

Maurice Halbwachs and Social Memory Studies in Poland and Bohemia: on Two Translations and their Contexts

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In the fall of 2010 Prague Sociologické nakladatelství (SLON) published the Czech translation of Maurice Halbwachs's book *La mémoire collective* [2010]. The French sociologist is considered the founder of social memory studies, popular research field of contemporary humanities, including sociology, cultural anthropology, cultural studies and history. Halbwachs is cited in almost every sociological publication on that subject, so little wonder that increasing interest in social memory roused interest in his works, including publication of translations. They appeared surprisingly late, as the first English translation of any of his studies on memory was published only in 1980 [Halbwachs 1980]. This paper is an attempt to put in a context and to assess the role played by the translation of Halbwachs's book *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, which appeared as early as in 1969 [Halbwachs 1969], in the development of Polish sociological research on social memory, as well as the possible impact of the recent Slon's edition on Czech sociology.

Maurice Halbwachs (1877–1945) was a member of the second generation of the Durkheimian sociological school. He studied philosophy with Bergson before he met Durkheim and turned to sociology. Halbwachs published on various subjects, and some of his writings were continually reissued in France and translated into English already in late 1950s and early 1960s. His first book on social memory entitled *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* was first published in 1925, and later on it was followed by the paper *La mémoire collective chez les musiciens* (1939) and the book *La Topographie légendaire des évangiles en terre sainte: étude de mémoire collective* (1941). The previously mentioned paper was also included into the *La mémoire collective*, a posthumous volume compiled from various manuscripts by Halbwachs's sister Jeanne Alexandre, and published in 1950.

Among Polish sociologists interest in social memory appeared long before the topic became popular within Anglo-Saxon social science. Its first sign was a paper entitled “Żywa historia”. Świadomość historyczna: symptomy i propozycje badawcze (“Living history”. Historical Consciousness: “Symptoms and Research Proposals”), published in the journal *Studia Socjologiczne* by Nina Assorodobraj-Kula, a former disciple of Polish Durkheimian Stefan Czarnowski, and an exponent of historical sociology [Assorodobraj 1963]. In her paper she focused on popular concepts and social uses of history, especially on shifts in historical consciousness caused by deep structural social changes, and she suggested an ambitious programme for the research of such phenomena. Although her paper was full of references to various historical works, philosophy and structuralist anthropology, Halbwachs was cited only once. Still, not his general concept of social memory, but his concern for nobility's special devotion to history was mentioned there

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[Assorodobraj 1963: 23]. Despite the early start, the factual research on social memory developed rather sluggishly. The only bigger theoretical work published was in fact the Polish edition of the *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, translated and supplied with an illuminating introduction by Marcin Król [Halbwachs 1969]. The book was not followed by any serious attempt to adopt or to develop the original Halbwachsian concepts. At about the same time extensive empirical research on historical consciousness started, initially led by Nina Assorodobraj-Kula herself and later on conducted mostly by Barbara Szacka and her team, which comprised a series of opinion polls among various sectors of population. The first comprehensive overview of the results of polls done by the OBOP public opinion research bureau was written by Jerzy Szacki, and appeared in 1973, but it was not available to broader public, being multiplied in a limited number of copies for the internal use by the state Radio and Television Committee [Szacki 1973]. In the 1970s and 1980s a whole series of papers and books was written by Barbara Szacka. As the topic was delicate from the ideological point of view, publication of her first book was delayed for almost ten years [Szacka 1977, Szacka 1983, Szacka – Sawisz 1990, cf. Szacka 2006: 7].

It seems that neither Assorodobraj-Kula's original programme nor Halbwachs (despite courteous references denoting him as an establisher of the research field [eg. Szacka – Sawisz 1990: 8]) influenced Polish social memory studies in any substantial way. What was in fact done, was extensive empirical research of historical consciousness lacking distinctive theoretical framework. Polish research teams collected invaluable, credible and detailed data concerning population's opinions on the historical past and documented their development trends during relatively long period of time. Information gathered and published still constitute a useful source of data for social historians and historical sociologists who may use it as comparative material or simply as an illustration. On the other hand, most of this material is only raw data, resource for a possible further, genuine sociological study. What was missing in the Polish research done in 1960s–1980s was not only refined theory, but simple theoretical self-reflection and sociological analysis, which could not be substituted by mere opinion polls, even supported by refined statistical instruments. The researchers conflated historical consciousness with opinions inferred from the answers to the questions asked in questionnaires and concentrated only on those supposed opinions, ignoring the diversity of social memory forms and the variance of their respective social contexts. The question of the social sources and various social memory formation practices – the sociological question per se – remained untouched.

Social memory studies in Poland were not only opinion polls. Among sociologically relevant works were for example Jerzy Szacki's writings on tradition, clarifying basic ideas concerning social implications and uses of the past [Szacki 1971]. Later on studies concerning not only popular opinions on the past, but their possible sources [eg. Szpociński 1988] appeared. From the beginning of democratic transition, and especially around the turn of the century a new wave of an interests in social memory aroused. It happened both due to the influence of growing popularity of the topic in Western social science, and because of growing social and political importance of history itself, caused by various political and economical factors. The most obvious one was the breakup of Communism, revision of public interpretation of the recent past, and rediscovery of topics ignored by the official Communist history (in some cases, such as Holocaust or non-communist resistance, they had not been promoted intensively enough by official propaganda,

but by no means really ignored), as well as the political application of history, especially of the Communist period itself, as a means to win political competition (or to deny one's opponents the very legitimacy to take part in politics). Another important factor was the emergence of a whole variety of ways to use the past as a potential economical resource – from compensations for German slave labourers to the possibility to reclaim property nationalised after the Second World War. It coincided with a general shift in the definition of property rights, which were becoming less material and more immaterial and/or intellectual rights [Verdery 2003, more in: Kiliias 2004].

Polish social memory studies were not confined to sociology and works of historians interested in metatheory, and later on in studying the social memory itself [eg. Kula 2004] were sociologically relevant. At present social memory is studied by many Polish scholars who investigate various topics and use different theoretical perspectives. Nevertheless, some problems plaguing sociological research did not entirely disappear, for example concentration on supposed contents of memory, and often on the memory of marginal groups, which might be interesting, but by no means important [eg. Szpociński 2009]. A significant feature is also disregard for economical and political sources and uses of history, even though the so-called “politics of history” advocated by Polish political Right since mid-2000s turned out to be a powerful instrument of politics, and an important arouser of renewed interest in history, especially in the Second World War period.¹ Although various theoretical inspirations are in play, among which ideas coming from cultural anthropology and cultural studies seem to be the most important, the Halbwachs's book (which has recently been reissued) does not seem to be an important one.

The timing of the development of Czech research on social memory was different from the Polish one. In the period from the publication of Assorodobraj-Kula's paper to the publication of Polish research results, Czechoslovak sociology underwent rapid ascent, no less rapid suppression and a long period of affliction. Czech scholars managed to do somewhat similar research as early as in 1946 (an opinion poll conducted by the Československý ústav pro výzkum veřejného mínění – Czechoslovak Institute for the Public Opinion Research) and 1969 (an opinion poll conducted by the Ústav pro výzkum veřejného mínění ČSAV – Institute for the Public Opinion Research of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences) [Vztah... 1969, Šubrt 1995], but just as in Poland, more substantial interest in the topic emerged quite recently. Its active promoter is a Prague sociologist, Jiří Šubrt. Being above all theorist he published some papers on the theory of social memory, as well as on a few somewhat related topics, such as time in sociological theory [Šubrt 2000]. Already in mid-1990s he did some minor research [Šubrt 1995], and recently he has been finishing a thorough study on Czech historical consciousness. It reminds, to a degree, earlier Polish research, although it consists not only of quantitative research (opinion polls), but also contains a qualitative component in the form of a series of focus group interviews. First results were published as an edition of the “Historická sociologie – Historical sociology” journal [Šubrt 2010] just few months after the publication of the Czech edition of the *La mémoire collective*.²

1 An important exception are the works of Lech Nijakowski [2007, 2008].

2 It is worth mentioning that the Czech translation of the concluding part of *La Topographie légendaire des évangiles en terre sainte* was published already in 1996, in the collection of French social science texts on urban issues [Halbwachs 1996].

It is hard to estimate any research in progress, especially when the results are presented in the form of a collection of diverse papers, which do not conform with any unitary theoretical position – from the Miroslav Hroch's [2010] text, sceptical to the very possibility to discern such phenomenon as historical consciousness, to a systematical presentation of a theoretical framework of the project, written by Jiří Šubrt and Štěpánka Pfeiferová [2010a]. Among their inspirations they mentioned (obviously) Halbwachs³ and the French historian Pierre Nora, but the two most important seem to be the social constructivism of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, and the system theory of Niklas Luhmann, with its stress on the necessity to reduce the system complexity (in the case of collective memory – to simplify it and to forget). Unfortunately, there exists certain discrepancy between this theoretical framework and the research results published in the volume. Explanatory potential of the system theory seems limited, as it is unable to explain any specific forms, let alone particular contents of social memory. Definitely, Berger and Luckmann's ideas might be useful as instrument enabling analysis of various levels and diverse sources of knowledge forming the supposed historical consciousness, which might have been possible to be discerned via the focus group interviews. Yet, the published research results ignore such issues, dealing only with people's opinions and failing to address sociologically relevant questions [Šubrt – Pfeiferová 2010b], [Šubrt – Vávra 2010]. As a result, despite thorough knowledge and deep interest in social theory, as well as the introduction of new research methods, the Czech research resembles earlier Polish studies, including their limitations.

Just as in Poland, Czech sociologically relevant studies on social memory include not only sociological research in narrow sense, but also various works of historians, philosophers and sociologists dealing with such subjects as the debate on the meaning of Czech history [eg. Havelka 2001], analyses of Czech historical myths and stereotypes [eg. Rak 1994] (such reflection is basically absent in Poland), or case studies of particular instances of the formation and/or operation of historical memory [somewhat untypical example: Hroch 1999: 216–221]. As most of these studies appear outside sociology, within disciplines which have their own, established traditions of dealing with memory and historicity, their authors do not seem to be interested in, let alone being forced to cite Halbwachs.

How did publication of two translations of two different Halbwachs books match the respective contexts of Polish and Czech sociological studies on social memory? The books themselves were similar, but by no means identical. Four opening chapters of the *Spoleczne ramy pamięci*, a Polish translation of the *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* [Halbwachs 1969], concerned the ways in which individual memory was being formed by collective life, while the last three chapters dealt with the collective memory (or rather: the past-related forms of social consciousness) of family, religious groups and social classes. The *Kolektivní paměť*, a Czech version of the *La mémoire collective* [Halbwachs 2010], is a collection of unpublished pieces (except the *La mémoire collective chez les musiciens*, which forms the first chapters of the book), originally brought together by Jeanne Alexandre. Yet, the Czech edition is a translation of a later, critical edition put together by Gérard Namer, including his introduction and afterword explaining the history, the concept and, to a degree, main ideas of the book.⁴ The first two chapters contain

3 Which is also a part of theoretical framework of [Kvasničková 2010].

4 For a non-specialist, the introduction and afterword by Namier seems a bit idle and redundant, while

speculations on social formation of individual memory, similar to those which form most of the content of the *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*. The last three chapters deal with slightly different topics, such as relation between collective memory and history, as well as the time and spatial dimension of memory (both individual and collective). An apparent difference between the two books is a bigger concern for plurality of social groups and various social life forms exhibited in the latter, instead of the dominant interest in the social (in singular/general) of the former.

As I have shown, the Halbwachs's work did not seem to play any important role in the Polish research of social memory. It would be naïve to attribute this relative lack of reception solely to its content – sociological books are recognized as classical not only due to their specific contents [Baehr – O'Brien 1994: 83]. On the other hand, such recognition seriously modifies the way in which they are read. Nevertheless, Halbwachs is by no means a “hard core” sociological classic, so there is no established tradition of interpretation of his works adapting them to contemporary standards. As a result, most of Polish and Czech scholars probably read his books as if they were more or less standard, contemporary works. Viewed from this perspective, Halbwachs had little to offer to the Polish scholars of 1960s and 1970s. They were interested mostly in historical consciousness (in fact in popular opinion on history as inferred from the opinion polls), while most of the content of the *Spoleczne ramy pamięci* were speculations about collective frameworks of individual memory (I will later return to the question of the character of Halbwachs's reasoning). Only the rest of the book, which dealt with collective consciousness of various groups, might have been interesting for them, having some affinity to the initial Assorodobraj's programme, ignored in the course of empirical research. But what role can play the Slon's edition for the Czech research, and for the Czech sociological community in general?

Of course, it is impossible for a non-specialist to assess the value of Halbwachs's works for his contemporaries. Still, it seems possible and useful to put his arguments into the context of sociology of his time, and evaluate it within this context, although from our own, present perspective. As I have showed, most of his translated work on social memory dealt with individual memory, and was an attempt to substantiate the “strong version” of the theory of mental phenomena as mere reflections of collective life. Problematic thing is not only the very character of such questions, which today belong somewhere between clinical and social psychology, and definitely not to sociology, but also the quality of Halbwachs's arguments. He used as primary evidence his own memories, impressions, thoughts, and sometimes fantasies about human thoughts or memories, though often described as if they had been factual descriptions of real phenomena [eg. Halbwachs 2010: 191–192]. Even today it is normal to use such material as illustration, but French sociologist employed it as a basis for his reasonings (it was, for example, main data used in his paper on the memory of musicians [Halbwachs 2010: 19–49]). Due to his profound belief in the collective character of mental phenomena, any reasoning in which such evidence was used, was in fact circular. Another feature that appears uncommon to a contemporary reader, is limited empirical and theoretical base of the two books,

a systematic, general introduction to Halbwachs's life and work, typical for other Slon's editions of sociological classics, is missing.

especially the *Kolektivní paměť*. Despite the fact that Halbwachs was probably familiar with Chicago research practice, he often resorted to fantasies instead of real experience while describing contemporary society. He cited historical works [eg. *Halbwachs 1969: 262–263, 350*], but much of his historical data were generalities or speculations [eg. *Halbwachs 1969: 286–292*], and not specific (i.e. footnoted) historical material. Dealing with family life, religion or division of labour Halbwachs often contrasted the traditional with the modern, mixing impressions on what seemed to be traditional with the actual past, and resorted to evolutionist schemes of supposed linear development processes [eg. *Halbwachs 1969: 262–275, Halbwachs 2010: 110–111*]. As for his theoretical arguments, he seemed to be satisfied with Bergson and Durkheim, and rarely used other concepts and ideas, which he could have known, and which might have been helpful means to analyse collective memory issues, such as, for example, American social psychology, German idea of *Verstehen* or systematic sociology that might have helped conceptualize the diversity of individual experience and various collective life levels...

Writing on possible uses of classical theory, Robert Merton [1996] attributed it with six possible functions. Reading it might reveal its affinity to contemporary academic work, and avoid the discovery of already well known truths. One can find prediscovers in classical works, and sometimes they may serve as partners in a kind of dialogue. Learning on past mistakes might reveal the need for reformulation of one's concepts. The two last functions of classics were, according to Merton, the role of a model for intellectual work, and the role of a text which is worth repeated rereading, and every time tells the reader something new. Naturally, such an account of functions presumes simplistic presentist vision of classics, who stick out somewhere in the past and talk to us using our own language. As for the two Halbwachs's texts on collective memory, it seems clear that read as if they were contemporary texts they cannot play any of those supposed roles. With their theoretical and empirical scarcity, as well as speculative character, they hardly offer any valid model for academic work. They deal mostly with subjects no longer interesting for a contemporary sociologist, and have been overshadowed by more sophisticated (and comprehensive) academic work, thus offering few potential affinities, and being not especially interesting partner for the discussion.

Although they did not seem to influence sociology in Poland or in Bohemia, the two Halbwachs books are nevertheless continually cited and even republished. To explain why it happens one needs a more sophisticated concept of the sociological classic than the Mertonian one. From a more realistic point of view the classical theory is an epiphenomenon of contemporary sociology, and a result of a reception-selection process [Baehr – O'Brien 1994: 85–101]. Its most important role is to embody particular theoretical currents [Alexander 1989]. Unfortunately for Halbwachs, he does not belong to any hard core of classics, and he does not symbolize any particular theory, but a broad and diverse current of sociological social memory studies. As a result, his position as a founder of a new research field seems to be unshaken, and sociologists feel obliged to put citations from his books in their texts, yet are not ready to make any substantial use of his ideas, which mostly deal with different subjects, based on obsolete concepts and uncommon (for them) intellectual practices. For the Slon's edition it means that due to the popularity of the subject it will be probably frequently bought (or borrowed from libraries), but few of its owners will actually read it, and it shall probably rarely inspire anyone.

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