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Maurice Halbwachs: Classical Sociology after the Classics

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Abstract

The paper sets out to analyse the scientific production of Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945). If in France he is substantially considered a classic to study, to publish and to republish, in other countries – in Europe, as in the United States – he is considered a lesser author, an epigone of Durkheim, though he was never even a direct alumnus of the latter. To me it seems, instead, that there is more than one reason why sociology should rediscover this figure, regarding both the theoretical aspect and that of empirical research.

First. Halbwachs is rightly known for his studies on collective memory; and, in effect, these are pioneering and courageous works that have involved enormous gains for the sociological discipline in epistemological terms. Nevertheless, he is unjustly little known as concerns the many other themes that he dealt with.

Second. Halbwachs' sociological posture starts from Durkheimian organicism, but never slavishly bows to it. In this sense, it seems me that the true hidden pearl of this author lies in his conception of social reality as of a dialectical and constant tension between society and individual.

Keywords: Maurice Halbwachs, sociological theory, collective psychology.

1. Maurice Halbwachs and his time

To understand the sociology of Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945), it is necessary to consider at the same time his biography and his intellectual trajectory. The one does not proceed separately from the other, in a parable that, with an oxymoron, I would define as one of ordinary extraordinariness.

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Halbwachs was born in Reims in 1877 from a French mother and German father that, on the German annexation of Alsace in 1871, had opted for French nationality. Because of work needs of the father, in 1879 the Halbwachs family moved to Paris, where Maurice was substantially to spend all his school and university years, and a large part of his academic career. He attended the Lycée Henri IV at whose *khâgne*, meaning the year of preparation for admission to the *École Normale Supérieure* (ENS), which Halbwachs was to attend between 1898 and 1901, he met Henri Bergson. The latter was the teacher that was to orient him towards philosophy (Karady, 1972: p. 9) and was one of the authors who were to influence much of his knowledge, especially regarding theory of memory and studies on collective psychology.

Halbwachs was a pure academician that came to the academic world late; after taking his *agrégation* in philosophy, for a long time he taught at French high schools. Between 1901 and 1902 he was in Constantine and Montpellier, in 1908-1909 in Reims, the following year and between 1911 and 1914 in Tours, and finally in 1915 and between 1917 and 1919 in Nancy (Topalov, 1997a: p. 1061). In these years, the young Halbwachs interwove teaching with scientific training and attempts to enter the university. The politically bland – but culturally strong – socialist militancy of the *École Normale* brand and, above all, his friendship with his old ENS colleague François Simiand, brought him close to the sociological sphere of the Durkheimians, who for some years had been coagulating around the *Année Sociologique*, the journal founded by Emile Durkheim in 1896 and edited by him; its main contributors, in addition to Simiand, included Marcel Mauss, Robert Hertz, Paul Fauconnet, Georg Simmel, Célestin Bouglé and Lucien Lévi-Bruhl, personalities Halbwachs was long to reckon with over the years. As is well known, the intent of the teacher from Épinal was to found, build and affirm the space of sociological knowledge, which at that time was not present in universities as an autonomous discipline. Soon Halbwachs was to become one of the main contributors to Durkheim's journal and his sociological school.

The First World War interrupted Halbwachs' scientific production and caused a real break in his life. More than the assassination in Sarajevo of Archduke Franz Ferdinand it was that of Jean Jaurès, on 31 July 1914, that made him aware of how events were precipitating (Becker, 2003: p. 36). The following day was to be marked by general mobilization in France. It was war. Halbwachs would not take part in the fighting, having been invalidated out due to severe myopia. This was to provoke a strong sense of inadequacy in him; he was afraid of being seen as a “draft dodger” while around him everything was collapsing and the tragedy was advancing. His patriotic sense (minimal) and the analytical and interpretative tension (very lucid) of what was happening drove him to write unusually fierce words: “je regretterai toute ma vie de

n'avoir pas été au feu: non que je brûle de défendre mon pays; mais risquer la mort et faire l'épreuve de son courage, voir les hommes sur un champ de bataille avec toute leur violence, leur bestialité et leur héroïsme, être un élément de cette vague tumultueuse et puissante, c'est une page qu'on aimerait avoir dans sa vie."¹ Halbwachs was not to fight at the front, but he was to be called to the War Ministry by Albert Thomas, an ex *École Normale* student devoted to active politics, as a member of the Armaments Office. He was to remain there until 1917 when, as already mentioned, he was to go back to teaching at the high school in Nancy, before at last succeeding in 1919 in getting into the university. He was appointed to the chair of sociology of the new French university in Strasbourg, the chair that had belonged, until his death the year before, to Georg Simmel. Halbwachs was to remain there for sixteen years, until 1935, at first as a professor of pedagogy and sociology and, from 1922, as the holder of the chair, the first one founded in France with this name, of sociology *tout court* (Craig, 1979: p. 275). The chronicles agree in describing the intellectual and cultural climate of the Alsatian university as little less than idyllic: big spaces for research, generous financings aiming at "Frenchifying" the old German university, strong interdisciplinary relationships between the teachers that were to lead to the constitution, among other things, of the well-known "*réunions du samedi*", institutionalized weekly meetings during which colleagues of different disciplines met to discuss their researches and their projects. It was on these occasions that Halbwachs was to establish honest professional relationships, and in some cases sincere friendship, with personalities of various disciplines like Marc Bloch, Lucien Febvre, Charles Blondel, Georges Lefebvre or Gabriel Le Bras (Craig, *Ibid.*: p. 277).

Though with a variety of positions and inclinations, the lowest common denominator of the Strasbourg cenacle was the strong Durkheimian influence that each of the authors atoned for. Besides, between the two wars, in France "le prestige de la sociologie reposait largement sur les travaux des durkheimiens [...]. Certains ne pouvaient imaginer une autre sociologie que celle inspiré par Durkheim: son autorité était reconnue par ses concurrents eux-mêmes" (Heilbron, 1985: p. 202-3). This influence was entirely evident in Bloch's 1924 *Les rois thaumaturges*, but also in Blondel's 1928 *Introduction à la psychologie collective*, to mention just two examples and to say nothing of the experience of the *Annales d'histoire économique et social* founded by Bloch and Febvre in 1929, to which Halbwachs was to contribute repeatedly until the end of his career (and his life). In the Strasbourg years, stimulated by these meetings and by this climate, in Halbwachs there was to mature the project

¹ From Halbwachs' private correspondence, quoted in Becker (2003), p. 45.

for the big fresco of studies on collective memory that made him well known and to which we will return afterwards. In 1930 he was Visiting Professor at the University of Chicago, where for some months he accessed the *sancta sanctorum* of American sociology of the day, alongside Robert Park and Ernest Burgess. In 1935, after Simiand's death, he left Strasbourg and returned to Paris, appointed a professor at the Sorbonne by Célestin Bouglé (Papilloud, 2005: p.119). In the same year he also became the secretary general of the *Annales sociologiques*, the name under which the publications of the *Année* had started again. The unitary nature of Durkheim's project was now fragmented into different sections: Halbwachs edited those devoted to moral statistics and social morphology (Lenoir, 2004: p. 202). Halbwachs' career all seemed to be moving upwards: in 1937 he became a member of the Superior Council of General Statistics of France; in 1938, the president of the French Institute of Sociology; in 1943, the vice-president of the Society of Psychology and, finally, on 20 May 1944 he obtained the prestigious and much sought after nomination to the *Collège de France* in the chair, constituted on purpose for him, of collective psychology, succeeding Marcel Mauss, forced to take early retirement in 1940 because of the racial laws. Halbwachs was never to take up his new chair; the Gestapo arrested him in his house in Paris in July of that year with the accusation of having protected his son Pierre, who was active in the French Resistance. He was to be deported to Buchenwald, where he was to die of hardships and consumption on 16 March 1945, a few weeks before the end of the war.

2. The Halbwachs corpus

During his intense scientific activity lasting almost forty years (1905-1943), Halbwachs produced 477 (479²) publications.³ Regarding typology, the vast majority (388, equal to 81% of the total production) is constituted by bibliographical records, critiques of works or articles by third parties; there follow the 52 (11%) essays and independent articles, and then the set of notes and introductions to works (17, 3.6%), and the monographs in his own name

² To the overall number two posthumous works must be added: the first, from 1947, on the expression of emotions, and the second, from 1950, which is one of Halbwachs' best-known works, namely *La mémoire collective*, edited by his sister Jeanne Alexandre Halbwachs. See the bibliography for details.

³ I refer to the bibliography, still the most complete and exhaustive, drawn up by Victor Karady (1972).

(15) or as co-author (1) for a total of 16, equal to 3.2%. Lastly, we find the university courses and the communications at conferences (6, 1.2%).

It is interesting to observe the chronological placing of this author's publications. In the decade between 1905 and 1914, i.e. between the year of the first known publication and the outbreak of the First World War – which, as I have already noticed, was to mark a first watershed in Halbwachs' life – 100 papers appeared (21%). In the following decade (1915-1924) there was a major slowing, with only 18 (3.8%) publications. The heart of the Strasbourg period (1925-1934) is the most prolific one, with 181 publications, equal to 37.9%, immediately followed by the ensuing decade (1935-1944), that of the return to Paris and of his scientific maturity, with 178 (37.3%) publications (excluding the two posthumous ones).

A statistic annotation of some interest concerns the publishing of the set of articles, notes and critiques (hence excluding the monographs, the lecture notes and the talks at conferences). Halbwachs published in many of the main scientific sociological, philosophical, psychological and historical-social journals of the day. As a student of the Durkheim school aiming, on one side, to strengthen and enlarge the epistemological status of sociology and, at the same time, on the other, to build up his own position among Durkheim's successors, he was to publish most of his papers (210) in the journals of the constellation of that school. In particular, he began in *L'Année sociologique* in 1905, and in that journal, down to 1925, was to publish 75 papers (bearing witness to the consideration and the value that he attributed to this journal, I cannot fail to notice that, during 1925 alone, the first of the two years of the new series edited by Marcel Mauss, Halbwachs was to send 50 contributions to it, often notes of just a few lines). In 1906 he had also published six times, mainly critiques or notes,⁴ in *Notes critiques*, a journal of *École Normale* socialism in the late nineteenth century-early and twentieth century gathered around the famous Lucien Herr (Alpini, 2004: p. 24). Between 1934 and 1942 he assiduously published (81 papers) in *Annales sociologiques*, this being the title under which the publications of *L'Année* had started again. Halbwachs' contributions to explicitly sociological journals number no fewer than 216 and

⁴ Halbwachs' collaboration with this journal was limited to 1906. From the following year, for one decade, he was almost exclusively to publish in *L'Année*. At least a brief mention must be made of Halbwachs' adhesion, always though *École Normale* socialism, to the protests about the Dreyfus affair that shook France in those years and to which Durkheim's entourage was not insensitive. As is well known, in 1912 Halbwachs married his second wife, Yvonne Basch, the daughter of Victor Basch, the founder and president of the *Ligue des droits de l'homme*. This commitment was to be expressed in the articles that Halbwachs published in *L'Humanité*, the socialist magazine founded by Jean Jaurès in 1904 (Halbwachs, 1908a, 1908b).

constitute the most important part of his corpus. But the Durkheimian hallmark also emerges elsewhere. I refer to the famous experience of the *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*, the well-known journal founded by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre (with the addition of Henri Pirenne) in 1929, which was to open up the season of the school of the same name that so much revolutionized the methodology of twentieth-century historical research, integrating contributions from other disciplines among which, first of all, sociology. I would gladly say that Halbwachs can rightly be considered one of the main promoters of this revolution, and certainly the main one in the sociological field. Indeed, from the year of its foundation and substantially until the end of his career (1942), he would not stop publishing with the group of Strasbourg scholars (who, like Halbwachs, over the years would go different ways, leaving the Alsatian capital, but always preserving its spirit) with no fewer than 130 contributions. I will return to this afterwards, but I cannot fail to notice at this point in the analysis that, curiously, his first contribution, in the inaugural issue of this journal that even reflected the Durkheimian spirit too much, is devoted to the father of methodological individualism, Max Weber. Starting from the recent publication of the biography, by his sister Marianne, of the Erfurt scholar (Weber, 1926), Halbwachs traces out a profile from which there shines through respect for a sociologist to whom, though with the differences of method, there must be recognized the status of founding father of the discipline: “on le comparerait volontiers à l'un de ces industriels capitalistes de l'époque héroïque, si bien décrits par lui, qui se sentaient moralement obligés de remplacer tout ce qu'ils gagnaient dans de nouvelles entreprises” (Halbwachs, 1929a: p. 88).

Other journals to which Halbwachs devoted time and energies, publishing various contributions in them over the years, are *La revue critique* (1929-1935) with 32 articles, and *La revue philosophique* (1905-1937) with 22 publications. Lastly, we find other contributions, less numerous, but no less interesting, like *Libret propos* (1921-1923) and six contributions, *La revue du mois* (1908-1914) with 5 publications, some political journals in which Halbwachs wrote four times, mainly at the beginning of his career (1905-1908), like *La Revue socialiste* and *Librairie du parti socialiste*. We also have *La revue d'économie politique* (1918-1921), with four articles; some with few but very significant publications, in specialist statistics journals like *Bulletin de la statistique générale de France* (1914 and 1930), *Bulletin international de statistique* (1925) and *Journal de la Société de statistique de Paris* (1933). Lastly, I will mention two curiosities that concern “Halbwachs in America.” The first one concerns a paper of his (Halbwachs, 1938a) published none other than in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, the journal of the Frankfurt critics, who at that time had already stably transferred to New York, and a second one for the American *Journal of Sociology*

(Halbwachs, 1939a). We must not be misled by the sporadic nature of these papers: they are rather important ones in the economy of Halbwachs' corpus, devoted, in the years of his full scientific maturity, to the theme, a central one for the epoch, of collective psychology and denoting, once more, Halbwachs' strong interdisciplinary vocation.

3. Some approaches to Halbwachs

Maurice Halbwachs' abundant sociological *oeuvre* lends itself to being explored and interpreted in different ways that can reveal their value and importance in the economy of sociological knowledge. As is obvious, also from what I have tried to point out in the preceding pages, it does not appear possible (and perhaps not even fruitful) to make a complete and analytical examination of Halbwachs' whole corpus; nevertheless, I believe it is possible to try to identify some pathways that on one side make it possible for the present writer to try to point out the main leitmotifs that give unity to this author's work and, on the other, allow the reader to have the most complete picture possible of Halbwachs' incredible work without dying of boredom. I therefore propose to take a pathway interweaving the chronology of his publications with the development of the main lines of theoretical and empirical research to which he devoted himself. I hope this will give a very exhaustive profile of the man and his work.

Halbwachs' biographical, scientific and bibliographical story can, in my opinion, be divided into three principal periods: the training years (1899-1914) and the experience of the First World War; the Strasbourg period (1919-1935); and the years of his maturity (1936-1944) down to his death.

3.1 Economic, class and consumption sociology

At the start of his career and in the years of his training, Halbwachs studied themes that he would also take up in other periods and others that he was to abandon more or less for good – themes that were closely related to his life or, instead, constituted mere “work” fields. He graduated in philosophy, the first in his course, in 1901; he carried out a period of research in Göttingen, Germany, in 1904 and finally did two research doctorates, the first in law in 1909 and the second in letters in 1913.

His frequentations of socialist milieus in the years of the ENS brought him into contact with issues of social inequality, injustice, exclusion, poverty and, not least, of the hierarchies of social stratification and classes in industrial modernity (Migliorati, 2015). Halbwachs' civic interests also became research

interests and his early writings directly bear witness to this. He was to write about the question of class representations, with particular reference to workers in industry (Halbwachs, 1905a, 1905b, 1926a, 1937a, 1939d), about economics (Halbwachs 1905d, 1909b) and about economic sociology (Halbwachs, 1908d, 1914a, 1914b, 1925d, 1932b). These various issues were all to come together in 1912, with the publication (Halbwachs, 1913a) of *La classe ouvrière et les niveaux de vie*, the dissertation of the doctorate in humanities that he was to present at the Sorbonne in January 1913. This is a formidable piece of economic sociology research on the hierarchies of social stratification and the feelings of class affiliation of a sample of German workers at the end of the nineteenth century, defined on the basis of their consumption behaviours; as Pierre Bourdieu puts it: a “véritable ethnographie de l’existence quotidienne des ouvriers qui s’appuie sur une lecture ingénieuse de budgets de familles” (Bourdieu, 1987, p. 167). *La classe ouvrière* was printed in 1912 by Félix Alcan; a few months later a research by a French author on German data and on themes of this kind would no longer have been possible since the clouds of the Great War were gathering over Europe. This too makes it an initiative of very great value for sociology at the time and for contemporary sociology. Halbwachs was to return to these themes with other papers during his career, both taking up, presenting and going deeper into the preparatory materials of this first research (Halbwachs, 1914c, 1921b, 1939c), and exploring once again the issue of consumptions in other contexts, notably the United States after his period in Chicago (Halbwachs, 1933a)

3.2 Studies on social morphology: urbanization, demographics and statistics

A second line of enquiry that Halbwachs opened up in those years concerned the study of social morphology and, particularly, of the structure of the urban physical and social space. It is a theme that was to return particularly in the years of his maturity and to which Halbwachs showed he was particularly sensitive, but one that significantly emerges starting from these early years of formation. From this set of reflections, Halbwachs was to derive the first doctorate dissertation, in law, that he was to undertake in 1909 with research on dispossession and the price of land in Paris (Halbwachs, 1909a). The nucleus around which the issue of social morphology revolves is once more eminently sociological, with a debt to Durkheim: “les tracés des voies sont en eux-mêmes des faits morphologiques puisqu’ils modifient la structure de la ville, la répartition, le groupement et la densité de ses habitants” (Halbwachs, 1909c: p.770). Starting from study of the structure of the cities and its street layouts, Halbwachs concludes that “il n’est pas nécessaire, il est même tout à fait inutile de chercher l’explication du tracé des voies nouvelles

dans les volontés ou intentions des individus” (*Ibid.*, p. 772). This is not the place to look more deeply into the issue, on which there are some dedicated studies (Topalov, 1997a, 1997b; Bergamaschi, 2008, Boudes, 2011). I will limit myself to considering that the theme of social morphology and urban sociology runs through much of Halbwachs’ sociology (Halbwachs, 1908a, 1908b, 1908e, 1920a, 1920b, 1925c, 1932a, 1934, 1935a, 1935b, 1936a, 1938b, 1939b) and constitutes one of the most important themes of his production. It may appear unorthodox in relation to this author’s strictly sociological, philosophical and psychological background, but we have to keep in mind that he was constantly committed to defining needs and establishing, on the basis of consolidated empirical data, the field of interest and action of the collective aspect over the individual one in the context of human phenomena. Among these, space is certainly one of the privileged fields because if its arrangement and organization may appear to be the fruit of chance or more or less shrewd individual choices, actually, according to Halbwachs, it is one of the terrains in which collective representations and the social forces that preside over the organization of individuals in society are most expressly manifested. After all, Durkheim himself attributed to the ways in which individuals group together the explicit status of a *social substratum* (Durkheim, 1895, 1899). In this sense, Halbwachs’ social morphology constitutes a privileged field of sociological observation.

On the margin of the studies on social morphology, mention must be made of Halbwachs’ reflections on demographic and statistical questions⁵ that closely interweave with those referring to the organization of space, but also, in some cases, those referring to economic sociology (Halbwachs, 1940a). The *Faits de population* (Lenoir, 2004: p. 201) constitute a privileged field of interest for Halbwachs that, together with his studies on economic and urban sociology, allow him to observe the complex dynamics of population in social contexts, the only ones able to describe their structure and evolution. He deals in particular with the determination of sex at birth, (Halbwachs, 1933b), with biological factors in the study of the wellbeing of populations (Halbwachs, 1935c), and with the birth rate (Halbwachs, 1937b, 1941b). Lastly, in Halbwachs the study of statistics occupies a large space and says much about

⁵ Halbwachs dealt with demographic issues in a vast series of notes, critiques and comments which I do not consider it useful to analyse in detail here. I will simply observe that, precisely with Durkheim, he was to take on himself the section “Social morphology” de *L’Année*, publishing various papers on French, Italian and German statisticians and demographers like Lucien March, Jacques Bertillon, Corrado Gini, Camillo Supino, Angiolo Cabrini and others. In the bibliography I refer to the longest articles or autonomous work.

the propensity of this author to study social facts in their empirical and concretely measurable evidences, on which he believes sociological analysis must be founded. Examples of it are a short manual for calculation of probabilities published in 1924, written together with Maurice Fréchet (Halbwachs and Fréchet, 1924), as well as some articles devoted to the theme (Halbwachs, 1923b, 1933c, 1935e) and an item in the *Encyclopédie française* (Halbwachs and Sauvy, 1936). To complete this section on Halbwachs' thought we can mention the complementary thesis of *La classe ouvrière* devoted to Adolphe Quetelet's notion of the average man (Halbwachs, 1913c).

3.3 Studies on collective psychology: memory, religion and suicide

As is well known, the line of enquiry that has mostly made Maurice Halbwachs famous is that of memory (wrongly, seeing the big spectrum of subjects that he dealt with). To this theme he devoted three monographs (Halbwachs, 1923a, 1925, 1939e, 1941, 1950), some preparatory articles and, in general, a large part of the contributions that appeared in the Strasbourg years, particularly in the *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*. In the case of memory too, the programme of this twenty-year-long research aimed substantially at development of Durkheim's project to affirm the autonomy and primacy of sociology in comparison to psychology in a field, that of memory, until then almost exclusively dealt with by psychology. Not by chance Halbwachs' first reference point is his old teacher, Henri Bergson, the author of *Matière et Mémoire*, already mentioned previously. In Halbwachs' terms, collective memory constitutes a function of society and social groups able to guarantee its cohesion thanks to the fact that the groups themselves constantly undertake to select and reconstruct the past in relation to the demands of the present and the future projects. As has been amply noticed by various authors (Grandi, 1997, Jedlowski, 2002, Namer, 2000, Péquignot, 2007, Giordano, 2010, Migliorati, 2009, 2010, Lavabre, 2011), Halbwachs does not defend a radical and doctrinaire thesis whereby collective memory would exist like individual memory and whereby one should therefore think of the existence of an analogous social dimension that, just as the individual mind preserves individual memories, would store collective memories (Bastide, 1970). Instead, between individual and collective memory there is a dialectical relationship through which memories stored by individuals find an ordering system with a solid social matrix in the social pictures of memory. Collective memory does not replace individual, but rather confers on it a horizon of sense and a structure of plausibility. I insist on this theme because it is on this basis that it is possible to understand the interest and centrality of studies on collective psychology in Halbwachs. I believe I can say, indeed, that if we had

to identify a lowest common denominator encompassing all Halbwachs' corpus, this would very probably have to be identified precisely in his studies on collective psychology (Halbwachs, 1905a, 1922, 1928, 1938a, 1942 [2015], 1955). Not by chance, the chair that he should have taken up at the Collège de France from 1944 bore precisely this name (cf. *supra*).

In the framework of the studies on collective psychology we can also mention a section that is little known but of great importance in Halbwachs' sociology, concerning studies on religious sociology (Halbwachs, 1926b, 1926c, 1930c, 1932c, 1938c). This is another theme deriving directly from Durkheim that Halbwachs studied and interpreted in a mainly theoretical form to replace his own hypotheses relating to the coexistence of individual and collective data, even in the most personal dimensions of living and acting.

From the latter point of view, it seems indispensable to me to spend a few words on a line of research that in my modest opinion places Maurice Halbwachs among the principal authors that have given sociological methodological depth and pregnancy to the epistemological discipline, without remaining trapped in the big pioneer frescos of the founder fathers. I refer to his studies on suicide that we find in a big monograph (Halbwachs, 1930a) – preceded by a preparatory article of the previous year (Halbwachs, 1929b) – that, starting from the title, eloquently alludes to *Le suicide* by Durkheim (Durkheim, 1897), but significantly distance itself from it and makes an adjustment of fundamental importance. As is well known, for Durkheim suicidal drives essentially have a social nature; Halbwachs believes that suicide occurs more often following events that have had the power to isolate the individual from the social milieus in which he acts, leading him or her to marginalisation and social disqualification: “si les hommes se tuent, c’est toujours à la suite d’un événement ou sous l’influence d’un état survenu [...] qui les détache ou les exclut du milieu social, et leur impose le sentiment insupportable de leur solitude” (Halbwachs, 1930a: p. 11). This is a conclusion (the subject of which is the one with which Halbwachs had explained the condition of social segregation of the factory worker in his 1913 *La classe ouvrière*) which does not totally reject the Durkheimian perspective and nevertheless eschews its rigid exclusion of individual and subjective dimensions in determining suicide. There is no reason, according to Halbwachs, to accept only social determinants, to the detriment of individual motivations. It is an intellectual posture that has been defined, with a term that is anything but neutral, “understanding” (Paugam, 2002; Marcel, 2004) and one aimed at completing the attempt to update Durkheim's methodological programme, which in some respects appeared too rigid, to answer the interpretative demands of the burning challenges of the forties (Marcel, 2004: p. 75).

3.4 Maurice Halbwachs' contribution to the diffusion of classical sociological theory

At this point on the pathway that I have tried to follow regarding the work of Maurice Halbwachs, a brief mention must be made of the papers that he devoted to major figures in French and international sociology in his day. These papers, over and above their specific interest, give us a sort of map of the important theoretical and epistemological references for Halbwachs and also tell us something about his activity as a populariser of the thought of the authors that he helped to get known in France. This part of his production is concentrated, with a few exceptions, in the years immediately after the First World War, as if Halbwachs, after a period in which events and the government commitment had kept him away from his own *daimon*, had felt the need to start again from the study of authors and their thought to get back into contact with his career as a scholar. As seems natural, one of his main interlocutors is Durkheim, to whom he dedicates a deeply affected article after his death (Halbwachs, 1920c): it is an affectionate tribute to his teacher in which he goes over his life and events as he prepares to gather up a large part of his scientific inheritance. In 1938 he was also to publish a pamphlet introducing his thought (Halbwachs, 1938d). In the same year there came two articles devoted to Vilfredo Pareto (Halbwachs, 1920d, 1920e) and, after a short time, a paper on Thorstein Veblen and his well-known theory of the wealthy class (Halbwachs, 1921c). I have already spoken of Max Weber (Halbwachs, 1929a), and of the psychologist Charles Blondel who was at that time a colleague of his in Strasbourg (Halbwachs, 1928).

Life grew short in front of Halbwachs; in the course of time he saw his closest friends and the colleagues of a lifetime disappear. In 1936 he was to dedicate an overall bibliographical revision to the work of his lifelong friend, François Simiand, who had died the year before (Halbwachs, 1936b). In 1940, it was the turn of Célestin Bouglé (Halbwachs, 1941c). Soon after that Nazi fury was to overwhelm Europe and, with it, Halbwachs. He testifies to the words (some say, spurious⁶) of Jorge Semprún in the extermination camp: “not knowing if I can invoke some God to accompany Maurice Halbwachs, though aware of the necessity of a prayer, I say aloud some verses by Baudelaire. It is the only thing that returns to my mind. *O death, old captain, it is time, let us set sail!*” (Semprún,⁷ 2002: p. 39).

⁶ From a private conversation I had with Christian Baudelot, whom I thank for his kindness.

⁷ The same testimony is found in Semprún (1995: p. 28).

4. Maurice Halbwachs today and tomorrow

Fame does not precede Maurice Halbwachs. And this is perhaps a good thing, because it makes him an author one can approach leaving aside the too many reverential fears, dangerous subjection and the sticky submissions. If in France he is substantially considered a classic to study, to publish and to republish, in other countries – in Europe, as in the United States – he is considered a lesser author, an epigone of Durkheim, though he was never even a direct alumnus of the latter. To me it seems, instead, that there is more than one reason why sociology should rediscover this figure, regarding both the theoretical aspect and that of empirical research. I will mention two reasons.

The first one. Halbwachs is rightly known for his studies on collective memory; and, in effect, these are pioneering and courageous works that have involved enormous gains for the sociological discipline in epistemological terms. Nevertheless, he is unjustly little known as concerns the many other themes that he dealt with. I am thinking about the studies on social stratification, on consumptions, on religious sociology, and on suicide, rather than on social morphology. The problem is that in the panorama of the history of sociology Halbwachs is placed on a thin ridge: no longer a founder father; nor yet a sociologist of the overspecialised fragmentation of knowledge. Halbwachs' generation found itself with the burdensome inheritance of thinkers like Durkheim, Marx, Weber and so forth, and, like every inheritance, found it hard to manage it. The problems to be solved were, probably, more than the gains achieved. Durkheimianism in its golden age was criticized for being a one-way programme, too hard for the complexity of the dominant modernism in which the sociological positivism of the past had to pay for the clash with the complexity of a world in deep and tumultuous transformation. To Halbwachs fell the hard task of systematizing and, sometimes, of revising the positions, sometimes almost dogmatic ones, of the previous generation. And this brings me round to the second reason.

Halbwachs' sociological posture starts from Durkheimian organicism, but never slavishly bows to it. In this sense, it seems me that the true hidden pearl of this author lies in his conception of social reality as of a dialectical and constant tension between society and individual. The former exists before the latter, but the latter reacts to the former by setting going the motor of social change. One thinks of the case of the research on suicide. Halbwachs does not deny that the determinants of the gesture of committing suicide have a social origin, but nevertheless recognizes that the individual has the faculty to perceive himself or herself and to represent himself or herself as excluded from society, abandoned, isolated, no longer subject to the integrative drive; in

a word, as being in the condition of being able (or being forced) to commit suicide.

The argument of the feeling of exclusion is one that Halbwachs repeatedly uses to defend his theses in the different spheres in which he develops it. In the representations of class through consumption behaviours, the workers are defined as excluded from social life for the function which the latter confers on them; collective memory is ineffective insofar as individuals are separated from the social groups that transport the currents of collective thought and the social representations of the past; the dislocation of public spaces in the urban fabric drive the choices of private people in particular directions. From all this a dynamic picture of social reality emerges in which the individual is not submitted *de plano* to the coercive action of society, but this does not mean that the latter does not exert any constraint on the individual. And vice versa: the system of social representations acts on the conscience of individuals orienting their behaviours (Halbwachs is sensitive to the question of order and integration and rejects any conflictualist position), but the individual has a space of freedom to act out those representations.

In this sense, Halbwachs seems to me an author of great depth and pregnancy for the contemporary world. Rejecting every dogmatic and simplificatory position, he always gives us a picture of the complexity of social action that, besides, can only be observed in the empirical datum. This is testified to by his well-argued theoretical hypotheses, by his thorough and precise researches on data and, above all, by his methodological posture, which is never obvious.

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