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*On Collective Memory*, by Maurice Halbwachs, is a collection of interwar writings on the nature and constitution of individual memories, as well as within families, social classes and religions. His theory of memory can be characterized not only by his insistence on the collective nature of memory, but also more specifically by the linguistic basis of this collectivity (173). He also demonstrates that memory is a shifting entity because it is continually reconstituted by people in the present, as they convey it through language. Finally, Halbwachs allows for individuals to hold simultaneous frameworks for memory, which differ depending on context—such as within a family, class, or religion.

Halbwachs derived some of his foundational ideas from the work of Emile Durkheim and Henri Bergson, his scholarly predecessors. Durkheim wrote about collective effervescence, notably in his ethnographic work, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Henri Bergson’s ideas about the inner subjective time, and the two types of memory were also important influences (48). Halbwachs, like Durkheim and other experimental scholars of the time, was resolutely cross-disciplinary. To the psychological and philosophical theories of Bergson, Halbwachs added the sociological and ethnographic concepts of Durkheim, and to that he also added his own background as a statistician.

Viewing the mind as a product of social conditions seems to have been paradigmatic for the period before the First World War, and may have gained momentum in the interwar period as (in part) a response to revolutions and the rise of fascism. To the ideas of Durkheim, Halbwachs was able to add the connecting feature that held together brief periods of collective effervescence: memory. By viewing memory as a social construct that is dependent primarily upon language, Halbwachs was able to describe the process by which the meanings of memory to change over time. Though he does not express it in these words, Halbwachs demonstrates the collective ability of people to create a paradigm through the continual reconstitution of memories.

In *On Collective Memory*, one of the problems Halbwachs faced was the inability to separate a human from his societal surroundings, in order to encounter adult memory in a pure form. He examines two specific instances to get as close to this state as possible: through dreams, and through aphasia. In both of these states, an individual’s framework for understanding memories is “deformed, changed or destroyed (43).”

The only instance in which most individuals occupy a space and time apart from the influence of society is in dreams. For this reason, dreams can be used as evidence for the social construction of memory. Halbwachs notes that dreams evoke fragmentary, not complete, images, which only “slackly” retain the conventions of the waking world. The dreamer, Halbwachs writes, retains an “embryonic social life,” which includes the use of speech—but no real or complete memory appears in dreams because there are no social context or cues with which to respond (39, 169).

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2 The two types are: 1) habitual or action-oriented memory, and 2) that which expresses a disinterest in present life.
The person with aphasia is perhaps an even more useful example for Halbwachs. Aphasia is a condition with several varieties of language and cognition impairment. In some cases, it only affects the individual’s communication, and in others, it affects his understanding of language. Halbwachs discusses the inability of the person with aphasia to “keep or recover his place in the social group.” In more severe cases of aphasia, an individual can perceive the world as images or physical experiences, but without the use of language, can’t apply meaning to those images or physical experiences—which, according to Halbwachs, eliminates the possibility of memory. Some time is also spent in discussion of the aged, and nostalgia. Halbwachs observes an increased inclination to remember—which is not a naturally acquired trait of the elderly, but an active reconstitution of the past in which adults don’t often indulge, using personal recollections, the recollections of others, and historic materials.

Finally, Halbwachs makes some interesting points about continuity, from a national, societal, or academic standpoint. He suggests that a person transplanted from one nation to another will not understand easily the frameworks of his new country—not without years of immersion in them, which will help him develop the collective memory of the general population. Likewise, he characterizes knowledge as a collective pursuit in which a scholar places his “discoveries in the chronology of the history of knowledge (176).” These two points, out of many, may be some of the most useful for the discussion of national memory and the changing presentation of history.

In recent years, Halbwachs has been invoked for a number of studies that deal with place memory and association. While this is by no means a comprehensive list of sources, I would like to discuss some of the kinds of work in which Halbwachs’s On Collective Memory has been used. Max Page’s exploration of creation and destruction of New York landscapes in the first half of the 20th-century uses Halbwachs as a starting point to talk about the social construction of memory, but adds a new dimension to Halbwachs’s almost entirely linguistic understanding of memory, by adding the memory that is continually reconstituted by the built environment. Karen Till uses On Collective Memory to suggest that people who are remembering are doing so in contemporary spaces and through contemporary social contexts, and through Halbwachs, Yael Zerubavel reminds her readers that monuments and commemorations establish historical continuity across generations. Finally, Halbwachs is still used in contemporary psychology literature (non-pharmacological literature!) to talk about topics like childhood place attachment.

Halbwachs was not always well received during his lifetime, and has also been critiqued in recent years for his “implicit assumption of a Durkheimian collective consciousness.” In addition, On Collective Memory has the arguable flaws of a manuscript that was published posthumously—it can be assumed that Halbwachs himself would not have been happy with the result—but it is possible that his raw writing has taken on a life which even Halbwachs himself might not have anticipated. He had criticized the historians of his time for emphasizing description rather than explanation, and an inability to “cope with the problems of historic causation (11).” That Halbwachs’s memory theory has been applied liberally to recent historical analysis might well have amused and pleased him.

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3 Commonly, aphasia is one of the sequelae of strokes, and may have been even more prevalent in Halbwachs’s lifetime than it is in our own.


6 Till, 233.