

**The *consequent processualism* as a social ontology to support a distributed  
conception of *memory* and *identity***

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**Abstract:** We propose a social explanation for the imbrication between the phenomena of memory and identity. We assume a “distributed conception” of memory and identity in order to understand that they neither are individual nor structural phenomena, but “distributed phenomena” within dynamic networks. The “distributed approach” assumed here comes from the debate about the extended mind developed within the Cognitive Sciences (Sutton, 2010; Heermink, 2017). This approach finds echo on the firsts sociological formulations about memory within Sociology (Halbwachs, 1925) and can be supported by a social ontology proposed by Andreas Glaeser (2005) called “consequent processualism”.

**Key words:** identity; memory; distributed mind; consequent processualism

## **Introduction**

For many centuries sciences have been debating about the imbrication and co-dependency between memory and identity. Classically many explanations about them have been developed by the fields of Philosophy, Neurosciences, and Psychology. If on the one hand we have approaches (coming from Philosophy, Neurosciences, and Psychology) that are very focused on the individual role, on the other hand we have sociological approaches that are very holistic and understand these phenomena as monolithical structures assumed for a set of individuals. Therefore, our intention is to present an approach that consider the individual and the social role to understand the imbrication of memory and identity. This approach come from the contemporary studies of Cognitive Sciences (Sutton 2010; Heermink, 2017) and finds echo in the firsts

formulations about memory inside Sociology (Halbwachs, 1925). The “distributed approach” lacks a proper social ontology capable of integrating it to a social theory. For that, we suggest that the “consequent processualism” (Glaeser, 2005) could fulfill this gap.

***Memory and identity as imbricated and distributed phenomena: an integration between Halbwachs and the Cognitive Sciences***

For centuries Philosophy has debated the problem of identity and John Locke (2012 [1689]) was the first to relate it to memory. To understand how a person  $A_1$  at a time  $t_1$  can be the same as  $A_2$  at a time  $t_2$ , he stated two problems regarding identity: its persistence and evidence. Roughly,  $A_2$  is identical to  $A_1$ , if and only if he/she remembers enough of what happened throughout his/her life at  $t_1$ . This original problem endorsed many ideas about the interaction between identity and memory in many fields of the Human Sciences. However, the philosophical answers to the relation of memory and identity are often solipsists, especially for not considering dear factors to Sociology such as social interactions. Sociology however always consider “memory” as a generic term, what brings problems to its definition and its relation to other phenomena such as identity.

When we speak of "memory" related to identity, we consider what Cognitive Sciences broadly call as "declarative memory". The declarative memory is a process, not a function like the "procedural memory". It is verbal rather than bodily, it can be reworked and it is not only a mechanical “know-how” (Eichenbaum, 2012). Within this category of “declarative memory” there is still a more specific subcategory: “declarative semantic memory” (a set of learned knowledge) and “declarative episodic memory” (events experienced timely and spatially by someone). The last one is especially relevant to the formation of the self through time and therefore to the identity. Among many aspects of identity, its relation to memory builds who we are in relation to both the temporal flow and to other individuals, who share similar interpretations about the past helping us to build our own memories and identity.

The formulations on memory and social interactions were classically developed by the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1923, 1925, 1941, 1950), who opened the field of studies on the subject within Sociology. He inherits the following problem about

memory from his first master Henri Bergson and he tried to conceive to it a more sociological explanation: *how the subjective perspective of past events can be accommodated, shared, and perpetuated within social relations and be supported by social elements (as social space and social time)?* Along four works, Halbwachs sparsely tries to build his “theory of collective memory”, where he highlights the importance of social factors for the memory formation and perpetuation, though keeping the individual perception and interpretation in the process.

In order to highlight the possibility to consider the social factors to understand memory, Halbwachs proposes the term "collective memory". However, the term remains ambiguous. Because of that, the studies based on Halbwachs have different interpretations and conceive different ontologies for the phenomenon of “memory”. We find two streams of “collective memory studies”: a) the strong version and b) the distributed version. The first stream understands the collective memory as a memory **of the** group, highlighting social practices, rituals and commemorative symbols that governs the present. Such studies consider the collective memory as "some sort of vague presence that is just out there in the cultural ether" (Wertsch, 2009, p. 1). The second stream emphasizes the memory **in the** group, i.e., a process of memory construction in which individuals use social relations to shape their memories. In our previous research (Cordeiro, 2015), we argue that Halbwachs does not hypostasizes the social, i.e., he does not attribute real concreteness to social phenomena, thus following the idea of distributed memory. Some interesting developments on this idea can be found in John Sutton (2010), who states that our cognition and consequently our memory relies not only on external objects, but also on social relations<sup>1</sup>, i.e., our remembering process is extended to the material environment and distributed in several individual minds. These ideas converge with our interpretation of Halbwachs, that argues for a conception of memory that is formed by the individual, shaped by her/his social relations and perpetuated through its materialization in verbal representations (esp. written or recorded). Once materialized,

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<sup>1</sup> Sutton follows the debate about the “extended mind” (Clark and Chalmers, 1998), that generated a program of research with several branches that try to explain other phenomena like memory, identity and narrative. All the branches assume the idea that cognition is not placed exclusively in the mind, but the mind relies on external objects and social relations to carry out any cognitive process.

the memories can be spread through the social network supporting others' remembering process.

How does it work this interaction between our memories and other's memories? And how much necessary are the memories of other to our own self maintenance? Joseph Butler had already criticized Locke's proposition at the time: "if my identity depends on my memories, how do I know that the memories that I have concerns to me?" That is, Locke presupposed by that the personal identity is composed only by remembrances that were experienced by my own. To Butler, however this would be very restricted and improbable, once he has some hidden sociological bias.

With the development of Cognitive Sciences three centuries later, Sydney Shoemaker (1970) introduced the concept of "*quasi-memory*" that is an episodic memory that is not stuck to the individual, i.e., it is not self-referenced. This concept came out after a clinical case in which the patient, after suffering an accident, had kept all the memories of his life without recognizing that he had directly experienced them. This event led Shoemaker to conclude that the selfhood is linked to phenomena that are separated to the body. The author argues for an important distinction between perception and consciousness, which was not common within the Cognitive Sciences.

The codependency between memory and identity is maintained in this argument, however the identity is not constituted only by memories that were constructed from the perceptive flow of the individual, but also by those that are in the flow of their temporal consciousness. So, we can consider that the self is extended into the environment breaking with the bodily confinement. We may have a quasi-memory of a past that was experienced by a third party, but we feel as it was experienced by our own selves. The third party is not anyone, but someone that is highly connected to us in our social network. The individual memories are reinforced by other's memories.

This idea is convergent with the original presuppositions of a concept of *quasi-memory* is useful to understand that we build ourselves upon a past that is important to us, which could be directly experienced by us or which could be experienced by others with whom we establish social relations or share similar values and experiences. Both memories (the directly experienced and the experienced by others) compose our biographical memory and consequently our self. This concept of *quasi-memory* break with the circularity of the lockean argument without breaking with the dependence relation between memory and identity. The identity however is not only based on the individual, but distributed between individuals who maintain relationships.

This idea keeps following the Halbwachsian theory about memory. The origin of the memory depends on the individual perception, but its expression selection is influenced by the social relations kept by the individual. Once it is expressed, the propagation of the memory is a distributed phenomenon. The interplay between individuals allow the remembrance process, once others gave us framework to remember our own memories and other past information that we encompass to our own memories set. The quasi-memories are these past “information”.

This idea of distributed can be found, some way, in different fields of knowledge that had no interaction: the French Sociology of the begging of the century and the contemporary Cognitive Sciences. Both have completely different influences. The French Sociology – here mainly represented by Halbwachs – took some ideas of the French Social Psychology – mainly represented by Charles Blondel – and the contemporary Cognitive Sciences – mainly represented by John Sutton- inherited the research program of Andy Clark e David Chalmers (1998) about the extended mind hypothesis. The Social Psychology of Blondel is one of the first psychological conceptions that consider the social to explain psychological phenomena. The extended mind hypothesis argues that cognition is not just inside the individual mind, because the mind often trusts in other objects and persons to develop to cognitive process. In both cases, Halbwachs and Sutton (as well as its prior influences) we have a distributed conception that shift the subjectivity *locus* to the social dimension. Both argue for the necessity of an interplay between individuals and between individuals and objects to build the remembrance process. Although they have strong similarities, they also have complementarities: in one hand, the theory of collective memory of Halbwachs lacks the conception of mind, a theory of mind and a comprehension of the mental phenomena. In the other hand, the extended mind hypothesis (and its further developments like the work of Sutton) lacks the group or the individuals and their social interplay.

Going back to the relation between memory and identity, following the distributed conception, we may evoke the idea of “distributed identity” (Heermink’s, 2017), which assumes that the self (and its maintenance) depends not only on our cognitive and bodily capacities, but also on the interaction with material environment and other individuals. In this manner, the process of identity formation is highly connected with other’s memories that are expressed both in mnemonic objects (i.e., photographs) and other’s mnemonic narratives. Thus, our self/identity formation is highly dependent on our own view of past which in its turn is build based on other remembrances (Sutton, 2010).

Heermink argues for an evocative relation between object and the mnemonic-identity construction process. A picture or a video of a past event do not show exactly how an event occurred, there is no isomorphism between an “object” and a past event, however the “object” help us evoke the past allowing the individual and collective interpretation of it. “Object” here is any physical object or structure that because of representative proprieties evoke memories (Heermink, 2017). Following Heermink, “the artefact does not need to be similar to the internal processes or states, but as a complement to the internal” (Heermink, 2017, p. 8). Thus, objects and narratives about the past are intertwined: “the evocative objects stabilize and extend the autobiographical memory” (Heermink, 2017, p.15). The objects trigger the memories that will be organized into a narrative. The external objects will be those that will guarantee some stability over time for the memory and its verbal expression. In the same sense as Halbwachs stated, once an objectified memory is materialized, it can be retaken by another individual at another moment of time, be reinterpreted and collaborate in the process of recollection. This is different from other sociological approaches that often handle with the phenomena of memory and identity as a holistic way, that is, considering the memory and identity as hypostatized phenomena that are upon the individuals. In the case of memory as cultural memories that encompasses the whole society or nation and in the case of identity as social markers (as race, gender, class, among others) that are socially constructed. In both cases there is a presupposition of a total sharing of memories or identity traces among a set individuals, converting the identity and memory to monolithically phenomena.

In this sense, the distributed conception seems to be an adequate manner to treat the phenomena of memory and identity within a social, once neither argues for a solipsist argument (like some arguments Philosophy and Psychology) nor argues for a that are often hypostatized argument (like some sociological holistic arguments). However, the distributed conception come from a field (the Cognitive Sciences) that lacks a social ontology. Conceiving a social ontology is necessary to understand the metatheoretical presuppositions and to integrate the different theories here mentioned. In the next topic, we explore not only the social ontology behind the distributed conception, but also a reflected methodological approach that can be connected to this social ontology.

***The consequent processualism as an adequate social ontology to support the conception of “distributed memory and identity”***

In order to integrate the theoretical assumptions, we should clarify our meta-theoretical statements. One of the main metaphors used by social scientists and cognitive scientists that defend the distributed conception was the characterization of the memory and identity as “non-essentialized” phenomena, that is, they are neither placed in the individual nor in the structure. When we deal with social phenomena within Sociology, we face the well-known micro-macro dichotomy. That is, what is preponderant, agency or structure? We have already surrounded this dichotomy, when we mentioned the subjectively (micro) and the holistic (macro) approaches to understand memory and identity. We saw however that neither Halbwachs’ theory of collective memory nor the extended mind hypothesis directly fall into the macro or the micro sides. Both consider that memory is a representation of a point of view that an individual has about a given event, and that he can only render intelligibility to that representation according to the point of view of the others to whom the individual establishes social relations. Moreover, once the individual always has a partial representation of the past, he/she often absorbs partial representations of the same past shared by other individuals in a group or network. In this manner, the distributed conception does not fit to the traditional distinction between micro and macro balance, because we argue for a conception of identity and memory that preserves the individual perspective that should be supported by social elements and interactions and minimally intelligible according to the point of view of others.

There is a “processual Sociology” that is capable to overcome the dichotomy between agency and structure in general. An interesting processual approach is the “consequential processualism” of sociologist Andreas Glaeser (2005) that inherited the Sociology of Max Weber, George Mead and especially of Max Gluckmann. In general, we could say that Glaeser has a conception of social life as an extremely complex version of a dynamic network, that is, networks that change over time in a procedural way.

Every process is a change of something; every process is an action or set of actions that changes something. This “something” would be what Glaeser calls “social formations.” Social formations are not things -unlike Durkheim's statement about social facts- but actions and reactions (or sets of them) whose effects transcend them and whose stability and duration depend on continuous sequences of other actions and reactions (Glaeser, 2005). When these social formations are rooted in a distributed way, we have

an “institutionalization”, offering an “appearance” of an object, ie. marriage, family, or even a set of memories of a set of individuals.

Assuming a social ontology that considers the idea of a processual network, the temporal aspect is very important. That is, the network is not only static, assuming a morphological role, but also dynamic. This complexity of the temporal factor adds the “unforeseen consequences” – a term borrowed from Max Weber – that are generated by the actions of individuals over time. Unforeseen consequences are nothing more than the effects of actions that escape a particular moment in which an action was carried out, extending in time and possibly reaching other persons. Glaeser renames this “dynamic unforeseen consequences” as “projective articulations”. They are precisely the unforeseen consequences generated in the present in function of past actions. For example, the materialization of memory in external objects (such as photos, videos, or books) plays an important role because it can become the common impulse that leads people from the same network to the recollection and interpretation of certain events of the past. Thus, when an individual registers a memory in a written account, for example, it materializes it and years later, this text can lead another individual to a remembrance process that integrates into his own autobiography some forgotten aspects that are highlighted in this text.

This is the idea of the “projective articulations”: the individual who wrote a memory at time  $T_1$  did not intend to trigger a specific recall process on another individual at a  $T_2$  moment. The memory phenomenon as a distributed representation of the past (Sutton, 2010), which is constantly reconstructed in the light of the present (Halbwachs, 1925) - hardly fits this social ontology proposed by Glaeser. The phenomenon of identity, on the other hand, when not conceived as memory dependent for its formation – therefore, as a temporal self – could easily tend to hypostatize, even within an ontology of networks. As Glaeser argues, the structural-functionalism has developed many approaches to the conception of the network treating them “as given phenomenon” (2005, p. 24), considering them as a structural phenomenon. Unlike the structural-functionalism, Glaeser's argues for a dynamic network that considers the temporal dimension, fitting perfectly into the conceptions of formation and perpetuation of memories and, consequently of identities, that we present. Thus, we come to a conception of memory and identity that mobilizes different non-essentialist theories, which emphasize the processual dimension and, therefore, do not reduce the explanation of memory and identity to agency or structure.



Considering the theoretical assumptions that we have presented, how would be the most adequate methodological posture? According to Glaeser (2005), the qualitative approach must be rethought because a traditional ethnography with thick descriptions about static groups are not consonant with the consequent processualism. The contemporary reality embraces a huge amount of data circulation that is constantly growing and changing and asks for an ethnography that tackles with temporal changes across time, capturing, for example, the projective articulations. Besides that, we cannot consider “group” as a self-constituted entity that is defined by its amount of cultural production and storage. We must assume that the individuals are interacting in a network across time and groups only exist as an instance in a particular moment of time. Understanding the wide dynamic of interactions rather than just doing descriptions of cases also allows us to come back to the theory and shed light to broader social process (Burawoy, 1998). In this manner, this methodological approach argues for a movement from the data to the theory in order to improve and re-elaborate it.

## **Conclusion**

Assuming a distributed approach to memory with new developed concepts as quasi-memory we can see its impacts to the closely related concept of identity. In order to consider it properly in a sociological explanation, we needed some social conception that could embrace it. Such conception must be comprehensive enough to deal with the complexity of social relationships. For this reason, we assumed the social ontology that has been developed by Andreas Glaeser called “consequent processualism”, which inherits a processual approach to social phenomena. In a nutshell, such conceptual could be seen as a dynamic network, i.e., a network that keeps changing through time because the change of social formations (actions and reactions within some point of a network). This approach is rich enough to deal with the phenomena of perpetuation and propagation of memories across time through their institutionalization. The unpredictability regarding how social formations may change give room to a non-deterministic approach even within a well-defined framework. In this sense, these are import first steps to have a strong methodology that can cope with some very difficult phenomena to grasp: memory and identity.

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