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Book Editor(s): Michael Rossington, Anne Whitehead, Linda Anderson, Kate Chedgzoy, Pablo Mukherjee, Jennifer Richards and Michael Rossington

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MAURICE HALBWACHS: FROM THE COLLECTIVE MEMORY

THE ULTIMATE OPPOSITION BETWEEN COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND HISTORY

The collective memory is not the same as formal history, and 'historical memory' is a rather unfortunate expression because it connects two terms opposed in more than one aspect. [. . .] Undoubtedly, history is a collection of the most notable facts in the memory of man. But past events read about in books and taught and learned in schools are selected, combined, and evaluated in accord with necessities and rules not imposed on the groups that had through time guarded them as a living trust. General history starts only when tradition ends and the social memory is fading or breaking up. So long as a remembrance continues to exist, it is useless to set it down in writing or otherwise fix it in memory. Likewise the need to write the history of a period, a society, or even a person is only aroused when the subject is already too distant in the past to allow for the testimony of those who preserve some remembrance of it. The memory of a sequence of events may no longer have the support of a group: the memory of involvement in the events or of enduring their consequences, of participating in them or receiving a firsthand account from participants and witnesses, may become scattered among various individuals, lost amid new groups for whom these facts no longer have interest because the events are definitely external to them. When this occurs, the only means of preserving such remembrances is to write them down in a coherent narrative, for the writings

Source: Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* [1950], trans. Francis J. Ditter, Jr and Vida Yazdi Ditter, intro. Mary Douglas (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1980), pp. 78–84.

remain even though the thought and the spoken word die. If a memory exists only when the remembering subject, individual or group, feels that it goes back to its remembrances in a continuous movement, how could history ever be a memory, since there is a break in continuity between the society reading this history and the group in the past who acted in or witnessed the events?

Of course, one purpose of history might just be to bridge the gap between past and present, restoring this ruptured continuity. But how can currents of collective thought whose impetus lies in the past be re-created, when we can grasp only the present? Through detailed study historians can recover and bring to light facts of varying importance believed to be definitely lost, especially if they have the good fortune to discover unpublished memoirs. Nevertheless, when the *Mémoires de Saint-Simon*, for example, were published at the beginning of the nineteenth century, could it be said that French society of 1830 regained contact, a living and direct contact, with the end of the seventeenth century and the time of the Regency? What passed from these memoirs into the basic histories, which have a readership sufficiently widespread to really influence collective opinions? The only effect of such publications is to make us understand how distant we are from those who are doing the writing and being described. The barriers separating us from such a period are not overcome by scattered individuals merely devoting much time and effort to such reading. The study of history in this sense is reserved only for a few specialists. Even were there a group devoted to reading the *Mémoires de Saint-Simon*, it would be much too small to affect public opinion.

History wanting to keep very close to factual details must become erudite, and erudition is the affair of only a very small minority. By contrast, if history is restricted to preserving the image of the past still having a place in the contemporary collective memory, then it retains only what remains of interest to present-day society – that is, very little.

Collective memory differs from history in at least two respects. It is a current of continuous thought whose continuity is not at all artificial, for it retains from the past only what still lives or is capable of living in the consciousness of the groups keeping the memory alive. By definition it does not exceed the boundaries of this group. When a given period ceases to interest the subsequent period, the same group has not forgotten a part of its past, because, in reality, there are two successive groups, one following the other. History divides the sequence of centuries into periods, just as the content of a tragedy is divided into several acts. But in a play the same plot is carried from one act to another and the same characters remain true to form to the end, their feelings and emotions developing in an unbroken movement. History, however, gives the impression that everything – the interplay of interests, general orientations, modes of studying men and events, traditions, and perspectives on the future – is transformed from one period to another. The apparent persistence of the same groups merely reflects the persistence of external distinctions resulting from places, names, and the general character of societies. But the men composing

the same group in two successive periods are like two tree stumps that touch at their extremities but do not form one plant because they are not otherwise connected.

Of course, reason sufficient to partition the succession of generations at any given moment is not immediately evident, because the number of births hardly varies from year to year. Society is like a thread that is made from a series of animal or vegetable fibers intertwined at regular intervals; or, rather, it resembles the cloth made from weaving these threads together. The sections of a cotton or silk fabric correspond to the end of a motif or design. Is it the same for the sequence of generations?

Situated external to and above groups, history readily introduces into the stream of facts simple demarcations fixed once and for all. In doing so, history not merely obeys a didactic need for schematization. Each period is apparently considered a whole, independent for the most part of those preceding and following, and having some task – good, bad, or indifferent – to accomplish. Young and old, regardless of age, are encompassed within the same perspective so long as this task has not yet been completed, so long as certain national, political, or religious situations have not yet realized their full implications. As soon as this task is finished and a new one proposed or imposed, ensuing generations start down a new slope, so to speak. Some people were left behind on the opposite side of the mountain, having never made it up. But the young, who hurry as if fearful of missing the boat, sweep along a portion of the older adults. By contrast, those who are located at the beginning of either slope down, even if they are very near the crest, do not see each other any better and they remain as ignorant of one another as they would be were they further down on their respective slope. The farther they are located down their respective slope, the farther they are placed into the past or what is no longer the past; or, alternatively, the more distant they are from one another on the sinuous line of time.

Some parts of this portrait are accurate. Viewed as a whole from afar and, especially, viewed from without by the spectator who never belonged to the groups he observes, the facts may allow such an arrangement into successive and distinct configurations, each period having a beginning, middle, and end. But just as history is interested in differences and contrasts, and highlights the diverse features of a group by concentrating them in an individual, it similarly attributes to an interval of a few years changes that in reality took much longer. Another period of society might conceivably begin on the day after an event had disrupted, partially destroyed, and transformed its structure. But only later, when the new society had already engendered new resources and pushed on to other goals, would this fact be noticed. The historian cannot take these demarcations seriously. He cannot imagine them to have been noted by those who lived during the years so demarcated, in the manner of the character in the farce who exclaims, 'Today the Hundred Years War begins!' A war or revolution may create a great chasm between two generations, as if an intermediate generation had just disappeared. In such a case, who can be sure that, on the day

after, the youth of society will not be primarily concerned, as the old will be, with erasing any traces of that rupture, reconciling separated generations and maintaining, in spite of everything, continuity of social evolution? Society must live. Even when institutions are radically transformed, and especially then, the best means of making them take root is to buttress them with everything transferable from tradition. Then, on the day after the crisis, everyone affirms that they must begin again at the point of interruption, that they must pick up the pieces and carry on. Sometimes nothing is considered changed, for the thread of continuity has been retied. Although soon rejected, such an illusion allows transition to the new phase without any feeling that the collective memory has been interrupted.

In reality, the continuous development of the collective memory is marked not, as is history, by clearly etched demarcations but only by irregular and uncertain boundaries. The present (understood as extending over a certain duration that is of interest to contemporary society) is not contrasted to the past in the way two neighboring historical periods are distinguished. Rather, the past no longer exists, whereas, for the historian, the two periods have equivalent reality. The memory of a society extends as far as the memory of the groups composing it. Neither ill will nor indifference causes it to forget so many past events and personages. Instead, the groups keeping these remembrances fade away. Were the duration of human life doubled or tripled, the scope of the collective memory as measured in units of time would be more extensive. Nevertheless, such an enlarged memory might well lack richer content if so much tradition were to hinder its evolution. Similarly, were human life shorter, a collective memory covering a lesser duration might never grow impoverished because change might accelerate a society 'unburdened' in this way. In any case, since social memory erodes at the edges as individual members, especially older ones, become isolated or die, it is constantly transformed along with the group itself. Stating when a collective remembrance has disappeared and whether it has definitely left group consciousness is difficult, especially since its recovery only requires its preservation in some limited portion of the social body.

HISTORY, RECORD OF EVENTS; COLLECTIVE MEMORY, DEPOSITORY OF TRADITION

In effect, there are several collective memories. This is the second characteristic distinguishing the collective memory from history. History is unitary, and it can be said that there is only one history. Let me explain what I mean. Of course, we can distinguish the history of France, Germany, Italy, the history of a certain period, region, or city, and even that of an individual. Sometimes historical work is even reproached for its excessive specialization and fanatic desire for detailed study that neglects the whole and in some manner takes the part for the whole. But let us consider this matter more closely. The historian justifies these detailed studies by believing that detail added to detail will form a whole that can in turn be added to other wholes; in the total record resulting from all

these successive summations, no fact will be subordinated to any other fact, since every fact is as interesting as any other and merits as much to be brought forth and recorded. Now the historian can make such judgments because he is not located within the viewpoint of any genuine and living groups of past or present. In contrast to the historian, these groups are far from affording equal significance to events, places, and periods that have not affected them equally. But the historian certainly means to be objective and impartial. Even when writing the history of his own country, he tries to synthesize a set of facts comparable with some other set, such as the history of another country, so as to avoid any break in continuity. Thus, in the total record of European history, the comparison of the various national viewpoints on the facts is never found; what is found, rather, is the sequence and totality of the facts such as they are, not for a certain country or a certain group but independent of any group judgment. The very divisions that separate countries are historical facts of the same value as any others in such a record. All, then, is on the same level. The historical world is like an ocean fed by the many partial histories. Not surprisingly, many historians in every period since the beginning of historical writing have considered writing universal histories. Such is the natural orientation of the historical mind. Such is the fatal course along which every historian would be swept were he not restricted to the framework of more limited works by either modesty or short-windedness.

Of course, the muse of history is Clio. History can be represented as the universal memory of the human species. But there is no universal memory. Every collective memory requires the support of a group delimited in space and time. The totality of past events can be put together in a single record only by separating them from the memory of the groups who preserved them and by severing the bonds that held them close to the psychological life of the social milieus where they occurred, while retaining only the group's chronological and spatial outline of them. This procedure no longer entails restoring them to lifelike reality, but requires relocating them within the frameworks with which history organizes events. These frameworks are external to these groups and define them by mutual contrast. That is, history is interested primarily in differences and disregards the resemblances without which there would have been no memory, since the only facts remembered are those having the common trait of belonging to the same consciousness. Despite the variety of times and places, history reduces events to seemingly comparable terms, allowing their interrelation as variations on one or several themes. Only in this way does it manage to give us a summary vision of the past, gathering into a moment and symbolizing in a few abrupt changes or in certain stages undergone by a people or individual, a slow collective evolution. In this way it presents us a unique and total image of the past.