Collective Memory and Cultural Identity*

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Problem and Program

In the third decade of this century, the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs and the art historian Aby Warburg independently developed[1] two theories of a "collective" or "social memory." Their otherwise fundamentally different approaches meet in a decisive dismissal of numerous turn-of-the-century attempts to conceive collective memory in biological terms as an inheritable or "racial memory,"[2] a tendency which would still obtain, for instance, in C. G. Jung's theory of archetypes.[3] Instead, both Warburg and Halbwachs shift the discourse concerning collective knowledge out of a biological framework into a cultural one.

The specific character that a person derives from belonging to a distinct society and culture is not seen to maintain itself for generations as a result of phylogenetic evolution, but rather as a result of socialization and customs. The "survival of the type" in the sense of a cultural

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1. Warburg however quotes Durkheim in his Kreuzlinger Lecture of 1923 in which the concept of "social memory" appears in his work for the first time. Cf. Roland Kany, *Mnemosyne als Programm: Geschichte, Erinnerung und die Andacht zum Unbedeutenden im Werk von Usener, Warburg und Benjamin* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1987). H. Ritter has informed me that according to unpublished notes, Fritz Saxl had referred Warburg to the work of Maurice Halbwachs.

2. Ernest H. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography* (London: The Warburg Institute, 1970) 323ff.

3. Warburg's most important source for his own theory of memory was Richard Semon. See Richard Semon, *Die Mneme als erhaltendes Prinzip im Wechsel des organischen Geschehens* (Leipzig: Engelmann, 1920).

125

pseudo-species[4] is a function of the cultural memory. According to Nietzsche, while in the world of animals genetic programs guarantee the survival of the species, humans must find a means by which to maintain their nature consistently through generations. The solution to this problem is offered by cultural memory, a collective concept for all knowledge that directs behavior and experience in the interactive framework of a society and one that obtains through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation.

We[5] define the concept of cultural memory through a double delimitation that distinguishes it:

1. from what we call "communicative" or "everyday memory," which in the narrower sense of our usage lacks "cultural" characteristics;

2. from science, which does not have the characteristics of memory as it relates to a collective self-image. For the sake of brevity, we will leave aside this second delimitation which Halbwachs developed as the distinction between memory and history and limit ourselves to the first: the distinction between communicative and cultural memory.

Communicative Memory

For us the concept of "communicative memory" includes those varieties of collective memory that are based exclusively on everyday communications. These varieties, which M. Halbwachs gathered and analyzed under the concept of collective memory, constitute the field of oral history.[6] Everyday communication is characterized by a high degree of non-specialization, reciprocity of roles, thematic instability, and disorganization.[7] Typically, it takes place between partners who can change roles. Whoever relates a joke, a memory, a bit of gossip, or an experience

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4.   Erik Erikson, "Ontogeny of Ritualization," *PUB. INFO London* (1965):21; Irenaus Eibl-Eibesfeldt, *Krieg und Frieden aus der Sicht der Verhaltensforschung* (Munich: Piper, 1984).

5.   The use of the plural refers to the co-authorship of Aleida Assmann in the formulation of these ideas. See Aleida and Jan Assmann, *Schrift und Gedächtnis: Beiträge zur Archäologie der literarischen Kommunikation* (Munich: Fink, 1987).

6.   Maurice Halbwachs, *Das Gedächtnis und seine sozialen Bedingungen* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1985); and Maurice Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective*, ed. J. Alexandre (Paris: PU de France, 1950).

7.   Of course, everyday communication is found in non-reciprocal role constellations such as medical anamnesis, confession, interrogation, examination, instruction, etc. But such "habits of speech" (Seibert) already demonstrate a higher degree of cultural formation and constitute a stage of transition between everyday and cultural communication.

becomes the listener in the next moment. There are occasions which more or less predetermine such communications, for example train rides, waiting rooms, or the common table; and there are rules — "laws of the market"[8] — that regulate this exchange. There is a "household"[9] within the confines of which this communication takes place. Yet beyond this reigns a high degree of formlessness, willfulness, and disorganization. Through this manner of communication, each individual composes a memory which, as Halbwachs has shown, is (a) socially mediated and (b) relates to a group. Every individual memory constitutes itself in communication with others. These "others," however, are not just any set of people, rather they are groups who conceive their unity and peculiarity through a common image of their past. Halbwachs thinks of families, neighborhood and professional groups, political parties, associations, etc., up to and including nations. Every individual belongs to numerous such groups and therefore entertains numerous collective self-images and memories.

Through the practice of oral history, we have gained a more precise insight into the peculiar qualities of this everyday form of collective memory, which, with L. Niethammer, we will call communicative memory. Its most important characteristic is its limited temporal horizon. As all oral history studies suggest, this horizon does not extend more than eighty to (at the very most) one hundred years into the past, which equals three or four generations or the Latin *saeculum*.[10] This horizon shifts in direct relation to the passing of time. The communicative memory offers no fixed point which would bind it to the ever expanding past in the passing of time. Such fixity can only be achieved through a cultural formation and therefore lies outside of informal everyday memory.

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8.   Pierre Bourdieu, *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique. Précède de trois études d'ethnologie kabyle* (Geneve: Droz, 1972).

9.   In his work, the sociologist Thomas Luckmann speaks of the "communicative household" of a society.

10.   According to T. Hölscher, that corresponds exactly to the timespan treated by Herodotus. Tacitus expressly noted in *Annals* III 75 the death of the last witnesses of the republic in the year AD 22; cf. Cancik-Lindemeier in A. and J. Assmann. As to the meaning of *saeculum* as the maximal life span of those who remember a generation, see Gladigow, "Aetas, aevum and saeclorum ordo. Zur Struktur zeitlicher Deutungssysteme," *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East*, ed. D. Hellholm (Tübingen: Mohr, 1983).

Transition

Once we remove ourselves from the area of everyday communication and enter into the area of objectivized culture, almost everything changes. The transition is so fundamental that one must ask whether the metaphor of memory remains in any way applicable. Halbwachs, as is well known, stopped at this juncture, without taking it into account systematically.[11] He probably thought that once living communication cristallized in the forms of objectivized culture — whether in texts, images, rites, buildings, monuments, cities, or even landscapes[12] — the group relationship and the contemporary reference are lost and therefore the character of this knowledge as a *mémoire collective* disappears as well. "*Mémoire*" is transformed into "*histoire*." [13]

Our thesis contradicts this assumption. For in the context of objectivized culture and of organized or ceremonial communication, a close connection to groups and their identity exists which is similar to that found in the case of everyday memory. We can refer to the structure of knowledge in this case as the "concretion of identity." With this we mean that a group bases its consciousness of unity and specificity upon this knowledge and derives formative and normative impulses from it, which allows the group to reproduce its identity. In this sense, objectivized culture has the structure of memory. Only in historicism, as Nietzsche perceptively and clairvoyantly remarked in "On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life,"[14] does this structure begin to dissolve.[15]

The Cultural Memory

Just as the communicative memory is characterized by its proximity

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11.   Halbwachs dealt with the phenomena beyond this border. Maurice Halbwachs, *La topographie légendaire des Evangiles en Terre Sainte; étude de mémoire collective* (Paris: PU de France, 1941). There, he presents Palestine as a commemorative landscape that transforms through the centuries. In Palestine, change in the image of the past follows theological positions that are made concrete in the construction of monuments.

12.   The classical example for a primarily topographically organized cultural memory is that of the Australian Aborigines with their attachment to certain sacred sites. Cf. Cancik in A. and J. Assman, and Halbwachs, *La topographie légendaire* for other examples of sacred or commemorative landscapes.

13.   Friedrich Overbeck, *Christentum und Kultur* (Basel, 1963) 20ff. and similarly Halbwachs, *La topographie legendaire* 261ff. treat such a transformation under the rubric of falsification and in the conceptual framework of primeval history and theology.

14.   Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke*, vol. 3, ed. K. Schlechta (Munich: Hanser, 1964).

15.   Cf. Aleida Assmann, "Die Ünfähigkeit zu vergessen : der Historismus und die Krise des kulturellen Gedächtnisses," A. and J. Assmann.

to the everyday, cultural memory is characterized by its distance from
the everyday. Distance from the everyday (transcendence) marks its tem-
poral horizon. Cultural memory has its fixed point; its horizon does not
change with the passing of time. These fixed points are fateful events of
the past, whose memory is maintained through cultural formation (texts,
rites, monuments) and institutional communication (recitation, practice,
observance). We call these "figures of memory." The entire Jewish cal-
endar is based on figures of memory.[16] In the flow of everyday commu-
nications such festivals, rites, epics, poems, images, etc., form "islands
of time," islands of a completely different temporality suspended from
time. In cultural memory, such islands of time expand into memory
spaces of "retrospective contemplativeness" [*retrospective Besonnen-
heit*]. This expression stems from Aby Warburg. He ascribed a type of
"mnemonic energy" to the objectivation of culture, pointing not only to
works of high art, but also to posters, postage stamps, costumes, cus-
toms, etc. In cultural formation, a collective experience crystallizes,
whose meaning, when touched upon, may suddenly become accessible
again across millennia. In his large-scale project *Mnemosyne*, Warburg
wanted to reconstruct this pictorial memory of Western civilization.
That of course is not our problem; our inquiry is more general. But we
are indebted to Warburg for emphatically directing attention to the
power of cultural objectivation in the stabilizing of cultural memory in
certain situations for thousands of years.

Yet just as Halbwachs in his treatment of the mnemonic functions of
objectivized culture, Warburg does not develop the sociological aspects
of his pictorial memory. Halbwachs thematizes the nexus between mem-
ory and group, Warburg the one between memory and the language of
cultural forms. Our theory of cultural memory attempts to relate all
three poles — memory (the contemporized past), culture, and the group
(society) — to each other. We want to stress the following characteris-
tics of cultural memory:

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16.   Halbwachs designated it as the object of religion to maintain the remembrance
of a time long past through the ages and without allowing it to be corrupted by intervening
memories. Halbwachs, *Das Gedächtnis* 261. The sharpness of this formulation, however,
only applies to the Jewish religion, which Halbwachs as an assimilated Jew did not treat
and hardly even mentions. For the problem of Jewish remembrance see Yosef Yerushalmi,
Zachor, Jewish History and Jewish Memory (Seattle: U of Washington P, 1982), and Willy
Schottroff, *Gedenken im alten Orient und im Alten Testament* (Neukirchen: Neukirchner
Verlag des Erziehungsvereins, 1964).

1) *"The concretion of identity"* or the relation to the group. Cultural memory preserves the store of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity. The objective manifestations of cultural memory are defined through a kind of identificatory determination in a positive ("We are this") or in a negative ("That's our opposite") sense.[17]

Through such a concretion of identity evolves what Nietzsche has called the "constitution of horizons." The supply of knowledge in the cultural memory is characterized by sharp distinctions made between those who belong and those who do not, i.e., between what appertains to oneself and what is foreign. Access to and transmission of this knowledge are not controlled by what Blumenberg calls "theoretical curiosity," but rather by a "need for identity" as described by Hans Mol.[18]

Connected with this is

2) its *capacity to reconstruct*. No memory can preserve the past. What remains is only that "which society in each era can reconstruct within its contemporary frame of reference."[19] Cultural memory works by reconstructing, that is, it always relates its knowledge to an actual and contemporary situation. True, it is fixed in immovable figures of memory and stores of knowledge, but every contemporary context relates to these differently, sometimes by appropriation, sometimes by criticism, sometimes by preservation or by transformation. Cultural memory exists in two modes: first in the mode of potentiality of the archive whose accumulated texts, images, and rules of conduct act as a total horizon, and second in the mode of actuality, whereby each contemporary context puts the objectivized meaning into its own perspective, giving it its own relevance.

3) *Formation*. The objectivation or crystallization of communicated meaning and collectively shared knowledge is a prerequisite of its transmission *in the culturally institutionalized heritage of a society*.[20]

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17.   The inevitable egoism of cultural memory that derives from the "need for identity" (Hans Mol) takes on dangerous forms, if the representations of alterity, in their relation to the representations of identity (self-images), become images of an enemy. Cf. Hans Mol, *Identity and the Sacred* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1976); Gladigow; and Eibl-Eibesfeldt.

18.   Mol.

19.   Halbwachs, *Das Gedächtnis*.

20.   For the problem of the stability of cultural meanings see Eric Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge: Belknap, Harvard UP, 1963), where he speaks of "preserved communication" as well as A. and J. Assmann, 265-84. For the technology of conservation and its intellectual implications see J. Goody, *La logique de l'écriture: aux origines des societés humaines* (Paris: A. Colin, 1986).

"Stable" formation is not dependent on a single medium such as writing. Pictorial images and rituals can also function in the same way. One can speak of linguistic, pictorial, or ritual formation and thus arrives at the trinity of the Greek mysteries: legomenon, dromenon, and deiknymenon. As far as language is concerned, formation takes place long before the invention of writing. The distinction between the communicative memory and the cultural memory is *not* identical with the distinction between oral and written language.

4) *Organization.* With this we mean a) the institutional buttressing of communication, e.g., through formulization of the communicative situation in ceremony and b) the specialization of the bearers of cultural memory. The distribution and structure of participation in the communicative memory are diffuse. No specialists exist in this regard. Cultural memory, by contrast, always depends on a specialized practice, a kind of "cultivation."[21] In special cases of written cultures with canonized texts, such cultivation can expand enormously and become extremely differentiated.[22]

5) *Obligation.* The relation to a normative self-image of the group engenders a clear *system of values* and *differentiations in importance* which structure the cultural supply of knowledge and the symbols. There are important and unimportant, central and peripheral, local and interlocal symbols, depending on how they function in the production, representation, and reproduction of this self-image. Historicism is positioned firmly against this perspectival evaluation of a heritage, which is centered on cultural identity:

The particle α"ν and the entelechy of Aristotle, the sacred grottos of Apollo and of the idol Besas, the song of Sappho and the sermon of the sacred Thekla, the metric of Pindar and the altar of Pompeii, the fragments of the Dipylon vases and the baths of Caracalla, the deeds of the divine Augustus, the conic sections of Apollonius and the astrology of Petosiris: everything is a part of philology because it all belongs to the subject that you want to understand, und you cannot leave anything out.[23]

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21. In this connection, Niklas Luhmann refers to "cultivated semantics." Niklas . Luhmann, *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1980).

22. We distinguish in this between three dimensions: the cultivation of text, i.e., the observation of word by word transmission; the cultivation of meaning, i.e., the culture of explication, exegesis, hermeneutics, and commentary; and mediation, i.e., the retranslation of text into life through the institutions of education, upbringing, and initiation.

23. Wilamowitz, quoted in Werner Jaeger, *Humanistische Reden und Vorträge* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1960) 1-2.

As is well known, there has been no lack of counter-movements against the relativism of such a value-free science (M. Weber). In the name of "life," Nietzsche opposed the dissolution of the horizons and perspectives of historical knowledge through the historical sciences. W. Jaeger and other neo-humanists opposed it in the name of education. To add a relatively recent voice of protest to this list, we quote Alexander Rüstows monumental work, *Ortsbestimmung der Gegenwart,* a plea for the "humanistic standpoint":

> — If you leave it (that standpoint, J. Cz.), then the history of the Boto-cudo, the Zulucafer, or any other people is just as interesting, just as important, just as directly linked to God, and we find ourselves in the midst of an aimless relativism.[24]

The binding character of the knowledge preserved in cultural memory has two aspects: the *formative* one in its educative, civilizing, and humanizing functions and the *normative* one in its function of providing rules of conduct.

6) *Reflexivity.* Cultural memory is reflexive in three ways:

a) it is practice-reflexive in that it interprets common practice in terms through proverbs, maxims, "ethno-theories," to use Bourdieu's term, rituals (for instance, sacrificial rites that interpret the practice of hunting), and so on.

b) It is self-reflexive in that its draws on itself to explain, distinguish, reinterpret, criticize, censure, control, surpass, and receive hypoleptically.[25]

c) It is reflexive of its own image insofar as it reflects the self-image of the group through a preoccupation with its own social system.[26]

The concept of cultural memory comprises that body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose "cultivation" serves to stabilize and convey that society's self-image. Upon such collective knowledge, for the most part (but not exclusively) of the past, each group bases its awareness of unity and particularity.

The content of such knowledge varies from culture to culture as well

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24. Alexander Rüstow, *Ortsbestimmung der Gegenwart; eine universalgeschichtliche Kulturkritik* (Zurich: E. Rentsch, 1952) 12.

25. About this concept cf. *Identität,* ed. Odo Marquardand and Karlheinz Stierle (Munich: Fink, 1979) 358: "About υπ\ληγι̣ζ: relate to that which the previous speaker has said; compare J. Ritter, *Metaphysik und Politik — Studien zu Aristoteles und Hegel* (Frankfurt\Main 1969), esp. p. 64, p. 66."

26. Niklas Luhmann, *Soziologische Aufklärung* (Köln: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1975).

as from epoch to epoch. The manner of its organization, its media, and its institutions, are also highly variable. The binding and reflexive character of a heritage can display varying intensities and appear in various aggregations. One society bases its self-image on a canon of sacred scripture, the next on a basic set of ritual activities, and the third on a fixed and hieratic language of forms in a canon of architectural and artistic types. The basic attitude toward history, the past, and thus the function of remembering itself introduces another variable. One group remembers the past in fear of deviating from its model, the next for fear of repeating the past: "Those who cannot remember their past are condemned to relive it."[27] The basic openness of these variables lends the question of the relation between culture and memory a cultural-topological interest. Through its cultural heritage a society becomes visible to itself and to others. Which past becomes evident in that heritage and which values emerge in its identificatory appropriation tells us much about the constitution and tendencies of a society.

Translated by John Czaplicka

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27.   George Santayana. Aleida Assmann is the source of this citation.