

MAURICE HALBWACHS  
ON  
COLLECTIVE  
MEMORY

*Edited, Translated, and with an Introduction by*  
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## Preface

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## The Reconstruction of the Past

When one of the books which were the joy of our childhood, which we have not opened since, falls into our hands, it is not without a certain curiosity, an anticipation of a recurrence of memories and a kind of interior rejuvenation that we begin to read it. Just by thinking about it we believe that we can recall the mental state in which we found ourselves at that time. From our impressions of that time, what remains within us before this moment and at the moment of discovery itself? The general notion of the subject, some more or less characteristic symbols, some particularly picturesque, moving, or funny episodes, sometimes the visual memory of an engraving, or even of a page or of some lines might remain. In reality we would feel incapable of mentally reproducing all the events in their detail, the diverse parts of the tale in proportion to the whole, and the whole series of traits, indications, descriptions, propositions, and reflections that progressively inscribe a figure or a landscape in the mind of the reader, which allow him to penetrate to the heart of the matter. This is so because we feel what a gap continues to exist between the vague recollection of today and the impression of our childhood which we know was vivid, precise, and strong. We therefore hope by reading the book again to complete the former vague memory and so to relive the memory of our childhood.

But what happens most frequently is that we actually seem to be reading a new book, or at least an altered version. The book seems to lack pages, developments, or details that were there when we first read it; at the same time, additions seem to have been made because our interest is now attracted to and our reflections focused on a number of aspects of the action and the characters which, we well know, we were incapable of noticing then. These stories moreover seem less extraordinary to us, more formulaic and less lively. These fictions have been stripped of a major part of their prestige: we no longer understand

This chapter's excerpts have been translated from pp. 113, 114, 121, 140, 141, 143, 144, 145, 148, 149, 150, 151, and 154 of *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*.—ED.



why and how they once communicated to our imagination such an uplift. . . .

We preserve memories of each epoch in our lives, and these are continually reproduced; through them, as by a continual relationship, a sense of our 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 the appearance they once had. They are not intact vertebra of fossil animals which would in themselves permit reconstruction of the entities of which they were once a part. One should rather compare them to those stones one finds fitted in certain Roman houses, which have been used as materials in very ancient buildings: their antiquity cannot be established by their form or their appearance but only by the fact that they still show the effaced vestiges of old characters. . . .

It seems fairly natural that adults, absorbed as they are with everyday preoccupations, are not interested in what from the past is now irrelevant to these preoccupations. Is it not the case that adults deform their memories of childhood precisely because they force them to enter into the framework of the present? But this is not the case with old people. These men and women are tired of action and hence turn away from the present so that they are in a most favorable position to evoke events of the past as they really appeared. But if these events recur is this not because they were always there? Is this not a striking proof of the preservation of memories that we believed to have been eradicated? . . .

If there are, in Bergson's sense, two kinds of memory—one made of habits and turned toward action, and another which involves a certain disinterest in present life—one would in effect be tempted to think that the elderly, as they turn from the practical aspect of objects and persons, and as they are liberated from the constraints imposed by profession, family, and active existence in society in general, develop the capacity to redescend into their past and to relive it in imagination. . . .

But in reality old people do not dream when they evoke their childhood past. One may rather say of the adult that when his mind, usually concentrated on present realities, is relaxed and allows itself to follow the slope leading back to his first days, he resembles a man who dreams, because there is in effect a lively contrast between his habitual preoccupations and these images with no relation to what animates his activities in the present. Neither the one nor the other dreams (in the sense in which I have defined this term): but this kind of dreamlike

activity, which is a distraction for the adult, comes to be a true occupation for the old. Old people ordinarily are not content to wait passively for memories to revive. They attempt to make them more precise, ask other old people, go through old papers, old letters; above all, they tell what they remember, when they do not try to write it down. In short, old people are much more interested in the past than are adults: but it does not follow from this that the old person can evoke more memories of this past than when he was an adult. Above all, it does not follow that old images, buried in the unconscious since childhood, "regain the power to cross the threshold of consciousness" only in the state of old age.

We can better understand what reasons awaken in the old person this new interest in a period of his life that had been long neglected if we put him back into the society of which he is no longer an active member, but in which he nevertheless continues to have an assigned role. In primitive tribes, the old are the guardians of traditions not just because they absorbed them at an earlier point than others, but also undoubtedly because they are the only ones to enjoy the necessary leisure to determine the details of these traditions in their exchanges with other old people and to teach them to the young during initiation. In our society an old person is also esteemed because, having lived for a long time, he has much experience and is full of memories. Why should old people not then be passionately interested in the past, in the common treasure of which they are the guardians? Why should they not try quite consciously to fulfill the function which gives them the only prestige to which they can now lay claim? . . .

Society, by giving old people the function of preserving the traces of its past, encourages them to devote whatever spiritual energy they may still possess to the act of recollection. If one sometimes makes fun of those who take this role too seriously and abuse the right of the old to tell of their past, this is only because every social function tends to have a tendency to become exaggerated. . . .

Not only the old, but all people (depending, of course on their age, temperament, etc.) instinctively adopt in regard to times past the attitude of the Greek philosophers who put the golden age not at the end of the world but at its beginning. Although there are periods of our existence that we might willingly cut off—although we might not be sure that we would like to relive our life in its totality—there is a kind of retrospective mirage by which a great number of us persuade ourselves that the world of today has less color and is less interesting than it was in the past, in particular regarding our childhood and youth. . . .

When it comes to the most somber aspects of our existence, on the

other hand, it seems they are enveloped by clouds that half cover them. That faraway world where we remember that we suffered nevertheless exercises an incomprehensible attraction on the person who has survived it and who seems to think he has left there the best part of himself, which he tries to recapture. This is why, given a few exceptions, it is the case that the great majority of people more or less frequently are given to what one might call nostalgia for the past.

Where does this illusory appearance of the past originate? Is it indeed an illusion? As Rousseau has said, while the child and the young man are weak absolutely, they are strong relatively: they are stronger than the adult so long as their powers surpass their needs. This plenitude of life brings in its wake a plenitude of impressions. When we grow older, even though we may feel sufficient organic resources within, we are animated in a variety of ways by the interests that are born of social life so that we are forced to limit ourselves. Constraints that originate externally are added to those which we impose on ourselves. Our impressions yield to the forms that social life imposes on them only at the price of losing a part of their substance. The yearning for nature amidst society is essentially the yearning for childhood among adults. . . .

We shall better understand the nature of this reshaping operation as it applies to the past, and perhaps also to dreamlike states, if we do not forget that even at the moment of reproducing the past our imagination remains under the influence of the present social milieu. In a way, contemplative memory or dreamlike memory helps us to escape society. It is one of the rare moments when we succeed in isolating ourselves completely, since our memories, especially the earliest ones, are indeed *our* memories: those who might read them in us as well as we read them ourselves have either vanished or been dispersed. Yet, if we flee in this way from the society of the people of today, this is in order to find ourselves among other human beings and in another human milieu, since our past is inhabited by the figures of those we used to know. In this sense, one can escape from a society only by opposing to it another society. . . .

So it is that when people think they are alone, face to face with themselves, other people appear and with them the groups of which they are members. Our modern societies impose many constraints on people. Without using the same authority and unilateral pressure that primitive tribes employ in regard to their members, modern societies nevertheless penetrate and insinuate themselves more deeply into their members because of the multiplicity and complexity of relations of all kinds with which they envelop their members. It is true that modern

societies pretend to respect the individual personality. Provided that individuals perform their essential duties, they are free to live and to think as it pleases them, to form their opinions as they wish. Society seems to stop at the threshold of interior life. But it well knows that even then it leaves them alone only in appearance—it is perhaps at the moment when the individual appears to care very little about society that he develops in himself to the fullest the qualities of a social being.

What are the principal traits that distinguish our present society from the society in which we immerse ourselves in thought? First of all, the latter does not impose itself on us and we are free to evoke it whenever we wish. We are free to choose from the past the period into which we wish to immerse ourselves. Since the kinds of people we have known at different times either were not the same or presented varying aspects of themselves, it is up to us to choose the society in the midst of which we wish to find ourselves. Whereas in our present society we occupy a definite position and are subject to the constraints that go with it, memory gives us the illusion of living in the midst of groups which do not imprison us, which impose themselves on us only so far and so long as we accept them. If certain memories are inconvenient or burden us, we can always oppose to them the sense of reality inseparable from our present life. But one can go still further. Not only can we roam freely within these groups, going from one to another, but within each of them—even when we have decided to linger with them in thought—we will not encounter this feeling of human constraint in the same degree that we so strongly experience today. This is because the people whom we remember no longer exist or, having moved more or less away from us, represent only a dead society in our eyes—or at least a society so different from the one in which we presently live that most of its commandments are superannuated.

There is incongruity in many respects between the constraints of yesterday and those of today, from which it follows that we can only imagine those of the past incompletely and imperfectly. We can evoke places and times different from those in which we find ourselves because we place both within a framework which encompasses them all. But how can we simultaneously experience various constraints of a social order when these constraints are incompatible? Here it is only one framework that counts—that which is constituted by the commandments of our present society and which necessarily excludes all the others. People form ties with each other and create bonds of friendship and solidarity; but they also compete with each other. This creates much suffering, fear, hostility, and hatred. Yet the competition we experience today has replaced that of yesterday and we are well aware

that the one and the other are incompatible. People of today concern us with the immediate or far away future. We may anticipate much good but also much bad from the future: both the good and the bad are undefined. People of the past, whose life and actions are now immobilized in a clearly defined framework, may have once expressed good or bad intentions in relation to us, but we now expect nothing from them: they evoke in us neither uncertainty, rivalry, nor envy. We cannot love them nor can we detest them. In short, the most painful aspects of yesterday's society are forgotten because constraints are felt only so long as they operate and because, by definition, a past constraint has ceased to be operative.

But I believe that the mind reconstructs its memories under the pressure of society. Is it not strange then that society causes the mind to transfigure the past to the point of yearning for it? Rousseau has said that of the Christian religion: "Far from binding the hearts of citizens to the state, it detaches them from it as from all the things of this earth. I know nothing that is more opposed to the social spirit." May I not paraphrase and say that the cult of the past, far from binding the hearts of people to society, in fact detaches them: there is nothing more opposed to the interest of society? But note that, whereas the Christian prefers to terrestrial life another which for him is at least as real and which he locates in the future, people well know that the past no longer exists, so that they are obliged to adjust to the only real world—the one in which they now live. They look back only intermittently at vanished time and they never linger there for long. Moreover, how can one fail to see that if people in society were always like a stretched spring, if their horizons were limited to the groups of their contemporaries (indeed of those contemporaries whom they find around them), if they were constantly forced to behave in conformity with their customs, tastes, beliefs, and interests, they might well bow before the social laws but they would endure them only as a harsh and continued necessity? Would they not consider society only as an instrument of constraint and not exhibit any generous and spontaneous enthusiasm for it? . . .

Society from time to time obligates people not just to reproduce in thought previous events of their lives, but also to touch them up, to shorten them, or to complete them so that, however convinced we are that our memories are exact, we give them a prestige that reality did not possess.