

GETTING IN TOUCH WITH MEMORY AND CULTURE

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The first step to learn past is the realization that our environment affects the way we remember the past. Like the present, the past is also a part of our reality, while far from being absolutely objective, nonetheless transcends our subjectivity and is commonly shared by others as well.

Most of studies of memory are done by psychologists, who are interested in how human beings remember past events. When psychologist examines the content of memories, they focus only in individual memory. But we want to study, how our collective memory works.

On the one hand, there are universal patterns of organizing, storing and accessing past experiences that apply to all people. On the other hand, we all have own autobiographical memories, made up of personal experiences that sometimes we share with other people, but not with all of them. So, there are particular part of memories commonly shared with particular group of people, which is depend on your nationality, place of living, religion or race. Thus, we can say that these types of memories are not just personal. At the same time, in fact we cannot say that these particular memories are universal either.

We cannot understand “memory” without using metaphors, because the phenomenon of “memory” has generated great metaphors about itself. Thus, we have to know how differently Maurice Halbwachs used this term “collective memory” and difference between collective memory and collected memory.

American sociologist Jeffrey Olick pointed that it is necessary to divide collective memory from collected. Drawing on Olick, we can therefore distinguish between

- collected memory as a socially and culturally formed individual memory. We remember the aid of culturally specific schemata: we act according to collectively shared values and norms: we estimate second-hand experiences into our personal wealth of experience. Thus, we can say that the individual mind appropriates various elements of the sociocultural environment;
- collective memory (in the narrow sense), which refers to the symbols, media, social institutions, and practices which are used to construct, maintain, and represent versions of a shared past. History, sociology, literary and media studies (including influential approaches by Pierre Nora and Assmanns) have traditionally addressed this second level of collective memory.

The two forms of collective memory can thus be separated analytically. However, they exert their influence only through their continual interaction, through their interplay of the individual and collective levels. There is no pre-cultural individual memory. But neither is there a “collective memory” that is totally detached from individuals and embodies solely in media and institutions.

To conceive of this fundamentally temporal aspect of culture, semioticians like Jurij Lotman and Boris Uspenskij integrated the idea of memory into their theory on their works, and said: “We understand culture as the nonhereditary memory of the community”.

A theory of culture which integrated anthropological and semiotic perspectives has been developed by Roland Posner. He conceives of culture as a system of signs which has three dimensions. He distinguishes between social, material and mental culture, and semiotics systematically connects these three areas in the way it defines a social culture as a structured set of users of signs; the material culture as a set of texts; and mental culture as a set of codes.

The three dimensions of culture postulated by cultural semiotics are dynamically interrelated, since users of “signs” (social dimension) are dependent on “codes” (mental dimension) if they want to understand “texts” (material dimension). In a specific cultural formation, codes

manifest themselves in social interaction as well as in media and other artifacts; and at the same time, it is here that culture is continually created anew.

Thus,

- The material dimension of memory culture is constituted by mnemonic artifacts, media, and technologies of media, ranging from symbols and landscapes to architecture and books to film and photography.

- To the social dimension of memory culture belong mnemonic practices and the carriers of memory: commemorative rituals, forms of production, storage, and recall of cultural knowledge: and the persons and social institutions involved in these processes.

- The mental dimension of memory culture, finally, includes all the shared schemata, concepts, and codes which enable and shape collective remembering through symbolic mediation, as well as the effects that the activity of remembering has on mental dispositions predominant in a community – such as ideas about time and history, values and norms, self-perceptions and the perception of others.

As a cultural memory is elusive, researchers can only study discrete acts, or performances, of memory. These way derive from either the material and the social dimension of memory culture and they may give rise to hypothesis about its mental dimension.

The French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs wrote three texts in which he developed his concept of collective memory. Today topic of collective memory takes a central place in the study of cultural memory. In 1925 he published a book, which is called “The social frameworks of Memory”. In that book Maurice Halbwachs attempted to establish that memory is dependent on social structures.

Halbwachs’s writings on collective memory in particular, and also the interest in the cultural dimension of remembering in general, were largely forgotten in the postwar period. Today, however, virtually no theoretical model of cultural memory exists without recourse to Halbwachs. It is possible to distinguish three main areas of analysis in his studies on collective memory, by reading texts of Maurice Halbwachs:

- His theory says that individual memory is connected with social structures;
- He studies also forms of intergenerational memory;
- His term “collective memory” includes cultural transmission and the creation of tradition.

So, by making this kind of works, Halbwachs unites two fundamental, and two fundamentally different concepts of collective memory.

1. Collective memory as the organic memory of the individual, which operates within the framework of a sociocultural environment.

2. Collective memory as the creation of shared versions of the past, which results through interaction, communication, media, and institutions within small social groups as well as large cultural communities.

The starting point of Halbwachs’s theory of collective memory is his concept of *cadres sociaux*. In the first part of work, using his reflections on dreams and language, Halbwachs gives a detailed illustration of the collective elements of individual memory. He comes to the conclusion that the recourse to *cadres sociaux*, social frameworks, is an indispensable prerequisite for every act of remembering. Social frameworks are, for Halbwachs, first of all simply the people around us. Humans are social creatures: without other humans, an individual is denied access not only to such obviously collective phenomena as language and customs, but also, according to Halbwachs, to her or his memory. This is partly because we generally experience things in the company of other people, who can also later help us to remember the events.

Much more fundamental for Halbwachs, however, is the fact that it is through interaction and communication with our fellow humans that we acquire knowledge about dates and facts, collective concepts of time and space, and ways of thinking and experiencing. Because we participate in a collective symbolic order, we can discern, interpret and remember past events.

It is only through individual acts of memory that the collective memory can be observed, since each memory is a viewpoint on the collective memory thinks Halbwachs. This “viewpoint”

can be understood as a position people assume based on their socialization and cultural influences. Every individual belongs to several social groups: family, religious community, colleagues, and so on. Each person thus has at his or her disposal a supply of different, group specific experiences and thought systems. Thus, what Halbwachs seems to suggest is that while memory is no purely individual phenomenon, but must be seen in its fundamentally collective dimension, it is the combination of various group allegiances and resultant frameworks for remembering that are the actual individual element which distinguishes one person from another.

In the second part of his book, Halbwachs distinguished between various forms of collective memories and provides some case studies, addressing family, religious community, and social class. Family memory is a typical intergenerational memory. This type of collective memory is constituted through social interaction and communication. In this way an exchange of living memory takes place between eye-witness and descendants. The collective intergenerational memory thus goes back as far as the oldest members of the social group can remember.

Halbwachs makes a sharp distinction between history and memory, which he sees as two mutually exclusive forms of reference to the past. Right at the beginning of his comparison of “lived” memory and “written” history, Halbwachs emphasizes that “general history starts only when tradition ends and the social memory is fading or breaking up”. Halbwachs sees history as universal; it is characterized by a neutral coordination of all past events. Central to history are contradictions and ruptures. Collective memory, in contrast, is particular; its carriers are groups which are restricted both chronologically and spatially, whose memory is strongly evaluate and hierarchical. A central function of remembering the past within the framework of collective memory is identity formation.

For Halbwachs, history deals with the past. Collective memory, in contrast, is oriented towards the needs and interests of the group in the present, and thus proceeds in an extremely selective and reconstructive manner. Along the way, what is remembered can become distorted and shifted to such an extent that the result is closer to fiction than to a past reality?

Halbwachs’s theory of collective memory has been applied by broad spectrum of disciplines to a wide variety of research objects. But this writings have not been able to serve as the basis of a single, coherent theory of cultural memory; this might be because his broad concept of collective memory is insufficiently differentiated. However, specific elements of Halbwachs’s writings have been adapted in various disciplines. Halbwachs thus became the forefather of a variety of memory theories.

Literature

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