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