

Memory and Sociology

Themes and issues

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ABSTRACT. This article describes the basic framework of the field of sociology of memory. It offers an overview of themes and issues around (1) the social aspects of individual memory; (2) collective memories; and (3) cultural attitudes towards memory. Such issues are relevant today from the perspective of sociology of time, and the author demonstrates some theoretical problems that arise and some directions in which they can be further developed. But such issues are also relevant in social discourse and in shaping individual and collective identities: their comprehension helps to investigate continuity and discontinuity in social life, as well as current conflicts and cultural ties. **KEY WORDS** • commemoration • culture • identity • individual and collective memory

The word ‘memory’ in everyday and scientific language refers to a vast set of phenomena that is not completely homogeneous. In its widest sense, memory can be considered as the capacity of a (living or artificial) system to respond to events by storing the resultant information and modifying its structure in such a way that the response to subsequent events is affected by previous acquisitions. In a more narrow sense, memory is taken to mean the human faculty of preserving certain traces of past experiences and having access to these – at least in part – through recall.

In the 20th century memory has been the subject of considerable thought both in the fields of art and philosophy, as well as science. The reasons for this special attention are probably to be found in that peculiar cultural and social constellation represented by modernity: on the one hand it has produced a world in perpetual change, in which traditions lose their value and recurring discontinuities are generated; on the other hand it has offered ever more sophisticated technical instruments that exteriorize the human faculty of recall and question

its meaning. Quite apart from these reasons (which deserve to be explored in a separate article), what is remarkable from a theoretical point of view is that our concept of memory has changed in the course of the 20th century: not only and not so much because the social world requires us to concentrate on the present or because we are used to objects that in one way or another help us 'recall', but because the very model of memory as a 'store' of traces of the past – a model which dates at least as far back as St Augustine – has been completely overturned and reformulated.

Contemporary thought conceives memory not as a store, but as a plurality of interrelated functions. What we call 'memory' is a complex network of activities, the study of which indicates that the past never remains 'one and the same', but is constantly selected, filtered and restructured in terms set by the questions and necessities of the present, at both the individual and the social levels. Philosophically speaking, what we call 'memory' can be described as the field of a complex temporal dialectic: while on the one hand the flow of life over time entails effects that condition the future, on the other it is the present that shapes the past, ordering, reconstructing and interpreting its legacy, with expectations and hopes also helping to select what best serves the future.¹

As far as sociology is concerned, its interest in memory logically derives from the recognition of the importance of the temporal dimension in human affairs. Both the continuities and the discontinuities of social life imply mechanisms of recalling and forgetting, selecting and processing what the past leaves behind it. The fleeting and, above all, all-pervasive character of these mechanisms – which are such that memory seems to be present, in one way or another, in practically all manifestations of life – is perhaps the reason why the study of memory developed relatively late compared to other areas of sociology. The sociology of memory only began to develop systematically in the 1980s following the tracks of the pioneering studies by Maurice Halbwachs between the 1920s and the 1940s. However, the present context appears highly varied: alongside a theoretical debate in which sociology compares and entwines itself with various disciplines, we have empirical research which at times corresponds to major social problems that are often debated by entire national communities. In the following pages I attempt to provide a brief framework of such developments. I do not intend to be exhaustive, but to offer an overview of themes, results and problems that can act as a map for further study. The issues on which I concentrate are related to the *social aspects of individual memory, collective memory and cultural attitudes* towards memory. These issues are closely interconnected, but they are partially distinct.

The Social Aspects of Individual Memory

It was Frederic C. Bartlett (see Bartlett, 1932/1995), one of the pioneers in the psychological study of memory, who emphasized the social dimension of individual memory in the 1930s. Bartlett observed first of all that, from the very time they select the materials for subsequent storage, our memories are *social* to the extent that they codify perceptions on the basis of their meanings, i.e. on the basis of a structure of knowledge of the world which in turn is the expression of the individual's membership of a culture. Second, Bartlett noted that normally the recollections that individuals have of a certain event are influenced by the others' recollections of those same events. Hence recall is constituted and stabilized within a network of social relationships.

In the same period, similar ideas were being developed independently in different countries by such scholars as Lev Vygotsky, George H. Mead and Pierre Janet (see Maines et al., 1983; Bakhurst, 1990; Paolicchi, 2000). But it was above all the work of Maurice Halbwachs that introduced this line of reasoning into sociology. According to Halbwachs, whose system of thought owes much to Durkheim, the memories of each individual are inscribed within 'social frameworks' which support them and give them meaning. These simultaneously cognitive and emotional frameworks consist of the categories through which the past is selected, ordered and understood; they are stabilized by interiorizing the effects of social interactions and stored as a result of these interactions being repeated (cf. Halbwachs, 1925/1994; 1950/1997).²

The social frameworks of memory are expressed and reproduced essentially through language and discourse. And it is language and discourse in particular on which the sociology interested in the social aspects of individual memory focuses today. With its relative interest in a general theory of memory and mind, this sociology has concentrated on memory as manifested in *narrative practices* (Namer, 1987a) which individuals use in different social contexts and, above all, in biographical interviews or in autobiographical accounts. In practical terms it has developed in relation to the problems stemming from the 'life histories' methodology (Bertaux, 1981; Ferrarotti, 1990). The studies produced in this field are far too wide-ranging to describe them in detail. The life histories method is used to study such issues as identities and biographies, gender and generations, consumption and lifestyles. Typically, the problem that appears to arise in empirical research is that of the reliability of what the individuals claim to recall. Nevertheless, a *life story* (i.e. the account that an individual provides of his/her life or a part thereof) is not the same thing as a *life history* (i.e. the tendentially 'objective' reconstruction of that same life from materials and testimonies external to the memory of the individual in question). As a consequence, it should be underlined that autobiographical memory performs functions for the researcher other than that of a mere documentary source. Each testimony

must be considered as a text to be analysed on several levels and to be understood hermeneutically, where the factual truth of what the individual claims is less important than its emotional truth, and where the content of what is narrated is less important than the ways in which it is expressed. The use of autobiographical sources provides, on the one hand, access to the dimension of 'subjectivity', i.e. the dimension that the individual attributes to his/her acts by interpreting and reinterpreting the data of his/her existence; on the other, it is the dimension of the individual's membership of the social circles within which his/her discursive practices take place.

The social dimension of individual memory in these practices can be seen in at least two ways. First in the link between individual time and social time. The narrated recollections tend to be organized around temporal references provided by the social context; social chronologies and those of personal experience are as a rule in a state of tension, but mutually sustain each other; the way they interweave varies according to the degree to which the individual is integrated into a group or into society as a whole (Cavalli, 1985; De Connick and Godard, 1990). Second, the social dimension of memory is evident given that the phenomenon observed is a *narration*. Language – a social institution – is the a priori resource that helps give expression to recall, and narrative discourse necessarily takes place in a social context. Narrative mechanisms are culturally mediated, and as a consequence the ways in which memories are exposed (and, probably, the ways in which they sediment inside the individual) are determined by the social context (Bruner, 1995). On the other hand, the act of narrating takes place within a dialogue relationship which includes not only the narrator, but also the recipient who listens, records, intervenes by asking questions and generates expectations. There is, therefore, a social aspect to recall which is linked to the structure of the specific relationship in which it occurs (Maciotti, 1985). Finally, the account in itself is a 'socializing action', an instrument that the narrator uses, with varying degrees of implicitness, to define his/her relationship with the reference groups (Burgos, 1989).

Interpreting and reinterpreting one's past are in actual fact closely linked with one's social ties. This brings us, however, to a more general theme. The view of the past is continually and simultaneously exposed to different views insofar as a modern individual refers typically to a multiplicity of social circles, each of which is equipped with a system to interpret the, at least partially, distinct experience. This may constitute a resource, but it may also generate uncertainty. This question of the 'multiple self' has been a feature of the sociology of modernity for at least a century, but is now particularly at issue (for a summary see Elster, 1985). The sociology of memory brings further points to bear on this question, namely that for a modern consciousness it is the very image of the individual past that is fragmented and multiplied.

The memories presented within a narration do not represent the past so much

as the individual's attempt to come to terms with this past in a given discursive context. It is always possible for the past to present itself differently in a different discursive context. Besides, can there be a past 'in itself', whose image remains unaltered regardless of its manifestation in concrete narrations? The issue is of greater interest to psychologists than to sociologists.³ Overall, the sociologists who deal with social aspects of individual memory seem, nevertheless, to tend towards a 'constructivist' view of memory: the past is part of that reality which we have learnt to consider a 'social construction' (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; see also Bruner, 1991). This is partly due to the very nature of the materials with which they work, which tends to force them, more or less consciously, in the direction of what some describe as a 'discursive turning point' currently taking place in the social sciences (Harré, 1992).

In other respects, they find themselves working on the edge of the debate on the concept of *identity*. The past of each individual is, in some respects, what makes people what they are; but its image modifies depending on the questions that the present asks. It is true that identity is made up of memory, but, if memory is narrative, identity is also narrative, and it is also subject to the same multiple narration.⁴ At this level, the sociology of memory probably still has a long way to go, but its results promise to offer significant empirical evidence to substantiate the current debate.

Collective Memories

The issue on which sociologists have focused their interest is 'collective memory'. Before tackling it, it must be observed on a very general level that each human society needs to establish its cultural heritage and transmit it from generation to generation to its members so as to preserve itself. There is no doubt that biological evolution can be considered as a process of preserving and transmitting the memory of the species, but the characteristic evolution of the human species requires that the task of preserving social memory be transformed into an intentional activity, and this gives rise to specific institutions, techniques and tools (Rossi, 1988; see also Assmann, 1992). The cultural heritage that each society preserves and transmits from generation to generation includes everyday and specialized knowledges, the arts and even the language itself, as well as skills and customs. Nevertheless, sociologists have, as a rule, left large tracks of this terrain to be explored by anthropologists and other social scientists, while they concentrated on the aspect of this heritage specifically concerning images and narrations *of the past*. The concept of 'collective memory' thus tends to be understood as a set of *social representations concerning the past* which each group produces, institutionalizes, guards and transmits through the interaction of its members.⁵

This definition, which was proposed more explicitly by Gérard Namer (1987a) but later used by sociologists in general, allows us to study collective memory by concentrating both on the content and on the processes that govern the formation, preservation and transmission of the content. This content may concern events that took place during the lives of the current members of a social group or events relating to a more remote past, and may even incorporate the founding myths of the group itself. This memory reflexively adjoins and overlaps with the customs, practices and the very institutions in which the continuity of the group expresses itself, mostly in a non-reflexive manner, and performs the function of sustaining the sense of a collective identity at the cognitive and symbolic levels (Connerton, 1989).

Collective memory may take on a more or less institutionalized form, objectifying itself into specific practices, in places of worship or in artefacts, but its origin and its reproduction are situated at the level of the communicative practices that shape social life. These practices generate processes that considerably select the past and which may be based on consensual criteria or be the cause of conflict. In each case, as Alessandro Cavalli has pointed out, 'since every criterion of selection in the end represents an attribution of value, these processes are never independent from the power structure that characterises the group or society at the time. The power to create and stabilise memory is in fact a general sign of power at all levels of social organisation' (Cavalli, 1991: 34).

The nexus between collective memory and power relationships is one of the issues that sociological research has dealt with most. The main function of collective memory is actually, as Halbwachs (1950/1997) noted so well, to permit cohesion of a social group and guarantee its identity. However, since identities cannot be taken for granted in the modern world, determining the content of the collective memory is a conflictual process. The collective representations of the social past are designed to give legitimacy to the society's beliefs and to inspire their projects, thus legitimizing the elites that represent them: the more complex a society and the greater the number of elites competing to dominate it, the more the past becomes the subject of strategies seeking to impose the representations that conform most to the dominant interests.

The most important of these strategies, above all as regards the construction of national identity, are undoubtedly *commemorative practices*. These practices, which include not only festivities and occasional ceremonies, but also monuments, exhibitions and museums, have been the focus of most sociologists' attention. Their work has focused in turn on the variety of actors involved, their interests and their strategies, on the processes of conflict and negotiation through which commemoration occurs, on the communication resources brought into play and on the forms of reception through which the past is experienced by the recipients (Schwartz, 1982, 1990; Schwartz et al., 1986;

Namer, 1987b; Connerton, 1989; Billig, 1990; Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz, 1991; Zolberg, 1996).

The political value that is attached to the interpretation of the past was particularly evident in the debates, especially in the final decades of the century, concerning what Habermas (1986) has described as the 'public use of history'. The central question in these debates concerns the relationships between western societies that emerged from the Second World War with the memory of the Holocaust (see also Bauman, 1988). This question, already so admirably stated by Adorno (1960), has made its full importance felt in the debate that saw Habermas in opposition to the 'revisionist' historians in Germany, and which has also had a number of repercussions in other countries. This debate brought the ethical dimensions related to memory to the fore (cf. among others Vidal-Naquet, 1987), highlighting the importance of reappraising the past for the civil life of democratic societies, and also highlighting the role of the mass media in structuring a 'public memory' (Gallerano, 1995).

The discussions mentioned also have important counterparts in the former Soviet bloc. The movements that led to the collapse of the 'realized socialism' regimes in eastern Europe criticized the manipulation of memory and history conducted by the elites, and fed on the defence of the memory of repressed groups, eventually producing what some have called a 'regained memory' (Brossat et al., 1990). The overthrow of the regimes in the east led, especially initially, to a full collective rewriting of the past (from retrials to the rehabilitation of those imprisoned by previous regimes, from the replacement of statues, plaques and the names of streets to the rewriting of school history books). At the same time, however, it also led to the emergence of 'national' and 'ethnic' memories which in some cases strengthened the process of emancipation of civil society, but in others (e.g. the former Yugoslavia) helped trigger devastating processes of disintegration, serving the elites capable of ruthlessly using the media for their own ends.

Some Theoretical Problems

The phenomena described in the preceding section have some interesting theoretical implications. First of all, one has to ask to what extent can the collective memory of a group 'reconstruct' the past by transforming its image arbitrarily to its own ends. On this point, Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) have noted that the images of the past are often manipulated by elites so as to completely 'reinvent tradition'. Schwartz (1982) more cautiously emphasized that the events selected by the collective memory always possess or have always possessed some factual importance that makes them open to some subsequent reformulation but, above all, as Schudson (1987) has noted, what limits the arbitrariness of the

reconstructions of the past is the *plurality* of the collective memories that exist in a modern society. A homogeneous collective memory that is entirely subservient to the interests of an elite is possible in principle only in a totalitarian society: in practice, however, the persistence of antagonistic memories in this case also limits the possibility of manipulating the past arbitrarily (Passerini, 1992).

Second, it is worth underlining that the arguments invoking the past used by social groups in support of their beliefs and aspirations today play a considerable role in public discourse. In terms of sociological theory, this seems to suggest that the weight of the form of 'traditional legitimation' of social systems has by no means disappeared. Since Weber (to whom we owe the concept), most sociologists over the 20th century have considered this form of legitimation as destined to become less and less important with the spread of modernity.⁶ Clearly, this is not true. But this assertion brings with it a host of other problems: the past is never an autonomous factor of discourse, but it combines with various economic and political factors. The possibilities for and interest in invoking the past to found collective identities (of a national, regional, ethnic or other type) actually vary considerably in different contexts, and recall the conditions in which groups and individuals have (or not) been able to choose from a number of action strategies to satisfy their needs (Melucci and Diani, 1992).

The very relationship between collective identity and memory is also highly problematic. Undoubtedly, memory is related to identity, at both the individual and the collective levels. This is true both in the sense that memory is what enables an individual to recognize himself as 'the same' over time, and in the sense that identity is the selecting mechanism by which an individual privileges certain memories over others. Nevertheless, relating memory so closely to identity can lead us to forget that memory is also something that can contradict the identity that an individual wishes to adopt at any given moment. This perspective was developed above all by scholars influenced by the Frankfurt school (Marcuse, 1955; Jay, 1982). At an individual level, psychoanalysis has amply shown that one of the reasons for interest in memory is its capacity to retain the traces also of what has *not* been incorporated in the conscious, and has therefore escaped the processes by which identity is created. This is why memory, at least potentially, has always had a critical and destabilizing force. But this is also true at a collective level: memory is not only what serves the identity of a group and its present interests, but also the depository of traces that may be valid both in defetishizing the existing and in understanding the processes that have led to the present as it is now, and to the criticism of this very present in the name of forgotten desires, aspirations or traumas.

Bearing this theoretical perspective in mind, the reference to memory that characterizes the current public debate in many countries shows two distinct and, in truth, opposing faces. On the one hand there are 'policies of identity'

which use the past by selecting only what can serve to sustain the chosen identity and defend the interests to which they refer. On the other, there are those who invoke the past because it needs to be *reappraised*.

This is by no means the same thing. The concept of 'reappraising' [*Aufarbeitung*] the past refers in fact to a particular form of memory's work. Rather than the spontaneous processes of forgetting (which tend to discard all that is problematic or painful) and the deliberate mechanisms of political will (which, in the same manner, tend to avoid whatever goes against the identity being defended), this form of recall proposes conscious confrontation with the most negative aspects of the past, giving rise to a process whereby the individual assumes *responsibility* for his/her past history (Barazzetti and Leccardi, 1997).

Cultural Attitudes

Cultural attitudes towards the past and memory can vary according to age and sex; they vary according to social group and class; they vary according to religion and to culture. There now exist a good number of studies on these themes in various countries. The panorama is too fragmented to be able to provide a detailed account. However, it is possible to draw up a framework within which the results of these studies can be placed.

The first point to emerge from sociological analysis is that human beings do not always remember in the same way. At the very least, they do not always have the same tools available to help them remember, and as a consequence they do not always attribute to their memory the same functions and the same meaning. In this respect the first key distinction is obviously that between societies with an oral culture and societies whose culture is prevalently written. The spread of writing was a decisive stage in the history of a progressive *exteriorization* of memory (Leroi-Gourhan, 1964). In preliterate societies, social memory was expressed prevalently in ritualized narrative practices, but the growth of writing modified the role and functions of memory, enabling on the one hand the birth of commemoration through celebratory monuments and inscriptions and, on the other, the production and collection of documents (Le Goff, 1979).

The gradual spread of writing made the techniques which in preliterate societies governed the exercise of memory obsolete (Yates, 1966). At the beginning of the modern age, this process was accelerated by the introduction of printing. Memory was further exteriorized and gradually experienced new forms of institutionalization, becoming more and more bureaucratized through the increasingly systematic collection of administrative, financial, diplomatic and family documents. Later on, technology offered more and more accurate

means of fixing traces of the past, initially with the invention of photography and the phonograph and, later, the computer. The means of preserving and reproducing the traces have become more and more sophisticated. These inventions 'have brought the past within the present as never before' (Kern, 1983: 38), changing the way in which each of us experiences our individual and collective past. In other respects, they have given rise to the creation of a 'social memory' whose extension transcends the capacity to appropriate every individual and collective memory. The extraordinary extension of the social capacity of memory mediated by technology is one of the most evident aspects of the typically modern contradiction between the exponential growth of 'objective culture' and the relative atrophy of 'subjective culture' described by Simmel at the beginning of the century (cf. Simmel, 1900/1977). In terms of social research, it must be added, however, that this memory is not necessarily accessible to everyone in the same way. The question of the democratic management of information archives related to the past has not gone away with new technologies. Indeed in a context of a potential surfeit of information available, the power of selection of the agencies that collect and spread this information has, on the contrary, grown more than ever (Gregory and Morelli, 1994).

Apart from the observations connected more closely to the state of these technologies, it is worth emphasizing, for our purposes, that modernity is an extremely contradictory cultural constellation as regards memory (Jedlowski, 1989, 1990). On the one hand, it is typified by a constant crisis of traditions: the past loses the normative function over the future that it previously possessed, and the continuity of social life is constantly under question. The expectations for the future increasingly differ radically from past experience insofar as time is 'accelerated' and the change in material environments becomes constant. This appears to take us towards a devaluation of the past as the past: in actual fact it opens the way to an awareness of a particularly acute distinction between the present, past and future (Koselleck, 1979). It is only as a result of this awareness that the past becomes 'lost time' par excellence, and this on the one hand leads to a specifically *historical* knowledge, and on the other to the growth of such feelings as nostalgia (it is no coincidence that the term was coined only at the end of the 18th century: cf. Davis, 1975). At the same time, it lends itself to the growth of new institutions and activities such as museums, restoration and antique dealing (none of which existed as such before modernity).

In truth, the past only began lending itself to its radical devaluation at the beginning of the 20th century by virtue of the avant-garde and 'modernist' movements. This devaluation continued over the century until a widespread and general abandonment of the past set in as part of a gradual 'presentification' of experience. This 'presentification' was already envisaged at the beginning of the century by authors such as Simmel, and are today essential to the analyses of

those who consider the present situation a 'postmodernity' (see Harvey, 1990). This cultural devaluation of the past still encounters countertendencies, however. Modernity has, for example, seen the rise of attention towards autobiographical memory as a privileged means of exploring individual self-consciousness. This attention is still alive and charts the growth among various classes of a general interest in autobiography (Passerini, 1988).

On the other hand, the process of estrangement resulting from the immense migration flows that (for economic, military or political reasons) witnessed over the century have bestowed individual, family and 'ethnic' memories with an extraordinary value. At the intersection of culture and politics, the movements that today affirm their ethnic, regional and national identities in various parts of Europe and of the world, in turn, certainly do not seem to 'devalue' the past at all. Some might consider these movements part of the 'postmodern' constellation, but this only transfers the ambivalence that characterized modernity to the postmodern. As we have seen, the point with respect to these movements is that their relationship with the past is unilateral to the extent that they use memory in an instrumental manner: in their attempt to find symbolic reinforcements for their own political projects, they systematically leave aside anything painful, problematic, unpleasant or obscure that the past may have. This use of memory is the opposite of what we have called reappraisal [*Aufarbeitung*] of the past.

The problem of reappraising the past manifested its vastness to modernity in the symbolic case of the Holocaust. The Holocaust leaves contemporary culture with a legacy that not everyone wishes to take on board. Through it the past calls upon us not to celebrate our victories or to support our claims, but to explore the meaning of what happened, to make us redeem the wrongs that we have committed, to teach us not to repeat them. The attitude that this idea inspires is not the dominant one or the most widespread. Nor is it a comfortable one. It is, however, a part of the cultural constellation through which we currently look at memory. Once again, as we can see, it is a constellation that is highly varied. Within this general framework, I will limit myself to mentioning, from among the most promising areas of research, those related to the role of the media and those that concentrate on intergenerational relationships.

It is a commonplace to state that the newest media necessarily undermine interest in the past. But sociological research paints a more complex picture. First, we may note that the media now constitute a key resource in the memory of groups. The problem, however, is that they offer each of us a range of information which, on the one hand, represents an immense opening up of possibilities of identification and, on the other, requires new procedures of selecting and forgetting. Second, due to the prevalently oral and visual nature of modern communication, it seems that the media tend not so much to erase as to modify the way individual and collective memory is organized. As, on the one hand, contemporary societies tend towards a situation of 'secondary orality'

(Ong, 1982), this deprives sedimented forms of thought expressed in writing and print of their importance, but on the other hand, it also proposes forms of thought that recall and transform more ancient forms.⁷

As regards the relationship between generations, one of the themes on which sociologists are focusing their attention is young people's apparent lack of a 'historical memory'. They seem to be completely disinterested in incorporating the past and the legacy of the previous generations into their experience.⁸ In actual fact, here too there is considerable variety: while those young people most exposed to consumerism do appear to be most interested in original and undemanding forms of memory such as 'revival'; there tend to be deeper forms of comparison with the past among those who are more interested in directly or indirectly political questions. In each case, the individual attitudes towards memory are partly idiosyncratic, but the quality of the public discourse can influence the form they take (Cavalli, 1999).

Conclusions

The breadth of issues and themes that a sociology of memory is called to address is, as we can see, quite vast. It contributes to the sociological understanding of the temporal dimension of human affairs, and it intersects with various key issues in sociology, ranging from the study of identity to that of the ways in which reality is constructed, from the analysis of movements and social institutions to a general reflection on modernity and postmodernism. Both on the levels of empirical research and of theoretical reflection the coming years are likely to see noteworthy developments. By way of conclusion, I would like to emphasize that among these developments, in my view, must be included the possibility of thinking not only about the 'practices of memory', by which I mean concrete ways in which certain contents concerning the past are stored and transmitted, but also of practices *as* memory, i.e. as forms of permanence of the past in a group's present. I use the term 'practices' here to mean any form of characteristic behaviour of a social group that has sedimented over time and is capable of reproducing itself. As for any form of memory, past practices are never the same, but are selectively incorporated and reformulated constantly according to the changing circumstances in our lives: in this sense the practices prolong the past within the present, but at the same time reformulate its legacy. Practices are a system of operative, cognitive and relational habits that constitutes the framework of continuity of every social group: it is a system which is undoubtedly interwoven with a universe of meanings, values and narratives that legitimize it, but it also possesses its own automatism which recalls the memory of bodies. As Paul Connerton has written, 'there is an inertia in the social structures which has not been explained sufficiently by any of the current orthodox

views on what a social structure is' (1989: 5), and explaining this 'inertia' is a task that is specific to the sociological analysis of memory. To do so, however, we must not limit ourselves to the study of *collective memory* as a set of information or images of the past (which sociology has mainly done until now), but to broaden our study to *social memory* as a set of practical, cognitive and affective attitudes which prolong past experiences in the present in a non-reflexive manner. These attitudes configure what in hermeneutic or phenomenological terms is called the 'pre-understanding' structure of the world in which we are necessarily immersed insofar as we are historical beings. And in fact, if we bear in mind the aspects due to which memory is permanence of the past in us as a set of effects and inertias, and at the same time that this past is reformulated and interpreted in representations which we call memories, then the hermeneutic paradigm appears to be the most appropriate model to study it.

The paradox of memory is the same as that referred to by the 'hermeneutic circle': the past structures the present through its legacy, but it is the present that selects this legacy, preserving some aspects and forgetting others, and which constantly reformulates our image of this past by repeatedly recounting the story.

Notes

English translation by Rodney De Souza.

1. For comments on these issues see Löwenthal (1985), Butler (1989) and Schmidt (1991).
2. Halbwachs' position stems from his criticism of Bergson with regard to Durkheim's theories. For a detailed discussion of Halbwachs's arguments and how his thought has developed over time (and for the related international bibliography) see Jedlowski (1987) and Namer (1994, 1997).
3. See Middleton and Edwards (1990) for a fully 'constructivist' perspective on memory. They affirm that what we call 'recall' is itself the product of linguistic interaction, the same interaction in which concepts such as 'mind', 'interior', 'memory' and the like are constructed as rhetorical expedients to bring order and understanding to a flow of operations that is unknown, save for the manifestations through which it appears. For a 'realist' perspective see Bakhurst (2000).
4. See MacIntyre (1981), Taylor (1989), Ricoeur (1991) and Melucci (1996) on the current interdisciplinary debate concerning identity, with particular reference to the relationship between memory, identity and narration.
5. Outside sociology, the concept of 'collective memory' (which retains a strong polysemy: cf. Lavabre, 2000) is used by historiography based on the French *nouvelle histoire* (see Nora, 1978, 1984–6). For a critical discussion of this concept in historiography see also Gedi and Elam (1996).
6. Rare exceptions include Shils (1981).
7. This study is wide-ranging and multidisciplinary; the aspects related to our issue are, however, often to be found in articles that only deal with it briefly. On the inter-

national scene I would like to mention the papers published in *Media, Culture & Society* as well as in this journal.

8. This theme is clearly interrelated with those described above. An exemplary study on this issue in Italy, where the subject is particularly popular (thanks also to the attention dedicated to it by *il Mulino*), is the one by Baiesi and Guerra (1997).

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