

# The *Other* and memory in Roger Bastide

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**Abstract.** This article investigates the figure of the French sociologist and anthropologist Roger Bastide in relation to the theory of memory that he elaborates in the context of his studies of Afro-Brazilian cultures. Following the studies of Maurice Halbwachs and Claude Lévi-Strauss, Bastide elaborates an idea of memory as the result of a dialectic interplay between the processes of collective memory and those of *bricolage*. This idea of memory could be useful in a more general analysis of the role of the past in contacts between different cultures.

**Keywords:** Otherness; Collective Memory; *Bricolage*.

## 1. Introduction

In the period between the early 1930s and the early 1970s, Roger Bastide (1898-1974) produced a vast and multiform work, in which he was able to integrate French sociology and anthropology (Comte, Durkheim, Girard, Gurvitch, Mauss, Lévi-Strauss), German sociology (Weber, Tönnies, Simmel), Freud's psychoanalysis and the American social sciences (Cooley, Mead and the Chicago School, Herskovits). In his vast oeuvre, the two perspectives of the social sciences, anthropology and sociology, are always present and often follow innovative twists and turns. In fact, Bastide rejects the rigid academic distinction between sociology and anthropology and defines himself as a sociologist, according to an idea, however - Ravelet (1996, p. 19) points out - that acknowledges him as an anthropologist and ethnologist at the same time, with strong interests in psychology. In the preface to his best-known work, *Les religions africaines au Brésil*, Georges Balandier (1995) defines Bastide's sociology as a «*sociologie de la rencontre*», animated by «a search for differences, curiosity for all forms of otherness, openness to knowledge beyond the limits of disciplinary rationality and rejection of exclusive scientific affiliations» (*Ibid.*, p. VI). For these reasons Bastide's work is richly complex and difficult to catalogue, and perhaps for this considerations it is still not completely known and studied (at least in Italy).

The aim of this article is to investigate the figure of the French sociologist and anthropologist in relation to his theories on the theme of memory assumed in the relationship with the elsewhere and with the other, concretely represented in Bastide's life and thought by the Brazilian lands and its populations of African origin. It was in the connection with Brazil that Bastide made the relations between cultures his primary object of study. And this interest is his starting point for the development of his original approach to memory, starting from the observation that «African remnants in America are a privileged case of collective memory. So we can use it - he says - to test both the relevance and the limits of Maurice Halbwachs' theory [*of memory*]» (Bastide, 2013, p. 46). Hence Bastide starts from a critical assumption of the theory of collective memory elaborated by Halbwachs in the volumes *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (1925), *La Topographie légendaire des évangiles en Terre sainte* (1941) and *La mémoire collective* (1950) in order to attain an idea of memory as the result of a dialectical interplay between the processes of collective memory and those of *bricolage* (a notion which, as we shall see, he draws from Lévi-Strauss), and at the same time recognizing a central place for memory in sociology, up to the point of arguing that any sociology of the imaginary and knowledge can only be conceived from a preliminary sociology of memory (Bastide, 2013, p. 38).

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## 2. A sociologist between two worlds

In a profound interweaving of biographical path, research practice and theoretical reflection, the two worlds Bastide inhabited take on a strong relevance: France, his land of origin and training in the social sciences, and Brazil, the place where he was nourished by the contrasts that this land offered to his gaze, becoming a source of experience and new knowledge.

In the period between the two world wars Bastide studied at the University of Bordeaux - where he got the *Agrégation* of Philosophy in 1924 - taught in several French high schools and wrote his first articles. During these years he was particularly close to Gaston Richard, his professor at the University of Bordeaux, who introduced him to René Worms' *International Institute of Sociology* and the *Revue internationale de sociologie*. From Richard he also drew an interest - rare in the French sociology of those years - in German sociology, in particular Max Weber, Ferdinand Tönnies, Leopold von Wiese and Georg Simmel. Bastide was in these years more influenced by Richard's thought than by Durkheim's. It should be remembered that although Durkheim and Richard had attended together the *École Normale Supérieure* and were later colleagues at the University of Bordeaux, their paths separated in the years around 1910. Later, after Durkheim's death, Richard began to criticize Durkheim's positions and his lack of attention to the individual dimension.

In this context, Bastide emerged as one of the rare French sociologists of his generation who did not recognize himself completely in Durkheim's sociology, which, as we know, was the dominant voice of French sociology in the inter-war years. In an original way, Bastide's sociological thought takes the individual into consideration and refuses to oppose the individual to the collective, a position that indicates him particularly close to Weber's thought. Indeed, as Balandier (1995, p. VIII) points out, Bastide «finds in Weber the reference to the socially situated individual - whom he assumes to be the actor, through interaction, of contacts between cultures - and the demonstration-illustration of the recourse to a interpretative sociology». By articulating, in this perspective, the «individual fact», the «social fact» and the «cultural fact», Bastide fruitfully brings together sociology, anthropology and psychology in an interdisciplinary reflection.

The originality of Bastide's sociological and anthropological outlook was about to strengthen starting from 1938 onwards, the year in which he arrived in Brazil as part of the cultural exchanges that France had with the country in order to take up the chair of sociology at the University of São Paulo, vacated by Lévi-Strauss following his decision to devote himself exclusively to field research. When he arrived in Brazil, Bastide was fascinated by the city of São Paulo and its cultural and ethnic contrasts: he was particularly interested in the city's black population and its social and cultural transformations, and his interdisciplinary outlook and focus on the individual were further consolidated. In Brazil, Bastide found new theoretical and methodological references in North American sociologists and anthropologists, who were at that time neglected in French and European universities, but present in the Brazilian academic world; he thus approached, for example, the epistemological orientations of the Chicago school (like the Chicago sociologists he used a set of qualitative methods, endorsing direct observation) and the acculturation theory of American cultural anthropology, from which he drew the idea that cultures that come into contact one another undergo reciprocal modifications.

Bastide remained in Brazil until 1951, when he was called back to France by Lucien Febvre to take up the chair of director of studies at the VI section of the *Ecole Pratiques des Hautes Etudes*. Until 1953, however, he spent his time between France and Brazil, where he still taught at the University of São Paulo, before settling definitively in France in 1954. In the following years, Bastide made other short trips to Brazil (in 1962 and 1973) and Africa (in 1958) to visit the original places of the Afro-Brazilian populations he had studied. The experience of living and working in Brazil, particularly during his first long stay there, left an enormous mark on Bastide's intellectual profile, and transformed, as has been written (Simon, 1994, pp. 61-62), the philosopher-sociologist of the library into a participant observer, capable of speaking from within a lived experience; having a base in experience itself, Bastide noticeably contributed to introducing the topic of inter-ethnic relations and contacts between cultures into French academia.

### 3. A sociology of otherness and memory

After his arrival in Brazil, and above all from the 1950s onwards, Bastide's writings drew up a true sociology of otherness and inter-ethnic relations, which can be found (as well as in many other writings of various kinds) mainly in the volumes *Le Candomblé de Bahia, rite nagô* (1958), *Les religions africaines au Brésil* (1960) and *Les Amériques noires. Les civilisations africaines dans le nouveau monde* (1967).

Bastide asked himself what would happen when men belonging to different socio-cultural groups come into contact, and presents the great theme of the relationship with the Other, which he addresses by combining historical-cultural and intra-psychic aspects, with the idea, that in order to better understand the Other, the researcher must place himself at the centre of the culture he proposes to study, living and communicating in it and taking an interest even in the banal facts of everyday life. Moreover, he invites the researcher to adopt an authentic research attitude, first of all by following a path of self-reflexivity in order to use an interpretative perspective free of prejudice, capable of taking into account factors that do not belong to our mentality and able to unveil the psychological mechanisms and the cognitive dimension that, all in all, make us all a little racist (Bastide, 1970a and 1971). With this encouragement to «unlearn racism» (cf. Siebert 2003), Bastide embraces a view of the Other that leads towards the search for the «total man», to whom contacts between cultures confer - according to his idea - a new personality, unified rather than interrupted. Specifically, Bastide studies the "total man" produced by Afro-Brazilian cultures, investigating more precisely syncretic religions, i.e. religions born from the encounter between the original African religions and those of America and Christianity. For example, he studied *Candomblé*, an Afro-Brazilian religion (but also present in other South American countries) that mixes indigenous rites, African beliefs and Christianity (Bastide, 1958).

Bastide explains that syncretism consists in «a mixture of several cultures that, instead of clashing, marry; in Mexico, Guatemala, Peru between Christian and Indian traditions - in Cuba, Haiti, Brazil between Catholicism and African traditions. Religious syncretism is selective» (Bastide, 1965, p. 166). By virtue of this selective union between different traditions, religions and cultures, the *Candomblé* adept overcomes the marginality of his condition by operating on a double participation dimension in social life that is devoid of inner conflicts, which features his simultaneity and harmony of behaviour, albeit its differences.

Bastide was aware of the fact, as Pierre Bourdieu (1995, pp. 11-15) summarizes in his commentary on *Les religions africaines au Brésil*, that «society functions because it has a past, and it has a past as long as it functions», in this investigation of the Other as «total man», a central role is given to the past of groups. As we will try to explain, he specifically focuses on what he identifies as the *bricolage* work carried out by memory in situations of contact between different cultures or in the presence of cultural trauma.

As we mentioned earlier, Bastide's starting point for talking about memory is represented by the pioneering studies on the relations between memory and society suggested by the Durkheimian sociologist Maurice Halbwachs. Commenting and criticizing these studies, but never in a polemical way, Bastide elaborates his theory of memory in several contributions, mainly in the chapter "*Les problèmes de la mémoire collective*" contained in his most famous work, *Les religions africaines au Brésil* (1960), and in the article *Mémoire collective et sociologie du bricolage* (1970b). Other considerations can also be found in the article *Groupes sociaux et transmission des légendes* (1949), in the volumes *Sociologie et psychanalyse* (1950) and *Les Amériques noires* (1967) and in the collection of essays *Le sacré sauvage et autres essais* (1975).

On the subject of memory, Bastide intends to demonstrate how, in the encounter between two different cultures, where we are used to consider simply the relationship between them, it would also be good to have a look at the relationship that each of them, and especially the marginalized or dominated culture, has with its own past. This important passage in his thought appears to be articulated in particular with one of the first original concepts he developed and which became a key

concept in all his work: the «principle of *coupure*», which we can translate as «fracture» or «cut» (Bastide, 1955; Cf. Cuche, 1994). In his idea, if, in the encounter between different cultures, the social marginality of individuals is not transformed into psychological marginality, it is the conceptual operation represented by the «principle of *coupure*» which allows the individual, deprived of a single identity, to live simultaneously and without particular worries in two different worlds. More precisely, it is not the individual who is «cut» in two, but the individual who cuts reality into several spheres in which he or she realizes different forms of participation that are experienced as non-contradictory. For example, Bastide (1955, p. 9) writes: «The Afro-Brazilian escapes through the principle of *coupure* the misfortune of marginality. What is sometimes interpreted as Black's ambivalence is indeed the sign of his greatest sincerity; if he plays within two frames, it is because there are two frames». It is in this logic that the Afro-Brazilian studied by Bastide «realizes the presence of all these holes that have been dug and slowly enlarged by the myth and strives to fill them. But since he has changed place, he can only fill them with new elements, heterogeneous in comparison with the African culture, borrowed from the Western society in which he lives» (Bastide, 1995, p. 359).

Thus, based on his researches on the myths and rituals of African origin still present, albeit transformed and readapted, in the communities of descendants of the ancient slaves in Brazil, Bastide throws new light on Halbwachs' theory, making it possible to re-evaluate elements normally overlooked by the commentators of the famous volumes *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* and *La mémoire collective* (Cf. Lavabre, 2013). Particularly in his article *Mémoire collective et sociologie du bricolage*, Bastide notes in Halbwachs' texts an advance on Durkheimian sociology; according to him, Halbwachs sometimes writes in his texts «what he does not want to say» (Bastide, 2013, p. 44), hence making it possible, after a careful reading, for individual consciences to interpenetrate against the idea of impermeable consciences. Halbwachs (2001, pp. 79-122) argues at times for the idea that, in order for the collective memory of a certain social group to endure, the actual presence of its members, the habit and the faculty «to think and remember as members of the group to which we belong» (*Ibid.*, p. 83) is necessary. Nevertheless, Bastide indicates, Halbwachs is unable to exploit this perspective of the permeability of consciences and to detach himself from the Durkheimian conception of a collective consciousness superior to and external to individuals. Taking into account this passage - of which Halbwachs gives a recurrent outline, but doesn't elaborate a definitive development - Bastide specifies that Halbwachsian theory of memory oscillates between a conception that emphasizes the group as a group (and which corresponds to the one mainly recognized by Halbwachs' scholars) and another that, on the contrary, stresses the individuals that form the group, who, in the progress of their interactions, preserve, reconstruct and transmit what we call collective memory. This second perspective makes Bastide recognize in Halbwachs' theory an idea of memory as a mere fact of communication between individuals. On this basis, Bastide arrives at the formulation of a general theory of collective memory which he develops from the notion of *bricolage*, reworked by Lévi-Strauss (1962) and investigated with strong references to Mauss, the first to have glimpsed the theory of *bricolage* from African-American phenomena (Bastide, 2013, p. 61). To this notion, and starting essentially from *bricolage* as a practice, as defined by Lévi-Strauss, Bastide dedicated an extensive reflection to explain what a «sociology of *bricolage*» might consist of (*Ibid.*, pp. 60-75).

In the study of the cults of syncretic religions, Bastide thinks of some kind of creation through *bricolage*. Following Lévi-Strauss, he observes that the character of mythical thought, as well as, on a practical level, of *bricolage*, is to elaborate structured sets by relating them not directly to other structured sets, but by using residues and traces of specific events, more precisely of memories separated from their chronology. *Bricolage* thus utilizes memory in order to reorganize the contents. However, the *bricolage* operation neither «extends nor renews what is considered from the past; it merely obtains the group from its transformations. This paramount importance of collective memory is far more enhanced when we move from the phenomena of the permanence of Africanisms to the one of the creation of an African-American culture [...] by black men or, conversely, of the maintenance of a destructive memory by whites" (*Ibid.*, p. 68).

On this basis, Bastide introduces a perspective which, reinforcing Halbwachs' theoretical proposal, suggest to think about the reciprocity of points of view and the interaction between the group as a group and the individuals who make it up, with their experiences and memories. This is based on the idea that collective memory can only exist on condition that continuity centers and social conversation are materially rebuilt, and that the group functions through communication between its members, not only through their communion, furthermore it is necessary to consider that it is not only the individual who is the meeting place of the groups to which he is linked, but that the group is also a place of exchanges between people (*Ibid.*, p. 54). Bastide indicates that memory exists only insofar as it is articulated among the members of the group, thus as a fact of «interpenetration of consciousnesses», and that in the end it is always the individual who remembers. In essence, in a sort of rehabilitation of the interpersonal over the collective, for Bastide memory is collective not because it belongs to the group as a group, transcendent in relation to the individuals that form it, but since the collective is the condition within which individuals exist, cooperating and relating to one another. Bastide thus advances a new conception of collective memory not based on the group as such, but based on its organization and structure: this means that the group's structure provides the frameworks for collective memory, no longer represented as collective consciousness, but as a system of interrelations of individual memories. If as Halbwachs thinks, others are needed to remember, it is not because «I» and «the others» are immersed in the same social thought, but because, according to Bastide, «our personal memories are concatenated with the memories of other people in a well-regulated game of reciprocal and complementary images» (*Ibid.*, p. 57) and these images can re-emerge whenever the community rediscovers its structure; Bastide, in fact, demonstrates that the African memories that can subsist in the communities of descendants of the ancient slaves in Brazil are those most adaptable and functional to the Brazilian global society, articulated in a mechanism in which the «collective memory of the Blacks is linked to the collective memory of the global society» (*Ibid.*, p. 70). This is because, he continues to explain, «every memory is manipulated by society, or by a group of this society; the White (while hypocritically claiming the need for their assimilation to Western values), does not want them to lose the collection of memories, even deconstructed ones, that the slaves were able to preserve in the New World, because if they lost them there would now be equality between the black man and the white man. In order to belittle the Black man, it is therefore necessary to destroy the symmetry of behaviour and mentality between the two competing groups» (*Ibid.*, p. 68).

Another element overlooked by Halbwachs (since he was interested in the phenomena of memory preservation, but not in the processes of forgetting) is the «consciousness of the holes in collective memory. [...] I have shown – Bastide states - that, since certain communication threads were cut by slavery, the scenario of African ceremonies cannot always restore itself in its organic globality, which is certainly reconstructed, but in a more or less lacunose way» (*Ibid.*, p. 58). Bastide argues, in fact, that it is wrong to define oblivion as an absence; instead, it should be acknowledged as a «full void» of something. African-American culture, he explains, is constituted by borrowing its elements from the White past to fill the gaps in the collective memory of slavery. This filling of an absence has a meaning for the group which, in terms of a *bricolage* work, undertakes to organize a new memorial configuration, which above all carries a future from the point of view of the interests of the group in question. Indeed, Bastide suggests, we should not speak of oblivion by relating to a culture, but we should simply study the forms of content substitution. Oblivion is a form of censorship, but thanks to this process of content substitution, it can also be a tool that encourages the individual or group to construct or re-establish a globally satisfactory self-image.

In conclusion, in the approach to memory that Bastide proposes, it emerges the idea that there is neither a strictly individual nor a strictly collective memory, and that what the group preserves is the structure of the connections between the different individual memories. Halbwachs himself, he observes (*Ibid.*, p. 54), was very close to this idea of structure or communication system in his study on the collective memory of musicians (Halbwachs, 2001, pp. 47-77), where he explains how in an

orchestra each musician has his own role, i.e. the pieces of the score he has to play according to a previously fixed sequence. This means that the whole score is not simply a mere fusion of sounds, but the exhibition of a system in which each musician has a place in relation to the other musicians, within a well-structured whole. For Bastide, this structure corresponds to a fabric of images and languages that function as social transmitters and within which memory can be reactivated. Collective memory is thus presented as «the memory of a structure of remembrance, the voids that can be opened there are felt as full voids, filled with something that is needed for the totality of the scenario to regain its meaning» (Bastide, 2013, pp. 59-60).

#### 4. Concluding remarks

Among the classical studies on memory, Bastide's work is one of the first to have offered interesting theoretical and methodological ideas for analyzing the role of memory in the relationship with the Other within complex and heterogeneous societies, and particularly within the phenomena of social change produced by the encounter between different cultures. The idea of memory as *bricolage* as a profound interconnection between the individual and the institutional, between the psychic and the social, seems to be a useful perspective from which to read and interpret the endless comparison with the Other, the elsewhere and the relative memories generated by the phenomena of mobility and exchange favoured by the process of globalization.

Through his research, Bastide suggests, for example, that migration is not only a displacement in space, but it is also an operation that leads towards a complex transformation of individuals, thus proposing a study of their specific psychological attitudes resulting from their migratory projects and their reactions to the living and working conditions they have to confront with. He also recommends, as he demonstrates in *Les religions africaines au Brésil*, never to lose sight of the fact that relations always take place «within a certain global structure» (Bastide, 1995, p. 14).

In the context of contemporary migration flows, with their load of cultures and memories of others, Bastide's lesson seems to be clear: in front of situations of social change, as well as in the uprooting phenomena that make the migrant divorce from his own habitual world, individuals are forced to reconfigure an identity that has become - on a subjective and social level - problematic, more precisely, as Floriani suggests (2004, p. 13), «as a *frontier identity* [...] *between the before and the after, between the elsewhere and the here*». Characterizing the migration phenomenon as a spatial and social recomposition of individual and collective identities and relations rises questions about frames of reference and belonging, the specific ways of mobilizing the past and building new «communities of memory» (Margalit, 2006, pp. 62-66), whether this is a spontaneous construction or, sometimes, supported by some form of manipulation. It should be noted, however, that the study of the role of the past in today's phenomena of mobility of individuals and groups belonging to different cultures needs to be compared with new problems. In fact, as Rampazi (2020, p. 135) well summarizes, «Mass global connectivity, the mobility intensification, the transnationality of work, the globalization of distribution/consumption processes are progressively detaching people's lives from belonging exclusively to a reference community whose territorial boundaries are also cultural frames. This tendency raises many questions about the future of cultural differences». Among these questions, the survival of cultural tradition emerges, especially when it becomes detached from the territory of the original community, where tradition was nourished by the evocative power of places. «The example of the diasporas - Rampazi further explains (*Ibid.*, p. 137) - shows that this possibility exists, provided that the tradition in question continues to be an integral part of the daily practices and relations of a group of people who represent themselves as a community. [...] In similar cases, the identity value of the place of origin does not disappear but is preserved by changing its configuration. From being a place where communities are physically rooted, it becomes the imagined spatial reference of a collective identity, an entity transfigured by the myth of its origins». In order to investigate this renewed relationship between memory and space, Bastide can provide useful avenues of analysis by virtue of the clarifications it suggests on the mechanisms of anchoring memories in space and the

constitution of new material centers, which are to be linked with mental images. «The *Candomblés* - Bastide explains - with their *temples*, their *pegi*, their sacred tree forests, their houses of the dead, the source of *Oshalà*, embody the sacred topographical reconstruction of lost Africa, adding that the first sacred stones were brought from Africa, still drenched in the supernatural force of the *orisha*, a force which, by mystical participation, is transmitted to all surrounding environment» (Bastide, 1995, p. 345).

In line with Halbwachs (1941) - who analyzed the religious memory linked to the sites of the Gospels in the Holy Land in order to explain the process that makes it possible to pass from material space to symbolic space - Bastide thus highlights the passage from the physical place of rootedness of a community to an imagined spatial reference of a collective identity, transfigured by the myth of origins. In this way he shows how the remodeling of space in the *elsewhere* in which the individual finds himself living provides the material anchors that allow memories to re-emerge from the depths of what we call collective memory.

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