AMERICA IN AN AGE OF MEMORY:
PIERRE BOURDIEU’S "THE ASSASSINATION OF MAURICE HALBWACHS" – COMMENTARY
AND TRANSLATION¹

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ABSTRACT: Maurice Halbwachs’ name has become familiar, in America, with the emergence (and proliferation) of memory studies, yet references to his work tend to be superficial or totemic. This translation and commentary of a remarkable tribute written by Pierre Bourdieu in 1987 sheds light on his methodological and political commitments. It provides a finer grained picture of Halbwachs as a scholar, sociologist, and product of the post-Bonapartist French system of education in the late 19th century, a context of commitment to human progress, while showing, in greater detail, the nature of the German sociology of the 1930s and 1940s that Bourdieu argues we should consider is directly related to the Shoah in which Halbwachs died.

KEYWORDS: Halbwachs, Bourdieu, sociology, “memory studies”, Holocaust

The name of French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs has become familiar, in America, with the emergence (and proliferation) of memory studies, though in the English language scholarship, as Jeffrey Olick points out, the reference is “more totemic than substantive or engaged” [Olick 2008: 22]. Historian Peter Novick invoked Halbwachs’ concept of collective memory to provide

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part of the theoretical framework for *The Holocaust in American Life*, but only briefly summarized Halbwachs’ work as focusing on “the way in which present concerns determine what of the past we remember”, then pit this slight definition of collective memory against history: memory is then ahistorical, even anti-historical, sees events from a single committed perspective, is impatient with ambiguities, and reduces events to mythical archetypes, while history, in contrast, strives to grasp the complexity of past events with the kind of detachment that would permit an interpretation that allows various perspectives as well as their inherent ambiguity [Novick 1999: 3–4]. Such a functional definition of history and memory by contrast is reminiscent of Pierre Nora’s similar exercise in *Les lieux de mémoire*, though normative preferences differ in their respective accounts. “Memory is life,” writes Nora, while explicitly recognizing (and here the epistemic position differs little from that adopted by Novick) that memory, as a phenomenon borne by living societies, is vulnerable to manipulation, appropriation, censorship and projection. Nora’s account, in contrast to Novick’s, depicts history as a discipline whose mission is to “destroy and suppress memory” even to “annihilate what in reality has taken place” [Nora 1989: 8–9].

This opposition has pedagogical appeal and at first blush history appears to have a distinct methodological and scientific advantage. That the time at which memory of the past is reconstructed is always in the present, and that social forces determine the manner of its establishment seem like adequate claims, but ultimately fail to fully render the sociological analysis of memory undertaken by Halbwachs over the course of two decades. Halbwachs’ 1941 book *The Legendary Topography of the Holy Land*, seeks a convergence between social science and history [Gérard 2000: 146], and with meticulous historical methodology, (one that tackles ambiguity, and with detachment strives to grasp complexity and takes into account multiple perspectives) concludes that humanity has created and recreated God over the ages, and that the artifacts that testify to this creation and recreation are not the work of individuals (nor of a supernatural being) but of social groups, creating social facts that shift and change [ibidem, 160]. The scientific study of memory, one is tempted to observe, is not quite as irrational as its object of study.

American debates about memory seem to focus on the idea of memory as a normative phenomenon, where scholars marshal arguments for and against [Radstone 2008: 31; Klein 2000: 127–150] a “memory discourse.” Memory discourse – whatever it may actually be, so varied are the methodologies that sometimes simultaneously drive and study it [Stone 2010: 31] – as opposed to Halbwachs’ study of memory as a social (and not individual) phenomenon, is more correctly what deserves to be opposed to history, and indeed on the political basis that informs Novick’s study of the surge of Holocaust memory after decades of silence in the United States. Kerwin Lee Klein has succinctly detailed a few critiques of memory discourse:

“The reification of bourgeois subjectivity in the name of postmodernism; the revival of primordialism in the name of postcolonialism; the psychoanalytic slide from the hermeneutics of suspicion to therapeutic discourse;
the privatization of history as global experiences splinter into isolate chunks of ethnoracial substance; the celebration of a new ritualism under the cover of historical skepticism” [Klein 2000: 144].

The type of transdisciplinary perversions mentioned by Klein (or the political consequences of memory’s cannibalization of history in the abandonment of collective political projects, as deplored by Charles Maier [Maier 1993] cannot be detected in the work (and life) of Maurice Halbwachs. An engaged reading of Halbwachs will lead, instead, to the opposite conclusion regarding his methodological, sociological, and indeed political approach to the social phenomenon of memory. There is a kind of tragic historical irony at work that Halbwachs’ life and approach go unexplored and misapprehended, while his name is invoked totemically so often to introduce studies of the memory of an event that took his life.

As it happens, the only footnote mentioning Halbwachs in Novick’s book refers to the introduction to Lewis A. Coser’s 1992 translation of Halbwachs titled On Collective Memory. (Coser’s effort translates an abridged version The Social Frameworks of Memory [Coser 1992: 37], along with the conclusion of The Legendary Topography of the Gospels in the Holy Land). Halbwachs’ work first appeared in English in 1980, but the translation of The Collective Memory (not to be confused with Coser’s similar title, as it is a different work, La mémoire collective, incomplete at the time of Halbwach’s death) preaced by Mary Douglas went out of print quickly, and was never reissued [Olick 2008: 21]. Both Coser and Douglas’ introductions were described by Olick as brief and superficial. Furthermore, Coser’s contains at least one error, regarding the reason for Halbwach’s arrest by the Gestapo, which happens to be reproduced by Novick (and others) [Coser 1992: 7; Novick 1999: 4]. Olick points out that “one of the enduring problems with reading Halbwachs in the Anglo-American context was that there is relatively little scholarship in English illuminating the intellectual-historical context in which he was writing as well as the complexities of his own intellectual development,” and that the excellent French Halbwachs scholarship (there is, in fact, a Maurice Halbwachs Center in Paris) has yet to be translated into English, in particular the meticulous work done by Gérard Namer to restore Halbwach’s work in a critical edition published in 1997 – L a mémoire collective – a book that corrects the serious content problems of previous editions, and restores 35 pages to this posthumous work by finally transcribing his manuscript in its entirety. One is tempted to agree

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2 Halbwachs’ work on memory was first discussed in English in 1932, seven years after the publication of Cadres sociaux de la mémoire by Frederic Bartlett in Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932): 294–296.
3 The error appears as well in Savelberg and King 2010: xxi.
4 http://www.cmh.ens.fr/: “Center Maurice Halbwachs is a Research Unit depending from the CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique / National Scientific Research Center), the EHESS (Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales / School for Advanced Studies in Social Sciences) and the ENS (Ecole Normale Supérieure).”
5 Halbwachs (1997); Namer (2000) is a comprehensive analysis of Halbwachs’ work on memory and details the changes and continuity in the political, historical and scientific context of the roughly two decades Halbwachs devoted to the study of memory, which Namer argues should
with Barry Schwartz’s assessment, regarding American memory scholarship, 
that “Halbwachs’ discoveries did not cause the present current of collective 
memory research; they were rather swept into it” [Schwartz 1996: 276]. What 
counts as memory studies in the United States indeed owes little to Halbwachs, 
and yet his name – perhaps as a result of the manner of his death, and much 
more than owing to his ideas – is a requisite reference.

Halbwachs was introduced to American academia at a time of political 
change, at the cold war’s end, when Holocaust imagery was reemerging in the 
context of the wars in Yugoslavia; the idea of collective memory, in those 
circumstances, could prove appealing indeed, as was understandably the case 
for Novick. Coser’s translation could not have been published at more propitious 
time. Described by Coser as a contribution to the sociology of knowledge, 
(which Coser considers Halbwachs’ most “important contribution” [Coser 1992: 
1] – Bourdieu will express, as we shall see, a different view) the two books 
abridged and translated are preceded by an introduction that certainly does not 
suffer from idolatry or complacency for his subject. “Halbwachs’s work,” writes 
Coser, “is terribly uneven,” adding that only his work on collective memory 
makes him a major figure in the history of sociology [ibidem, 21]. But even the 
latter observation is subject to an significant reservation: though Coser allows 
that Halbwachs has overcome a difficulty in Durkheim’s thought – accounting 
for creativity and cultural renewal in periods of calm as well as periods of ef-
fervescence with the theory of collective memory – this praise is quickly 
qualified as Coser states that Halbwachs has “introduced a paradox that makes 
his idea somewhat less penetrating than Durkheim’s.” The paradox lies in 
Coser’s assessment that Halbwachs has employed “the presentist approach, as 
it is called” [ibidem, 25], one that sees the past as a social construction, mainly, if not wholly, shaped by concerns of the present, and that current beliefs, 
interests, and aspirations shape views of the past in every period of history. 
Coser goes on to adopt the critique developed by “American sociologist Barry 
Schwartz” who “in many brilliant essays” argues that presentism (the reader 
now surmises that the expression originates with Schwartz) if taken to its 
logical conclusion, “would suggest that there is no continuity in history alto-
gether” [ibidem, 26], but a series of snapshots. Coser then argues that even if 
Durkheim lacked the notion of collective memory, he was nonetheless “more 
perspicacious than Halbwachs” by recognizing continuity. Coser adds, implying 
that Halbwachs was unaware of this, that a “society’s current perceived 
needs may impel it to refashion the past, but successive epochs are being kept 
avlive through a common code and a common symbolic canon even amidst 
contemporary revisions” [ibidem, 27]. Reading the Halbwachs translation to 
follow, by this point of Coser’s introduction, seems rather like an unnecessary 
chore.

The “presentism” charge has stuck. It was originally formulated in Barry 
Schwartz’s “The Social Context of Commemoration: A Study in Collective 

be properly construed as social rather than collective. Namer’s interpretations have not, however, 
been universally well received Cf. Wintrebert (2001): 171–172.
Memory,” citing the penultimate paragraph of the introduction to Halbwachs’ *The Legendary Topography of the Holy Land*: “If, as we believe, collective memory is essentially a reconstruction of the past, if it adapts to the image of ancient facts to the beliefs and spiritual needs of the present, then a knowledge of the origin of these facts must be secondary, if not altogether useless, for the reality of the past is no longer *in* the past” [Schwartz 1982: 376]. Schwartz then argues that Halbwachs’ approach (distilled as it is by a single sentence) promotes the idea that there is “no objectivity in events, nothing in history that transcends the particularities of the present”. Schwartz crafts a *via media* between theories that, on the one hand, emphasize the foundational events to the detriment of the evolution of memory over time, and on the other, Halbwachs’ “presentism” to study commemoration at the United States Capitol.

“The reality of the past is no longer *in* the past,” translates Schwartz (whose footnote refers to the wrong page number in Halbwachs’ work). This can certainly seem to support Schwartz’s view that Halbwachs has introduced “relativistic theory, which locates the significance of events in the standpoint of the observer.” Unfortunately, however, Schwartz’s translation distorts the meaning of Halbwachs’ sentence. The final portion reads: “puisque la réalité du passé n’est plus là, comme un modèle immuable auquel il faudrait se conformer.” This ought to be properly translated as “the reality of the past is no more” (or no longer here) which is the opposite of the claim that “the reality of the past is no longer *in* the past”; for Halbwachs, obviously, the reality of the past is in the past, and because it is no more, it does not have to be a model to which collectives (in the case of his study, pilgrims who travel to the Holy Land) – note here that we are not interested in a single observer, as suggested by Schwartz – are obliged to conform. That Halbwachs has shown that successive waves of believers seeking geographical evidence or vindication for their faith got history (and even precedent) very wrong is not tantamount to claiming that history is impossible or that there is no objectivity in events: it is in fact that very objectivity against which Halbwachs contrasted the pilgrims’ shifting conventions about holy places.

Coser’s charge against Halbwachs’ supposed inability to account for continuity seems curious in light of the latter’s clear demonstration that collective memory is characterized by continuity, as long as that is feasible, and reverses the charge, arguing that it is history that provides snapshots, periodizes in ways that might be unfamiliar to the group’s experience of continuity and change, and when executed with enough detail, tends to be too erudite to influence more than a very small portion of a society or group [Halbwachs 1997: 131]. This is not meant as a charge against history, but rather as sociological observations drawn from studying the way different kinds of collectives remember the past. Halbwachs made these points in the posthumous *Collective Memory* [Halbwachs 1980: 2], a work Coser judged skeletal and one that he doubted Halbwachs would have wished to see published in such an unfinished state [Coser 1992: 2]. Unfinished or not, the work contains clear responses to the objections formulated by both Schartz and Coser, and it is curious that they did not take it into account.
The presentist charge has been the most ubiquitous in the North American literature, sometimes prefaced by the adjectives “excessive” and “extreme.” Yet it is often in the same book or chapter that the reader will be introduced to Halbwachs’ biography – most will insist on his death at Buchenwald – and some of his intellectual contributions, only to quickly discard his approach as presentist.⁶

Curiously, this structural defect in Halbwachs’ thought does not seem to have been detected by French scholars who have studied his work the most closely. Sarah Gensburger, in a measured but detectably exasperated critique of the Anglophone understanding of Halbwachs in Memory Studies, observes his canonical stature in the field, while noting the absence of empirical work actually undertaken on the basis of his theoretical contribution. Gensburger revisits the “presentist” charge, and writes that far from reflecting the “temporal form of crude constructivism” that would be presentism, Halbwachs argued that the present memory of a social individual is both reconstructed and recognized [Gensburger 2011: 418]; recall of an event is not merely the piecing together of images, but instead requires some kind of intersubjective understanding of a social nature; at minimum language.

Other misunderstandings abound, but one in particular stands out, providing good reason for producing this essay and translating Bourdieu’s tribute to Halbwachs: Marc Osiel claims that the man who was a correspondent for l’Humanité, scholar of the working class, French Socialist party member and resistant couches his definition of collective memory in “Burkean terms” [Osiel 1999: 200].

This commentary and translation of a very brief but significant article written by Pierre Bourdieu in 1987 will certainly not remedy the dearth of translated scholarship on Halbwachs. What it offers, instead, is first a modest contribution to setting out some of the key aspects of the “intellectual-historical context in which he was writing as well as the complexities of his own intellectual development,” both in this commentary, as well as in Bourdieu’s essay. Secondly, it offers Bourdieu’s remarkable political reading of Halbwach’s life and death, and explores the political theory that underpins the relation between the manner in which Halbwachs studied sociology and the circumstances of his death in the Buchenwald concentration camp. It is in the spirit of Bourdieu, who renewed French interest in the work of the first and second-generation French sociologists, Durkheim, Mauss, and Halbwachs, by republishing their work in the mid-sixties onwards, and who had translations published of key foreign-language texts of scholars such as Jack Goody, Edward Sapir, John Searle, Mikhail Bakhtin, Ernst Cassirer, and Herbert Marcuse, and who promoted the international circulation of ideas [Müller 2002: 9], that this translation and commentary is offered.

Though Pierre Bourdieu had rekindled French interest in Halbwachs, the eulogy was not his favored form; as Remi Lenoir put it, “he loathed formal,
contrived flattery” [Lenoir 2006: 38]. Yet nothing in Bourdieu’s essay is
divided, and the exercise is devoted to a defense of scientific humanism as well
as an illustration, in the death of Maurice Halbwachs, inmate number 17, 161
of the Buchenwald concentration camp [Becker 2003: 418], of the ultimate
result, in Nazi Germany, of hostility towards the scientific study of society. It
is a disciplinary defense, and a broader defense not only of scientific progress
but also of commitment to the human progress inherent in Halbwachs’ political
attachment to the distinctly republican variety of French socialism defended
by Jean Jaurès. It is, finally, a work of memory – the only significant contribu-
tion of Halbwachs that Bourdieu fails to mention – and as Halbwachs noted,
memory is not only a social construction, broadly speaking, but is also a
construction among smaller social units, whether they be musicians [Namer
2000: 215], lawyers, or merchants [Halbwachs 1992: 161, 149], in accordance
with current needs. This sheds light on Bourdieu’s omission, which appears in
fact to not be one at all: the essay itself is an attempt to capture the current
concerns that sociology faces (and the social group composed of academic
sociologists); thus, he can write that the idea of promoting of “a politics of
scientific reason,” and indeed an activist conception of such an approach (mil-
itante or engagée) is not a thing of the past, not dead, not dying, and not buried.
Academic engagement in favor of human progress is to be associated to serious
scientific methodology; it has broken free of myths (precisely those myths
deplored by Novick, with good epistemic reason) and works, in turn, to de-
mystify its object of study.

Halbwachs did not, as Novick seems to have understood, view collective
memory as a normative category to be compared favorably to the craft of his-
tory. His works on memory are empirical explorations of how memory shifts in
societies, over time, and how social units influence those changes; he explicitly
acknowledges that social memory often distorts historical truth [ibidem, 182].
An equally important, but more infrequently noted insight is that memory is
not, and cannot be, a purely individual phenomenon. “We speak,” writes Hal-
bwachs, “of our recollections before calling them to mind. It is language, and
the whole system of social conventions attached to it, that allows us at every
moment to reconstruct our past” [ibidem, 135]. Bourdieu may have had in mind
– and if he did not, his essay certainly embodies the idea – Halbwachs’ passage
contrasting the manner in which the historians of his time (he is likely here
referring to his colleague Marc Bloch and the Annales school with which he
was closely associated, contributing articles to their journals and sitting on
their editorial boards) [Deyon 1197 : 18] were increasingly reluctant to draw
general lessons from the past, with society’s judgment of people while they
live and when they die, and of their acts when they are produced. “Since a past
fact is instructive and a person who has disappeared is an encouragement or
an advertisement, what we call the framework of memory is also concatenation
of ideas and judgments” [Halbwachs 1992: 175–176].

And so the life of Maurice Halbwachs, remembered, say, in the introduction
to a recent American volume about memory, atrocities, and the law [Savelsberg
and King 2010: xxi], titled “How Maurice Halbwachs Died – and How We
Remember Him” will be telescoped as the life of the student of Durkheim who was arrested after complaining of the murder of his Jewish in-laws either by the Gestapo or the “henchmen of the collaborative Vichy regime”, a man who suffered like millions of others, and whose identity is ultimately absorbed, and made authoritative, at least for the American academic audience, by Lewis Coser’s introduction to his translated work in 1992. Is Halbwachs doomed to be a totemic reference, or worse yet, a statistic among the millions killed (he who cannot count among the six million?)

His life is worth more, as Bourdieu shows, than what present American concerns now deem him to be: not merely the student of Durkheim, or author of seminal (but largely, one can be forgiven for assuming, unread) works on memory; he published an edition of Rousseau’s Social Contract that he was teaching in occupied France, penned a study – at the disciplinary frontier between philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, and sociology – on the collective memory of musicians to express briefly his distress in experiencing the transformation of Wagner into an organ of Nazi propaganda, which will lead him to strengthen his previous insight about professional memories based on shared language (and not, crucially, shared politics, but rather shared institutional commitment to their discipline, i.e: music) [Halbwachs 1997: (35)].

Bourdieu reconstructs a memory of Halbwachs from a disciplinary perspective, but also from the perspective of what Loïc Wacquant calls his “philosophical anthropology” [Wacquant 2008: 264], which rests not on the concept of interest but of recognition and mis- or non-recognition. Wacquant explains that Bourdieu does not adopt a utilitarian theory where individuals consciously strategize to obtain wealth, power, or status; instead, individuals seek dignity, which can only be granted to them by society. Indeed, it is only by being granted “a name, a place, a function within a group or institution can the individual hope to escape the contingency, finitude and ultimate absurdity of existence” [ibidem]. This is the manner in which Bourdieu rescues Halbwachs from non-recognition, celebrating his approach and contribution to the discipline of sociology. However, further on, Bourdieu emphasizes the critical importance of praxis, which he sees in the real-world engagement of Halbwachs, something that if it fails, writes Wacquant, to attain Durkheim’s wish for the discipline to establish political norms and moral standards:

“...could at least contribute to the elaboration of ‘realistic utopias’ suited to guiding collective action and to promoting the institutionalization of justice and freedom. The ultimate purpose of Bourdieu’s sociology, then, is nothing other than to foster the blossoming of a new, self-critical, Aufklärung fit for the new millennium. By directing us to probe the foundations of

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7 Annette Becker’s meticulous study of Halbwachs’ life between the wars reproduces the list of elements in his widow, Yvonne’s, application to the state to earn the posthumous status of “Dead for France” (Mort pour la France). Among them appeared the statement that he was arrested at his home by the Gestapo as an accomplice of his son, Pierre, an intelligence agent in the Résistance: cf. Becker (2003): 407.

8 Maurice Halbwachs, édition commentée, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Le contrat social (Paris: Audier, 1943).
knowledge, the structures of social being, and the hidden possibilities of history, it offers us instruments of individual and collective self-appropriation and thus of wisdom – it helps us pursue, as it were, the originary mission of philosophy” [ibidem, 276].

Bourdieu’s interest in philosophy (whose “originary mission” is to avoid leading an unexamined life) is apparent in his essay, and in particular against a certain form of nihilist hostility to modernity, science in general, and social science, in particular. Hostility to French (scientific) sociology follows from Martin Heidegger’s stated belief, in his 1933 Rectorial Address, that the science of the Greeks was less a prolegomena to Western science than its (glorious) future: that knowledge, further, is to be subordinated to necessity, and even to will. Bourdieu rightly notes the ambiguities and euphemisms employed by Heidegger in his speech, and in addressing its conclusion, which pronounces an academic *Führerprinzip* relating “labor service”, “defense service”, and “knowledge service” for the sake of the German *Dasein*, Bourdieu deadpans: “by the end of the lecture the listener does not know whether to turn to read Diels on ‘the pre-Socratics’ or join the SA” [Bourdieu 1991: 5].

To better grasp the significance of the distinction Bourdieu draws between French and German sociology, it is instructive to canvass the state of the German discipline in the 1930s, when Halbwachs gradually abandoned his engagement with his German colleagues. Bourdieu writes of his promotion of Max Weber’s work on bureaucracy and on the origins of capitalism, and suggests a lack of interest in other German sociological scholarship mired in abstract and superficial considerations. After the Nazis came to power in Germany, they extended their demonization of communist and socialist movements to the discipline of sociology, considered by them to be “Marxist”, “liberal”, and indeed “Jewish” [Ramstedt 1997: 99]. Three quarters of German sociologists fled Germany, and those who remained retreated to non-sociological disciplinary niches within the academy. Otthein Ramstedt offers that just as socialism and communism were politically unacceptable in Nazi Germany, so too was sociology rejected as a science [ibidem]. A new, National Socialist “German Sociology” emerged, and gained an enthusiastic following in academia from social scientists. Thus, in 1935 there were more specialists identifying themselves as sociologists than there had been in 1931, despite the emigration of three-quarters of their number [ibidem, 100]. German Sociology was less an approach or a school than a requirement of full political commitment to the Nazi ideology. Impartiality – the inheritance of Max Weber – was rejected in the words of Hans Pfeffer, as having been responsible for making sociology an “instrument of struggle used by bourgeois society against the people” [ibidem, 101]. These “new sociologists” considered that social facts in Germany could not be understood by examining social, economic, or political factors, but rather, that what had occurred in 1933 could only be interpreted by a

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9 Halbwachs, not Aron, introduced Weber to French academia. Cf Halbwachs (1925): 132–157; Halbwachs (1929): 81–88: See, also Béra (2005): http://www.philosophiedudroit.org/bera,%20halbwachs%20par%20becker.htm.
mythological approach [ibidem, 103]. Two subsequent developments characterize the decline of German sociology: first, the view that the discipline was to interpret its own commitment to “a people in becoming” as hostility to those who would threaten to destroy that future. Sociology that did not support the German people’s future was deemed an enemy. Secondly, “German sociology” did not view the concept of “people”, as meaning “population”, or even “state”, but rather understood it as “race”, which in turn was viewed from the Darwinist standpoint of “survival of the fittest”. And that “survival” would require conflict, as only conflict would permit the emergence of a victorious “fittest” survivor [ibidem, 104–105]. The polar opposition to the French sociology, and to Maurice Halbwachs’ humanist, scientific approach, as well as his lifelong commitment to socialism could not be more apparent.

Halbwachs’ commitments find their roots in the general political and intellectual context of late nineteenth century France. Born in 1877, in German occupied Alsace, his parents were intellectuals (his father a distinguished professor of German) and radical socialists with an admiration for the scientific and technological progress of the time, idealizing figures such as Louis Pasteur, and excited by the development of electrical machines, faster means of transport, and the use of nickel to produce stronger steel alloys. [De Montlibert 2006: 114]. Halbwachs was raised in an environment of intellectual discipline, attachment to the rationalist philosophy of knowledge inherited from the Enlightenment, as well as an awareness of the social world.

The broader social context of education reform undertaken by the post-Bonapartist Third Republic, in order to prevent an eventual attempt to restore the monarchy as a result of Catholic influence over education, was perfectly consistent with Halbwachs’ upbringing. In 1876, the year before Halbwachs was born, the Ferry Laws were passed, providing for free, mandatory and non-religious (laïque) education. Budgets devoted to public education in this period are instructive: in 1875, 37 million Francs, in 1885, 133 million francs, 197 million in 1895, and finally, in 1905, 230 million Francs were invested by the French state to pursue the humanist project that Education Minister Jules Ferry believed would build a social consciousness [ibidem, 115]. As Christian de Montlibert writes, the ratio of 13.6 students per teacher in 1886 would favor the “social reproduction” of intellectual families, as was indeed the case with Halbwachs who would go on to become Henri Bergson’s philosophy student in secondary school – he attended the Lycée Henri IV in Paris – then the École Normale Supérieure, where he was introduced to socialism through fellow students and the Dreyfus affair.

Halbwachs’ subsequent contributions are remarkably well detailed10 by Bourdieu in his short essay, and will not be restated here. Given, however, the general reliance on the Coser translation (and introduction), in America, for

10 Bourdieu omits, however, mention of Halbwachs’ one year sojourn as Visiting Professor at the University of Chicago in 1930. Halbwachs’ reports, published in the regional daily Progrès de Lyon, described his experiences in a growing American city facing massive unemployment and focused on the effect of education on the life and integration of different waves of immigrants, as well as the American discomfort with the African-American population. He published two peer-reviewed papers
biographical information in regards to Halbwachs, a few additional elements should be introduced to conclude this essay. It is often affirmed that Halbwachs, as Coser writes (and as is reprised by many others), filed a complaint with the Vichy authorities regarding the murder of his Jewish father-in-law, Victor Basch, professor of esthetics at the Sorbonne and past president of the Human Rights League (Ligue des droits de l’homme) in January 1944, after he had moved from Nazi-occupied Paris to the “French” Vichy zone. He was taken from his apartment, with his wife, and shot summarily in a wooded area [Deyon 1997: 19]. However, contra Coser, no evidence of this complaint was ever found.11 In any event, even if the complaint were to be substantiated, it does not appear to be the proximate cause of Halbwach’s arrest, in July of that year, two days after his son, Pierre, a member of the Résistance was arrested. Halbwachs had managed to stall the Gestapo and his wife was able to escape. Maurice and Pierre Halbwachs were first sent to the Fresnes jail, then to Buchenwald [de Montlibert 2006: 120] where before becoming terribly ill after being used as slave labor in the quarry, he devoted the few “free” hours a week to providing lectures to inmates: on Marx, on German demographics [ibidem], and on the beauty of German poetry [Namer 2000: 219]. Halbwachs’ widow, Yvonne, informed the post-liberation authorities that he had been a member of the resistance, the “Vélites-Thermopyles” network, primarily composed of intellectuals.12

Peter Novick’s research questions regarding the emergence of Holocaust memory in the United States—both collective and institutional (in the political sense) – in the 1990s, “Why here? Why now?” can be asked of Coser’s translation of Halbwachs in 1992.13

But as Raul Hilberg, author of the seminal study The Destruction of the European Jews (often considered a historian, but who was a trained political scientist, teaching the discipline throughout his academic career) [see the instructive Hilberg, 1996] put it in an interview conducted by Claude Lanzmann in the film Shoah:

“In all of my work I have never begun by asking the big questions because I was always afraid I would come up with small answers. I have preferred, therefore, to address these things which are minutiae or detail in order that I might then be able to put together, in a gestalt, a picture, which, if not an explanation, is at least a description, a more full description, of what transpired”.14

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11 Becker (2003): 369. An accurate though brief account is now available in English: Afelbaum (2010).
12 Becker (2003): 408. She appends a footnote indicating that his status was amended in 1947 to recognize him as a lieutenant of the resistance intelligence network to which he belonged.
13 Jeffrey K. Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi and Daniel Levy are to be credited with exploring the genealogy of the publication of Coser’s abridged work (and for making available translations of a portion of Marc Bloch’s reviews), but do not show the reasons for Coser’s interest in Halbwachs or for unusually highly critical introduction. Cf. Olick et al. (2011).
14 Interview of Raul Hilberg by Claude Lanzmann in Shoah (Shoah). Francia: Les films Aleph, color 570 (1985).
Humanism, humility, and discipline: that is the legacy of social science in the face in inequality, racism, and war. Not dead, not dying, not buried.¹⁵

The Assassination of Maurice Halbwachs

Pierre Bourdieu, La liberté de l’esprit, *Visages de la Résistance.* 1987, n°16, pp 161–168.

Maurice Halbwachs died in March 1945 at the Buchenwald concentration camp to which he had been deported. The conditions of his detention and death must not be forgotten:

“One hundred to two hundred a car with no water, that is the trip from Compiègne to Buchenwald. At Sarrebruck they remove your clothing and shoes to prevent escape. At Buchenwald, driven out from the cars, beaten with rifle butts and truncheons. We wait twelve hours, completely naked in a windy corridor, before completing various administrative formalities. Everyone’s body is completely shaved and shorn. Our clothes are assigned: striped shirt, vest, and pants, along with clogs. No socks, no underwear. Fifteen days in quarantine: five hundred to a block, piled over each other, five minutes a day to wash up. Hit under any pretext, most often without pretext. The fifteenth day, they send us to work at the quarry. Up at four in the morning, we receive two hundred and fifty grams of bread, twelve grams of margarine and a quarter [165] liter of hot water, called « coffee. » At the quarry, they saddle us to small wagons filled with rocks and we climb back up an incline eight hundreds meters long, with a difference in altitude of about one hundred meters. Clubs and shovels rain down on the bent backs of these men, treated like horses, when they do not advance quickly enough. We make up to twenty-four such trips every day. At noon, a reward: a half hour break and a quarter liter of « coffee. » At seven o’clock in the evening, each of us returns to the camp, carrying a large rock. At seven-thirty, roll call, long, and exhausting after the day’s work. After roll call, return to the block where soup is waiting: three quarters to a liter of soup; twice a week, rutabaga, once beet leaves, twice unpeeled potatoes in rutabaga sauce, twice barley. At ten o’clock, we can finally go to bed. And the next day, we begin again... We were the property of the SS. When a factory needed workers, we were « rented » for five marks a day. The money earned financed the leisure of our masters. The most miserable among us were the infirm. Since they could not work, the SS considered that they did not need a full ration of food, and thus withdrew margarine, and only left them with two hundred and fifty grams of dry bread and three quarters of a liter of soup. They were one thousand per block, each block « normally » accommodating five hundred prisoners. When we were five hundred, we had a hard time moving. They, the infirm, had to take turns sleeping: a team would wake up at midnight to allow their comrades to sleep. And it is in these conditions that Mr. Halbwachs spent

¹⁵ I would like to acknowledge the support and cooperation of Professors Jerome Bourdieu and Loic Wacquant.
many months. Hospitalized in August 1944 for generalized furunculosis, he left the hospital two months later, after an approximate recovery. Hospitalized a second time around January for dysentery and chronic weakness, he died three weeks later. The only thing we could obtain for him is that he not be euthanized”.

[166] There is no hierarchy of murder. But it is impossible not to experience a kind of ethical despair when faced with the assassination of one who struggled for universalism and who committed all his intelligence and conviction to create conditions of understanding and tolerance between peoples separated by history.

I realize that academic virtues are unpopular today and that it is far too easy to deride the mediocre, petit-bourgeois and vaguely social democratic inspiration of any enterprise that seeks to edify, against all forms of particularism, a scientific humanism that refuses a demarcation between the rigors of science and the passions of politics, and that strives to put the weapons of reason to the service of generosity. But that is precisely what Maurice Halbwachs represented, at a time when those contemplating social science, statistics, “average”, and “leveling” (I refer here to Heidegger’s famous text on Dos Mann), denounced the dangerously “reductive” and “positivist” pretensions of the sciences of man, at times employing the same words as today’s nihilists, prompt to recognize that in the very intention of learning about society scientifically lies a sort of totalitarianism, or a more or less obscured form of denunciation.

Born in 1877, Maurice Halbwachs attended the École Normale between 1898 and 1901, at the time of the Dreyfus affair: he joined in street demonstrations with Simiand, during Zola’s trial. He became a socialist. Abandoning metaphysics, he developed knowledge of economics without equal among the Durkheimians with the exception of his friend, and intellectual guide, François Simiand. His thesis in law, Exploitation and the Price of Land in Paris, published in 1909, is a study in applied sociology, and even engagé sociology. In it he shows what the project of the planners [167] owes to the obscure constraints that regulate the mechanisms of speculation (he also unfailingly criticized the premises and methods of economists and in particular their deductivist pretensions): the work resulted in his being invited to meet with Jaurès, who he admired, and in the Socialist party publishing a propaganda brochure against capitalist speculation. Halbwachs traveled to Germany in 1909 to study Marxism and German political economy. He provoked a small political scandal that was referred to in Parliament by sending to L’Humanité, where his friends Mauss and Hubert wrote regularly, an account of police repression of a Berlin strike. The article resulted in his being expelled from Prussia. The incident reveals an intellectual posture that conceives of the scholar’s work as a militant task (and conversely) and that clearly expresses, in his first great publications “The Position of the Sociological Problems of Class,” “Needs and Tendencies in Social Economics,” “The Psychology of the Modern Worker,” “Science and

16 Archives of College de France, Maurice Halwachs files. Note: This is the footnote as written by Pierre Bourdieu. A more detailed citation is to be found in Becker, 422: HBW2 B2-04.2 “Quelques faits sur Buchenwald et la mort de MM. Halbwachs et Maspero, par M. Mandelbrojt.”
Social Action,” “The Capitalist City,” themes that were almost entirely ignored by the other Durkheimians. There is a risk of under-estimating today the challenging enterprise of defending, at the Sorbonne, a thesis on *The Working Class and Standards of Living* (1913), a veritable ethnographic description of the daily existence of workers based on an ingenious reading of family budgets.

To fully do justice to this intellectual project, it is necessary to discuss all the aspects of an academic practice where scientific activism is apparent, which is well formulated, it seems to me, by Lucien Febvre, when he describes Maurice Halbwachs as a “mind of astonishing curiosity, always possessed, when one met him, with a new intellectual passion that he would expose with a kind of unpretentious enthusiasm that precisely epitomized him.” We know all the forms of collaboration [168] that he instituted with specialists from other disciplines, notably with mathematicians Georges Cérif and Maurice Fréchet, co-authors of his *Probability Calculations Within the Reach of All* (he had, in his youth, written critical studies on Liebniz and François Quételet). And also the scientific exchanges that this man, about whom it was agreed that he was “gentle and almost timid”, engaged, in particular during his tenure in Strasbourg with philosophers, psychologists, historians, geographers, demographers: Martial Guéroult, Maurice Pradines, Charles Blondel, Marc Bloch, Lucien Febvre, Georges Lefebvre, Gabriel Le Bras, etc. This generalized will to promote a politics of scientific reason, and first in the order of its accomplishment, in the university, translates a critical view of the institution that is fully revealed in what may appear to be a detail: he was among those who already affirmed, in the words of Lucien Herr, that they wished to sacrifice nothing to the “devourer of intellectual forces that is professorship”. If I raise this revealing trait, it is to persuade that for the long course of academic history, all that under discussion here has nothing of a dying, dead or buried past.

Indeed, I am convinced that the scientific enterprise that was interrupted with the death of a scholar like Maurice Halbwachs expects from us its continuation. It is not a matter of celebrating dead heroes, which, like in all grieving rites, makes them disappear a second time, by virtue of accepting their disappearance. It is a matter of taking up their struggle where they left it, and without forgetting the violence that vanquished them, which we must seek to understand.

For that, Maurice Halbwachs can still assist us, he who, though he without a doubt did more than anyone else to contribute to the dissemination of German sociology in France, never ceased to question himself, not without concern, about [169] his own scientific and political ambiguities. A member of the German Studies Center at the University of Strasbourg, and often invited, until 1930, to give conferences in Mainz, where the Center was established, Maurice Halbwachs was part of a small minority that had fought in favor of exchanges of professors between French and German universities. Of all the professors at Strasbourg, he along with Charles Blondel, were the only ones to have attended the Franco-German meetings at Davos (where he met Sombart) during the years 1928–1931. Favorable until 1930 to Franco-German reconciliation, he presented German sociologists in his courses (one of which canvassed “the principal representatives of German sociology”) as well as in his publications.
He was the first to have recognized the importance of Weber, and defended his theses on the origin of capitalism: he employed his ideas on charisma and bureaucratization, praising his rigorous methodology, taste for interdisciplinary research and his lack of dogmatism, all in addition to great intellectual audacity. He was more reserved about Mannheim, Simmel (“a gifted sociologist”) and Sombart. But, and this is essential, he considered that apart from Max Weber, German sociologists were too preoccupied with theoretical questions and trivial debates about notions such as Geist or Kultur and especially far too hostile to empirical and interdisciplinary research, and far too removed from the de-mythified and demystifying (which does not mean “disenchanted”) vision of intellectual work that is required for the modern scientific enterprise. He thought that the state of German sociology reflected the difficulties that Germany had encountered in its evolution towards modernity: the Germans, he said, have a great deal of difficulty understanding the situation in which they are, and in adapting to it. Instead of seeing a desultory admission of scientific assurance in the statement that when German will have adapted to modernity, its sociologists will adopt [170] the scientific vision that characterizes French sociology, the question that emerges from the life and the death of a man whose scientific project was that of Maurice Halbwachs, must be asked resolutely, and in its most general form: it is possible indeed – as was the case, in this instance, with the German professors and scientists – that metaphysical oratory or exalted condemnations of the scientific study of society, or, more simply, silence, or indifference to secular realities, contribute more than we would like to think to the establishment of a “collective spirit” that authorizes abominable doctrines, apparently excluded from the highly euphemized discourse of the university.

I believe that, under the threat of exposing ourselves to the repetitions of history, it is necessary to accept to see a link between the Rectoral Addresses that the greatest German philosopher of the day delivered in 1933, while wearing an swastika armband, to the glory of the German University, and against the reductive and destructive rationalism of which French sociology was the most despised example, and the assassination of a great French sociologist, perpetrated in 1945, in the ultra-rational insanity of an extermination camp.

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ПРЕГЛЕДНИНАУЧНИ РАД

АМЕРИКА У ДОБА СЕЂАЊА: „УБИСТВО МОРИСА АЛБАКСА”
PЈЕРА БУРДИЈЕA – КОМЕНТАР И ПРЕВОД17

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РЕЗИМЕ: Име Мориса Албакса постало је познато и свеприсутно у Америци с појавом „студија памћења“. Међутим, позивања на његово дело пречесто су по-
вршна, без темељнијег разматрања. Овај превод и коментар изузетно похвалног
tекста сећања који је написао Пјер Бурдије 1987. године јасно осветљава Албаксова
методолошка опредељења. Бурдије даје детаљну слику о Албаксу као научнику,
социологу, продукту постбонапартистичког француског система образовања у ка-
сном деветнаестом веку, у контексту посвећености људском напретку, док приказује
dетаљније природу немачке социологије из 1930-их и 1940-их, а за коју тврди да је
треба узети као директно повезану са Холокаустом у којем је Алвакс настрадао.

КЉУЧНЕ РЕЧИ: Алвакс, Бурдије, социологија, студије памћења, Холокауст

17 Уређивачи одбор Зборника Матице српске за друштвене науке примио је рукопис
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