

Memory and the Practices of Commitment

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Eighteen years ago, I bought a book whose front cover is backgrounded by a raven, traditional bird of night, descending sun, and windblown sands—all symbols of the passage of time. I am looking at it now. At the foreground appear three children, the biggest of whom, a 7- or 8-year old, stands with a miniature sword beside a toy horse. Until this moment, I assumed the picture was taken in France during World War I. The book's author is French, which makes my assumption about the scene's location reasonable; nothing in the picture, however, suggests that it was taken in wartime. I supplied this assumption myself. My professional interests in collective memory, which account for my buying this book, have somehow become entangled with my personal experiences. This occurs commonly. Paul Valery observed, "There is no theory that is not a fragment, carefully prepared, of some autobiography" (Crane, 1996, p. 5). I recognize the truth of Valery's words in my own life and work.

I move backward, from present to past, beginning with the observation that late adolescence and early adulthood are "the formative years during which a distinctive personal outlook on politics emerges" (Rintala, 1968, p. 93; see also Mannheim 1928/1952, p. 300). Howard Schuman and Jacqueline Scott (1989) tested this observation by asking a sample of American adults to identify the two or three most important events of the past 50 years. They found that respondents tend to name events occurring during their late adolescence and young adulthood (Conway, 1997; Schulster, 1996). That my experience deviates so markedly from Schuman and Scott's findings would be an uninteresting anomaly if age differences explained most of the variation among the events that their respondents named. Because the effect of age is much weaker, my case might contribute something to what they are trying to understand.

C. Wright Mills (1959, p. 6), writing about the "sociological imagination, observed that "no social study that does not come back to the problems of biography, of history, and their intersections within a society has completed its intellectual journey." The writing of this essay, an exercise that has led me to the meaning of my earliest memories, has been a deeply personal journey. As a sociologist, however, my aim cannot be self-discovery; it must be self-transcendence: the understanding of cultures, social structures, and mentalities that lie outside the narrow confines of my own life. As a sociologist, I must address phenomena objectively; I must sometimes draw on my experience, however, to make progress in my work. Because the fine-tuning of theory and of self-understanding are two aspects of the same thing, the aim of my essay is the illumination of both my personal memory and the sociological theory of memory. Self-discovery becomes sociological discovery when it suggests general ways of knowing the world.

The link between research and autobiography appears through “sociological introspection” (Ellis, 1991, 1993)—deliberate self-dialogue to determine how public events are privately processed and become objects of moral commitment and identity. The focus of my introspection is to determine why some events (a) are remembered better than others and (b) are more salient than others to one’s identity and (c) why the most salient and self-defining events can be remembered least vividly.

The most important historical event for me is World War II, which occurred not between my late adolescence and early adulthood but between the fifth and eighth years of my childhood. To say that I remember these years of war is not enough. I cannot forget them and wish to repossess them, traumatic as they were. Something about them makes sorrowful their passing, more than the passing of any other years of my life. Although the term hypermnesia—the unexpected and involuntary amplification of memory, of seemingly forgotten contents erupting into consciousness (Terdiman, 1993, pp. 185-202)—relate to my situation, it does not describe it accurately. I can evoke or suppress my memories of the war years at will, but I cannot rid myself of them. If Schuman and Scott (1989) had included me in their sample, I would have named World War II as the most important event in American history and would have had difficulty naming a comparable second-place event. The reason I would have given for naming the war is its geopolitical significance, but I would have been unable to articulate its effect on my experience, which is also an important reason for my singling it out. This experience is worth talking about, I think not only because I shared it with millions of other youngsters but also because no theory of cognition, personality, or socialization—including Karl Mannheim’s, Sigmund Freud’s, Jean Piaget’s, Lawrence Kohlberg’s, Erik Erikson’s, or any other I know—throws much light on it.

PRACTICES OF COMMITMENT

As I look back in time, I find that “practices”—cooperative activities oriented toward the communal life they constitute (MacIntyre, 1981)—contribute to the memorability of events. Embodied in the routine performances of ritual and of social duties, practices are “habits of the heart” that connect culture, social structure, and personality. I am interested in practices of a particular kind, namely, practices of commitment—self-transcending activities whose purpose is to secure the social good. Practices of commitment establish webs of interconnection and shape identity by creating trust, joining people to families, friends, and communities, and making individuals aware of their reliance on the larger society. Practices of commitment enact obligations that keep the nation and its communities alive (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985, p. 154). I intend to demonstrate and explain the memorability of commitment practices, including practices undertaken at the very edge of “childhood amnesia” (Wetzler & Sweeney, 1986), and to extend this understanding to autobiographical memory in general.

The commitment practices undertaken by Philadelphia’s first, second, and third graders in the early 1940s were utterly mundane: (a) the carrying of recyclable metal and newspapers to school; (b) the daily school ritual of pledging allegiance in a classroom filled with reminders of the ongoing war; (c) the acceleration of history lessons and their

application to contemporary events during the days leading to school holidays (Columbus Day, Armistice Day, Lincoln's and Washington's birthdays, and Memorial Day); (d) purchasing of Savings Stamps (miniature war bonds) "for the boys," as soldiers and sailors were then called; (e) school-organized visits to historical sites, monuments, and shrines (including Independence Hall, the Liberty Bell, and gigantic statues of George Washington); and (f) Saturday afternoon movie matinees during which the president's image, backgrounded by the national flag and accompanying a message to buy war bonds, preceded and gave an almost ceremonial quality to the main attraction, which usually featured unblemished heroes dramatically conquering unredeemable villains.

These practices were supported by an infrastructure of play that took place in arcades, in which children shot at moving images of Hitler, Mussolini, Tojo, enemy paratroopers, and airplanes; in the home, in which toy soldiers, guns, tanks, planes, and cannons were arrayed against each other; and in the streets, where rifles, walkie-talkies, helmets, and uniforms simulated war and sacrifice. Play was not in itself a practice of commitment, but it socialized children into understanding what commitment entails. On the basis of sharp division of the world into good and evil, child's play moralized violence by defining the ends to which it had to be applied and dramatized morality by defining the lengths, to which one had to go to sustain it. In the late twentieth century, war toys seem to many to be instruments of a mindless culture of violence; in the mid-twentieth century, the toys of war sustained a culture of commitment.

Salvaging

Edward Tiryakian (1997) asks,

How is it that in the socialization process of the family and other primary groups (such as the school, the neighborhood, and the peer group), the person develops the same sentiments of belonging to and participating in something larger on which the nation depends? (p. 163)

I developed the sentiments to which Tiryakian refers through commitment practices and play. The activities I remember best, however, were neither the most fun nor the most entertaining; they were the most tedious—the gathering and depositing at school of wastepaper and tin cans. Like others trying to recall decades-old events (Pillemer, Goldsmith, Panter, & White, 1988), I remember no details. I am uncertain whether I carried trash from home to school or if picked it up on the way to school. Tin and metal refuse, I recall, was more prestigious than paper, but I cannot say where I delivered either. I do not remember whether the papers I carried were tied or not, or whether the metal was bagged or boxed. I have never been without the memory of regular bearing something heavy down Huntington Street from 33rd Street to my 28th Street school, however.

Recalling no single episode of gathering and delivery, I have assembled into memory a summary scene of the entire salvaging experience—one that probably lasted, for me, from the first to the third grade. This anomalous memory, vague but powerful and unforgettable, calls to mind the following observation by Maurice Halbwachs

(1950/1980), a sociologist who conducted pioneering research on memory: In some instances, we know “beyond any doubt that a certain event occurred, that we were present and actively participated in it. Nevertheless, this episode remains foreign to us, just as if someone else played our role” (p. 24). Halbwachs is relevant to my effort to understand how some memories can be important but remain vague. Of the several commitment practices in which I engaged, however, why do I remember salvaging newspapers and tin cans above all others? The substance of the matter—carrying trash—is insignificant, but might it reveal something important about the general problems of memory and political socialization?

CULTURE OF MOBILIZATION

I grew up in the midst of total war mobilization. The purpose of mobilization was pictured on front pages of daily newspapers, which carried war news—only war news, day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year. There was no effective way to escape the presence of war: The radio, which carried the burden of home entertainment, conveyed war reports continually; comic books, a new genre whose volume of titles had peaked in 1941, saturated generation of children, adolescents, and young adults with stories explaining the evil of the enemy and the moral purpose of the struggle against him; and in the movies, there were regular newsreels of the fighting, appeals to buy war bonds, and feature films concerning war.

War defined the meaning of everything. Everywhere, public information posters urged people to waste nothing and to use time efficiently. Above all was the summons to relentless work: “Every Day You Take Off Gives the Axis a Break,” “Give ‘Em the Stuff to Fight With,” and “He’s Betting His Life That We Stay on the Job.” Students, like workers, were militarized. At the start of the school year, as I discovered after I began to write this essay, the *Philadelphia Bulletin* (1944c, p. 3) reported that “an army of 270,000 boys and girls started I their march from... summer vacations to their battle stations in the classrooms.” Parents having reason to fear polio were permitted to keep their children home, but all other pupils “are earnestly urged to take up their school books, as the most effective weapons by which to aid the Nation now” (p. 3). Three months after “The Invasion,” the local War Manpower Commission chairman said, “The opening of school is your D-Day” (p. 3). At a time when “big government” has become a political issue, it is difficult to convey how comprehensive the role of government can actually become.

Most striking among my recent discoveries about the “home front” was the great paper shortage. “Wastepaper Goes to War,” a cartooned announcement that children and adults could understand, appeared in every issue of the *Philadelphia Bulletin*. Because paper was necessary to package supplies, including weapons, its collection was imperative. More than 90% of Philadelphia’s households, according to one survey, saved newspapers, most of which was collected by schoolchildren. Some schools gave awards to students for collecting the most paper, whereas the city gave school awards for per capita collection (*Philadelphia Bulletin*, 1944a, 1944b, 1944d, 1944e).

Chronic paper shortage and reliance on the school to collect wastepaper helps explain why I remember my part in the salvage effort, but it does not explain why I remember so little in detail. What I forgot about these years, however, was hardly idiosyncratic. Maurice Halbwachs (1950/1980) observed, “We appeal to witnesses to corroborate or invalidate as well as supplement what we somehow know already about an event that in many other details remains obscure” (p. 22; for recent evidence, see Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 1996). As I try to remember, I “recognize in myself many ideas and ways of thinking that could not have originated with me and that keep me in contact with it” (p. 24) Thus, memory is a social process: We appropriate most of our childhood recollection through the stories told us by others.

My witnesses were not the children with whom I went to school because I have seen none of them since I left. The school itself, however, was an important site of memory. If I had not attended school, I would have had an impoverished sense of what I was doing by salvaging and buying stamps; I would have had little conception of the war itself. I would have had no idea what the conversations at home meant or how to interpret the Saturday afternoon newsreels. The school, however, was not a source of vivid memories. This is because I remember not as an individual but by assuming the viewpoint and employing the conceptions of the group of which I am a part. If remembering is framed by witnesses, then forgetting must be an aspect of a change in my relation to the group (Halbwachs, 1950/1980, pp. 24-30). I forget most about events when the group in whose midst I experienced them no longer exists.

SOCIAL FRAMEWORKS OF MEMORY

Given the precariousness of memory, I wonder whether the war was actually meaningful to me as a child or whether I undertook my practices of commitment as would a robot and projected on them understandings of the war acquired as an adult. The more I think about the matter as an adult, however, the more certain I am that I knew the meaning of what I was doing as a child. I did not gain this knowledge, however, directly. Maurice Halbwachs (1992) was probably right when he asserted that, as children, “we knew nothing of the external world but the repercussions of outside events within the circle of our kin” (p. 61). Given the family’s centrality in our early childhood, family thoughts become ingredients of most of our [childhood] thoughts” (p. 61). This is because “the group to which the child at this age most intimately belongs, which constantly surrounds him, is the family” (Halbwachs, 1950/1980, p. 37). It is through the family that national history becomes a personal possession (Niemi & Sobieszek 1977) and an object of knowledge.

My earliest family memories, unlike my memories of trash collecting, are abundant, vivid, and event specific. Many family memories are war related; sleeping in the same bed with a cousin wearing his olive drab (army) underwear; watching two cousins leaving for duty, their mother-in-law (my aunt) tearfully bidding them farewell; and receiving two photographs of a B-17 bomber that I had requested by letter from an aircraft mechanic cousin, and when he was home on leave, being carried about on his shoulders. Once, in an exuberant mood, I struck his head repeatedly with my little fists

and remember his cheerful reprimand. He fixed radios and victrolas (phonographs), and I associate him alone with a 78-rpm Dick Haymes album. I remember the tune and most of the lyrics of my favorite record, “Why Am I Always Dreaming of Theresa?” even though I have not heard it in more than 50 years. I also recall pulling down the shades and sitting next to my mother during blackout exercises; examining my father’s air-raid warden helmet and arm band; an elderly aunt exclaiming *Schiess far Amerika* (Shoot for America) as she shot her Casino hand; my grandmother telling me about her nephew giving chocolate to children in Burma; going with a pretty cousin, a sailor’s wife, to see the movie *Objective Burma*; accompanying my mother to the corner barber shop (the neighborhood polling place) to vote for Franklin D. Roosevelt; believing that moustached Thomas Dewey, Roosevelt’s Republican challenger, resembled Hitler; my mother’s crying at the news of Roosevelt’s death; banging together tin can tops to celebrate VJ Day; setting the bolt and clicking the trigger of the rifle that my sailor cousin brought back from Japan; going to the crowded homecoming, in a small row house like mine, of a cousin I never knew; and attending a double wedding at which one of the two grooms was civilian and the other was a fierce-looking soldier wearing boots. I forgot what the brides, two sisters, looked like.

Through these repercussions on the life of my family, I experienced the war’s reality. What I learned in subsequent years, however, was disenchanting. I discovered that only a few of my cousins actually saw heroic combat, and none did what Errol Flynn or John Wayne did at the Saturday afternoon movies. This unpleasant discovery, however, had no effect on the vividness with which I remembered them. I remember them now because of what they were and not because of what they did. Of this matter, too, my understanding is dependent on Maurice Halbwachs. The family is unique, Halbwachs explained (1992), because its members perceive one another as “unique in kind,” irreplaceable, and unsubstitutable. This image of distinctive individuals, condensed in our knowledge of their first names, is “deeply penetrating since it allows us to retrieve realities we have come to know personally through intimate experience”—even after the persons whose names we know have died (pp. 70-73), as have most of those who were young adults during my childhood. In other words, memories are stored as systems: “Some memories allow the reconstruction of others” (p. 53). What Halbwachs is saying is that public events and personal experience intersect in such a way that the objects of recall and the contexts of which those objects were a part are stored together in the mind (Brown, Shevell, & Rips, 1986). This is important for making sense of why vague memories are so salient. We cannot gauge “their relative strength and the ways in which they combine within individual thought unless we connect the individual to the various groups of which he is simultaneously a member” (Halbwachs, 1992, p 53). The vagueness of my school memories is understandable in these terms. I recollect the names and faces of a few schoolmates but nothing more. Because I had no prolonged contact with them, I forget almost everything I did in their company. If the family is a carrier, a frame, for the retention of childhood memories, however, then why should not activities outside the family, including the salvaging of paper and tin, be forgotten? What was it about collecting trash that made it so meaningful, so worthy of remembrance?

MEMORY AND COMMITMENT

War feeds on obligation. I cannot recall feeling moral obligation any more than I recall experiencing material scarcity; I think of salvaging today as a practice of commitment, however, because it is associated in my mind with both. Obligations are satisfied through practices of commitment, whereas the sharing of these practices, in Bellah et al.'s (1985) words, "helps us identify with others different from ourselves, yet joined with us...by common ends" (p. 251) Practices of commitment are memorable because they are self-defining, and they are self-defining because they embody communal attachment. We remember best what we do when we act for the sake of causes that transcend our individual lives; we remember doing things imbued with collective purpose. Notwithstanding residual ethnic, religious, and racial bitterness (Adams, 1994) the meaning of the war for me, as for others like me, is rooted in the fact that "the war years provided the last great collective social experience in this country's history" (Perrett, 1973, p. 12). I have never been plugged into the society as directly and totally as I was while this event—the event I now consider to be the century's most important—was transpiring.

The activities I have described did not have the same meaning for all children. As far as I can remember, Jewish children like myself made no distinction between Germans and Japanese. We had somehow come to believe that both wished to win the war to kill Americans—all Americans. This belief was manifest in my imagination by foreign soldiers assaulting my street and shooting all its residents. Somehow, I had overgeneralized German hatred for the Jews—a hatred that most Jewish children, I believe, could vaguely realize but not accurately attribute.

Memory's "critical period," then, may not be entirely developmental, as Schuman and Scott (1989) believed; it may also be social—the period in which individuals feel society most deeply within themselves. My critical period affected not only my perception of past events but also my vision of the present and future: my strong support for liberal domestic policies and the Democratic Party; my contempt for defeatist policies, such as that of Henry Kissinger, which assumed that America could best survive by becoming part of an "interdependent" world; my support for the Vietnam War long after most Americans had turned against it; my strong support for the Gulf War; my dismay at the Smithsonian Institution's proposed Hiroshima display, which would have presented Japan's suffering and its viewpoint more elaborately than that of America; and my many disagreements with colleagues on the academic left. My memories have been models for, not reflections of, my current experiences.

Some events are memorable because of their objective significance, regardless of when they occurred in the life of the individual—or even if they occurred before the individual was born. Many people, however, remember events that concretely affect their late adolescent and young adult lives. Schuman and Scott (1989), for example, demonstrate that people who passed through World War II as young adults remember the period not because of its moral or geopolitical significance but because of the personal hardships it

caused. Whether Schuman and Scott's short telephone interviews succeeded in capturing deeper layers of their respondents' feelings and thoughts, however, is open to question. No one can deny the age cohort effect that Schuman and Scott document; yet, in some cases this effect is accompanied by other influences.

In describing the effect of World War II on the residents of "Yankee City," Lloyd Warner's (1959) observations are similar to mine: "Verbally and superficially [Yankee City's residents] disapprove of war, but at best this only partly reveals their deeper feelings (p. 274). It is in time of war that the average resident gets his deepest satisfaction as a member of his society" (p. 274). Various organizations instead of undertaking their usual activities, turned to work that was vital both to them and to the men fighting overseas. Traditional antagonisms between ethnic, religious, and racial groups never disappeared but lessened and as everyone gave up something for the sake of the common enterprise there was a feeling of unconscious well-being—a euphoria" (p. 275). The daily newspaper listing of young men injured and killed infused significance in all acts to help win the war no matter how small. That war is the great unifier also evident in the fact that the local organizations most likely to draw members from all class levels and religious, ethnic, and racial groups were patriotic associations.

Many social scientists have for understandable reasons, become skeptical, even hostile to any manifestation of patriotic sentiment, but its constructive aspects must be recognized. Patriotism, the readiness to renounce one's own interests for the sake of one's country, is distinguishable from nationalism, the cultivation of national consciousness and invidious veneration of the nation and its history (Lowenthal 1994). Because sacrifice for the sake of a cause reflects greater commitment than do verbal assertions alone, patriotism exemplifies the reasons why social scientists focus more on practices than language as conveyers of meaning (Swidler 1996 p. 2). Gertrude Himmelfarb (1997) acknowledged this when she described patriotism as "an ennobling sentiment, quite as ennobling as love of family and community. It elevates us, invests our daily life with larger meaning dignifies the individual even as it humanizes politics" (p. 37). Himmelfarb's words explain why memory of patriotic efforts makes the nation a permanent object of one's sense of self.

Patriotism ennobles, elevates, dignifies, and humanizes as long as it enables us to transcend our narrow loyalties and tribalisms and motivates us to preserve practices of commitment in remembrance. Emile Durkheim (1915/1965), the great teacher of Maurice Halbwachs, asserted that in modern societies only patriotism is capable of overriding society's internal divisions:

There are periods in history when, under the influence of some great collective shock, social interactions have become much more frequent and active Because [the individual] is in moral harmony with his comrades, he has more confidence, courage, and boldness in action, just like the believer who thinks he feels the regard of his god turned graciously towards him." (pp. 241-242)

This same current of collective arousal probably accompanied the events commonly named by Schuman and Scott's (1989) respondents—President Kennedy's assassination, the civil rights movement, and the first landing on the moon. To suggest that arousal

helped make these events memorable is not to deny their objective importance. On the contrary, the intrinsic salience of crisis determines why certain events create a state of collective arousal and others do not. Our sharing of this effervescent state, however, is what we remember most directly and what induces some of us later to learn and to write about the events that caused it.

Paul Valéry's belief that theory is an elaboration of biography has merit, but the concept of biography itself might be more complex than Valéry believed. Biographical memory, in particular, is to be understood as a social process and not the result of "human development" (the unfolding of life stages given in human nature itself). As we reflect on our lives, we find ourselves remembering our lives in terms of our experience with others. This is why the content of what we remember and forget is a sociological puzzle—one that becomes less daunting when the insights of qualitative sociology are brought to bear on it. The past, it is true, is stored in individual minds, but what is stored and how it is stored are determined socially.

NOTE

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