

'Collective memory': A memoir and prospect

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Abstract

This article reflects on the past, present and future states of social memory studies. Despite the proliferation of work employing the term 'collective memory', the field retains the 'non-paradigmatic, transdisciplinary, centerless' qualities identified in 1998. As a result, this essay celebrates the appearance of *Memory Studies* along with a number of other endeavors promising systematization and institutionalization in the vast literature on social memory.

Key words

Germany; Halbwachs; social memory studies; sociology

Around 1990, I began a dissertation on 'official' memory in postwar Germany. I had come to the topic through the usual confluence of intellectual and personal concerns. As a secular Jew, awareness of the Holocaust was one of the major pillars of my tenuous identification as such, despite the fact that both sides of my family had arrived in the USA around the turn of the century and had no personal connections to the Nazi horrors. I was at the time also about to be married to a non-Jewish German woman whose own family, while not bearing any particularly egregious secrets, was nevertheless no more free of their childhood contexts than was typically the case. Obviously, the relevance of history for subsequent generations was something that concerned me personally – psychologically, morally and politically.

As I repeatedly tell my students, however, family history and personal preoccupations do not suffice for a worthy dissertation topic. For me, the intellectual motivation – which in retrospect I like to think was overriding – was the wave of so-called 'turns' in the social sciences of the 1980s – linguistic, narrative and cultural. In theory classes, we were reading structuralist and post-structuralist writings on discourse and the problem of meaning; in political sociology we were problematizing legitimation in a post-Marxist, culturalist manner; and even in discussions of organizational behavior and social movements, we were noting the power of storytelling, movement 'narratives' and organizational 'cultures'.

The personal and the intellectual came together when I read about the German historians' dispute of 1985–86, in which public intellectuals debated how appropriate it was to place memory of the National Socialist past at the center of German politics and identity. However, the more general question for me, decisive for the dissertation, was that of the role played in political legitimation by what I at the time called 'images of the past'. It is by now nearly impossible to remember that 'collective memory' was not an obvious rubric for such a research endeavor, or for any sociological endeavor for that matter, particularly not for one concerned with the state and political legitimation. We had all read – or were supposed to have read – Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1947), towards the end of which Durkheim develops his theory of ritual and collective representations through an analysis of commemoration. One could read about 'political myth' in such works as that of Henry Tudor (1972). Philosophers such as Alisdair MacIntyre (1984) and David Carr (1991) were writing compellingly about the importance of narrative for identity. Edward Shils (1981) had written a dense treatise on tradition which, while obviously bearing on questions later discussed in terms of 'collective memory', nevertheless did not employ that concept. Even Hobsbawm and Ranger's (1983) *The Invention of Tradition*, which was later to be considered very much a part of the 'collective memory' literature, did not refer to 'collective memory' nor did any of its chapters cite Halbwachs. In empirical sociology, Barry Schwartz (1982) had published a key paper on 'The Social Context of Commemoration', which was nevertheless one of the very few discussions of Halbwachs and 'collective memory' in the contemporary sociological literature – later rightly held as a seminal paper, but at the time not as obviously so, at least not to me. David Lowenthal's *The Past is a Foreign Country* (1988) indeed appeared in those years, but it is a dense and difficult tome, and seemed to me at the time more *sui generis* than generative and, while it did include extensive discussions of Halbwachs and collective memory, its overriding theme was mainly 'heritage' and the debates over it in the Britain of the 1970s and 1980s, rather than 'collective memory' per se. Many authors were thus addressing topics later to be assembled under the collective memory rubric but not yet overwhelmingly in those terms.

Upon the recommendation of an advisor steeped in the European literature (Juan Linz), I read Mary Douglas's (1980) translation and edition of Halbwachs's posthumous *The Collective Memory*, which indeed convinced me that I had found the rubric I was looking for, an impression gradually confirmed by the increasing frequency with which the name and the term seemed to be popping up in new books and, less frequently, in journal articles. Nevertheless, that what I was interested in – the role of 'images of the past' in political legitimation – was best handled as a problem of 'collective memory' was by no means much more obvious than that it should be handled as a problem of 'political culture', 'narrative', 'symbolic politics', or any number of other concepts circulating at the time. For me, the major appeal of Halbwachs was his clearly sociological understanding of memory against individual psychology and his application of Durkheim's theory of collective representations to the problem of memory at the level of the group, which together gave me the confidence that what I was interested in was indeed a legitimately sociological topic, and moreover appropriate to

an analysis of the state (though this seemed an extrapolation at the time, which was before the efflorescence of research on what Pierre Nora called 'the memory-nation nexus' (Nora, 1992)). But, again, this framework was still not as obvious a choice as it might seem today.

One of the enduring problems with reading Halbwachs in the Anglo-American context was that there is relatively little scholarship in English illuminating the intellectual-historical context in which he was writing as well as the complexities of his own intellectual development, for instance the differences between his 1925 *Social Frameworks* and his two later books – *Legendary Topography of the Holy Land* and the posthumous *On Collective Memory* (Halbwachs, 1992), both of which developed his earlier ideas in reaction to their reception, particularly by his colleagues the psychologist Charles Blondel (1926) and historian Marc Bloch (1925). These holes in the Anglo-American literature were exacerbated by the brevity and, frankly, superficiality of both Douglas's introduction to her 1980 edition of *The Collective Memory* and of Coser's introduction to his 1992 *On Collective Memory*; by the fact that Douglas's edition went out of print quickly, never to be reissued; by the non-transfer of the excellent French scholarship on Halbwachs by Gerard Namer (2000) and others; and by the resultantly poor understanding of the connection between Halbwachs's work on collective memory and his work on social classes, the family and social 'morphology,' issues well-illuminated in Namer and in the unfortunately never-published 1975 dissertation of Suzanne Vromen, the only significant study of Halbwachs in English.¹ Even at the beginnings of the concept's huge efflorescence in a variety of places, then, exactly what theoretical resources were available for a project like mine was far from clear.

In the wake of my dissertation, which I thus survived through an even more than usually ad hoc constellation of concepts, references and theories, I set about trying to impose, for better or worse, some order on the diverse resources I had drawn on, which resulted in a 1998 essay for the *Annual Review of Sociology*, written with Joyce Robbins, on what I (obviously along with many others, though not necessarily in the same way) had by then begun to think of as a field of sorts – which I called 'social memory studies' (Olick and Robbins, 1998). Taking the form of a literature review, our effort nevertheless felt much more like an act of bricolage, cobbling together an enterprise that we characterized, in a gross understatement, as 'non-paradigmatic, transdisciplinary, and centerless'. This was assuming it could be seen as an 'enterprise' at all – or was it a field, a sensitizing (as opposed to operational) concept, a paradigm, an area or something else? We even faced the grammatical question of its ontological status: social memory studies *is* or social memory studies *are*? These questions remain unresolved, and perhaps unresolvable, to this day.

Ten years ago, it was just barely possible (though it probably wasn't really) to include in such an essay much of what seemed important and relevant to the questions I saw as linked by the term (though, to be sure, in retrospect there was much going on, particularly in French and German sociology, that I failed to take into account); I even felt the freedom to reach into other areas – such as the sociology of science, reputations and literary canons – to draw out what I saw as suggestive connections to issues not squarely in any 'field' of social memory studies.

Would such an endeavor still be possible today, after 10 more years of expansion in the field (or whatever it is)? Part of the question is whether anyone could comfortably read most of the good work available. Where 10 years ago this seemed just barely possible, today the challenge would dissuade even the most megalomaniacal bibliographer; where 10 years ago, even on a graduate student and then assistant professor salary I bought most books I saw on the bookstore shelves that were framed in terms of collective memory, a year of such purchases now would likely bankrupt even the best-paid scholar. Particularly straining here would be the enormous number of conference volumes and other edited collections. And even merely to print out every new journal article or book chapter on 'collective memory' would place too great a burden on local forests, though with such online technologies of scholarly memory as JSTOR and Google, finding them has certainly become easier (though anxiety-inducing: try entering 'collective memory' into Google or JSTOR without feeling overwhelmed!).

How are we to evaluate the metastatic growth of work on, about, related to or employing the concept of 'collective memory'? My use of the adjective 'metastatic' tips the scales perhaps too far in the negative direction. One of the greatest challenges for a scholar trying to remain on top of the literature is how much of the work of the last 10 years has been so very good, and how exciting it has been to see the concept applied to, and cross-fertilized with, contexts far beyond the state of the art from 15 years ago. Nevertheless, I remain troubled by the 'non-paradigmatic, transdisciplinary, centerless' qualities of the enterprise, qualities that seem to have persisted despite (or perhaps because of) the exponential growth of work on 'collective memory' and related topics.

As a sociologist, I am sensitive to some of the institutional sources of that condition. First, so many of the questions about collective memory depend on a deeply interpretive understanding of rich historical materials and contexts (a condition that resists generalization, both because the empirical materials are historically unique and because few of us have expertise beyond one or two such contexts). The many volumes that seek to respond to this, including one of my own (Olick, 2003), by gathering marginally related case studies are helpful but ultimately unsatisfactory. Second, the numerous different disciplines employing the concept and contributing to its refinement often have their esoteric qualities, distinct discourses, and often jealously patrol their boundaries (a condition that is not ironic to anyone who understands Halbwachs's effort to show through his work on collective memory the primacy of the sociological vision, and the negative reaction this claim evoked from Blondel and Bloch). Related to this is the problem that in the early stage of work, many were talking about collective memory issues in other terms, whereas now we often talk about other issues in terms of collective memory, thus risking a loss of conceptual specificity. Most important, in my opinion, however, is the lack of even the most basic agreement on canonical texts that might be read across all that divides us (indeed, while Halbwachs and Nora are universally cited, very often such cites seem more totemic than substantive or engaged), or at least a basic lexicon so that we do not all feel compelled to reinvent the wheel in our first footnotes, paragraphs or chapters.

There are indeed stirrings of solutions to this 'non-paradigmatic, transdisciplinary, centerless' condition, not least of which is the inauguration of this important journal. Others include the handbook edited by Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (2007), currently in press, as well as numerous outstanding basic survey texts, such as Barbara Misztal's *Theories of Social Remembering* (2003) or Elizabeth Jelin's *State Repression and the Labors of Memory* (2003), among others. There are also a number of superb websites now up and running, those by Harold Marcuse and John Sutton being, in my opinion, among the very best.² Another organizing effort is *The Collective Memory Reader*, which I am currently editing along with my colleagues Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi and Daniel Levy, and which will be published by Oxford University Press in 2008. In the course of proposing the *Reader*, however, we were surprised with the extent to which some reviewers resisted our desire for greater organization or paradigmaticization (if that is even a word, which it probably isn't). To be sure, our proposal was simultaneously overstated and underspecified. It was overstated because we emphasized words such as 'canonical', 'definitive' or 'field-defining'. For many, however, these terms sound like code words for 'hegemonic', 'stifling' and 'exclusionary'. These latter certainly could not be farther from our intentions. But I remain convinced that more intellectual organization is better than less, at least in this moment for this field (or, again, whatever it is). Of course, we now face the problem of alleviating our proposal's under-specification, which is a daunting task indeed. The challenge is much bigger than one *Reader*, or three readers for that matter. But one has to start somewhere.

In conclusion, I would like to simply enumerate a number of projects, intellectual and institutional, beyond those just mentioned, that in my opinion would be salutary for the field (enterprise, paradigm, whatever).

First, I would like to see more in the way of international cooperation, including more translation. A particular gap in the Anglo-American literature, as I already mentioned, concerns the intellectual-historical context of Halbwachs's work, including the complexities of its reception. Such a gap could easily be filled by the translation, for instance, of Gerard Namer's (2000) important study, among others. Other crucial works currently insufficiently known and assimilated because they have not been translated into English include those of Jan and Aleida Assmann. And surely there are others that I can't even mention because my linguistic insufficiencies leave me entirely unaware of them.

Second, it seems to me that interdisciplinarity is a concept that has never really fulfilled its promise, even in this most 'trans-disciplinary' field. We all write a lot about how we need to take the work of other disciplines seriously, but rarely does this go beyond reading and citation. I have been particularly and repeatedly struck by the mutual affirmations of psychologists who want more emphasis on the social and sociologists who want more emphasis on the cognitive. The same is true in history and sociology, where the bulk of debate has nevertheless been preoccupied with epistemological matters (in historiography, collective memory is often assimilated to oral history rather than to the Halbwachsian problematics, that were taken up so effectively by Halbwachs's colleague Marc Bloch, by the later *Annales* historians, and by the history of mentalities that grew out of it). Actual cross-disciplinary research, however, has been much rarer than affirmations about its necessity and desirability (which imbalance I suppose I have

just contributed to, once again). We need to think more about genuine interdisciplinary cooperation, cooperation that is beyond the level of mutual referencing.

Third, there is a productive and interesting conference circuit in social memory studies. But given the structure of funding for such endeavors, they are mostly intimate gatherings. This certainly has advantages. But perhaps it is time to start thinking of a larger gathering that could contain and exhibit the diversity of perspectives – disciplinary, geographical, epochal and otherwise – that have been motivated by the term ‘collective memory’ so as to redeem the benefits I suggest in the previous two paragraphs. In other words, here is hoping and suggesting that the virtual community *Memory Studies* will consolidate and expand and can soon be matched with a real community. After all, in doing so, we would merely be following the advice of Durkheim and Halbwachs.

Notes

- 1 Suzanne Vromen (1975) ‘The Sociology of Maurice Halbwachs’. Patrick Hutton’s *History as an Art of Memory*, which was for me an extremely important intellectual framing, did not appear until 1993, the year I was already writing my dissertation, hence too late to shape my theoretical package.
- 2 Harold Marcuse’s website can be accessed at <http://www.history.ucsb.edu/faculty/marcuse/classes/201/CollectiveMemoryDefinitions.htm#intro> and John Sutton’s at <http://www.phil.mq.edu.au/staff/jsutton/Socialmemory.htm>.

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