

## DO SOCIETIES REMEMBER?

The Notion of ‘Collective Memory’: Paradigms and Problems  
(from Maurice Halbwachs on)\*

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We seem to be facing a paradox: on the one hand, the expression ‘collective memory’ is heard everywhere: from the field of historiography to the public use of history, and in political, scholastic and journalistic discourse. One might legitimately wonder whether it has become what Uwe Pörksen has defined as a ‘plastic word’ – contrived, available for multiple use and mass consumption.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, the notion of ‘collective memory’ is still criticized, in ways which seem to ignore decades of theoretical reflection, as well as historiographical and anthropological practice.

In an essay in the first issue of the journal *History and Memory*, Amos Funkenstein maintained that “consciousness and memory can only be realized by an individual who acts, is aware, and remembers. [...] Remembering is a mental act, and therefore it is absolutely and completely personal”.<sup>2</sup> Some years later, in the same journal, others criticized “the belief in memory as an actual living entity”: they stressed that the expression ‘collective memory’ is legitimate only from a metaphorical standpoint and concluded that “collective memory is but a myth”.<sup>3</sup> They further asserted that the constructive character of memory, if accepted, would erase history as a science, i.e. as a methodologically consistent effort to reconstruct the real development of past events.<sup>4</sup>

Weinrich distanced himself from the notion of collective memory, which he found “a relatively unspecific and moreover anachronistic expression”,<sup>5</sup> while others saw it as an unfortunate extension of metaphors pertaining to the individual to the social dimension.<sup>6</sup> These criticisms all imply that Maurice Halbwachs was responsible for introducing a concept of ‘collective memory’ based on the attribution of a typically personal function, that of memory, to an alleged collective subject. Many scholars who have studied social memory – and its role in both our shaping

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1 On the concept of the ‘plastic word’ see PÖRSKEN 1988.

2 FUNKENSTEIN 1989, 6.

3 GEDI/ELAM 1996, esp. 34–35 for the first two quotations in the text and 47 for the third.

4 GEDI/ELAM 1996, 40.

5 WEINRICH 2004, 115.

6 See CANKIK/MOHR 1990, 311.

and understanding of the past – in depth have highlighted the fact that Halbwachs gave undue emphasis to the collective nature of the social conscience, by drawing too sharp a distinction between it and the consciousnesses of the individuals who make up any community.<sup>7</sup>

On closer inspection, these observations resemble some of the criticisms that the young Durkheimian Halbwachs faced in the 1920s, when he proposed examining memory as a sociological – rather than psychological or positivistic organic – phenomenon.<sup>8</sup> Marc Bloch's – generally acute and unbiased – 1925 review of Halbwachs' *Cadres Sociaux* exemplifies this attitude; Bloch criticized Halbwachs' use of a “vocabulaire durkheimien, caractérisé par l'emploi, avec l'épithète ‘collective’, de termes empruntés à la psychologie individuelle”. It should be noted, however, that the illustrious historian did not have “aucune objection sérieuse à parler de ‘mémoire collective’, comme de ‘représentations’ ou de ‘conscience’ collectives”; his criticism of Halbwachs was that he did not explore the mechanisms through which the collective memory is preserved and transmitted in both interpersonal and intergenerational communication.<sup>9</sup> A few years later, the famous experimental psychologist F. C. Bartlett – who discovered important elements in the social determination of the individual's mnemonic processes – seemed to believe that Halbwachs over-emphasized the capacity of a social group to preserve memory and recover the past through mechanisms proper to individual memory.<sup>10</sup> To ignore Maurice Halbwachs' conception of memory is to discuss the question of social – or collective – memory only approximately.<sup>11</sup> The recent renewal of interest in his work does not, I believe, pre-empt this examination of his theory, although this new interest has, indeed, already begun to alter perceptions of the French thinker and sociologist, whose decisive importance to the constitution of new paradigms of the sociology of memory, as well as historiography, has never been fully acknowledged.<sup>12</sup> This essay considers Halbwachs' three major works on the topic at hand: the *Cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (1925), the *Topographie légendaire des Evang-*

7 See FENTRESS/WICKHAM 1992, xi.

8 On the relationship between Halbwachs and Durkheim see VERRET 1972; CRAIG 1983; MUCCHIELLI 1999a; MARCEL 2001. On the protagonists and tendencies of the study of memory between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>, see LEONE 1996; JEDLOWSKI 2001; 2002, and the broad outline drawn by NIETHAMMER 2000, 323–35, as well as the lively, perceptive pages by Jan Assmann in ECHTERHOFF/SAAR 2002, 7–10. See also, most recently, HIRSCH 2016.

9 See BLOCH 1925, 78.

10 See BARTLETT 1932, 296.

11 The best biography is by V. Karady, in his collection of Halbwachs' texts (HALBWACHS 1972, 7–22); BECKER 2003 (with Pierre Nora's foreword on pp. 9–16) is of particular relevance today; although it is not a strictly biographical reconstruction, the author had access to unpublished letters and archives.

12 The most significant essays on Halbwachs' reflection on memory are: HEINZ 1969; DOUGLAS 1980; NAMER 1987; CARDINI 1988; JEDLOWSKI 1989; NAMER 1991; COSER 1992; HUTTON 1993, 6–8, 73–90; LLOBRA 1995; CAVICCHIA SCALAMONTI 1997; MONTLIBERT 1997; SABOURIN 1997; LAVABRE 1998; MUCCHIELLI 1999b; MARCEL/MUCCHIELLI 1999; NAMER 2000; NIETHAMMER 2000, 314–66; NISIO 2000; ECHTERHOFF/SAAR 2002; JEDLOWSKI 2002, 43–64;

*iles en Terre Sainte* (1941) and *La mémoire collective*, which was published posthumously in 1950.<sup>13</sup>

The starting point of Halbwachs' reflection in the *Cadres* is a radical criticism of H. Bergson's concept of memory as the foundation of subjectivity, and, in particular, of the "vraie mémoire", or "pure mémoire", which, according to Halbwachs, operated together with the "mémoire-habitude". The latter makes use of past experience to generate action, but does not evoke a corresponding image; while the former corresponds to the so-called "mémoire-souvenir",<sup>14</sup> vivifying the past through images which are active in the subconscious, by recovering the "pure mémoires" stored in the depths of the heart and theretofore inactive, separated as they were from the sensations, and detached from the present. His analysis of the implications of dreaming in terms of memory (distancing himself from Freud), and his consideration of the relationship between memory and language, especially with regard to aphasia, led Halbwachs to deny that memory was an intrinsically individual psychic faculty, operating beyond, and independently of, social relationships. Instead, he believed, everything seemed to point towards the intrinsic social contextualization of individual memory. It is important to stress, however, that Halbwachs neither denies the existence of the individual memory, nor replaces it with the collective memory: his intention is to show that individual memory can only be considered within the context of the social realm, which determines its actions and affects its contents.

The social character of individual memory emerges from different angles. Individual memory cannot be detached from the memory of others, since the definition and verification of a memory often implies an awareness of others' memories: our memories are vivified, completed and guaranteed only in relation to those of others. Memory, therefore, is neither exclusively nor intrinsically individual. What is more, no memory can ever be entirely inner. If someone forgot about the society to which he belongs, he would lose his ability to distinguish himself from his own past, and would have the illusion that he was reliving it, as in a dream. This, however, is not

DÉLOYE/HAROCHE 2004; PÉQUIGNOT 2007; JAISSON/BAUDELLOT 2007; BRIAN 2008; MIDDLETON/BROWN 2011; DESSINGUÉ 2015; GENSBURGER 2016; NIKULIN 2017.

13 See HALBWACHS 1925 and 1941, respectively. Halbwachs' writings on collective memory (in BECKER 2003 it is noted that, according to his wife, Halbwachs would have liked to entitle it *Mémoire individuelle et mémoire collective*) were recovered in a set of four handwritten folders among his papers, and were first published in the *Année Sociologique* (3e s. 1940–1948 [1949], ed. by G. Gurtwisch) and, later, in a volume titled *La mémoire collective* (HALBWACHS 1950), which was affectionately edited by Halbwachs' sister, J. Alexander. The second edition, edited by J. DUVIGNAUD (Paris 1968), adds to the former (*Annexe*, 168–201) the essay *La mémoire collective chez les musiciens* which had originally appeared in *Revue philosophique* 127, mars-avril 1929, 136–65; the Italian translation, edited by P. JEDŁOWSKI (Milano 1987 [1996]), is based on this second edition. The new critical edition by G. NAMER (HALBWACHS 1997) has become a key text; it supplements Halbwachs' notes and, on more than one occasion, modifies the previous editions. It also includes a broad study by Namer himself on pp. 237–95. Halbwachs' best bibliography, including the hundreds of reviews he wrote, was compiled by V. Karady in HALBWACHS 1972, 411–44, supplemented by CRAIG 1979.

14 See BERGSON 1896.

the case – the individual remembers the past as such, as something which is precisely and concretely shaped; this is possible because he distinguishes the past from the present, recognising himself as being in the present and aware of his connections to others. Two conclusions can be inferred from this: first, contrary to Bergson's theory, the act of remembering is intimately linked with the present and sensations;<sup>15</sup> second, and more importantly, individual memory is a social act because remembering necessarily implies a relationship with a cultural context which corroborates one's memory, and means that one's thinking is necessarily shaped by an essential connection with the system of ideas belonging to a particular social context. Generated by an intellectual and cognitive act, memory is thus social: memory and cognition overlap. Remembering means reconstructing the past on the basis of a society's intelligence, and not retreating into one's inner reality, dissociated from all social connections. Remembering starts from the present, from a shared system of ideas, using the language and reference points of a particular society.<sup>16</sup> In other words, it is actually the cognitive, expressive and cultural paradigms of society that allow individual memory to function, in conjunction with the entire set of material and moral aspects of life within the society to which one belongs, or has belonged.<sup>17</sup> The study of aphasia confirms the social characterization and origin of individual memory, since the interruption of the social communication ensured by language is the very reason for an individual's difficulty in remembering, which is itself connected to the loss of speaking ability.

The key to Halbwachs' thought is here revealed in his complex argument for the existence of an intermediary element between the individual memory and society: the '*cadres sociaux de la mémoire*' (or *social frameworks of memory*). These frameworks are neither retrospectively constituted through the combination of everyone's memories, nor empty receptacles into which the memories of the individuals settle. Rather, they are the tools which collective memory uses to reconstruct the past, starting from the present and shaping an image which fits the dominant ideas of the time.<sup>18</sup> These social frames, in fact, are not simply external points of reference for the individual memory, as Charles Blondel was inclined to think:<sup>19</sup> they stimulate the formation and contextualization of memories, and are therefore involved in their very production. A society's representation of time and space, for instance, offers a context, a frame in which everyone's memories are connected, organised, and acquire meaning. Social frames also offer the societal standpoint from which an individual elaborates his memories: as the standpoint changes, so do the memories. The frames of memory are, indeed, constantly interacting with individual memories, and constantly reshaping them.

In the second part of the *Cadres* (chapters 5–7), Halbwachs reflects on the notion of collective memory as the memory of a social group. He demonstrates,

15 HALBWACHS 1925, 275.

16 *IBID.* 25.

17 *IBID.* 38.

18 *IBID.* xviii.

19 In his review of the *Cadres* (BLONDEL 1926).

through an analysis of the collective memories and traditions of families, religious groups and social classes, first, that collective memory exists to the extent that individuals, when remembering, adopt the point of view of the members of the group to which they feel they belong; second, that the memory of the group in turn fulfils and reveals itself in individual memory. Within this inextricably bound nexus, collective memory, which is always the memory of a group, can be defined as the set of notions and images which supports the group's self-awareness and identity (not explicitly defined thus, but clearly meant as such). Consider, for instance, the traditional family:

[...] chaque famille a son esprit propre, ses souvenirs qu'elle est seule à commémorer, et ses secrets qu'elle ne révèle qu'à ses membres. Mais ces souvenirs, de même, d'ailleurs, que les traditions religieuses des familles antiques, ne consistent pas *seulement* [my italics] en une série d'images individuelles du passé. Ce sont, en même temps, des modèles, des exemples, et comme des enseignements. En eux s'exprime l'attitude générale du groupe; ils ne reproduisent pas seulement son histoire, mais ils définissent sa nature, ses qualités et ses faiblesses.

Let us now consider the concept of collective memory which Halbwachs outlines in the concluding pages of the *Cadres*, condensing it into a pithy formula: collective memory is social thought, and social thought is essentially memory.<sup>20</sup> It is important to note that, in Halbwachs' conception, social thought is a society's set of ideas and beliefs, which results from knowledge of the present, to which it corresponds, and gives voice. Nor is this set an abstract entity, it takes shape within individuals and groups who exist in time, and leave their traces in the memories of others. From this point of view, every social idea is also a society's memory: every historical character and fact exists within a society's system of ideas, and turns into an element – a notion, or a symbol – imbued with meaning, thus entering the society's memory. In this very sense, then, social thought is memory.

Is Halbwachs here making that step of which he has often been accused: transferring an individual psychological faculty – memory – to society, and thus hypostatizing a collective memory? I would say not, just as he did not earlier, in the case of the memory of groups. According to Halbwachs, in fact, social thought has a tangible existence, since it is embodied in persons and groups, so that collective memory never appears as an 'extra-individual' activity of a collective subject. It might appear, particularly given Halbwachs' somewhat generic use of language and his refusal to adopt abstract definitions, that this is the direction of his thought; the *Cadres*, however, never take this approach. Turning to his later works, let us consider whether the accusation of hypostasis finds any validity here. The topics under discussion and the documentary evidence under examination in the *Topographie légendaire* appear very different to those in the *Cadres*. Nonetheless, the latter's declared goal to investigate an example of collective memory which allows its general working mechanisms ("les lois") to be identified, is probably Halbwachs' answer to Marc Bloch's invitation,<sup>21</sup> that he explain how collective memory origi-

20 HALBWACHS 1925, 295–96.

21 NAMER 1987, 66 and 116, insists on the value of Halbwachs' research as an implicit answer to Bloch's invitation.

nates and perpetuates, without either anthropomorphising society, or using a finalistic-functionalist concept of collective memory as a mere datum corresponding to a society's structural needs. The book's main contribution to the research on this theme is the theory that localization in space is essential to the mechanisms of collective memory, just as it is, although in different ways, to the mnemotechnics of every epoch and society. While in the arts of memory imaginary spaces support the mnemonic operation, in the case of collective memory, that function is fulfilled by natural spaces, whether real or perceived as such.

The *Topographie* studies the complex, shifting processes through which the religious traditions have constructed sacred landscapes, focussing on the localizations of the Christian memory's most significant places, with particular reference to Bethlehem, Nazareth, the Mount of Olives, the cenacle, Pilates' *praetorium*, and the *Via Crucis*. The collective memory of Jesus' life – sustained by the religious tradition, pilgrimage, the Crusades, and travellers' accounts – has imagined and constantly reshaped the landscape of the Holy Land. And the latter, in turn, has always been the ground for the changing forms which, over time, have characterized the Christian collective memory and commemorative practices, assuming great symbolic value and also contributing to the development of the historical tradition. The sacral landscape of the Holy Land thus appears as the privileged form from which a particular type of collective memory originates, corresponding to Jesus' time on earth: the privileged locus of the assembly and symbolic enhancement of the Christian collective memory. It is worth noting that, for Halbwachs, the *Topographie* is the study of an emblematic case which can be transferred to other phenomena: he sees the mechanisms of memory related to space as also operating in relation to time, events, and people.

Concentration en un même lieu, morcellement dans l'espace, dualités en des régions opposées, ce sont là autant des moyens familiers dont se servent les groupes d'hommes, non seulement les Eglises mais d'autres communautés, familles, nations, etc., en vue de fixer, d'organiser leurs souvenirs des lieux mais aussi de temps, des événements, des personnes.<sup>22</sup>

*La mémoire collective* – published posthumously, and the fruit of what seems to have been a period of mental affliction – draws together the themes of the *Cadres* and the *Topographie*. The book contains some significant changes of perspective, with regard to the spatiality of collective memory, for example. While Halbwachs' discourse in the *Topographie* focused on the spatial frames of memory and the interaction between the mechanisms of religious memory and the process of construction of a legendary – although perceived and described as real – landscape, in the chapter on space in *La mémoire collective*, Halbwachs concentrates on those groups affected by a tradition of presence in a space, with the latter, in turn, becoming an actual spatial frame for the memory of the group itself. When a group is embedded in a particular space,<sup>23</sup> it both shapes that space in its own image, and adapts itself to it: the image of the external environment, and of the group's relationship to it, thus comes to play

22 HALBWACHS 1941, 147.

23 HALBWACHS 1950, 136–37.

a significant role in the idea of self that the group develops. Even when a group has no physical connection with a specific place – and its group identity originates in non-spatial factors (based on kinship, or religious, or juridical ties) – it will position itself within a spatial frame, possibly inherited from the traditions in which it locates its memories. This is the preservation, or – perhaps we should say – the memory, of the group’s relationship with the juridical, religious, and economic spaces that constitute the fixed frame in which it always finds its identity.

Let us now examine the collective memory more generally, and another shift in the perspective of memory studies. At the beginning of the second chapter, Halbwachs restates and further explores the very core of his concept.<sup>24</sup> Here, claiming legitimacy for the phrase ‘group memory’, Halbwachs points out that memories organize themselves in two different ways, either around a specific individual, or unfolding in a social context of which they form several partial images: that is, a group memory, but not a psychological function of a collective unit. Group memories, however, are linked to specific groups, and do not, by definition, go beyond group boundaries.<sup>25</sup> Collective memories are therefore numerous – potentially infinite, in fact –, just as their social basis is indefinitely, and multifariously, divisible.<sup>26</sup>

The complications increase when we consider that groups can actually cease to exist – although a pool of their ideas, concerns, and ideas of meaning tend to persist, because what ultimately constitutes the group is the current of ideas and thought that was at its heart. However, the individual memory can still arrange and retrieve its recollections within the frame of the memory of a formerly existent group, provided that it is able to reconnect with this current of collective thought. And this, indeed, is unavoidable, since currents of collective thought both encounter and intersect in individual memories and consciousnesses,<sup>27</sup> while every recollection is one of myriad ‘points of view’ on the collective memory.

It is important to note that, in taking this path, Halbwachs seems to gradually distance himself from the concept of social frame as the crucial mechanism for reconstructing the past through memory. The latter, now, appears more like the process of connecting with a current of social thought, even when the group in which that current originated no longer exists. Here we find another shift in perspective, however, and we cannot know how Halbwachs would have dealt with it, if he had further developed his theory. If the collective memory is located in a current of social thought – of ideas –, and thus in a meaning, or set of meanings, then it can be transmitted through a wide range of means: literature, the arts, conversation, and, indeed, monuments and commemoration rituals. Memory, then, may become culture, meaning, even symbol – much more than the mere construction of the past.

When, later on, we refer to the modern uses of the paradigm of cultural memory in anthropology, culture theory, and historiography, we should recognize Halbwachs as the first thinker to take this path.

24 *IBID.* 35.

25 *IBID.* 70.

26 *IBID.* 76–77.

27 *IBID.* 126–28.

We return now to the key question to which the critiques of Halbwachs' theory refer – whether explicitly or not –, and from which this essay took inspiration. In the light of what has been said so far, it seems quite clear that Halbwachs did not simply ‘psychologize the social’, or attach psychological functions proper to the individual to collective groups without changing their character or *modus operandi*. Surprisingly, even Paul Ricoeur – in a lecture given in 1996 – is sensitive to these critiques.<sup>28</sup> Ricoeur, of course, recognizes that the process of memory is not solipsistic, that it requires interaction with others, that individual memories often draw upon the recollections and stories of others, and, finally, that our memories are embedded in collective stories.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, he takes for granted that Halbwachs – in the end – assumed the existence of a collective subject of memory and supposed the group memory to exert the same functions of observation, organization and retrieval or evocation ascribed to the individual memory. Although short, the above analysis of the texts provides enough evidence to show that this reading does not do Halbwachs justice.

It bears noting, moreover, that the alternative theory put forward by Ricoeur, with regard to an explicit reference to Husserl's phenomenology of intersubjectivity – i. e. a common domain of individual memories and a phenomenology of the simultaneous, mutual and interconnected constitution of the individual, and the collective, memory –, is closer to one of Halbwachs' core ideas than Ricoeur admits: that is, the idea of the individual memory as – simultaneously – both a meeting point for collective currents of thoughts and a particular perspective of the collective memory. Ricoeur, in fact, seems subsequently to soften his position on Halbwachs' ideas, in his magnum opus *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (2000), undoubtedly the most incisive philosophical discussion on the French sociologist's ideas about memory.<sup>30</sup> Here Ricoeur notices how decisively Halbwachs distanced himself from “the sensualist thesis that the origin of a memory lies in a sensible intuition preserved as such and recalled as identical”,<sup>31</sup> but complains that Halbwachs runs the risk of moving almost inadvertently from the thesis that “no one ever remembers alone” to “we are not an authentic subject of the attribution of memories”.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, Ricoeur emphasizes the fact that the act of recollection is personal, although indelibly marked by the social. That Halbwachs finally arrived at the idea that the consciousness has the power to place itself within the viewpoint of the group, and that each individual memory provides a perspective on the collective memory, seems to Ricoeur (and I concur) not only to overstep the bounds of the theory of the social frameworks of memory, but also to be a contradictory return to the idea that the act of recollection is intrinsically personal. This critique – an ‘in-

28 On Ricoeur's thought with regard to memory and forgetting, see DESSINGUÉ 2011; 2017.

29 See “Die vergangene Zeit lesen: Gedächtnis und Vergessen” in RICOEUR 2004a, 47–119, esp. 51–59. (The text contains a series of PhD lectures held in November 1996 at the Facultad de Filosofía y Letras of the Universidad Autónoma of Madrid. It was originally published in German: Göttingen, Wallstein: Essener Kulturwissenschaftliche Vorträge, 2004).

30 RICOEUR 2003.

31 *IBID.* 172.

32 *IBID.* 173.

side job', one might say – seems to strike at the heart of Halbwachs' theory. Its real significance, however, is this: thanks to it, we now need to acknowledge that the real limitation of Halbwachs' theory is not its hypostatizing of the collective memory, but its excessive attachment to a psychologizing concept of memory. Having made this case, Ricoeur proceeds to consider a different perspective, from which the two opposing approaches to memory – as individual, or collective, function – are not denied, but transcended, as Ricoeur claims a trajectory of memory attribution from the self, to 'the closest' others, and then to the others at "an intermediate level of reference between the poles of individual memory and collective memory, where concrete exchanges operate between the living memory of individual persons and the public memory of the communities to which we belong".<sup>33</sup>

Ricoeur's analysis of the philosophical implications of Halbwachs' theory is probably, to date, unrivalled. And yet, since the 1980s, within the sociology of memory, the theory of culture, anthropology and historiography and literature theory<sup>34</sup> meaningful and highly influential paradigms of the collective memory which explicitly draw upon Halbwachs' pivotal ideas have been adopted; interestingly, some paradigms, which were developed independently of Halbwachs, actually end up reaffirming and further developing his ideas.

Scholars in the fields of the sociology of memory and culture theory usually assume both the reconstructive and the socially marked character of memory. In the chapter on 'remembering' in his seminal book, James Fentress reaffirms that "memory is not a passive receptacle, but instead a process of active restructuring, in which elements may be retained, reordered, or suppressed"; and Eviatar Zerubavel stresses that memory is not just a simple reproduction of the past, since it "is patterned in a highly structured manner that both shapes and distorts what we actually come to mentally retain from the past".<sup>35</sup> This belief is, of course, in line with common current constructivist positions.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, it seems important to stress that to share the basic concepts of constructivism does not necessarily imply also to share its radical denial of the knowability of the past which – its fundamentally Foucaultian roots notwithstanding – is as popular as it is highly relativistic, if not nihilistic. In fact, constructivism in itself by no means implies the denial of analytical and cognitive aspiration: here, too, the sociology of memory owes a significant debt to Halbwachs.

Furthermore, with regard to the social mark of memory, it should be noted that today the whole sociology of memory "foregrounds what we come to remember as *social beings*",<sup>37</sup> that is being part of a "social context within which we access the

33 2004b, 131, but the whole analysis, on pp. 120–32, is essential.

34 Here I will limit myself to drawing attention to the seminal essay by ASTRID ERLI (2005) which provides more than the title suggests: a critical discussion of the theories of Warburg, Halbwachs, Nora and Assmann (ch. 2), a theoretical analysis of the collective memory (ch. 5) and, most importantly, an argument for the relevance of literature as a *medium* of cultural memory.

35 ZERUBAVEL 2003, 11. ZERUBAVEL is one of the leading exponents of the sociology of knowledge and memory: see, at least, 1997 and 2004.

36 BERGER/LUCKMANN 1966 is a crucial reference in this regard.

37 ZERUBAVEL 2003, 2, italics by Zerubavel.

past”.<sup>38</sup> The focus is therefore on memory as proper to social beings; on social contexts within which everyone has access to the past and understands it; on the ways in which acquiring any social identity involves acquiring a group’s memory and thereby identifying with its collective past, and, finally, on the process by which we learn to remember in a socially appropriate manner. In fact, “being social presupposes the ability to experience things that happened to the group to which we belong long before we even joined them as if they were part of our own personal past”.<sup>39</sup> And this because the fusion of an individual’s history with the collective history of the group to which they belong is part of the process of acquiring any social identity. This is the perspective from which Halbwachs’ theory of the social frameworks of memory has been revisited and updated. Zerubavel points out that experiments have shown that in certain contexts many individuals tend to make the same ‘free’ mnemonic associations, and he suggests that some apparently personal memories can, in fact, be interpreted as personalized manifestations of a single common collective memory, not so much in terms of memory content shared within a group understood as a mnemonic community, as in the way that the structures of memory are configured. Indeed, as Zerubavel put it “remembering involves more than just recall of facts, as various mental filters that are quite independent of those facts nevertheless affect the way we process them in our mind (...) such filters are highly impersonal, as they are rarely ever grounded in individuals’ own experience”,<sup>40</sup> belonging instead to their mnemonic communities and traditions.

Jan Assmann’s powerful theory of memory, which draws upon the sociology of memory, culture theory and historiography, was elaborated in his *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* (1992), and went on to gain widespread acclaim after its English translation in 2011. Assmann’s theory, which borrows much from Halbwachs, is based on the social construction of the past and the reconstructive character of memory, on the identitary function of the culture of memory, and on a typology of forms of collective memory supported by historical case studies from Ancient Egyptian, Greek and Israelite culture. The discourse around the Greek world, incidentally, is problematic, but that is a discussion for another occasion.

Assmann assumes that a society’s culture of memory enables it to construct – in different ways, which should all be considered singly – a self-image, and to perpetuate its identity through the generations. Memory is a reconstructive process: not merely the archiving of facts stored in the memory, but the definition of the past according to specific frameworks of cultural reference: from this perspective the only remembered past is the meaningful one. Thus conceived, the past is therefore a social construct resulting from a society’s need for meaning, and from its frames of reference.

Within this general outline, Assmann develops a comprehensive model of the function of memory which distinguishes and contrasts two basic modes of memory: the cultural, and the communicative. Cultural memory takes shape in the founding

38 *IBID.* 3, italics by Zerubavel.

39 See ZERUBAVEL 1997 and IRWIN/ZARECKA 1994.

40 See ZERUBAVEL 2003, 4.