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Introduction to Special Section: Critical Theory and Memory (II)*

Memory as a Medium of Critique

Luca Corchia**, Claudia Hassan***

Abstract. This second part of the special section *Critical Theory and Memory*, with essays by Luca Corchia and Claudia Hassan, Teresa Grande and Giuseppe Mercuri, Luca Corchia, Vera Kopsaj, and Angelo Falzarano, completes the project launched in issue no. 3/2025 of *Trauma and Memory* and bridged by Paolo Jedlowski's essay on past futures. This Introduction argues that memory is not merely an object of critique but one of its media. Collective remembrance performs five functions: a *cognitive* function, which reconstructs the experiences concealed by dominant narratives; a *normative* function, which preserves unfulfilled claims to justice; a *political* function, which sustains the democratic public sphere and historical accountability; an *emancipatory* function, which enables learning processes through the confrontation with histories of domination and suffering; and a *utopian* function, which preserves unrealized futures. Reconstructing the dialogue among the contributions – from Habermas's distinction between *consciousness-raising critique* and *rescuing critique* to Benjamin's *Eingedenken*, from the question of German guilt to *algorithmic oblivion* and the *synthetic memories* of the *hyperfast society* – the text shows how Critical Theory and Memory Studies correct one another. The former offers the latter normative criteria for judging the direction of remembrance; the latter restores to the former an awareness of the selectivity, mediation, and social temporality of all memory. What emerges is the outline of a *critical theory of public memory*, whose future tasks are sketched in conclusion.

Keywords: Critical Theory; Public memory; Working through the past; Algorithmic oblivion; Past futures.

1. Critical Theory and Memory: A Common Intellectual Project

The first part of this special section closed with a deliberately sharp thesis: “memory is today the most concrete form of critique” (Caon and Corchia, 2025: 143). The second part, presented here, takes up that thesis and specifies its meaning. If the critical tradition long treated memory as an *object* – a terrain of ideological manipulation, repression, and commodification to be unmasked – the essays collected in these two issues show that it is also a *medium* of critique: the place where critique finds its evidence, its criteria, and its alternatives. To criticize the present, after all, is to measure it against something the present does not wholly contain: experiences it has forgotten, sufferings it has not repaired, possibilities it has let fall. Without memory, critique shrinks to a judgment without terms of comparison; without critique, memory shrinks to an inventory or a liturgy.

This twofold implication has a disciplinary history worth recalling. Since the 1980s, the “memory boom” (Huyssen, 2003) has turned a long-marginal theme into an autonomous and interdisciplinary field of study. Its achievements are by now common ground. Since Halbwachs (1925; 1950), we know that there is no remembering outside the social frameworks that allow recollections to be fixed

* The first part of this Special Section was published on pp. 138-188 of issue no. 3/2025 of *Trauma and Memory*.

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and retrieved; with Jan and Aleida Assmann (1992; 1999), we have learned to distinguish communicative memory, which lives across three or four generations, from cultural memory, entrusted to texts, rituals, and institutions; with Ricoeur (2000), we have learned to distrust the abuses of forgetting as much as those of memory, and to think of a “just memory” as a task rather than a given; with Alexander (2004), we have understood that a collective trauma does not coincide with the event that causes it, but with the social process of meaning-making that constitutes it as such. The field has thus shown that all memory is selective, reconstructive, and oriented by the present. Yet this very success has exposed it to a symmetrical risk: that of a descriptive presentism which registers the plurality of memories without possessing criteria to judge them.

It is here that the encounter with Critical Theory proves productive. Ever since his programmatic essay of 1937, Horkheimer had defined critical theory by its relation to history: society is not a second nature but the product of human praxis and therefore, in principle, transformable (Horkheimer, 1937). Critique thus has an intrinsically temporal structure: it presupposes that the present is not necessary, and memory is the first testimony that things have been different and could have been different still. Seyla Benhabib (1986) captured this structure in her distinction between the explanatory-diagnostic moment of critical theory, which reconstructs the crises and contradictions of the present, and its anticipatory-utopian moment, which projects the present’s unrealized possibilities. In the Koselleckian tension between “space of experience” and “horizon of expectation” (Koselleck, 1979), memory occupies precisely the hinge: it is what allows the present to be diagnosed as the outcome of a history and, at the same time, to be reopened towards what that history interrupted.

The Frankfurt School never developed a systematic sociology of memory. And yet questions of memory run through the whole of its work. They emerge in the analysis of fascism and antisemitism, from the “Elements of Anti-Semitism” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1947) to the research on the authoritarian personality and the *Gruppenexperiment* on how post-war Germans spoke, in public and in private, about their own past. They emerge in the reception of psychoanalysis, which drew from the Freudian distinction between remembering, repeating, and working through (Freud, 1914) the model of a reflexive relationship with what has been repressed. They emerge in the Frankfurt formula that “all reification is a forgetting”, which Honneth (2005) made the foundation of his rereading of reification as “forgetfulness of recognition”. And they emerge, finally, in the reflection on historical consciousness, democratic learning, and public responsibility that accompanies the history of the Federal Republic.

Three moments of this tradition form the common background of the essays collected here. The first is Adorno’s 1959 lecture *The Meaning of Working Through the Past*. Adorno distinguished *Aufarbeitung* as critical confrontation from the liquidation of the past that invokes its name precisely in order to close it: “its intention is to close the books on the past and, if possible, even remove it from memory” (Adorno, 1959/1998: 89). And he added: “I consider the survival of National Socialism within democracy to be potentially more menacing than the survival of fascist tendencies against democracy” (ibid.: 90). The criterion was set out in the closing lines: “the past will have been worked through only when the causes of what happened then have been eliminated” (ibid.: 103). The second is Benjamin’s philosophy of history: *Eingedenken* as a remembrance that wrests the past from the “homogeneous, empty time” of progress (Benjamin, 1940/2006: 396); the “weak messianic power, a power on which the past has a claim” with which every generation is endowed (ibid.: 390); the task “to brush history against the grain”, because “there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (ibid.: 392). The third is Habermas’s reworking of this legacy. In his 1972 essay on Benjamin, Habermas distinguishes *consciousness-raising critique* from *rescuing critique* (Habermas, 1972/1983); in his interventions in the *Historikerstreit*, he translates remembrance into the “public use of history” and grounds a constitutional patriotism on the memory of Auschwitz (Habermas, 1987); in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, he assigns to anamnesis the function of a decentering counterweight to a time-consciousness turned entirely towards the future (Habermas, 1985/1987). Alongside these three moments stand Marcuse’s thesis that the truth of

memory lies “in its specific function of preserving promises and potentialities that have been betrayed” (Marcuse, 1955); the theory of recognition, which shows how collective experiences of disrespect, sedimented in the memory of groups, fuel social struggles (Honneth, 1992); and Wellmer’s (1993) reflection on the conditions of a democratic culture in a modernity that remains constitutively unreconciled.

From this constellation derives the hypothesis that guides the entire special section. Memory is a condition of democratic self-understanding, since a political community recognizes itself in the way it answers for its own past. It is the medium through which societies confront suffering and injustice, because only in remembrance do the victims remain present as claims rather than as statistics. It is a field of ideological struggle, because, as Benjamin warned, “even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious” (Benjamin, 1940/2006: 391). And it is a resource for emancipation, because what was possible and did not come to pass continues to question what is. In more analytical terms, the contributions allow us to distinguish five critical functions of collective remembrance. The *cognitive* function makes it possible to reconstruct social experiences concealed by dominant narratives. The *normative* function preserves claims to justice that remain unfulfilled. The *political* function sustains democratic public spheres and historical accountability. The *emancipatory* function enables learning processes through the confrontation with histories of domination and suffering. The *utopian* function, finally, preserves unrealized futures and alternative historical possibilities.

The dialogue between Critical Theory and Memory Studies takes on a particular urgency in the present. Digitalization and platform capitalism have turned the archive into infrastructure and remembrance into flow; algorithmic memory selects, reframes, and erases according to criteria of visibility and profit. Political polarization has made the past a repertoire of rhetorical weapons; competing historical narratives confront one another on a transnational scale, oscillating between what Rothberg (2009) has called “competitive memory” and the possibility of a “multidirectional memory”; and the crisis of democratic legitimacy also manifests itself as a crisis in democracies’ relationship to their founding act. The first issue condensed this condition into a paradox: “we remember more than ever, yet increasingly less together” (Caon and Corchia, 2025: 139). To face it, the two fields must correct one another. Critical Theory brings with it the critique of domination and of ideology, the analysis of social pathologies, democratic theory, the theory of recognition, and the idea of an emancipatory social inquiry. Memory Studies contribute the categories of collective remembrance, historical consciousness, cultural transmission, trauma and working through, the public uses of the past, and the temporal dimensions of social life. Their encounter outlines the contours of an emerging field that we propose to call a *critical theory of memory*.

2. The Contributions of the Two Issues

The first issue had shifted the axis of inquiry from “what we remember” to “how, and through what, we remember” (Caon and Corchia, 2025: 142), proposing to understand memory as a “critical infrastructure”: not a repository of the past, but a sociotechnical and normative dispositif that enables or disables the collective capacity to understand, judge, and act (Caon and Corchia, 2025). Rather than for their individual findings, those contributions deserve to be reread today for the four thematic clusters they opened.

The first cluster concerns the *digital mediation of memory*. Simone D’Alessandro (2025) showed that platforms are not neutral storage tools but ecosystems that restructure individual and collective remembrance according to logics oriented towards the monetization of attention. Memory loses its narrative and performative character and takes the form of a constantly alterable archive-database. The result is a “governance by opacity” that exercises power not by imposition but by defining the cognitive contexts within which judgments and decisions are formed. The practices of resistance identified by the author – *undesign*, reinvention, *workarounds* – require advanced skills: the defense

of an uncolonized memory thus risks becoming the privilege of the few. This is the first formulation, within the special section, of memory under digital capitalism.

The second cluster concerns the relationship between *memory and communicative rationality*. Drawing on *The Theory of Communicative Action* and on *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie* (Habermas, 2019), Daniel Valente Pedroso de Siqueira (2025) read cultural memory as a normative reserve: a body of sedimented contents which, when discursively reactualized, nourish the collective capacity for critique and moral orientation. His diagnosis of three colonizations of memory – bureaucratic, mercantile, and algorithmic – and his proposal to defend remembrance as a democratic public good provided the special section with a grammar of memory as a communicative practice and as a form of resistance to the colonization of the lifeworld.

The third cluster concerns *counter-memory* and marginalized histories. Benedetta Pozio (2025) made Marrano crypto-Judaism the paradigm of an “objectless anamnesis”: a memory deprived of texts and liturgies, which preserves not contents but the very form of transmission, and which for this very reason cracks the teleology of the victors. The “fidelity to absence” introduced an ethics of the fragment into the special section. Silence can be an indictment; a gap can hold a claim to justice; counter-history is not necessarily an alternative narrative, but may be the gesture that prevents the dominant narrative from closing.

Paolo Jedlowski’s essay (2026), published between the two issues, constitutes the fourth cluster and the bridge between the two parts of the project: that of *future-oriented memory* and historical imagination. Starting from the figure of Lulu, the last descendant in Edgar Reitz’s *Heimat* saga, who calls herself an “archaeologist of the future”, Jedlowski proposes a sociology of “past futures”: the remembrance of the horizons of expectation within which earlier generations acted. To remember those futures is to understand the meaning that action had for those who performed it, to rethink relations between generations as a confrontation of expectations, and to recognize in collective identities the trace of what might have been. But it also means, in the wake of Marcuse and Benjamin, reactivating “betrayed promises” as a critical resource without forgetting the heterogenesis of ends: the memory of the futures imagined by modernity – development, progress, the futures imposed on colonized peoples – is also an exercise in self-criticism. The essay thus anticipates the Benjaminian questions on unrealized possibilities, historical alternatives, and utopian memory that the second issue will develop. It adds a decisive proviso: not all past futures deserve to be taken up again, and the memory of the future counts as an invitation to act only if it rescues hope from melancholy.

Taken together, these contributions established five figures of memory that the second issue presupposes as it opens new directions for critical memory studies: memory as resistance, as communicative practice, as counter-history, as temporal imagination, and as a stake in digital capitalism. One detail shows how closely these figures are intertwined. The same *Heimat* that Jedlowski reads as an archaeology of the future was received, in the years of the *Historikerstreit*, as a “German alternative to the American series *Holocaust*” and as a vehicle of a pacified continuity with the past (Holub, 2019). The same work can serve normalization or estrangement: what decides is not the material of memory but the direction of its use. This is precisely the criterion that the second issue brings to the center.

The essay by Luca Corchia and Claudia Hassan, *Consciousness-Raising Critique or Rescuing Critique? Critical Theory, Sociology of Memory, and Public Working Through-the-Past*, provides the second issue with its conceptual framework. Its point of departure is the Habermasian category of the “public use of history”, read at the intersection of the Frankfurt tradition and the sociology of memory. After the dissolution of the *topos* of *historia magistra vitae* described by Koselleck, history can no longer teach how to live; the public use of history is not a reissue of it, but what takes its place once didactic exemplarity has become impracticable. The theoretically most significant step concerns Halbwachs. If collective memory tends to expel what divides the group and thus “selects systematically against conflict”, a memory that publicly assumes guilt represents a functional anomaly. The public use of history is then the “normative obverse” of collective memory: a self-critical public memory does not arise spontaneously, but requires institutions, intellectuals, and public conflict. On

this basis, the authors articulate the two forms of critical intervention that Habermas derives from Benjamin and Adorno. *Consciousness-raising critique* operates on the cognitive and hermeneutic plane: it clarifies cultural patterns, works through the past, discloses false consciousness, and projects alternatives to the existing order. It corresponds to the explanatory-diagnostic moment of critique, and it is here that the critique of ideology meets the sociology of cultural trauma, since attributing traumatic status to an event is a speech act that raises contestable validity claims. *Rescuing critique*, by contrast, safeguards the debt owed to the victims and the semantic potentials threatened by oblivion: it is the register of “anamnestic solidarity”. The essay’s thesis is that the two critiques are not alternatives. Without the second, the first would shrink to an ascertainment of facts; without the first, the second would harden into ritual. From this follows a criterion of judgment that seems to us one of the most generalizable results of the entire special section: a public use of the past “is to be judged by its direction rather than by its intensity” – that is, by whether it confirms the self-understanding of those who remember or exposes it to contestation – and, with Adorno, by the persistence or otherwise of the conditions that made possible what is being commemorated. The institutionalization of memory (remembrance days, memory laws, “memory journeys”) partly realizes what Habermas called for, but risks turning it into “civil liturgy”, “civil religion”, or “banal commemoration”. Constitutional patriotism, the authors conclude, protects against the manipulation of the past not because it prescribes the right memory, but because it establishes the conditions under which competing memories can expose themselves reciprocally to critique. Memory thus becomes a practical resource for democratic self-transformation and civic learning, in keeping with Adorno’s indication that “the only education that has any sense at all is an education toward critical self-reflection” (Adorno, 1966/1998: 193).

If Luca Corchia and Claudia Hassan reconstruct *rescuing critique* chiefly in its Habermasian translation, the essay by Teresa Grande and Giuseppe Mercuri, *Remembering Lost Futures. Walter Benjamin and Dialectical Images of Memory*, restores its source and widens its scope. The authors read Benjamin as the theorist of an “authentic memory”, capable of recovering the past in its entirety, including the silenced contents of history, and of reactivating “lost futures”, that is, the expectations of the past that remained unfulfilled. *Eingedenken* appears here as an atypical form of memory, in which the dialectic between past and present exceeds descriptive reconstruction and safeguards the claim that the past holds over the present. The dialectical image is the sudden constellation in which a fragment of the past and the now illuminate each other. The *Jetztzeit*, which the authors trace back to the Jewish conception of history as *Toldot*, interrupts the homogeneous time of progress and historicism. The essay’s most original contribution, however, lies in shifting this conceptual constellation from the plane of the philosophy of history to that of urban space. Taking up the diagnosis of the decline of experience (*Erfahrung*) in favor of punctual lived experience (*Erlebnis*), together with the pages of *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, *City Images*, and the *Passages*, Grande and Mercuri read the city as a reification of collective memory. Street names, plaques, monuments, ruins, and unfinished urban projects hold a “not yet conscious knowledge” that routine renders invisible and that only an awakening can reactivate. Applied to the urban landscape, the dialectical image makes it possible to see simultaneously “what has been, what has become, and what might have been”. The essay thus deepens the utopian and emancipatory function of memory in two directions. On the one hand, it explicitly links Benjaminian redemption to Jedlowski’s past futures, extending it from the hopes of the oppressed to those of every generation. On the other, it gives that redemption a sociological materiality: critical memory dwells not only in texts and public controversies, but is deposited in the spaces of everyday life, where it is decided whether a *Stolperstein* will remain an obstacle to the gaze or become part of the furniture. The critique of progress thereby ceases to be a speculative thesis and becomes a method for reading places.

Luca Corchia’s second essay, *The Question of German Guilt in the Intellectual Biography of Jürgen Habermas*, tests the categories of the essay co-authored with Claudia Hassan against a long-term historical case. Its point of departure is the statement *Grundsätze der Solidarität* of 13 November 2023, signed by Habermas together with Nicole Deitelhoff, Rainer Forst, and Klaus Günther. The

author argues that the polarized reception of that text misconstrued it, because it ignored what German guilt means, biographically and in terms of public memory, for Habermas's generation. The reconstruction follows a history-of-ideas approach in which biography operates as a corrective to impersonal historiographical narratives. It traverses childhood under the Third Reich; the "democratic conversion" of 1945, which matured as Habermas listened to the Nuremberg trials on the radio; the return of the exiles; the Heidegger case; the Frankfurt Auschwitz trial; the generational conflict of 1968; the *Historikerstreit*; unification; the controversy over the Berlin memorial; the diagnosis of secondary antisemitism; and, finally, the so-called "Historikerstreit 2.0" of 2021. The guiding thread is Jaspers's (1946) distinction between moral guilt, which cannot be imputed to those born afterwards, and political liability (*Haftung*), which is inherited along with citizenship. The essay's thesis is that the successive controversies are not a series of occasional interventions but the stages of a single learning process, in which each episode displaces the site where that liability is publicly assumed. The Auschwitz trial shows that courts can establish guilt but cannot make liability be assumed; the *Historikerstreit* makes explicit that what the revisionists sought to be relieved of was liability, not guilt; unification raises the question of whether liability survives a change in the subject that inherits it; constitutional patriotism, the memorial, and the critique of secondary antisemitism answer the same problem, namely how liability is to be transmitted once the generation of the *Nachgeborenen* has itself passed. In Jan Assmann's terms, this is the passage from the communicative memory of witnesses to the cultural memory of institutions. Drawing on the conversations published in 2024, the essay also corrects the standard narrative of an Adornian inheritance: the reading of the imperative of non-regression that Habermas defended in 1986 derives from Jaspers rather than from Adorno. It is this bifurcation that makes his 2023 position intelligible. Habermas's trajectory thus illuminates a more general question for democratic theory: *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* is not an obstacle on the road to "normality", but the source of legitimation of a postnational democracy. German *Zerknirschung*, the author concludes, is not exportable as content but only as form, that is, as the obligation of every political community to subject its own history to the same labor of critical abstraction. This indication resonates with Margalit's (2002) distinction between an ethics of memory, bound to the "thick relations" of communities, and a morality of memory, which concerns humanity as a whole in the face of radical evil.

Vera Kopsaj's essay, *Ghosts in the Machine: Digital Memory, Loss and Algorithmic Oblivion*, moves the very memory of the Shoah from the memorial to the *feed*. Kopsaj takes up the critique of the culture industry, the Benjaminian notion of redemption, and Marcuse's thesis of art as the memory of a failed liberation, and combines them with an interpretive netnographic analysis of three hundred posts published between January and August 2025 on Instagram, Facebook, and X. The posts, sampled through ten hashtags and coded along six analytical axes, are grouped into three macro-categories: ritual, conflict, and critique. The findings show a predominance of ritualized practices (almost half of the corpus), roughly a quarter of conflictual and politicized uses, and a similar share of counter-memorial and self-critical practices. "Platform-specific grammars of grief" also emerge: Instagram's aestheticized solemnity, Facebook's institutional and pedagogical framing, and the real-time politicization of X, where Holocaust memory is mobilized in the conflict over Gaza. The proposed category, *algorithmic oblivion*, designates a condition in which mnemonic traces proliferate while the possibility of symbolic working through weakens. Oblivion, in this sense, does not consist in erasure, but in compulsive and decontextualized circulation. The Freudian distinction between repeating and working through is thus transposed to the cultural plane: platforms structurally privilege repetition, while memory, managed as tertiary retention by private infrastructures, becomes "proletarianised" in Stiegler's (2010) sense. Two aspects make the essay particularly relevant to the special section. The first is that it shows how collective memory increasingly depends on privately governed technological systems, in which visibility does not coincide with historical intelligibility and the archive gives way to the flow: as the author writes, "digital infrastructures not only shape what is remembered, but also condition the very possibilities of remembrance". The second is that Kopsaj, taking up the distinction between an "idealist" and a "materialist" paradigm of working through the past (Schulz, 2024), observes that platforms align more easily with the former and marginalize the slow, structural labor

required by the latter. This opens an explicit dialogue with the essays by Corchia and Hassan and by Corchia: the public sphere, to which Habermas entrusts the guarantee of non-regression, is today itself a platform infrastructure. Digital counter-memory – extended captions, family testimonies, attention to the Romani, disabled, and homosexual victims excluded from public mourning – then appears as a practice of friction, fragile and situated, which reintroduces duration and context and widens the boundaries of what, with Butler (2009), is grievable.

Angelo Falzarano's essay, *The Man Without Memory in the Hyperfast Society: Time, Trauma, and Digitalization through Critical Theory*, carries the diagnosis from the level of platforms to that of temporal regimes. Its point of departure is a paradox: the more society multiplies the traces of the past, the less capable it seems of transforming them into experience. The man without memory lacks not data, but the inner temporality needed to work them through. Falzarano brings four constellations of Critical Theory – Adorno, Benjamin, Freud, and Habermas – into dialogue with Rosa's (2005) theory of social acceleration and temporal alienation and with the connective turn described by Hoskins (2018). The result is a "coexistence of hypermemory and critical amnesia": Freudian *Nachträglichkeit*, the temporal gap that makes the working through of trauma possible, is erased by a regime of simultaneity in which the past resurfaces instantly as a notification. The most novel element is the analysis of generative artificial intelligence. "Synthetic memories" "produce the past instead of preserving it"; the algorithmic industry no longer standardizes merely the products of imagination, but imagination itself; Benjamin's dialectical image risks becoming an image produced in series. The essay does not, however, end on diagnosis. Following Bloch (1959) and the Freudian critique of repetition, the author identifies possible utopian reactivations in feminist, queer, postcolonial, and ecological memory practices, and shifts the question significantly: "The question is no longer what has happened but what we make happen by remembering". Contemporary temporal regimes undermine historical continuity, experience, and remembrance, and for precisely this reason remembrance becomes a politics of time.

Taken together, the five essays converge along several axes that make them more than a collection. The first axis is the relationship between *memory and critique*: the Habermasian pair of *consciousness-raising critique* and *rescuing critique*, Benjamin's *Eingedenken*, digital counter-memory, and memory as a politics of time are different ways of conceiving remembrance as a critical operation rather than as mere preservation. The second axis is that of *memory and democracy*: the public use of history, constitutional patriotism, and the defense of memory as a public good – already formulated in the first issue – tie the quality of remembrance to the quality of the public sphere. The third axis concerns *memory and historical responsibility*. Jaspers's *Haftung*, the responsibility of those born afterwards, and the asymmetry, recalled by Corchia and Hassan following Tota (2020), whereby the right to forget belongs to the victims while the duty to remember belongs to institutions and to the collectivity: all this defines a responsibility that is transmitted across generations without turning into collective guilt. The fourth axis, *memory and digitalization*, extends the analysis of algorithmic colonization begun by D'Alessandro and by Pedroso de Siqueira with two new concepts, *algorithmic oblivion* and *synthetic memories*, which describe not the loss of traces but their ungovernable overabundance. The fifth axis is that of *memory and lost futures*: from Jedlowski's Lulu to Benjamin's cities, from Pozio's fidelity to absence to the principle of hope invoked by Falzarano, memory appears as a repository of unexpressed possibilities. The sixth axis, finally, concerns *memory and emancipation*: education for autonomy, post-conventional learning processes, and the awakening from the urban phantasmagoria all point to the same idea, namely that to remember critically is to become capable of not repeating. The second issue thus complements the first in a precise way. If the first had asked *how, and through what*, we remember, the second asks *in whose name and in which direction* we remember, and with what temporal rhythms. The resulting research program articulates three levels: a normative level, which provides criteria for distinguishing the public use of the past from its ritual or identitarian use; a historical-genealogical level, which tests those criteria on cases of long duration; and an infrastructural and temporal level, which examines the material and technical conditions under which remembrance becomes possible or impossible today.

3. Towards a Critical Theory of Public Memory

It is now possible to attempt an assessment of the editorial project as a whole. To Memory Studies, the special section offers, first of all, criteria. The field has shown with great subtlety that all memory is selective and constructed; the essays collected here suggest how to distinguish among selections. What matters is the direction rather than the intensity of remembrance, the persistence or otherwise of causes, the difference between the visibility of a past and its historical intelligibility, and the distinction between repetition and working through, transposed from the clinic to culture. These criteria do not prescribe mnemonic contents, but allow practices, institutions, and infrastructures to be assessed. To Critical Theory, the special section restores a dimension that the procedural turn had at times left in the shadows: the anamnestic one. The theory of the public sphere, of recognition, and of social pathologies cannot do without memory, because the criteria by which a society judges itself are formed in the confrontation with what it has done and suffered. As Habermas wrote in commenting on Benjamin, “without the influx of those semantic energies with which Benjamin’s rescuing criticism was concerned, the structures of practical discourse – finally well established – would necessarily become desolate” (Habermas, 1972/1983: 158).

The project has also built a number of conceptual bridges that we consider durable. The first connects Halbwachs’s sociology to Habermas’s theory of the public sphere, reading the public use of history as the normative obverse of collective memory. The second transfers the Freudian distinction between repeating and working through from individual analysis to digital platforms. The third links Benjamin’s philosophy of history to the sociology of urban space and to the sociology of the future. The fourth recognizes in Jaspers’s distinction between guilt and liability the genealogy of constitutional patriotism. The fifth holds together Koselleck’s semantics of historical time and the Benjaminian redemption of past futures.

No less important are the questions the project leaves open. The first concerns the tension, which emerged from the dialogue among the essays, between a materialist paradigm of working through the past, which measures it by the elimination of causes, and a discursive paradigm, which entrusts it to public learning. Neither suffices on its own: it remains to be clarified how the public sphere can affect the social conditions that make the past threatening. The second concerns the relationship between the singularity of the Shoah and the multidirectionality of memories. The 2021 controversy, colonial memories, and the mobilization of the Shoah in contemporary conflicts require of a critical theory of memory criteria capable of preventing both relativization and competition among victims (Rothberg, 2009). The third concerns the European decentering of the Frankfurt tradition, which the postcolonial memories invoked by Jedlowski and Falzarano make unavoidable. The fourth concerns empirical tools: Kopsaj’s netnography points the way, but a methodology capable of observing recommendation algorithms directly, and not only their effects, has yet to be built. The fifth, finally, concerns the very subject of memory in an age in which memory can be generated artificially.

From this set of results and open questions, memory emerges with five faces. It is a medium of critique, because it offers critique evidence, criteria, and alternatives. It is a democratic resource, because the quality of the public sphere depends on the way it works through the past. It is a site of symbolic and political struggle, because the definition of what counts as trauma, guilt, or legacy is always a question of power. It is a repository of unrealized possibilities, because past futures continue to question the present. And it is a mechanism of collective learning, because only what is worked through can avoid being repeated. From this follow the research directions that seem to us most urgent. The first concerns artificial intelligence and memory: the authenticity of testimonies, the production of plausible but non-existent pasts, and the governance of generative archives. The second concerns digital memory infrastructures and their regulation as public goods. The third concerns democratic resilience and the role of remembrance in countering the gradual erosion of institutions. The fourth concerns transnational memories and the conditions of a European memory that is not a monolithic identity. The fifth concerns migration and memory, that is, the memories that cross borders

and seek entry into the public spheres of receiving societies. The sixth concerns ecological crises as traumas without a single origin and without a defined time. The last, perhaps the most difficult, concerns the public working through of the past in polarized societies, where memory risks becoming the principal instrument of mutual delegitimation.

These results connect directly with the mission of *Trauma and Memory*. The journal has made the dialogue between psychoanalysis and the social sciences its *raison d'être*, and the special section has put that dialogue to the test. The category that runs through it from beginning to end, working through the past, originates in the Freudian clinic, passes through Adorno into sociology and political theory, and returns today in the analysis of platforms and temporal regimes. Sociology, philosophy, history, cultural studies, and political theory have engaged with one another here not in order to juxtapose perspectives, but because none of them alone can explain how a society remembers, forgets, and answers for its own past. Critical research on trauma and memory thus has a direct democratic relevance: it studies the conditions under which a political community can avoid repeating what it has destroyed.

At the end of this path, it seems to us that Critical Theory and Memory Studies are converging towards a common intellectual program. Born of different questions, the two fields are discovering that they need each other. Critical Theory without memory risks becoming a procedure without content, ready to judge a present whose genesis it ignores. Memory Studies without critique risk becoming a cartography without orientation, able to describe every memory but unable to say which one deserves to be defended. Together, they can address some of the most pressing challenges of contemporary societies: the privatization of the infrastructures of remembrance, the acceleration that dissolves experience, the polarization that turns the past into a weapon, and the crisis of a future we no longer know how to imagine. The task that the special section hands on to those who come after is the one Benjamin entrusted to every generation: to recognize that the past has a claim on us, and that honoring it means not repeating it, but making possible once again what remained unfulfilled within it.

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The Question of German Guilt in the Intellectual Biography of Jürgen Habermas*

Luca Corchia**

Abstract. The essay reconstructs the place of the question of German guilt in the intellectual biography of Jürgen Habermas. Its point of departure is the statement *Grundsätze der Solidarität* of 13 November 2023, whose polarized reception – the essay argues – misconstrued Habermas’s stand because it ignored what German guilt means, biographically and in terms of public memory, for his generation. Following a history-of-ideas approach in which biographical reconstruction operates as a corrective to impersonal historiographical narratives, the essay retraces the stages of a lifelong process of clarification: childhood under the Third Reich and the “democratic conversion” of 1945; the return of the exiles and the Frankfurt apprenticeship; the Auschwitz trial; the generational conflict of 1968; the *Historikerstreit*; German unification; the controversy over the Holocaust memorial in Berlin; and the diagnosis of secondary antisemitism. Drawing on the critical legacy of the Frankfurt School, Habermas entrusts to the public sphere a labour of clarification in which the memory of the Holocaust emerges not as a mere historical legacy but as an ethical task structuring the democratic self-understanding of the Federal Republic. The question of guilt thus proves central to the construction of a collective consciousness and of a political culture – epitomized by constitutional patriotism and governed by the imperative of non-regression – capable of opposing revisionist tendencies and the return of nationalism. The essay’s specific contribution is to read these successive controversies as a single learning process governed by Karl Jaspers’s distinction between moral guilt and political liability (*Haftung*): each episode displaces the site in which that liability is publicly discharged – from the individual conscience to the courts, from the generational conflict to historiography, and from the constitution to the European public sphere.

Keywords: German guilt; Jürgen Habermas; Holocaust memory; public sphere; constitutional patriotism; secondary antisemitism.

Riassunto. Il saggio ricostruisce il posto della “questione della colpa” tedesca nella biografia intellettuale di Jürgen Habermas. Il punto di avvio è la dichiarazione *Grundsätze der Solidarität* del 13 novembre 2023, la cui ricezione polarizzata – si sostiene qui – ha frainteso la presa di posizione di Habermas perché ha ignorato che cosa significhi la colpa tedesca, sul piano biografico e su quello della memoria pubblica, per la sua generazione. Secondo un approccio di storia delle idee in cui la ricostruzione biografica opera come correttivo delle narrazioni storiografiche impersonali, il saggio ripercorre le tappe di un processo di chiarificazione durato tutta una vita: l’infanzia sotto il Terzo Reich e la “conversione democratica” del 1945; il ritorno degli esuli e l’apprendistato francofortese; il processo di Francoforte su Auschwitz; il conflitto generazionale del Sessantotto; la disputa degli storici; l’unificazione tedesca; la polemica sul monumento all’Olocausto di Berlino; la diagnosi dell’antisemitismo secondario. Raccogliendo l’eredità critica della Scuola di Francoforte, Habermas affida alla sfera pubblica un lavoro di chiarificazione in cui la memoria dell’Olocausto emerge non come semplice lascito storico, ma come compito etico che struttura l’autocomprensione democratica della Repubblica Federale. La questione della colpa si rivela così centrale nella costruzione di una coscienza collettiva e di una cultura politica – compendiata dal patriottismo costituzionale e retta dall’imperativo della non-regressione – capace di opporsi alle tendenze revisioniste e al ritorno del nazionalismo. Il contributo specifico del saggio consiste nel leggere queste controversie successive come un unico processo di apprendimento governato dalla distinzione di Karl Jaspers fra colpa morale e responsabilità politica (*Haftung*): ogni episodio sposta il luogo in cui tale responsabilità viene pubblicamente assunta – dalla coscienza individuale ai tribunali, dal conflitto generazionale alla storiografia, dalla costituzione alla sfera pubblica europea.

Parole chiave: colpa tedesca; Jürgen Habermas; memoria dell’Olocausto; sfera pubblica; patriottismo costituzionale; antisemitismo secondario.

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1. Introduction

On 13 November 2023, the research centre Normative Orders of the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main published the letter *Grundsätze der Solidarität* (Principles of Solidarity. A Statement), signed by Nicole Deitelhoff and by the two founders and directors of the Cluster of Excellence, Rainer Forst and Klaus Günther. At the bottom of the document appears the signature of Jürgen Habermas, who had been the teacher of the two scholars since the 1980s. Addressing the Israeli–Palestinian conflict in the days following the mass kidnapping carried out during Hamas’s attack in southern Israel – on 7 October around 251 people were abducted – and the Israeli response with the occupation of Palestinian territories, the four scholars express concern about the rise of antisemitic attacks in Germany and worldwide “after the beginning of the latest war between Israel and Hamas.” The letter states in full: “The Hamas massacre, with its declared intention of eliminating Jewish life in general, has pushed Israel to counterattack. The modalities of this retaliation, justified in principle, are the subject of controversial debate; the principles of proportionality, of preventing civilian casualties, and of waging war with a view to a future peace must be the guiding principles. Despite the concern for the fate of the Palestinian population, however, standards of judgment slip completely when genocidal intentions are attributed to Israel’s actions. In particular, Israel’s actions do not in any way justify antisemitic reactions, especially in Germany. It is intolerable that Jews in Germany are once again exposed to threats to life and physical safety and must fear violence in the streets. The democratic ethics of the Federal Republic of Germany, oriented toward the obligation to respect human dignity, is tied to a political culture in which Jewish life and Israel’s right to exist are central elements deserving special protection in light of the mass crimes of the Nazi era” (Habermas et al., 2023).

The reactions of journalists, researchers and students were immediately polarized into the two camps of the indignant and the enthusiastic, each quick to politicize for present purposes Habermas’s stand against the «intentional extermination of Jews as such», against the «Israeli reaction» and against an antisemitism that today finds «a perfect occasion» to raise its head. What both camps failed to consider – and here, in my view, lies the source of the misunderstanding of Habermas’s position – is what German guilt means for his generation, in biographical terms and in terms of public memory, with respect to the Shoah and, in a fuller sense, to the “Holocaust”. The episode of November 2023 is therefore of interest here not in itself, but as the epiphenomenon of a deeper motivational question, one that involves Habermas’s intellectual biography and German political culture as a whole.

That question has, for Habermas, a long prehistory. He has always criticized the presence within German high culture of a “mixture of intelligence and autism”, exemplified by the tragic career of the *Geisteswissenschaften*. Ever since Romanticism, an ambiguous relationship developed between a “belated nation” in the process of modernization and a *Kultur* that was rewriting its history. Recalling the days of the *Deutsches Jungvolk*, Habermas traces the historical lines of a representation of the Germanic ethos that ended by reconciling itself all too readily with the political institutions of the “New Reich”: «I remember the war years, when the young Nazis (*Jungvolk*) used to gather on 9 November, in front of the war memorials and with burning braziers, to practise the rituals of the Nazi cult of death. [...] In Germany, national consciousness and republican sentiment were last integrated in the revolutionary movement of 1848, as they still are today in the classical nation-states of the West. Since then, nationalism among us has been consumed – down to its racist consequences – at the expense of the republican spirit, and this zero-sum of political effects branded the seventy-five years of the state from 1871 to 1945. In German heads, the unity and strength of the nation were associated with the expulsion of internal enemies. First came the enemies of the Reich, the Social Democrats, the Catholics, the national minorities; then the Jews and the radical democrats, the left and the intellectuals, the Gypsies, homosexuals and the disabled – in short, all those elements alien to the people» (1990a: 158).

Habermas’s intellectual biography is interwoven with twentieth-century German history, tracing a path that reflects the tensions between memory, identity and ethical responsibility. Its trajectory is retraced here by following the stages of a process of clarification that accompanied the democratization of the Federal Republic and the consolidation of a public consciousness oriented towards the principles of the *Rechtsstaat*. On this point I may be permitted to refer to methodological considerations developed

elsewhere: biographical reconstruction has no anecdotal value here, but operates as a «“corrective” to impersonal historiographical narratives», on the conviction that «individual decisions and agency also orient the intellectual developments that sustain ideas and theories» (Corchia, 2026: 183). The essay opens with a flashback to childhood under the Third Reich and to the democratic conversion that marked Habermas’s youth; it then examines the return of the exiles and the significance of their integrity in the context of reconstruction. There follow the Frankfurt Auschwitz trial, the generational conflict of 1968 and the controversy with the historians over the past – all crucial moments in the definition of a shared memory. Finally, the most contemporary knots are addressed: German unification, constitutional patriotism as an antidote to nationalist drifts, the controversy over the Holocaust memorial, and the new risks of secondary antisemitism.

The question that organizes this reconstruction can be stated in one sentence: how did the question of German guilt become, for Habermas, not one theme among others but the biographical matrix of his political theory – the point at which the categories of the public sphere, of post-conventional identity and of non-regression were forged? The literature on Habermas and German memory is by now extensive, and the present essay is indebted to it at every step: to the biographies of Müller-Doohm and Yos, to the political-historical readings of Specter, Pensky and Holub, and to the conceptual analyses of Niesen and Rees. What it adds is threefold. First, it treats the successive controversies – the Heidegger case, the Auschwitz trial, 1968, the *Historikerstreit*, unification, the memorial, secondary antisemitism – not as a series of interventions but as a single learning process, governed throughout by one distinction that the literature mentions in passing but seldom uses as an analytical thread: Jaspers’s distinction between moral guilt, which cannot be imputed to those born afterwards, and political liability (*Haftung*), which is inherited along with citizenship. Second, it shows that each episode marks a displacement of the site in which that liability is discharged – from the individual conscience of 1945 to the university, from the courtroom to the generational conflict, from historiography to the constitution and finally to the European public sphere – so that the theory of constitutional patriotism appears as the institutional form that *Haftung* takes once it can no longer be borne by the biographical generation of the *Nachgeborenen*. Third, it draws on Habermas’s most recent testimony, above all the conversations published in 2024, to correct on one decisive point the standard narrative of an Adornian inheritance: by his own admission, the reading of the imperative of non-regression that he defended in 1986 derives from Jaspers rather than from Adorno, and this bifurcation, unnoticed at the time, is what makes his position in 2023 intelligible.

The question of guilt thus emerges as a central knot in the critical construction of a collective consciousness capable of resisting revisionist drifts. Running beneath it is the research on the conditions of prejudice and on the authoritarian personality. The insistence on recalling the memory of the atrocities committed in the name of an autocratic nation of “supermen” (*Herrenmenschen*) must be traced back both to an aversion to National Socialism, with its myths and its state violence, and to the conviction that it is a responsibility to work to avert any relapse into barbarism (Müller-Doohm, 2009/2010: 445). Such lucidity, it should be added, was anything but immediate: that blindness to the significance of antisemitism was not the preserve of conservatives alone is documented by Martin Jay with regard to the Institut für Sozialforschung itself – «the members of the Institut were anxious to deny any significance at all to their ethnic roots», to the point that even in the midst of the war «even so hardheaded a realist as Franz Neumann could write in *Behemoth* that “the German people are the least anti-Semitic of all”», a judgement which, Jay notes, «seems to have been supported by almost all of his Institut colleagues» (1973: 32). Collective identity in West Germany underwent a cultural trauma whose overcoming – still under way – has been possible not only through repression but also through critical working-through: «After the war it had become impossible to appropriate our traditions without prior examination. As for me, I regarded this labour of reflection, of critique in the literal sense, equally as a professional duty. People like me are reproached with a negative nationalism; it is said that we poison what is our own, that we over-moralize, or again that we have made an ambiguous change of camp by identifying with the victims. If, in 1945, we proceeded to a change of elites, this entailed mental continuities that remained intact until the 1960s and 1970s. Such a background makes it possible to understand that my generation, it seems to me, contributed more than others to opening up the Federal Republic of

Germany intellectually» (Habermas, 2001a). Reflection on German guilt thus shows how the memory of the Holocaust is not a mere historical legacy, but an ethical task that structures the democratic self-understanding of contemporary Germany. From the critique of national mythologies to the defence of constitutional patriotism, Habermas identifies in the solidary remembrance of the victims the foundation of a public responsibility capable of countering every revisionist resurgence. His intellectual biography thus becomes the paradigm of a critical labour upon history which, far from being accusatory, aims to preserve the conditions of non-regression and to reaffirm the imperative of an emancipatory modernity.

2. Childhood under the Third Reich

Habermas was born on 18 June 1929. We know a good deal about his early years thanks to a number of interviews, to the intellectual biography written by Stefan Müller-Doohm (2014/2016), to Roman Yos's study *Der junge Habermas* (2019), and to the recent book-length interview *Es musste etwas besser werden*, again conducted by Müller-Doohm and Yos (2024/2026). It should be recalled that 1929 has passed into the annals of history as the year of the world economic-financial crisis, which had fatal repercussions for the young Weimar Republic, already weakened by the attempts at political destabilization mounted by the communist left and the nationalist right and by the many fault lines running through civil society. During the "Great Depression" the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) became a mass movement, came to power at the national level, and set about establishing the "new Reich" through squad violence and emergency powers.

Habermas's primary socialization took place in a Protestant family of the professional middle class in Gummersbach, a small town in North Rhine-Westphalia. His father Ernst was a legal adviser with a doctorate in economics and ordo-liberal affinities, who later became director of the local Chamber of Industry and Commerce, while his mother, Margarete Köttgen, devoted herself, as was customary, to running the household and educating the three children. On 5 March 1933 almost half the voters of Gummersbach voted for the National Socialist Party, and from the following year onwards the municipalities of the Oberberg were the scene of persecutions of Jews and of the imprisonment of political opponents, communists above all. National-conservative in political orientation and a social expression of the "elite of officials", traditionally loyal – if not servile – towards the authority of power, Ernst had joined the National Socialist Party in the spring of 1933. On how that membership is to be qualified, and above all on how the son related to it, Müller-Doohm's biography offers clarifications worth taking up. Like most of those who belonged to the functional elite, Ernst Habermas «went along with the wave of self-coordination [*Selbstgleichschaltung*]», and the new masters «were greeted with a loyalty befitting the traditional ideas of an authoritarian state that already had wide currency, especially among civil servants» (Müller-Doohm, 2014/2016: 32). He was economic adviser to the NSDAP for the district and, having volunteered for the Wehrmacht, reached the rank of major. The biographer is careful, however, to place him precisely: taking as his criterion the «regime's policies of terror and annihilation», Ernst Habermas «is, strictly speaking, not to be counted as a member of the Nazi elite. There is no evidence to suggest that he was a prototypical ardent follower of that "greatest commander of all times".

We should assume, then, that Ernst Habermas was not a member of that "generation of the unconditional"» – born between 1900 and 1919 – which constituted the group responsible for the extermination. Habermas has described the political atmosphere of his father's house as «unremarkable for the time», that is, characterized by «a bourgeois adaptation to the political environment, while neither fully identifying with it, nor seriously criticizing it». And above all: «Although the son would later become one of the most vehement critics of that "communicative silence" [*kommunikatives Beschweigen*] and its pragmatic justification, he shied away from confrontation with his father. He did not doubt that their political differences could not be bridged, but this did not touch upon their personal relationship» (ibidem). Afflicted from birth by a cleft palate, a malformation that made speaking difficult and made his relations with others personally traumatic (Habermas, 2005/2008: 14), Jürgen was protected by his solicitous mother, Margarete, née Köttgen (1894-1983), the daughter of a Düsseldorf brewery owner who had served as a nurse in a military hospital during the First World War. The child experienced the

totalitarian state of the National Socialist regime as one reality among many. On turning ten, disappointed at having been rejected by the *Deutsches Jungvolk*, he was admitted, on his father's initiative, as an auxiliary of the medical service (Yos, 2019: 33). In a few rare autobiographical references Habermas recalls that he was little motivated by adherence to the Nazi *Weltanschauung* with its cult of the warrior, and attributes to his "disability" an effect of distancing from militarism and from the totalitarian temptation. Years later, in 2006, that membership would be held against him by the magazine "Cicero"¹, as it was against other intellectuals of that generation such as Günter Grass; it prompted the German scholar's reply (2006a) and was settled in a civil action for defamation won by Habermas. There was never, however, any dissidence. Everyday life ran on quietly and, despite the "harelip", the young man was an excellent student, from primary school through to the Gymnasium Moltkestraße (today merged into the Städtisches Lindengymnasium Gummersbach), with a marked vocation for the medical profession. His schoolmate Hans-Ulrich Wehler, two years his junior, would recall a school environment in which the teachers for the most part identified with right-wing liberal conservatism, even if many endorsed National Socialist ideology (2006: 176).

It was the war that changed the perception of German history. At the outbreak of hostilities, in the summer of 1939, Habermas's father volunteered for the ranks of the Wehrmacht and became an "officer". He would describe him as «someone with the ambitions typical of the educated bourgeois class, someone for whom the military was important in the first instance because it gave him the status associated with the title of a major» (Müller-Doohm, 2014/2016: 43). Then came the Anglo-American bombardments, and the cities of Germany, from north to south, were almost all razed to the ground. Gummersbach was a minor target. What made an impression on the very young Habermas was the internal order by which Hitler turned repression upon the German population, decreeing the death penalty for deserters. In February-March 1945 those born in 1928 and 1929 were conscripted as *Luftwaffenhelfer*, that is, as support personnel for the air force. Although both had been regimented in the *Deutsches Jungvolk*, Habermas did not undergo the experience of the young men commonly designated as the *Flakhelfer-Generation* (cf. Bude, 1987; Wehler, 2008). Again because of his "disability", he was assigned to the army medical service, also on account of his inclination towards medical studies. He did not have combatant status and never took up arms, even though he found himself on one occasion very close to the front. Habermas describes the end of the Second World War in 1945 as a veritable "revolutionary caesura". Compared with the older generations, young men like him enjoyed the demographic advantage of the "grace of a late birth" (the celebrated formula used by Helmut Kohl). In the same direction one should read an observation Habermas has formulated only recently about his own generation which, having no direct responsibility for omissions or complicity with Nazism, was able to perceive «the abyss behind the façade of normality» (2024/2026: 9). Here, moreover, Habermas reads back upon the whole affair of the *Historikerstreit*. Reconstructing the conditions under which his generation was able to become aware of the «depth of the rupture represented by Nazi domination», he specifies that such lucidity was no merit of theirs: «our young age, through no merit of our own, made us sensitive enough to perceive the abyss behind the façade of normality that we were leaving behind us. Fundamentally, we had no acts or omissions to answer for, nor memories of situations of complicity that might have obstructed this coming to awareness». And he adds a remark of direct relevance here: «in the *Historikerstreit* I have always found the differences of age illuminating» among the contending parties (ibidem). The historians' dispute was thus, in his eyes, not merely a conflict between historiographical paradigms and ideological conceptions, but the collision of biographical trajectories that had entertained a structurally different relationship with complicity in Nazism.

¹ In 2006, in the wake of the Grass scandal, Jürgen Busche – an influential German journalist, writer and literary critic – published in "Cicero" (2006) an attack on Habermas, accusing him of having concealed a position of command in the Hitler Youth. The article insinuated a biographical hypocrisy designed to protect his moral authority. Habermas reacted first with a reply (2006a), proving documentarily that he had already discussed his own past in earlier writings, and then in court, obtaining a legal injunction for defamation. The affair ended with victory before the Hamburg court. On the alleged evidence of his involvement in National Socialism Ralf Dahrendorf also intervened, in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*: «Anyone who believes such nonsense has suspended his normal powers of judgement; there would, after all, be simpler methods for getting rid of a piece of paper, if that were necessary» (2006).

That this sensibility was formed against a precise experience is shown by the episode of his first university semester, again recounted in the conversations with Müller-Doohm and Yos. What shocked him were not the militants of the far right, but the leaders of the BHE, of the German Party and of the CDU – Oberländer, Seehofer, Merkatz – who behaved «exactly like the radical right» and who «shortly afterwards all reappeared as ministers in Adenauer’s first cabinet»: «with their brazen rhetoric, they showed that they had no sense whatever of the need for a break with the Nazi period» (ivi: 17). At the first stanza of the *Deutschlandlied*, intoned amid the roar of the hall, the young student rushed out of the room, wondering whether he was really the only one to bear in mind that «for twelve years that national anthem had been fused into an indissoluble unity with the *Horst-Wessel-Lied*, the anthem of the National Socialist party».² It is in the same context that the formula from which the book-interview takes its title must be placed: recalling that first semester, Habermas writes that «those political certainties come back to life with which the intellectual need for a philosophical enlightenment was then, so to speak, impregnated: a better world had to be built, and that depended on us» (ibidem). Habermas’s theoretical ambition and his political commitment were thus generated from the same biographical root: not from the discovery of a doctrine, but from the recognition of a continuity of personal experiences and of rhetorics that 1945 had by no means interrupted.

3. A Democratic Conversion

For the young Habermas, the immediate post-war years were marked by the wait – shared with his mother and his younger sister Anja – for the return home of his father and his elder brother Hans-Joachim from American prison camps. There were, moreover, the family’s material hardships in a period of poverty, with black markets and official food rations below subsistence level. To help at home, Habermas too found work on a farm nearby in the Bergisches Land; but what he chiefly remembered was his mother’s “unstable character” and her “severity” at a time when she «took over the role of the head of the family with courage during her husband’s absence» (Müller-Doohm, 2014/2016: 45). The dominant emotional tonality was nonetheless the sense of relief that spreads with the end of a war, even among the defeated. Sometime later he would recall having experienced 1945 as a turning point, and the death of the dictator together with Germany’s unconditional surrender not as a “humiliation” but as «a liberation, historical and personal» (Habermas, 1979/1981: 512). Above all he recounts the shock of the terrifying images of the extermination of the Jews in a documentary on the concentration camps by the American Counsel for the Prosecution of Axis Criminality and, in November 1945, of listening on the radio to the Nuremberg trials of the regime’s leaders, among them Hermann Göring, Alfred Rosenberg, Rudolf Hess, Joachim von Ribbentrop, Robert Ley and Hans Frank: «After the revelations concerning Auschwitz, nothing could be taken at face value. What we had experienced as a more or less normal childhood and adolescence now transpired to be everyday life in the shadow of a rupture in civilization. Without having done anything to deserve it, my cohort had the opportunity to learn without reservation from the Nuremberg war crimes trials, which we followed on the radio. We made Karl Jaspers’s distinction between collective guilt and collective liability our own and took very seriously the responsibility for the consequences of a regime that had been supported by the mass of the population» (2005/2008: 18)³. The sudden awareness of having lived rather serenely within a “criminal

² His aversion to national anthems, Habermas notes, has remained with him to this day: as late as 1994, at the Federal Assembly, he had Peter Glotz warn him of the exact moment to leave the hall before the German anthem was played (Habermas, 2024/2026: 17).

³ The interview *Un référendum pour une Constitution européenne*, conducted by Nicolas Truong on 1 March 2001 for *Le Monde de l’éducation*, opens with a personal recollection of that collective experience: «Leaving aside the turbulent final years of the Second World War, I grew up in what seemed to me at the time to be the normal conditions of a small town in the Rhenish Massif. In childhood and early youth one understands well enough that it is the everyday lifeworld – the family, the neighbourhood, the school – that establishes the coordinates of the habitual and the unusual. Only with adolescence does one acquire a certain distance from these self-evident facts. I was not yet sixteen when the Americans arrived. And the contrast produced by the images and the information that struck me during the summer of 1945 could not have been more intense. I was not prepared to see in the cinema the images of those walking skeletons who presented themselves to the Allies after the liberation of the camp at Bergen-Belsen. In the newspapers I read the incredible figure

political system” impelled him to interrogate the “question of guilt” of the German people, and the “human face” of that crime, through his readings of Jaspers and Arendt. It is worth establishing at the outset the Jaspersian distinction that governs the whole affair beneath the surface. Müller-Doohm and Yos recall that his «distinction between collective guilt and collective liability was of great importance to Habermas, who was as shocked by Auschwitz and the war crimes as he was by the widespread silence over the deeds that had been committed» (2019: 579). From his first readings of *Die Schuldfrage* (1946/2001) onwards, Habermas held that Jaspers had rightly insisted «that all of its citizens are collectively liable for the political guilt incurred by a criminal state» (1956/1971: 96). The formula is decisive because it shifts the centre of gravity from individual moral imputation – which cannot be ascribed to those born afterwards – to *Haftung*, to the political liability that is inherited along with citizenship. It is on this differential that the entire architecture of the public use of history will rest forty years later. In his study *Der junge Habermas*, Yos documents with precision the context of those readings and those broadcasts, showing that the coming to awareness occurred through an accumulation of heterogeneous materials. Already during his post-war secondary-school years Habermas was obtaining from the communist bookshop in Gummersbach pamphlets containing texts by Marx and Engels printed in East Berlin; he took note «with interest of what only a few years earlier was still regarded as reprehensible or “degenerate”» and followed the reports of the Nuremberg trials on the radio; in one of the first books on the National Socialist system – Eugen Kogon’s *Der SS-Staat* (1946) – and in the earliest filmed documentation of the extermination camps «he found a world altogether different from the one that until May 1945 had appeared to him as “normality”». The adverb with which Habermas has repeatedly placed that experience on record is “*schockartig*”: the crimes entered his consciousness «all at once», and he therefore belongs among those for whom 1945 meant a biographical caesura, the moment at which «personal life-rhythm and great historical events converged» (Yos, 2019: 32). From this Yos draws an interpretive consequence worth recording, since it bears directly on the nexus between guilt and identity: the collapse of the National Socialist system «must have appeared to him at the same time as the collapse of the identity he had acquired up to that point», given that he had grown up in a household «on the whole adapted to the circumstances» (ivi: 32-33).

The dismay in the face of the abysses of one’s own history and the growing awareness of the criminal inhumanity of Nazism were a crucial turning point in Habermas’s intellectual biography. He has repeatedly described the situation of dispossession into which the population fell when confronted with the impossibility of defining collective identity upon the continuity of a tradition wholly compromised by the experience of the concentration camps. Thus, in the interview with Jean-Marc Ferry on the limits of neo-historicism, he states: «“Tradition” means, after all, that we unproblematically continue what others began and have taught us. We usually imagine that, were we to meet these forebears face to face, they would not completely deceive us, would not play the role of a *deus malignus*. In my view, it is precisely this basis of trust which was destroyed before the gas chambers. The complex preparation and extensive organization of a coldly calculated mass murder, in which hundreds of thousands – indirectly a whole people – were involved, took place, after all, with the appearance of normality preserved, and was even dependent on the normality of highly civilized social intercourse. The monstrous occurred, without interrupting the steady respiration of everyday life» (1988a/1990: 150).

The generational placement deserves to be fixed with precision, for it is this that gives the story its profile. Specter recalls that Habermas «was not among those who had the “gift” of late birth [...]: Born in 1929, Habermas was recruited to the Hitler Youth in 1944 and sent with his youth cohort to help man

of six million exterminated Jews. From the radio I learned of the crimes that were later judged at Nuremberg, and I heard the reticent voice of those responsible. If one considers that the normality offered by the everyday context to a still rather introverted boy was utterly disintegrated, it is not at all surprising that, after such a shock, my expectations in the matter of normality took some time to re-establish themselves. One thinks about it one’s whole life long. What imposed itself upon us above all in that period is the question that still disquiets the young people who read Goldhagen today. Despite all the clarifications provided by historiography, it remains difficult to understand how, in a highly civilized country, our contemporaries could collaborate, assent, or simply look on in silence when, from the very first days, the process of segregating the Jews, the persecution of communists and social democrats, the manifest assaults on elementary rights, all took place before everyone’s eyes. In one way or another, there is a trauma that has marked my generation» (2001a: 17).

the anti-aircraft artillery of the western wall defenses» (Specter, 2010: 4). This is the cohort that scholars have called the *Flakhelfer-Generation* or, with A. Dirk Moses, the «45er»⁴, who are credited with the major role in the «discursive democratization» of the Federal Republic, as the «key generation [...] uniquely placed to commence the process of republican value development» (ivi: 5). The reason for the date is biographical before it is historiographical: «“What really determined my political life was 1945”, wrote Habermas. “At that point the rhythm of my personal development intersected with the great historical events of the time” [...] He describes himself as transfixed by the radio broadcasts of the Nuremberg trials in 1945–6, from which he first learned of the Holocaust and its atrocities. Thus 1945 has been called Habermas’s “existentially motivated philosophical birthday”» (ivi: 6). Specter nonetheless prefers the label of “58ers”, which is the one Habermas himself favours – «“I am, if anything, a ‘58er and cannot speak for the ‘68er generation”», he has repeated on several occasions – because «it directs our attention toward the years in which Habermas emerged as a public intellectual with meaningful contributions to the German debate on the state and constitution» (ivi: 6-7). The clarification has direct effects on our argument: the memory of guilt is not a content passively inherited, but the vector of a political-cultural reconversion of which it was the active subject. In order to render the notion of generation methodically usable, it is worth recalling Karl Mannheim’s distinction between “generational location” (*Generationslagerung*) and “generational connection” (*Generationszusammenhang*), which makes it possible to recover an otherwise slippery concept such as that of the «spirit of the age» without dissolving it into a presumed homogeneity (Corchia, 2026: 183).

In this grim light one better understands the unreserved identification – the re-education – with the liberal-democratic ideals that had been imported by the Western powers, the sense of historical responsibility for the growth of democratic culture, and the importance of defending it against the return of arbitrary powers (*Machtbildungen*). He has repeatedly insisted that without the caesura of ’45 he would not have felt the fire of public commitment and would not have come to the study of philosophy and social theory (2005/2008: 171). Thus it was that, wishing to understand the “urgent problems of the age”, in the first curriculum vitae written for his school-leaving certificate the self-projection towards the medical profession gave way to one towards “journalism” and to the dense and profound thoughts of existentialist readings “which he barely understood” (2002: 52). That generation, whose primary socialization (childhood, schooling and adolescence) took place under National Socialism and the war, includes figures important for the history of the Federal Republic, such as the intellectuals Hermann Lübbe, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Niklas Luhmann, Hans-Ulrich Wehler, Odo Marquard, Alexander Kluge, the brothers Hans and Wolfgang Mommsen, Günter Grass, and the politicians Helmut Kohl and Johannes Rau (Brunkhorst & Müller-Dooch, 2017: 1). That “class of 1929” was a generation of people too young to be stained by crimes or by the guilt of their parents, yet old enough to live through its full drama. As Habermas would write, the generation of those who «simply for reasons of age were not discredited by committing or keeping silent about the deeds of the Nazi period, and yet were formed with clear memories of a fascism that had consequences for the biography of every individual» (1969a: 49). They felt obliged to take a position with regard to the Nazi regime and, above all, to make a non-negotiable choice of camp in favour of democracy. Rolf Wiggershaus describes the resulting position as a twofold mistrust without immediate outlets: coming «from a politically conformist middleclass family», Habermas was sceptical of the SPD and still more of the communists; but he was also «a product of post-war “re-education”», whose ideals he took so seriously that he remained equally sceptical of the right-wing parties, «which he thought had made no radical break with the disasters of the past». The outcome is recorded in a terse sentence: «Initially, he could not see any political force with which he would be able to identify himself» (1988/1995: 538).

⁴ Yos specifies that only the cohorts from 1926 to 1928 were called up towards the end of the war as Flak- or *Luftwaffenhelfer*; the cohort of 1929, to which Habermas belongs, «was no longer regularly conscripted, or only in a few cases, though it was sometimes enrolled in the *Volkssturm*», which – these are the words of Rolf Schörken, whom Yos takes as his reference – sets «clear limits in experience» with respect to the immediately preceding cohorts (Yos, 2019: 20). It follows that the label *Flakhelfer-Generation* is improper in the strict sense, and that the preferable designation is that of the «45er», borrowed from Moses.

4. The Return of the Exiles, the Heidegger Case and the Frankfurt Apprenticeship

In 1949 the Christian Democratic Party, in which not a few people compromised with the previous regime had gathered, won the first elections, and Konrad Adenauer was elected Chancellor of the Federal Republic, inaugurating a “normalization” based politically on anti-communism and economically on pride in reconstruction and national development. Chancellor from 1949 to 1963, Adenauer had set in motion a process aimed at returning West Germany to a “normal” condition of political, economic and cultural stability after the catastrophe of Nazism and the defeat of 1945. This had come about, however, through a repression of the past that permitted an internal reconciliation, shifting attention to economic reconstruction rather than to the memory of Nazi crimes and the working-through of German guilt. In the interview with Bolaffi, the “Adenauer period” is described as «driven by a tremendous desire for stability and restoration, by a privately oriented and aggressive will to reconstruct. This period lasted until the beginning of the sixties – economically vital, culturally rigid and provincial (if one excludes painting), yet already characterized by a kind of division of labour between politics and culture» (1988d/1992: 229-230). It is against this climate of restoration that the young Habermas’s dismay at the first federal elections must be read.⁵

Having graduated in 1954 after studies in philosophy, psychology, German literature, history and economics between Göttingen (Hartmann, Wein), Zurich (Barth) and Bonn, Habermas was formed by the integrity of the returning exiles: «What made a difference for us at the time was the divisiveness of the political fates of those banished philosophers who returned. The perception of the fates of Karl Löwith or Helmuth Plessner as émigrés, whose books we read at the philosophy department in Bonn alongside those of Hans Freyer and Arnold Gehlen, is the key to understanding the outstanding importance that Jewish philosophers acquired in the old Federal Republic for the education of some members of my generation and many members of the following generation. The breakdown in civilization had made us suspicious of what was specifically German in the depths – or better, the shallows – of German traditions» (2011a/2015: 106). The young Habermas, as noted, followed political events closely. His commitment to the democratization of the Federal Republic became still stronger from the “normalization” of ’49 onwards, with the election and formation of Konrad Adenauer’s first government.

His secondary schooling continued until the first semester of 1949 and, compared with the university ferment in which Dahrendorf was immersed, the Gymnasium kept well clear of the problems of the present. Müller-Doohm reports a conversation in which Habermas recalls that his teachers – to whose memory he would devote a brief piece in the school magazine in 2002 – provided no content whatever for orienting oneself in contemporary history, still less on embarrassing political themes: «According to Habermas, sensitive political topics such as National Socialism, the Second World War and Auschwitz were not covered» (2014/2016: 50). Although he was developing socialist convictions, he found no representation in Kurt Schumacher’s SPD, whose programme expressed a left-wing nationalism. From Adenauer’s inaugural address onwards – in which nothing was said about the collective responsibility of the Germans or about the crimes of National Socialism – the new climate of “normalization” led him to conclude that a radical and broader democratization of German culture and society was necessary: «There had been no break with the past, no new beginning in terms of personnel, no change in mentality – neither a moral renewal nor a revolution of political mindset» (2005/2008: 19). To the “mortgages of Adenauer’s restoration” Habermas would devote part of the interview given to Markus Schwering for the “Kölner Stadtanzeiger”. Looking back, he acknowledged the “real importance” of the foreign policy of that period, with the firm anchoring of the Federal Republic to the West, but he

⁵ In his recollection, the tones of the leaders of the centre-right parties appeared close to those of Otto Ernst Remer’s far right. The testimony is given at length in the conversations with Müller-Doohm and Yos: «What shocked me at the time were rather the leaders of the BHE, of the German Party and of the CDU, because they behaved exactly like the radical right. They were Oberländer, Seeböhm and Merkat, whom I came to know as arrogant and rancorous orators against the occupying powers, and who shortly afterwards all reappeared as ministers in Adenauer’s first cabinet! With their brazen rhetoric, they showed that they had no sense whatever of the need for a break with the Nazi period» (2024/2026: 17).

also bore witness to strong grounds for dissent: «In the 1950s, I was outraged by the horrendous moral debts incurred by the domestic policies of Adenauer's restoration, by the cynical insensitivity to all the encumbrances he imposed, without a moment's thought, on our political culture. At that time there was not the kind of change of elites that has been so zealously carried out in the former GDR. The "garden gnome" cultural climate Sieburg described did not produce the necessary cultural break with mentalities that went back to the Wilhelmine period, and continued through the Weimar Republic and the Nazi era right up until the beginning of the 1960s – a break that would have been so good for the spiritual health of the country» (1994b/1997: 88-89).

Returning to his university education in Bonn, Habermas attended the philosophy courses of Oskar Becker, a former student of Husserl, and the cultural anthropology courses of Erich Rothacker – both conservative in orientation and compromised with the Nazi regime. In the course of his studies he was able to work through the texts of Humboldt, Fichte, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Cassirer, Scheler, Bühler, Weisgerber, Gehlen and Plessner, finding existential answers in the analytic of Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* and in the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre, Otto F. Bollnow and Wilhelm Jerusalem. A "conscious mistrust" of his own cultural tradition nonetheless accompanied Habermas's formation within a university that counted important scholars involved with Nazism (his own doctoral supervisors, Rothacker and Becker, were among them), and in which one could still hear, in Arnold Gehlen's lectures, an echo of the brutal polemic against humanitarianism⁶. The composition of that teaching body is summed up by Wiggershaus in a fact worth more than many descriptions: «Apart from one, Theodor Litt, all the professors who were of significance to him during the course of his studies had been either convinced Nazis or at least conformists, carrying on their work as usual during the Nazi regime» (1988/1995: 538-539).

It was on the university benches that Habermas formed a friendship and an intellectual relationship with Paul Lorenzen and Karl-Otto Apel. The latter, seven years his senior and Rothacker's assistant, would influence him by orienting him towards the currents of the philosophy of language, hermeneutics and pragmatism. It was Apel who, in the summer of 1953, gave him a copy of Heidegger's *Einführung in die Metaphysik*, in which the master of Freiburg republished, without any commentary save for a few interpolations, the lectures held in the summer semester of 1935 at the University of Freiburg im Breisgau – and in which he evoked the identity between the "men of the future" and the Nazi leaders and the "inner truth and greatness of this movement" (1953/1959). The "incredulous horror" that impelled him to write a critique in the columns of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* would mark a turning point in Habermas's biography. In the article *Martin Heidegger: On the Publication of the Lectures of 1935* (1953/1993), Habermas brings out the problematic nexus between philosophy and politics in Heideggerian thought. The 1935 lecture course, two years after Heidegger's adherence to Nazism, contained expressions that revealed the persistence of a language compromised with the ideology of the regime. Habermas underlined how the Heideggerian lexicon ("inner greatness", "destiny of the people")

⁶ Replying to Jean-Marc Ferry, Habermas states that the experience of the moral catastrophe of the National Socialist regime and of the obscurantist legacies of the former intellectual avant-garde inoculated him for the rest of his academic life against every celebrated version of the radical critique of the normative principles of modernity, «beginning with those that founded their instruments on a captious reading of Nietzsche's writings. In this respect there was never any need for great theoretical effort. For my generation, the instinctive rejection of anti-humanist chatter imposed itself of its own accord» (2001b: 102). In this period, then, Habermas's mistrust consolidates itself towards that apolitical – but for the most part collaborationist – self-understanding of the intellectual elites, and towards that deep current of typically German thought hostile to modern civilisation: «The change of perspective that occurred in 1945, and that opened a new day upon everything which until then had seemed to me normal and self-evident, inoculated me, so to speak, against whatever seductiveness certain themes and casts of mind might have – against the pathos of decision, the haughty heroism and the lieutenant's mentality of the young conservatives in which figures such as Ernst Jünger, Hans Freyer and Arnold Gehlen could cloak themselves. The presumptuous rhetoric and the intoxication with profundity in which the Nietzscheans delight repel me as much as the ostentation with which the mandarins welded Germany and ancient Greece together in an elitist posture. [...] My intellectual development cannot be understood apart from the confrontation which, throughout my life, has set me against figures such as Heidegger or Carl Schmitt. National Socialism was able to draw on such resources all the less in that the reservoir of ideas from which it could draw was so vast. The moral corruption of the German university from 1933 onwards cannot be explained without this manifold intellectual affinity, which many were unwilling to admit after 1945» (2001a: 18).

was not neutral, but impregnated with National Socialist pathos. He brought to light the tension between the claim to an “originary” philosophy and its historical implication: the appeal to the “essence of truth” and to “being” is interwoven with categories that legitimate a decisionist and authoritarian vision. Heideggerian metaphysics, far from being apolitical, became a horizon that justified “great politics”. In particular, Habermas denounced the risk of a “structural complicity” between ontological language and the political mythology of Nazism. For Habermas, the publication of the *Vorlesung* called for a critical reflection on the German philosophical tradition and on its relationship to power and to its own past. The 1935 lecture course was not a philosophical document, but a symptom of the crisis of reason in the twentieth century. At twenty-four Habermas was suddenly catapulted into the centre of German intellectual debate and won the esteem of many scholars, including – as we shall see – that of Adorno, who shared the association Habermas had drawn between the philosophical thought of the turn (*Kehre*) and Heidegger’s political positions under the National Socialist regime, and who, with still greater resonance, invoked in his public interventions the function of the intellectual against the repression of the German people’s responsibility.

Habermas belongs among those who raised the Heidegger case, a discussion opened beyond the embarrassments of the Heideggerian school with regard to the post-war attempt to denazify that philosophy. The essay *Martin Heidegger: Work and Weltanschauung*, included as a Preface to Victor Farias’s study *Heidegger et le Nazisme* (1988/1989), sets out to clarify his political conduct in the light of his philosophical thought: «I would like here to supplement Farias’s investigation with a few remarks, taking up a question I previously broached in another place (cf. 1985a/1987): whether there was an internal connection between Heidegger’s philosophy and his political perception of the world-historical situation» (1989/1989: 145). The legitimate distinction between a thinker’s person and his work should not prevent us from asking whether – and to what extent – Heidegger’s philosophical project may have been shaped, in its very substance, by the intrusion of elements belonging to what Germans call *Weltanschauung*, an ideologically inflected worldview. While separating person and work, Habermas shows the intrusion of an intrinsically authoritarian world-view: «one may say, with Otto Pöggeler, an absolutely loyal follower of the master, that Heidegger, to the very end, never moved out of the shadow of National Socialism. Only if one keeps this truth in mind can one properly appreciate the disruptive significance of *Being and Time*. The apologists do Heidegger a disservice» (1988c/1990: 30). The point that, according to Wiggershaus, that controversy disclosed is the internal nexus between work and world-view: it was a matter of recognizing that «what was objectionable in Heidegger was not just the speech he gave in 1935 as rector, but his philosophy itself: a glorification of Nazism emerged from its objective structure». The charge was circumstantial: Habermas accused Heidegger «of using the history of Being to sanction the elimination of the idea of the equality of all before God, the idea of individual freedom, and the idea of providing a practical and rationalist corrective to technological progress» (1988/1995: 539). Heidegger is an extraordinary “antidote” in a twofold sense: he offers motifs for reflection on temporality and language, but also the example of a philosophy that chooses the leap into the esoteric as the supreme form of possession, authoritatively imposing silence: «From the rubble of the transcendental architectonic there is salvaged a philosophy that continues to be competent for being detached from the ontic. Being assumes the historicized form of a truth mediated and set to work destinally by leaders [*Führer*] and by poets [...] For Heidegger, scientific thought and methodically conducted research are henceforth merely the expression of a destiny of being oriented towards the technical domination of the world. As a symptom of the oblivion of being, the modern sciences take their place in the fateful history of metaphysics that fulfils itself as an epochal transformation of world-pictures and linguistic ontologies. Philosophy alone, in the dialogue of thinkers with poets, maintains a relation, as intimate as it is devout, with these obscure events» (1990c/1991: 40).

The Heidegger case was not one debut among others. Max Pensky places it at the origin of a posture that lasted half a century: «His first publication indicted Heidegger’s refusal to amend passages in the republication of the 1935 lectures titled *Introduction to Metaphysics* that were open in their praise of Nazism [...] Given the extraordinary popularity of Heidegger both within and outside the West German academy at that time», the essay «was a major intervention, introducing themes that would continue with remarkable consistency over the next half-century». The theme thus inaugurated is precisely the

one reconstructed here: «For Habermas, West Germany had a special responsibility to construct an open, democratic, fully modern political culture through deliberate critical discourse on the continuities and discontinuities with its fascist past». That such a demand should appear obvious in retrospect must not mislead us: «it was hardly so in the Federal Republic's early years, which were marked by deep conservatism and a general distaste for political engagement, features that help explain much of Heidegger's postwar popularity» (2019a: 201). Specter places the episode within the experience of a disillusionment that multiplies its significance: the discovery that «the philosopher he so admired had written in 1935 of the “. . . inner truth and greatness of the Nazi movement”», and that in 1953 he had republished those lectures «without retraction of the astonishing passage», confining himself to adding an explanatory note (Specter, 2010: 9). The point that concerns us here is that the dismay was not a strictly philosophical matter – *Being and Time* had been the horizon in which, until then, Habermas had lived – but brought to light the failure of the new German state to take seriously the task of denazifying the universities; and it matured into a critique broader than the one levelled by Fritz Ringer (1969) at the antimodern mentality of the German “mandarins” – a world that did not disappear in 1933: «the “mandarin mentality” is a term that symbolically condenses all the authoritarian, irrationalist, or anti-democratic attitudes against which Habermas defines himself» (2010: 11). For the argument of this essay the episode marks a first displacement. What Habermas holds Heidegger accountable for is not a deed but a language, and the failure to retract it: liability, in Jaspers's sense, is here extended from the political community to the university and to the philosophical tradition in which the past survives unavowed. It is the same charge – that a vocabulary can carry a past that its speakers refuse to name – that he would bring, thirty years later, against the neoconservative historians.

While writing his dissertation, Habermas's formation was enriched by his reading of Karl Löwith's *From Hegel to Nietzsche* (1941/1964), György Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* (1923/1971) and Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (1947/1972) (1981/1992: 98). These coordinates are to be found in the articles of literary, theatrical and film criticism that he wrote for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, the *Frankfurter Hefte* and the *Handelsblatt*, as well as in the essays published in the renowned journal *Merkur* on the critique of mechanization, of bureaucracy and of the dangers of mass society, in which the question of the working-through of the past (*Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit*) by German intellectuals recurs frequently. Those émigrés who had returned home – Adorno, Horkheimer, Arendt, Löwith – together with the rehabilitated Karl Jaspers are the “unscathed figures” who took on “intellectually redemptive” traits and whose importance Habermas has repeatedly recalled. These intellectuals made it possible to recover, without mistrust, a capacity to learn from one's own theoretical traditions, that is, the chance of an unprejudiced reception (1988c/1990: 30). On this stratification Habermas has returned with an autobiographical formula of rare concision: «I read Marx already as a schoolboy, and my last book also contains a chapter on Marx. I have always been a Hegelian Marxist whose thought was shaped by Kant and subsequently by pragmatism. I was initially impressed by *History and Class Consciousness* and was later strongly influenced by the Weberian Marxism of early Critical Theory» (2020b: 29).

The picture of that return must, however, be specified on a point that Habermas has made explicit only in the most recent conversations, and which concerns the disciplinary geography of the conflict. The public clash over the past, he observes, «in the last analysis derived from different attitudes towards the National Socialist past», but «it flared up only with the student movement» and, in philosophy as in the other humanistic disciplines, «it took place more among the members of my generation than among our teachers»; «the situation was very different in sociology, where the returning émigrés and the old Nazis confronted one another» (Habermas, 2024/2026: 20). The difference is not a matter of detail: it explains why German sociology was able to assume early on the function of a seismograph of institutional continuity, and why the philosophical controversy instead erupted with a generation's delay. Habermas recalls, moreover, that the controversy was «fuelled also by the “FAZ” [...] and by its co-editor Joachim Fest» (ibidem) – the same man who twenty years later would be among his opponents in the historians' dispute: an element of biographical continuity on the adversary side that deserves to be recorded alongside the better-known ones in the Habermasian camp. As for the notion of generation, the common trait is for Habermas not a shared position but a shared experience to which people react

differently: «even if a generation is formed through a shared experience, its members differ from one another in the way they react to that experience». What united the liberal and left-wing camp was rather a twofold conviction: «the impulse towards a new beginning, perceived as inescapable, and the critical awareness that German traditions could no longer be carried forward unfiltered» (ivi: 21). This is, almost to the letter, the formula we shall find again in the thesis of the *Historikerstreit*, according to which the only patriotism practicable for the Federal Republic is the one that passes through the filter of Auschwitz.

Without academic prospects but gifted as a writer, Habermas was for the most part a freelance journalist. Among his essays, *Die Dialektik der Rationalisierung* of August 1954 stood out: a rereading of Karl Marx's theory of capitalism, in particular of the alienation of industrial labour and of mass consumption, whose common condition was subsumed under the concept of "compensation". There was also the proposal to extend the category of rationality from the technical to the practical-moral sphere. In the Preface to the collection of essays *Dialettica della razionalizzazione*, edited by Emilio Agazzi, he would state years later, with reference to the theory of commodification, that «the key ideas of this article contain the nucleus of much of what I wrote later in the Theory of Communicative Action» – a declaration to be set against his judgement that it was elaborated «in a still rather clumsy manner» (1983a/1983: I). The intellectual affinity between Habermas and the first "Critical Theory" was being born *in nuce*. To this critical disposition Habermas gave a first explicit political formulation in May 1955, with the article *Ohne mich auf dem Index*, which appeared in the *Deutsche Studentenzeitung* at the height of the mobilization against rearmament. Claiming for himself a mentality that anti-communist propaganda branded as defeatism, he defined it as «a mentality shaped by the particular experiences of the totalitarian system and of its collapse», whose motives politics ought first of all to understand before reacting to them with an eye to public opinion (Yos, 2019: 176). The distinctions he introduces are already those of a theorist of the public sphere: it makes a difference «whether one has no interests» or is merely prevented «from expressing interests in a socially effective way», and it makes a difference whether one has no goals «or whether one fears the programmes that distort them» (ivi: 177). The positive side of the «count me out» is bound up with the «awareness of the unrepeatable opportunity of 1945», an opportunity compromised by the fact that subsequent developments had unfolded «on the crumbling ground of a tabooed past» (ivi: 177-178). The passage on the national question deserves to be recorded in full, because it anticipates by thirty years the argumentative structure of the constitutional patriotism to be discussed below: «the national idea has lost its tensile force. If we nonetheless desire and pursue national unity, this happens out of a concern and a bond more closely referred to the individual, familial or neighbourly. The commonality of the most recent history is stronger than that of a great past. The fact of being able to converse without a pocket dictionary is stronger than the questionable commonality of blood and of ethnic traditions» (ivi: 179).

Habermas was hired by the Institut für Sozialforschung in mid-February 1956 and became Adorno's first assistant for the chair of philosophy and sociology at the Goethe Universität for a little more than two years, during which he was involved in and directed some of the research under way, took part in the IfS conferences – among them the important one for the centenary of Freud's birth in 1956, where he met Marcuse – held seminars, continued to publish feuilleton articles, drafted his first essays on Marxism – which cost him the hostility of the director, Max Horkheimer – and drew up his Habilitation project. It should be said that in those years Habermas knew very little of the tradition of social philosophy that would later be labelled the "Frankfurt School". He had come to appreciate the intellectual "integrity" of these Marxist Jews forced into exile by the Nazi regime and only recently returned to the German university; besides the *Dialektik der Aufklärung* he had read the collection *Prisms* (1955a/1967) and had listened on the radio to Adorno's interventions on the question of guilt. In an academic world largely compromised with the Nazi past and dominated by a conservative and antimodernist cultural orientation, "unscathed figures" such as Horkheimer and Adorno, but also Hannah Arendt and Karl Löwith, took on "intellectually redemptive traits", allowing students to embark upon an "unprejudiced reception" of German cultural traditions and to apply philosophical categories to socially relevant problems (1988c/1990: 30). To the critical function of the "returnees" with respect to German culture Habermas has devoted innumerable passages of his works, as in the essay *Jewish Philosophers*

and *Sociologists as Returnees in the Early Federal Republic of Germany: A Recollection*, in which he brings out the fact that the “returnees” did not merely resume their academic careers: they brought with them critical perspectives matured in exile, which made it possible to call into question practices and narratives consolidated in the Federal Republic (2011a/2015: 108). Habermas emphasizes that this critique was often uncomfortable for the academic and political elites, but necessary for a genuine working-through of the past. In the book-interview *Es musste etwas besser werden*, Habermas recalls the importance of the exiles’ return, since they brought with them the living presence of the Jewish and republican cultural universe of pre-Nazi Weimar (2024/2026: 34). The measure of the recognition accorded to the “returnees” is given by an institutional fact: in November 1951 Horkheimer was elected rector of the University of Frankfurt and, as Jay observes, «perhaps more symbolic still, he was the first Jew to achieve that post after the war». At the end of his term he received the Goethe Prize, the city’s highest honour. Once settled in Frankfurt, he «was lionized by a Frankfurt community grateful for the recapture of at least one survivor of Weimar culture», associated with Adenauer and appeared regularly on radio, on television and in the press (1973: 286-287). On Adorno’s position, the testimony Habermas would consign to his obituary is telling: «In every institutional setting he was “out of place”, and not as if he intended to be», and «academic philosophy [...] never really acknowledged this unusual intellectual»; despite the influence he exercised for fifteen years over the literary public sphere, «Adorno did not get one of the official prizes», so that «his joy was disproportionately great when the German Association for Sociology made him its president» (1969b/1983: 102).

On the other hand, Habermas had no impression of a systematic reflection: «I didn’t think of it that way at the time. For me there was no critical theory, no connecting doctrine. Adorno wrote critical essays on culture and held seminars on Hegel. He made contemporary a certain Marxist background. That was it» (1981/1992: 98). Moreover, a young scholar could not grasp the lines of continuity with the critical theory of the 1920s and 1930s. As we have said, the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* had been unavailable since the advent of Nazism and, despite the insistence of Heinz Maus and Habermas, Horkheimer was opposed to republishing its volumes⁷. The critical theory of the interwar period was in any case «largely invisible» to him, retrospectively little more than «a submerged continent» (Specter, 2010: 29). The fact is less anecdotal than it may appear: it means that the resumption of the Frankfurt legacy was an act of critical reappropriation, not of institutional continuity – the very disposition that Habermas would recommend for the Germans’ relationship with their own traditions. Nonetheless, he managed to make the constitutive programme of the first critical theory his own. It was the converging theoretical coordinates, besides the fine prose and the democratic ideals, that drew him towards Adorno’s thought, for which he felt a genuine fascination, and with which he sought to elaborate a critical conception of modern rationalization of his own. In the furrow of the Frankfurt tradition lay also the invitation to the social sciences to renew a fruitful relationship with concrete praxis, not only on the technical-instrumental but also on the practical-moral plane, taking on the task of being a “ferment” and a “guide to the right life”. Adorno’s influence could also be felt in the appeal to the concept of “self-reflection”, according to which every specialized body of knowledge ought to reflect on the epistemological conditions of knowledge and on the historical-social conditions of its genesis, organization and use. The hypothesis advanced was that the relationship between organized capitalism and mass democracy was producing a series of effects: first, the bureaucratization of the private and public spheres, with the erosion of spaces of autonomy in work and consumption; second, the predominance of technocrats, political leaders and pressure groups in representative institutions and in public administration; third, the exclusion of workers, consumers and citizens from decision-making. The contradiction Habermas meant to highlight was that, alongside the progressive politicization of society brought about by state intervention in all domains of the lifeworld, one was witnessing the depoliticization of the masses.

⁷ In reality, as Müller-Doohm documented, contrary to Habermas’s assertion, while it is true that Horkheimer «had a great fear that we would get to the crate in the institute’s cellar that contained a complete set of the *Zeitschrift*» (1981/1992: 97), he not only knew about the existence of another complete edition, but had also consulted the entire collection purchased by Wilhelm Hennis, assistant to Carl Schmid, and archived at the Institut für Politische Wissenschaft (2014/2016: 20).

In January 1962 Habermas had presented to the Berlin University Days the paper *Von den kritischen und konservativen Aufgaben der Soziologie*. It was, in the first place, a reconstruction in the history of ideas aimed at «ascertaining, from the standpoint of the history of science, how sociology has understood its political relationship to the established order» (1962b/1971: 291). In the *pars construens*, Habermas defended the thesis that a critical sociology was possible only as “historical sociology”, whose object had to be «the development of society as a whole» (ivi: 300). The problem of the nexus between theory and praxis – with the assignment to sociology of the task of «clarifying practical consciousness in the process of the formation of the general will» (ibidem) – was traced back to the normative problem of grounding critique. In that period Habermas believed he could find the justification of value-references in reflection on the universalistic principles constitutionalized in democratic *Rechtsstaaten*, and in the critique of ideology the specific function of a critical theory that protects itself and society from an uncritical elaboration of the existing order: «If, then, a task can nonetheless be assigned to sociology beyond the pragmatics of an empirical science of planning, that task is this: instead of making evident what happens in any case, to bring to consciousness what in any case we must do [...] from the fictitiously anticipated perspective of a generalized subject of social action». And again, critical sociology «takes at its word the meaning claimed by existing institutions, since even when these are utopian words they – if realistically understood – disclose within the existing order what it is not» (ivi: 304). The solution is entirely internal to the Frankfurt paradigm. The conflict with Horkheimer concerned precisely this point. It was the 1957 essay on the philosophical debate over Marx and Marxism that furnished him with «grounds for urgently recommending Habermas’s removal from the Institute»; and when the publication of *Student und Politik* was blocked, the director objected to Adorno that the «imagination of the average reader» could not realize by democratic means the potential invoked: «How is a people which is “being held in the shackles of bourgeois society by a liberal constitution” to change into the so-called political society for which, according to H., it is “more than ripe”, other than by violence?» (cited in Wiggershaus, 1988/1995: 554). The final judgement on Habermas was blunt: «He probably has a good, or even brilliant, career as a writer in front of him, but he would only cause the Institute immense damage» (ivi: 555).

The study of the structural transformations of the public sphere (1962a/1989), carried out under the supervision of Wolfgang Abendroth at Marburg, belongs to a programme aimed at reconstructing the normative foundations of Frankfurt critical theory. It could also be read as a political critique of Adenauer’s *Kanzlerdemokratie*, he having just been re-elected in the national elections. The work does not deal directly with Nazism and the question of German guilt, but it provided an interpretive key for analysing the post-war Federal Republic, bringing out the crisis of legitimacy of German democracy and the limits of a political participation reduced to media consumption. In this sense Habermas became one of the young intellectuals most valued by the “New Left” and by the student movement that was beginning to occupy the public stage. And to sociological analysis he joined active commitment in the ranks of the Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund (SDS). In the lecture *Der Hermann Heller der frühen Bundesrepublik. Wolfgang Abendroth zum 100. Geburtstag* (2006b/2008), Habermas reconstructs Abendroth’s intellectual and political profile, relating it to the transformations of twentieth-century German history. He presents Abendroth as the exemplary figure of an intellectual who, though marked by the experience of National Socialism and by exile or marginalization, remains faithful to a project of social democracy and of radical critique of institutions. The text underscores the tension between memory and normalization in the Federal Republic and the role that intellectuals such as Abendroth played in keeping alive a critical consciousness of democracy. Habermas values Abendroth as a model of the public intellectual who neither withdraws into the ivory tower nor reduces himself to a mere technical consultant. Abendroth is described as a supporter of participatory democracy and as a critic of the authoritarian tendencies that can resurface even in formally democratic contexts. For Habermas, Abendroth’s personal trajectory – which introduced him into the Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund – his trade-union commitment, his legal militancy and his theoretical critique reflect the need for a *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* that does not confine itself to formal gestures but engages political culture and the structures of power. The essay highlights his attention to the material conditions of democracy, to the protection of social rights and to the need for an informed and pluralistic public

discourse. In commenting on German history, Habermas uses the figure of Abendroth to argue that the recognition of historical guilt must translate neither into a permanent self-condemnation nor into a functional repression. Abendroth embodies the position according to which the memory of the Holocaust and of Nazi crimes must constitute a normative constraint for contemporary politics, orienting the construction of institutions that prevent new authoritarian degenerations. The distinction between historical responsibility and personal guilt promotes a constitutional patriotism grounded in rights and democracy.

5. The Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial

Retrospectively, Habermas identifies throughout the “incubation period” of the 1960s a tendency towards a collective identity that problematizes the past and redefines self-understanding no longer on the basis of foreign policy – anti-communism and Atlanticism – and of the country’s successes as an economic nation, but also as a nation of citizens of a democratic *Rechtsstaat* which had pushed the question of national identity into the background. A key moment was the affair of the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial (1963-1965), which marked a decisive turning point in the working-through of the Nazi past in West Germany, breaking the climate of collective repression and silence typical of the 1950s. The initiative was due to Fritz Bauer, chief prosecutor of Hesse, who in the early months of 1959 received incriminating documents on more than ninety members of the SS who had served at the extermination camp (Frei, 1996). Aware of the strong institutional resistances and of the presence of former Nazi officials in the judicial apparatus of the time, Bauer entrusted the investigations to young prosecutors (Joachim K  gler, Georg Friedrich Vogel and Gerhard Wiese) untainted by any involvement with the regime. The inquiry had to overcome formidable obstacles: severe shortages of resources, bureaucratic boycotts, and even open intimidation by fellow magistrates. In tracing the surviving witnesses – dispersed in countries such as Poland, Hungary and Israel, with which the Federal Republic had no diplomatic relations – the contribution of Hermann Langbein, representative of the International Auschwitz Committee, was decisive. The extent of those resistances deserves emphasis, because it says something essential about the relationship between state apparatuses and memory in the Federal Republic of the decades preceding the *Historikerstreit*. On the procedural plane, Bauer’s action was made possible by a precise institutional step: on the basis of the material he had received, he applied to the Federal Court of Justice, which assigned to the District Court of Frankfurt am Main jurisdiction over all crimes committed at Auschwitz, thereby withdrawing for the first time from an international court competence over a case of that magnitude. Until 1959, indeed, Nazi criminals had been tried by Allied tribunals, both because their norms were better suited to the purpose and because occupied Germany was in no position to institute proceedings of such scope. The choice of very young prosecutors was not a generational preference but a precaution: «Bauer probably chose very young prosecutors deliberately, so as to exclude any involvement of theirs with National Socialism», in a context in which «the strong continuity of the personnel of the police and of the judicial apparatus with the National Socialist past made it very difficult to investigate Nazi crimes» (Franceschi, 2017). The investigation proved unpopular within the judiciary itself: it was repeatedly sabotaged and left without adequate resources, to the point that the prosecutors used the greengrocer’s fax machine, slept in police stations or on a bench in the Tiergarten, and drew on their own salaries to balance the accounts of their missions. The investigating magistrate Heinz D  x reported that, shortly after taking on the proceedings, he had been approached by two authoritative colleagues offering him “advice” on the handling of the case, and concluded that the aim was not to help him but to dissuade him from bringing it to trial. To other forms of obstruction – the withholding of urgent correspondence at the Hessian Ministry of Justice, the denial of funding on specious grounds – was added the fact that, after nine months waiting for authorization for an official mission to Auschwitz, D  x travelled to the camp during his own holidays, taking there the photographs later produced in court. Among the openly hostile colleagues was an elderly and respected magistrate who in 1942 had been present at the Wannsee Conference (D  x, 2004: 31).

Langbein’s role too deserves a quantitative specification that measures its weight. A survivor of Auschwitz and representative of the Internationales Auschwitz-Komitee, Langbein recommended the expert witnesses, indicated the incriminating evidence, supplied the information about the camp and,

above all, procured the names of half the witnesses questioned in the course of the investigations (Wojak, 2009: 323). The figure is no detail: it means that the judicial reconstruction of Auschwitz rested, for a decisive part, on the self-organization of the victims, that is, on a collective subject external both to the state and to the corporation of jurists. It is the first appearance, in the history of the Federal Republic, of what Habermas will call a memory that constitutes itself in the public sphere before it does so in the institutions.

Opened on 20 December 1963 and concluded on 20 August 1965, the trial was the largest proceeding for Nazi crimes in the history of post-war Germany. In the dock sat twenty-two former administrators and guards of Auschwitz (among them physicians, adjutants and a kapo). The trial unfolded over 183 sessions, saw the deposition of more than 350 witnesses and the collection of 124 volumes of records. The verdict imposed seven life sentences and ten terms of imprisonment, alongside three acquittals and two stays of proceedings. The trial also registered, however, the precise limits of the German penal code of the time, which lacked specific norms for prosecuting a bureaucratically organized state genocide. The need to apply ordinary criminal law forced the prosecution to focus on individual guilt and motivation for the offence of murder, fragmenting the perception of the systemic responsibility of Auschwitz. On this point the sharpest formulation is that of Devin O. Pendas, according to whom German law «fundamentally lacked the theoretical apparatus to comprehend and pass judgement upon a state-sponsored, bureaucratically and systematically organized genocide» (2006: 53). Criminal law had been conceived to judge individual crimes committed for individual motives, and since for German law intent corresponds to a subjective mental state, the centrality of the individual defendant's will as a criterion of culpability made it «extremely difficult to comprehend the Auschwitz system and to pass judgement upon it» (Franceschi, 2017). The investigation was therefore conducted according to the parameters of an ordinary murder trial, with a strictly defined objective: to determine the personal guilt of the defendants. From this follows a consequence of direct interest to us. The trial produced a judicial truth that was at once rigorous and structurally inadequate to its object: the legal form, applied to a state crime, returned its image fragmented into a sum of personal responsibilities. The disjunction between the juridical structure of the trial and the historical character of the Shoah is precisely the gap into which, twenty years later, the task Habermas assigns to the public use of history will insert itself: what the court cannot say by statute – the nexus between bureaucratic rationality, obedience and extermination – must be said elsewhere, in the public sphere, and with other argumentative instruments. Put in Jaspers's terms, the trial institutionalized one side of his distinction and left the other without a forum: it could establish criminal guilt, person by person, but the political liability of the community that had made the camp possible lay by construction outside its jurisdiction. This is why the Frankfurt trial is a turning point in the itinerary reconstructed here, and not merely an episode in its background: it is the moment at which the question of guilt, having found its judicial answer, reveals that it still lacks a public one.

Media coverage was imposing (almost a thousand articles in the leading newspapers). The press, however, often favoured a narrative that portrayed the defendants as “monsters” and “demons”, allowing public opinion to distance itself from the crimes and turning the event into a voyeuristic tale (as criticized by intellectuals such as Martin Walser and Erich Kuby). The two criticisms must, however, be distinguished, because they identify opposite risks. For Martin Walser, who intervened in «*Kursbuch*» with the essay *Unser Auschwitz*, the true significance of the trial lay not in the judicial proceeding but «in the education of a population that could not be brought to know what had happened in any other way» (Walser, 1965: 189); the problem was that this *Aufklärung* had proved insufficient, since the detailed and almost voyeuristic account of the atrocities had allowed the public to distance itself not only from the facts but from their authors. Isolated from any historical context, Walser warned, the fascination would be short-lived: «since no Höss, no Heydrich, no Himmler, no race ideologist or director of IG-Farben sits in the courtroom, it would be possible for the Auschwitz trial to become a monstrous jumble of murders; one that could involve us only as consumers of sharp headlines. And these are forgotten as soon as they are replaced by new headlines» (ivi: 195). Erich Kuby, by contrast, feared the symmetrical outcome, that is, not the wrong lesson but the absence of any lesson: «social reality is such that it would be utopian to expect that the public would not try to repress this trial, as it

represses everything that is uncomfortable» (1994: 7). The two concerns – that the public might ignore the proceedings despite their grandeur, or that, while following them, it might not draw «the right lesson» – circumscribe with precision the problem Habermas would inherit: the publicity of a memorial event by no means guarantees its formative efficacy, and indeed the very form of media narration may neutralize it. It is no accident that, in following the trial, the press replicated the legal narrative of individual guilt, unintentionally shifting attention from the Holocaust as a historical process – with lasting implications for German society – to a vision of Auschwitz as an earthly inferno, largely incomprehensible, peopled by «monsters», «demons» and «devils» (Franceschi, 2017). While the communist newspapers of the GDR used the trial to attack the Western capitalist system and the nationalist ones sought to minimize the guilt, the moderate and conservative press concentrated on formal respect for the rule of law (*Rechtsstaat*). The four discursive strategies deserve to be named, because they prefigure with notable precision the positions in the field during the historians' dispute. The communist camp practised what may be called a cynical historicism: it maintained that the trial did not do justice to the historical context of Auschwitz, but did so by reducing the entire causality of the genocide to the greed of IG Farben and by drawing a polemical, and openly antihistorical, line between Auschwitz and Adenauer's chancellorship. Since the antifascist founding myth of the GDR was endangered precisely by the fact that it was the West Germans who were trying the Nazis, the attack could not be direct: at the close of the proceedings «*Der Morgen*» was thus able to write that if the Auschwitz trial had been accomplished, the guilt of Auschwitz had remained unexpiated because the system had not been condemned.

The nationalist camp, gathered around the *Deutsche National-Zeitung* and the nascent NPD, practised instead a “cynical legalism” coupled with trivialization: it rejected the law in the name of the law itself, pressing procedural guarantees to the point where the perpetrators remained presumed innocent in defiance of the evidence, while at the same time casting doubt on the number of victims, on the coherence of the survivors' depositions and on the very existence of a deliberate policy of extermination, invoking a general amnesty for all war crimes according to the *tu quoque* schema. For them the trial was merely one further episode of «national masochism», and the political programme opposed to it demanded, in Otto Hess's words, «respect, balance, common sense, and self-awareness» (cf. Klessmann, 1988: 100). As can be seen, the arguments we shall meet again in the nationalist apologetics of the mid-1980s are already present in 1964.

In the camp that supported the proceedings, finally, the Social Democrats adopted a didactic moralism that emphasized the moral lessons of the outcome while neglecting the substance of the trial, and traced the defendants' motives back to an excessive «sense of duty» presented as an archetypally German trait – nothing more than an anonymous order had turned innocent men into mass murderers – while the conservatives defended the inviolability of the *Rechtsstaat* against every «political» contamination of the trial, without realizing that such an avowedly apolitical form was itself a political position. The early history of the Federal Republic may thus be understood in terms of two parallel practices: the social reintegration of former Nazis and, together with it, a political-judicial design aimed at circumscribing the crimes of National Socialism by identifying the “worst criminals”, so as to fix the boundary of what was morally acceptable without endangering the political loyalty of millions of fellow citizens (Franceschi, 2017).

Despite the divergences in public opinion, the Frankfurt Trial remained an indispensable moment of historical awareness. The available survey data nonetheless require that this coming to awareness be measured with caution. A June 1964 survey by the DIVO Institute found that 40% of respondents had not followed the trial through any medium of information (Schmidt and Becker, 1967: 111); a poll of the following month indicated instead that 83% of Germans had heard of it and 42% were able to name its location, figures close to but not higher than those recorded for the Eichmann trial (87% and 46%), despite the imposing press coverage. More significant still is that at the beginning of 1965 a survey by the Institut für Demoskopie in Allensbach, founded and directed by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, found 57% of the population opposed to further proceedings against Nazis, within a trend that rises from 34% in 1958 to 44% in 1966 (Franceschi, 2017).

The resulting picture is one of a divergence between media resonance and moral assent: the press did everything possible to bring the trial before the eyes of the country, without this translating into

consent to the judicial operation. This is why, from the point of view that concerns us here, the Frankfurt Trial is to be read less as a collective conversion than as the opening of a conflict: the irreversible entry of Auschwitz into German public space and, at the same time, the birth of the discursive strategies destined to contain its implications. The conclusion to be drawn defines exactly the space in which the Habermasian intervention will be located: neither delegation to the judiciary nor repression, but the discursive labour – permanent and always revocable – of a public sphere that takes upon itself what the verdict cannot establish.

Both Adorno and Habermas experienced at first hand, in Frankfurt, the political and cultural climate of the years of the trial, and both expressed crucial reflections on the event. Adorno, who as early as 9 November 1959 had delivered, at the Koordinierungsrat für Christlich-Jüdische Zusammenarbeit in Wiesbaden, the lecture *The Meaning of Working Through the Past* (1959/1998), followed the debate around the trial attentively. In the immediate aftermath of its conclusion, Adorno delivered the celebrated radio lecture *Education after Auschwitz* (1966b/1998), in which he pointed out the limits of the judicial path. While recognizing the importance of Fritz Bauer's work, Adorno showed how criminal justice, by concentrating on the punishment of individual perpetrators, risked proving a purely formal working-through unless accompanied by an analysis of the social and psychological structure that had made Nazism possible. For Adorno the danger lay in the persistence of the "authoritarian character" and in the psychological conformism of the German population. Hence the need for an educational turn. It is worth recalling that those lectures were not isolated episodes but the culmination of a public posture deliberately assumed ever since his return from American exile, when Adorno «deliberately takes on the risk of speaking of the noose in the hangman's house» (Müller-Doohm, 2005: 272) and, in 1951, provokes his readership with the dictum on the barbarism of writing poetry after Auschwitz. Between the late 1950s and the early 1960s – in a phase marked by antisemitic movements in West Germany – he placed the reputation of his scholarly standing at the service of a public warning about the survival of National Socialism, going so far as to declare: «I consider the survival of National Socialism within democracy to be potentially more menacing than the survival of fascist tendencies against democracy» (Adorno, 1959/1998: 90). The accompanying diagnosis is that «democracy has not become naturalized to the point where people truly experience it as their own and see themselves as subjects of the political process» (ivi: 93). Adorno himself defines his contribution to intellectual enlightenment, in terms of social theory, as «a turn toward the subject, the reinforcement of a person's self-consciousness» (ivi: 102). And it is precisely this imperative, tirelessly opposed to public silence, that fixes his agonistic location: Adorno «positions himself as a militant naysayer, even as a disturber of the peace» (Müller-Doohm, 2005: 273). His critique of the various defences against making German guilt an object of conscious discussion contributed to Germany's process of self-understanding with regard to history and democracy, to the point that he must be granted a share of responsibility for what has been called a "second founding" – an intellectual one – of the German republic. It is necessary, however, to register also the aporia that such a posture carries with it, because it marks the limit of the Adornian model with respect to the one Habermas would adopt twenty years later. Adorno vehemently pleaded for the working-through of the past and for the use of the possibilities offered by the democratic constitution, and was at the same time convinced that the political sphere was a façade no less than the political public sphere, whose media he nonetheless used extensively (ivi: 274). Hence the formula from *Minima Moralia* in which the aporia is condensed: «Whatever the intellectual does, is wrong» (Adorno, 1951/1974: 133). It is exactly the position that a critique which renders conscious will have to overcome – not by abandoning the task of unmasking, but by restoring to it an addressee. The judicial path appeared to Adorno structurally insufficient, and not simply incomplete. For Adorno, Auschwitz does not represent an accident along the way but the catastrophic outcome of Western civilization: the rationalization described in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947/1972), born to emancipate man from myth, has reversed into a new form of blindness. Culture not only failed to prevent barbarism; it was complicit in it through its very structure. If reason has become purely instrumental, capable of organizing extermination with the same efficiency with which a factory is managed, then a procedural apparatus that ascertains the guilty will of individual perpetrators cannot, by construction, reach what is properly social in that crime. It is the same asymmetry between legal form and historical object that the Frankfurt trial

made visible, but read from the standpoint of the diagnosis of civilization rather than from the limits of the penal code. From this follows the specificity of the pedagogical proposal. Education cannot confine itself to the transmission of technical knowledge, but must become an «education towards contradiction and resistance», with the aim of preventing human beings from once again becoming objects capable of executing criminal orders in the name of efficiency. The subjective presupposition of Auschwitz Adorno locates in «bourgeois coldness», that is, in the incapacity to love and to identify with the suffering of others, and in that “fetishism of technology” which permits one to act without reflecting: «People are inclined to take technology to be the thing itself, as an end in itself, a force of its own, and they forget that it is an extension of human dexterity. The means – and technology is the epitome of the means of self-preservation of the human species – are fetishized, because the ends – a life of human dignity – are concealed and removed from the consciousness of people» (1966b/1998: 200). The aim of education is therefore the formation of an autonomous subject, capable of saying “no” to the pressures of the collective, which implies a critique of the culture industry inasmuch as it habituates the masses to passivity and repetition: the Adornian position presents itself as an applied sociology, aimed at unmasking the mechanisms that transform the individual into an «atom» of the crowd. That lexicon derives, in no small part, from the study *Schuld und Abwehr* (1955b) contained in the *Gruppenexperiment* of 1955, whose central mechanism Wiggershaus summarizes thus: hardly any of the participants was prepared to say «It was right that they should be killed»; it was rather a matter of making one’s own excessive identification with the collective compatible with knowledge of the crimes, and therefore «one denies or minimizes such knowledge in order not to lose the possibility of identifying with the collective that psychologically enables countless people to overcome an unbearable sense of their own powerlessness» (cited in Wiggershaus, 1988/1995: 474). To the «anthropological» reaction thus identified Adorno gave the name of «collective narcissism», and Wiggershaus can therefore describe that study as «the first, and in the 1950s the most penetrating, analysis of the post-Hitler German inability to mourn» (ivi: 476).

The relation to the Habermasian position can then be specified by way of difference. Habermas shares the demand that the working-through should not be exhausted in the verdict, but he shifts the centre of gravity from the formation of character to the structure of public communication: where Adorno calls for a «de-barbarization» starting from an awareness of one’s own aggressive impulses, Habermas will call for discursive procedures capable of rendering arguable what ritual and sentence leave implicit. They are two responses to the same problem – the fragility of the subjective presuppositions of democracy – diverging on the point at which the lever is to be placed: the formation of the individual for the former, the conditions of the public sphere for the latter. Habermas himself identified in the trial a fundamental moment of rupture in the political evolution of the Federal Republic – the moment at which the truth about Nazi crimes irrupted irrevocably into public space. The trial forced German society to abandon apologetic memory and the narrative of the Germans solely as “victims of the war”. The democratic identity of post-war Germany could no longer be based on a traditional national belonging or on an uncritical historical continuity, but on the assumption of collective responsibility for the Holocaust and on strict respect for the principles of the *Rechtsstaat* and of the human rights that emerged precisely through trials such as the one led by Fritz Bauer.

6. 1968 and the Conflict of Generations over the Past

The 1960s were also a period of great domestic and international events. There was the Vietnam War, diplomatically supported by the FRG government; the subversive activities of the CIA in South America; the civil rights movement in the United States; the Palestinian question with the Six-Day War in the Middle East; the nationalist struggles of the anticolonial movements; the military coup in Greece and many other occurrences. There were the treaties with the Eastern countries, the recognition of the GDR, the policy of détente and the abatement of anti-communism, the strengthening of the European Community and the divergences between Europe and the United States. The critical potential hitherto confined to the circles of the critical intelligentsia found its sounding board in schools, universities and publishing, ending by forming the opinion of a vast part of the population. In national politics, in

December 1966, the first *Große Koalition* was formed, through the agreement between the Christian Democratic Union and the Social Democratic Party to support the government of Chancellor Kurt G. Kiesinger. Habermas had opposed it before its formation, stating at a round table that there were good reasons to fear the new government more than the old one and charging the SPD with “opportunism” (1966/1998). In those years the ferment of the new generation had turned into rebellion. Although he was one of the intellectuals of reference for the Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund – in which the Berlin section led by Rudi Dutschke had assumed a pre-eminent position – Habermas was among the first to come into collision with the student movement, out of which, in Germany and elsewhere, the galaxy of collectives and political groups of the “new left” was being born. Riding the wave of global and national political events, the youth protest continued to grow and radicalize, attracting the attention of the media, with demonstrations, occupations, sit-ins and many other, more creative forms. The Springer publishing group launched an opinion campaign to persuade the political leadership to react with repressive measures. The turning point came with the protests that followed the repression of the demonstrations of 2 June 1967 against the state visit of the Shah of Persia in Berlin, in which the police killed the student Benno Ohnesorg. The following week, student demonstrations against the repressive police operations took place throughout the Federal Republic. Habermas was “shocked” by the head-long course of events and feared that the students’ demonstrative actions might accelerate the passage of the emergency laws, under discussion since 1965 – that is, a limitation of constitutionally guaranteed civil and political rights. His criticism of the line taken by the university leaders – many of them students of his own and of Adorno’s, or inspired by Frankfurt publications – was sharp, and issued in the celebrated expression “left-wing fascism”, pronounced on 9 June during the crowded assembly that followed Ohnesorg’s funeral in Hanover. To the assembly – entitled *Hochschule und Demokratie. Bedingungen und Organisation des Widerstandes* (“The University and Democracy: Conditions and Organization of Resistance”) – only four professors had been invited: Margherita von Brentano, Hartmut von Hentig, Abendroth and Habermas himself. His *Rede über die politische Rolle der Studentenschaft in der Bundesrepublik* (“Speech on the Political Role of the Student Body in the Federal Republic”) denounced the police operations as an “act of terror” and an “intentional intimidation”, and identified in the students’ protest a legitimate, necessary and urgent expression of commitment with which to reawaken democratic consciousness. Habermas nonetheless warned against a subversive “actionism” at any cost, above all the “masochistic” variety that seeks to «provoke a transformation of the indirect violence of institutions into manifest violence» (1967/1969: 145). The intervention was contested by Hans-Jürgen Krahel, a student of Adorno’s and spokesman of the Frankfurt SDS, according to whom, in the face of the “bloody and brutal lash” of the violent machinery of the state, the ritualized forms of student provocation were legitimate; and by Dutschke, by then a leading figure of the movement, who accused Habermas of wanting to «kill the emancipatory subject with his senseless objectivism» and of defending the “irrational” democracy in power. Müller-Doohm reports his reaction, which generated the famous formula, as follows: «Habermas was alarmed but did not immediately react. Only later, long past midnight, when he was about to leave the congress, did he change his mind; he returned from the car park (‘I was already in my car’) to the hall, where the discussion continued. In his ‘Question to Rudi Dutschke’ (the name given to Habermas’s intervention by the documentary film-makers Hans Dieter Müller and Günther Hörmann in their *Ruhestörung*), Habermas suggested that Dutschke, who was no longer present at that point, supported a voluntaristic ideology ‘which was called utopian socialism in 1848, but which under present conditions – I believe I have reason for using this terminology – must be called “left-wing fascism”.’ The audience was split down the middle and reacted with both booing and applause» (2014/2016: 192).

The echo of the accusation was resounding and was taken up by the entire national press, itself polarized into political positions that had become irreconcilable. Over time, Habermas never ceased to regard as a misfortune a whole series of features characteristic of the student protest: the naïve use of the concept of revolution typical of a youth movement that represents itself «as the *longa manus* of Che Guevara in the metropolises» and turns its gaze towards the East (China, Vietnam, Cambodia, etc.) or towards the Latin American countries (Cuba, Mexico, etc.); a mistaken reading of a historical situation that was anything but revolutionary; the underestimation of the democratic *Rechtsstaat* through a

misconstrual of what was entirely obvious even to Marx, namely that no human emancipation can be achieved without the realization of the so-called bourgeois liberties; and the total discrediting of the institutional spaces of public discussion – universities, parliaments, courts, party congresses – interpreted as outposts of power in which to intervene with acts of provocation and violence aimed at “subverting the function” (1988d/1992: 232).

Habermas’s denunciation, in the summer of ’68, of the political activists (the “left-wing fascists”) – many of whom had, moreover, taken up in their own way the theses set out in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962/1971) – must be understood in this context. In the exasperated sabotage of the political and cultural institutions of the democratic state he saw not merely a latently terroristic politics whose results – the apparent legitimization of the real terrorists and a repressive state policy supported by the silent majority of citizens – were the opposite of the hoped-for shock effect. The decisive aspect remains the incapacity of the ’68 movement – scarcely encouraged, to be sure – to take part in the life of the political institutions, failing to recognize the formidable opportunity that had arisen after the rupture of 1945 (1988d/1992: 236).

The judgement on the lack of a sense of “historical measure” with respect to the functions secured by the *Bundesrepublik* goes hand in hand with Habermas’s satisfaction at the path towards a politics of civil and social rights: «Under administratively regulated capitalism, Germany (the Federal Republic) has, for the first time in centuries, become a contemporary of Western Europe. Superstitiously one still fears to say it out loud: We are living today in one of the six or seven most liberal nations and in one of the six or seven social systems with the fewest internal conflicts» (1971/1983: 8). In an interview published in 1988, Habermas would reflect on the legacy of the student movement of 1968 and on its impact upon the political culture of the Federal Republic. The starting point is the question: “What remains of ’68?”, and how the legacies of that era are interwoven with the crisis of the antifascist consensus. That consensus, nourished by the “radical failure of Nazi policies” and by the repugnant image of Soviet communism, had oriented Germany towards the West (1988b/1989: 190-191).

On the one hand, the cultural revolution of the young played an absolutely central role in feeding the so-called anti-authoritarian movement which, from the early 1970s, established itself through different and often wholly original forms of political participation in Western countries, such as civil disobedience and symbolic violence. The realization of political ideals is pursued, first of all, in the sphere of everyday life, in associations, communities of every kind, consciousness-raising groups, and on the basis of highly individualized lifestyles that place new themes at the centre of public discussion: the valorization of forms of sociality and of the many paths in the search for an authentic life that realizes the person; the great problems of contemporary world politics; pacifism; ecologically compatible development; the formation of post-national identities, and so on: «The student protest scene brought about the first advance of a fundamental liberalization (Karl Mannheim once spoke of “fundamental democratization”). I am thinking of the new individualism of lifestyles, oriented to libertarian models, but also the new forms of autonomous public sphere, in which the borderlines between demonstration and civil disobedience, between discussion, festival, and expressive self-presentation tend to dissolve. Here I perceive a long-term effect of the forms of protest of that period, and of what Marcuse, at the time, called a “new sensibility”» (1988d/1992: 234). The great historical importance Habermas assigns to the caesura in German political culture and civic consciousness generated by the long wave of ’68 – second only to the liberation from Nazism – is amply attested by the closing answer of the Interview with Angelo Bolaffi: «Without the pressure of attitudes which emerged during that period, we would today have no Greens, no alternative scenes in the big cities, no awareness of the fact that subcultural and ethnic plurality enriches our streamlined culture – we would not have the degree of urbanity which is gradually being established, and it is likely that there would be less sensitivity on the part of the rulers towards the mood of the populace, perhaps there would not even be the so-called liberal wing in the CDU» (ivi: 236).

Habermas has retrospectively expressed second thoughts, in particular on the merits of a new generation that confronted the legacy of Nazism without reserve, both within the privacy of families and publicly, raising the question of the German people’s responsibility for the crimes of Nazism and of whether Nazism was in some way part of the “German national character” or the work of a small

criminal clique, so that the German population had – as was claimed – been a victim of Nazism: «The student protest movement put an end to the shoving aside of a Nazi past that was sweepingly condemned but generally bracketed out» (1990b/1991: 87).

After 1968, the demand for “democracy in cash” (that is, effective rights, real participation) pushed towards a politicization of civil society and the birth of autonomous counter-public spheres (ecological, feminist and pacifist movements). This process rendered more fragile the model of integration based on strong parties and favoured a more pluralist and critical political culture, but also one more exposed to identitarian tensions⁸.

The significance of 1968 for the question of guilt can now be stated with precision, since it explains an apparent paradox: the same Habermas who accused the student leaders of “left-wing fascism” would later credit their movement with having ended the “shoving aside” of the Nazi past. The generation of 1968 transformed the question of liability into an accusation of moral guilt directed at the fathers and, by extension, at the institutions of a Federal Republic that had reintegrated them; and it was against this extension – not against the accusation itself – that Habermas reacted. For him the democratic *Rechtsstaat* was not the continuation of the compromised past under another name, but the only forum in which political liability could be publicly discharged, and to delegitimize it in the name of the past was to destroy the instrument of its working-through. The conflict of generations thus marks a further displacement in the itinerary traced here: the question of guilt left the privacy of families and became a matter of public political culture, but Habermas insisted that it be settled in the institutions of the constitutional state rather than against them. It is this position, formed in 1967-68, that made the *Historikerstreit* possible.

7. The Historians’ Dispute

After the efforts of the generation of the 1960s, which, refusing to be content with the repressive strategy pursued by its parents, forcefully insisted on obtaining answers to the most disturbing questions about the German past, the theme of the Nazi legacy returned to the centre of debate in the Federal Republic in the early 1980s. Habermas detected in this, in many respects, a belated confirmation of the *Tendenzwende*, that is, of the ideological shift already under way by the mid-1970s. The ramifications of a neoconservative stabilization in the political-cultural domain are analysed in many essays in which he engages with the reactions to terrorism, the new obscurity resulting from the loss of utopian energies, the resurgence of nationalism and the impulses towards a “reconciliation with the past” that evades the question of how Auschwitz was possible. See, by way of example, the intervention *Linke, Terroristen, Sympathisanten. Eine Briefwechsel mit Kurt Sontheimer*, in the “Süddeutsche Zeitung” of 27 November 1977; the interview given to Angelo Bolaffi at the Max Planck Institut in Starnberg on 29 May 1978,

⁸ In his reply to Angelo Bolaffi on the role played by the student protest in breaking the deceptive “communicative silence” about Nazism, Habermas develops an overall argument that takes its cue from the criticisms he received during those years for his harsh assessment and ends with a strictly autobiographical reflection: «When Inge Marcuse suggested to me, in 1969 in Korcula, that – with the student rebellion – a generation had appeared for the first time in postwar Germany which was prepared to confront the heritage of fascism critically, and without reservations, I was hurt, indeed outraged. I knew my Frankfurt students, just as I knew my contemporaries, for example Alexander Kluge, who was writing his *Lebensläufe* at the end of the 1950s. I experienced the suggestion as an injury. In one respect I was probably right, because for the most part the left-wing students had a rather clichéd notion of fascism. At that time it cost a real effort to assert in public that the organs of state also carried out functions which helped to secure freedom, or that, in spite of everything, the *Bundesrepublik* was one of the six or seven most liberal countries in the world. It was difficult for me to find an audience for such statements, which were intended to introduce a sense of historical proportion. In another respect, however, I was wrong to react to Inge Marcuse as I did: the ’68 generation was probably the first in Germany which did not shy away from asking for face to face explanations – from parents, from older people in general, in front of the television set, and so on. [...] The student protest was the staging of a public – and sometimes rather self-righteous – reckoning, also reaching into the private domain, with collective avoidance of the German responsibility, of the historical liability, for National Socialism and its horrors. When I was a student, in 1953, I wrote a comparable article on Heidegger’s 1935 lectures, because I was outraged by the inability of the protagonists (such as Heidegger, Carl Schmitt, Gehlen and so on) to utter even one word admitting a political error. But I avoided any confrontation with my father, who was certainly only considered to be a passive sympathizer. In short, the generational clocks were set in such a way that the ’68ers were able to insist, without any embarrassment, on a specific confrontation with the past. This confrontation had perhaps had something abstract about it up until then» (1988d/1992: 231).

entitled *I potenziali critici nella società*; the lecture *Die Kulturkritik der Neokonservativen in den USA und in der Bundesrepublik*, published in “Merkur” in November 1981; and the interview *Conservative Politics, Work, Socialism and Utopia Today* given to the “Magazin der Basler Zeitung” (1984/1992). Precisely under the long Christian Democratic chancellorship of Helmut Kohl – begun in 1982 with the constructive vote of no confidence against Helmut Schmidt, and clearly confirmed by the federal elections of 6 March 1983 – centred on economic stability, tax reduction and the strengthening of the alliance with the USA, the general atmosphere, according to Habermas, gradually changed «in a markedly pessimistic direction», assuming in some of its features the appearance of a veritable “counter-revolution” fuelled by “rancour” and “resentment”. The “historians’ dispute” is situated in this context (1988d/1992: 230). Robert Holub’s reconstruction converges on this reading and specifies its steps. The change of government in 1982, from Helmut Schmidt to Helmut Kohl, «seemed to herald a shift not only in politics, but also in the way the past was instrumentalized for political ends»; and Kohl’s handshake with Ronald Reagan in the military cemetery of Bitburg, in May 1985, «seemed symbolically to consign to the past both the former enmity between the two allies and German responsibility for the crimes committed by the National Socialist regime». Holub isolates three tendencies damaging to a responsible relationship with history: reducing the Third Reich to «an aberration perpetrated by a small minority»; re-establishing a continuity with the past «on the plane of everyday life and subjective experience», as in the television series *Heimat*, conceived as a German alternative to *the American series Holocaust*; and finally the political recourse to anti-socialist and anti-communist sentiments, whereby «the Federal Republic thus became the continuator of a fundamentally sound Nazi foreign policy» (Holub, 2019: 165). Upstream of all this stood the address delivered in January 1983 by the conservative philosopher Hermann Lübbe for the fiftieth anniversary of Adolf Hitler’s rise to power, entitled *Der Nationalsozialismus im politischen Bewußtsein der Gegenwart*. Lübbe «suggested that silence about the past was essential to the healthy development of the nascent German democracy, while the agitation about the past during the student movement of the 1960s deserved censure» (1983/2008: 580). This intervention has entered the history of world historiography because in it Lübbe introduced the celebrated sociological concept of “communicative silence”. The philosopher defended the initial reticence and the collective silence of 1950s Germany about complicity with Nazism, maintaining that such an “agreed silence” was not a cowardly psychological repression, but an asymmetrical yet necessary social condition for allowing citizens to integrate peacefully and to rebuild the foundations of the newborn liberal democracy of West Germany.

In 1986-1987 there flared up in West Germany the debate ignited by the revisionist theses of the historians Ernst Nolte, Andreas Hillgruber, Klaus Hildebrand, Rainer Zitelmann and of the journalist Joachim Fest. The dispute is situated historically after the Bitburg controversy, concerning a commemorative ceremony in a German military cemetery where 2,000 soldiers were buried, among them members of the Waffen-SS. Invited by Chancellor Helmut Kohl to the ceremony of 5 May 1985 marking forty years since the end of the Second World War, the President of the United States, Ronald Reagan, stated in one passage of his speech that the Schutzstaffel men buried at Bitburg were victims of Hitler just as much as the murdered Jews, and that «they [the Germans] have a feeling of guilt that has been imposed upon them and I just think it is unnecessary» (cf. Kattago, 2001: 62). On the nexus between Bitburg and the dispute Müller-Doohm supplies a chronological element worth making explicit. To Reagan’s visit of May 1985 there corresponded, on the opposite side, Richard von Weizsäcker’s address before the Bundestag on 8 May, which «ran counter to the conservative spirit of the times and its “intellectual-moral turn”»: the federal president emphasized that 8 May 1945 had not been a day of defeat but «a “day of liberation from the inhumane system of National Socialist violent rule”», and concluded: «Let us today, on the 8th of May, look the truth in the eye as well as we can» (Weizsäcker, 1985; Müller-Doohm, 2014/2016: 399). Deeply struck by that address, Habermas was by contrast outraged by the spectacle of Bitburg and expressed his indignation in the columns of “*Die Zeit*” on 24 May (1985b/1986). Reagan’s speech was praised by Michael Stürmer – Kohl’s adviser and speechwriter (1986/1993). The German people should no longer feel a special guilt for Nazi crimes, and the new generations of Germans were to find grounds for pride in past and recent German history. This was the beginning of the “normalization” of the Nazi past, from which the *Historikerstreit* took its start in a

context of the recovery of traditional identities, among them the powerful one of *Heimat*. The position taken by the conservatives, and by Ernst Nolte in particular, was that there had been no special historical path leading Germany from autocracy to National Socialism [*Sonderweg*], that the Holocaust was not a unique event and that the Germans should bear no special burden of guilt for the “Final Solution of the Jewish question”. For the conservative historians in particular, there was no moral difference between the genocides of the “Gulag Archipelago” in the Soviet Union and those of the concentration camps in Nazi Germany (1980/1993; 1986/1993). These positions provoked a reaction from Habermas, Hans-Ulrich Wehler, Jürgen Kocka, Hans and Wolfgang Mommsen, Martin Broszat and Heinrich August Winkler. The dispute was conducted through articles and letters to the editor in the newspapers *Die Zeit* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and inflamed the public debate of the *Bundesrepublik*, spreading rapidly to the specialist and cultural press throughout the West. As Gian Enrico Rusconi specified in setting out the object of the controversy: «None of the authors who intervened casts doubt on the horrendous dimensions and the criminal nature of the Nazi actions, in particular of what is customarily called the Jewish Holocaust in Europe. No one intends to erase those crimes or to “rehabilitate” Nazism. [...] Beyond the provocative, exasperated or infelicitous expressions, the problem common to all the contenders is the search for the right attitude of today’s Germans towards the horror of Nazism. [...] The debate soon reaches the threshold of fundamental questions that remain open. How are the guiltless of today to work through the “memory owed” to the victims of a past to which they inexorably belong? [...] Here too the scholars divide» (Rusconi, 1987: IX-X). The reading Specter proposes of that conjuncture brings out its overall political stake. The commemorations of the fortieth anniversary of the Allied victory promoted by Kohl «prompted a firestorm of controversy about how the Federal Republic should remember Nazism and the Holocaust», and «the scandal of Bitburg gave new impetus to an existing debate over public memory and West German national identity. Kohl’s push to establish museums of German history in Bonn and Berlin indicated that a struggle was underway concerning the right way to remember the Nazi past» (2010: 147). The decisive point, for our argument, is the nexus Specter establishes between historiographical rewriting and foreign policy: «Habermas believed that Kohl’s domestic and foreign policy goals were of a piece. If German identity could be “normalized” through revisionist history-writing and museum work, German nationalism would be strengthened; a stronger national identity would enable excessive German assertiveness in *Mitteleuropa*» (ivi: 148). This was therefore no academic dispute: as Hans-Ulrich Wehler wrote in his intervention *Entsorgung der Vergangenheit? Ein polemischer Essay zum “Historikerstreit”*, it revealed «symptoms of a minor “cultural revolution” from the Right. The *Historikerstreit* doggedly continues the long conceptual and political struggle for hegemony which the neoconservatives have so zealously pursued» (1988/1990: 216; cf. Torpey, 1988: 5-24). Wehler criticized conservative historical revisionism, defending the singularity of the Holocaust against comparisons with Soviet crimes. And he reasserted the need for a critical analysis grounded in structural German culpabilities, rejecting the use of historiography as an instrument of national integration. That the argumentative schema was not unprecedented is shown by the fact that Wiggershaus had already isolated it with regard to Hofstätter’s polemic against the *Gruppenexperiment*, describing it as «a tried and tested procedure which is popular to this day: playing down the dangers from the right, presenting the “exposers” of such dangers as totalitarian moralists and idealists themselves, and declaring genuine reflection on this to be a private affair» (1988/1995: 477).

In the article *A Kind of Settling of Damages (Apologetic Tendencies)* (1986a/1989), published in *Die Zeit* on 11 July 1986, Habermas sharply criticized Nolte, Hillgruber and Stürmer for having undertaken an “apologetic” historiographical rewriting of the Nazi era. He denounced the attempt to relativize the Shoah, presented as a defensive “reaction” to the Stalinist gulag, by trading on the demand that today’s Germans “identify” with the Wehrmacht’s last stand on the eastern front and with the sufferings of the civilian population. It is the twofold thesis of the “comparison” of Bolshevik and Nazi crimes and of their “causal nexus”. For Habermas, this revisionism performs the political function of discharging an “immoral past” in order to reinvigorate a national sense “without guilt”. In this sense he speaks of a “settling of damages” of the German past by means of a “balancing out” of the crimes. In Jaspers’s terms, what the revisionists sought to discharge was not moral guilt – which no one any longer imputed to those born afterwards – but political liability, the only form of guilt that citizenship transmits; and it

is precisely because that liability cannot be settled by comparison that the “balancing out” of crimes appeared to Habermas as an apologetic device rather than a historiographical thesis. In the same direction were to be understood the projects for the German Historical Museum in Berlin and the House of the History of the Federal Republic of Germany in Bonn, which Habermas criticized as part of a broader «operation to entice German public opinion into supporting the conservative cultural climate, eager to settle accounts once and for all with an oppressive past» (Rusconi, 1987: VII)⁹. For Habermas, on the contrary, it was necessary to insist on the historical irreducibility of the Shoah: a singular crime, not assimilable to other crimes. Recognizing its uniqueness was a presupposition of the *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, the process undertaken by the German people to confront the Nazi legacy. The collective memory of the Shoah was not one detail among many but an identity-forming nucleus of post-war democracy. It is an epochal event, endowed with paradigmatic value for the formation of the historical memory of a rupture in civilization, and it functions as an originary normative constraint for German civic consciousness.

Here the fundamental distance from Adorno’s thought emerges. The master’s reflection on regression as a way of describing the repression of guilt, and on secondary antisemitism, is contextualized and internalized in order to specify the fracture of Nazism: «Whereas Adorno sees the universal effect of a regressive pressure lurking within the process of civilization, Habermas’s understanding of the normativity of non-regression is indexically referred to German history» (Niesen, 2023: 213). Habermas has recently returned to this distinction with a clarification that modifies its retrospective range. Reconstructing the sense of Adorno’s imperative in *Education after Auschwitz*, he first acknowledges that the «never again Auschwitz»¹⁰ entailed politically relevant consequences for the history of mentalities of the Federal Republic of Germany. But he adds that, as Niesen has shown, «this exorcizing warning against regression too betrays Adorno’s totalizing vision of evil»: the Holocaust constitutes the historical event that marks the «relapse into barbarism» for humanity as a whole, since «barbarism continues to subsist for as long as the conditions that brought that relapse to maturity substantially persist» (Habermas, 2024/2026: 66). The decisive point comes immediately afterwards. Habermas recalls that in the Federal Republic «another interpretation of Adorno’s imperative against regression established itself, different from the generalizing thesis, in terms of a philosophy of history, of an enduring regression»: this is the interpretation «already formulated in 1949 by Karl Jaspers and taken up by me during the historians’ dispute», according to which «the moral appeal to assume responsibility for the consequences of the rupture in civilization caused by one’s own nation is addressed in particular to those born afterwards – personally innocent – the generations of the German perpetrators» (ivi: 66-67). And he concludes with an admission of considerable documentary value: «I myself, during the controversy, had not realized the difference between the two interpretations» (ivi: 67). The confession is precious for our reconstruction, because it at once confirms and complicates the thesis of internalization. On the one hand it attests that the Habermasian reading of the imperative derives not from Adorno but from Jaspers, and that its foundation is not a philosophy of history but the ascription of a determinate responsibility to the *Nachgeborenen*. On the other hand it shows that this divergence was not thematized at the time of the dispute, but became visible only in retrospect. It follows that the distinction between the universal imperative and the internalized imperative is to be read not as a declared divergence between master and pupil, but as a bifurcation that the history of reception has made explicit on the basis of a shared formulation. Habermas reiterates, moreover, that he was always disquieted by Adorno’s «fundamental schema of a systematically negative philosophy of history», «which emerges most

⁹ « If one has a look at the composition of the commissions that have designed the plan for the German Historical Museum in Berlin and the House of the History of the Federal Republic in Bonn, one cannot help but get the impression that the new revisionism is to be realized in these museums in the form of displays and pedagogically effective exhibits» (Habermas 1986a/1993: 41).

¹⁰ «Every debate about the ideals of education is trivial and inconsequential compared to this single ideal: never again Auschwitz. It was the barbarism all education strives against. One speaks of the threat of a relapse into barbarism. But it is not a threat—Auschwitz was this relapse, and barbarism continues as long as the fundamental conditions that favored that relapse continue largely unchanged. That is the whole horror» (Adorno, 1966b/1998: 191).

sharply in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*», while declaring himself struck «by the way in which Adorno reads a transcending impulse of hope into the anguished critique of a desperate state of the world, one that goes beyond Kant's exhortation to the use of rational freedom» (*Ibidem*).

Collective memory has the duty to keep remembrance alive, through reflection on guilt, as the condition of a constitutional patriotism that is pluralist, democratic and aware of the responsibilities arising from the crimes of the fathers. Habermas shares Wolfgang Mommsen's judgement on the "liberation" of 1945: «There is no getting around the bitter truth that the defeat of National Socialist Germany was not only in the interest of the peoples who were bulldozed by Hitler's war and of the peoples who were selected by his henchmen for annihilation or oppression and exploitation – it was also in the interest of the Germans» (1986/1993: 212). Consciousness of the catastrophic history of the Nazi regime, with its crimes ineliminable from collective memory, was for Habermas too the great chance to develop a post-conventional identity, beyond the confines of nationalism: «The unconditional opening of the Federal Republic to the political culture of the West is the greatest intellectual achievement of our postwar period; my generation should be especially proud of this» (1986a/1993: 43).

Let us specify the operation Habermas performs in adopting that expression, since it does not originally belong to him. As Rainer Nickel reconstructs, in 1987, «in the wake of the *Historikerstreit*», Habermas takes up the phrase «constitutional patriotism» – coined by the political scientist Dolf Sternberger in a celebrated intervention of 23 May 1979 (1979/1990) – introducing a semantic shift rich in consequences. Sternberger meant to save patriotism as a variant of "love of one's country" (*Vaterlandsliebe*), understanding the constitution as the expression of a national community of values and the state as an "association of friendship" (*Freundschaftsverband*). Habermas, by contrast, asserted a postnational version of patriotism, free of any reference to cultural values, shared destinies and homogeneous populations. Constitutional patriotism therefore represents a historical learning process that leaves the old nation-state behind, and the new postnational state «is not suited to ecstatic emotional attachment» – which Nickel illustrates with Federal President Gustav Heinemann's celebrated reply to someone who asked him whether he loved Germany: «I do not love the state. I love my wife». In place of state patriotism there thus enter «pride in, and loyalty towards, the procedures of democratic will-formation and the legal guarantees of the constitution», which promote «the coexistence and communication of equally entitled forms of life» (Nickel, 2017: 514).

The confrontation continued with numerous interventions from both fronts. On 11 August, Habermas took up his pen again to write a letter to the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. Under the title *Geschichtsschreibung und Geschichtsbewußtsein*, he charged Nolte with having played down the "so-called" extermination of the Jews by equating them with enemies fighting against the German army – starting from Chaim Weizmann's declaration of early September 1939, according to which the Jews would fight alongside England. This would have justified treating them as prisoners of war and interning them in concentration camps (1986b/1993: 59). The most interesting essay, however, is *Vom öffentlichen Gebrauch der Historie*, published for the first time in the newspaper *Die Zeit* on 7 November 1986. Here Habermas extends his reflection on the risks that a historiography practised in the first person, from the standpoint of the participants, outside specialized venues and with explicit political judgements on the present and the future, may become an instrument for reworking historical traumas through an operation designed to relaunch a "normal patriotism" – a use that becomes functional to a kind of national reinterpretation without the guilt of the extermination. The intent «impatiently urged by the politicians of the Wende government» is to erase historical responsibilities and return to a carefree national pride: «But words are again streaming out of mouths long held shut, words that for good reasons have not been used since 1945, at least not in public» (1986c/1993: 163). The episode of the Bitburg ceremony, with President Reagan and Chancellor Kohl laying wreaths at the cemetery to honour members of the Waffen-SS, had precisely this threefold symbolic valence: «The aura of the military cemetery was supposed to waken national sentiment and thereby a "historical consciousness"; the juxtaposition of hills of corpses in the concentration camp and the SS graves in the cemetery of honor, the sequence of Bergen-Belsen in the morning and Bitburg in the afternoon, implicitly disputed the

singularity of the Nazi crimes; and shaking hands with the veteran generals in the presence of the U.S. president was, finally, a demonstration that we had really always stood on the right side in the fight against Bolshevism» (*Ibidem*)¹¹.

It is worth recording the passage in which constitutional patriotism is formulated as an explicit counter-move, because it displays its memorial foundation. Replying to Stürmer in July 1986, Habermas takes up a figure already used in an essay on *Die Kulturkritik der Neokonservativen in den USA und in der Bundesrepublik* (1982/1985): «the unreserved opening of the Federal Republic to the political culture of the West is the great intellectual achievement of the postwar period, of which my generation in particular can be proud. The result will not be stabilized by a NATO philosophy coloured with German nationalism. That opening was achieved precisely by overcoming the ideology of the centre which our revisionists are now warming up again with their geopolitical chatter about “the old geographically central position of the Germans in Europe” (Stürmer) and “the reconstruction of the destroyed European Center” (Hillgruber)» (Habermas, 1986a/1993: 43). And shortly afterwards, in the formulation that matters most here: «The only patriotism that will not estrange us from the West is a constitutional patriotism. Unfortunately, it took Auschwitz to make possible to the old culture nation of the Germans binding universalist constitutional principles anchored in conviction. Those who want to drive the shame about this fact out of us with phrases such as “obsession with guilt” (Stürmer and Oppenheimer), those who desire to call the Germans back to conventional forms of their national identity, are destroying the only reliable foundation for our ties to the West» (ivi: 43-44). From this follows the criterion Habermas opposes to Stürmer: «Historiography should aim at enlightenment, not social integration» (Specter, 2010: 150), since – as Habermas writes – «those who seek to do more than revivify a sense of identity naively rooted in national consciousness, those who allow themselves to be guided by functional imperatives of predictability, consensus-formation, social integration via endowing meaning, are bound to avoid the enlightening effect of history writing and reject a broad pluralism of historical interpretations» (1986a/1993: 42).

On the third target the stakes rise still further. Nolte, «trained not as a historian but as a philosopher under Martin Heidegger», advanced three theses: that «the preoccupation with the Holocaust has diverted our attention from other important questions»; that «the black-and-white schema provided by the Third Reich as a lens for evaluating historical events distorts our view of the past»; and that «the failure to normalize Nazism has illicitly served the interests of specific groups», among them «the persecuted and their descendants, who seek an undeserved privileged status» (Holub, 2019: 167). At the centre stood the contestation of the uniqueness of the Holocaust, reduced to one among many genocidal attempts or «therapies of annihilation», and presented as an «Asiatic deed» imitative of the Stalinist gulag, whose only innovation would have been «the technical procedure of gassing» (*ibidem*). Habermas's objections are two, and both bear on our theme: that Nolte «relativizes responsibility for the destruction of European Jewry and thus produces an apologia for that moral responsibility which had become, from Karl Jaspers's 1946 essay on the question of German guilt onwards, the cornerstone of public discourse on the subject»; and that, «by relegating ultimate responsibility for the Holocaust to the Soviet Union, he preserved a link between a purified German identity and the anti-communist politics of NATO's conservative wing» (*ibidem*).

On the method by which those theses were constructed it is worth recording Lutz Klinkhammer's analysis, since it identifies the device that renders them unusable as historiography. Nolte and his followers, he observes, employed «a method more philosophical-phenomenological than historical», for

¹¹ In an interview given to Enrico Filippini on 16 December 1986 for the newspaper “la Repubblica”, Habermas condensed the “three sources of unease” with regard to revisionism that he had already expressed in the article On the Public Use of History: «I believe that the kernel of the whole affair lies in this: one must and one wishes to find some form of national and collective identity to compensate for certain internal political uncertainties, which today run very deep. One must and one wishes to strengthen historical consciousness in order to revitalize a thousand-year-old tradition. One must and one wishes to relativize the Nazi caesura; one must say that it was not absolute evil because Bolshevism was “more” evil: in order to forget it. What is wanted is a reintegration of the horror so as to neutralize it... All this, all these historians, who are of unequal worth, would be nothing if they were not instrumentalized. In the Germany of Chancellor Kohl, however, they are... You must understand: I became a man of the left through the Nuremberg trials...» (Habermas, 1986d/2013: 23).

which «to historicize meant first of all to give ample space to the thought of the protagonists»; but «it is clear that from giving voice to the Nazi protagonists one can easily arrive at victimization», since understanding those figures ends by «reproducing the protagonists' self-definition without confronting it with the facts: for example, citing only those sentences that indicate what the protagonists thought and wanted» (2002: 359). The outcome is that «ideas and facts, claims and actions» end up on the same plane, as in the sentence in which Nolte writes that «against the claims of the Soviet Union, Hitler reacted with great energies, even if these were probably excessive» – where «the “claims” of Bolshevism serve to explain Hitler's intervention – that is, in our words: a war of extermination – and the alleged re-action is minimized even in its quantitative measure through the words “probably excessive”» (ivi: 360). That Nolte should then go so far as to recognize «a historical right to National Socialism» is, for Klinkhammer, «a distortion and a path that voluntarily departs from the range of terms scientifically usable by professional historians». The antidote proposed is at once modest and binding: «the documentary method, that is, a historiography of facts: facts understood as weak certainties, but methodologically controlled» (ibidem).

The outcome of the dispute also deserves to be recorded, because it is the sharpest confirmation of the Habermasian thesis on the regime of circulation of historical knowledge. «To a large extent», Holub writes, «the public debate that ensued missed Habermas's principal concerns»: his critique «concerned the conservative attempt to manipulate history and to produce a new national identity that would undo the moral consensus about the Nazi past. He objected to the public use and abuse of history; methodological disputes and quarrels internal to the discipline were of secondary importance» (2019: 167). Habermas was instead accused of insufficient historical competence, of partisanship and «of having misquoted and distorted his opponents», as well as «of confusing scholarship, which is objective and judged by experts, with politics and morality» – which was exactly «the accusation Habermas levelled at the historians». His fundamental theses, set out in the final section of the initial essay, in the first reply and in the lecture delivered in Denmark in May 1987, «were virtually ignored by friends and adversaries alike» (ibidem).

Habermas is not opposed to the public use of history. History must be understood not only as an academic discipline, but as a medium for the formation of the political and moral identity of a community¹². The public use of history is not mere commemoration, but the reflexive appropriation of the past in the present, which in Germany's case is connected «not by purely contingent circumstances, but intimately, with that context of life [...] which made Auschwitz possible» (ivi: 102). The public use of history is the ensemble of practices through which German society reflects critically on the past in public spaces – institutions, media, civil society – in order to assume historical responsibility for the crimes of Nazism, to orient the present and the future on the basis of democratic values, and to prevent revisionisms that relativize the guilt and responsibilities of the past. Replying to the criticisms of Hillgruber, Hildebrand, Stürmer and Fest concerning his alleged intellectual dishonesty, in the “Note” of 23 February 1987 Habermas reiterated that «the National Socialist era constitutes a particularly inadequate object for the aim of promoting an identity-conferring normalization» (1987a/1987: 159).

On the occasion of the award of the Sonning Prize, in Copenhagen on 14 May 1987, Habermas returns to the theme of “historical consciousness and post-traditional identity”, reaffirming that the inclusion of the Federal Republic in the West is not a mere matter of alliances, but the result – and the continuing task – of a post-traditional restructuring of the political and moral identity of the Germans. The point of departure is the dismantling of the ideology of the *Mittellage* (Germany's “middle position” between East and West) and of the *Sonderweg* (the “special path” – the cultural aspiration to a German destiny distinct from that of Western Europe), both definitively compromised by Auschwitz. From this derives the idea that West Germany's orientation to the West is normative, not merely geopolitical, and must translate into a critical, post-conventional historical consciousness and into a constitutional patriotism. The awareness that a “civilized people” could have closed its eyes before mass

¹² «The political culture of the Federal Republic is certainly influenced by the comparative work of historians and other scholars. But the results of scholarly work must first pass through the locks of the mediators and the media and then return to the perspective of the participant in the public river of the appropriation of tradition. [...] It is about the public use of history» (Habermas 1986c/1989: 167-168).

crimes imposes a labour of memory that renders tradition suspect and open to criticism, rather than a repertoire to be rehabilitated by means of “levelling comparisons”. Every normalization that dilutes the singularity of the crime risks degrading the memory of the victims into a “farce”. This is why the official self-representation of the Federal Republic (from Heuss to Heinemann and on to Weizsäcker) has laid down as a condition that German identity be derived from the “best traditions” filtered through Auschwitz – that is, through a critical appropriation of national history. This consensus, Habermas observes, was called into question by the right in the 1980s. In an interview given to the “Frankfurter Rundschau”, the stake for Germany’s future is brought into focus: «beneath the debate on the question in what sense the Nazi mass crimes were unique lies the deeper question of what attitude we want to take toward the continuities of German history – whether we can affirm our political existence while maintaining a clear awareness of a break with our more sinister traditions. Can we, and do we want to, give up the comforts and the dangers of a conventional identity that is incompatible with a critical appropriation of traditions? Nationalism is as virulent as ever. This question, I am afraid, has not yet come due» (1988b/1989: 193). In revisionism he saw a “disquieting, hermeneutically unreflective procedure”, capable only of “empathetically identifying” with the situation of the Germans who lived through the dramatic days of the Russian front and of the collapse: «It is as though the Right, discredited in the shadow of National Socialism, had only been waiting for a pretext to rise up again against the “Ideas of 1789”; only this ghostly projection can explain the intensity of the emotions aroused» (1988d/1992: 230-231). And in the essay *Zur Stellung der Sozial- und Geisteswissenschaften. Ein Blick auf ihre Nachkriegsentwicklung*, he discusses the results of Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann’s survey on the wounded nation, in which a country deeply disoriented in its own spirit is “painted in dark colours”, its elites supposedly incapable of transmitting shared values to the new generations and unproductive with respect to the old culture whose fame has by now faded. In a lecture on the evolution of the social sciences and the humanities in the Federal Republic, delivered at the conference “The Contemporary German Mind” at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Habermas observes that – although «blind spots in our knowledge» persist – the data must be examined with care, because the opening to the West might instead be an index of a «society that learns» the advantages of normality, reflects on the long shadow of its uncomfortable past and chooses for itself a «more appropriate diet» (1988e/1993: 210).

8. German Unification and the Return of “Normality”

After the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) faced an explosive situation of protests and political crises. On 18 March 1990 the first free elections were held, won by the parties favourable to reunification, and on 31 August the Unification Treaty was signed, sanctioning the entry of the eastern Länder into the Federal Republic; it came into force on 3 October. To these events Habermas devoted journalistic interventions, several essays and the book-interview collected by Michael Haller, *The Past As Future* (1991a/1994), expanded in the Italian edition by the interview *Qualche risposta sul post-comunismo* [“What Answers to Post-Communism”] (1991b/1992). In the early 1990s, with the Berlin Wall now fallen and the two Germanys merging into a single state, the temptation of a “return to normality” re-emerged forcefully in public opinion and in the political class (1990e). After forty-five years of division, there spread the desire to take leave of the mortgages of the post-war period, to overcome the trauma of the mass crimes and to regain, at last, a national innocence. Yet the question of German identity could never have dispensed with a direct and permanent confrontation with the guilt of the Holocaust. The true birth of the Federal Republic and of its democratic civilization rested not on a glorious history of the state or on traditional patriotism, but on the experience of catastrophe, on the void of civilization and on the cultural trauma (*Zivilisationsbruch*) that issued from Auschwitz. After Nazism, the critical working-through of the past was not a simple historiographical duty, but the highest political achievement of the entire post-war period. Only the painful renunciation of a merely façade-like consciousness of “normality” had allowed Germany to develop an authentic democratic culture, sensitive to the universalism of human rights. This historical legacy implied special moral obligations, in the first place towards the protection of, and solidarity with, Israel. The wounds bequeathed to subsequent generations required that sensitivity to the suffering

inflicted be kept always alive in the land of the guilty. To liquidate this awareness in the name of a recovered great-power role, or to mask it behind an alleged “flight from responsibility”, meant yielding to a dangerous aestheticization of power and war. The headlong process of unification, however, conducted by purely economic-administrative means, risked compromising this delicate political-cultural equilibrium. Faced with the temptation of a «second» or «third guilt» – understood as the collective repression of responsibility and the search for a psychological amnesty – there emerged the risk of an elite nationalism calculated at the drawing board in order to accelerate integration. Unification thereby posed, for the first time, the question of whether political liability survives a change in the subject that inherits it: the GDR had exempted itself from that liability by means of its antifascist founding myth, and the enlarged Federal Republic now had to decide whether to extend the “mortgages of the post-war period” to its new citizens or to take the occasion to be rid of them. That is why, in Habermas’s eyes, the mode of unification – administrative annexation or democratic self-determination – was inseparable from the question of guilt. An ambiguous emotional tension was unleashed in the Federal Republic by the fall of that “absurd” wall which since 1961 had separated it from those compatriots who, with the end of the war, had suffered the “worse fate”. On 23 November 1989, a few days after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the German question still appeared to Habermas an open one: on the one side, the government and the CDU-CSU parliamentary majority, many local administrations and important press organs, among them the FAZ, expressed unequivocally the national will for a reunification conducted, so to speak, “under the tutelage” of the Deutschmark; on the other side, the red-green minority, some local administrations and newspapers, and Habermas himself who, while favourable to unification, stressed the opportunity for a public discussion in which the democratic self-determination of German citizens might be accomplished. This is clearly to be read in the intervention *Die Stunde der nationalen Entdeckung. Republikanische Gesinnung oder Nationalbewußtsein?*: «Some listen to the patriotic heartbeat of the nation, others perceive in the enthusiasm for freedom the desire for a more radical democracy. [...] These aims are not mutually exclusive, if one looks far enough ahead. But the next steps, the political choices, will differ according to priorities. The alternatives are not the existence of two states or annexation, but rather an unconditional orientation towards the goal of a radical democratization that entrusts the decision to those who bear its consequences, or else the instrumentalization of the rhetoric of self-determination for a policy of annexation carried out by the means of foreign economic policy» (1990a: 159). The joy at recovered freedom and at German reunification is accompanied by an “hour of national feeling” that raises questions about the nature of German identity. The most worrying aspect lies in the possible consequences on the plane of culture – which in forty years had only with difficulty set out towards the political traditions of freedom, even without a “republican way of thinking and feeling” – in the face of the risk of a “vortex effect” that might suck politics and public opinion into the “whirlpool of nationalism” (ivi: 161). The history of Nazism has made continuity with tradition impossible. Habermas distinguishes between spontaneous solidarity and political nationalism: while the former is a legitimate expression of empathy towards fellow citizens in the East, the latter risks reactivating identitarian rhetorics that Germany, after Auschwitz, can no longer assume without reservations of history. The catastrophe of 1933-1945 severed the nexus between state and identity, imposing a new paradigm alternative to ethnic nationalism: *Verfassungspatriotismus*, founded on democratic and universalistic principles.

The course of events did not follow Habermas’s proposal to grant economic aid – as the spearhead of a European-level coordinated effort – in order to restructure a socialist society in a radical-democratic direction (1990b/1991: 90). What came true instead was his fear of a “cold hollowing out” of the GDR’s political sovereignty through a capitalist restructuring of the economy that ends by producing a “creeping assimilation” by means of a “stick-and-carrot” policy (1990a: 161), and a “destabilization” both of the provisional government led by Hans Modrow from 13 November 1989 to 12 April 1990 and of the only institutional embodiment of the resistance (the “Round Table”), conducted with its customary charm by the Chancellery – though the SPD opposition is not exempt from criticism either, having agreed to colonize the electoral contest within the GDR (1990b/1991: 94). *Yet Again: German Identity – A Unified Nation of Angry DM-Burghers?* thus thematizes the question of German identity in the context of the reunification of 1989-1990, interpreting it as a historical challenge that reactivates latent

tensions in Germany's political culture. The point of departure is the awareness that cultural, linguistic and historical unity does not necessarily coincide with statehood: Germany has never been a classical *Staatsnation*, but rather a *Kulturnation*. The experience of National Socialism and the catastrophe of 1945 shattered every possibility of a naïve national identity. The tendency to approach a «normal kind of western national identity», founded on “pride” in one's own democratic institutions, is confirmed by a series of studies that take account of the acceleration history has undergone with the fall of the Berlin Wall (ivi: 95). On the other hand, Habermas fears the resurgence of economic nationalisms and of identitarian rhetorics capable of obscuring the lesson of Auschwitz, which remains a “point of no return”. Unification must take place under the sign of European integration and of a postnational culture, avoiding a return to a “normalization” that trivializes historical responsibility. Habermas warns that economic rhetoric (“the power of the Deutschmark”) risks turning into a surrogate for nationalism, feeding a *Wirtschaftsnationalismus* that could undermine the European perspective. For this reason unification must be accompanied by a strengthening of constitutional patriotism, as a guarantee against the resurgence of antisemitic stereotypes and authoritarian nostalgias. A recrudescence of those nationalistic tensions would have immediate consequences for the process of building the European Union: «If we do not rid ourselves of the prepolitical crutches of nationality and community of fate, we will be unable to continue unburdened on the very path that we have long since chosen: the path to a multicultural society, the path to a federal state with wide regional differences and strong federal power, and above all the path to a unified European state of many nationalities. A national identity which is not based predominantly on republican self-understanding and constitutional patriotism necessarily collides with the universalist rules of mutual coexistence for human beings; it collides with the fact that state integration is now happening simultaneously on three levels – the state, the federation, and the European Community» (ivi: 96). He fears the resurfacing of the «stream of energy, which was crystallized in the “ideas of 1914”», which must never be regenerated. It is a «question of spiritual hygiene, not of repression» (ivi: 99).

A year later, considering the “normative deficits of unification”, Habermas denounces the fact that the “pure sentiment” of “euphoric exultation” at the eminently civil enthusiasm of eastern compatriots regaining their freedom soon gave way to a dispassionate assessment of the resolute role of the Kohl chancellorship in determining the direction and the modalities of the unification process. He acknowledges that the chances for a «reform of socialism in a democratic direction» were not well founded: «The economy was unproductive. The administrative institutions were an apparatus of repression. There was an advanced degree of delegitimation, at least among the younger generations. Even the social system's core of legitimation, a low-level social security bought with concealed unemployment, was rotten: it was housed inside a shell that, as Marx would say, kept all the forces of production in fetters» (1991a/1994: 34). Faced with «landgrabbing territorial fetishism», however, Habermas does not conceal his «nervousness» (ivi: 36). Annexation contributed to dispersing the self-esteem that the citizens of the East had gained as “actors of history”, even while one must admit the passive character of the movement: «The locus of control doesn't seem to have been located within the engaged, demonstrating masses and their brave and civil leaders nearly to the extent that it appeared, at first, from the exciting images of the omnipresent television cameras» (ivi: 40). The modes and timing of unification were determined by the German government: «The most striking physiognomic feature of this is the instrumental character of the administrative procedure itself. Despite all the carefully installed foreign-policy cushioning, despite all the tailoring to economic imperatives, this procedure never won any democratic dynamic of its own. [...] They set the course for a process that proceeded primarily in the categories of economic organization – without ever having made the political alternatives into a theme for discussion» (ivi: 41-42).

On 2 August 1990 the tanks of Saddam Hussein's Iraq invaded Kuwait. The international community reacted with sanctions and, after Iraq's refusal to withdraw, a coalition led by the United States was formed under a UN mandate. The military operation began with the air phase “Desert Storm” on 17 January 1991, followed by the ground offensive on 24 February. Within a few days the allied forces liberated Kuwait; the ceasefire was declared on 28 February. The conflict highlighted the role of the

USA as a global power. On the national plane, the “confused” and “hasty” German participation in the coalition marked a turning point, even though it had taken place only through military supplies and financial support. Bound until then by a prudent and pacifist post-war foreign policy, Germany was beginning to assume global military and political responsibilities. Habermas asked himself about the risk of a national normalization, that is, a return to a logic of power and to nationalistic drifts. The need to seal the “recovered normality” of unified Germany by regaining a military role at the international level was keenly felt by the right-wing political camps: «The right pins the blame for such criticism squarely on its own government, and warns of a new German special path – not so much because they fear it, but because, with the misleading notion of a German “normalcy” to be won, they see a chance of finally crossing that finish line that had always been out of their reach. One sees this most recently in the Historians’ Debate» (ivi: 25). While pointing out the unpreparedness of the government, absorbed as it was in the economic difficulties of reunification, Habermas nonetheless does not consider that the choice to renounce direct engagement should be stigmatized as a “flight from responsibility”. He does not regard as at all controversial the readiness of the German armed forces to take part in United Nations monitoring and peace missions, carried out by the blue helmets under a precise international mandate – but not a commitment with allies that neither has nor borrows, *ex ante* or *ex post*, a legitimation from the UN. Habermas interprets the ardent desire for a field of military action independent of the UN and of its system of alliances – and thus the rupture of so-called Genscherism – as the reassertion of the «principle of German *raison d’État*» and as a renewed proposal of those «extra-ordinary exercises in audacious being-there» which are absolutely forbidden to German citizens. The first international test of reunified Germany was thus confronted in the celebrated intervention *Wider die Logik des Krieges* in the columns of “*Die Zeit*” on 15 February 1991, which marked the debate on German identity throughout the 1990s. In this sense, the Gulf War would catalyse nationalistic tendencies already present in German society: «So far, the backers of an undialectical “return to normalcy” haven’t been successful in bringing it off. But now they see a window of opportunity for reversing a transformation of mentality that took place over the last several decades, and for launching Greater Germany on the course toward a “normalization” that will finally free us of the trauma of mass crimes and give us back our national innocence» (1991a/1994: 29). The Gulf War of 1991 represented for Germany, reunified only a few months earlier, the first dramatic political and existential test on the post-Cold War international stage. In a climate of profound disorientation and heated debate, Habermas outlined a complex position that would mark the discussion of political culture and German identity throughout the 1990s. If on the one hand he acknowledged the juridical and moral legitimacy of the multinational operation promoted by the United Nations to counter the Iraqi aggression against Kuwait, on the other he maintained the need for a rigorous military self-restraint on Germany’s part, identifying a single, non-derogable exception: the moral and historical obligation of solidarity with the security of the State of Israel. The Habermasian reflection went beyond the single warlike event to bear upon the very nature of the new Federal Republic. The philosopher criticized the temptation of the conservative elites to exploit the Gulf crisis in order to decree the end of the post-war German «anomaly» and to promote a rapid geopolitical “normalization”. Habermas denounced the risk that a new and insidious «sense of exceptionality», or *Sonderbewusstsein*, was being regenerated, oscillating dangerously between an abstract, isolationist pacifism and a search for power of the traditional kind (1993a/1997).

This attempt to liquidate the past risked rekindling the historic mistrust of Germany’s European partners, in particular French concerns at the resurgence of German hegemony in the heart of Europe (1993b/1997). In recalling the historical constraints and the legacies of the first Bonn Republic (1994b/1997), Habermas stressed that Germany’s democratic identity could not be founded on a collective amnesia. The obligatory working-through of the past (1992/1997) did not represent an obstacle to be overcome in order to become a “normal” nation, but rather the fundamental achievement of German democratic civilization. In posing the fundamental question of whether it was still possible to «learn from history» (1994a/1997), Habermas made it clear that the turn of 1989 and the birth of the future “Berlin Republic” had to remain firmly placed in the shadow of 1945 (1995/1997). For a united Germany, adherence to the values of the universalism of human rights and to constitutional patriotism

remained the only real bulwark against the resurfacing of dangerous nationalist temptations. In the final analysis, Habermas's position on the Gulf War demonstrated that Germany's true political maturity would be measured not by its capacity to project military force outwards, but by its unconditional fidelity to the historical memory of guilt and of the trauma of Auschwitz.

9. Constitutional Patriotism as an Antidote to Nationalism

In his later reflections, from the early 1990s onwards – for example in *Citizenship and National Identity* (1990d/1996), and then more fully in the studies in political theory contained in *Die Einbeziehung des Anderen*, in particular in the two essays *The European Nation-State: On the Past and Future of Sovereignty and Citizenship* (1996a/1998) and *On the Relation between the Nation, the Rule of Law, and Democracy* (1996b/1998) – Habermas identifies in German guilt not a limit but a reflexive motor for the construction of a form of constitutional patriotism that extends from national boundaries to the transnational plane, first of all the European one. A patriotism founded on democratic values and secularity, starting from the critical working-through of the past. The concept refers to a core of identity and to a form of loyalty within a political community that is grounded not on ethnic, cultural or nationalistic identities, but on the universal and democratic principles of the rule of law enshrined in the constitution. From this standpoint, the recognition of collective guilt for the Shoah becomes the occasion for a new social pact – not only German but European – which rejects ethnic-nationalist identitarianisms and grounds the political legitimacy of the European community on public dialogue and on respect for human dignity. Democratic Germany and European integration are understood as institutional devices for preventing a return to barbarism and for countering democratic regression. In *Bestiality and Humanity: A War on the Border between Law and Morality*, Habermas registers the maturation of German political culture in the Kosovo question: «The military intervention of the German Federal Army means the end of a long period of restraint which had imprinted itself on the civil traits of the postwar German mentality. [...] Fortunately, the familiar stifling tones remain absent from the German debate. No longing for fate [*Schicksalssehnsucht*], no intellectual rolling of the drums for the “good comrades”. During the Gulf War the rhetoric of the emergency situation, alongside incantations of stately pathos, dignity, tragedy, and manly maturity, were mobilized against a vocal peace movement. Not much remains of either. Here and there, still a bit of malice in reference to a subdued pacifism, or hardline slogans along the lines of “we’re abandoning the moral high ground”. Even this tenor fails to cut any ice, however, since both supporters and opponents of the military action make use of a crystal clear normative language. [...] [in Germany] the public debate and mood do not differ from that in other West European countries. No special path [*Sonderweg*], no special consciousness» (1999a/1999: 263-264). In the interview given to Giancarlo Bosetti for the online journal “Caffè Europa” on 14 December 2000, Habermas reaffirms that Germany – by now much larger than the other major members of the Union in population, gross income and number of members of the European Parliament – «should have no aspiration to a special leading role in Europe, nor should it lend substance to the fear that we Germans might have such aspirations. The tradition of the old *Bundesrepublik* is still strong enough to immunize the Berlin Republic against false temptations. What I hope for is a cooperative Germany within a Europe that grows together» (2000). That constitutional patriotism is not an identitarian fallback but the political form of a renunciation of univocity is the thesis with which Specter closes his central chapter: «his greatest contribution to the resolution of West German identity was to describe it in terms of a series of nonidentities» (Specter, 2010: 168). The dimensions of that non-identity are three: «First, by remaining nonidentical with itself, the *Rechtsstaat* refused the legal closure of its moral horizon. Second, by making the constitution nonidentical with the political culture, the values of society could evolve. Third, the idea of the West was not reducible to the “Atlantic value community” of NATO and therefore was not identical to it». The common denominator of his adversaries, in all three disputes – rearmament, historiography, civil disobedience – is the refusal of «his antagonists to tolerate ambiguity» (ivi: 169). It is the same mentality, in the military, historical and juristic professions, which clings to unambiguities all the more when those involved feel that the rug is being pulled from under their feet: «Authoritarian legalism renounces the human substance of the ambiguous at precisely the point that the democratic

constitutional state acquires nourishment from this substance» (Habermas, 1983b/1985: 112).

The Jaspersian ancestry of the formula deserves to be made explicit, because it clarifies at once its genesis and its function. The expression *Verfassungspatriotismus* – Dafydd Huw Rees recalls – «was introduced by political scientist Dolf Sternberger in 1979, drawing on Jaspers’s ideas about collective guilt. The term expresses the theory that, in modern democratic states, the constitution can and should play the role once played by the nation in generating civic solidarity». The question to which it responds is precisely the one posed by Jaspers: «Germans could not simply return to an unproblematic sense of national identity following the horrors of the Third Reich and the Holocaust», so that it was necessary to establish «what kind of collective identity, then, could bind its citizens together and ensure their loyalty to the new liberal-democratic order» (Rees, 2019: 66). The lineage is not a matter of erudition: it shows that constitutional patriotism is the institutional form that political liability assumes once it can no longer rest on the biographical memory of a generation. What Jaspers had entrusted to the conscience of citizens in 1946, and what Habermas had defended as the duty of the *Nachgeborenen* in 1986, is here transferred to a procedure – a relation to the constitution that any future citizen can enter, whatever his or her descent. Against the recurrent charge of abstractness, it must be stressed that constitutional patriotism is by no means a bloodless construct: citizens interpret the principles contained in their constitution – which represent universal moral norms and might be found in any liberal-democratic constitution – in the light of the unique historical experience of their community, so that «each country’s constitutional patriotism will be different, inflected by the particular past that country has “worked through” – the German version, inflected by memories of fascism and the Holocaust, collective guilt, division, and reunification, will be different from the French version, inflected by a tradition of revolutionary democracy» (ivi: 67). It follows that the aim is not to erase national identity: «Constitutional patriotism does not aim to eliminate national identity, but rather to decenter it and deprive it of its political function» (ivi: 66). The distance from the first Frankfurt generation is sharp. For Horkheimer and Adorno, the true emancipation of the Jew could come only from the end of domination, and «only when reconciliation, which ironically was the highest value of the Jewish faith, was realized in the social sphere could anti-Semitism truly end. Partial solutions such as Zionism and assimilation were destined to fail» (Jay, 1973: 233). Constitutional patriotism is, by contrast, a «partial solution» of that kind, but one claimed as such: not reconciliation achieved, but a procedure that keeps conflict open and binds its outcome to universalistic principles.

10. The Controversy over the Holocaust Memorial

On 31 March 1999 Habermas intervened in the pages of “*Die Zeit*” with *Der Zeigefinger: Die Deutschen und ihr Denkmal*. The debate on the memorial to the murdered Jews in Berlin is treated by interpreting that monument as crucial to the formation of Germany’s political identity. The essay is articulated around five nuclei: the historical and political context; the meaning of the memorial; who speaks through the memorial; the challenge and openness towards the future; and the function and form of the memorial (1999b/2006: 38-39). After decades of hesitation, the memorial project becomes possible only at the end of the 1990s, at a moment when reunified Germany risks sliding towards a “normality” that might obscure the critical memory of the past. It is not a question of “giving the Jews a monument”, but of an act through which the descendants of the perpetrators assume historical responsibility and incorporate it into their own political self-understanding. The Berlin memorial represents a sign of rupture with compromised traditions and of the commitment not to repeat the horror. Only German citizens, heirs of the culture that made the crime possible, can and must decide the meaning of the monument that addresses their conscience. The question “who speaks through the memorial” is, once again, the Jaspersian question: the memorial gives material form not to a guilt that would be attributed to the descendants, but to the liability they assume by deciding, in public, what is to be remembered in their name. The remembrance of the victims must remain central. Its function is not to represent a “mark of shame” for the national image: the memorial is not a sign of “self-humiliation”, but an act of civilization that breaks with the nationalistic cult of sacrifice. It inaugurates a public memory oriented towards universal responsibility, not as a static repository of historical facts, but as an active social process. The

Holocaust monument is addressed to future generations. It must stimulate a critical confrontation with Auschwitz as a permanent “admonitory index” within collective memory, the condition of a democracy that integrates the universalism of rights with historical self-criticism. Finally, it is of interest that, for Habermas, on the formal plane the memorial should be conceived neither as a museum nor as a didactic site, but as an austere artistic sign, capable of provoking reflection and of resisting trivialization. He defends the choice of an abstract, non-monumental language (Eisenman’s field of stelae), one that expresses negativity without triumphalism.

The episode well exemplifies a more general reflection on memory. The reconstruction of the past also questions us about the repressions of the past and about our own complicities, whether we are implicated through deeds and/or through omissions. We may therefore interpret this affair with the categories of Jeffrey Olick and Joyce Robbins (1998), systematized a decade later by Olick himself (2007), in the attempt to understand how societies “decide” what to remember and what to forget. The title of Paolo Jedlowski’s essay – *Intenzioni di memoria* – is meant to underline precisely this “anamnesic” aspect of collective life: «there are mnestic phenomena of an unintentional character, but also processes in which intentions play a role. For forgetting can be encouraged» (2016: 11). Among the mechanisms of forgetting that intentionally aim to forget and to make others forget are censorship, silences, erasures, omissions and the deliberate manipulation of traces. Among the “exercises of memory” are ceremonies, monuments, plaques, meetings and occasions for the narration of facts and for reflection, educational programmes and so on. These moments of remembrance have gradually shifted more and more from physical places – cafés, drawing rooms, civic clubs, squares, assemblies and the like – to media ones, including the «immense and heterogeneous ensemble that comprises documentaries, films, essays, novels, television programmes, graphic novels, as well as the comments, evaluations and discourses that accompany them from time to time» (ivi: 117).

11. Secondary Antisemitism in Germany and in Europe

Over the last two decades, Jürgen Habermas’s political-philosophical reflection has engaged closely with the transformations of German identity in the aftermath of reunification and in the context of European integration. At the centre of his thought there remains one indispensable idea: the Federal Republic of Germany cannot accede to a presumed geopolitical or cultural “normality” by repressing the legacy of the Holocaust. On the contrary, the memory of historical guilt and the constant working-through of its psychological and political ramifications constitute the only legitimate foundation for a mature, open and authentically European democracy. One of the most critical knots addressed by Habermas concerns the metamorphoses of anti-Jewish prejudice in contemporary Germany. In an interview given in the early 2000s, the philosopher drew attention to the persistence and the dangerousness of secondary antisemitism (*sekundärer Antisemitismus*) (Habermas, 2004b). Unlike the traditional form of racial or religious hatred, secondary antisemitism manifests itself not in spite of Auschwitz but, paradoxically, because of Auschwitz. It is a reactive resentment, fed by the psychological and political desire to escape the moral burden of historical guilt and to put an end to a duty of memory perceived as an imposition. For Habermas, the secondary forms of antisemitism are narratives that supplant the sense of collective guilt with accusations that the survivors are “exploiting” the memory of the Holocaust – an antisemitism not “in spite of” but “by way of” Auschwitz. The delay with which this drift has been recognized is denounced without extenuation: «In Germany, it has taken far too long for Nazi marches, anti-Semitic attacks and even the murder of a politician to serve as a wake-up call for a public indoctrinated with anti-communism and Islamophobia» (Habermas, 2020b: 20).

The diagnosis has a direct antecedent in Adorno’s analysis of prejudice, which it is worth recalling because it illuminates its psychological structure. In the chapter “Elemente des Antisemitismus” of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer (1947) describe the antisemite through the theory of «false projection»: antisemitism is not a simple cognitive error or a residue of religious hatred, but a disease of civilization; the authoritarian subject, repressed by a society that imposes constant sacrifices upon him, projects onto the Jew his own forbidden desires and his own frustration. The Jew becomes the perfect scapegoat because he represents what capitalist society has rendered abstract and intangible:

the circulation of money, an intellectuality unbound to the soil, a happiness not subjugated to labour. The structure of this persistence had thus already been anticipated. Jay summarizes the conclusion as follows: Horkheimer and Adorno «took little comfort in the “defeat” of anti-Semitism brought by the victory of the Allies over Hitler. Overt antagonism to the Jews might have been successfully extirpated, but its underlying cause had been preserved» in what they called a “ticket mentality”; so that «Hitler’s conquerors might have eliminated the more obvious effects of anti-Semitism, but they had done little to destroy its root causes» (1973: 233-234). The empirical elaboration, moreover, was that of *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno, 1950), where the predisposition to prejudice was analysed as the outcome of a fragile psychic structure that seeks security in submission to power and in aggression towards the “different”. Sociologically, antisemitism is explained as the pathological reaction to reification: in a world in which man is reduced to a commodity, hatred of the other is the only way in which the subject feels able to assert his own identity. As Stefano Petrucciani observes, Adorno’s critique unmasks a social system that produces individuals incapable of real experience and drives them to take refuge in destructive collective stereotypes (2007: 89).

In the light of this schema, secondary antisemitism appears not as a belated anomaly, but as the historically updated variant of the same mechanism: what is projected onto the victim is no longer the repressed desire, but the moral burden the subject refuses to bear. Guilt, instead of being worked through, is attributed to those who remember it – or, in the terms that have guided this reconstruction, political liability is refused by converting it into a moral guilt that one can then deny. This is why the Habermasian and the Adornian readings converge on the decisive point: neither regards prejudice as a residue destined to die out with generational turnover, since both trace it back to social conditions still in operation. The universal competition and the fear of social decline which, according to Adorno, create the fertile ground of the authoritarian personality continue in fact to operate in contemporary democracies: when the economic system reduces individuals to replaceable functions, the accumulated rage seeks an outlet directed outwards. In the same direction went the transformation of morality into ideology, of which Wiggershaus reports two examples of disconcerting topicality: against restitution and compensation it was objected that, «in view of the gravity of the crimes, restitution was not possible anyway»; and in defence of the racial measures it was maintained «that they were at least honest, and had also helped the Jews to create Israel» (1988/1995: 475). To this is added a discursive automatism that Habermas qualifies as an «apologetic reflex»: until recently, moderate German politicians could not take a stand against right-wing violence «without simultaneously pointing out [...] the symmetry between right-wing and left-wing extremism» (Habermas, 2020b: 20).

In November 2023, together with three other German intellectuals – Nicole Deitelhoff, Rainer Forst and Klaus Günther – he signed a statement published by “Normative Orders” at the University of Frankfurt and relaunched by Reset DOC. The massacre carried out by Hamas, aimed at “eliminating Jewish life in general”, is firmly condemned. Israel’s reaction is considered justified in principle, although it must adhere to criteria of proportionality, aim at the protection of civilians and favour a prospect of future peace. In any case, the document expresses full support for Israel and for all Jews in Germany, in response to the reappearance of antisemitic acts on German streets: «The democratic ethos of the Federal Republic of Germany, oriented to the respect of human dignity, is bound to a political culture for which Jewish life and the right of Israel to exist are central elements, worthy of special protection in the light of the mass crimes of the Nazi era» (2023). Habermas, however, does not concentrate on the instruments of the *streitbare Demokratie* (“militant democracy”), such as the banning of extremist parties, but proposes once again, as a strategy, the strengthening of a democratic consciousness of human rights within the German and European public sphere. The collective memory of the Holocaust lies at the centre of the construction of a postnational identity capable of recognizing antisemitism above all where it is instrumentalized by revisionism in order to deny guilt and responsibility. Habermas emphasizes that antisemitism in Germany retains a destructive charge and a gravity far greater than in the rest of Europe (Habermas, 2004b). This judgement has, within Habermas’s intellectual biography, a counterpoint that must be recalled: the decades-long relationship with Israel and with Gershom Scholem. «Israel was the other pole», Habermas declares, recalling his first journey to Jerusalem in 1977 for Scholem’s eightieth birthday, when Scholem «laid the city, so to speak, at our feet» and accompanied

him «like an expert guide through the quarters and the surroundings of this exemplarily “historical” city» – «he who, as a Zionist, had come to that land in 1923 and had never forgotten the problem of the expelled Palestinians» (2024/2026: 43). The remark, a few lines long, says much about the posture Habermas would assume in 2023: solidarity with Israel is not conceived as an alternative to the recognition of the wrong done to the Palestinians, and it is learned from a Jewish interlocutor who held the two terms together. Of his later stays Habermas recalls the lectures at the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem; the long period spent with his family during the outbreak of the war in Lebanon – lived through «in a convulsive state of mobilization» in a country «of a moving beauty but, as could be seen once again, profoundly threatened in its very essence»; Scholem’s funeral, «when each participant in the long funeral procession laid a stone upon the grave»; and his last visit in 2012 for the inauguration of the lecture series on Buber (ivi: 144). The bond with Scholem had been born in 1963 out of a footnote on the correspondences between Jakob Böhme and Isaac Luria, and turned into a friendship between the two families (ivi: 144-145). This biographical stratum is not ornamental with respect to the argument. It shows that the Habermasian position on German antisemitism does not derive from a theorem about national guilt, but from a long and concrete familiarity with German Jewish life dispersed by emigration: that New York of Hannah Arendt, Hans Jonas and Aron Gurwitsch in which, «even more than two decades after the end of the war, our present seemed to awaken, in that context, distant memories, in which we were involved as though we had taken part in them» (ivi: 142). It is the personal form of that “anamnesic solidarity” which, on the theoretical plane, he would demand of the German public sphere. In the land of the guilty, every attempt to minimize the Shoah or to turn historical memory into a mere façade-like formalism risks reopening civic wounds and undermining democratic political culture. Historical responsibility is not exhausted by generational turnover; it is reflected directly also in relations of neighbourhood and in sensitivity towards the peoples who suffered Nazi aggression. Analysing the complexity of the historical relations between Germany and Poland, Habermas notes that understanding the historical reservations and fears of the countries of Eastern Europe must remain a priority ethical imperative for German identity, obstructing any resurgence of revanchist sentiments or of national self-sufficiency (2004a/2006). On the side of communicative conditions, he would later connect the increase in antisemitism to the «de-formalisation of public communication» and to the reduced distance between published opinions and the semi-public opinions of the digital «“soapbox”»; but he judges worse still «the organisational potential offered by the formation of bubbles and niches in the “dark” Internet», with extremist networks infiltrated into the police, the Bundeswehr and the intelligence services, which «today conjure up the nightmare of a deep state» (2020b: 22).

In parallel with his critique of secondary antisemitism, Habermas has denounced the attempts of conservative political culture to redefine national identity through the concept of *Leitkultur* (“guiding” or hegemonic culture). In a harsh intervention prompted by the resurgence of xenophobic and Islamophobic impulses, the philosopher showed how the debate betrays a nation’s fear of losing itself in an irremediably plural and multicultural society. To seek to impose a majority culture of ethnic-national derivation as a criterion of assimilation for religious and immigrant minorities means taking a step backwards with respect to the achievements of constitutional patriotism. For Habermas, German identity cannot take refuge in an idealized cultural homogeneity, which risks fuelling a pathological intolerance (Habermas, 2010b).

The only “guiding culture” compatible with the lesson of Auschwitz is the one rooted in the universalistic principles of the Basic Law, in the practices of the inclusion of the other and in unconditional respect for difference. Habermas’s reflection on national identity is inextricably interwoven with Germany’s role within the European Union. With the outbreak of the financial and euro crisis in the 2000s and 2010s, the philosopher discerned the re-emergence of a “New German Question” (Habermas et al., 2011). United Germany, having become the dominant economic power on the continent, began to display a dangerous re-nationalization of its political horizon, replacing its traditional European vocation with a short-sighted protection of its own budgetary interests (Habermas, 2010a; Habermas, 2011b).

Habermas has sharply criticized the attitude of the German political elites – and in particular Chancellor Angela Merkel’s management – describing it as a resounding «failure of the elites» (*Elitenversagen*). By imposing policies of rigorous austerity on the countries of Europe’s southern periphery

without offering in exchange any prospect of democratic integration and risk-sharing, Germany risked turning the Union into an instrument of economic hegemony. To sleep «on the edge of a volcano» and to forget that European integration was the historical response to the disaster provoked by German nationalism in the twentieth century means, for Habermas, betraying the memory of 1945 (Habermas, 2013). The single currency and the European Union are not mere accounting arrangements, but a common destiny in which the very resilience of Western democracies is at stake (Habermas, 2010c). Faced with the risks of the continent's fragmentation and with the rise of far-right populist movements within Germany itself, Habermas has repeatedly issued public appeals for a rebirth of the European spirit, reaffirming that the national perspective is by now inadequate to meet global challenges (Habermas et al., 2018). It is an enlargement of constitutional patriotism through the construction of a European public sphere and the integration of institutions.

Thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the philosopher has often returned to drawing up a balance sheet of the process of Germany's political and cultural unification. In the interview *For God's sake, spare us governing philosophers!*, given to Borja Hermoso for "El País" on 25 May 1998, he calls himself a "German patriot": not of the ethnic nation, but of the country that after 1945 produced a stable democracy and, through decades of polarization, a liberal political culture. It is the constitutional patriotism of 1986, which nonetheless requires a narrative background: the Constitution must be felt as a national achievement. German identity is plural and regenerative – it includes Turkish, Iranian and Greek immigrants of the second and third generation – and the populist rejection of those people is senseless.

Habermas's position traces a coherent red thread: Germany cannot define its identity by separating itself from its own history or from its European context. From the struggle against the creeping forms of secondary antisemitism (Habermas, 2004b) to the rejection of an exclusionary *Leitkultur* (2010b), and on to the critique of economic hegemonism in Brussels (2011b; 2013), the philosopher reiterates that German democratic civilization exists only as a culture of self-criticism. In this perspective, the memory of guilt is not a paralysing constraint, but the fundamental ethical compass that requires Germany to be the motor, and not the obstacle, of a united and solidary Europe (Habermas et al., 2018). Analysing the change of course in European unification brought about in the wake of the pandemic crisis – with the acceptance of debt mutualization for the recovery funds – Habermas has glimpsed in it a "second chance" for Germany (2020a). The first chance, in 1989, risked being exhausted in a purely administrative and accounting unification, marked by the illusion of being able to return to being a "normal" nation-state. This second chance instead allows Germany to understand that the completion of its own internal unity is indissolubly bound to the completion of European unity.

This coherence must be framed within the Habermasian diagnosis of the «postnational constellation», which constitutes its sociological premise. Pensky sums up its outcome in the terms that concern us here: to the gap between economic globalization and the regulative capacities of states there corresponds a «rise of economic and political inequality, a shift of economic risks from states to individual persons and vulnerable groups, and, most troubling, the return of older reactionary forms of group solidarity. Politically, this is visible in the reactivations of exclusive national and ethnic forms of ascriptive identity, nativism and xenophobic reactions to immigrants, the revitalization of nationalist parties, and the gradual collapse of the cosmopolitan project» (Pensky, 2019b: 323-324). Specter identifies it as the Habermasian legacy: the multidimensional political crisis of 1981-1987, «from Euromissiles to *Historikerstreit* – was the theater in which Habermas worked out his own account of *Westbindung*, the key to which was his redefinition of the West as a fallibilistic, open, democratic experiment». Hence the formula that epitomizes the relation between memory and institutions: «The price exacted for constitutional patriotism was civil disobedience». The reconstructive work of the 1980s on the concepts of modernity and constitutionalism, Specter concludes, «staged a mutually transformative encounter between Germany and the West that has helped to keep the meaning of Western liberal democracy open for all its citizens» (2010: 207). Against this background one understands why the Habermasian defence of democratic values ended by assuming, as Pensky himself notes, a «conservative mission», in the sense that «the genuine achievements of German political culture in the half-century following total collapse – a robust democracy, with broad political inclusion, tolerance of cultural and ethnic diversity,

a functional social security system to offset the effects of economic competition, and a national commitment to a peaceful and open Europe – themselves seemed to come under increasing threat» (Pensky, 2019a: 203). As late as 2021, Habermas intervened once more in the debate on German historical memory. On 23 May, A. Dirk Moses published in “*Geschichte der Gegenwart*” the intervention *Der Katechismus der Deutschen*: German memory would be a quasi-religious catechism with five articles – the uniqueness of the Shoah, a special responsibility towards the Jews, the security of Israel as *raison d’État*, antisemitism as distinct from racism, anti-Zionism as equivalent to antisemitism – which sanctions dissent. In the background: the Mbembe case (2020), the Bundestag’s BDS resolution (2019), the German reception of Rothberg’s *Multidirectional Memory* and the reticent memory of German colonial crimes. Between June and September, Frei, Diner, Friedländer, Aly and Zimmerer intervened. Habermas came last, and it was he who imposed the label “*Historikerstreit 2.0*” – which Moses and Zimmerer would reject. Habermas starts from a methodological concession: like every historical fact, the Holocaust too is comparable with other genocides; it is the meaning of the comparison that depends on the context. In 1986 what was at stake was not the admissibility of the comparison with Stalinist crimes, but its use: to relieve Germans born afterwards of political responsibility – Jaspers’s *Haftung*. The same criterion applies now. Against Moses, Habermas denies that German memory is an identitarian catechism and vindicates its conflictual genesis: a hard-won achievement of post-war political culture, not an imposed dogma. He then reformulates singularity in non-quantitative terms: colonial genocides struck strangers, whereas the extermination of the Jews struck fellow citizens constructed as an “internal enemy” – a Schmittian category – that is, as a subversive danger internal to the nation. Hence the “dialectic of normalization”: the Federal Republic became normal precisely by assuming the abnormality of its own past, and to renounce this in the name of mnemonic pluralism would mean losing the normative foundation of its own democracy. Habermas does not deny that colonial crimes must be remembered, and he legitimates the comparison; but he denies that remembering them requires relativizing Auschwitz, defending the singularity of the Shoah as a rupture in civilization. The thread linking back to 1986 is the criterion of the public use of history: not which comparisons are admissible, but what political function they perform in the self-understanding of a democratic community (2021). It must be recalled that the «postnational constellation» is not for Habermas one category among others, but the framework within which are arrayed the challenges that from the 1990s onwards occupy the centre of his reflection: «economic globalization and the melting pot», the «supranational processes of integration, such as the European one», «the advent of populisms and separatist movements», «the waves of migration, the tearing of the solidary fabric of communities that struggle to govern pluralism» (Corchia, 2026: 190).

12. Conclusions

The path traversed – from childhood under the Third Reich and the democratic conversion of 1945, through the return of the exiles, the Auschwitz trial, the generational conflict of 1968 and the *Historikerstreit*, down to unification, the controversy over the memorial and the diagnosis of secondary antisemitism – makes it possible to recognize in the concept of *Nicht-Regression* (non-regression) the normative imperative that Adorno and Habermas develop in response to the *Zivilisationsbruch* of National Socialism and in order to prevent gradual erosions of democratic institutions (Niesen, 2023). Both converge in regarding National Socialism as a total regression, but they decline the imperative differently. For Adorno it is universal: barbarism is a latent threat inherent in modern civilization and in administered capitalism, and post-1945 Germany is not immune to it. Habermas, by contrast, internalizes it: Germany bears a specific historical responsibility, because the crime took place “here”, creating an existential bond with traditions poisoned by unspeakable crimes. He rejects the notion of collective guilt and insists on the shared responsibility of the *Nachgeborenen*, those “born afterwards”, for the Nazi past. The Adornian declension of this imperative – the frontal attack on the culture of “turning the page” in the Germany of the economic miracle and the denunciation of the «empty rituals» of monumental memory (Adorno, 1959/1998) – is discussed analytically in the companion essay (Corchia and Hassan, 2026). On one point, however, the road taken by Habermas diverges from that of his masters,

and Jay unwittingly indicates the reason: the fecundity of the Institute in exile had been conditioned by its isolation, and it was public recognition that eroded the cutting edge of critique (1973: 287-288). The Habermasian wager is exactly the reverse: to entrust the guarantee of non-regression to the public sphere, and not to distance from it. For both, in any case, the memory of the past functions as a mechanism against the return of authoritarian forms; and the imperative is concrete: to defend the historical level of freedom and justice attained.

Read through the Jaspersian distinction, the itinerary reconstructed here displays a coherent logic that neither a history of ideas nor a political chronology could bring out on its own. The distinction between moral guilt and political liability, adopted in 1945 from the radio broadcasts of the Nuremberg trials, is not a static premise but the variable that each episode redefines. The Heidegger case extended liability to the language of the philosophical tradition; the Auschwitz trial showed that the courts can establish guilt but not liability, and thereby opened the space of the public sphere; the conflict of 1968 brought the question out of the privacy of families while forcing Habermas to defend the *Rechtsstaat* as the only forum in which liability can be discharged; the *Historikerstreit* made explicit that what the revisionists sought to discharge was liability and not guilt; unification asked whether liability survives a change in the subject that inherits it; and constitutional patriotism, the memorial and the diagnosis of secondary antisemitism are three answers to the same problem – how liability is to be transmitted once the generation of the *Nachgeborenen* has itself passed. This is what the essay adds to the literature on Habermas and German memory: not a new episode, but the demonstration that the episodes are stages of one learning process, and that the theory of the public use of history and of constitutional patriotism is the form that Jaspers's *Haftung* takes when it is entrusted no longer to consciences but to institutions.

The memory of the past is connected, moreover, to constitutional stability and to European integration. The passage from the national to the European plane is not, however, immediate, and the literature has insisted on the point. Christian Joerges recalls that «the topos of constitutional patriotism, which refers to the specific historical context of the early Federal Republic, concerns Germany's past and the re-civilization of the country – the transformation of its political culture after the Second World War» (Joerges, 2017: 545). It is precisely this rootedness that makes it possible to reject the objection according to which constitutional patriotism would be sociologically too «thin» to guarantee the cohesion of modern societies: for Habermas the nation-state, and Germany in particular, represent «an ambivalent achievement», and if republicanism prevailed – that is, if «the “nation of the state” (*Staatsnation*) succeeded the “nation of the people” (*Volksnation*)» – this happened only through «a painful process of abstraction by which local and dynastic loyalties were finally transformed into the self-consciousness of democratic citizens as belonging to one and the same nation» (ibidem).

From this rootedness follows a prudential criterion that holds for our conclusion as well: «the idea of constitutional patriotism cannot be transferred to the European plane without further mediations», since no European political framework would be definable «if all European societies declared sacrosanct the forms they have historically and culturally assumed»; it must therefore be understood «in programmatic terms: the plurality of Europe must not be transformed into homogeneity, but must rather give rise to reciprocal relations of recognition» (Joerges, 2017: 546). German *Zerknirschung*, in other words, is not exportable as content, but only as form: not the obligation for every European country to remember the same guilt, but rather that of subjecting its own history to the same labour of critical abstraction.

The same logic, finally, governs Habermas's positions on the use of force, touched upon here only in passing. From the first Gulf War onwards, Anna Geis recalls, Habermas criticized «the tendency of the sole Western superpower to turn a justified “police action” into a “perfectly normal war” in order to secure its own interests in the Middle East» (2017: 582) – where the word normal returns to designate, as in the historians' dispute, the operation by which one would take leave of a historical exception. An overall conclusion may now be drawn, and it leads back to the misunderstanding from which we set out. Habermas's intellectual biography shows that the consciousness of guilt is not a paralysing burden, but the condition of possibility of a post-national political culture: only a memory that keeps the wound open – from the culture of *Zerknirschung* to constitutional patriotism – safeguards the historical level

of freedom and justice attained and prevents «normalization» from turning into oblivion. Read in this light, the statement of 13 November 2023 appears not as a partisan episode but as the coherent application of the imperative of non-regression. This is the legacy that the German experience, in its exemplary function, hands down to the Italian and European debate as well. It may serve as a farewell to recall the formula with which Habermas indicated the minimum threshold below which a society ceases to be one: «Any society that wants to preserve a trace of humanity must demand that much transcendence of itself, which means that much orientation beyond oneself and what exists» (2020b: 29).

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Between a Silenced Past and Lost Futures. Walter Benjamin and the Critical Potential of Memory*

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Abstract. Within the critical approach of the Frankfurt School, and in the original interweaving of Marxism and Judaism, Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) is in search of an authentic memory, a memory that engages in a critical comparison between the past and the present in order to recover the past in its entirety (including the silenced aspects of history) and the lost futures (the unfulfilled expectations of the past). In order to argue this claim, the contribution proposes a reading of the texts in which Benjamin variously, though not always explicitly, addresses the question of memory and historical knowledge, arriving, on the one hand, to explore the concepts of *Eingedenken* (an active memory that recovers from the past what has been forgotten or suppressed) and *dialectical images of memory* (understood as the outcome of the process of active memory), in particular in the texts *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1940) and in the chapter ‘Theory of Knowledge and Progress’ contained in the famous volume devoted to the *Parisian Passages* (*Paris. Capital of the 19th Century*, 1935); on the other hand, proposing the theme of the loss of experience correlated to an idea of memory as tradition as a thread running through his intense reflections on the condition of the individual in mass culture and society (*On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*, 1939). Within this second reflection, Benjamin also draws the images of the city as a mental reification that is expressed, in practice, as evidence of a social reification that holds a memory that feeds on “collective dreams” and the “illusion of the commodity”. This is particularly the case in the writings *Berlin Childhood around 1900* (1950), *Images of the City* (1925) and, once again, in the volume *Paris. Capital of the 19th Century*. Ultimately, criticising the empty historiographical continuity, Benjamin opposes the mystification of the collective consciousness with the figure of the awakening, which is, for him, made possible by the urban “actualisation” of the collective memory that makes the *Eingedenken* possible. It will be highlighted how this perspective offers itself today as a useful conceptual tool for deciphering the traces of memory that dot our cities. When applied to the urban landscape, Benjamin’s concept of the *dialectical image* means that an element from the past suddenly enters into a relationship with the present, enabling us to see simultaneously *what has been*, *what has become*, and *what might have been*.

Keywords: Walter Benjamin - Critical Memory - Urban Space

Riassunto. Nell’ambito dell’approccio critico della scuola di Francoforte, e nell’originale intreccio tra marxismo ed ebraismo, Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) è alla ricerca di una memoria autentica, una memoria che opera un confronto critico tra il passato e il presente per giungere al recupero del passato integrale (che comprende anche i contenuti tacitati della storia) e dei futuri perduti (delle aspettative del passato rimaste irrealizzate). Per argomentare questa affermazione, il contributo intende proporre una lettura dei testi in cui Benjamin affronta variamente, pur non sempre in maniera esplicita, la questione della memoria e della conoscenza storica, giungendo, da un lato, a disegnare i concetti di *Eingedenken* (una memoria attiva che recupera dal passato ciò che è stato dimenticato o sconfitto) e di *immagini dialettiche di memoria* (intese come esito del processo di memoria attiva), in particolare nei testi *Tesi di filosofia della storia* (1955) e nel capitolo “Teoria della conoscenza e del progresso” contenuto nel celebre volume dedicato ai *Passages parigini* (*Parigi. Capitale del XIX secolo*, 1982); dall’altro lato, proponendo il tema della perdita dell’esperienza correlata a un’idea di memoria come tradizione come filo conduttore delle sue intense riflessioni sulla condizione dell’individuo nella cultura e nella società di massa (*Di alcuni motivi in Baudelaire*, 1955). Entro questa seconda riflessione, Benjamin disegna altresì le immagini della città come una reificazione mentale che si esprime, in pratica, come testimonianza di una reificazione sociale che custodisce una memoria che si nutre di “sogni collettivi” e dell’“illusione della merce”. Ciò in particolare negli scritti *Infanzia berlinese* (1950), *Immagini di città* (1955) e, ancora una volta, nel volume *Parigi capitale del XIX secolo*. In definitiva, criticando la vuota continuità storiografica, Benjamin oppone alla mistificazione della coscienza collettiva la figura del *risveglio*, il quale è ad esempio reso possibile, per lui, dall’“attualizzazione” urbana della memoria collettiva che rende possibile l’*Eingedenken*. Verrà messo in evidenza come questa prospettiva si offra oggi come strumento concettuale utile a decifrare le tracce di memoria che costellano le nostre città. Applicata al paesaggio urbano, l’idea benjaminiana di immagine dialettica indica che un elemento del passato entra improvvisamente in rapporto con il presente e ci permette di vedere, contemporaneamente, *ciò che è stato*, *ciò che è diventato* e *ciò che avrebbe potuto essere*.

Parole chiave: Walter Benjamin, Memoria critica, Cultura di massa, Spazio urbano

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1. The Unfinished Past

In this article, we aim to investigate the foundations of Benjamin's perspective on memory¹ and then focus on the reasons for the urban 'actualization' of collective memory and the conceptual tools that Benjamin offers to decipher the traces of memory that dot cities.

Among the critical theorists who animated the Frankfurt School, Benjamin stands out as the most original member. As is well known, his enigmatic thinking is articulated in a *unique* intertwining of Jewish tradition and Marxism (a more vulgar Marxism, less tied to Hegel's philosophy than the members of the Frankfurt Institute).

Benjamin was a singular philosopher, sociologist, and literary critic, widely recognized as a particularly representative figure of the generation of Jewish-German intellectuals born in the second half of the 19th century, whose thinking profoundly marked European culture in the 20th century². Between the 1920s and 1930s, and until his tragic death in 1940 while fleeing Nazi persecution, Benjamin placed at the center of his intellectual work the novelty of mass society and consumerism, the radically changed conditions of life and experience, and above all their consequences for the processes of knowledge, art, and culture in general. These are themes that, moreover, permeate the Frankfurt School's reflection on modern society - on the new phenomena present in it, on its elements of crisis and contradiction - in the light of the famous *Critical Theory*, the theory developed by the Frankfurt group starting from a revision of the foundations of Marxism, whose Hegelian origins were reevaluated, integrating into it various elements of Freud's psychoanalytic theory.

Benjamin's contribution to the study of memory processes in the social sciences essentially refers to the critical perspective he opens up on the knowledge of the past and, therefore, to a new way of looking at the relationship between past, present, and future. In fact, he outlines an operation of knowledge of the past that aims to grasp the difference between the past as it is known *now, in the present*, and how it really was *then*, in order to bring to light those contents that have been forgotten or silenced. Thus, if we consider that what a society celebrates about the past does not concern the past in its entirety and does not involve all the traces that remain of it, Benjamin's perspective opens up the possibility of "liberating" the past in its entirety to make room for another present, suggesting that in order to *truly* understand the past, it is necessary to look beyond its official narratives; that is, it is necessary to bring to light those contents that have been lost or prevented from being visible.

To best explain this process of knowledge, it is useful to follow the reasoning that Benjamin articulates in various ways throughout much of his work, particularly in his unfinished work on the *Parisian Passages* - specifically in the section "Theory of Knowledge and Progress" - and in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*³, written in the late 1930s. In these texts, we find the theme of historical knowledge and memory developed in a direction that, while on the one hand welcoming the effort to escape absolutist promises and illusions of the future, also opens up to the possibility of

¹ For a discussion of Benjamin's contribution to the study of the collective past – defined "critical-emancipatory paradigm" – in light of a reading from the perspective of forgetting, see Grande (2022).

² This generation of intellectuals experienced a profound conflict with their world of origin, mainly due to a conflict with their fathers' generation over the ambiguous attitude they assumed towards Judaism. In fact, while on the one hand they lived in accordance with Jewish tradition, on the other hand they were ready to welcome complete assimilation into German society. This conflict, together with the historical and social conditions of the society in which they lived (suffice it to recall the First World War, German inflation, and Nazi persecution in the 1930s), instilled in them a desire for change and revolt: it was therefore a generation that had faith in the role of the avant-garde and revolutionary forces, a generation of utopians and aspirants to a radically 'different' world, to a new and better order of reality. In his work, Benjamin seems to concentrate all the tensions, problems and contradictions of the Jewish-German cultural universe of this generation. See Arendt, 1981, pp. 141-144.

³ The *Theses* were formulated by Benjamin a few months before his suicide on the French-Spanish border. On the one hand, they are a reflection on the contemporary historical situation; on the other, they represent a sort of maturation of the theoretical problems linked to his latest works, those concerning, broadly speaking, the broad and in-depth analysis of the conditions and consequences of modernity. It can therefore be argued that the *Theses* constitute a synthesis of the main themes of Benjamin's philosophy.

tracing back to the past the root of any desire to reveal what in the future may be different from the present.

The original idea of the *Theses* is to construct another history. But constructing another history essentially means proposing a new conception of time. Reflection on time is dominant in Benjamin's work; it is inseparable from it. In general, we can say that he does not think of time as continuity, in terms of a 'before' and an 'after'; for him, time is not a simple projection forward, nor is it expressed in an evolution. Instead, it is texture and discontinuity, clots and interruptions. In this perspective, the three dimensions of time (past, present, and future) do not follow a continuous development: the past is not the "already been" and the future is not far from the present. Benjamin seems to express this aspect in a phrase by Karl Kraus that he uses as a motto for the fourteenth Thesis: 'the origin is the goal', whose meaning leads directly to the heart of Benjaminian time, to the point of discovering its Jewish origins. Inspired by Jewish tradition, Benjamin imagines a time in which the fundamental event is always ongoing, in which the goal is not located far in the future but is always already present. Thus, he contrasts the empty and quantified instant with a *Jetztzeit*, a time-now (understood as an instantaneous contraction of time) that is realized in the messianic arrest of historical events, in a sudden conjunction of past and present that challenges and interrupts sterile temporal continuity. In its deepest sense, the meaning of the term *Jetztzeit* is closely linked to Jewish theology and the specific way of understanding history, as an act of birth, as something that is accomplished with the messianic times. As has been clearly explained Consigli (1986) in his careful reading of messianism as the hidden but fundamental core of Benjamin's critical theory:

«In the Torah, *Toldot* is the word that designates 'history' and at the same time 'the thing that must be given birth to'; history represents the act of birth, the birth of an identity that is fulfilled with the messianic times [...] according to the Torah, history conceived as *Toldot* will generate what the prophets call the 'Ben Adam', the Son of Man, that is, the Messiah who is born of a human identity» (Consigli, 1986, p. 161).

Jetztzeit and *Toldot*, then. It can be said that, in some respects, *Jetztzeit* is for Benjamin what *Toldot* is in Jewish tradition: a challenge to homogeneous time. In *the Theses*, Benjamin chooses history conceived as *Toldot* as the ultimate image of "time-now." Thus he writes in the eighteenth *Thesis*:

«It is well known that Jews were forbidden to investigate the future. Instead, the Torah and prayer instruct them in memory. This freed them from the fascination with the future that those who seek information from fortune tellers are subject to. But this did not make the future a homogeneous and empty time for Jews. For every second in it was the small door through which the Messiah could enter».

It is on this foundation that Benjamin grafts the question of memory.

Benjamin addresses the theme of memory precisely from the point of view of historical understanding, and the dominant motif refers to the possibility of critically recovering an integral past; this is based on the idea that the past does not correspond to something definitively concluded in itself, but presents a margin of incompleteness on which it is possible to intervene: Benjamin essentially envisages a rewriting of history from the point of view of the 'vanquished', according to a perspective which, in an attempt to 'save' the past, or rather to grasp it as it truly was, offers a radical critique of cumulative and quantified time and of the very idea of progress, typical of historicism. This operation of knowledge, strongly imbued with utopian impulses, 'goes against the grain of history', that is, it proves capable of opposing the discontinuous and tacit history of the oppressed, of those who find themselves in conditions of subordination and who have been excluded from the official versions of history and the dominant narrative of the past, to the triumphant and consolidated history of the victors.

This reasoning emerges clearly in the seventh *Thesis*:

«[...] But the masters of each era are the heirs of all those who have won. Identification with the victor therefore always benefits the masters of the moment. This is enough for the historical materialist. Anyone who has won to date participates in the triumphal procession in which today's rulers pass over those who now lie on the ground. The prey, as has always been the custom, is dragged along in the triumph. It is designated by the expression "cultural heritage." In the historical materialist's view, it must be viewed with a detached eye. For

all the cultural heritage that he embraces with his gaze inevitably has an origin that he cannot think of without horror. It owes its existence not only to the efforts of the great geniuses who created it, but also to the nameless slavery of their contemporaries. It is never a document of culture without also being a document of barbarism, nor is the process of tradition by which it passed from one to the other. The historical materialist therefore distances himself from it as far as possible. He considers it his task to go against the grain of history» (Benjamin, 1962b, pp.78-79).

At the heart of this discourse we find *Eingedenken*, the term he uses in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*⁴, which he places at the center of his idea of an authentic vision of history, made up of a discontinuous time, filled with *Jetztzeit*, with significant historical facts (a work, a life...), which, taken from reified historical continuity, become moments not of a description of the past, but of a peculiar experience of it. *Eingedenken* is therefore an active form of remembrance, which recovers from the past that which has been forgotten or suppressed. Through *Eingedenken*, the past is removed from the continuity of history and can manifest itself in the present in the form of a *dialectical image*, which arises when a fragment of the past enters into a constellation with the present; within this constellation, the present and the past illuminate one another:

«[...] an image is dialectic in stillness. For whilst the relationship between the present and the past is purely temporal and continuous, the relationship between what has been and the present moment is dialectical: it is not a progression but a discontinuous, jump-like image. Only dialectical images are authentic images (that is, not archaic); and the place where they are encountered is language» (Benjamin, 2000, p. 516).

Eingedenken can therefore be described as a rather atypical form of memory, as a model of utopian temporality that originates from a past to be saved, in which the dialectic of restitution between past and present is realized in something more than a pure descriptive reconstruction of the past: it configures the possibility of protecting the right that the past has over the present, or what Benjamin distinguishes as a 'lost future' waiting to be reactivated. According to Benjamin, the past encompasses what has been defeated and forgotten, and the power of *Eingedenken* lies precisely in its ability to assign a critical quality to the present, to reactivate this unredeemed character of the past, to leverage what has remained unfulfilled in history to open up new perspectives on the future⁵. This is a dialectical shift which, as Marchesoni (2017, p. 18) points out:

«consists in completely rethinking the relationship between past and present, as well as the very status of the past. If it is true that in traditional historiography “the past was considered a fixed point and the present was assigned the task of groping its way towards this fixed point,” Benjaminian archaeology aims to read the past in the light of the potentialities that make it, in a certain sense, non-past and from which alone a perspective on the future can unfold».

The *dialectical images of memory* therefore suggest a perspective which, while on the one hand welcoming the effort to escape absolutist promises and illusions of the future, on the other hand opens up to the possibility of bringing back to a critical re-examination of the past the root of any desire to

⁴ For further information on the concept of *Eingedenken*, which appeared in Ernst Bloch's philosophy before Benjamin's reflection, see the volume edited by Marchesoni (2017).

⁵ Benjamin's reflections find an original development in Jedlowski's (2017) discourse on the 'memories of future pasts', which simultaneously bring into play social, historical, and biographical temporality: memory of the future is, in essence, the recollection I make, in the present, of a future I imagined in the past (it is the difference between what was and what could have been). It is, therefore, a comparison between yesterday's expectations and what actually came to pass. In fact, if the redemption Benjamin refers to essentially concerns the past that speaks of the future of the oppressed and demands their redemption, the full meaning of the question that the past poses to the present can be extended to all 'past futures', i.e. the past futures that concern each subject immersed in the flow of historical time, as well as everyday time, with their own aspirations and plans (for example, the kind of life I imagine having in the future when I am young), which each of us is called upon to confront at some point in our lives. Understood in this way, redemption also becomes a daily practice for everyone, interwoven with responsibility and hope: that we have been awaited on earth, as Benjamin writes, speaks of the responsibility to remember what we have hoped for. That each generation has received a weak messianic force as a gift means that each generation has possessed the capacity to hope, and still possesses it: if we remember the hopes of those who preceded us on earth, by hoping in turn we become their heirs.

establish what in the future may be different from the present, including in this a sort of reparation and assumption of responsibility.

Eingedenken is the mean by which lost futures can be reactivated, and only in this way we can arrive at an authentic memory, to be traced back through the integral time. This is a critical view of the historical *continuum* that is very close, moreover, to the more general one proposed by the Frankfurt theorists, who understood the development of self-awareness and the resurgence of the lost past as an integral part of the process of emancipation, or rather, of man's reconciliation with his own existence. More precisely, we understand emancipation as a particular form of knowledge of oneself and one's condition, which constitutes a form of knowledge that is, at the same time, a reinterpretation of the past and a critique of the present, specifically aimed at breaking the self-enclosure of a present that offers nothing but its tragic and normative repetition, in order to open up to concrete change and the future. In this regard, Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) observed that one of the highest prices paid for progress was the repression of pain and suffering produced by the domination of nature, understanding the latter not only as something external to man, but also as an internal reality. Every reification, they argued, corresponds to an oblivion. A few years later, in *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse clearly summarized this perspective:

«Remembering the past can give rise to dangerous insights, and established society seems to fear the subversive contents of memory. Remembering is a way of dissociating oneself from facts as they are, a form of “mediation” that briefly breaks the omnipresent power of given facts. [...]. And in the personal events that reappear in the individual's memory, the fears and aspirations of humanity are affirmed - the universal in the particular» (Marcuse, 1964, p. 110).

In this sense, the wounded memory of the defeated is the memory that demands recognition, that demands accountability, and that imposes on new generations – often strangers to those events – the need to remember and process that “lost future” that the past contains.

It should also be considered that the assumption of responsibility in remembering transcends generations and represents the basis for the recognition of traumas and forms of oppression that demand reparation and justice. When speaking of memory, responsibility must obviously be assumed as an ethical expression, as both a 'response' and a 'promise', built around the idea of a continuous time that links past, present, and future: I am responsible today for my yesterdays' actions, just as I am responsible for the future consequences of my actions (Leccardi, 2007, p. 121)⁶. Therefore, the processes of elaborating the past, when considered from the perspective of Benjamin's critical-emancipatory paradigm (and more broadly that of the Frankfurt School), do not correspond to a 'weakened memory' (Adorno, 1959, p. 27) that rejects bonds of meaning, responsibility, and critical quality: rather, they present themselves as an individual and collective endeavor animated by the desire to revisit what has happened, in the awareness of the tensions and contradictions that inhabit the present and in the possibility of constructing new horizons of expectation.

2. The urban reification of collective memory

The theme of memory returns, with a rather literary perspective, in the texts *City Images* (1925) and *Berlin Childhood* (1950). Here, the theme of memory is also linked to the theme of the loss of experience related to an idea of memory as tradition, a discourse that is the common thread running through Benjamin's intense reflections on the condition of the individual in mass culture and society. It is precisely within this reflection that Benjamin draws images of the city as a mental reification that

⁶ Taking responsibility (both individual and collective) for an uncomfortable past is not a very popular path; similarly, the transmission of memory across generations is not always a harmonious process. The generational transmission of memory is in fact strongly imbued with tension when the legacy to be passed on is steeped in forms of violence, as is the case with events linked to catastrophes (including natural ones), wars, totalitarianism, and forms of abuse perpetrated or suffered. In cases such as these, the processing of the past through the work of mourning brings individual pain into play, bringing memory to the fore as a precious source of survival, awareness, and the rewriting of identity: individual pain thus becomes a prerequisite for an ethic of responsibility towards memory (Yerushalmi, 1988; Siebert, 2007).

is expressed, in practice, as evidence of a social reification that preserves a memory nourished by 'collective dreams' and the 'illusion of commodities'.

The theme of experience and its decline in the modern age is addressed, in particular, in the text *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire* (1939). With various references to Proust, Bergson, and Freud, Benjamin emphasizes the role that tradition plays in authentic, integral experience and points to the modern processes that undermine the conditions of its existence. To do this, he distinguishes between two types of experience: *Erfahrung* (authentic experience that takes place in memory and is rooted in tradition) and *Erlebnis* (experience that imposes itself vividly on consciousness). These are two contrasting terms: *Erlebnis* is the term used in phenomenological philosophy that we can equate with 'lived experience', understood as vivid, precise experience, as the presentation of a certain content to consciousness; *Erfahrung* is accumulated experience, which requires time and duration: it corresponds to a process of sedimentation of content in memory and its return as self-consciousness. For Benjamin, the deterioration of *Erfahrung* and its replacement with *Erlebnis* is a characteristic of modern mass society. An example he gives in this regard is the replacement of coherent narrative with disjointed and fragmentary information that increasingly involves the modern individual, particularly the metropolitan individual (cf. Jedlowski, 2002).

In addition to his original way of understanding historical knowledge, Benjamin's reflections on the city are also set against the backdrop of the transformations that have taken place in the meaning and value of experience.

In Benjamin's reflections, the city represents a privileged prism through which the *critical-emancipatory* paradigm is expressed and to which the categories of *Eingedenken* and *dialectical images of memory* can be applied: for Benjamin, cities represent the world. Magris (2007, p. V) writes:

«For him, the world is the city: the Berlin of his childhood, the Moscow or Marseille of his travels, the Paris of the 19th century with its *passages* leading from one era - and one life - to another. The cities, captured by him in snapshots that freeze the ephemeral in the eternity of the image, are alive, melancholic, or lovable; their aura is the seduction of the sensible and the present. But their houses, their streets, and the faces of their passers-by have cracks which, although concealed, announce, like wrinkles on a face, the crumbling of life and history, their collapse and irredeemable fall into the heap of ruins of the past».

In the cities he visited, Benjamin sought to capture, through the categories of *name* and *image*, a past that remained buried in the present, which contains redemptive possibilities for the future. It is possible to think of dialectical images, in fact, as a sort of "arrest of thought" in which an image of the past illuminates a moment in the present that finds meaning in that image and manifests, in a monadic construction, a messianic arrest of events and thus a revolutionary *opportunity* in the struggle over the past (Tagliacozzo, 2025, p. 33).

As we have seen before, Benjamin's philosophy proceeds, in fact, through images, rendered dialectical by tearing them away from conformism and habit, through the reactivation or reactualization of their emancipatory potential. The image is elusive, and only in it the past can be fixed. In the search for lost time, however, the *name* acts as both an obstacle and an ally: thanks to *the name*, in fact, we appropriate what we find, but at the same time it represents a sort of "glass screen" that acts as a barrier to our subsequent perception of reality.

As we know, Marcel Proust's *La recherche du temps perdu* influenced Benjamin in the writing of his Berlin childhood memories. There is, however, a fundamental difference between Proust's search for lost time and the Benjamin one: in the former case, the search is directed towards the past, towards recalling what has been, while in the latter case, the past is recalled in order to be projected into the future, in an attempt to bring out those feelings charged with possibility that are now dormant and unexpressed. Therefore, for Benjamin, lost time is not the past, but the future. As Szondi (1982) points out in an article dedicated to Benjamin, significantly entitled 'Hope in the Past':

«Proust listens to the sounds that come from the past, Benjamin to those that anticipate a future that has itself become the past. Unlike Proust, Benjamin does not want to free himself from temporality, he does not want to contemplate things in their ahistorical essence, but aims at historical experience and knowledge; however, he is rejected into the past, into a past that is not closed, but open and promising a future. Benjamin's tense is not the recent past, but the future perfect in all its paradoxicality of being a future and yet also a past» (Szondi, 1982, p. 18).

The images of cities that Benjamin offers us are full of wonder and remarkable insights, often colored by the use of evocative metaphors that, in some way, represent both “the premonition of the child and the cognitive ability of the adult”. These are not simple descriptions of the cities he visited: in each of them, Benjamin captures social peculiarities, such that through the city it is possible to read the experiences of those who live there against the backdrop. The dialectical image, therefore, represents a portrait through which it is possible to arrest the course of events, the ephemeral: it is a snapshot through which to bring out the ruins and victims fallen in the march of progress and history, or rather that typically modern concept of history that consists in 'connecting the seemingly confused multiplicity of events, of different particular stories, into a coherent whole' (Beonio-Brocchieri, 2022, p. 37) or, in other words, the modern regime of historicity (Hartog, 2007). This is why cities lend themselves well to this dialectical operation of re-emerging 'aborted' futures, as they represent a symbol of power shrouded in transience (Magris, 2007). The image is not a simple description of what the author sees or experiences through the senses: the dialectical image is, in a sense, a 'dream image' that flashes before the scholar's eyes when he manages to grasp its meaning, a snapshot that is in constant danger of vanishing if it is not promptly captured. Benjamin is, after all, searching for lost futures through research and memories of his childhood: in particular, the theme of truth is at the heart of his investigation, that primal experience that can no longer be repeated as it was, but can only be dreamed.

The city represents the place - and the time - in which to seek out what is unrealized and outdated in the present. Works such as *Berlin Childhood* (1950) and *City Images* (1925), as well as the large collection dedicated to Parisian *passages*, feature the cities where the author stayed for varying lengths of time during his life: Berlin, Naples, Marseille, Moscow, San Gimignano, Bergen, and Paris. A journey within a city is both a spatial and temporal experience, as mentioned above: on the one hand, it is in the names of the streets, points of interest, and monuments that our gaze primarily lingers on and through which we experience it; on the other hand, however, the city is a journey through time, in that what has already been experienced has now changed into memory, even though the city may be materially the same as it was then. This is especially true when the city is experienced either by a native or by someone visiting for the first time: the exotic element inherent in the names and snapshots captured by the stranger does not have the same effect on those who have already lived in those streets and places. The native does not travel in the geographical sense of the term, but rather travels through the experiences of their childhood in that city. Describing and understanding one's own city therefore implies taking a journey into the distance of time. In other words, the stranger's gaze is similar to that of a child who does not yet know what is around them: it is the primal experience, what one experiences for the first time. Those who have grown up and lived in a city, on the other hand, must describe it and search for traces of a future past waiting to be revealed. They have no choice but to travel through their memories, or rather, to search for that primal gaze capable of evoking the 'never before experienced' and projecting it into the future. For those who live in a particular city, name and image merge inextricably, as the mechanism of habit, of the usual, *of the obviousness* of everyday life (Schutz, 1979) comes into play, in which distance and proximity cancel each other out: this is why, between the two poles of name and image, a certain distance, both spatial and temporal, is necessary, and this is why it is necessary to travel in memories rather than on the streets, as those who travel in their own past are able to separate name and reality (Szondi, 2007). As Benjamin demonstrates in *Berlin Childhood* (1950), the gaze of the adult, who travels through their childhood memories and retraces the places and times they experienced, is such as to disrupt the usual: in some ways, it is potentially an antidote to today's presentification, which engulfs memory and hope (Beonio-Brocchieri, 2022).

3 Conclusion

In the wake of Benjamin's reflections, we note that the names of the streets and squares of our cities today often contain a past unknown to most people and genuine *intentions of memory* (Jedlowski, 2016) promoted by institutions or solicited by civil society. How many of us are fully aware of the meanings of the names of the streets that make up our cities? In other words, there is a hidden memory waiting to be reactivated, there is a call for a 'reawakening' of memories and consciences that not all of us are always willing or ready to accept.

In other words, the concrete aspect of those grand narratives we call "memory" refers to their visibility in social space, their condensation, their objectification in all those traces that crisscross our urban spaces and impose themselves on us in everyday life: examples include the names that identify various places in the city, monuments, commemorative plaques, and official commemorations that take place on "remembrance dates".

But these material traces of memory that inhabit our daily lives do not always tell us something; more often than not, they become invisible. This invisibility is also described by Calvino in *Invisible Cities* (1972), a book presented as a series of travel reports by Marco Polo to the Tartar emperor Kublai Khan. Calvino, with a literary gesture, shows how cities are a combination of many things: places of exchange, signs of language, desires, promises and, along with all this, memories. As Tota (2001) observes, the cities Calvino describes are cities of memory, invisible memories of relationships and events that transform the physical space of a city, its buildings, squares, and streets, into the social space of its memories and the experiences of its inhabitants, both past and present. The streets of the cities we walk through every day take on a new light when street names, plaques, and monuments begin to speak, or rather, when we begin to pay attention to them: it is at that moment that the obviousness of our daily gaze can be overcome and the meanings of the traces of memory can be recovered from the invisibility that surrounds them.

Based on these reflections, Benjamin suggests that urban space is the site of a "not yet conscious knowledge," a sort of involuntary collective memory that persists, crystallized, in urban space. In other words, it is a *reification*⁷ of collective memory, an autonomization of social meanings inherent in the past in "objects" of the city that live a life of their own. Urban artifacts therefore inscribe the collective and social past which, in Benjamin's sense of the term, must be dialectically recovered *for* and *in the awakening*. The memories that the city objectively represents constitute a concrete starting point for those who want to recover what has been lost, and whose ruins evoke the forgotten world. In this sense, Benjamin seeks dialectical images that, by relating the city to memory, allow *authentic memory* to emerge. The latter corresponds to a phenomenon through which the 'prehistoric dream' that came from full time meets the 'historical dream' inserted into empty time, charged with the explosive tensions of the dreams of the former, from which the latter had separated it. This presupposes a policy of transmitting the promises of happiness of the past that empty and homogeneous time has silenced.

From this perspective, we may conclude by arguing that Benjamin can rightly be regarded as a sociographer of collective memory (Berdet, 2005). His reflections are, in fact, particularly useful, on the one hand, for understanding how certain historical events are remembered and celebrated at the expense of others, which are instead consigned to oblivion (through monuments, urban structures, commemorations and, more generally, through the actions of political and cultural institutions); on

⁷ In the Hegelian sense of the term, reification refers to the historical separation of the subject from the object. The objects that man has created stand as things foreign and external to him. For Benjamin, architecture is the reification of collective memory. In his work on *Passages*, iron constructions, transitory and functional monuments that temporarily materialize the industrial ghosts of 19th-century man (goods, world fairs, railway stations, etc.) become, at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the stable and formal monuments of everyday life.

the other hand, they enable us to interpret urban space as a repository of lost futures, that is, of unrealised historical possibilities: ruins, abandoned or transformed buildings and neighbourhoods, and unfinished urban projects preserve traces of the expectations that past societies harboured for the future. When these traces are examined critically, past and present merge, producing what Benjamin defines as a *dialectical image of memory*. In this sense, from a Benjaminian perspective, the city preserves not only the memory of what has happened, but also the memory of what might have happened.

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Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique? Critical Theory, Sociology of Memory, and Public Working Through-the-Past*

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Abstract. The essay examines the Habermasian category of the “public use of history” at the intersection of Frankfurt School critical theory and the sociology of memory. After reconstructing the dissolution of the topos of *historia magistra vitae* and the sociological framework of collective memory, public memory, and social memory – from Halbwachs to contemporary memory studies – it traces the category’s Frankfurt School roots: Benjamin’s theses on the concept of history and Adorno’s reflections on working through the past. On this basis, it articulates the practical functions of knowledge and distinguishes the two forms of critical intervention in the public sphere that derive from that legacy: “Consciousness-Raising” and “Rescuing Critique”. Public memory thus appears as a solidaristic and never-completed practice of working through the past, whose normative core – the imperative of non-regression – binds democratic identity to the remembrance of the victims and stands opposed both to revisionism and to the ritual neutralization of commemoration. The essay’s distinctive contribution is to show that the two critiques are complementary rather than alternative, and that the public use of history is the normative obverse of collective memory as Halbwachs described it: a self-critical public memory does not arise spontaneously, but requires institutions, intellectuals, and public conflict, and is to be judged by its direction rather than by its intensity.

Keywords: public use of history; collective memory; consciousness-raising critique; rescuing critique; memory work.

Riassunto. Il saggio esamina la categoria habermasiana di “uso pubblico della storia” all’incrocio fra la teoria critica francofortese e la sociologia della memoria. Dopo aver ricostruito la dissoluzione del topos della *historia magistra vitae* e la cornice sociologica della memoria collettiva, memoria pubblica e memoria sociale – da Halbwachs ai *memory studies* contemporanei –, ne rintraccia le radici francofortesi: le tesi di Benjamin sul concetto di storia e quelle di Adorno sull’elaborazione del passato. Su questa base articola le funzioni pratiche del sapere e distingue le due forme di intervento critico nella sfera pubblica che deriva da quell’eredità: la critica che rende coscienti e la critica che “salva”. La memoria pubblica appare così come una pratica solidale e mai conclusa di elaborazione del passato, il cui nucleo normativo – l’imperativo della non-regressione – vincola l’identità democratica alla rammemorazione delle vittime e si oppone tanto al revisionismo quanto alla neutralizzazione rituale della commemorazione. Il contributo specifico del saggio consiste nel mostrare che le due critiche sono complementari e non alternative, e che l’uso pubblico della storia è il rovescio normativo della memoria collettiva descritta da Halbwachs: una memoria pubblica autocritica non nasce spontaneamente, ma richiede istituzioni, intellettuali e conflitto pubblico, e va giudicata dalla sua direzione più che dalla sua intensità.

Parole chiave: uso pubblico della storia; memoria collettiva; critica che rende coscienti; critica che salva; lavoro della memoria.

1. Introduction

This essay examines the category of the “public use of history” in the light of the sociology of memory and of its roots in Frankfurt School critical theory. What is at stake is the public role of the scholar as an intellectual and as a mediator between expert cultures and the lifeworld: a role directed

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towards the clarification of values, the disclosure of asymmetries of power, and the establishment of linguistic situations free from domination. Within this framework, critique extends as far as the dimension of anamnestic memory: an act of solidarity towards the victims of the past, indispensable if the utopian potential of modernity is to be redeemed and a self-aware intersubjective self-determination promoted. From Benjamin and Adorno, Habermas derives both modes of intervention in the public sphere – the critique that “raises consciousness” and the critique that “rescues” – and, with them, the imperative of non-regression as the specific duty of those born afterwards – an imperative that, as we shall see, cannot be entrusted to public memory alone, since it binds memory to a transformation of the very conditions that make it necessary. It should be noted that the welding of memory and reason is not a late acquisition. Fonti and Guevara have shown how the Habermasian architecture of remembrance derives from the secularized appropriation of a Jewish heritage, and in particular from that «Anamnesis as a fundamental aspect of rationality» which constitutes the restorative element of the utopian messianism of the early “Frankfurt School”: «Historical remembrance is a task of reason and not merely a mandate for religiously sensitive individuals» (2018: 39). Hence the Benjaminian assumption that serves as the premise of the entire Frankfurt trajectory: ethical universalism must take seriously even the injustice already committed and, by every measure, irreversible; there exists a solidarity between those born afterwards and those who preceded them, and such solidarity can be borne witness to and generated only by memory, so that the liberating force of remembrance does not refer, as it does from Hegel through to Freud, to the dissolution of the power of the past over the present, but rather to the settlement of a debt that the present has contracted with the past (ivi: 38). It is the duality that we shall find again in the distinction between consciousness-raising and rescuing critique. We thereby underscore the place that Walter Benjamin has occupied within this constellation of thought, since the physiognomy of the conceptual pair depends upon it. Michael Löwy has observed that Benjamin belongs to Critical Theory «in the broad sense», but is distinguished from it by certain singular traits that constitute his «specific contribution»: he is «the first to have called into question the ideology of progress» and is, «far more than any other thinker of Critical Theory», the one who was able to «mobilize productively the themes of Jewish messianism for the revolutionary struggle of the oppressed» (Löwy, 2005: 87-89; cf. Jay, 1973). It is this twofold trait – the opening towards possible futures and a political torsion of remembrance – that Habermas, through Adorno, takes up and at the same time delimits, and that the sociology of memory reworks under the name of the critical-emancipatory paradigm.

What this article adds. The distinction between consciousness-raising and rescuing critique is Habermas’s own, and its sources in Adorno and Benjamin are well documented. Our contribution lies not in the reconstruction of those positions but in three theses that the reconstruction serves to establish. First, the two critiques are not alternatives, nor is the second the affective version of the first: rescuing critique supplies the normative content – the debt owed to the victims – without which consciousness-raising would shrink to a mere ascertainment of facts, while consciousness-raising transfers that content onto the procedural register of a revocable public argumentation, without which remembrance would harden into rite. Neither alone secures non-regression. Second, once translated into the categories of the sociology of memory, the public use of history turns out to be the normative obverse of collective memory as Halbwachs described it: if group memory selects systematically against conflict, a memory that publicly assumes guilt is a functional anomaly, one that does not arise spontaneously but requires institutions, intellectuals, and public conflict in order to be produced. This explains both why the *Historikerstreit* took the form it did and why the later institutionalization of remembrance risks reversing what it was meant to secure. Third, the criterion that separates a public from a ritual use of history lies not in the intensity of memory but in its direction – whether it confirms or exposes the self-conception of those who remember – and, with Adorno, in the persistence or otherwise of the conditions that made the commemorated events possible. The reciprocal grafting of critical theory and the sociology of memory is thus not an exercise in intellectual history: each corrects a blind spot of the other, the cognitivism of the former and the descriptivism of the latter.

The argument proceeds by way of reciprocal grafts between two bodies of literature that have often ignored one another. On the side of critical theory we adopt the nexus between theory and praxis and the practical functions of knowledge. On the sociological side we adopt the conceptual triad that

structures the field (collective memory, public memory, social memory) together with the findings of research on commemorative practices, on banal commemoration, and on cultural trauma. The empirical case of reference remains the German controversy of the 1980s, which here operates not as a historiographical object but as a testing ground for a theoretical thesis. The path is articulated as follows: we first reconstruct the dissolution of the topos of *historia magistra vitae* and the entry of memory into social theory. From this we draw a first result: the public use of history is not a reissue of didactic exemplarity, but what takes its place once the structure of historical time has rendered that exemplarity impracticable (2). The conceptual framework is then established, distinguishing collective memory, public memory, and social memory, and showing that selectivity is not a correctable defect but the ordinary mode in which the past is produced. Here the point of maximum tension between the two frameworks emerges: if, according to Halbwachs, group memory selects systematically against conflict, then a memory that publicly assumes guilt is a functional anomaly, one that requires institutions, intellectuals, and public conflict in order to be produced (3). The following section submits the thesis to the objections that specify its scope – first of all the critique of the prejudice according to which remembering would set us free – and derives from them the distinction between the two modes of critique that gives the essay its title (4). On this basis we articulate the practical functions in which consciousness-raising is exercised: the clarification of cultural patterns and intellectual mediation; the working through of the past and the risks of ritual commemoration; the disclosure of false consciousness, where the critique of ideology and the sociology of cultural trauma converge; and the projection of alternatives to the existing order towards possible futures (5). The further step is to reconstruct the restitutive and redemptive side of remembrance, its Benjaminian genealogy, and the limits that Habermas himself acknowledged in it (6). Finally, the conclusions trace the two registers back to the imperative of non-regression and to the responsibility of the *Nachgeborenen*, showing why constitutional patriotism protects against the manipulation of the past not by prescribing the right memory, but by instituting the conditions in which competing memories can expose themselves reciprocally to critique (7).

2. Memory in sociology: from *historia magistra vitae* to memory studies

Before articulating the functions of critique, we introduce the framework within which the expression “public use of history” acquires a sociological and not merely polemical meaning. The emergence of memory as a social theme is situated between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when the transition to modern society and the catastrophe of the Great War generate the widespread perception of a rupture in social continuity, together with the awareness that the acceleration of the historical course makes it ever more difficult to use the past in order to illuminate the present and to foresee the future (cf. Jedlowski, 2002). As Teresa Grande observes, the consciousness that a society has of its own transformation is a typically modern trait, and it is in that consciousness that «reflection on the relations between memory and society finds its roots – in the awareness, that is, that social life is made of continuities and discontinuities, and that both alike imply mechanisms of remembering and forgetting, of selection, elaboration, and interpretation of what remains of time past» (2014: 281). It is with modernity that the topos of the *historia magistra vitae* dissolves. For almost two millennia, Koselleck recalls, history had been conceived as «a kind of reservoir of multiplied experiences which the readers can learn and make their own», according to the formula of Zedler’s *Universal-Lexicon* of 1735: «For that which we cannot ourselves experience, we have to follow the experience of others» – that is, «a school in which one could become prudent without error» (1979/2004: 27). That this function had by then become a rhetorical convention is shown by the anecdote with which Koselleck opens the chapter: in 1811, in order to win an argument about the Prussian debt, Friedrich von Raumer invented out of whole cloth a testimony of Thucydides on the damage done by paper money in Athens, and the privy councillor Oelssen allowed himself to be persuaded so as to preserve the appearance of erudition: «The privy councilor acquiesced to this formula, not to an argument» (ivi: 26). What renders that *topos* unusable, however, is not the rhetorical deception but a changed structure of historical time. In the formula that Johann Wolfgang von Goethe suggests to Count Karl Friedrich von Reinhard, experience «arrives for

individuals always too late, while for governments and peoples it is never available», since «past experience presents itself concentrated in a single focus, while that which has yet to be experienced is spread over minutes, hours, days, years, and centuries; thus similitude never appears to be the same, for in the one case one sees the whole, and in the latter only individual parts» (Goethe & Reinhard, 1820/1957: 246; Koselleck, 1979/2004: 38). Hence the conclusion – which serves as a negative premise – drawn from Henry Adams: «Adams proposed a law of acceleration (as he called it), on the basis of which standards were continually altered, since the acceleration of the future constantly foreshortened resort to the past. [...] Adams drew the conclusion that one could no longer teach how to behave, but at the most, how to react» (ivi: 42).

The public use of history is not a reissue of history as the “mistress of life”: it is what takes its place once didactic exemplarity has become impracticable. To that dissolution, however, Benjamin gives a formulation that is not merely diagnostic but oppositional, and that must be adopted here because it constitutes its critical obverse. What succeeds formative exemplarity is not a neutral time, but «the homogeneous, empty time» filled with «a mass of data» (1940/2006: 396), whose function is to naturalize the course of history and, with it, the victory of those who have won. Against such a conception – which he calls historicism – the task of historical knowledge is «to brush history against the grain» (ivi: 392). The *topos* of the *historia magistra vitae* does not therefore simply lapse: it survives, inverted, in the faith in progress, and it is for this reason that Benjamin was – among the critical theorists – the first to count the progressivist illusions – in particular the conviction of «swimming with the current of history» – among the causes of the defeat of the German workers’ movement in the face of fascism (Löwy, 2005: 88). That the *topos* cannot be restored in historicist form is the presupposition that Adorno makes his own, and it holds as a rule for the use of history defended here. Benjamin, he observes, took as the canon of his own procedure «the late Nietzsche’s critical insight that truth is not identical with the timelessly universal, but that the figure of the absolute results solely from what is historical» (1955/1976: 235). Hence the formula – drawn from a note for the work on the *Passages* – according to which «the eternal is in any case far more a ruffle on a dress than an idea». It is not a matter of illustrating ideas with interchangeable historical examples, but of recognizing that historical constellations, «in their uniqueness, constitute those ideas as themselves historical» (ibidem). It is exactly the opposite of the exemplarity dissolved by Koselleck – and at the same time the reason why the past always remains contestable.

The shift entails a decisive consequence for the Habermasian framework as well. With the entry of memory into sociology – which Grande and Affuso (2012) trace back to the convergence between the psychology of Bartlett and Janet, Vygotsky’s historical-cultural school, the historiographical renewal of the *école des Annales*, the sociology of Halbwachs, and the Frankfurt theorists – there takes hold in the social sciences «the idea [...] that the past does not correspond to contents and meanings given once and for all: it is instead subject to incessant transformations that take place within social interactions, involving individuals, groups, and institutions» (Grande, 2014: 282). Against the idea of a macro-subject, the public use of history is not the property of a collective subject, but an identifiable set of scholastic, medial, commemorative, and judicial practices that can be described, dated, and criticized one by one. If the past is a material continuously reworked in interaction, then the dispute over its interpretation is not an accessory of democratic life but a properly political stake: it is precisely the presupposition that makes sense of the Habermasian gesture of transferring a historiographical controversy onto the terrain of the public sphere and of culture.

The rediscovery of memory by the social sciences, after the long season of neglect that follows the first three decades of the twentieth century, is moreover bound up with a historical context close to the one in which Habermas’s intervention matures. From the 1980s onwards the European continent confronts the massive migratory flows from the less wealthy countries of the world, the processes of globalization, and the modification of geopolitical balances that followed the fall of the communist system led by the Soviet Union. There is, furthermore, the formation of a supranational identity that opens the debate on European citizenship, on the historical and cultural roots of the continent, and on its unifying memory (Namer, 1993; Jedlowski, 2009). In the scientific, educational, and political-institutional fields there grows «attention to the working through of pasts that are problematic for the consciousness of

Europe and of its individual countries: the Shoah, colonialism and decolonization, the various forms of dictatorship that have marked the history of the old continent» (Grande, 2014: 282).¹ The *Historikerstreit* is therefore not an isolated episode of German culture, but an acute case of a memorial torsion that traverses the whole of Europe.²

The outcome that Jedlowski attributes to these events coincides with our thesis. That transformation «brought to the foreground the ethical dimensions connected with memory», bringing to light «the importance of reappraising the past for the civil life of democratic societies, and also highlighting the role of the mass media in structuring a “public memory”» (2001a: 35). It is not incidental that the reconstruction closes with a term of comparison: the movements that led to the collapse of the regimes of really existing socialism criticized «the manipulation of memory and history conducted by the elites, and fed on the defence of the memory of repressed groups», producing what has been called a «regained memory»; but the collective rewriting of the past that followed also brought forth «national» and «ethnic» memories which in some cases strengthened the emancipation of civil society and in others – the former Yugoslavia – «helped trigger devastating processes of disintegration» (ibidem). The ambivalence raised by Jedlowski serves as a warning: the reappropriation of the past is not emancipatory by definition.

It is within this framework that the sociological reception is to be situated (in Italy, Jedlowski; Rampazi and Tota; Doni and Migliorati). That reception brings out «the dynamic and conflictual nature of memory, its political and ethical valence», and such aspects «are above all evident in what Jürgen Habermas has called the public use of history, indicating the school and the mass media as its sites of production par excellence (to which it is today obvious that one must add communication on the internet as well)» (Grande, 2014: 283). The yield that the sociology of memory draws from the Habermasian notion is twofold. On the one hand, «reflections on the past of our societies no longer take place solely in the classic sites of academic discussion [...] but are present in the public domain as well»; on the other, they prove «functional not only to the conservation of “what has been”, but also to the construction of “what is”» (ibidem). It is this function – constitutive and not conservative – that explains why, for Habermas, what was at stake in the polemic with Nolte, Hillgruber, and Stürmer was not the philological correctness of a historiographical thesis, but the political identity that such a thesis contributed to producing. What he contests is not the substitution of “memory” for “history”, but the assertion of a certain mode of remembering.

Worth noting is the enlargement of scale that this perspective makes possible and that corresponds, on the biographical and theoretical plane, to the Europeanism of the later Habermas. The recovery of memories and the critical revisiting of history appear as a standpoint on the past that can permit the making explicit of the contradictions and of the complex interweaving of culture and barbarism that have marked the history of a Europe which – after having been the cradle of totalitarianisms and colonialisms – intends to present itself as a model of coexistence founded on the egalitarian recognition of civil, political, social, and cultural rights. As Namer remarks, what is at issue for today’s Europe is bringing fully to the surface the memory of those past facts in which Europe conceived as “other than itself” everything that lay outside its own geographical and cultural borders (1993: 45). The outcome of this perspective is formulated by Fornari in converging terms. Since «memory, identity, and tradition,

¹ It should be noted, with Renate Siebert, that if Europe can present itself as a «privileged space of human experience», this is possible also because the totalitarian experience of Nazi-Fascism and of the genocide of the Jewish people «has been worked through, constructed as a collective trauma, and self-critically integrated into European memory», and because Stalinist totalitarianism is in its turn in the course of being worked through, or at least publicly debated after 1989. Nevertheless, «the same still cannot be said of the third component of the totalitarianisms of twentieth-century Europe: colonial imperialism» (2014: 296).

² In Italy, Jedlowski has given prominence to the Habermasian notion and placed it at the centre of studies on public memory: «The political value attributed to the interpretation of the past» – he writes – «has proved particularly evident in the debates, especially in the final decades of the century, concerning what Habermas (1986) described as the “public use of history”». In particular, along the line “admirably” formulated by Adorno, «the central question in such debates concerns the relations between the Western societies that emerged from the Second World War and the memory of the Holocaust» – a question that «made its full importance felt in the debate that saw Habermas oppose the “revisionist” historians in Germany, and that had repercussions in other countries as well» (Jedlowski, 2001: 35).

far from being compact and self-identical structures, appear rather as formations traversed by internal differences, by plural genealogies, by unreconciled contaminations», then European identity – «which often claims to be monolithic and self-representative» – requires the awareness of being «an assemblage of heterogeneous times, a mobile palimpsest, a field of forces that cannot be reduced to a linear narrative or to a prepackaged geopolitical coherence» (2026: 17). The working through of the past that Fornari advocates tends towards «a thought capable of restoring to Europe the consciousness of its rhizomatic origin, of its disseminated memory, of its being a threshold, a crossroads, a mingling, a place of dialogue, a space of reasons» (ibidem).

3. Collective memory and public memory: the public use of history

An ambiguity weighing upon the expression “public use of history” must be dissolved. Introducing the international collection on *Cultural Memory Studies*, Astrid Erll proposes to abandon the opposition between history and memory – «a blind alley» – in favour of the idea of «different modes of remembering in culture». One and the same event can be remembered as myth, as political history, as traumatic experience, as family affair, or as an object of generational contention: «seen in this way, history is but another mode of cultural memory, and historiography its specific *medium*» (2008: 7)³. A useful clarification comes from Lutz Klinkhammer. The expression suggests «a sharp separation between a scientific use, pure and “natural”, as opposed to a public (that is, political) use consisting in an instrumentalization of history for political ends» (2002: 350).⁴ What is of interest here is that the separation does not hold. Klinkhammer shows this by listing perfectly legitimate public uses: the one «that occurs when their works are publicly discussed, when they create a public discourse»; and the one, irreproachable but anything but neutral, of the changing of place names – the naming, in September 1944, of a Roman square after the Martyrs of the Fosse Ardeatine in place of the previous one dedicated to Hitler, which «constituted a clear message about the past, an intentional proclamation of a new beginning» (ibidem).⁵

On the Italian side the category has received from Nicola Gallerano an extensive definition that specifies its channels and its ends. To the “public use of history” «there belong not only the mass media, each moreover with its own specificity [...], but also the arts and literature; sites such as the school, historical museums, monuments, and urban spaces, and so on; and finally institutions, formalized or not (cultural associations, parties, religious, ethnic, and cultural groups) which, with more or less avowedly partisan aims, commit themselves to promoting a reading of the past that is polemical with respect

³ On this point one must go back to Halbwachs, since the relation between history and memory that Erll proposes to overcome was already in him a relation of succession and not of opposition. General history, he writes, «starts only when tradition ends and the social memory is fading or breaking up. So long as a remembrance continues to exist, it is useless to set it down in writing or otherwise fix it in memory». Historiography takes over where the groups that guarded a recollection dissolve, and the need to write it «is only aroused when the subject is already too distant in the past to allow for the testimony of those who preserve some remembrance of it» (1950/1980: 78). From this follows a corollary bearing directly on our object: the controversy over the interpretation of the German past ignites precisely at the moment when that threshold is crossed – when, that is, the direct witnesses begin to be lacking and the past passes from the hands of groups into those of the institutions that organize its transmission.

⁴ Fiamma Lussana, for instance, traces back to Habermas the distinction that governs that field: the new subjects of mass society are those who «speak and write using the “first person”, leaving to professional historians or social scientists the use of the “third person”», and who read the past «not according to the norms and practices of the historiographical discipline, but on the basis of the memory of the group or category with which they identify, and against the grain of current historiography» (2000: 1077).

⁵ It should be recorded that the proliferation of terminology is not an Italian accident. In opening the dossier on *public history*, David Glassberg observes that «the profusion of terms – collective memory, popular memory, public memory, counter-memory – suggests that memory requires further definition as a field of study», and he indicates the reciprocal yield of the two traditions: «the new scholarship on memory offers us a new way to think about public history, a common intellectual foundation for the diverse enterprises taught and practiced under its name», since understanding «the various ways in which societies think about the past and use it in the present» helps to recognize «the institutional contexts in which they operate as well as the presuppositions about history with which the public approaches their work» (1996: 7-8). Alongside the critical side examined here, the public use of history therefore has a professional side: museums, archives, heritage authorities, where those presuppositions become everyday decisions.

to historical or historiographical common sense, starting from the memory of their respective group», while «politicians bear particular responsibility for its degeneration» (1995: 17). The breadth of the definition confirms that the public use is not a genre of discourse but a “regime”.

The proper function of the category, for Klinkhammer, is therefore a different one: «the crimes committed against others are minimized, while those suffered are amply remembered» (2002: 350). Decisive, then, is the identification of the conditions under which that mechanism is activated: «above all when a political-cultural change is experienced, when a society or a part of it believes it needs to declare itself normal and wishes to return from a critical attitude towards the past to a presumed normality, to a new or renewed national pride» (ivi: 350-351). A telling example is the periodization of German history in which the breaking of the silence after 1968 gave way – with the Christian Democratic–Liberal political and cultural turn of 1982 – to the will to become a “normal” nation once more – a programme that Kohl announced as a «moral and intellectual turn», meaning by this «also the renewed use of a language woven from words such as dignity, honour, and tradition, the creation of new museums on the history of Germany, or the revaluation of the Prussian state» (ivi: 351). The mechanism that Klinkhammer describes had already been identified by Adorno in terms that are worth reporting because they constitute the direct antecedent of the Habermasian argument of 1986. In the lecture *The Meaning of Working Through the Past*, delivered in 1959, the return to normality appears not as the outcome of a successful repression, but as the very form in which the past continues to operate: «I consider the survival of National Socialism *within* democracy to be potentially more menacing than the survival of fascist tendencies *against* democracy» (1959/1998: 90). The statement shifts the centre of gravity of the analysis from threats external to the democratic order to the dispositions that the order itself reproduces – and it is precisely this shift that makes the public use of history a problem of democratic regime and not of public order.⁶

Let us now retrace the question, starting from the definition of “collective memory” that Jedlowski has formulated in sociologically precise terms: «a set of *social representations concerning the past* which each group produces, institutionalizes, guards and transmits through the interaction of its members» (2001a: 33). The advantage of this definition, traceable to Namer (1987), is that it allows studies to concentrate «both on the content and on the processes that govern the formation, preservation and transmission of the content», and to locate the origin of such processes not in the institutions that objectify them but at «the level of the communicative practices that shape social life» (Jedlowski, 2001a: 34). That definition has a direct antecedent in the thesis with which *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* closes its analytical part: «in the last analysis, no memory is possible outside the frameworks used by people living in society to fix and retrieve their recollections» (1925: 107). The point carries all the more force in that Halbwachs arrives at it not by speculative means but through two pathologies: dream and aphasia, «that is, the most characteristic states in which the field of memory contracts». In both cases the frameworks «become deformed, are altered, are partly destroyed, but in two very different ways», so that comparing them makes it possible to isolate «two aspects of such frameworks, and as it were two sorts of elements of which they are composed» (ibidem).⁷

⁶ The occasion of that intervention deserves to be recalled, because it shows how the diagnosis arose from a fact of public memory and not from speculation. The lecture was delivered in the late autumn of 1959 before the Coordinating Council for Christian-Jewish Cooperation, and its alarm was triggered by the desecration with swastikas of the Cologne synagogue at Christmas of that year – an episode whose reactions were notable for the muted tone of the protests and for the fact that the press dwelt on the damage to the country’s image abroad (Müller-Doohm, 2003/2005: 385). From this followed the diagnosis that gives the conceptual reconstruction its background: «democracy has not become naturalized to the point where people truly experience it as their own and see themselves as subjects of the political process», so that it «is not identified with the people themselves as the expression of their political maturity» but «is appraised according to its success or setbacks» (Adorno, 1959/1998: 93). The nexus between working through the past and the quality of democracy is, in Adorno, of this order: not moral, but functional.

⁷ The reconstruction that Marcel and Mucchielli have proposed of this passage clarifies its epistemological stakes. Against the current neurological explanation, Halbwachs observes that aphasia presents itself first of all, «viewed by an outside observer», as «the impossibility of communicating with other members of the social group», and that similar disturbances «may be encountered in practically anyone in specific situations», as with someone sitting an examination who, out of nervousness, momentarily forgets words; whence it may be postulated that aphasia «does not require the presence of brain damage», but is first of all «“a deep alteration in the relations between the individual and the group”»

The decisive point, however, concerns their selectivity. Such practices – Jedlowski observes – «generate processes that considerably select the past and which may be based on consensual criteria or be the cause of conflict» (2001a: 34). In any case, as Alessandro Cavalli had already noted, «since every criterion of selection represents in the last instance an attribution of value, these processes are never independent of the power structure that characterizes the group or the society at a given moment. The power to create and stabilize memory is in fact a general indicator of power at all levels of social organization» (1991: 34). From this follows the thesis we take up from Jedlowski's reflections, according to which «the more complex a society and the greater the number of elites competing to dominate it, the more the past becomes the subject of strategies seeking to impose the representations that conform most to the dominant interests» – and among such strategies the most important, «above all as regards the construction of national identity, are undoubtedly *commemorative practices*» (2001a: 34). That this selectivity is not an accident but the ordinary way in which the past is produced is, moreover, the conclusion that the sociology of memory has drawn under the name of “presentism”. Olick and Robbins record that «a powerful line of so-called “presentism” runs through much of the sociological work on memory, work which documents the ways in which images of the past change over time, how groups use the past for present purposes, and that the past is a particularly useful resource for expressing interests»; but they add a distinction that our argument cannot afford to lose, since within presentism «it is possible to emphasize either instrumental or meaning dimensions of memory» (1998: 128). The instrumental emphasis reads the work of “memory entrepreneurs” as a manipulation; the emphasis on meaning reads it as a production of meanings that are binding even for those who produce them. It is exactly the difference between the revisionism that Habermas combats and the public use of history that he proposes: not two degrees of sincerity, but two regimes of the relation between present interests and validity claims.

A methodological caveat sharpens this account, one that Wulf Kansteiner has pressed most forcefully. Much of the literature on collective memory, he argues, conflates the study of memory's makers and vehicles — the archives, museums, and media through which the past is represented — with the study of how that past is actually received, appropriated, or ignored by its audiences: collective memory is made of «the intellectual and cultural traditions that frame all our representations of the past, the memory makers who selectively adopt and manipulate these traditions, and the memory consumers who use, ignore, or transform such artifacts according to their own interests» (2002: 180). The caution bears on the model adopted here: a public use of history that presupposes citizens capable of contesting inherited narratives cannot take for granted that those narratives are in fact received critically rather than passively consumed — a limit the present essay, focused on theoretical and institutional production, leaves open.

The origin of that principle of selection is stated by Halbwachs with a sharpness that is at once the foundation and the limit of his sociology. Since «society cannot live if, among the individuals and the groups that compose it, there does not exist a sufficient unity of outlook», it follows that «society tends to remove from its own memory everything that might separate individuals or set groups apart from one another, and that in every epoch it reworks its recollections so as to bring them into accord with the variable conditions of its own equilibrium» (Halbwachs, 1925: 392). Collective memory, that is, does not select at random: it selects systematically against conflict. And it is exactly here that the point of maximum tension with the Habermasian perspective is located. If the function of collective memory is to maintain the equilibrium of the group by expelling what divides it, then a memory that publicly assumes guilt – that is, one that deliberately introduces into the group the division between those who committed, those who let it happen, and those who descend from the one and the other – is, in

(2008: 143; Halbwachs, 1925: 69). What the aphasic lacks – still citing Halbwachs – «is not so much memories as the ability to situate them in a framework, the very frame which is provided by the social environment [...]. The loss of words [...] is only one specific manifestation of a more general incapacity: all conventional symbolism, the necessary basis of social intelligence, has become foreign to him» (ibidem). From this follows the formula that the two authors adopt as their conclusion: «Memory, intelligence, and identity are constructed by a learning process within a group» (ibidem). It is the reason why, in this essay, the question of guilt cannot be treated as a problem of individual consciences: the frameworks within which those born afterwards can or cannot situate what has happened are supplied by society, not by the individual.

Halbwachsian terms, a functional anomaly. The public use of history of which Habermas speaks is therefore not a particular case of the collective memory described by Halbwachs: it is, so to speak, its normative obverse, since it asks a society to preserve precisely what the sociological law of remembrance would tend to expel. Which explains, in passing, why that operation requires institutions, intellectuals, and public conflict: it does not come about spontaneously.

The normative obverse has, moreover, an earlier and more radical Benjaminian formulation. If group memory tends towards agreement, then «every age must strive anew to wrest tradition away from the conformism that is working to overpower it» (1940/2006: 391). The only historian capable of fanning the spark of hope in the past is the one «firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious. And this enemy has never ceased to be victorious» (ibidem). The statement has a precise sociological reach: what Halbwachs describes as the integrative function of remembrance, Benjamin describes as the outcome of a relation of forces. The selection that for the former is a condition of the group's equilibrium is for the latter the way in which the victors continue to win over the past as well. It is this torsion – and not a generic duty to remember – that makes public memory a field of conflict.

It is worth restating the definition of “public memory” on which this section rests, in the formulation given to it by Leccardi, Jedlowski, and Cavalli. It designates «the ensemble of images of the past that, at any given moment, not only circulate among certain groups of people but are also regarded as publicly relevant and are publicly discussed». It is, in short, «memory as an object of the public sphere». The decisive trait is that it is «an open space, the space in which different memories communicate (or clash) with each other about the criteria of selection, plausibility and relevance of the past, while also exposing themselves to criticism from other memories» (2023: 40).⁸

The definition has two implications for our argument. The first is that conflict is not a pathology of public memory but its form of existence: what the *Historikerstreit* stages is not the rupture of a consensus, but the exercise, under conditions of maximum tension, of an ordinary function. The second concerns the present-day conditions of that space. The authors observe that the new media would at first sight seem to revitalize its dynamics, entailing «a democratization of the public sphere that gives space and voice to a plurality of memories that would otherwise be confined to the private sphere»; but such democratization «has proven to be easily polluted by organized interventions», and even in the absence of manipulation «the excess and fragmentation of discursive flows that characterize the Internet limit the impact of each and every single voice», to the point that the reciprocal segregation of networks can generate «what some call a ‘balkanization’ of the public sphere and, therefore, of memory itself» (ibidem). This is the condition within which the Habermasian appeal to an argumentative mediation between expert knowledge and common sense against the loss of meaning must today be reread.⁹

⁸ Alongside that definition must be set the formulation that makes explicit its link with the Habermasian framework, since it is in this that the notion acquires its theoretical foundation. «Public memory is the memory of the public sphere – Jedlowski writes – the latter being understood, with Habermas [...], as the domain of the life of modern democratic societies within which citizens' convictions confront and reciprocally influence one another on the basis of an argumentative logic of a rational character which, in principle, is accessible to everyone» (2001b: 387). From this follows a corollary that our argument adopts: «in certain respects, the public sphere is itself memory», since «it cannot exist as a rational confrontation of arguments without yesterday's discourses being compared with today's» and because «it constitutes itself as a tradition» (ibidem). It is not, therefore, a matter of two objects that meet – a public sphere and a memory – but of a single structure grasped from two sides. In this regard, Jedlowski attributes to public memory two functions that coincide with theses shared here: «in the first place, public memory is today the site where the collective memories living within a society confront one another: such confrontation may see one group or another prevail but, so long as the public sphere exists as such, it nonetheless favours reciprocal recognition and the possibility of expression for different identities. In the second place, the processes of elaboration of public memory are those within which the criteria of plausibility and relevance are defined» (ibidem).

⁹ The ambivalence of the media that the three authors record has, in the Italian debate, an earlier formulation that deserves to be recalled because it balances its two sides. Lussana observes that «in media society, the risks of tampering with and distorting the past increase, but there also grows the expansive, and hence democratic, capacity for participation in public life», since media society «gives voice to new subjects» and «mobilizes potentially liberating energies which are, precisely by virtue of that quality, potentially manipulable» (2000: 1078). Namer, by contrast, had underlined its levelling outcome. The conjunction between the dismemberment of classes into professional groups and the growing

That the gap between what is said publicly and what is thought privately is the proper object of a sociology of public memory is, moreover, the result of the empirical research *Gruppenexperiment* (1955) of the Institut für Sozialforschung. Under Pollock's direction, the inquiry replaced the opinion poll with group discussion, taking as its model the railway compartment: «in railway compartments, discussions often took place in which strangers discussed even the most delicate topics with astonishing openness»; the procedure indeed made it possible to observe that «some members of the group tended to express “public” views different from the “private” ones given in their personal interviews» (Wiggershaus, 1988/1995: 436). Public memory is not the sum of private memories: it is a distinct discursive regime, with its own censorships and its own permissions – and for this reason alone it calls for specific instruments of investigation.

A clarification concerning the status of public memory is in order. Marita Rampazi observes that the ambiguities, conflicts, and negotiations inherent in memory processes were long «underestimated or “bracketed” in the past, in the name of an alleged “naturalness” of memory, above all of the memory with which the values, norms, and procedures of public discourse are usually associated»; but «such naturalness has never existed, and “public” memory – the memory that offers motivations, contents, and stimuli for civic action – has always been the product of dynamics of power that develop among different components of society», a product that «can also feed on outright “inventions”, whose demystification is often possible only in phases of great historical and social transformation» (2002: 1). To this observation Klinkhammer adds a consequence that bears directly on the position of whoever writes history, and that is worth adopting: «historiography is not outside every discourse on the public use of the past. We cannot define ourselves as external to that debate, as judges above the parties», so much so that «the assumption of an Archimedean point would be self-deception» (2002: 352). The point is not moralistic but historical-philosophical: «with the professionalization of historiography in the second half of the nineteenth century, with its academic institutionalization, historiography as such acquired a public role», and «since the French Revolution of 1789 history has assumed a legitimating function for the political culture of modern society, and to this day it has not ceased to perform that task» (ibidem). It follows that the opposition between a scientific historiography and a degenerate public use does not describe two distinct practices, but two degrees of awareness of the same practice – and this is exactly what Habermas meant when he shifted the question from the truth of the neoconservatives' theses to the regime of their circulation.

On the gap between professionalized historiography and public opinion, Klinkhammer offers a sociological description that accounts for its recurrent asymmetry of effects: «the historians' conception of truth does not correspond to that of the public. The public expects an “*ex cathedra*” answer to the problems raised, a definitive judgement that closes the debate instead of opening it: the historian knows that the basis of his judgement is rarely sufficient and that he is almost bound to express his doubts and his “weak certainties”». But since «by stressing these doubts he would weaken his position as an expert in the eyes of the public», it happens that «these doubts are often left unexpressed» (ibidem) – and it is precisely this reticence that leaves the field clear for those who harbour none. From this follows a rule that explains the geometry of the *Historikerstreit*: «what turns the intervention of historians into a public event is the explicit performance of the function of legitimation, which automatically attracts public attention when the historian promotes revisions of assessments hitherto held to be settled, or when he consciously breaks taboos. The more settled and central the contested assessments appear, the greater the public attention» (ibidem). The series he lists – Fritz Fischer's theses of 1961, the *Historikerstreit*

importance of television has «multiplied the collective memories legitimated by the diffusion of the mass media and has trivialized and hollowed out their contents, reducing them to violent collective shocks of an interchangeable nature» (2001: 394). The two diagnoses are not mutually exclusive: they describe the widening of access and the impoverishment of form as joint effects of the same apparatus. In the same direction moves the anthropological observation of Ugo Fabietti: «memory and forgetting do not manifest themselves “after the fact”, such that something is remembered and something else is instead forgotten. Memory and forgetting are rather two constitutive dimensions of the relation between cultures, which make it possible to position, or reposition, individuals and groups within spaces of action and of social representation» (2001: 407).

of 1986-87, the 1995 debate on the character of 8 May 1945, the Goldhagen controversy of 1996-97, the exhibition on the crimes of the Wehrmacht – shows indeed that conflict is not an incident of the public sphere, but its mode of functioning whenever a central interpretation of the past is at stake.

The nexus between memory and power has, moreover, a specific name in the German tradition, that of *Geschichtspolitik* (“politics of history”), a label that «indicates both the role of history in politics and the role of politics in history» (Olick, 2008: 151). It is exactly the reversibility that the *Historikerstreit* stages: a politics that avails itself of the past, and a past whose configuration is the outcome of a political conflict. The observation has two consequences. The first is that the public use of history is not an anomaly that supervenes upon an otherwise spontaneous memory: it is the ordinary regime in which public memory is constituted, and the 1986 controversy does not introduce politics into memory but rather makes its constitutive political nature visible. The second is that the moment in which such demystification becomes possible coincides with phases of rupture – and this was precisely the condition in which the Federal Republic found itself between the Bitburg affair of May 1985 and reunification. Marita Rampazi identifies in those very years the decline of the two pillars on which modern democracies had been built: class identity and «the sense of national belonging, whose weakening calls into question the context within which modern democracy developed: the one generated by the exclusive identification of the State with the nation» (2002: 2).¹⁰

4. Remembering is not enough: objections and the two modes of critique

Although constitutive, remembrance does not of itself perform a critical function, nor is it emancipatory; indeed, it must be tested against a radical objection. Jeffrey Goldfarb has devoted to the problem an essay with a programmatic title, *Against memory*, in which he denounces the «enlightenment prejudice» of much of the literature on memory politics, summed up in the formula «Remembering will set us free» (2016: 54). Among the examples he adduces, the German controversy over the Shoah figures in a prominent position, understood as a requisite for a decent democratic society in the shadow of the Nazi regime, alongside the Israeli “never again” and the working through of communist memory in East-Central Europe in the 1970s and 1980s. The *Historikerstreit* is therefore, in the specialist literature, one of the textbook cases of that prejudice – and this compels us to interrogate its limits. Goldfarb’s objection is not that remembrance is useless, but that it does not exempt us from the ambivalences of the social condition: «Against memory because it is closely linked with forgetting. Against memory because it suggests that memory will set us free, when in fact it embeds us in the dilemmas of the social condition. Against memory because memory cannot substitute for imagination» (ivi: 62). Memory and forgetting are indeed two sides of the same coin, both entailing an active creativity and normative problems of their own: «In order to remember together, we must forget together, pay attention to some things that happened as we ignore others» (ivi: 55). Hence the appeal, which Goldfarb takes up from Paul Ricoeur, to a civic responsibility of arbitration: «“The mixture of abuses of memory and abuses of forgetting [...] allows us to speak of too much memory at times, and too much forgetting at other times. It is the responsibility of the citizen to arbitrate between such hazardous assessments”» (ivi: 53; Ricoeur, 2000).

¹⁰ On this point Koselleck offers a formulation worth adopting, because it describes exactly the temporal regime within which public memory operates. Commenting on Goethe’s observation that «In the same town one will hear in the evening an account of a significant event different from that heard in the morning» (1829/1962: 316), he infers that «What “really” happened already lies in the past, and what is reported no longer coincides with it. A history is absorbed by its effect. At the same time, however, it consists in more than the given impact which it has in specific situations» (Koselleck, 1979/2004: 208). But that effect is never definitive: «For these effects change themselves without the past history ceasing to assist in the promotion of these effects. Each retrospective interpretation feeds off the pastness of an occurrence and seeks to articulate it anew in the present. A history thus enters a complexly fractured temporal succession and is continually rearticulated, whether consciously or unconsciously handed down» (ibidem). It follows that the contest over the past is not an accident of public memory but its normal form, and that the criterion for judging it can never be its coincidence with what happened, but rather the public quality of the procedure by which it is rearticulated.

This proviso is valuable because it specifies, by contrast, what distinguishes the public use of history from a mere injunction to remember. If memory can harden into “cliches” – those, Goldfarb observes, «of Israelis who declare never again for their collective but do it again to their Palestinian neighbors», no less than those of the Polish anti-communists or of the *Tea Party* – then what is needed is a memory «tempered by imagination», one that does not only remember, forget, and re-remember, but also «re-remember, but also to re-invent [...] to work to start anew» (2016: 63). This is exactly why, in Habermas, the duty of memory cannot take the form of a prescribed content, but only that of an open argumentative procedure: obligatory remembrance without discourse produces the very closures it means to avert. Adorno had identified a more insidious version of such closure, one that concerns not remembrance but the vocabulary in which it is spoken of. Current talk of the “guilt complex” «has something untruthful to it», since psychiatry – from which the concept is borrowed – regards the feeling of guilt as «pathological, unsuited to reality, psychogenic». The word “complex” thus serves «to give the impression that the guilt [...] is actually no guilt at all but rather exists in them, in their psychological disposition: the terribly real past is trivialized into merely a figment of the imagination of those who are affected by it» (1959/1998: 91). Behind the apparent psychological understanding there operates a strategy of neutralization – the same one that Adorno finds in the line of Goethe that Mephistopheles pronounces «in order to reveal his innermost principle, the destruction of memory» (ibidem).

As noted, the debate on the working through of the past and on ethical-political responsibility cannot dispense with a reflection on the communicative and institutional dynamics that govern the public sphere in contemporary democracies. If in Habermas the public use of history is situated at the crossroads of rational learning and anamnestic remembrance, *memory studies* have shown how every representation of the past is the outcome of complex processes of symbolic construction and negotiation. Social memory is not an inert deposit of events transcribed by historiography, but rather «a sort of social unconscious» in which the motifs of the “long durée” are laid down. And from it there can re-emerge into the consciousness of society those contents «forgotten because incompatible with those of the groups that, one after another, become the bearers of the dominant collective memories» (Rampazi, 2002: 7). Social memory is therefore a conflictual arena in which groups, institutions, and political elites contend for the legitimacy and the supremacy of their own identitarian self-representations. Understanding the public use of the past therefore requires that the Habermasian philosophical-normative clarification be flanked by an analysis of the communicative devices and social practices through which memory becomes public and institutional.

On this terrain it is worth recording the reconstruction that Raphael Neves proposes of the Habermasian relation between working through the past and public responsibility, since it brings out its multidimensional structure. Taking up the intervention *Über den öffentlichen Gebrauch der Historie: warum ein “Demokratiepreis” für Daniel Goldhagen?* in the “Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik” (1997/2001), Neves observes that for Habermas «“bringing the past to consciousness” should not be solely an individual task». It is rather a matter of «a multidimensional undertaking involving legal practices, historical knowledge, and self-understanding through public discourses» (2019: 444). The work of historians, within this division of labour, «occurs at a slower pace compared to that of courts, it provides causal explanations based on elements other than guilt or innocence», but it does not exhaust the task: «The “public use of history,” to use one of Habermas’s expressions, is part of the ethical-political processes of selfunderstanding of citizens», who «try to realize what they have inherited as a political community, to recognize what they themselves are collectively liable for – something very different from collective guilt – and what traditions will continue or not» (ivi: 445). The Habermasian passage that Neves cites in closing formulates the hermeneutic presupposition of the whole operation: «“How we decide questions of accountability for crimes not only depends on the facts, but also on how we view the facts. How much responsibility we ascribe to persons and how much to historical circumstances, where we draw boundaries between individual freedom and constraint, guilt, and innocence – these decisions depend on the particular pre-understanding with which we approach the events. The hermeneutic ability to recognize the true scope of responsibility and complicity for crime varies with our understanding of freedom: how we value ourselves as persons, and how much we expect from ourselves as political actors”» (ibidem; Habermas, 1997/2001: 36-37).

The public use of history acquires efficacy only when it takes on the features of a solidaristic memory oriented in a critical sense. It is appropriate here to distinguish the two modes of reflexive intervention that give this essay its title. Consciousness-raising operates on the cognitive and hermeneutic plane, disclosing ideological manipulations, institutional continuities, and revisionist attempts to normalize guilt: it is a discursive clarification that analyses historical connections with analytical detachment in order to ground a demythologized democratic self-understanding, and that – according to the distinction proposed by Müller-Doohm – proceeds from indignation rather than from despair, addressing its recipients in the form of an explanatory discourse in the first person plural (2005: 277-278). Mere cognitive awareness of the facts is not enough, however, to secure non-regression into barbarism: it must be integrated with remembering critique, which recalls the obligation of solidarity towards the victims and towards their unredeemed suffering.

The weight of the notion of remembrance in the German controversy is well documented. Habermas, Pensky observes, «continued to make use of Benjamin's claim [...] that “even the dead” remain imperiled by a progressive conception of historical time that consigns them to forgetting and oblivion» (2019: 496). The generations of those who lived, suffered, and died under conditions of injustice retain a weak messianic power: a claim to be remembered and to see their own suffering redeemed. It is this conception, and not a generic duty to remember, that operates in the interventions of the *Historikerstreit*: the “normalization” of the Nazi past «was not only politically inadvisable but morally repugnant», since it violated «an implicit obligation to keep alive the memory of historical suffering that subsequent generations of German citizens, implicated in one way or another in the legacy of the country's fascist past, had to confront». The belief in a past “in need of redemption” must generate the demand for a solidarity with the victims: «Even if counterfactual and indeed paradoxical, such solidarity does not “rescue” the past but approaches questions of memory and historical responsibility as profoundly moral ones, rather than questions of political expediency» (ibidem).

This reflection goes back to the 1972 essay on the actuality of Benjamin, in which its limit too was clearly fixed. The critique of ideology, he observes, «when it uncovers within apparently universal interests the particular interest of the ruling class [...] is a political force» and aims to «dismantle the structural violence invested in institutions». Rescuing critique, by contrast, «that sets out to rescue semantic potential with a leap into past *Jetztzeiten* has a highly mediated position relative to political praxis» (Habermas, 1972/1983: 153). Hence the formula that governs this whole section: «an immanent relation to political praxis is by no means to be gained from rescuing critique, as it is from consciousness-raising critique» (ibidem). The two modes are not interchangeable, nor is the second the affective version of the first: they answer to different tasks and are exposed to opposite risks – political impotence in the one case, semantic desiccation in the other.

A space of comparison with Adorno is opened by Müller-Doohm's juxtaposition: Adorno «embodies the anti-consensual type of intellectual who uses the art of exaggeration and hopes to be saved by the productive power of the negative», whereas the practice with which Habermas identifies is «the type that trusts in the productive power of communication» (2005: 278). It is described as a rehabilitation of the Gramscian category of the organic intellectual. The difference is not one of doctrine but of position. The two belong to generations separated by the experience – undergone only by the elder – of persecution, exile, and the loss of culture and language; for Habermas the decisive impulse was instead «the replacement of a criminal social system by a democratic constitution», so that, for heuristic purposes, «while Adorno is the philosopher of the holocaust, Habermas's is a post holocaust-philosophy» (ivi: 276). From this follows a different location of the critic with respect to his own object: Adorno «negated the society, which has become a system of horror from an extraterritorial perspective», whereas Habermas criticizes society «from the perspective of the participant», in accordance with the «“power of transcendence from within”» (ivi: 277). If critique operates from within the lifeworld, the public use of history cannot be a verdict pronounced upon society, but an intervention addressed to one's fellow citizens as co-participants in the same discourse.

5. Consciousness-raising: the practical functions of knowledge

Consciousness-raising is one of the practical functions of a knowledge that can be translated into technically usable knowledge, into knowledge capable of orienting action, and into knowledge aimed at clarifying the material and symbolic relations of domination that obstruct emancipation. Indeed, while on the theoretical plane it sets itself the goal of elaborating a theory of society capable of reconstructing the structural components and the mechanisms of change of social formations, as social critique it can perform four public tasks. In the first of these – the “rationalization” of social systems (“social technology”) – the Frankfurt tradition at least has taken no particular interest, except in terms of a denunciation of an ideological conception of science and technology within the framework of the critique of instrumental rationality. The practical functions of choice in the tradition of the so-called “Frankfurt School” are rather: (1) the “clarification” of cognitive, evaluative, and expressive patterns, offering itself as a mediation, within the public sphere, of theoretical, pragmatic, moral, and ethical discourses and of aesthetic criticism, in which claims to truth, efficiency, rightness, preferability, and authenticity are thematized: with such interventions the aim is to foster collective “acts of coming to consciousness”; (2) the “working through” of the past – a notion whose genealogy, from the Freudian *Verarbeitung* to Adorno and on to the sociological meaning of a collective assumption of responsibility for one’s own history, warns of the risk that the institutionalization of remembrance may turn into civil liturgy, substituting ritual for argumentation; (3) the “disclosure” of those contents of cultural traditions that withdraw the contradictions of social orders from thematization, thereby becoming the author of a “counter-discourse” with respect to the “false representations” that dominate the mainstream of mass communication: here critical theory recovers the critique of ideology and establishes a “parallel” interest with psychoanalysis; (4) the commitment to “projecting alternatives to the existing order”, by way of the utopia of an “unreified everyday communicative praxis”.

5.1. The clarification of cultural patterns and the mediation of intellectuals

The choice to place in the background the service rendered to economic and administrative organizations follows from the conviction that expertise, though essential to the rationalization of social systems, does not of itself secure the symbolic resources needed to renew personal motivations, social solidarities, and cultural values. Given a “diffusion of horizons of possibility” greater than in the past, this “congestion of the future” is all the more dangerous if we relate to it unawares. «The problem – Habermas writes – is to clarify our self-understanding historically, since only this can create a distance from a present that stands under the pressure of the future. We must make clear to ourselves who we are and how we wish to live, if we do not want to remain at the mercy of events» (1991/1992: 126-127). Specialist knowledge should not “fall upon people’s heads”, but should rather favour the “critical-projective recovery of a shared heritage”: not prescribing choices, but offering, in an open exchange, a knowledge that makes people more aware and more autonomous. The normative project of modernity – self-knowledge, self-determination, self-realization – can be deciphered only if we restore to the prefix “self” this intersubjective projective meaning (1988b/1990: 34).¹¹

The problem is to mediate «expert cultures with everyday praxis while keeping the praxis of life shielded from the claims of an immediate intrusion by experts» (1981c: 12). Hauke Brunkhorst notes here the distance from the *Zeitdiagnostik* of Adorno and Horkheimer, for whom, in Weberian fashion, «the veil of reification is never so thick as to be impenetrable, that is, graspable only by a few elect philosophers» (2006/2008: 30). The loss of meaning is due neither to the coarsening of an “intact” cultural tradition nor, as Max Weber held, to the “polytheism of values” (1981a/1984: 243-254): the capacity to adopt multiple attitudes is a quality of a decentred understanding of the world. What afflicts the spirit of the age is rather the impoverishment produced by the split between the scientific, moral,

¹¹ The image has a Benjaminian antecedent worth recording: the history of culture, Benjamin wrote, «increases the burden of treasures that is piled on the back of humanity. But it does not bestow upon us the power to shake it off, so as to put it at our disposal»; and Habermas comments: «Benjamin sees the task of criticism precisely in this» (Habermas, 1972/1983: 130).

and aesthetic knowledge of the experts and the common sense diffused in the everyday world: the more expert knowledge isolates itself and remains elitist, the greater the damage for all – the desiccation of common sense and the “trivialization” of conduct of life, on the one hand; the “musealization” of “sterilized” cultural traditions, devoid of social vitality, on the other (1981b/1987: 330).

Habermas returns repeatedly to the public role of social theory. He aims to promote the structural conditions for a circulation of ideas that makes available a diffused knowledge capable of triggering learning processes and of replacing violence and deception with the intersubjectively binding force of good reasons. In *The Relationship between Theory and Practice Revisited*, the task that qualifies intellectuals is to take part in public processes of mutual understanding and to foster acts of coming to consciousness, availing themselves of the social authority that derives from their professional abilities and from the «ambitious claim to consider in each case all relevant points of view impartially and to take all interests involved equally into account» (1999/2003: 289-290). The distinction between “true” intellectuals and “media intellectuals” recurs frequently. Ever since the interview with Hans Peter Krüger, Habermas had criticized the latter as “exhibitionist” and “narcissistic” figures who hold themselves responsible for matters that do not concern them and of which they possess no precise knowledge. What one witnesses is the spread of a “vague and at times implausible sociology” personified by improvised publicists in search of public approval, who take turns in the printed press, on radio broadcasts, and on television screens. In this “overflowing of mass communication”, “true intellectuals” seem to have become unfashionable figures, within the division of labour between those who crowd the “media stage” and those who, playing the “roles of spectators”, remain in the gallery (1989/1990: 96). By contrast, the intellectual should mobilize a diffused knowledge that translates the language of experts and professional communicators into a language of experience, accessible to the wider lay public, without this entailing insensitivity to the variety of problems and themes of public interest. Some time later, Habermas would take the occasion of the award of the “Bruno Kreisky” Prize to intervene in the discussion on the role of the intellectual in media society. The description of the orientations and communicative modalities of the “serious intellectual” takes up the model of discourse: «For the good reputation of an intellectual, assuming she has one, is not based primarily on celebrity or fame, but on a standing which has to be acquired in her own field, whether as a writer or as a physicist, at any rate in some specialist field, before she makes a public use of her knowledge and reputation. When she contributes arguments to a debate, she must address a public composed, not of viewers, but of potential speakers and addressees who are able to offer each other justifications. This is, ideally, a matter of exchanging reasons, not of hogging the limelight through a carefully staged performance. Perhaps this is why the groups of politicians, experts, and journalists invited by one of those fabulous talk-show hostesses do not leave any room to be filled by an intellectual. We don’t miss the intellectual because her role is already performed better by the other participants» (2006/2009: 54). In Habermas’s words one senses the awareness of the decline of a figure with which, for two centuries, the Enlightenment “illumination” of ideas was identified. And yet, within the architecture of *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* such figures have an unquestioned centrality: the great themes of recent decades show how necessary they are to the mediation between the public sphere and politics; it is they who identify critical situations and give an account of them; moving from this periphery, their ideas are taken up by wider cultural circles, parties, trade unions, and other intermediate bodies, kindling discussions in the mass media until they become nuclei of crystallization for movements and subcultures that aim to condition the agenda of the great economic and political institutions (1992a/1996: 381). The task of intellectuals is therefore to grasp the great themes, to broaden and deepen socially relevant arguments, thereby improving the quality of public debate as a whole.¹²

¹² That this figure enjoys no prerogative whatever is what Müller-Doohm brings out by isolating four characters of Habermasian intellectual practice: normativity, discursivity, modifiability, and fallibility. The first delimits the field: discursivity concerns all questions about the true and about the “right life” that fall to the decision of all. The second concerns the medium: the capacity to distinguish between good and bad arguments and to formulate them so that they reach competent addressees, so that the aim of the debates Habermas provokes is to produce public discourse and, at most, to give exemplary form to the public use of reason. The third is the expectation that existing structures of power, once their illegitimacy has been demonstrated, can be modified; the fourth is the recognition that intellectual practice is exposed to

Extending the intentional meaning of the concept, Paolo Jedlowski writes that «among the discourses that the public sphere accommodates there are some that concern specific representations of the past», and in this regard he speaks of a “public memory” or “memory of the public sphere” as that «domain of the life of modern democratic societies within which citizens’ convictions about matters of collective relevance confront and reciprocally influence one another, gradually modifying and contributing to the formation of public opinion» (2016: 15). Public memory is not only the memory of institutions but «is constituted by all the discourses and cultural artefacts concerning the past that are situated within the communicative space of a society, where citizens engage in dialogue with institutions but also with one another» (ivi: 16). Jedlowski describes as “self-critical” this memory «that does not attribute crimes to others, but recognizes its own, or those committed by a group to which, for better or worse, one belongs».

Jedlowski further specifies that this is an “uncomfortable memory”: «If it is one’s own group that is spoken of, one risks being considered disloyal. If it is oneself as an individual that one refers to, one must reckon with the defences erected by pride. In every case it is a memory that coincides with a certain calling into question of one’s own identity» (ivi: 9). As in Habermas, faced with the mechanisms of defence – censorship and displacement – self-critical memory establishes a parallelism between the critique of the ideology of collective consciousness – the reassuring representations of the “we” – and the critique of the self-deceptions of consciousness – the ideal representations of the self: «Identities, with their attendant array of professed values, are often propped up with the help of self-deceptions. [...] Whether explicit or implicit, a mechanism of denial is at work. It extends and reproduces itself into the future: human beings go on deceiving themselves about the past of which they are the heirs» (ibidem).

5.2. *Working through the past: the risks of ritual and prescriptive commemoration*

Before examining more closely the meaning of critique as critique of ideology, a genealogical clarification concerning the very notion of “working through” is called for. Reconstructing the history of the term, Leccardi, Jedlowski, and Cavalli recall that the expression comes from the language of psychoanalysis – the *Verarbeitung* by which Freud designated «specific modes of ‘work’ that happen partly within the psyche and partly in the relationship between the patient and their analyst» – and that Adorno’s merit «lies in having first used the term outside the context of psychoanalysis» (2023: 21). What the term working through designates is a process of reconsidering experience whose aim is not only the recognition of repressed contents, but liberation «from the influence of the repetitive mechanisms caused by the fixation of the unresolved trauma in certain symptoms: when trauma that has not been dealt with locks the future in malaise, memory is the only force that can free the future» (ibidem). The following passage is the one that concerns us here, because it fixes Habermas’s position in the history of the concept: «In sociology, “working through” became the name of a process in which a group takes responsibility for its own history». It is, that is to say, «an act of recognition of what was lived, breaking through the censorship imposed by public discourse and by the individuals themselves. This recognition implies an understanding of the very reasons why we censored it» (ibidem). Working through does not consist in remembering something more, but in rendering thematizable the conditions of one’s own omission: it is the structure we have described as consciousness-raising. The authors finally draw from it a criterion that serves as an anticipated reply to every apology for forgetting: there are many forms of forgetfulness; some are necessary, but the forgetting of that for which we are responsible is not among them (cf. Leccardi, 2016). It is worth recalling the asymmetry that Aleida Assmann places at the basis of the distinction between canon and archive: «if we grant that forgetting is the normality of personal and cultural life, then remembering is the exception, which – especially in the cultural sphere – requires special and costly precautions» that «take the form of cultural institutions» (2008: 98). The institutions of active memory «preserve the past as present», whereas those of passive memory «preserve it as past»: memory laws therefore belong to the former, and precisely for this reason

error. This last point excludes the image of the intellectual as a mediator of meaning and interpreter of the world as a whole. What remains is a task of translation: rendering into ordinary language complex problems belonging to specialist value spheres (2005: 275-276).

their efficacy is to be assessed by the cost they manage to impose upon forgetting, not by the solemnity they display.

The sociology of memory has further specified the terrain on which this “clarification” operates and its “normative force” – the “duty of memory”. Anna Lisa Tota has moreover underlined a dividing line that bears directly on this moral injunction: «if a case can be made for forgetting with reference to individual memories, the same cannot be said of public memories: in the latter case the only ones who would have the right to forget would be those who suffered an injustice, whereas the community of reference, civil society, and above all the State would always have the duty to remember» (2020: 160-161). The formula clarifies why the Habermasian argument is not reducible to a generic moral injunction: it does not enjoin everyone to remember on the same terms, but distributes the obligation asymmetrically, laying it first of all upon institutions and upon the collectivity of those responsible. It is exactly what Habermas was claiming when he set the public duty of the Federal Republic against the private memory of the victims, and it is what makes unacceptable, in his perspective, every form of normalization promoted by the State or in its name. By contrast, over recent decades – with Holocaust memory legislation and memory policies – «the duty, that is, to remember the past, to withdraw it from oblivion» has established itself as constitutive of republican identity and of the formation of the new generations (Grande, 2014: 283). Emblematic in this sense is the European directive of 2000 designating 27 January – the date of the opening of the gates of Auschwitz – as the “day of remembrance” of the Shoah. Produced by a public reflection on the past, this prescriptive order has in turn fuelled «an intense debate on the educational efficacy of the official and ritualized forms of working through the past, as well as on the contents and methods to be adopted for the school teaching of twentieth-century history» (ibidem; cf., for Italy, Bertacchi and Lajolo, 2003; Cavalli, 2005; Santerini, 2005).

The point is anything but marginal for the Habermasian position; indeed, it reveals its point of maximum tension. The institutionalization of remembrance realizes in part what Habermas was calling for – that the memory of the victims not be confined to the private sphere. It realizes it, however, in a form that risks turning into its opposite: ritual substitutes for argumentation, the commemorative date absolves from the labour of clarification, anamnestic solidarity converts into civil liturgy. Among the more recent practices Grande points to the “memory journeys” and the “encounters with witnesses” addressed to young people, in particular in order to learn the historical reality of the concentration camps: experiences whose yield depends entirely on whether or not they restore to the participants a reflexive position, and not simply a shared emotion (2014: 283). The difference between a public and a ritual use of history lies exactly here.

The criterion that allows the two outcomes to be distinguished is formulated by Jedlowski in terms that overlap with the conceptual pair adopted here. The reference to memory that characterizes contemporary public debate, he observes, «shows two distinct and, in truth, opposing faces. On the one hand there are ‘policies of identity’ which use the past by selecting only what can serve to sustain the chosen identity and defend the interests to which they refer. On the other, there are those who invoke the past because it needs to be *reappraised*» (2001a: 36-37). The second meaning renders the German term *Aufarbeitung*: the concept of “reappraising” the past «refers in fact to a particular form of memory’s work. Rather than the spontaneous processes of forgetting (which tend to discard all that is problematic or painful) and the deliberate mechanisms of political will (which, in the same manner, tend to avoid whatever goes against the identity being defended), this form of recall proposes conscious confrontation with the most negative aspects of the past, giving rise to a process whereby the individual assumes *responsibility* for his/her past history» (ivi: 37). The distinction is valuable because it locates the dividing line not in the degree of intensity of memory but in its direction: identity politics and public working through can employ the same materials, the same dates, and even the same institutions. They differ solely in that the former confirm the self-conception of those who remember, whereas the latter exposes it to internal contestation.¹³

¹³ Grande notes the same gap in efficacy: «current imperatives regarding memory seem destined to remain substantially mute, in the sense that the “duty of memory” [...] fails to amalgamate effectively with the intention of the “lesson of the past”, with the imperative of “never again”, and with the concurrent formation of a critical, open, and tolerant civic consciousness» (2022: 36). The point becomes cogent if one looks at the actual returns of the memory policies that have

On the trajectory that has led to the present institutionalization and on its symbolic valences, Lecardi, Jedlowski, and Cavalli offer a periodization rich in detail. The history of Holocaust memory, they observe, «has unfolded in several phases»: the period before 1960 «is known as the years of silence»; it «was followed by the phase of the return of the repressed, then the age of testimony, and finally what might be called a phase of consolidation and articulation of the question», and «such phases have affected every domain of European public life» (2023: 20). The outcome is that this trajectory «has made the Holocaust, today, the centre of a sort of “civil religion” in Europe, a religion founded on the injunction not to forget what we want never to happen again» (ibidem). This formula deserves to be taken literally, because it indicates the risk with precision: a civil religion has rites, a calendar¹⁴ and a clergy, and it can sustain itself even in the absence of the discussion that ought to nourish it. Within public memory, they add, «social movements are relevant actors: they elaborate alternative attitudes and memories, and they struggle to press their importance upon others» (ivi: 43). In this way the authors restore to our argument an element that the opposition between rite and argumentation alone would leave in shadow: between the institution that celebrates and the citizen who attends there operates a third actor, who contests the criteria of relevance and proposes new ones. The observation does not attenuate the duty of memory: it shifts its foundation from automatism to argumentation, which is precisely what Habermas asks of the public sphere.

The merit of memory studies lies in having made less dichotomous the relation between the public and the ritual use of history, and with it the opposition between argumentation and rite. As Tota specifies, the narrative practices and the monuments – large and small – dedicated to the memory of collective traumas are not mere aesthetic representations, but communicative structures that mediate the political perception of the past. To commemorate through narrative practices or monuments means «to speak within a code» (2006: 331). In this sense even a “banal commemoration”, which turns remembrance into an element of conformism purged of its charge of contestation and of normative admonition, carries a more ambivalent meaning. Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi has proposed this notion to designate the set of mnemonic practices and artefacts that operate in everyday life without being perceived as commemoration: not «the flag waved consciously with fervent passion», but «the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building» (2016: 86). Many forms of banal commemoration are indeed realized at the institutional level by planning narrative practices and monuments relating to the past that enter into, and are retrieved within, the scenarios of everyday life. In the German case, for instance, examples are «street names, plaques on buildings [...] and the brass cobblestones set into the pavements of Berlin and Vienna to acknowledge the Jews rounded up from the adjacent addresses during the Holocaust» (ibidem). Banal commemoration thus shows that a third regime exists, in which the past is present without being either discussed or celebrated, and yet «absorbed and internalized» below the threshold of thematization (ivi: 88). For Vinitzky-Seroussi, the German *Stolpersteine* are, in this sense, the exact obverse of the *Mahnmal*: not a place to which one goes on an appointed date, but a stumbling block distributed along the everyday route.

flourished since the 1990s – museums, memorials, commemorations, memory laws, institutions charged «with writing history, honouring the victims, pronouncing on good and evil» (ibidem). The reason Grande draws from this bears closely on the distinction between public and ritual use: the success of a politics of memory cannot be measured by its media and audience success, because «“participation” does not correspond exactly to “understanding” of the meaning and of the educational message one intends to convey» (ibidem).

¹⁴ The calendar is the place where the difference is decided between a remembrance that opens time and one that administers it. In the fifteenth thesis Benjamin observes that «calendars do not measure time the way clocks do; they are monuments of a historical consciousness», and that the day with which a calendar is inaugurated returns «in the guise of holidays, which are days of remembrance» (1940/2006: 395). Robert Gibbs has inferred that the stake of that thesis is not so much the “conservation” as the “production” of the past: «the calendar draws the past near» and precisely for this reason «it produces our past, that is the past that is alive for us», so that calendars are «monumental: public, fixed and commemorative» (2005: 209). Yet the thesis closes with an acknowledgement of loss – of that historical consciousness «not the slightest trace has been apparent in Europe, it would seem, for the past hundred years» (Benjamin, 1940/2006: 395) – which Gibbs comments upon without attenuation: «but Benjamin’s point is more severe: the past does not live in the calendar anymore» (2005: 210). Applied to days of remembrance, the observation supplies the criterion sought here: a date is not in itself either empty rite or remembrance, but becomes the one or the other depending on whether it merely marks out homogeneous time or manages instead to interrupt it.

These everyday experiences lie at the heart of the concept of “social practices of memory”. The very possibility of speaking of them «refers back to memory’s capacity to externalize itself, to become objectified, and to be deposited in instruments that remember on our behalf»; memory «thereby renders itself socially visible and hence analysable» (Grande, 2014: 285). Taking up Jedlowski (2002), Grande observes that modernity is defined as the epoch of the widest deployment of such practices – print, photography, cinema, and all their subsequent derivatives – but specifies that they are not exhausted in artificial memories of a technical order: they also include narrative acts, and first among them testimonies, cultural institutions (museums, libraries, galleries), urban artefacts (monuments, statues, memorial stones, inscriptions), the celebratory ceremonies that go under the name of commemoration and, finally, the process of patrimonialization of the “sites of memory”, which, as goods to be preserved for future generations, acquire a central place in the cultural heritage and in the identity of a nation (2014: 285).

If one holds that the Habermasian dichotomous vision suffers from an excessive cognitivism, it must be noted that banal commemoration represents at once a resource and an insidious risk. Its efficacy depends on whether the unnoticed presence of the past retains the potential to become, at any moment, an object of discourse and, in particular, an object of public discourse. As Adorno had already stressed, this is precisely the risk of every individualizing remembrance. And so we return to the prescription demanded by the case of memory laws: to “work through”, not to “liquidate”. In *The Meaning of Working Through the Past* Adorno denounced the collective narcissism of the Germany of the economic miracle, which minimizes guilt or transforms it into a closed chapter of history, and with it the risk of monumental memory, that is, of empty rituals that exempt the individual from present responsibility. *Aufarbeitung* must not be a settling of accounts, but an opening of the wound (Lohmann, 2015): an act of resistance against the culture of “turning the page”. Let us restore the two statements on which that distinction rests. The first concerns the intention that animates the text: «its intention is to close the books on the past and, if possible, even remove it from memory» (Adorno, 1959/1998: 89) – where working through is invoked precisely in order to obtain the effect opposite to the one the term promises. The second is the clause with which the essay closes, and which fixes the criterion for every reckoning: «the past will have been worked through only when the causes of what happened then have been eliminated. Only because the causes continue to exist does the captivating spell of the past remain to this day unbroken» (ivi: 103). It follows that working through is not measurable by its own monuments or by its own laws, but by the persistence or otherwise of the social conditions that made possible what is being commemorated: a criterion that no politics of memory can satisfy by decree.

For Adorno, the warning rested on a precise sociological diagnosis: the democracy of the Federal Republic had not yet entered into custom, but remained an institutional form superimposed upon a social structure still potentially authoritarian. Where sociological analysis shows that every practice of memory selects, and therefore produces, the past it purports to describe, Adorno added a normative clause: selection is the more dangerous the more reassuring its outcome. Without a radical self-critique of society, memory becomes a screen behind which the very dynamics of exclusion of the past are concealed. In its contemporary declension, the risk is no longer explicit denialism, but the neutralization of the Shoah through its media omnipresence: if memory becomes a content of entertainment or a state rite devoid of social critique, it ceases to be an antidote to barbarism. It is the severest formulation of the criterion by which, almost thirty years later, Habermas would distinguish, in the *Historikerstreit*, the “public use” of history from its “administration”.

In this connection we may recover Halbwachs’s thesis that the past does not pre-exist the practices that actualize it: «the past is not preserved, not even virtually: the past is continually constructed. In the present and for the present» (Canesso, 2023: 86). The relation between memory and history changes as well: if memory is above all “collective memory”, then such memories «do not amount to so many names, dates, and formulas, but truly represent currents of thought and experience within which we recover our past only because we have lived it. [...] In addition to written history, there is a living history that perpetuates and renews itself through time» (Halbwachs, 1950/1980: 64). The

Halbwachsian formula fixes with precision the terrain on which the Habermasian notion of the public use of history is situated. Alongside «written history» there operates a «living history», which is such only if it is mobilized by a group that appropriates it and that, in the present, continually revalorizes the historical series it holds significant (Canesso, 2023: 87).

Proceeding from the expectations and needs of the present time, memory practices are performative, in the sense that they produce the past they purport to describe, emphasizing certain aspects and organizing the forgetting of others, and becoming an accepted and shared background knowledge within society. Their outcome is a common-sense knowledge, which requires mediation between expert cultures and everyday praxis. Here the role that Habermas assigns to the public sphere returns, and not as a supplement of popularization: it is the only place in which the constitutive selectivity of memory can be made evident to those who undergo it. The “trivialization” of conduct of life and the “musealization” of cultural traditions that Habermas fears are, in sociological terms, the two degenerative outcomes of memory practices that have ceased to be open to discussion.

Once the minimal condition of a discursive reflexivity has been established, a further question arises, concerning the sustainability of a public memory. In this regard Tota proposes the notion of a “sustainable past”, that is, «that representation of the past which we actualize in the present and which allows the subject to transform the traumas suffered into a resource for the future, rather than into a burden weighing upon the present». The past «becomes sustainable when it does not pollute the present, when it ceases to be toxic», whereas in its polluting form it «ought to be forgotten, worked through, transformed» (2020: 166). Ecology is not an ornamental metaphor but extends the notion of “pollution” to communication, distinguishing «a form of verbal pollution (“we are what we say”), a form of acoustic pollution (“we are what we listen to”), and a form of visual pollution (“we are what we see”)), the ensemble of which «would correspond to what produces the toxicity of our memories» (ivi: 167). It should be added that this interpretive selectivity operates not only upon contents, but also – and perhaps above all – upon the forms that enter public controversies. On this point Tota had already specified that commemorations are «highly conflictual processes», because every time a political or cultural institution is called upon to commemorate an event «it is in fact called upon to formulate for the first time, or else to reiterate, an assessment»; at the basis of commemorative processes «there is always the expression of a choice (what to commemorate and what to forget, how and to what extent to commemorate)» (2006: 330). It follows that the commemorative arena is by definition antagonistic: social groups bearing different values clash within it in order to negotiate the social definitions of reality, and the sites and objects of memory function as «possible factories of history and of national identities» (ibidem).

The decisive point, however, concerns the *medium*. To commemorate through a statue or a monument means to express assessments and definitions of what happened within a preset set of expressive constraints. Now, since whoever was not a direct witness «sees first of all a monument and only subsequently the cause for which it was erected» (ivi: 331), the form of objectification acts back upon the contents it renders transmissible. Hence the Roman sociologist’s thesis that «the way in which memory becomes objectified is socially defined and culturally determined», which «makes certain memories possible and not others»: the expressive codes of memory «cannot be thought of as neutral, just as no code ever is», and the poetics of memory therefore become «the social dynamics that make memory possible» (ivi: 332). This specification has a direct consequence for the Habermasian concept of the public use of history. If «in every nation there are institutions that sanction which forms of memory are legitimate and illegitimate», and if there is a problem of the «adequacy of the expressive code [...] with respect to the event to be remembered», then one must acknowledge the role of «powerful institutions of memory that hold the monopoly of expressive codes» (ibidem). The Berlin controversy over the *Mahnmal* – on which Habermas intervened repeatedly – did not therefore turn on an incidental aesthetic question: it turned on who held that monopoly and on which commemorative genre was adequate to a crime of State. The conflict over form “is” the conflict over the public use of history. It is exactly the reversal that Habermas feared when he insisted that the memory of the victims should not be converted into an identitarian resource for the descendants of the perpetrators.

5.3. *The disclosure of false consciousness*

The public sphere is a domain replete with distortions, and Habermas is well aware of this. From the early 1960s onwards he initiated a critique of the idealism underlying the “human sciences”: the “claim to universality of hermeneutics” is reflected in the “abstract autonomy” of the logic of cultural development with respect to the “material interests” that influence its creation and transmission. *The Theory of Communicative Action* had made clear that within the perspective internal to the lifeworld there operate “three fictions” – «(a) the autonomy of actors, (b) the independence of culture, and (c) the transparency of communication» – that conceal the factors exerting influence from outside (1981b/1987: 149). To “naïve hermeneutics” is opposed a theory of the mechanisms that secure the unproblematic reproduction of social formations in which differentiated participation in political power, the unequal distribution of wealth, and the selective recognition of social prestige are institutionalized. In assuming the task of “unmasking” false representations, Habermas shares the programmatic element that most characterizes critical theory: the “critique of ideology”. Unlike manifest external constraints and deliberate but latent manipulations, it refers to “internal constraints”: situations of “self-deception” that point back to the structural conditions of “systematically distorted communication” (1981b/1987: 333). Hence the “parallel” between psychoanalysis and critical theory, including the comparison between the intellectual’s relation to public opinion and the relation between therapist and patient (1968/1971): self-deception expresses at the individual level the same phenomenon of “false consciousness” that ideology expresses for the contents of cultural tradition, by way of mechanisms similar to the strategies of defence – “displacement” and “repression”. Habermas therefore defined ideology, analogously to Freudian unconscious deception, not as “mere illusion” but as “objective illusion” (1981b/1987: 329): the falsity of representations is due neither to bad faith nor to errors of thought, but to belonging to a form of life whose overall structure makes “systematic distortions” inevitable. And although ideologies withdraw aspects of the social world from public discussion, they – like symptoms in the case of self-deceptions – leave social crises as their trace. Thus is specified the non-directive task of social theory, which can claim only to introduce into public discourse motivations previously expressed in unrecognizable form. Critical theory operates within the domain of self-transparency, and hence says nothing about the truth of such motivations or about their obligatoriness or normative rightness. It does not operate immediately as an orientation for action, but within the reflexive formation of the will.

The convergence between the critique of ideology and the sociology of memory can be specified by distinguishing, with Grande, two paradigms. Halbwachs’s teaching is directed at showing «how memory favours the cohesion and the continuity of a social group, thereby confirming its identity» (2014: 286). It is true that he stressed that history is the history of a minority, an «external and artificial reconstruction of a plurality of memories», so that «denied and heterogeneous memories can open up viewpoints and experiences that are concealed by official narratives, and that are consequently able to unhinge the idea of a univocal direction towards the truth of history» (ivi: 287). It was, however, above all critical theory – with its Freudo-Marxist programme of disclosing «the gap existing between what modern society actually is and what, instead, it *claims to be* on the basis of its own self-representations» – that placed at the centre the disclosure of public memory «as a critique of identity, that is, as recognition, working through, and assumption of its hidden or neglected sides» (ivi: 286).

An indirect confirmation of this diagnosis and of this function of knowledge comes from the sociology of cultural trauma, which Renate Siebert discusses starting from Jeffrey C. Alexander (2003). In this acceptation a cultural trauma is first of all a social construction: «it does not represent in the first instance a wound, but its construction as dominant public discourse», so that «the process of constructing cultural trauma coincides with the formation of the public memory of that trauma». A traumatic event «must assume the status of evil, must become evil», and this «is a matter of representation» (Siebert, 2014: 296). For such a representation to be produced, religious, aesthetic, and juridical mediations are required, together with interventions by the mass media and by state bureaucracies, and above all «social groups and memory entrepreneurs sufficiently powerful and influential to render cases of “extreme suffering” symbolic, ritual, and recognized beyond the history of the original occurrences» (ivi: 297). The Habermasian expression “public use of history” designates this field of forces at work.

Alexander insists on the point that makes the category usable within a sociology of the public sphere: the cultural process that attributes traumatic status to an event «is deeply affected by power structures» (2004: 10). To recognize a trauma is therefore not to register a fact, but to exercise – or to undergo – a capacity of definition: «Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways» (ivi: 1). Citing the writings of Austin, Searle, Habermas, and Lara, Alexander specifies the model with an illuminating analogy: «the trauma process can be likened, in this sense, to a speech act», since traumas too have speakers, addressees, and situations (ivi: 11). The attribution of traumatic status is a linguistic act that raises validity claims and can be contested – which brings the sociology of cultural trauma back within our pragmatic framework. The decisive point is not the gravity of the event but its construction: «it is the meanings that provide the sense of shock and fear, not the events in themselves» (ivi: 10). It follows that the imputation of traumatic status is itself a stake of the public sphere – and this is exactly what, in the German case, the *Historikerstreit* made visible. In that case too, the emergence of cultural trauma did not depend exclusively on the objectivity of the crime committed, but on the capacity of public discourse to conceptualize it as an irreparable fracture of the social pact.

The necessity of keeping anamnesis alive rests on the fact that the traces of the past never remain wholly confined to time past, but tend to reappear in public discourse in the form of controversies that are never laid to rest. This is why Robin Wagner-Pacifici has proposed to redefine memory not as content but as event, substituting for the category of “difficult past” that of “restless event” (2016: 22-32): a past that has not been clarified and that has been expropriated of its painful charge continues to work subterraneously, destabilizing the democratic culture of a nation and resurfacing in the form of prejudice and resentment. As Tota has specified, displaced memory never disappears entirely: it leaves «silent traces» and «memories without a dwelling» ready to re-emerge «as soon as the victims regain the power to narrate» (2006: 329-330). The public use of history defended by Habermas during the *Historikerstreit* answers precisely to the necessity of obstructing such operations of sterilization of trauma. The Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial, discussed in the companion essay (Corchia, 2026), offers this category its textbook case and at the same time its severest test. Fritz Bauer was, in the precise sense of the definition, a memory entrepreneur: he did not confine himself to prosecuting the guilty, but intended «to make of it an object lesson for the German people» (Franceschi, 2017), assigning to the proceedings, that is, a function exceeding their juridical mandate. The mediations indicated by Alexander – the juridical ones, those of the mass media, those of the state bureaucracies – are all present there; and yet cultural trauma was not constituted, or was constituted only in mutilated form. The reason is that the three levels worked against one another: the judicial bureaucracy obstructed the investigation, the juridical form fragmented the crime of State into a sum of individual malicious acts, and finally the press translated that fragmentation into a gallery of “monsters” that dispensed the reader from implicating himself.

Against this repression Benjamin’s critical-emancipatory paradigm has moved. Within that paradigm «forgetting coincides with an instrumental and political act of negation and concealment that must be disclosed, opening the possibility of “liberating” the past so as to make room for another present». The operation aims to grasp «the difference existing between the past as it is known now, in the present, and as it really was then, in order to bring to light those contents that have been hidden and silenced» – a recovery of the past in its integrity with a view to readings proposed «in the name of the generations of the vanquished», that is, of all those subjects «who have been excluded from the official versions of history and from the dominant narrative of the past» (Grande, 2022: 33). Emancipation is a form of self-knowledge that is at once a rereading of the past and a critique of the present. And with the sixth of Benjamin’s *Theses on the Philosophy of History* – as we shall see more fully in the final section – the Marxist critique of ideology takes on an eschatological curvature through its encounter with Jewish messianism. The demand for a rewriting of history from the standpoint of the “vanquished” opens up a perspective which, in the attempt to “rescue” the past – that is, to grasp the gap between the past as it is known now and the past as it really was then – mounts a radical critique of cumulative and quantified time and of the very naivety of the Enlightenment idea of progress (Benjamin, 1940/2006: 391). In the

seventh thesis, Benjamin proceeds from the observation that historicism necessarily practises empathy with the victor: «whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which current rulers step over those who are lying prostrate», and the cultural goods that the procession carries with it – «they are called “cultural treasures,” and a historical materialist views them with cautious detachment» – have an origin that «he cannot contemplate without horror»; hence the capital statement: «there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism» (ivi: 391-392). For Benjamin the past is not a stable datum that can be reconstructed “as it really was”, as Leopold von Ranke maintained, but a field of tension that becomes historical only when a fragment of it “flashes up” in the present; the “rescue” of the past – interrupting the progressive narrative and restoring a voice to the vanquished – is therefore not a moral exhortation but a definition of historiography. In the *Theses* he seeks «to define, for the first time, a historical materialist historiography». Whereas historical materialism had always defined itself in terms of revolutionary expectations for the future, Benjamin «strictly reverses this perspective: historical materialism is to be defined by a certain relation to the past, namely, a redemptive relation», so that «the task entrusted to historical materialism is not to make the future, but to save the past» (Beiner, 1984: 424). The criterion that follows is that to historicism – for which «the truth will not run away from us» – the materialist opposes the precariousness of the past and the urgency of «seiz[ing] hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger», since the past is «an irretrievable image which threatens to disappear in any present that does not recognize itself as intended in that image» (Benjamin, 1940/2006: 390-391).

The experience of the totalitarian regimes of twentieth-century Europe rendered the nexus between memory and power still more dramatic. As Grande recalls, such regimes, «by rewriting or erasing history and manipulating the memory of victims and witnesses, aspired to dominate the course of history and to bend it to totalizing ends» (2014: 287). The Frankfurt denunciation places the emphasis on the danger of a continuity between the totalitarian manipulation of the past and its neoconservative normalization in the present, in which the past is withdrawn from discussion and made functional to an immaculate identity. It should be added that Adorno had made explicit the rhetorical form and the risk of such a comparison. Closing the lecture *The Meaning of Working Through the Past*, he acknowledged: «I have exaggerated the somber side, following the maxim that only exaggeration per se today can be the medium of truth»; and at the same time he took leave of the opposite use of the past. The warning bears directly on the neoconservative public use of history: consciousness-raising operates by accentuation – its aim being «to delineate a tendency concealed behind the smooth façade of everyday life before it overflows the institutional dams that, for the time being, are erected against it» (1959/1998: 99) – and for this reason it is distinguished as much from the prophecy of doom as from the neutral historical report.

The nexus between memory and power subsequently finds in Koselleck a methodological caution with far-reaching political consequences: «no historical movement can be adequately evaluated in terms of the self-same counterconcepts used by the participants of such a movement as a means of experiencing or comprehending it», since this would ultimately mean «the perpetuation of a victor’s history by his seeking to make permanent a temporary dominance through the negation of the defeated» (1979/2004: 158). To adopt the lexicon of the protagonists as descriptive categories of history amounts to prolonging their domination. The point bears precisely on the German case and explains why the critique of ideology cannot confine itself to reversing the signs of those oppositions: it must dismantle their asymmetric structure, which “survives” the changing of words, given that «words are replaceable, whereas the asymmetric structure of the argument survives» (ivi: 159).

Taking up Aleida Assmann, Grande distinguishes between a *repressive* forgetting, «functional to dictatorial regimes», and a defensive forgetting, «promoted by the perpetrators of violence, which feeds on the everyday silence of the victims and of society as well, and which can be countered only following a strong change of values in the name of human rights» – a change we may date to the 1980s, with «the progressive development of new sensibilities towards the victims of historical phenomena such as the Shoah, the forms of slavery, dictatorships, colonialism» (2022: 34; cf. Assmann, 2016: 73-85). The category of defensive forgetting identifies with precision the object of the Habermasian polemic in

Germany: not the forgetting of facts, which by 1986 had already been established, but the strategy of neutralization on the part of those responsible and their heirs. The *Historikerstreit* was precisely the moment in which that change of principles and values clashed openly with the defensive forgetting it meant to counter.

Against this background one better understands the reason why the critique of ideology, in matters of memory, cannot be resolved into a mere ascertainment of facts. The processes of working through the past, if considered from the standpoint of social critique, do not amount to a “weakened memory” that refuses bonds of meaning and responsibility: «they present themselves rather as an individual and collective labour animated by the will to assume and revisit what has happened, in the awareness of the present and in the possibility of constructing new horizons of expectation» (Grande, 2014: 289). The “weakened memory” of which Adorno spoke in the 1959 lecture is, in Habermasian terms, the outcome of a “systematically distorted communication”: not the absence of remembrance, but a remembrance from which the connection with responsibility has been amputated. For Adorno, the ultimate reason lay in the very structure of bourgeois subjectivity. Recalling him a few weeks after his death, Habermas summarized his diagnosis thus: «Adorno had called coldness the principle of bourgeois subjectivity without which Auschwitz would not have been possible. He had deciphered in even the most unsuspect normality a vitality grown cold» (1969/1983: 99). If what made extermination possible is not an erroneous opinion but a disposition sedimented in the ordinary forms of associated life, then no documentary ascertainment can by itself produce the effect of disclosure: the critique of ideology must reach the level, far less accessible to working through, at which the past continues to operate as habit.

To link memory too closely to identity – Jedlowski warns – «can lead us to forget that memory is also something that can contradict the identity that an individual wishes to adopt at any given moment» – and this perspective «was developed above all by scholars influenced by the Frankfurt school» (2001a: 36). On the collective plane the critique of ideology must operate as psychoanalysis does on the individual plane. The transposition to the collective level is immediate and coincides with the very definition of remembering critique: memory «is not only what serves the identity of a group and its present interests, but also the deposit of traces that can serve to de-fetishize the existing order, to understand the processes that have led to the present as it is, and to criticize this same present in the name of forgotten desires, aspirations, or traumas» (ibidem). It is exactly the function that Habermas claimed for critique against neoconservative normalization: not to conserve the past, but to keep open its capacity to call collectively into question the identity of those who inherit it.

5.4. *Projecting alternatives to the existing order*

Critical theory should, moreover, broaden the margins of the worldview when other citizens are anchored to “business as usual”, thereby spreading the search for meaning for “what is missing” and for “what could be otherwise”. It is not enough to intervene when public discourse leaves the tracks of argumentative exchange, performing a function of “early warning”. An equally lethal danger is that of remaining imprisoned within *mainstream* themes, renouncing action as a utopian counterforce (Habermas, 2006/2009: 55). The reference to utopia is all the more important because within the “congestion of the future” one runs the risk of losing even the idea of an alternative: «Even a majority culture that does not consider itself threatened preserves its vitality only through an unrestrained revisionism, by sketching out alternatives to the status quo or by integrating alien impulses – even to the point of breaking with its own traditions» (1993/1998: 223).

In this connection it is useful to return to Maurice Halbwachs, since he offers an explanation of the mechanism by which a dominant tradition can be defeated and subverted. The ideas that sustain the repression or the manipulation of the remembrance of the past of one of our “collective forms” can give way before ideas supported by a broader collective experience: «if today’s ideas are capable of opposing recollections and of prevailing over them to the point of transforming them, it is because they correspond to a collective experience which, if not equally ancient, is at least far broader; it is because they are common not only (as traditions are) to the members of the group under consideration, but to the members of other contemporary groups. Reason is opposed to tradition as a more extended society is

opposed to a more restricted one». Hence the concluding formula, which deserves to be taken literally: «what the group opposes to its own past is not its present, it is the past (more recent perhaps, but this matters little) of other groups with which it tends to identify» (1925: 394).

Applied to the case of the Holocaust, the proposition yields a remarkable return. What Habermas opposes to the German national traditions is not an abstract present nor a rootless morality, but the historical heritage of other groups – the political culture of the West, juridical Enlightenment, democratic constitutionalism – with which the Federal Republic deliberately chooses to identify. Constitutional patriotism is therefore not, in Halbwachsian terms, the absence of a tradition: it is the adoption of the tradition of a more extended society against that of a more restricted one. And one then understands why its adversaries were able to denounce it as uprooting: from the standpoint of the restricted group, the operation does indeed appear as a loss; from the standpoint of the more extended group, as a gain in reason.

The learning processes towards post-conventional forms of identity and belonging return here as the motor of development. What Erik Meyer observes confirms the core of the Habermasian thesis. Sanctioning past conduct, he notes, «not only has a material impact, it also has symbolic significance: A standard is set, allowing an evaluation of the previous regime», so that «its legitimacy and acceptance depends on public communication» (2008: 174). And from this he draws a praxeological criterion that may be taken as the measure of the whole affair: «The methods and the extent of coming to terms with the past can be seen as a sign of the condition of a country's political culture» (ibidem).

The ideal of a better society finds, in the lecture at the Congreso de los Diputados of the Spanish Parliament on 26 November 1984, both a *pars destruens* and a *pars construens*. On the one hand, Habermas examines the danger of an “exhaustion of utopian energies”, announced by the disquiet of historical consciousness in the face of the “contraction of the horizon of the future” (1984/1998: 50). Habermas distinguishes the utopian visions of the society of labour, which trace happiness back to material well-being, from those that shift the “utopian accents” onto “unreified everyday communicative praxis” (ivi: 52). The project of a more humane, egalitarian form of life freed from material need cannot constitute the sole ideal of collective action: by appealing to an instrumental reason that valorizes the forces of production and administrative performance, it risks entering into a “deceptive symbiosis” with a social system that limits the mobilization of collective intelligence and reintroduces, cloaked in paternalism, the colonization of the lifeworld. In order to counterbalance the colonization of the private and public spheres, Habermas renews the utopia of an “unreified communicative praxis”. What he describes is not a mood but a mutation in the consciousness of time: «the exhaustion of utopian energies is not just an indication of a transitory mood of cultural pessimism but rather goes deeper. It could indicate a change in modern time consciousness as such. Perhaps the amalgam of historical and utopian thought is disintegrating [...]. Perhaps historical consciousness is being relieved of its utopian energies» (ivi: 52).

What is at stake is not an objective datum but a disposition: «obscurity is nonetheless also a function of a society's assessment of its own readiness to take action. What is at stake is Western culture's confidence in itself» (ivi: 51). If historical consciousness becomes separated from utopian energies, what falls away is precisely the temporal structure within which remembrance can count as a demand for redemption and not as an inventory. Ever since the 1972 essay on Benjamin, Habermas has acknowledged that he introduced into the concepts of exploitation and progress a third term, alongside those that the Marxian tradition had isolated: «besides hunger and repression, failure; besides prosperity and liberty, happiness» (Habermas, 1972/1983: 156). Hence the hierarchy that makes the theme of the exhaustion of utopian energies anything but rhetorical: «prosperity without liberty is not prosperity and [...] liberty without happiness is not liberty» (ivi: 157). And hence the question that Habermas addresses to his own social theory and that is worth adopting here as a counterweight: «can we preclude the possibility of a meaningless emancipation?», given that «without the influx of those semantic energies with which Benjamin's rescuing criticism was concerned, the structures of practical discourse – finally well established – would necessarily become desolate» (ivi: 158). Remembrance is therefore not an affective supplement to the discursive procedure: it is its condition.

The nexus that Koselleck posited between the categories of “experience” and “expectation” regains

its actuality here. Experience is the «present past, whose events have been incorporated and can be remembered», and it also contains «an element of the experience of others, preserved and transmitted by generations or institutions». Expectation, by contrast, «is the future made present; it turns towards the not-yet, towards the non-experienced, towards that which is to be disclosed» (1979/2004: 259). The two categories are not symmetrical, because experience is a space whereas expectation is a temporal horizon, whence the terms “space of experience” and “horizon of expectation”. Experience «assembles itself into a totality, within which many layers of earlier times are simultaneously present», whereas the horizon is «that behind which a new space of experience will open, but which is not yet visible» (ivi: 260-261).¹⁵

Considering the temporal structure of the modern age, Koselleck had observed that, in times past, the smaller the “experience”, the greater the “expectation”. Today that relation can be reversed, and it is precisely in the reversal that the stake of a non-celebratory memory lies: «the greater the experience, the more cautious one is, but the more open is the future as well» (1979/2004: 274). It follows that a society which enlarges its space of experience – including that of the victims and of the defeated – does not reduce its own possibilities, but makes them available for projecting alternatives for the future.

On this terrain we may adopt the reformulation that Fabrizio Fornari has proposed of the category of *Zeitgeist*, since it gives the notion of “utopian energies” a precise conceptual structure. Against the descriptive use of the term, which reduces it to «an impressionistic formula: a *post hoc* synthesis that has recomposed into unity what historical experience has presented rather as fragmentary, contradictory, conflictual», he proposes to consider it «not as the spirit that renders an epoch homogeneous, but as a critical hermeneutic category, capable of rendering legible the structural tensions that traverse it»; so that «an epoch is defined not by what it fully realizes, but by the aporias it contains, by what it fails to integrate into its own symbolic, social, political, and ontological horizon» (2026: 15). The exhaustion of utopian energies is not a loss of optimism, but the closure of that gap. It should be observed, in this regard, that Habermas concedes that the idea of the conditions of an “ideal communication community” being realized is counterfactual – all the more so in that the excess of expectations placed upon “utopian energies” must be balanced by the “conservative counterweight of historical experience” (1984/1998: 12). Nevertheless, it is not unreasonable to conceive the task of critique as that of fostering a more argued, inclusive, equal, and transparent dialogue, considering that this implies no normative reference to social models predefined for everyone: «What can be defined normatively are the necessary but general conditions of an everyday communicative practice that enables the participants to realize for themselves, on their own initiative and in accordance with their needs and their views, concrete possibilities of a better and less threatened life» (ivi: 54).

As Rampazi specifies, for these possible futures Namer (1993) coined the term “negative memory”, that is, the memory «repressed because “uncomfortable”, not consistent with the identitarian project of the groups dominant on the political and social scene». Enclosed within it are «the great projects of civilization that remained unfinished, the failures, the betrayal of the values in whose name action had been oriented and justified». And it is in the reactualization of some of those repressed meanings that «a process aimed at the reconstruction of a memory – as working through – connected to the definition of new forms of belonging and identitarian definition can find its nourishment» (Rampazi, 2002: 7).

6. Rescuing critique: remembrance as a restitutive and redemptive moment

Within the tradition of critical theory, beyond the definition of “practical reason” as the antinomic counterpart of “instrumental reason”, there runs a more subterranean thread that interrogates, with fascination, the ultimate limit of reason before the enigmatic meaning of a human life – and not only human

¹⁵ The consequence that Koselleck draws from this for political modernity describes with precision the risk against which we have argued. The «concepts of movement» – republicanism, democracy, liberalism, socialism, communism, fascism – share «a compensatory effect»: «the smaller the experiential substance, the greater the expectations conjoined with it. The smaller the experience, the greater the expectation: this is the formula of the temporal structure of the modern age» (Koselleck, 1979/2004: 274).

– that escapes the disposal of our knowledge. Before following this motif of Benjaminian declension, which reaches, by way of Adorno, as far as Habermas¹⁶ and Hartmut Rosa, it is worth establishing what distinguishes, on the plane of intellectual practice, a “Rescuing Critique” from a “Consciousness-Raising”.

That this distinction is not an exegetical curiosity but a choice within the theory of critique is well shown by Pensky’s reconstruction. In the 1972 essay, indeed, Habermas understood the Benjaminian trait «as a reorientation of the very purpose of critique itself»: whereas the critique of ideology of Marxian descent, which Habermas traces from Marx to Marcuse, renders manifest the immanently contradictory character of social reality and reveals that what appears natural is in fact made up of «highly contingent constructs that mask real social domination», the purpose of Benjaminian critique is «to rescue the fading products of bourgeois culture, rather than appropriating them and putting them to critical use as mere evidence of the collapse of bourgeois ideologies» (2019: 495). What Habermas holds to be decisive is not so much Benjamin’s stature as a literary critic, but rather «the historical consciousness that refuses to regard past human experiences – above all, experiences of concrete suffering under conditions of social injustice – as morally neutral». The contribution of the Benjaminian philosophy of history that passes over into Critical Theory lies in its being «a secularized version of a messianic call to redeem the past – to make good suffering already past by remaking the world» (ibidem).

If for Adorno and Benjamin the normative content of modernity has this religious double bottom, it might come as a surprise that in recent years, reflecting on the foundations of the social bond, Habermas has devoted much attention to the consequences he feared from «a secularization that consumes religion’s promises of redemption», nourishing indeed the «analytical force that makes us aware», but blocking that «mystical force of a retroactive reconciliation» which discloses to the contemporary gaze the capacity to remember and to commemorate historically the “non-identical forms of life” effaced by the advance of rationalism and modernization. He seeks in the “ruins of philosophy” that “buried truth” from which only “remembering thought” draws a «negating force capable of transcending reification» – the «only simulacrum accessible to us in which the promise of a reconciliation between spirit and nature is renewed» (1994/2002: 133-134). While the reflections on the translatability of religious contents are prominent in the later work, it seems worth recalling that the early interest in Bloch, Löwith, Scholem, Benjamin, Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, Arendt, and Mitscherlich already bore witness to the attempt to address the theme of salvation “in a secular manner”.

The horizon of that search has been reconstructed by Peter Gordon starting from the early essay of 1961, *The German idealism of the Jewish philosophers*, in which Habermas wrote that «If there were not extant a German-Jewish tradition, we would have to discover one for our own sakes» (1961/1983: 42). Gordon insists on the biographical conjuncture that gives that declaration its weight: «As a young intellectual writing in the wake of the Holocaust, Habermas keenly felt the historical and political responsibility for helping to revive an understanding of the heritage that the Third Reich had tried to destroy» – a responsibility heightened by gratitude towards Adorno and Horkheimer, «émigrés who embodied the repressed German-Jewish intellectual inheritance of the Weimar era» (Gordon, 2019: 204). It was above all through Gershom Scholem that Habermas «came to appreciate the vitality of Jewish-messianic thought, especially as it informed the German Idealist tradition» (ibidem), down to the most concise formula: «Jewish philosophy, in all its versions, has remained critique» (Habermas, 1961/1983: 26).

¹⁶ If it is Habermas who brought the discussion of the two “critiques” to scholarly attention, the formula “Rescuing Critique” has its source in Adorno, who refers it to Benjamin in terms more radical than the Habermasian ones. Closing the 1955 profile, Adorno writes that «the centre of Benjamin’s philosophy» is «the idea of the salvation of the dead as the restitution of distorted life through the consummation of its own reification», and he offers as his own key the sentence with which the essay on the *Elective Affinities* concludes: «“only for the sake of the hopeless ones have we been given hope”» (1955/1976: 246). On this point the relation between the two authors of the first School is not merely theoretical. It was Adorno – Habermas recalls – who «with his Benjamin edition and his Benjamin interpretations, and still more with the relentless recourse to Benjaminian motifs in his own writings [...] was the first to make the thought of his friend an unfalsified and irrevocable component of German discussion» (1969/1983: 103).

In the essay *Walter Benjamin: consciousness-raising or rescuing critique* the role assigned to the “redemptive potential of art” is set out in full, in the broad acceptance given to it by German philosophy from the late eighteenth century onwards. To art falls the task of illuminating the sources of authentic life; to aesthetic criticism, that of translating into discourse – by “mortifying the work” – something in itself “unsayable”. The originality of aesthetic criticism lies in its capacity to “remember”, through translation, “something wholly forgotten”, to the point that in Benjamin it becomes an “archaeology of knowledge” or a “culture of remembrance”. “Remembrance” appropriates the history of art «under the aspects of rescuing the messianic moments and preserving an endangered semantic potential». This programme must be understood «not as reflection on a process of self-formation but as identification and retrieval of emphatic experiences and utopian contents» (1972/1983: 149). As Benjamin wrote in the second thesis: «like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak messianic power, a power on which the past has a claim» (1940/2006: 390). The weak messianic power invests the present with the responsibility of acting as “redeemer” towards the past, redeeming the sufferings and the hopes of those who preceded us, and in general the unrealized possibilities of the past. The reach of this inversion is grasped with precision by Habermas, who translates it into Koselleck’s categories. Modern time consciousness constitutes itself in the growing divergence between «space of experience» and «horizon of expectation»; but – and this is the correction that Habermas addresses to Koselleck himself – the idea of progress has not only secularized eschatological hopes by opening the horizon of expectation in a utopian sense, it has also closed off the future as a source of perturbation by means of teleological constructions of history, and historicism is, for Benjamin, its mere functional equivalent (Habermas, 1985/1987: 12-13). Against both figures Benjamin effects a drastic reversal of the two terms, assigning to all past epochs a horizon of unfulfilled expectations and to the present the task of experiencing them in remembrance, so as to satisfy them with our weak messianic power (ivi: 14). The effect is twofold: on the one hand the pressure of the future is multiplied by that of a past and unrealized future; on the other, there is corrected the «secret narcissism» of effective-historical consciousness, which even in its revolutionary variants – from Nietzsche to Korsch – continues to direct its gaze from the present towards a past to be appropriated in view of the expectations of that same present (ivi: 13-15). The past is not a closed chapter to be filed away, but an accumulation of unheeded claims that only the critique of the present can redeem from oblivion and from the victory of the oppressors. Taking up that legacy in the face of the catastrophe of history, in the final aphorism of *Minima Moralia* Adorno would write that the only responsible philosophy consists in «contemplat[ing] all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique. Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will one day appear in the messianic light» (1951/1974: 247). The theme of the “redemptive meaning” of aesthetic experience is therefore at the centre of the *Excursus on Benjamin’s Theory on the Philosophy of History*, in meditations that point back to the Adornian attempt to “think the non-identical” in order to rescue the experience of a “non-levelling equality” and of an “individualizing communality” (1985/1987: 14).¹⁷ The specific gain of the *Excursus* concerns, however, the status of rescuing critique. In remembrance the injustice suffered is not revoked – this remains impossible – but rather «virtually reconciled», and precisely in this way the present is bound to the «communicative context of a universal historical solidarity» (ivi: 15). The liberating force of remembrance, as we have said, no longer serves, as it did from Hegel to Freud, to dissolve the domination of the past over the present, but to dissolve a guilt of the present towards the past (ibidem); and anamnesis functions as a decentring counterweight to the concentration of responsibility that a time consciousness oriented exclusively towards the future has unloaded onto the shoulders of a present knotted upon itself (ivi: 16). Remembrance, on this reading, is not an aesthetic-theological supplement to communicative reason: it is the way in which the community of communication extends itself to those who will never again be able to take the floor.

¹⁷ It is an experience – as a later essay puts it – that must affirm a «justice oriented towards the future» and at the same time be «in solidarity with the irreparable suffering of past generations», to whom we owe at least «the weak power of an atoning remembrance» (Habermas, 1988a/1992: 243).

The reconstruction that Fornari proposes of the *Theses* makes it possible to specify in what sense that remembrance is a critical operation and not an act of piety. Already in the *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* Benjamin elaborates a conception of the origin (*Ursprung*) that «breaks with every idea of linear foundation»: the origin «does not coincide with an initial point in time», but «with a vortex, with a whirling movement in which past and present enter into a critical constellation», and «emerges where historical continuity cracks and what has been repressed or defeated returns to interrogate the present» (2026: 21)¹⁸. From this follows an image of history that appears not as «a movement towards the better, or a purely serial and pluralist arrangement of viewpoints, but as a sedimentation of ruins: an accumulation of failures, unkept promises, and experiences excluded from the narrative of the victors» (ibidem). On this basis one understands the function of the *Jetztzeit*: «the present is no longer an instant flowing within the temporal *continuum*, but a moment charged with past, in which an unredeemed historical possibility can be seized», so that «authentic historical knowledge does not follow the flow of time, but arrests it (*Stillstellung*), suspending the progressive narrative that naturalizes victory and injustice» (ivi: 24). The arrest of time has a messianic character, but it is a rigorously secular messianism: «it is not a matter of announcing the end of times, nor of founding a new teleology of the *katechon*, but of interrupting the homogeneous time of progress in order to render justice to what has been excluded. The messianic gesture redeems not the future but the past, withdrawing it from oblivion and restoring it as a critical demand in the present» (ivi: 26). It is the most exact definition of what critical theory calls rescuing critique – and the reason why it is not an alternative to consciousness-raising, but its condition: «the interpretation of the present then becomes an eminently critical operation. It is not a matter of describing what the age says of itself. It is a matter, rather, of arresting it in order to listen to what, within it, has not yet found words» (ivi: 27).

The motive of post-1945 critical theory, however, is not despair but indignation. Unhappy consciousness is not present in Habermas, for whom, despite the messianic lexicon that resonates within it, amnesic solidarity with the victims is not a variant of rescuing critique: it takes over its content – the debt owed to the victims – but transfers it onto the procedural register of a public argumentation that is always revocable. That such a transfer is possible depends, however, on a reservation that Habermas has never withdrawn. In 1972 he had summarized the Benjaminian programme in the image with which the first of the *Theses on the Philosophy of History* opens – the puppet of historical materialism that wins only if «it enlists the services of theology, which today, as we know, is small and ugly and has to keep out of sight» – and had pronounced its failure: «this attempt must fail, because the materialist theory of social development cannot simply be fitted into the anarchical conception of the *Jetztzeiten* that intermittently break through fate as if from above» (Benjamin, 1940/2006: 389). Hence the Habermasian interpretation according to which «Benjamin did not succeed in his intention of uniting enlightenment and mysticism because the theologian in him could not bring himself to make the messianic theory of experience serviceable for historical materialism» (Habermas, 1972/1983: 149-150). The Habermasian appropriation of rescuing critique is therefore, by explicit admission, partial: it retains its normative content – the debt owed to the victims – and lets fall its philosophical framework of eschatology.

7. Conclusions: memory, redemption, responsibility between the generations

The sociology of memory has, for its part, underlined the peculiarity of Benjamin's form of remembrance. The German term is *Eingedenken*, which Grande proposes to render as “immemoration” and which «qualifies as a rather atypical form of remembrance, in which the dialectic of restitution between

¹⁸ The same conception of the origin is at the centre of Didi-Huberman's reading, for whom the Benjaminian *Ursprung* is not the source but «a whirlpool in the river of becoming [that] pulls the emerging matter into its own rhythm», so that decline itself forms part of it and the historicity that results demands «to be recognized as a restoration, a restitution, and as something that by that very fact is uncompleted, always open» (2005: 4). Hence the definition he proposes of the “dialectical image”: «it's not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, an image is that in which the Then and the Now come into a constellation like a flash of lightning» (ivi: 7).

past and present is realized in something more than the merely descriptive reconstruction of the past»: it configures indeed «the possibility of safeguarding the right that the past has over the present, that is, what appears in Benjamin's eyes as a "lost future" awaiting reactivation» (2022: 33).

In other words, the force of *Eingedenken* lies «in its capacity to reactivate this unredeemed character of the past, to draw upon what has remained unfulfilled in history in order to open perspectives on the future» (ivi: 34). The line of inquiry is that of Jedlowski, who has proposed to extend the Benjaminian notion of redemption beyond the redemption of the oppressed, so as to include all «past futures», that is, the horizons of expectation that each generation has nourished: «That we were awaited on earth, as Benjamin writes, speaks of the responsibility of recalling what we hoped for. That every generation has received as its endowment a weak messianic power means that every generation has possessed the capacity to hope, and possesses it still: if we remember the hopes of those who preceded us on earth, then by hoping in our turn we make ourselves their heirs» (2017: 73-76). Commenting on the *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Leccardi, Jedlowski, and Cavalli maintain that one may come to see «the past not only and not as a reservoir of "not-yets", but also as a reservoir of "not-anymores" [...] a repertoire of unrealized possibilities that we can tap into to inspire the present and our future actions» (2023: 33).

Brought back to this register, Habermasian "anamnestic solidarity" too is not merely a debt owed to the victims: it is the safeguarding of the possibilities of a future that barbarism suppressed together with the persons. The sociological reading of the *Theses* makes it possible to illuminate, by contrast, the restitutive side of remembrance. Grande observes that in this text the Benjaminian idea of memory as critique is articulated, where «the theme of memory is addressed precisely from the standpoint of historical understanding, and the dominant motif refers back to the possibility of a critical recovery of the past in its integrity; this on the idea that the past does not correspond to something definitively concluded in itself, but presents a margin of incompleteness upon which it is possible to intervene» (2014: 287). It is exactly this margin of incompleteness that makes thinkable the "anamnestic reparation" of which Habermas himself speaks in the *Excursus on Benjamin's Theory on the Philosophy of History*: if the past were closed, solidarity with the victims would be a sentiment without an object; since it is not, that solidarity can take the form of a debt that the present contracts and that only remembrance can, virtually, settle.

The dialectical images of memory offered by Benjamin suggest, in this direction, «a perspective which, while on the one hand it embraces the effort to escape the absolutist promises and the illusions of the future, opens itself, on the other, to the possibility of tracing back to the critical re-examination of the past the root of every will directed at establishing what in the future may be different from the present» (Grande, 2014: 287). This is a critical gaze upon the historical *continuum* very close to the more general one proposed by Horkheimer and Adorno, who understood the development of self-consciousness and the resurgence of the lost past as an integral part of the process of emancipation. The thesis of the Frankfurt masters is of decisive importance for the Habermasian conception, because it establishes the equation between reification and forgetting that makes remembrance – and not only reflexivity and argumentation – a critical operation in its own right.

A further aspect touches the knot that Habermas introduces with the category of the *Nachgeborenen*. The assumption of responsibility in remembering, Grande writes, «transcends the generations and constitutes the basis for the recognition of the traumas that call for reparation and justice». Responsibility is to be assumed as a moral expression, as "answer" and at the same time "promise", built around the idea of a continuous time that binds past, present, and future. Leccardi condenses it in a maxim: «I am responsible today for my action of yesterday, just as I am responsible for the future consequences of my actions» (2007: 121). It is the temporal structure that sustains the 1985 *Excursus on Benjamin*, in which Habermas had maintained that anamnesis functions as a "decentring counterweight" to a modern time consciousness turned exclusively forwards. Generational transmission does not hand down to the *Nachgeborenen* a past, but rather a determinate representation of it, with its selections and its silences – and it is precisely this that makes its working through a task and not an indisputable given. The Habermasian distinction between collective guilt, which is rejected, and shared responsibility, which is

claimed, finds here its sociological translation: what is inherited is not the guilt of the fathers, but the unresolved tension of a transmission that no rite can render painless. In *On the Public Use of History*, Habermas outlines a model in which guilt is not isolated individual guilt but collective responsibility structured within rational public discourse: it is in the linguistic working through of the past, in civil and democratic exchange, that a shared morality is generated. The strength of a post-fascist democracy lies in keeping alive the moral sense of guilt through education, culture, and institutions. Habermas invokes the Benjaminian legacy in affirming that «There is first of all the obligation that we in Germany – even if no one else any longer assumes it – must, undisguisedly and not simply intellectually, keep awake the memory of the suffering of those murdered by German hands. These dead justifiably have a claim on a weak anamnestic power of solidarity, which those born afterward can only practice in the medium of the constantly renewed, often confused, always worrying memory». Towards «our Jewish fellow citizens, the sons, the daughters, the grandchildren of the murdered» (1986/1993: 165), Habermas speaks of a «common remembrance of that for which one cannot atone» (ivi: 167).

The analysis of memory processes illuminates precisely the generational dynamics that traverse the question of guilt. The passing of the baton entails a radical reconfiguration of the social frameworks of remembrance: when the direct witnesses disappear, memory risks drying up into a purely historiographical reconstruction, or exposing itself to forms of secondary revisionism. It is the problem that Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi posed in observing that generational transmission «shows itself heavily impregnated with tensions when the legacy to be transmitted is steeped in forms of violence» (1988: 11), and that Jedlowski has taken up by proposing to study “memories of the future”, that is, the expectations and projects that each generation inherits along with the past (2016: 121-130). The urbanization of Benjamin’s theses specifies the reach of a project that becomes political in a direction which the messianic register risks obscuring on the soteriological plane.

It is precisely within the horizon of generational succession that the Habermasian thesis of “constitutional patriotism” displays its full cogency: the moral unity of a nation that has emerged from the barbarism of Nazism cannot rest on a presumed ethnic-cultural continuity with the past, but on the reflexive internalization of a republican political culture that has made of Auschwitz its own principle of arrest and its own critical filter. There is, then, a nexus between memory and democratic form. Constitutional patriotism protects against the manipulation of the past not because it prescribes the right memory, but because it institutes the conditions in which competing memories can expose themselves reciprocally to critique: it is plurality, not prescription, that makes revisionism costly.

What that remembrance is to produce is the question to which Adorno had replied in *Education after Auschwitz*. The lecture had opened with a formula that has the value of a methodological premise – «the premier demand upon all education is that Auschwitz not happen again» (Adorno, 1966/1998: 191) – and from it there followed a consequence bearing on the manner, and not the content, of transmission: «the single genuine power standing against the principle of Auschwitz is autonomy, if I might use the Kantian expression: the power of reflection, of self-determination, of not cooperating» (ivi: 195). The answer is therefore that «the only education that has any sense at all is an education toward critical self-reflection» (ivi: 193). The convergence with the Habermasian framework is precise: what is transmitted to the *Nachgeborenen* cannot be a prescribed memorial content, since a prescription would produce the very heteronomy that is to be prevented; it can only be the capacity to reflect on the conditions that such content documents.

The dialectic between consciousness-raising and rescuing critique proves decisive in the face of the resurgences of contemporary antisemitism. The assumption of historical responsibility cannot be delegated to the formal rites of the rule of law or to the verdicts of courts – as emerged from the conceptual limits of the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial – but requires a discursive labour within the open horizon of the public sphere. When collective memory loses its force of ethical resonance and is reduced to an administrative norm, it ceases to function as an antidote against discrimination and authoritarianism: it is the risk that Goldfarb named in speaking of mnemonic «clichés» and in calling for a memory «tempered by imagination» (Goldfarb, 2016: 63), and that Zachary Metz describes as the outcome of the present-

day «ortho-memorial practice» (2016: 288). We need neither collective identities paralysed by the memory of guilt nor identities pacified by rituals of commemoration, but identities that constitute themselves through a self-understanding capable of withstanding the confrontation with the legacy of history. Studies of Holocaust memories are exemplary, in part, because they pose the problem of how to transmit that memory to subsequent generations «so that they may recognize and combat the emergence of analogous phenomena», but also because they compel us to acknowledge «what of that memory persists, often in implicit and silent ways, though no less relevant for that to the lives of the descendants of victims and perpetrators alike» (Leccardi, Jedlowski, and Cavalli, 2023: 38). What counts, they specify, «is a dimension at once individual and collective: what the predecessors recount and how, as well as what and how the successors are able to ask» – and this «concerns the descendants not only of the victims, but of the perpetrators as well» (ibidem). The consequence the authors draw is that «the past cannot be changed, but its interpretation can, and so too can the service that memory renders to the future: against interpretations of the past that push us towards revenge, we can construct memories for which the past is no longer the entity holding the future hostage» (ivi: 38).

That labour has, in the sociological literature, a name that is worth adopting in closing, because it situates the German case within a transformation of worldwide scale. Olick calls it «politics of regret» and makes of it «a new principle of legitimation», under which he gathers «a variety of practices with which many contemporary societies confront toxic legacies of the past» – public apologies, reparations, trials, truth commissions (2007: 122). The category states exactly what our itinerary seeks to show: that the public working through of the past is not a moral supplement to democratic legitimacy but one of its sources, and that the relation of a political community to its own crimes has become a criterion by which it is judged and judges itself. And that what Habermas argued in 1986 as the obligation of a single nation has, in the meantime, been generalized into a principle, with all the risks of ritualization discussed here. Tota, Luchetti, and Hagen have condensed what is at stake in an asymmetric formula placed as an epigraph to the volume *Sociologie della memoria*: if for the victims forgetting is a right, for a collectivity remembering is a duty. It is this institutional and civic commitment that constitutes the core of what the editors themselves call an “ecology of the past”: the construction of communicative and memorial devices capable of preserving the trace of historical traumas without transforming them into rhetorical stereotypes or banal celebrations (2018).

It is now possible to state what the reciprocal grafting undertaken here adds to the two traditions on which it draws. From the sociology of memory, critical theory receives the demonstration that selectivity is the ordinary mode in which the past is produced, and hence that a self-critical public memory is a functional anomaly which no appeal to reason can generate without institutions, intellectuals, and conflict. From critical theory, the sociology of memory receives the criterion by which that anomaly is to be judged: the direction, not the intensity, of remembrance, and the persistence or otherwise of the conditions that made the commemorated events possible. On this basis the alternative announced in the title can be dissolved: not consciousness-raising *or* rescuing critique, but each through the other – the second supplying the debt that the first turns into an argument.

In conclusion, the public use of history is the regime in which memory becomes open to discussion: a space in which representations of the past expose themselves to the critique of other memories and in which the selectivity of every commemorative practice can be thematized rather than merely undergone. Within this space the two modes of critique that Habermas derives from Benjamin and from Adorno operate together: consciousness-raising, which discloses manipulations and keeps open the revision of the self, and rescuing critique, which binds identity to the debt owed to the victims and safeguards the space of possible futures. Their combination defines a public memory that is solidaristic and never completed: not a prescribed content, but a procedure of working through that holds together peace through law and peace through memory. It is in this practice, as fragile and revocable as the democracy that hosts it, that the imperative of non-regression finds its only guarantee.

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“Ghosts in the Machine”: Digital Memory, Loss and Algorithmic Oblivion

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Abstract. This article revisits the Frankfurt School’s reflections on trauma and memory to theorise Holocaust commemoration in the age of the ‘platform society’. Drawing on Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of the culture industry, Benjamin’s notion of redemption, and Marcuse’s account of art and fantasy as preserving ‘the unconscious memory of a failed liberation, of a betrayed promise’, it conceptualises algorithmic oblivion as a structural tendency through which mnemonic traces proliferate while critical engagement weakens, as memory increasingly circulates as spectacle rather than symbolic elaboration. Methodologically, the study combines critical theory with a netnographic interpretative analysis of 300 posts published between January and August 2025 on Instagram, Facebook, and X, sampled through ten Holocaust-related hashtags. The posts were coded in MAXQDA according to six analytical axes –standardised memorial tropes, aestheticisation/spectacularisation, algorithmic grammars, politicisation/semantic conflict, counter-memory, and critical/self-critical memory –organised into three categories: ritual, conflict, and critique. The findings point to platform-specific grammars of grief: Instagram foregrounds curated solemnity and aestheticised spectacle; Facebook privileges institutional framing and pedagogical ritualisation; X politicises remembrance through real-time, conflictual discourse. Across platforms, however, counter-memorial practices emerge that resist algorithmic flux, restore historical framing, and reopen the space of mourning. The article proposes a theoretical and empirical framework to distinguish between memory as spectacle and memory as critique, arguing that digital infrastructures not only shape what is remembered, but also condition the very possibilities of remembrance.

Keywords: Digital memory; Algorithmic oblivion; Holocaust; Frankfurt School; Netnography; Social media; Counter-memory.

Riassunto. Questo articolo riprende le riflessioni della Scuola di Francoforte su trauma e memoria per teorizzare la commemorazione della Shoah nell’era della “platform society”. Muovendo dalla critica dell’industria culturale di Adorno e Horkheimer, dalla nozione benjaminiana di redenzione e dalla concezione marcusiana dell’arte e della fantasia come custodi della «memoria inconscia di una liberazione mancata, di una promessa tradita», l’articolo concettualizza l’*oblio algoritmico* come una tendenza strutturale attraverso cui le tracce mnestiche proliferano mentre l’impegno critico si attenua, poiché la memoria circola sempre più come spettacolo piuttosto che come elaborazione simbolica. Dal punto di vista metodologico, lo studio combina la teoria critica con un’analisi interpretativa etnografica di 300 post pubblicati tra gennaio e agosto 2025 su Instagram, Facebook e X, selezionati attraverso dieci hashtag legati alla Shoah. I post sono stati codificati in MAXQDA secondo sei assi analitici–tropi memoriali standardizzati, estetizzazione/spettacularizzazione, grammatiche algoritmiche, politicizzazione/confitto semantico, contro-memoria e memoria critica/autocritica–organizzati in tre macro-categorie: rituale, conflitto e critica. I risultati evidenziano grammatiche del lutto specifiche per piattaforma: Instagram privilegia una solennità curata e una spettacolarizzazione estetizzata; Facebook favorisce cornici istituzionali e ritualità pedagogiche; X politicizza la memoria attraverso un discorso conflittuale in tempo reale. Tuttavia, su tutte le piattaforme emergono anche pratiche contro-memoriali che resistono al flusso algoritmico, reintroducono il contesto storico ed espandono le possibilità del lutto. L’articolo propone un quadro teorico ed empirico per distinguere tra memoria come spettacolo e memoria come critica, sostenendo che le infrastrutture digitali non solo plasmano ciò che viene ricordato, ma condizionano anche le stesse possibilità del ricordare.

Parole chiave: Memoria digitale; Oblio algoritmico; Shoah; Scuola di Francoforte; Netnografia; Social media; Contro-memoria.

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Introduction

«How can one celebrate this Memorial Day, Lloyd?
By not confusing memory with remembrance, sir.
And what would be the difference, Lloyd?
Remembrance honours the dead we must not forget, sir.
Memory preserves the facts we must not repeat.
I fear that memory is being lost along with reason, Lloyd.
And that is why we must fight to defend it, sir.
Every day? Every minute, sir».¹
(Simone Tempia)

This imaginary dialogue with the butler Lloyd (Tempia, 2016) crystallises a fundamental tension running through contemporary commemorative culture: the distinction between remembrance as ritualised homage and memory as critical, historically grounded labour. While remembrance tends to stabilise itself in symbolic gestures – acts that reassure rather than unsettle – memory, in its stronger sense, demands contextualisation, reflexivity, and ethical vigilance. It is a practice of elaboration rather than mere retrospection.

In the digital age, this tension becomes particularly salient. Social media platforms do not simply host commemorative acts; they reconfigure the conditions under which remembrance, mourning, and forgetting take place. Logics of visibility and algorithmic curation shape what becomes salient and what recedes from view, often privileging affective immediacy over historical depth.

It is within this transformed mnemonic environment that Holocaust commemoration must now be re-examined. The circulation of Holocaust memory across platforms reflects what Baer and Sznajder (2016) have conceptualised as the globalisation of Holocaust memory, detached from national frameworks yet unevenly recontextualised.

The title *Ghosts in the Machine* intentionally echoes Gilbert Ryle's critique of Cartesian dualism (1949). Here, however, the 'ghost' is reworked as a metaphor for the spectral condition of digital memory: traces of trauma and loss appear fleeting and immaterial, yet remain deeply shaped by platform infrastructures and political-economic logics.

Within digital environments, what survives historical trauma no longer persists as lived memory in the classical sense, but as an algorithmically mediated residue: fragments of testimony, ritualised images, hashtags, quotations, and performative gestures that circulate independently of their original contexts. These 'ghosts' of experience are continuously reassembled through metrics of visibility, engagement, and monetisation, producing a form of remembrance that is at once omnipresent and decontextualised. Trauma, once anchored in embodied suffering and collective historical consciousness, risks being transformed into datafied remembrance – present everywhere, yet increasingly detached from critical reflection and symbolic integration.

The central question is therefore how the digital mediation of Holocaust remembrance reshapes historical trauma into a spectral, algorithmically mediated form of memory and what this shift entails for the possibility of critical remembrance in contemporary digital culture. While platforms promise unprecedented access, participation, and mnemonic pluralism, they also tend to standardise commemoration into repetitive and easily consumable forms. The very conditions that enable remembrance to circulate widely may thus simultaneously erode its reflexive, ethical, and critical dimensions.

In this light, digital memory appears neither inherently emancipatory nor merely manipulative. Rather, it constitutes a contested terrain in which practices of critical remembrance coexist with processes of neutralisation, commodification, and ideological smoothing. The 'ghosts in the machine' name this unresolved tension: the persistent presence of historical trauma within systems that preserve memory while subjecting it to the logics of visibility, repetition, and exchange. Examining these dynamics through a critical theoretical lens makes it possible to interrogate not only how Holocaust

¹ Vernacular meme on *Instagram* (posted on January 27, 2024), with 10,510 likes ([instagram.com/vita_con_lloyd](https://www.instagram.com/vita_con_lloyd)) and on *Facebook* ([facebook.com/vitaconlloyd](https://www.facebook.com/vitaconlloyd)). Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine.

memory circulates online, but also how the conditions of digital culture shape what can still be remembered critically.

Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and X no longer merely mediate memory; they organise it. Couldry and Hepp (2017) conceptualise contemporary social life as ‘deeply mediatized’, arguing that media are no longer external channels of representation but infrastructures through which social reality itself is constructed and enacted. In the age of digital platforms, media operate as environments that organise practices, relations, and forms of meaning-making. Rather than merely shaping communication, media increasingly ‘constitute the social’ (p. 3), requiring social theory to rethink its foundational categories in light of mediated realities.

Rituals once anchored in monuments, archives, or testimonial transmission now circulate through feeds, hashtags, and engagement metrics. A paradoxical condition takes shape: the proliferation of commemorative traces coincides with a weakening of symbolic working-through – a phenomenon conceptualised here as ‘algorithmic oblivion’.

The analysis proceeds through a qualitative and interpretive approach that treats memory as a dynamic cultural practice shaped by communication infrastructures, rather than as a fixed archive. Following Olick *et al.* (2011), memory is approached here not as a static repository of the past, but as memory-labour: a dynamic set of practices, narratives, and conflicts through which the past is continually rearticulated.

To examine this condition, the article reclaims the critical vocabulary of the Frankfurt School. Within the Frankfurt School tradition, critique is inseparable from a suspicion toward forms of reconciliation that mask domination, a concern central to Jay’s reconstruction of critical theory (1982). Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of the culture industry illuminates how standardised tropes and pseudo-individualisation reappear in digital commemoration; Benjamin’s philosophy of history foregrounds the imperative to rescue threatened images of the past; Marcuse (1955) interprets the artistic imagination as preserving the “‘unconscious memory” of the liberation that failed, of the promise that was betrayed’ (p. 144). In Marcuse’s perspective, memory does not function as reconciliation with the past, but as the preservation of unrealised possibilities that continue to negate the existing order. Rather than integrating historical suffering into a coherent narrative, such remembrance sustains critique precisely by refusing closure and by keeping alive the memory of what could have been.

Freud’s psychoanalytic distinction between repetition and working-through remains central to understanding how traumatic material resurfaces in transformed symbolic forms.

Building on this tradition, the article combines theoretical reflection with a qualitative netnographic study of 300 posts drawn from ten Holocaust-related hashtags published between January and August 2025 on Instagram, Facebook, and X. Using MAXQDA, posts were coded along six analytical axes that capture the oscillation between ritualisation, conflict, and critique.

Two lines of inquiry structure the analysis: a critical reinterpretation of Holocaust memory within the algorithmic ecosystem, and the identification of counter-memorial practices that resist commodification and reassert the ethical and political stakes of remembrance. Rather than simply ‘applying’ Frankfurt School concepts to digital media, the article approaches platformed memory as a historical mutation. Such a return to Frankfurt does not imply the uncritical transposition of inherited categories to the present, but their reactivation in relation to transformed historical conditions. As Fazio (2020) suggests, the continuing relevance of Critical Theory lies precisely in recovering its critical intentions while rethinking its conceptual vocabulary in light of contemporary forms of digitalisation, surveillance, and social administration. Algorithmic infrastructures do not replace mass culture; they radicalise its tendencies, transforming remembrance into a circulatory regime governed by visibility, repetition, and affective immediacy. Within this regime, memory risks losing its character as symbolic labour and regressing into ritualised repetition or ideological instrumentalisation.

Against this background, the article contributes to digital memory studies by introducing the concept of algorithmic oblivion to explain how platform infrastructures reshape Holocaust remembrance through logics of visibility, rapid circulation, and affective immediacy. Empirically, it

shows how Instagram, Facebook, and X organise distinct platform grammars of remembrance, while also leaving room for counter-memorial practices that resist ritualisation and spectacularisation.

1. Memory as Data: From Archive to Supply

Within trauma studies, the Holocaust has long been understood not merely as a historical event, but as a rupture that exceeds representational frameworks and challenges the very possibility of narration (LaCapra, 2014 [2001]; Eyerman, 2013; Hirsch, 2012). Its memory resists closure, linearisation, and full symbolic mastery, returning instead in fragmented, belated, or repetitive forms. From this perspective, the Frankfurt School's reflections on memory, repression, and the administered world intersect productively with psychoanalytic trauma theory: both foreground the risk that what cannot be worked through returns in distorted, ritualised, or compulsively repeated forms (Adorno and Tiedemann, 2003; Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002 [1944/47]).

In this context, the transformation of memory into data is more than a shift in medium or format; it reconfigures the temporal, symbolic, and political conditions under which traumatic memory circulates. In traditional settings, archives were embedded in institutional frameworks – libraries, museums, state repositories – governed by principles of preservation, contextualisation, and epistemic responsibility (Assmann, 2011; Erll, 2011). Their function was not simply to store traces of the past, but to stabilise historical narratives and sustain the slow work of collective reflection.

Platform infrastructures increasingly absorb and displace this archival function. Yet their governing logic is not oriented towards preservation or historical depth, but towards prediction, monetisation, and real-time interaction (van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal, 2018). Memory, under these conditions, is reorganised as a continuous flow of data, optimised for visibility, engagement, and circulation. The result is a mnemonic regime in which remembrance is valued less for its capacity to sustain understanding than for its capacity to generate affective response.

Psychoanalytically, this shift carries decisive implications. In *Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through* (1914), Sigmund Freud argued that repressed material does not simply disappear, but returns in transformed and symptomatic forms. Repetition, in this sense, signals not mastery but the persistence of an unresolved past; working-through designates the temporal labour² through which repetition may be gradually transformed into symbolic elaboration and historical intelligibility (Freud, 1958 [1914]). In traumatic memory, the failure of working-through results not in forgetting, but in compulsive return. Freud's distinction is mobilised here not in a clinical sense, but as a formal theory of memory processes applicable at the cultural level. Digital platforms structurally tend to privilege repetition over working-through. They multiply mnemonic traces while weakening the temporal, narrative, and symbolic conditions necessary for elaboration. Fragments of the past return incessantly – images, slogans, quotations, ritual gestures – detached from historical context and narrative integration. Algorithmic circulation thus risks producing a collective form of acting-out, in which trauma reappears as spectacle rather than being transformed through reflective engagement (LaCapra, 2014 [2001]). From the perspective of cultural trauma theory, remembrance operates less as the preservation of factual knowledge than as an ongoing process of meaning-making through which societies negotiate responsibility, identity, and moral orientation (Eyerman, 2013).

This tension can be further clarified by revisiting the concept of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* as developed within Critical Theory. In its original formulation by Theodor W. Adorno (1959), *Aufarbeitung* designates more than the symbolic acknowledgment of historical wrongdoing. It names a materialist and fundamentally negative practice: not the reconciliatory integration of the past into a coherent collective narrative, but a critical confrontation with the structural conditions that enabled catastrophe and that may persist into the present. From this perspective, remembrance becomes ideological whenever moral condemnation or ritualised commemoration substitutes for an analysis of social continuities and objective conditions.

² Here, “labour” refers to a temporally extended and reflexive process of working-through, rather than to productive or instrumental work, drawing on psychoanalytic and Critical Theory traditions.

By contrast, Jürgen Habermas (1995) rearticulates *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in a more explicitly normative and discursive key, emphasising processes of public deliberation, moral learning, and the reflexive reshaping of collective identity through the acknowledgment of past injustice. While this idealist paradigm foregrounds the transformative potential of self-understanding and democratic discourse, it also opens the risk – already identified by Adorno – of reconciliation becoming premature or compensatory. As Johannes Schulz (2024) has argued, these two paradigms should be analytically distinguished: an idealist model oriented towards collective self-enlightenment and a materialist model aimed at uncovering the enduring structural causes of past violence.

Platformed forms of commemoration tend to privilege visibility, repetition, and affective affirmation, thereby aligning more easily with idealist modes of working through the past, while marginalising the slower, conflictual, and structurally oriented labour implied by Adorno's materialist conception of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. The Frankfurt School's critique of mass culture provides a useful lens through which to understand this tendency. Horkheimer and Adorno (2002 [1944/1947]) show how cultural standardisation and commodification can neutralise negativity by incorporating potentially disruptive forms into established patterns of consumption. Applied to traumatic remembrance, this critique draws attention to the risk that historical suffering, once formatted as readily consumable cultural content, may lose some of its capacity to disturb established meanings and provoke critical reflection. Under platform conditions, this tendency is intensified: memory circulates as repeatable, shareable, and increasingly standardised content, potentially displacing confrontation with historical rupture in favour of recognisable and affectively accessible forms.

Contemporary theories of digital memory further clarify this transformation. Van Dijck (2007; 2013) has shown how platforms replace the archive with the feed: a temporally unstable, affect-driven stream organised around behavioural prediction rather than historical relevance. Users do not retrieve memory; they scroll through it. Remembering becomes a performative and responsive act, shaped by metrics of visibility and participation. In this environment, memory is increasingly anticipatory, formatted for discoverability and algorithmic resonance rather than for contextual depth.

Stiegler's notion of tertiary retention provides a further critical lens. The technical exteriorisation of memory, he argues, is no longer collectively governed, but increasingly designed, owned, and monetised by industrial systems (Stiegler, 2010). Platforms thus operate as memory brokers, shaping not only what is remembered, but how societies relate to their past. Mnemonic traces are fragmented, decontextualised, and reassembled according to logics of novelty and engagement, rather than continuity or symbolic integration.

The problem is not simply the digitisation of memory, but the fate of traumatic memory under conditions that privilege circulation over elaboration. Platformed remembrance tends to reproduce the very dynamics that trauma theory identifies as obstacles to working-through: repetition without transformation, visibility without historical intelligibility, and affect without narrative integration. Memory proliferates as data, yet risks losing its capacity to sustain critical engagement with the past. This compression of remembrance into a continuous present can be read in light of Koselleck's (2004) analysis of modern regimes of historicity, in which the relationship between past, present, and future is historically variable rather than given.

This tension constitutes the precondition for algorithmic oblivion, understood not as the disappearance of memory but as its compulsive circulation in forms that weaken the possibility of symbolic and historical working-through.

Seen in this light, digital commemoration can also be approached through Mannheim's (1952) account of generational transmission. For Mannheim, new generations encounter the inherited cultural heritage through a process of 'fresh contact', involving not simply transmission but selection, reinterpretation, and the reorganisation of inherited experience (pp. 171–173). This process becomes particularly significant as Holocaust memory increasingly passes to generations without direct biographical ties to the event. Digital platforms are therefore not merely spaces in which inherited memories are preserved, but environments in which they are selected and rearticulated through contemporary visual, affective, and communicative practices.

2. Spectacle, Loss, and the Commodification of Grief

Inspired by Adorno's critique of the culture industry (Adorno, 1991) and Butler's notion of "grievability" (the right to mourn) (2016), this section examines how mourning is increasingly subsumed into the attention economy. For Adorno, the culture industry standardises and commodifies cultural expression, transforming even the most intimate or critical forms of art into products aligned with the imperatives of mass consumption. Within digital platforms, this logic extends to mourning itself: grief is repackaged as consumable content, optimised for algorithmic circulation and attention capture. From this angle, the spectacularisation of remembrance can be understood in Debord's sense (2021 [1967]), as a transformation of historical suffering into consumable appearances circulating within the economy of attention.

Digital memorials – whether in the form of social media posts, remembrance pages, or video montages – present themselves as spaces of solidarity and witness. Yet their circulation within platform logics often transforms them into commodities, valued for their capacity to generate engagement rather than to foster reflective or transformative remembrance. As Adorno argued, when cultural forms are subsumed under the logic of exchange, their critical or emancipatory potential is diminished. Mourning, in this sense, risks becoming a predictable genre within the repertoire of platform content.

Within the platform economy, grief is frequently aestheticised: images of candles, black-and-white portraits and carefully curated captions become part of a visual language optimised for emotional immediacy. This process can strip mourning of its historical and political depth, transforming loss into an affective moment to be consumed, liked, and shared. The risk, as Hirsch (2012) and LaCapra (2014 [2001]) warn, is that memory becomes a repetitive performance rather than a symbolic working-through, precluding the critical work necessary to process trauma.

The visibility of grief is also profoundly unequal. Certain tragedies – often those involving individuals who conform dominant cultural norms – receive amplified media coverage and widespread digital commemoration, while others remain marginalised or invisible. Butler's concept of grievability (2016) highlights this structural inequality: not all lives are recognised as worthy of public mourning. In the context of digital platforms, this inequality is further shaped by algorithmic preferences, which favour content that attracts high engagement, reinforcing existing social and geopolitical hierarchies.

Finally, the commodification of grief also raises questions about ownership and control. Platform terms of service often grant companies broad rights over user-generated commemorative content, effectively placing even the most intimate acts of mourning into a corporate archive. In this case, the logic of the culture industry – as diagnosed by Adorno – meets the infrastructure of data capitalism, producing a form of mourning that is both public and privatised, visible yet subject to corporate governance.

This dynamic recalls Marcuse's insight (1955) into the ambivalence of aesthetic form. While art preserves the unconscious memory of a betrayed promise, its pleasurable and reconciliatory qualities simultaneously risk neutralising critique. Under platform conditions, this ambivalence is intensified: aestheticised grief circulates as consumable affect, preserving traces of historical suffering while dulling its capacity to disturb, negate, or demand transformation.

3. Algorithmic Oblivion: The New Regime of Forgetting

While digital platforms present themselves as unprecedented repositories of human memory, they simultaneously enact novel and structurally specific forms of forgetting. This paradoxical condition can be described as *algorithmic oblivion*: a regime in which mnemonic traces proliferate, yet the conditions for symbolic integration and historical working-through are progressively weakened. Oblivion, in this sense, does not denote the absence or erasure of memory, but its compulsive circulation in decontextualised and repetitious forms.

Algorithmic oblivion should not, however, be understood as a deterministic effect of platform infrastructures or as a condition that uniformly governs users' mnemonic practices. It describes a structural tendency through which platforms shape the conditions of visibility, temporality, and

circulation without fully determining how users interpret, appropriate, negotiate, or resist them. The same affordances that favour repetition and affective immediacy may therefore also be mobilised to produce contextualisation, testimony, pedagogical engagement, or critical reflection. What is at stake is not the disappearance of user agency, but the conditions under which that agency is exercised.

From the standpoint of trauma theory, this dynamic becomes deeply problematic. As Freud demonstrated, traumatic memory does not obey the logic of linear recall. What cannot be symbolically elaborated returns in repetitive, fragmented, or displaced forms, often as acting-out rather than recollection (Freud, 1958 [1914]). Remembering, in its critical sense, requires temporal distance, narrative mediation, and sustained interpretive labour. When these conditions are absent, repetition becomes compulsive rather than transformative.

Benjamin's insistence (2023 [1942]) that the past carries a 'secret index' binding it to redemption emphasises that memory is never guaranteed by repetition or preservation alone. The past matters only insofar as it enters into a relation with the present, activating unrealised possibilities and silenced lives as ethical claims rather than inert traces (pp. 3-4). Holocaust memory fails not through disappearance, but when it loses its capacity to address the present as a promise. Read through this lens, algorithmic oblivion is not defined by loss of traces, but by the disruption of the present-past relation through which those traces could become ethically claim-making.

Under platform conditions, this relation is systematically eroded by temporal architectures that privilege repetition, immediacy, and circulation over historical mediation. Their temporal architecture is organised around continuous refresh, novelty, and immediacy, encouraging users to encounter the past as an endlessly renewed present. Drawing on Chun's (2016) notion of habitual new media, platform memory can be understood as repetition without retention: content reappears incessantly, yet without accumulating narrative depth or historical coherence. The past is not integrated into a meaningful temporal sequence, but recirculated as affective stimulus. While the archive-feed distinction initially served to describe a structural shift in the organisation of memory, its implications become fully visible at the level of traumatic temporality.

From a Marcusean perspective, algorithmic temporality radicalises the historical alliance between time and domination. The continuous present produced by platform infrastructures erodes the capacity to remember not only what was, but what could have been. Oblivion thus operates not through erasure, but through temporal saturation: the incessant flow of the present displaces the memory of unrealised freedom.

Paradoxically, this condition recalls Mayer-Schönberger's (2011) argument that forgetting is not merely a failure of memory systems, but a necessary social function – one that digital infrastructures profoundly destabilise.

Adorno's critique of the culture industry offers a crucial framework for understanding this transformation. For Adorno, mass-mediated culture fosters passive consumption by standardising experience and neutralising negativity (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002). Under algorithmic conditions, this logic is intensified rather than superseded. Feeds curate memory fragments according to metrics of engagement, privileging what is immediately legible, emotionally resonant, and easily consumable.

The subject is increasingly positioned as a user navigating pre-selected mnemonic stimuli, although this positioning does not exhaust the ways in which individuals engage with the past. Users may reproduce dominant commemorative scripts, but they may also reinterpret, contextualise, or contest them through their own mnemonic practices.

This process produces a form of historical amnesia masked by hyper-visibility. As Huyssen (2003) has argued, modern cultures often respond to anxieties about forgetting with an excessive production of memory. In platform environments, this surplus is algorithmically managed. Posts, images, and videos are retrieved, amplified, or suppressed according to opaque criteria of relevance and profitability. This produces a selective recall that amplifies certain narratives while marginalising others, effectively producing an algorithmic historiography that writes and rewrites the past in real time. Such selective recall is not neutral. LaCapra (2014 [2001]) emphasises that unprocessed trauma risks oscillating between denial and compulsive repetition. Esposito (2017, p. 5) adds a further dimension to this problem, since memory cannot be reduced to the accumulation or repetition of mnemonic traces. It depends on selection and contextualisation, and therefore on the interplay

between remembering and forgetting. What changes under platform conditions, therefore, is not the inherently selective character of cultural memory, but the infrastructural conditions under which selection, visibility, and forgetting take place.

Algorithmic oblivion gives this dynamic a specifically infrastructural form. Traumatic pasts are neither silenced nor worked through; they are perpetually reactivated without the symbolic scaffolding necessary for elaboration. Holocaust memory, under these conditions, risks becoming an object of ritualised circulation or political instrumentalisation rather than a site of ethical confrontation. Stiegler's analysis of tertiary retention further illuminates the stakes of this regime. The technical exteriorisation of memory, once associated with collective transmission and care, is increasingly subordinated to industrial and commercial logics (Stiegler, 2010). Platforms function as custodians of collective remembrance while simultaneously expropriating users' capacity to shape temporal relations to the past. Memory becomes proletarianised: individuals participate in remembrance without exercising meaningful control over its organisation, duration, or interpretive framing.

Algorithmic oblivion can therefore be understood as a structuring of forgetting. It is not merely that certain memories disappear from view; rather, the very forms through which memory can appear are shaped in advance. The feed privileges immediacy over duration, affect over interpretation, and rapid circulation at the expense of historical framing. In doing so, it undermines the conditions necessary for what Adorno termed *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* – a critical working-through of the past that resists reconciliation and closure.

Yet algorithmic oblivion does not exhaust the possibilities of digital remembrance. Precisely because it operates through repetition and circulation, it also generates points of friction in which historical context, testimony, and symbolic labour may re-emerge.

In this sense, algorithmic oblivion names not a total condition, but a contested regime. It designates the dominant tendency of platformised memory to transform trauma into endlessly circulating fragments, while also delineating the terrain on which counter-memorial practices may emerge. Understanding this regime is therefore a prerequisite for identifying how digital environments can both inhibit and, under certain conditions, sustain the critical work of remembering.

4. Counter-Memory and Platform Resistance

Against this tendency, counter-memory designates practices that reintroduce duration, context, and critical reflexivity into digital remembrance. Counter-memory does not simply oppose memory to forgetting; rather, it intervenes in the very forms through which memory appears, circulates, and acquires meaning within platform environments.

These practices resonate with Marcuse's notion of unconscious memory as the preservation of unrealised freedom and betrayed promises. Counter-memorial interventions do not aim at reconciling the past with the present; instead, they keep the negation of existing conditions alive by resisting closure, saturation, and aesthetic pacification.

The concept of counter-memory is commonly traced back to Foucault, for whom it signalled a challenge to official histories and institutionalised narratives (Foucault, 1977). In the present context, however, counter-memory must be understood not only as a political or historiographical intervention, but as a response to the specific dynamics of traumatic memory under algorithmic conditions. What is at stake is not merely the contestation of dominant narratives, but the preservation of the conditions necessary for working-through in environments that structurally favour repetition and immediacy.

As trauma theory has shown, working-through requires temporal spacing, narrative mediation, and interpretive labour (Freud, 1958 [1914]; LaCapra, 2014 [2001]). Counter-memorial practices on social media often enact precisely these operations: they slow down the feed, expand captions beyond minimal affective cues, foreground testimony and archival material, and explicitly situate fragments of the past within historical and relational frameworks. In doing so, they interrupt the compulsive circulation of decontextualised traces and reopen the possibility of reflective engagement.

Critical theory provides a further lens through which to interpret these practices. The Frankfurt School's emphasis on negativity and its resistance to premature reconciliation directs attention to

forms of remembrance that refuse to resolve historical catastrophe into reassuring or stabilised meanings. From this perspective, counter-memory does not seek closure or offer consolatory narratives. Rather, it preserves dissonance, discomfort, and unresolved tension as conditions for critical remembrance. In digital environments saturated with standardised tropes and emotionally reassuring rituals, such refusal acquires particular significance.

Benjamin's philosophy of history sharpens this point. His notion of redemption does not imply salvation or completion, but the rescue of threatened images of the past from conformist continuity (Benjamin, 2023 [1942]). Counter-memorial practices can be read as attempts to seize such images at moments of danger, interrupting the homogeneous flow of platform time. By insisting on historical specificity and by foregrounding silenced or marginalised experiences, they challenge the logic through which algorithms privilege what is already legible, popular, and affectively resonant.

The political stakes of counter-memory are further illuminated by Butler's concept of grievability. Digital platforms reproduce and intensify hierarchies of visibility that determine which lives are publicly mourned and which remain peripheral (Butler, 2016). Counter-memorial practices contest these hierarchies by expanding the field of mournability, drawing attention to victims historically excluded from dominant Holocaust narratives – such as Romani people, disabled individuals, and homosexual victims – and by questioning the limits of ritualised commemoration. In this sense, counter-memory operates as an intervention into the moral economy of attention, not merely into representational content.

At the same time, counter-memory within platform environments remains structurally precarious. As van Dijck (2013) has emphasised, platforms are not neutral stages but actors with economic and political interests that shape visibility, longevity, and circulation. Practices that slow down attention, resist aestheticisation, or foreground complexity may be downranked, marginalised, or absorbed into dominant formats. Resistance is therefore neither external to platform infrastructures nor guaranteed to endure; it unfolds within constraints that constantly threaten co-optation.

For this reason, counter-memory should not be idealised as an alternative regime of remembrance, but understood as a fragile and situational practice. Its significance lies not in overcoming algorithmic oblivion, but in exposing its limits. By reintroducing friction into the flow of digital memory, counter-memorial practices keep open the space of symbolic labour that trauma demands. They demonstrate that, even within environments structured by circulation and optimisation, memory can still function as critique rather than spectacle.

Here, counter-memory marks the point at which digital remembrance becomes reflexive. It is where memory turns back upon its own conditions of possibility, interrogating not only what is remembered, but how and under what constraints remembering takes place. Such practices do not resolve the tensions of platformised memory, but they render them visible – and, in doing so, sustain the ethical and critical work of remembering in the aftermath of historical catastrophe.

5. Methodology

This study combines critical theory with a netnographic analysis of Holocaust commemoration on social media platforms. Adopting an interpretive and reflexive stance, memory is approached not as a stable object or transmissible content, but as a situated cultural practice that is continually enacted through platform infrastructures, affective repertoires, and algorithmically structured logics of circulation. From this perspective, remembrance emerges at the intersection of symbolic forms, technological mediation, and social interaction, rather than as a simple reflection of pre-existing historical knowledge (Erll, 2011; Neiger, Meyers, & Zandberg, 2011).

This approach is especially suited to the study of traumatic memory. Trauma, as theorised within psychoanalytic and cultural frameworks, resists linear narration and stable representation, manifesting instead through repetition, displacement, and fragmented return (Freud, 1958 [1914]; LaCapra, 2014 [2001]). A netnographic methodology allows these dynamics to be examined *in situ*, by observing how traumatic pasts are activated, ritualised, contested, or critically reworked within everyday digital practices.

5.1 Data collection and corpus construction

The empirical material consists of 300 publicly accessible posts published on Instagram, Facebook, and X between 1 January and 31 August 2025. While limited in scale, the corpus is appropriate for an in-depth qualitative and interpretive analysis aimed not at statistical generalisation, but at identifying recurrent mnemonic patterns and platform-specific grammars of remembrance. The time frame was selected in order to capture both routinised and intensified moments of Holocaust remembrance, including two major mnemonic peaks: International Holocaust Remembrance Day (27 January) and Yom HaShoah (27-28 April). Analysing posts produced both during and beyond these commemorative nodes allows for an examination of how Holocaust memory is periodically ritualised, reactivated, and reframed within the temporal rhythms of platform-driven attention.

Posts were identified through ten Holocaust-related hashtags, including: #HolocaustMemorialDay; #WeRemember; #Shoah; #Auschwitz; #YomHaShoah; #HolocaustSurvivor; #AntiSemitism; #NeverForget; #giornodellamemoria; #viaggiodellamemoria. These hashtags functioned not merely as sampling devices, but as discursive markers signalling participation in commemorative practices and facilitating the circulation of memory within platformed publics.

Posts were collected manually through the native search interfaces of each platform. No API, automated scraping tool, or third-party data-extraction software was used. For each platform, the ten selected hashtags were entered individually into the search function, and the resulting publicly accessible posts were examined one by one. Posts in both English and Italian were included and analysed in their original language. Relevant posts were documented either by screenshot or by copying their textual content into a dedicated Word file, with a separate corpus file created for Instagram, Facebook, and X. The three platform-specific corpora were subsequently imported into MAXQDA, where both visual and textual materials were coded and analysed.

The manual collection procedure was consistent with the qualitative and interpretive orientation of the study, as it enabled posts to be assessed in their immediate communicative and visual context rather than treated as decontextualised data points. A stratified, quota-based sampling strategy was used to maximise analytical variation rather than statistical representativeness. The final corpus comprised 100 posts per platform, balanced across (a) the ten selected hashtags; (b) three temporal sub-periods (January–February, March–May, and June–August); and (c) institutional and individual accounts, where feasible. Within each stratum, posts were examined sequentially through the hashtag search results and included when they contained substantive commemorative, historical, or reflective content relevant to Holocaust remembrance. Duplicate posts, near-identical reposts, purely commercial or promotional material, hashtag spam, and content from private or inaccessible accounts were excluded. Comment threads were not systematically included in the corpus. However, when the discussion generated by a post was considered analytically significant for understanding how its mnemonic meaning was negotiated, contested, or reframed by users, relevant comments were documented and included in the qualitative analysis. These discussions were treated as contextual material rather than as independent units of analysis.

At the same time, the study recognises that hashtag search results on social media platforms are not neutral or fully reproducible outputs. Searches were conducted in a logged-in browsing environment rather than through neutral or incognito sessions. The visibility and ordering of posts may therefore have been affected by platform-specific ranking mechanisms and personalised signals associated with the browsing environment. The study did not attempt to reconstruct or experimentally control these recommendation systems, nor does the resulting corpus claim to represent the complete universe of posts associated with the selected hashtags. Rather, it constitutes a purposively constructed qualitative corpus of publicly accessible commemorative content encountered through the platforms' native interfaces during the period of data collection. Algorithmic mediation is therefore treated not only as an object of theoretical analysis but also as a methodological condition of access to the field.

5.2 Analytical strategy and codebook development

Coding was not based on a purely inductive logic; instead, a dialogical approach was adopted, in which empirical observation and critical theory were iteratively brought into relation (Kozinets, 2019). The six analytical axes were neither derived solely from the data nor imposed deductively from theory; rather, they emerged through an abductive process that linked key theoretical tensions to empirically observable patterns. Each axis captures a tension identified in the theoretical framework developed in the previous sections – such as repetition and working-through, spectacle and critique, or circulation and contextualisation. In this way, the codebook operates as a bridge between Frankfurt School concepts, psychoanalytic trauma theory, and platform-specific mnemonic practices. The six axes were organised into three broader analytical categories.

1. Memory as Ritual, encompassing standardised memorial tropes, aestheticisation/spectacularisation, and algorithmic grammars;
2. Memory as Conflict, capturing politicisation, semantic struggles, and agonistic reframing;
3. Memory as Critique, including counter-memory and critical/self-critical memory practices.

Coding was conducted by the author using MAXQDA through an iterative process, allowing for systematic comparison across platforms while preserving the qualitative depth of individual posts. Posts could receive more than one code when multiple mnemonic dynamics were present. For the aggregate comparison reported in Table 2, however, each post was assigned a dominant analytical axis on the basis of its prevailing communicative and mnemonic function, in order to avoid double counting.

5.3 Methodological reflexivity and ethical considerations

All posts included in the corpus were publicly accessible at the time of collection, and no private data were used. Usernames were anonymised in the analytical notes unless the account belonged to a public institution or a widely recognised public figure. Direct quotations are reproduced only where analytically relevant, without usernames or other identifying metadata; quotations from widely recognised public figures, such as Liliana Segre, retain their attribution where authorship is relevant to the analysis. The analysis focuses on discursive and representational patterns rather than on individual users' intentions or psychological states.

Methodological reflexivity was central to the research process. The study does not aim to access the 'authentic' meaning of posts, but rather to interpret how remembrance is shaped, constrained, and enabled within specific platform environments. As van Dijck (2013) and Couldry and Hepp (2017) argue, platforms shape communicative practices; accordingly, the analysis attends not only to what is remembered, but also to how platform affordances and algorithmic logics configure the conditions of remembering.

By combining critical theory with qualitative netnography, this methodological framework enables an examination of Holocaust commemoration as a dynamic and contested practice within digital environments. It makes it possible to trace how traumatic memory is ritualised, politicised, or critically reworked across platforms, and to identify the conditions under which remembrance may still function as symbolic labour rather than as mere circulatory spectacle.

Table 1 presents the six analytical axes and their organisation into the three broader categories of ritual, conflict, and critique, showing how Holocaust memory is articulated, negotiated, and contested within digital environments.

The resulting framework captures the movement between ritualised repetition, political contestation, and critical reflection. Rather than forming a linear progression, these modes coexist and often overlap within the same posts or interactional threads, generating tensions between symbolic reassurance, ideological struggle, and reflexive critique. The observed patterns are consistent with platform logics that tend to privilege recognisable and repeatable forms of content, while interactional affordances may intensify conflict. Critical and counter-memorial practices, by contrast, appear less prevalent within the analysed corpus.

From a classical perspective, such ritualised forms of remembrance can be read as expressions of what Halbwachs (1992) described as the social frameworks of memory, within which individual acts of remembering are stabilised, repeated, and made intelligible through shared symbolic forms.

Table 1. Analytical Axes of Digital Holocaust Memory: Ritualisation, Conflict, and Critique

CODE / Sub-code	Operational Definition	Typical Posts (Examples)	Theoretical Connection
RITUAL			
Axis 1 – Standardised memorial tropes	Recurrent symbols, slogans, dates, and commemorative formulas that stabilise Holocaust remembrance in recognisable and repeatable forms.	Lighting digital candles; annual use of #HolocaustRemembranceDay; ‘Never Forget’ or ‘Never Again’; photographs of memorials or concentration camp sites.	Horkheimer and Adorno: standardisation and pseudo-individualisation; Halbwachs: collective memory stabilised through shared symbolic frameworks.
Axis 2 – Aestheticisation / Spectacularisation	Representation of Holocaust memory through visually curated, affectively charged, or spectacular forms that may privilege emotional immediacy over historical contextualisation.	Curated memorial imagery; black-and-white filters; stylised photographs of Auschwitz; reels combining commemorative images with music.	Horkheimer and Adorno: commodification and aesthetic neutralisation; Debord: spectacle; Marcuse: ambivalence of aesthetic form.
Axis 3 – Algorithmic grammars	Communicative practices adapted to platform logics of visibility, engagement, discoverability, and circulation.	Hashtag stacking; strategic tagging; platform-optimised visual formats; repetitive or highly shareable commemorative content.	van Dijck: platform connectivity; Helmond: platformisation; platform logics as conditions of algorithmic visibility and circulation.
CONFLICT			
Axis 4 – Politicisation / Semantic conflict / Antisemitism	Political appropriation of Holocaust memory, struggles over terminology and historical analogy, or explicitly antisemitic discourse.	Debates over comparisons between the Holocaust and other genocides; disputes over the use of the term ‘Shoah’; political instrumentalisation; denialism or antisemitic trolling.	Adorno: memory in tension with ideology; Horkheimer: instrumental reason; Marcuse: semantic struggles as ideological battlegrounds.
CRITIQUE			
Axis 5 – Counter-memory	Alternative mnemonic practices that challenge dominant narratives, exclusions, or established commemorative forms and reintroduce marginalised histories or perspectives.	Posts foregrounding Romani, disabled, or homosexual victims; family archives; survivor testimonies; grassroots commemorative practices; challenges to official narratives.	Foucault: counter-memory as disruption of dominant narratives; Benjamin: rescue of threatened or marginalised pasts; Butler: expansion of grievability.
Axis 6 – Critical / Self-critical memories	Reflexive interrogation of the forms, limits, exclusions, or banalising effects of digital commemoration itself.	‘Are we really remembering, or just posting?’; critiques of Auschwitz selfies; reflections on the exhaustion or ritual repetition of ‘Never Again’; questioning the aestheticisation of Holocaust memory.	Adorno: <i>Vergangenheitsbewältigung</i> as critical, non-reconciliatory working-through; Schulz: materialist and idealist paradigms of working through the past.

6. Comparative Findings. Platform Grammars of Holocaust Remembrance

The netnographic analysis of 300 posts across Instagram, Facebook, and X shows that Holocaust commemoration is profoundly shaped by platform-specific grammars of communication. Although all three platforms reproduce a shared repertoire of standardised memorial tropes –most notably the injunction ‘Never Forget’, often accompanied by images of Auschwitz, candles, or memorial sites – these tropes are inflected in distinct ways according to the socio-technical logics of each environment. Remembrance thus appears not as a uniform practice, but as a situated form of memory-work articulated through different platform cultures.

Helmond (2015) conceptualises *platformisation* as the process through which social media platforms extend their infrastructural and economic logic beyond their own boundaries, reformatting the wider web to make external data ‘platform ready’ (p.1). She shows that platforms operate through a dual logic of decentralising features across the web while recentralising data via APIs, plug-ins, and metadata. Platforms thus actively shape participation and visibility through material–technical architectures rather than functioning as neutral intermediaries.

On *Instagram*, commemorative practices are predominantly structured around aestheticisation and spectacularisation. Posts frequently rely on curated visual styles, filters, slow-motion reels, and background music, framing remembrance as an affective and shareable experience. Solemnity is performed through visual refinement rather than through contextual depth, aligning with Instagram’s broader culture of aesthetic self-presentation. This dynamic exemplifies the risk, identified by Adorno and Horkheimer, that memory may be transformed into a consumable aesthetic object, in which affective immediacy substitutes for critical engagement. At the same time, Instagram displays a pronounced reliance on algorithmic grammars: extended hashtag strings (#Shoah, #NeverAgain, #HolocaustMemorialDay, #History, #Education) are commonly used to maximise visibility and circulation. Against this background, instances of counter-memory emerge primarily in posts that deliberately interrupt the flow of images by incorporating archival material, extended captions, or family testimonies, thereby slowing down the fast-scrolling logic of the feed and reintroducing historical specificity.

On Facebook, Holocaust remembrance is largely organised through institutional framing. A significant proportion of posts originate from schools, museums, NGOs, and civic organisations, presenting commemoration as a collective pedagogical act embedded within organisational discourse. Here, the grammar of grief is less oriented towards visual performance and more towards narrative explanation, didactic framing, and institutional authority. This stabilising function supports continuity and transmission, yet it also tends to reproduce routinised and ritualised forms of memory. Importantly, however, Facebook also hosts a notable number of critical and self-critical interventions. These include posts that explicitly foreground groups historically marginalised within dominant Holocaust narratives –such as Romani people, disabled victims, and homosexual victims –and reflections on the exclusions and silences embedded in established commemorative practices. In such cases, remembrance functions not only as homage to the past, but as a reflexive interrogation of its limits.

On X, Holocaust memory is most clearly articulated through politicisation and semantic conflict. The platform’s real-time, agonistic communicative structure makes it particularly conducive to the mobilisation of Holocaust memory within contemporary political struggles. Posts frequently recontextualise the Shoah in relation to ongoing conflicts –most prominently the war in Gaza –producing highly polarised and confrontational discourses. Here, Holocaust memory becomes a contested symbolic resource, invoked alternately as a moral benchmark, a tool of accusation, or a rhetorical weapon. This dynamic illustrates how memory operates as a site of semantic struggle rather than consensual commemoration. X also accommodates significant forms of counter-memory and critical memory, especially in threaded posts that provide historical clarification, challenge instrumental uses of the Shoah, or explicitly critique the reduction of memory to slogan or analogy.

Across platforms, Holocaust remembrance oscillates between what may be described as spectacularised memory and critical remembrance. Instagram foregrounds aestheticised solemnity and affective immediacy; Facebook institutionalises remembrance through pedagogical and organisational frames; X politicises memory as an arena of discursive and ideological conflict. Yet none of these environments is homogeneous. In each case, we observe counter-memorial practices that resist algorithmic oblivion by reintroducing context, restoring historical specificity, and expanding the boundaries of grievability. These high-friction interventions demonstrate that digital infrastructures do not simply host memory, but actively shape the conditions under which remembering becomes possible.

Table 2 summarises the distribution of the 300 analysed posts across six analytical axes, grouped into the three categories of ritual, conflict, and critique. While posts were often coded across multiple axes during the qualitative analysis, the table reports the dominant axis assigned to each post in order to avoid double counting and to ensure analytical clarity at the aggregate level.

From a comparative standpoint, the data indicate a marked predominance of ritualised memory practices (Axes 1-3), which account for 140 posts (46.7% of the total corpus). These practices include the recurrent circulation of standardised tropes such as ‘Never Again’, the aestheticisation of commemorative imagery, and the strategic deployment of algorithmic grammars to maximise visibility and circulation.

The Conflict axis (Axis 4, $n = 78$; 26.0%) captures the frequent mobilisation of Holocaust memory within contemporary political and semantic disputes, particularly on X, where remembrance is reconfigured as an agonistic and polarised discursive resource.

Critical and counter-memorial practices (Axes 5-6) account for 82 posts (27.3%). Although less prevalent than ritualised forms, these interventions remain analytically significant insofar as they disrupt routinisation and algorithmic drift by reintroducing historical context, foregrounding marginalised victims, and explicitly reflecting on the risks of banalisation and symbolic exhaustion inherent in repetitive digital commemoration.

Rather than forming discrete and isolated modes, these patterns point to a field in which ritualisation, conflict, and critique intersect and overlap. Ritualised forms may dominate, yet substantial portions of the dataset mobilise memory both as a site of political struggle and as a resource for critical, counter-memorial engagement. The possibility for posts to be coded across multiple axes further highlights the polyvalent and contested character of digital memory, as well as its entanglement within competing –and often contradictory –platform grammars.

Table 2. Overall Comparative Framework of Digital Holocaust Memory
($N = 300$ posts: *Facebook, Instagram, X*)

Analytical axis	Description	Macro-category	N. of posts	%
Axis 1	Standardised memorial tropes	RITUAL	103	34.3
Axis 2	Aestheticisation / Spectacularisation	RITUAL	14	4.7
Axis 3	Algorithmic grammars	RITUAL	23	7.7
<i>Axes 1–3</i> (<i>Ritual total</i>)	—	<i>RITUAL</i>	<i>140</i>	<i>46.7</i>
<i>Axis 4</i>	<i>Politicisation / Semantic conflict / Antisemitism</i>	<i>CONFLICT</i>	<i>78</i>	<i>26.0</i>
Axis 5	Counter-memory	CRITIQUE	60	20.0
Axis 6	Critical / Self-critical memories	CRITIQUE	22	7.3
<i>Axes 5–6</i> (<i>Critique total</i>)	—	<i>CRITIQUE</i>	<i>82</i>	<i>27.3</i>
TOTAL			300	100.0

6.1 Selfies and Site-Specific Memory: The Case of Auschwitz

Among the posts collected across Instagram, Facebook, and X, a recurrent and particularly contentious practice involves users photographing themselves at Auschwitz and sharing these images under commemorative hashtags. These posts crystallise the ambivalence of digital memory cultures: the same act – appearing in a photograph at a site of historical atrocity – may function as ritual participation, aesthetic spectacle, or critical intervention, depending on its framing, narration, and circulation.

Recent scholarship on digital Holocaust memory has highlighted how sites such as Auschwitz circulate online as visual and performative resources, often oscillating between education, affective engagement, and self-presentation (Ebbrecht-Hartmann and Henig, 2021). Feldman and Musih (2023) analyse Auschwitz selfies as practices emerging from a generational and medial shift in Holocaust remembrance. They argue that selfies mark a transition ‘from witness to witnesser and from onsite to online presence’ (p. 403), reflecting the decline of survivor-centred authority and the rise of digitally mediated forms of self-witnessing. Rather than being inherently transgressive, selfies rework earlier traditions of photographic, ritual, and embodied witnessing. Crucially, their meaning does not reside in the image alone, but in the interconnected processes of taking, framing, circulating, and publicly reacting to the image, through which the boundaries of legitimate Holocaust representation are continuously negotiated.

Read through the lens of algorithmic oblivion, these insights illuminate how Auschwitz selfies oscillate between ritualised visibility and critical friction, depending on whether digital circulation reinforces repetitive spectacle or opens space for symbolic working-through.

At one level, such photographs reproduce standardised memorial tropes. Iconic elements of the camp – the railway tracks, the ‘Arbeit macht frei’ gate, barbed wire fences – serve as recognisable backdrops for ritualised invocations such as ‘Never Forget’. In these cases, remembrance is less oriented towards historical specificity or contextual reflection than towards signalling affiliation with a shared commemorative community. The image functions as a token of participation in a collective rite, reaffirming belonging rather than provoking critical engagement. As Zelizer (1998) has shown, iconic images do not merely illustrate historical events but actively shape the moral and emotional frames through which collective memory is organised and transmitted.

In other instances, Auschwitz selfies drift towards aestheticisation and spectacularisation. When emphasis is placed on personal appearance, pose, or visual filters, the memorial site risks being transformed into a stage for self-presentation and personal branding. As Reading (2011) observes, digital memory practices are deeply entangled with logics of personalisation and circulation, blurring the boundary between commemoration and consumption.

Yet visual self-presentation should not in itself be equated with mnemonic passivity or trivialisation. The decision to place oneself within the visual field of Auschwitz may also express emotional involvement, a form of generational self-positioning in relation to an inherited past, a claim to witnessing, or an intention to communicate the experience to others. Such motivations cannot be inferred from visual form alone or reduced to compliance with platform logics. The analytical question therefore concerns how self-presentation, narrative framing, historical contextualisation, and subsequent interaction combine to shape the mnemonic meaning of these practices.

When self-presentation does reduce the memorial site to a setting for visual consumption, it exemplifies the Frankfurt School’s critique of commodification, whereby even sites of extreme historical suffering may be absorbed into regimes of visual consumption and affective immediacy.

At the same time, personal photographs at Auschwitz can also operate as forms of resistance to algorithmic oblivion. Posts that accompany images with extended captions recounting family histories, survivor testimonies, or reflective accounts of the emotional impact of visiting the site function as counter-memorial practices. By foregrounding narrative, duration, and contextualisation, these posts disrupt the fast-scrolling logic of the feed and reassert memory as symbolic labour. In this sense, they resemble what Reading (2009) conceptualises as “global memory”, whereby mnemonic practices circulate across digital platforms while retaining personal, political, and historical meaning.

These practices further generate critical and self-critical discourses about the legitimacy and limits of digital commemoration. Some posts explicitly condemn selfies at Auschwitz as trivialising or disrespectful, while others defend them as acts of personal witnessing or embodied remembrance. Frosh’s (2018) discussion of *Yolocaust*, Shahak Shapira’s project targeting apparently inappropriate photographs taken at Berlin’s Holocaust Memorial, is particularly relevant here. Frosh complicates the assumption that the meaning of such images can be inferred from their visual form alone, while conceptualising the selfie as a gesture of embodied sociability whose meaning emerges through its performance, circulation, and reception. The apparent lightness or incongruity of a selfie at a site of atrocity may therefore become an object of ethical judgement without necessarily revealing the intentions or historical awareness of the person who produced it. This reflexivity – often unfolding in captions or comment threads – demonstrates memory’s capacity to interrogate its own forms, echoing Marcuse’s insight that remembrance preserves traces of ‘betrayed promises’ and thus retains critical potential.

Auschwitz selfies exemplify the dialectical nature of platformised commemoration. Depending on how they are framed and contextualised, they may become hollow ritual gestures, aesthetic spectacles, or meaningful interventions that slow circulation and restore historical context. Their significance does not reside in the image alone, but in the assemblage of visual framing, textual narration, and algorithmic circulation that shapes whether and how they reinforce or resist algorithmic oblivion.

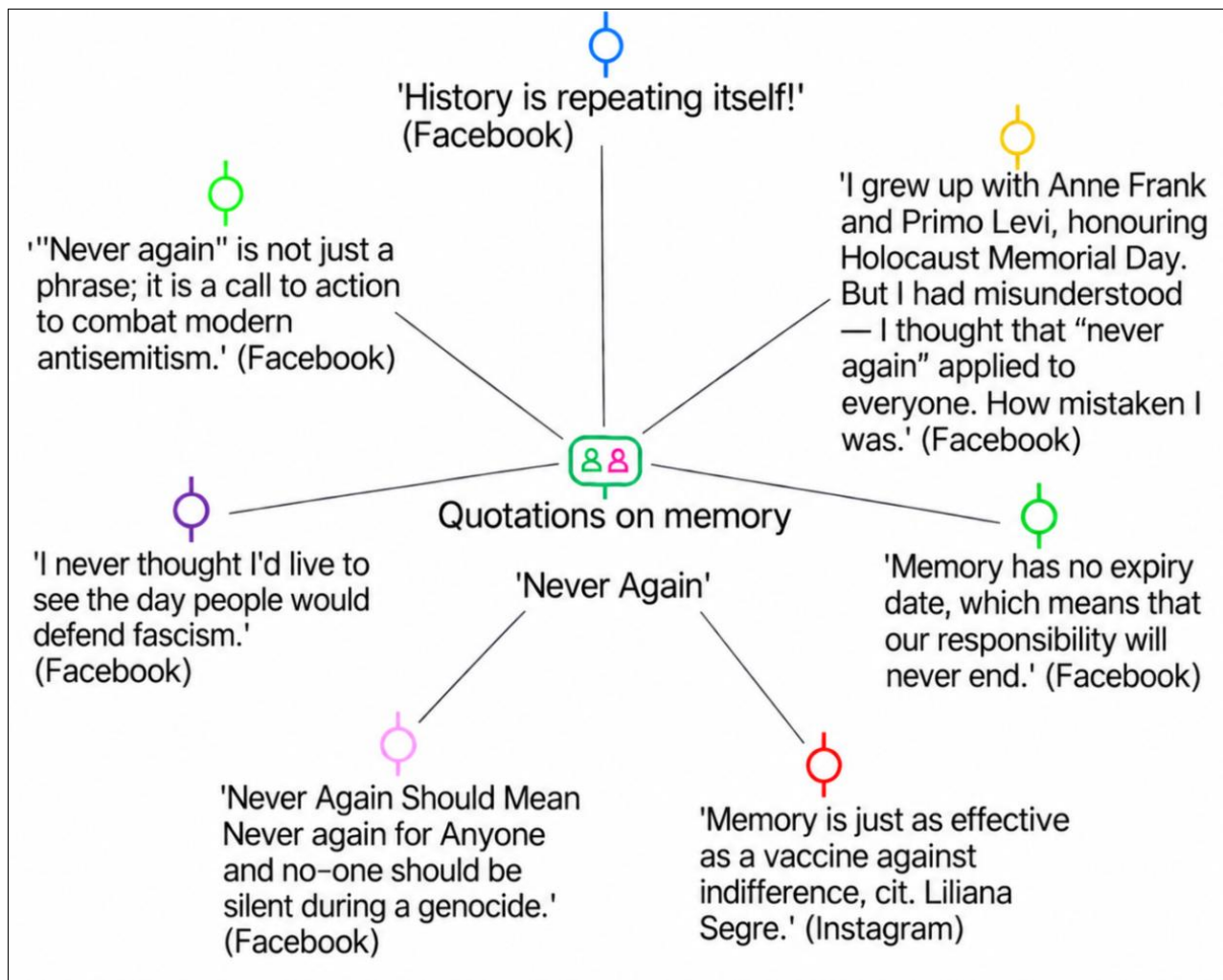
A comparable ambivalence emerges in the circulation of quotations centred on the trope ‘Never again’. The MAXQDA code map focusing on quotations highlights the centrality of this phrase across platforms, particularly on Facebook. At one level, such quotations operate as ritualised invocations, with formulations such as ‘Memory has no expiry date, [...]’ or ‘Never Again Should Mean Never again for Anyone.’ reaffirming memory as an enduring moral imperative. In these cases, the phrase functions as a stabilising mantra, detached from specific historical or political contexts.

The dataset reveals instances in which “Never again” is mobilised as a resource for political engagement. Posts link the slogan to contemporary struggles against antisemitism, racism, or the resurgence of fascism, transforming it into a tool of moral mobilisation. Other contributions introduce critical disillusionment, exposing fractures within the universalist promise of the trope. As one user reflects: ‘I thought “Never Again” applied to everyone. How mistaken I was’. Such statements reveal the gap between ritual repetition and lived historical experience.

Finally, the invocation of authoritative figures – most notably Liliana Segre’s assertion that ‘memory is just as effective as a vaccine against indifference’ – anchors the trope within an institutional register of legitimacy. These quotations simultaneously stabilise memory and delimit its acceptable meanings, situating remembrance within recognised moral frameworks.

These uses of “Never again” highlight its deeply ambiguous status in digital memory cultures. Although it often functions as a ritualised slogan, it can also be reused as counter-memory, highlighting exclusions, betrayals and broken promises, or as a political resource in today’s conflicts. Facebook emerges as the platform where quotation as a discursive strategy is most prevalent, providing space for both ritual affirmation and critical reinterpretation.

Figure 1. Digital Quotations on Memory: The Ambiguity of “Never Again”



Note. Quotations are reproduced *verbatim* from the analysed posts, including original capitalisation and typographical inconsistencies.

Source: Author’s elaboration based on data analysed with MAXQDA.

Discussion

This study set out to theorise Holocaust commemoration under platform conditions by conceptualising algorithmic oblivion as a structural tendency through which mnemonic traces proliferate while the conditions for symbolic working-through are attenuated. The comparative netnographic analysis of Instagram, Facebook, and X substantiates this claim and clarifies the mechanisms through which platform infrastructures reformat remembrance into distinct grammars of memory. At the same time, the findings demonstrate that these infrastructures do not fully determine mnemonic practices, leaving space for countervailing forms of critique and reflexive engagement.

From the culture industry to algorithmic culture

Extending Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of the culture industry to contemporary platform environments, the findings reveal how standardised commemorative tropes – such as ‘Never Forget’, candles, and iconic images of Auschwitz – operate as pseudo-individuated units optimised for circulation and recognition. These tropes are endlessly repeated with minor variations, facilitating recognisable forms of participation without necessarily fostering historical understanding. In this respect, platformised remembrance radicalises rather than replaces the logic of mass culture:

standardisation is intensified through algorithmic amplification, while difference is tolerated only insofar as it remains legible and engaging.

Instagram's emphasis on aestheticised solemnity exemplifies this dynamic. Here, remembrance is frequently shaped through visual refinement and affective immediacy, turning memory into a consumable spectacle. X, by contrast, channels Holocaust memory into agonistic presentism, where the Shoah is mobilised within ongoing political conflicts and semantic struggles. Facebook's dominant institutional framing stabilises meaning through pedagogical and organisational discourse, yet often reproduces routinised commemorative forms. The comparison thus points less to three separate models of remembrance than to different configurations of a common tension between circulation and critical engagement.

Algorithmic grammars and traumatic repetition

What unifies these platform-specific styles is the presence of algorithmic grammars that privilege circulation, immediacy, and engagement. Practices such as hashtag stacking, optimisation of visual formats, and strategic tagging align remembrance with metrics of visibility rather than with interpretive depth. The empirical material therefore gives concrete form to the tension between repetition and working-through developed earlier. Platform environments continuously reactivate Holocaust memory, yet often without the temporal spacing, narrative mediation, or contextualisation required for symbolic elaboration. These findings provide empirical support for the notion of algorithmic oblivion developed above. Memory remains omnipresent, yet risks becoming anaesthetised through repetition and spectacle.

Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (2023 [1942]) provide a critical vocabulary for understanding the temporal and ethical stakes of digital remembrance. Rejecting historicism's conception of history as a continuous progression unfolding in 'homogeneous' and 'empty' time (p. 13), Benjamin insists that the past becomes meaningful only when it is seized 'at a moment of danger'. From this perspective, the multiplication of mnemonic traces is not in itself evidence of successful remembrance; what matters is whether those traces retain the capacity to interrupt the present and confront it with unresolved historical claims. Against this logic, counter-memorial practices resonate with Benjamin's injunction to 'brush history against the grain' (2023 [1942], p. 6), reactivating memory as critical labour rather than ritualised repetition.

Counter-memory as friction and working-through

Against these tendencies, the analysis identified a range of counter-memorial practices that introduce friction into the flow of digital remembrance and resist algorithmic oblivion. Posts that foreground survivor testimony, family archives, extended captions, or site-specific histories slow down attention and demand interpretive labour. These practices do not reject platforms outright but exploit platform affordances, such as carousels, threads, or long-form captions, to cultivate duration, context, and reflexivity.

From a trauma studies perspective, such practices can be understood as attempts to move from acting-out towards symbolic working-through. They do not resolve the tensions inherent in Holocaust memory, nor do they offer reconciliatory narratives. Rather, they sustain discomfort, ambivalence, and unresolved questions as conditions for ethical remembrance. In this respect, counter-memory resonates with Adorno's insistence on non-reconciliation and with Benjamin's call to rescue threatened images of the past from conformist continuity.

Counter-memory also intervenes in the politics of grievability. By foregrounding victims historically marginalised within dominant Holocaust narratives – such as Romani people, disabled victims, and homosexual victims – these practices expand the field of public mourning and challenge ritualised exclusions. Memory thus becomes not only a matter of honouring the past, but also of interrogating its silences and hierarchies.

In this sense, counter-memory echoes Marcuse's understanding of aesthetic imagination by preserving the memory of what has been denied or betrayed and turning it into a critical measure of the present rather than an object of nostalgia.

Visibility versus intelligibility

The findings suggest that ritual, conflict, and critique should not be understood as distinct forms of digital remembrance. They operate instead as overlapping modes of memory-work within the same platform environments. This overlap brings into focus the tension between the growing visibility of Holocaust remembrance and its historical intelligibility.

In this regard, the findings resonate with Corchia's (2023) analysis of the platformised public sphere, which suggests that communicative practices alone are insufficient to grasp the structural transformation of public life under platform conditions. What the analysis reveals is not merely a shift in commemorative styles, but a deeper reconfiguration of the infrastructural conditions under which memory becomes visible, circulates, and acquires social intelligibility. The issue, then, goes beyond changing styles of commemoration. Platformisation alters the conditions through which memory is organised, circulated, and made socially intelligible.

Digital infrastructures shape not only what is remembered, but how memory is organised, prioritised, and made meaningful. Platforms tend to privilege visibility over historical intelligibility, rapid circulation over contextual framing, and affective resonance over interpretive depth, thereby encouraging forms of mnemonic engagement that are immediately legible yet historically shallow.

Yet the analysis cautions against a deterministic reading of platform power. The persistence of counter-memorial practices demonstrates that digital environments do not fully determine mnemonic conduct or foreclose the possibility of critique. Users may appropriate platform affordances in ways that restore context, narrative density, and historical specificity, even though their agency remains situated within infrastructures that unevenly distribute visibility and attention. Under platform conditions, the space for such critical memory therefore remains possible, but fragile and uneven.

Limits and future research

This study is limited by its language scope and temporal frame, focusing on posts published between January and August 2025. Platform algorithms are dynamic and opaque, limiting reproducibility over time. Since the study analyses publicly accessible content rather than recommendation systems themselves, it does not directly measure algorithmic ranking or amplification; references to algorithmic logics should therefore be understood as theoretically informed interpretations of observable platform practices. Future research could extend the analysis longitudinally across multiple commemorative cycles, incorporate additional linguistic and cultural contexts, and combine netnography with trace ethnography to examine how counter-memories travel – or stall – within recommendation systems.

Conclusions

This article examines Holocaust commemoration under the conditions of the platform society, advancing the concept of algorithmic oblivion to describe a structural tendency within platformed memory whereby mnemonic traces proliferate while the possibilities for symbolic working-through are progressively weakened.

The analysis shows that platformised Holocaust memory is structured by a persistent tension between repetition and critique. Ritualised tropes, aestheticised imagery, and algorithmic grammars facilitate the rapid circulation of commemorative content, yet often detach memory from historical context and narrative integration. In this sense, remembrance risks becoming ubiquitous but shallow: endlessly visible, yet increasingly difficult to elaborate. Algorithmic oblivion thus names not the

disappearance of memory, but its transformation into a repetitive and weakly decontextualised flow that undermines the critical labour trauma demands.

The study also identifies counter-memorial practices that resist this tendency. Through extended narration, testimonial framing, archival references, and reflexive critique, some users reintroduce duration, context, and interpretive effort into digital remembrance. These practices do not overcome the constraints of platform environments, nor do they resolve the contradictions of Holocaust memory. Rather, they mark fragile yet significant attempts to preserve memory as symbolic work rather than mere spectacle.

Conceptually, the six analytical axes developed in this study –organised around the categories of ritual, conflict, and critique – offer a framework for distinguishing between different modes of memory-work within digital environments. This framework highlights that the same platforms can simultaneously host routinised commemoration, political contestation, and critical reflection. Digital memory is thus not homogeneous, but internally differentiated and shaped by competing cultural grammars.

More broadly, the findings indicate that the central challenge of Holocaust remembrance in the algorithmic age lies not in visibility, participation, or access, but in intelligibility. Platforms privilege circulation over contextualisation and affect over interpretation, yet they do not fully foreclose the possibility of critique. The persistence of counter-memory indicates that even within environments structured by algorithmic logics, remembrance can still function as a site of ethical reflection –albeit under precarious and contested conditions.

Holocaust remembrance in the platform society emerges neither as a purely spectacularised ritual nor as a fully critical practice, but as a field of tension between repetition and working-through. Algorithmic oblivion names the dominant tendency of digital memory to circulate trauma without elaboration, while counter-memory marks the fragile persistence of critique within that regime. Attending to this tension is essential not only for understanding digital remembrance, but for sustaining the ethical work of memory in the aftermath of historical catastrophe.

To return to Tempia's Lloyd (2016) and bring the argument full circle, the point is not to multiply reminders, but to defend the conditions of remembering as critical work –every day, and, under platform time, every minute. Remembering, ultimately, is not a matter of encountering the past again and again, but of understanding its history, reflecting on its meaning, and asking why it still matters in the present.

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The Man Without Memory in the Hyperfast Society: Time, Trauma, and Digitalization through Critical Theory

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Abstract. The essay explores the contemporary crisis of memory in the age of hypervelocity and digitalisation, questioning the fate of historical consciousness confronted with algorithmic temporality and the automation of remembrance. Drawing on the paradigms of Critical Theory from Adorno and Benjamin to Freud and Habermas, memory is conceived as an act of resistance and as the place where wounded time becomes a possibility for thought. The analysis extends to the mnemonic forms of digital society, from social acceleration (Rosa) and algorithmic memory (Esposito) to the connective transformations of memory described by Hoskins. The rise of generative artificial intelligence introduces a new threshold, that of “synthetic memories” which produce the past instead of preserving it. In this scenario, memory loses its ethical value and is reduced to a technical function. Yet, following the utopian legacy of Bloch and Freud’s critique of repetition, the essay identifies a potential reactivation: a memory that, even when immersed in simulation, can still safeguard the promise of time and oppose the dominance of simultaneity with a politics of remembering.

Keywords: critical memory; trauma; Critical Theory; artificial intelligence; algorithmic temporality.

1. Introduction – Memory and Forgetfulness in the Age of Hypervelocity

Contemporary reflection on memory lives within an unavoidable tension: the more society multiplies traces of the past, the less it seems capable of transforming them into experience. The expansion of archival devices, the algorithmic automation of remembrance and the digital persistence of data generate an apparent excess of memory that coincides with a new form of amnesia, a saturation without sedimentation. Under these conditions, memory no longer ceases to accumulate but stops working; it remains suspended in a present that regenerates itself continuously, devoid of historical depth.

One may therefore ask whether the hypermediated subject, constantly exposed to flows of information and automated recollections, still possesses the means to elaborate critically what is received. Memory, which in other historical moments represented a force of resistance to trauma and oblivion, today risks being reduced to a mere function of the technical system. The question, far from rhetorical, is whether a critical form of memory is still possible: not mere conservation but a gesture capable of questioning, interrupting and transforming.

In this context, Critical Theory offers a conceptual laboratory of remarkable relevance. In Adorno, Benjamin, Freud and Habermas, memory is never a simple registration of the past but an act of opposition, a site where wounded time opens to the possibility of the new. For Adorno, it represents the only defence against the repetition of barbarism: to remember means not to allow the wound of Auschwitz to close, keeping alive what resists total integration. In Benjamin, memory becomes interruption, a gesture that breaks the linearity of history and reactivates in the present the unrealised potentialities of the past. Freud, with the notion of *Nachträglichkeit*, had already shown that trauma

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is never definitively archived; it returns, demands elaboration, obliges thought to conceive temporality as deferment rather than as succession. Habermas, finally, reinterprets collective memory as a normative reservoir, a space where historical consciousness can counter the functional drift of late modern societies.

To test these paradigms within the digital age means to question their endurance in the face of an unprecedented transformation: the digitalisation of social time and the emergence of generative artificial intelligence as a new actor of collective memory. When algorithms not only archive but also produce memories, the boundary between remembrance and simulation becomes uncertain. What, then, remains of memory as a work of the negative, as an act of consciousness and resistance? Is an experience of time still possible that is not pure computational simultaneity but retains the slowness necessary for the elaboration of trauma and the construction of meaning?

This essay situates itself within a theoretical-critical horizon of genealogical inspiration, intertwining philosophy, sociology and media studies in order to investigate the transformations of memory in the digital age. The adopted approach is genealogical-critical and theoretical-sociological in orientation: it does not aim to reconstruct a history of memory but to analyse the ways in which it takes shape as a practice of resistance across different phases of modernity. The method consists in bringing into dialogue four constellations of Critical Theory (Adorno, Benjamin, Freud and Habermas) with more recent analyses from memory and media studies (Assmann, Rosa, Hoskins and Floridi). Although the argument draws on psychoanalytic accounts of individual memory, its principal object is social and cultural remembrance: the practices, representations and mediations through which the past acquires meaning within collective life. Accordingly, memory is not attributed here to computational systems as a cognitive faculty, nor does the concept of synthetic memory imply that artificial intelligence itself remembers. Rather, synthetic memory designates a sociotechnical regime in which computationally generated representations can enter, circulate within and reshape human practices of remembrance. The specific contribution of the essay lies in distinguishing this regime from established categories of digital and algorithmic memory: not as another form of technological mediation, but as a condition in which computational systems can produce new mnemonic representations rather than merely preserve, organise or resurface existing traces. The category is therefore intended to identify a shift in the relation between memory, experience and historical referentiality introduced by generative AI.

The purpose is not to provide a normative model of “authentic” memory but to understand the conditions under which memory can still operate as a critical force capable of interrupting the automatism of oblivion. Building on the legacy of Critical Theory, the essay examines the impact of algorithmic temporality and artificial intelligence on historical consciousness and the possible utopian reactivations emerging within contemporary social practices. In this sense, memory is not considered a heritage to be preserved but a field of tension between trauma and promise, loss and possibility. To comprehend this tension means to restore to critical thought its highest function: keeping open the space where the past, instead of dissolving into the present, can still become a principle of the future.

2. Memory, Time and Historical Consciousness in the Classics of Critical Theory

In the tradition of Critical Theory, reflection on memory has never been a secondary theme but rather the very condition of thought. To criticise is to remember: to bring back into consciousness what the present tends to suppress. The act of remembrance, far from being contemplative, becomes a gesture of resistance against the neutralisation of meaning. It is from this perspective that Adorno, Benjamin, Freud and Habermas elaborated four distinct yet converging theoretical constellations in

which memory takes shape as the dialectical form of time: not as a linear flow but as the space where the present is transformed by the past.

For Adorno (1966), memory is an ethical act before it is a cognitive one. After Auschwitz, thought itself is called upon to become memory in order not to betray the experience of barbarism. To remember means to refuse any reconciliation that would pacify what cannot be repaired and to preserve the wound as a trace of what resists total integration. *Negative Dialectics* is grounded in this gesture: keeping the negative open against every conciliatory synthesis. Memory in this sense does not soothe but unsettles; it is the subjective counterpart of a truth that cannot be reduced to identity.

Benjamin (1940 [2003]) radicalises this intuition by transforming memory into an act of interruption. In the *Theses on the Concept of History*, time ceases to be a straight line and becomes a constellation: the past flashes up within the present as a possibility of redemption. To remember is not to accumulate but to arrest the continuity of history and to release what has been imprisoned within it. Every act of memory is, for Benjamin, a redemption of the unrealised, an attempt to rescue the past from the oblivion of the victors and return it to the promise of the future. Memory thus becomes a revolutionary force, a political practice of time.

Freud (1920 [1955]), though working in a different field, had already introduced a conception of time that anticipates the critical dimension of memory. Trauma, he writes, is never inscribed once and for all; it returns, demands elaboration and is transformed in the very act of being recalled. *Nachträglichkeit* – the retroactive production of meaning – reverses chronological linearity and shows that every recollection is a rewriting. Memory does not preserve; it produces. It does not fix but transforms. This paradigm of deferred temporality became fundamental for Critical Theory, which recognised in collective history the same movement of traumatic return: only through distance can what has happened be understood.

Habermas (2019) develops this intuition on a properly social level, assigning to collective memory a normative function. In *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie*, memory is not simple tradition but a reservoir of moral and symbolic intuitions that survive the instrumental rationality of modernity. It preserves the resources of meaning needed to counter the colonisation of the lifeworld by technical systems. To remember becomes, for Habermas, a communicative act, a way of maintaining the dialogue between past and present, between religion, philosophy and society. Memory is not nostalgia but the condition of public discourse and of the very possibility of orientation.

These perspectives converge in rejecting memory as a neutral repository of the past, but they do so from different theoretical positions. In Adorno, remembrance is bound to non-reconciliation and to the ethical persistence of suffering; in Benjamin, it interrupts historical continuity by recovering unrealised possibilities; in Freud, it belongs to the deferred temporality through which trauma is retrospectively elaborated; in Habermas, it functions as a normative and communicative resource within historical consciousness. Their convergence therefore does not erase their differences: what they share is the refusal to reduce memory to passive conservation. It is from this differentiated framework that the digital transformation of memory can be examined.

This framework also enters into dialogue with contemporary memory studies. Erll (2011) conceptualises cultural memory as a dynamic process shaped across media and practices of representation, while Olick (2016) emphasises the social and political organisation of collective memory and the role of historical narratives in the construction of collective identities. The memory of trauma is not a simple conservation of the past but a word that attempts to express the unspeakable, an act of translation that transforms pain into shareable thought. In this view, memory becomes an ethical gesture, capable of keeping open the wound of time and resisting its technical erasure (Meghnagi, 2014).

3. The Hyperfast Society and the Crisis of the Sedimentation of Memory

The very idea of memory as sedimentation is today challenged by a radical transformation of social temporality. Rosa (2013) has described this condition as social acceleration: a continuous increase in the speed with which technical, economic and communicative processes unfold, without this necessarily implying progress in the experience of time. The result is not so much a more efficient world as a chronic perception of instability. Life flows faster than consciousness can process, and the biographical horizon fragments into a series of successive presents. Memory, which requires slowness, deferment and elaborative repetition, becomes the first victim of this logic of urgency.

Acceleration does not simply produce an overload of information; it alters its very quality. Rosa (2013) links social acceleration to forms of temporal alienation that weaken the relation between experience and meaning. Each event is immediately replaced by another, leaving no time for reflection. The consequence is a form of dynamic amnesia: we do not forget because of a lack of data but because of an excess of stimuli. This amnesia of abundance fits perfectly within the logic of digital media, where memory is no longer a process of interiorisation but an external, incessant and reversible flow.

In Assmann's perspective (2011), collective memory requires institutions and rituals to endure over time. Every society establishes forms of transmission that transform the past into a shared heritage: archives, schools, ceremonies and narratives. Collective memory is always an interweaving of experience and narration, the space where individual life stories find symbolic recognition within the social fabric (Jedlowski, 2002). In the digital era, however, these structures are progressively replaced by platforms operating according to economic and algorithmic criteria. Memory is no longer entrusted to care but to function. Everything is preserved, yet nothing settles. The universal archive of the web produces a paradox: the more accessible memory becomes, the less it is meaningful. The loss does not concern content but the capacity to confer significance. Contemporary society oscillates between collective amnesia and memorial saturation: an excess of traces that no longer produces sedimentation but overload and paralysis of meaning (Hassan, 2018). In this sense, digital memory appears as a form of accumulation without experience, where the past becomes available but remains unprocessed.

Hoskins (2018a) describes digital memory as a field in which remembering and forgetting are increasingly shaped by digital media, networks and archives, transforming the ways in which the past is accessed, circulated and controlled. At this point, algorithmic mediation adds a further layer: as Esposito (2017) argues, the accessibility of stored pasts increasingly depends on computational procedures that select and organise information beyond the operations of human recollection. Memory is thus shaped not only by what is preserved, but by the conditions under which traces become retrievable and visible.

Van Dijck (2007) had already noted how digitalisation tends to transform personal memory into an automatic system of archiving. Photographs, messages and posts no longer require an intentional act of preservation: they save themselves, often without the subject being aware of it. Within this passivity lies a new form of alienation. The individual does not forget by choice but because choice itself has been suspended. The algorithm assumes the role of mnemonic filter, determining what remains visible and what disappears.

The overall outcome is an anthropological transformation: memory loses its reflective dimension and becomes instantaneous, performative and circular. Commemorative hashtags, viral campaigns and digital flash mobs create ephemeral mnemonic communities that arise and dissolve within a few days. These devices generate an illusion of participation but rarely produce elaboration. As Assmann (2020) observes, shared memory requires long time, repetition and interpretive practices; otherwise,

it remains emotion without duration. Hyperconnectivity does not therefore lead to a broader memory but to a multiplication of fragmented memories incapable of merging into historical consciousness.

If traditional memory was bound to forgetting as its necessary counterpart, which made it possible to select and order the past, digital memory tends to eliminate oblivion altogether. Everything remains, yet without hierarchy or context. Time becomes a flat archive governed by the logic of continuous updating. Hoskins (2011) describes this condition as the connective turn: the shift from a regime of collective memory to one of connective memory, in which every user is potentially an archivist but no one remains a custodian. This transformation is developed further in Hoskins's notion of a "memory of the multitude" (2018b), which questions the adequacy of collective memory as a model for mnemonic practices increasingly distributed across digital networks. The effect is an extended present that absorbs the past without truly remembering it.

In this scenario, the figure of the "man without memory" does not denote a lack of data but the inability to transform data into experience. The hyperfast society produces subjects saturated with external memories yet deprived of inner temporality. Time no longer settles; it folds in on itself within a circuit of notifications, automatic anniversaries and personalised feeds. Memory becomes event rather than process, constant presence rather than elaboration. In such a condition, the question that traverses Critical Theory acquires renewed urgency: how can memory regain its transformative power when time itself has been colonised by speed?

4. The Man Without Memory: Between Hypermnesia and Critical Amnesia

At the level of subjectivity, this condition takes the form of a paradox: mnemonic abundance coexists with a diminished capacity to turn accumulated traces into lived continuity. In a society that feverishly accumulates traces, data and images, oblivion no longer arises from scarcity but from excess. Technological hypermnemonia, as Stiegler (2010) observes, generates a form of systemic amnesia: everything is recorded but nothing is internalised. Memory, externalised in digital devices, no longer sustains the continuity of the self but disperses it into a series of disconnected moments.

The hypermediated subject lives within a constant flow of automatic mnemonic cues: notifications, social "memories", algorithmic anniversaries. Designed to maintain attention, these stimuli end up replacing memory with its simulation. What was once an act of recollection becomes an automatised display. As van Dijck (2007) notes, digital memory no longer requires intentionality: one does not decide to remember; one is remembered by the system. In this shift, the experience of time undergoes a radical mutation. The past no longer presents itself as distance but as repetition, returning without elaboration, as an echo deprived of meaning.

Freud (1920 [1955]) had already understood that repetition is never neutral. Trauma, unable to be symbolised, tends to reproduce itself compulsively: what has not been thought is repeated. The man without memory is, in this sense, a traumatised subject, though of a collective and diffused trauma, that of living in a present without deferment. Freud's *Nachträglichkeit*, that temporal spacing which makes consciousness possible, seems to have been erased by a regime of simultaneity that prevents any elaboration. Algorithmic temporality knows no delay: the past resurfaces immediately as image or notification, stripped of the slowness necessary for thought.

Rosa (2019) has shown how social acceleration can culminate in a loss of resonance, weakening the individual's capacity to establish a meaningful relation with the world. The loss of resonance is, ultimately, a loss of memory: what cannot find time to be experienced cannot be remembered. Experience collapses into stimulus, and the stimulus cannot settle. The hyperfast individual is condemned to a compulsion to the present, an eternal return of the identical that renders history impossible.

The outcome is a paradoxical coexistence of hypermemory and critical amnesia. On one hand, digital society produces an almost infinite archive of data, images and testimonies; on the other, it dissolves the ability to attribute them value and continuity. Memory loses its interpretive function and becomes a technical performance. Esposito (2017) locates this transformation in the specifically algorithmic processing of social memory, where the accessibility and organisation of past information increasingly depend on computational procedures rather than on acts of human recollection. The past becomes a feed rather than a narrative.

In this context, historical consciousness, the capacity to connect individual experience with collective destiny, weakens to the point of disappearance. The man without memory is an individual incapable of temporalising himself. He does not forget for lack of information but because he no longer possesses an inner rhythm that would allow him to elaborate it. Inner time, the condition of memory, is replaced by the external time of permanent connection. As Stiegler (2018) writes, the digital industry does not merely capture attention; it expropriates temporality itself, transforming memory into a commodity.

From this arises an anthropological risk of vast scope: the dissolution of the link between memory and identity. Memory, in the critical sense, is what allows the subject to defer, to avoid immediate coincidence with the self. When this distance disappears, the autonomy of thought weakens as well. The hypermediated subject is no longer capable of remembering critically but only of reacting. Freud might have recognised in this scenario a collective form of *acting out*: a society compulsively repeating without understanding what drives it.

Yet within this mnemonic saturation one may still glimpse a possibility. The excess of digital recollection, its uncontrollable accumulation, might signal an unsatisfied need for elaboration. The man without memory, far from being a completed destiny, could be the symptom of an unresolved tension: that between memory as archive and memory as consciousness. To acknowledge this tension is the first step towards restoring to memory its critical status, capable of transforming repetition into thought.

5. The Rise of Generative Artificial Intelligence and Synthetic Memories

If the hyperfast society has weakened the sedimentation of recollection, the emergence of generative artificial intelligence introduces a further threshold in the longer transformation of digitally mediated memory. Generative systems do not produce representations of the past *ex nihilo*: they recombine patterns learned from existing textual, visual and cultural traces. What changes is that the resulting representation need not correspond to a specific originating event, testimony or archival trace.

By synthetic memory I mean a form of remembrance in which computational systems do not merely store, retrieve or select traces of the past, but generate mnemonic representations that may have no direct experiential or historical referent. Its specificity therefore lies not in algorithmic mediation as such, but in the production of plausible pasts: images, voices, narratives or reconstructions that acquire the form and social function of memory without necessarily deriving from an event that was experienced or documented. Synthetic memory thus marks a shift from the algorithmic organisation of existing traces to the generation of new mnemonic objects.

Floridi (2023) describes contemporary AI as operating within an increasingly AI-friendly infosphere, an informational environment in which artificial agents interact with data and reshape the conditions under which human practices take place. Within such an environment, generative systems can produce texts, images, voices and videos that resemble mnemonic traces without necessarily corresponding to an experienced or documented event. The resulting problem is not simply one of false information, but of referential instability: representations of the past can acquire plausibility independently of the events to which memory would ordinarily refer.

Chun (2016) has described digital media as habitual infrastructures in which repetition shapes perception and experience. Generative AI extends this logic by producing representations from patterns learned across existing data. The issue is therefore not that computational systems remember, but that their outputs can acquire mnemonic relevance once they enter human practices of interpretation, circulation and remembrance.

Esposito (2017) describes algorithmic memory in terms of computational processes that manage stored information and its accessibility without reproducing the operations of human remembrance. This remains primarily a logic of processing and organisation of existing traces. Generative AI introduces a further discontinuity: the mnemonic object itself can now be produced computationally. Synthetic memory names this additional threshold, where the past is not only filtered or resurfaced but reconstructed in forms that may exceed the archive from which they derive.

Recent work on AI and memory has described generative systems in terms of distributed mnemonic agency and “stochastic remembering” (Smit, Smits & Merrill, 2024), emphasising the probabilistic and interactive processes through which humans and AI systems engage with the past. Synthetic memory addresses a related but distinct problem: not primarily who or what participates in remembering, but the changing referential status of the representations that enter mnemonic circulation.

From the perspective of Critical Theory, this scenario represents the extreme realisation of the culture industry analysed by Horkheimer & Adorno (1944 [2002]). Where the culture industry standardised the products of human imagination, the industry of AI standardises imagination itself. It does not simply reproduce experience; it automates its very genesis. Adorno (1966) would perhaps have recognised in this automatisisation the most complete form of reification: thought reduced to calculation, memory transformed into function.

Whereas the culture industry acted upon symbolic products, the algorithmic industry acts upon cognitive processes themselves, automating the act of remembering. This transformation marks the passage from a standardised production of content to a standardisation of experience, in which the subject becomes an integral part of the technical circuit.

Benjamin (1940 [2003]) might have read the same scene differently, perceiving in it the final triumph of the history of the victors. Synthetic memories are, in a sense, the ultimate stage of the neutralisation of the past. There is nothing left to redeem because everything can be generated anew. The dialectical image that in Benjamin flashed as a promise of salvation now becomes an artificial image produced in series. The revolutionary *Jetztzeit* is converted into a perpetual computational present.

What changes at this point is also the status of absence. The distance between an event and its later representation has traditionally left room for interpretation, testimony and contestation. Generative systems can instead populate that distance with plausible images, voices and narratives, turning what is missing from the record into material available for production. The problem of synthetic memory therefore concerns not only what can be fabricated, but what happens when absence itself ceases to function as a limit.

The distinction becomes clearer in concrete cases. Deepfakes and AI-generated reconstructions can introduce representations of events that were never recorded, while generative avatars of deceased persons can produce new interactions from existing personal traces. Recent studies have examined these dynamics in relation to Holocaust memory (Makhortykh, Vziatysheva & Sydorova, 2023) and AI-driven “synthetic afterlives” (Kidd & Nieto McAvoy, 2025). These cases are paradigmatic because generative systems do not merely reorganise access to existing traces: they produce new representations that can enter the social circulation of remembrance.

Amid this proliferation of subjectless recollections, Critical Theory can once again play a decisive role. If Adorno and Benjamin saw in memory the locus of the negative, today the challenge is to think

of a memory of the false that does not coincide with falsehood but reveals its structure. Perhaps the technical possibility of falsifying every testimony compels us to interrogate memory not as a guarantee of truth but as a practice of responsibility. The question is no longer what has happened but what we make happen by remembering.

6. Sociological and Political Consequences

The transformations of memory in the digital age are not confined to the cognitive sphere; they redefine the very conditions of social coexistence. As Aleida Assmann (2011) argues, collective memory is the device through which societies construct their identity in time, and its digitalisation profoundly alters this structure. Memory is no longer entrusted to stable institutions, archives, schools, museums or rituals, but to flows of data in constant renewal. In this transition, the relationship between memory and collective identity becomes more fragile: society no longer recognises itself in a shared past but in a multiplicity of partial memories that often stand in conflict with one another.

The main effect of this shift is the fragility of symbolic bonds. As Assmann (2020) observes, collective memory is never a simple repository but a process of selection and interpretation. It requires institutions that ensure duration and the possibility of revision. Digital memory, by contrast, tends to dissolve the long time of tradition into a condition of permanent simultaneity. The communities emerging from this logic, viral campaigns, online commemorations, protest hashtags, generate immediate and powerful forms of belonging, yet rarely lasting ones. Their political value lies in the speed of shared emotion rather than in the construction of a common horizon.

Judith Butler (2020) has shown how the remembrance of victims of racial, sexual or state violence can become a political act of resistance. To remember those who have been erased means to challenge the very conditions of visibility and mourning. Yet in the digital ecosystem, even the memory of pain risks being absorbed by the circuits of attention. Images of wounded bodies, names turned into hashtags and global commemorative campaigns produce moments of widespread empathy that often end within the act of sharing itself. The question is whether this fleeting visibility is enough to bring transformation or whether it ends up, on the contrary, anaesthetising trauma and turning it into spectacle.

In a related direction, Klein (2014) identifies ecological trauma as one of the blind spots of contemporary consciousness. The climate crisis is the collective trauma par excellence: global, diffused, without a single origin. Yet even in the face of environmental catastrophe, memory remains fragmented. Each natural disaster generates a brief wave of emotion followed by a rapid media oblivion. The hypermediated society records but does not elaborate; it accumulates but does not transform. Klein interprets this incapacity as the symptom of a culture that has replaced responsibility with resilience and elaboration with management. Ecological memory, to become political, should instead turn into a practice of temporal responsibility, a way of thinking the continuity between past, present and future.

A similar logic of selective forgetting emerges in postcolonial memory. Mbembe (2019) has shown how Western modernity was built upon a systematic erasure of colonial violence. The memories of the subjugated peoples, fragmented and marginalised, resurface today through digital archives, artistic practices and movements of symbolic decolonisation. Yet digitalisation also entails the risk of neutralisation: subaltern memories may be displayed but rarely listened to. The global archive absorbs everything but does not guarantee the justice of remembrance. As Mbembe (2021) argues, decolonial memory cannot remain at the level of visibility; it must become an act of restitution and reappropriation of time.

The tension between visibility and oblivion, connection and distance, runs through all contemporary practices of political memory. The remembrance of injustice is never a simple act of testimony: the social recognition of trauma also depends on the moral and political frameworks through which suffering and victimhood acquire public meaning (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009). Every collective trauma involves a process of cultural construction through which a society gives meaning to suffering and elaborates its public representation. Even within the digital ecosystem, the symbolic dimension of trauma remains decisive: what matters is not only what happens but how it is narrated and recognised (Alexander, 2004). Movements such as Black Lives Matter, feminist and queer struggles or global ecological commemorations operate through the logic of shared remembrance and public testimony. Their strength depends on their ability to transform emotion into historical consciousness. While the digital favours immediate connection, the challenge is to maintain it over time, to translate it into language and to turn it into experience.

Collective memory, in this sense, is not simply what remains of the past but what is made to endure in the present. It is a political act in the fullest sense, a labour of selection and form. The outcome of the digitalisation of memory will depend on our ability to recognise that connection does not replace community and that visibility does not equate to justice. Remembering remains a fragile gesture but also the only one through which societies can still interrogate themselves.

7. Memory as a Utopian and Critical Resource

If the analysis of the hyperfast society and its technologies reveals the dissolution of memory as consciousness, we must still ask whether it is possible to think of memory in terms of possibility rather than loss. The tradition of Critical Theory offers here a perspective of resistance: memory is not only the space of the wound but also that of hope. In this direction, Bloch (1959) formulated perhaps the most radical vision, conceiving memory as a principle of hope, as the custodian of unrealised possibilities that the past entrusts to the future.

For Bloch, time is not a closed sequence but an open field of potentiality. Every experience contains, alongside pain, a utopian residue, something that has not been but could have been. Memory therefore serves not only to preserve the past but to keep its promise alive. As Bloch (1959) writes, only what has been hoped for in history can still be changed. In this sense, to remember also means to anticipate, to awaken in the present what has not yet taken form. Memory is not a backward movement but an exercise in political imagination.

This intuition lies at the heart of Benjamin's dialectic. For Benjamin (1940 [2003]), the past is never definitively closed but awaits redemption in the moment when the present recognises it as incomplete. The revolutionary *Jetztzeit* and Bloch's concrete hope converge in conceiving memory as an interruption of linear time and as an opening towards a qualitatively different future. Utopian memory is, in this sense, a critical practice par excellence: it preserves absence but transforms it into possibility.

Today, this utopian function of memory appears in many social practices operating within the field of digital culture and the politics of the body. Feminist and queer commemorations, community archives of marginal experiences and digital platforms collecting testimonies of discrimination or violence all escape the logic of the ephemeral and the viral to create spaces of symbolic duration. In these practices, remembrance becomes performative: to remember means to circulate again lives and words that would otherwise remain invisible.

Butler (2020) has emphasised how memory can become an ethical and political alliance, capable of uniting the living and the dead in a community of shared vulnerability. It is not a cult of the past

but an ethics of relation. Memory in this sense is not only what remains but what allows us to remain together. It is a relational gesture, open and non-identitarian, which finds in emotional resonance a form of resistance.

Similarly, Klein (2014) and Mbembe (2019) have shown how ecological and postcolonial memory can serve as laboratories for rethinking justice. To remember the wounds inflicted on the earth or on colonised peoples does not mean only to bear witness but to reactivate a sense of collective responsibility. These memories, often preserved in digital archives or diffused artistic practices, assume a utopian function precisely because they propose a new alliance between memory and the future, not remembrance as conservation but as reinvention of the common world.

In an environment dominated by speed and simulation, critical memory thus represents the possibility of reclaiming time. It allows us to escape the compulsion to the present, to slow down, to reopen the space of thought. From this perspective, remembrance becomes a political act in the deepest sense, a decision about how the past continues to live within the present. The utopia of memory is not evasion but transformation of the real through awareness of its incompleteness.

As Bloch (1959) suggests, only what is remembered can still be redeemed. Memory is therefore not only resistance to trauma but also its transfiguration. In recognising absence, memory opens a passage towards what does not yet exist. It is within this space that Critical Theory rediscovers its strength, not in nostalgia but in promise.

8. Memory, Time and Critique in the Digital Age

To reflect on memory in the age of its automatisations means to question the very destiny of historical consciousness. The technological, social and perceptual transformations that have been examined do not simply represent a change in scale or speed but a reconfiguration of the relationship between time and experience. In a world where every event is immediately recorded and reproduced, the risk is not the loss of memory but the loss of its meaning. The past is no longer forgotten; it is neutralised, made available and harmless.

Critical Theory remains relevant here not because it provides a ready-made model for digital memory, but because it preserves a conception of remembrance as interruption, elaboration and normative orientation. What changes in the digital environment is the technical condition under which these functions can still operate.

Digital technologies and generative AI do not merely alter what is remembered; they modify the conditions under which something can enter the field of memory at all. Read together, these perspectives (Floridi, 2023; Esposito, 2017; Hoskins, 2024) shift the question from how technologies mediate remembrance to how generated representations can enter the field of memory and alter its relation to historical evidence. The issue is therefore not whether technology destroys memory, but how generative systems transform the relation between remembrance, experience and historical referentiality.

The same infrastructures that automate and synthesise remembrance can also support practices of critical reappropriation, from participatory archives to collective forms of commemoration. The decisive distinction is therefore not between human and technical memory, but between forms that collapse the past into immediate availability and practices that preserve distance, contestability and responsibility. In this sense, memory remains a critical practice of time: its political force lies not in preserving the past intact, but in maintaining the conditions under which the past can still interrupt the present.

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Being Present: Benjamin on Image, Temporality, and Trauma

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Abstract. This article examines Walter Benjamin's conception of the image through the temporal relation in which what-has-been and the present become historically recognizable together. A restricted comparison with Freud's *Nachträglichkeit* brings into focus the non-coincidence of occurrence and later significance, while preserving the difference between psychic experience and the historical and aesthetic mediations of such recognizability. The dialectical image, I argue, does more than register temporal rupture: it configures a relation in which heterogeneous temporal moments become historically intelligible together. Aesthetic mediation and Benjamin's engagement with Proust bring this problem into the sensible and embodied temporalization of the subject, where remembrance exceeds voluntary recollection. The argument then reaches a threshold at which remembrance concerns pasts never experienced by those to whom they later become significant. Historical remembrance here depends upon materially transmitted traces without their assimilation to the memory of a collective subject. Trauma returns at this threshold as a political problem, since its belated efficacy remains bound to singular experience even where the violence from which it arises is historically organized. Being present finally designates the temporal-political relation emerging from these differentiated mediations: a present answerable to histories it has not itself experienced, whose encounter with what has passed can alter its historical situation and leave its possibilities otherwise than settled in advance.

Keywords: Walter Benjamin; dialectical image; trauma; historical temporality; afterwardsness (*Nachträglichkeit*); involuntary memory; historical remembrance; aesthetic mediation.

1. Introduction

To be present would seem, at first, to mean inhabiting the time in which one lives. Benjamin makes this seemingly ordinary condition historically difficult. In the *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, the present emerges against the homogeneous and empty time of historicism as a moment at which the historical continuum can be arrested and an otherwise obscured past suddenly becomes recognizable. What has been can flash up in the Now, forming a constellation whose moment of recognizability gives the historical image its peculiar temporal intensity. History does not simply accumulate behind the present. Its apparently settled past remains traversed by unrealized possibilities, interrupted transmissions, and the claims of those whose histories have been written from the standpoint of the victors. Such moments acquire another force when a present becomes capable of reading them as historically its own concern. The dialectical image condenses this relation between what-has-been and the Now, bringing into visibility tensions that the appearance of historical continuity had kept apart. The present consequently occupies a more precarious position than chronological succession suggests. It is the time from which the past becomes readable, while this readability exposes the present to histories it cannot simply possess as its inheritance. *Being present*, as the problem pursued here, begins from this unsettled relation between historical distance and present recognizability. It asks how what has passed can become effective under altered historical conditions, and how the present itself comes to be differently situated through that encounter (Benjamin 1940 [2003], Theses V–VII, XIV, XVI–XVII; Benjamin 1999, N2a,3; N3,1).

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Across Benjamin's different engagements with history, image, remembrance, and aesthetic experience, history becomes legible through its encounter with a particular present, often under the signs of interruption, danger, awakening, and sudden recognition. Yet these dispersed configurations do not readily settle into a single temporal model. The question is therefore how their affinity can be articulated in a form sufficiently capacious to preserve the complexity of Benjamin's thought without prematurely closing it.¹

The same caution applies to Benjamin's relation to Freud and, more broadly, to the place of psychoanalytic problems within his thought², particularly where his temporal configurations are brought into relation with psychoanalytic ones. Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit*³ emerges from the observation that an occurrence need not possess from the outset the significance it will later assume within psychic life. An earlier scene can persist as a trace whose affective and traumatic determination arises only through a subsequent experience, so that the later moment does more than disclose what had remained hidden in the first.⁴ It retroactively reorganizes the significance of what occurred (Freud 1895 [1950], SE 1, pp. 295–297; Freud 1896, SE 3, pp. 189–221). Memory accordingly takes shape through processes of reinscription in which temporal priority and psychic significance cease to coincide. The past available to memory is therefore already subject to displacement and reconstruction, as Freud's account of screen memories makes especially apparent, while the Wolf Man case radicalizes the difficulty by making the temporal relation between an earlier scene and its later psychic efficacy itself an object of interpretation (Freud 1899, SE 3, pp. 299–322; Freud 1918 [1914], SE 17, pp. 7–122). Freud's later accounts of repetition and traumatic recurrence render the consequences of this displacement more acute. What returns has already happened, although its efficacy belongs to another time and can seize a present that does not command the conditions of its return (Freud 1914, SE 12, pp. 145–156; Freud 1920 [1955], SE 18, pp. 12–15, 30–31).

A corresponding complication of temporal sequence is at stake in Benjamin, though on different terms. Afterwardsness complicates the apparently straightforward sequence in which experience occurs, passes into memory, and subsequently becomes available for recollection. The past persists through traces, substitutions, repetitions, and altered investments, while later experience can confer upon an earlier occurrence a determination unavailable within its first registration. For the present argument, the differentiation between the spatiotemporal occurrence of an event, its aesthetic-experiential registration, and its subsequent determination within practical modes of consciousness and will may provide a provisional point of orientation. Its relevance to Benjamin remains necessarily open, however, since his thinking brings media, materially transmitted histories, forms of experience, and their theoretical-political articulation into relations that repeatedly condition one another without thereby becoming interchangeable. The question is therefore less whether Freudian afterwardsness supplies a temporal model for Benjamin than how far the problem it articulates can remain operative as it passes through these differently constituted forms of mediation.

¹ The complexity of Benjamin's philosophy warrants particular care. His writings resist disciplinary compartmentalization and are better approached as a multilayered philosophical configuration traversing aesthetics, history, politics, and the theory of experience. As Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne emphasize in their introduction to *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy*, Benjamin's philosophical project requires precisely such attention to the relations among apparently disparate domains; significantly, they invoke Benjamin's proposition that "'construction' presupposes 'destruction'" (A. Benjamin & Osborne 1994, p. x).

² The relation between Benjamin and psychoanalysis has been approached in markedly different ways, which itself cautions against treating Freud as providing a directly transferable model for Benjamin's thought. See Roff 2004; Weigel 1996; Nägele 1991.

³ *Nachträglichkeit* is rendered here as "afterwardsness" (Fr. *après-coup*), following Laplanche's account of retroactive constitution rather than mere temporal delay (Laplanche 1999, pp. 34–45).

⁴ Freud's account of repression further complicates this persistence insofar as what is excluded from consciousness is not thereby deprived of efficacy, but continues through derivative formations and the conditions governing its return (Freud 1915, SE 14, pp. 141–158).

Especially consequential here is Benjamin's engagement with Proust, where image, remembrance, and experience converge upon the temporalization and visualization of the subject.⁵ This experiential configuration may also illuminate the place of trauma in Benjamin, insofar as singular experience in its sensible articulation opens onto *Eingedenken*, through which remembrance acquires a specifically historical reach. What remains uncertain in such a passage is the distance it must preserve: how might histories never lived by the present subject enter its experience without being assimilated to the memory of a collective subject?

Moving from the dialectical image and aesthetic mediation through Proustian involuntary memory to historical transmission, the argument follows the changing temporal forms of remembrance, only there returning to trauma as a political problem of singular experience and historically transmitted violence.

2. Dialectical Images and the Temporality of Historical Recognizability

For Benjamin, the image is irreducible to a static object of representation because its mode of appearance is itself temporal. Past and present do not merely succeed one another but enter into a constellation in which their relation becomes newly legible, so that the image condenses heterogeneous temporalities: fragments of what has been, the present of their recognizability, and, crucially, the possibility of a future opened by what the historical continuum has left unrealized. Temporal rupture consequently matters less as interruption in itself than through the receptivity it demands toward relations that chronological succession obscures. Non-coincidence between an occurrence and the moment of its recognizability must remain open to renewed constellation; otherwise rupture itself risks hardening into repetition or becoming blind to the heterogeneous temporalities it discloses. Benjamin occasionally brings this danger close to states of shock or intoxication, yet these mark limits rather than the principle of the dialectical image. Compulsive recurrence, in this sense, constitutes an extreme rather than paradigmatic form of temporal non-coincidence. What returns belatedly in traumatic experience does not return as an intact past available to sovereign recollection; its fragmented emergence registers instead an occurrence holding out against integration into the experience to which it nevertheless belongs. The dialectical image poses a different but structurally related problem at the level of historical experience: what has been becomes legible only through its discontinuous constellation with a present in which possibilities suppressed or left unrealized by historical continuity become recognizable. How can temporal rupture become historically legible through the specific mediation of the image without that mediation domesticating the discontinuity it makes recognizable?⁶

The difficulty of recognizability is already internal to Benjamin's conception of the dialectical image. What becomes legible in the Now must interrupt the continuous relation between past and present, yet this emergence is inseparable from the historical construction through which dispersed and suppressed materials are brought into constellation.⁷

This methodological complication also modifies the relation between temporal rupture and temporal immediacy in Benjamin. The dialectical image names a historical rupture in which what-has-been crystallizes with the Now in a sudden flash—an interruption of homogeneous time through

⁵ For a fuller examination of Benjamin's engagement with Proust, see Schlossman 1986.

⁶ On the temporality of the dialectical image and the constellation of past and present, see Buck-Morss (1989, pp. 241–252) and Osborne (1995, pp. 136–140).

⁷ Pensky locates precisely this unresolved tension between the dialectical image as an “event of a new time” and as the “production of a materialist critic,” observing that the Messianic Now that “springs forth” into profane time remains difficult to reconcile with the “painstaking application of historical method” (Pensky 2000, p. 193).

which the past insists within the present. As Benjamin writes in Convolute N of *The Arcades Project*, “the dialectical image is the caesura in the movement of thought,” the moment in which “what-has-been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation” (Benjamin 1999, p. 463). Yet the image is not simply an event subsequently given aesthetic form: its historical legibility is inseparable from the concrete mediations of its appearance—montage, allegory, ruin, photographic arrest—through which heterogeneous temporal materials enter into constellation. The distinction between temporal structure and mode of appearance must therefore remain analytically available, without hardening into a division between content and form. In the broadly Kantian configuration of Benjamin’s thought traced by Caygill, such distinctions persist through their reciprocal implication rather than through the separation of independently constituted terms (Caygill 1998).

Aesthetic forms neither merely illustrate an independently constituted rupture nor produce its temporality; they shape the conditions under which its interruption becomes perceptible and historically intelligible. In this sense, Benjamin’s images function as “flashes of knowledge,” in which temporal shock becomes a mode of historical cognition (Weigel 2015, p. 362).

The distinction between the temporal rupture of historical continuity and the formal-material mediation of its recognizability also determines the specific sense in which Benjaminian temporality can be brought into relation with Freud’s concept of afterwardsness. The difficulty of reading Benjamin through Freud lies, however, in determining how far this segmented or fragmented temporality—whereby what has occurred remains constitutive of the subject even as later experience gives its determination another form—can illuminate historical experience without abstracting this retrospective determination from its psychic conditions and transferring it as a model to the political history of remembrance.

The psychic mediation of an earlier experience and the formal-material and historical mediation of a past are not equivalent. Yet this difference remains under tension insofar as the constitution of significance may involve another position—an interpreter, observer, or third party—across increasingly extended forms of mediation. What comes into view is thus the widest span across which temporal determination might operate, rather than two neatly separated registers. Trauma occupies an extreme or threshold position within this span. Where experience is overcharged, blocked, or exceeds a threshold of integration, the relation between occurrence and later determination acquires a particularly forceful form. Traumatic belatedness does not thereby become the dialectical force of historical recognizability. In Benjamin, when *das Gewesene* becomes recognizable through its discontinuous constellation with a determinate Now, no psychic force equivalent to traumatic non-coincidence need be posited. Instead, the caesura itself changes its mode according to the form of mediation. Its relation can therefore be thought across differently constituted forms of experience without historical recognizability being reduced to psychic temporality or psychic experience being detached from the social and historical conditions of its mediation.

This specifically historical form of non-coincidence explains why Benjamin’s account of the dialectical image does not merely reject linear chronology but reconfigures the relation between past and present. He writes: “It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation” (Benjamin 1999, p. 463). Benjamin describes this moment as “the caesura in the movement of thought,” emphasizing that the dialectical image “is not a synthesis but a constellation, pregnant with tensions” (p. 463). This interruptive structure is inseparable from the moment of recognizability in which historical truth briefly appears. As he further notes, “Every present day is determined by the images that are synchronic with it: each ‘now’ is the now of a particular recognizability. In it, truth is charged to the bursting point with time” (pp. 463–464). The present, then, is not merely a later moment produced by temporal succession but the site in which

fragments of the past become legible. The dialectical image thus holds past and present in a constellation whose temporal tension resists their subsumption into a continuous historical narrative.⁸

Within this specifically historical constellation, what is at stake is more than the intensification of a discontinuity already lodged within historical time. Its occurrence produces the relation through which heterogeneous moments become historically intelligible together: what-has-been acquires a determination that it did not possess independently of the Now in which it becomes recognizable, while that Now is itself altered by the past with which it enters into constellation. Historical experience might therefore be understood neither as the recovery of an already constituted meaning nor simply as the interruption of an established continuum, but as the formation of a temporal relation through which a new configuration of historical connectedness first becomes thinkable. Material traces such as ruins, citations, fragments, and montage participate in this production rather than merely giving sensible form to a meaning constituted elsewhere. The historical relation configured in the dialectical image is therefore inseparable from the punctuality of its recognizability. “The true image of the past,” Benjamin writes, “flits by; it can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again” (Benjamin 1940 [2003], Thesis VI).

The formulation concerns more than the transience of memory: it makes the historical intelligibility of the past dependent upon a present encounter in which what-has-been becomes newly determinate. The flash does not simply disclose material whose meaning had remained intact beneath its historical suppression; rather, the moment of recognition configures a relation through which past and present become legible together. Precisely because this relation is punctual rather than continuously available, it breaks with the historicist procedure of arranging events within a succession whose apparent coherence converts catastrophe into another moment of development. Materialist historiography turns instead toward those breaks in transmission at which the past can enter into a relation with a present that neither merely inherits nor retrospectively masters it. Benjamin’s “weak messianic power” brings the political stakes of this temporal structure into view: the claims of the oppressed past become effective not through their incorporation into an enlarged historical continuum, but through a present capable of entering into a still-unsettled relation with them (Benjamin 1940 [2003], Theses II, VI).⁹

The punctuality of historical recognizability places a corresponding demand upon the practice of the historian. The “Angel of History” renders visible what such a practice must resist: propelled forward by the storm of progress, the angel perceives where historical continuity sees development an accumulating catastrophe, “one single catastrophe” piling wreckage upon wreckage (Benjamin 1940 [2003], Thesis IX). Materialist historiography consequently cannot consist in completing the

⁸ Weigel reconstructs a development from the predominantly spatial and topographical organization of memory in the early *Passagen* materials toward a scripto-topographical model in which historical perception assumes the form of reading. Individual and collective memory are brought into structural relation, while the earlier constellation of dream and waking is progressively reformulated through traces, writing, distortion, and their conditions of readability. Of particular importance is Weigel’s account of Freud’s distinction between permanent memory traces and perception-consciousness: the trace is never simply available as such but becomes readable through a discontinuous and momentary *Aufleuchten* of consciousness. She argues that Benjamin takes up precisely this structure in relation to the images of what-has-been, whose “historical index” consists in their becoming readable only at a specific moment, the “Now of cognizability.” The Freudian configuration is consequently neither reproduced unchanged nor abandoned: it is displaced into a theory of collective memory and historical perception and further elaborated through Benjamin’s concepts of image, constellation, writing, and non-sensuous similitude (Weigel 1996, pp. 99–116, esp. pp. 101–105, 107–109, 113–116).

⁹ Andrew Benjamin develops this account from Walter Benjamin’s Thesis V of *On the Concept of History*, particularly the formulation that “the true image of the past flits by” and can be seized only as an image that “flashes up at the moment of its recognizability” (Benjamin 1940 [2003], Thesis V). On this basis, Andrew Benjamin distinguishes an image merely “given to be seen” from one that “has to come to be seen” and interprets *Erkennbarkeit* as a punctual moment in which recognizability involves both “seeing within destruction” and seeing “as a form of destruction.” He further contrasts this moment with myth and eternal recurrence and relates the truth of the image to its momentary rather than continuous presence (A. Benjamin 2013, pp. 174–177).

sequence from which these remains derive their meaning. Its task is rather to seize singular moments of recognizability in which what has been excluded from it can enter into another historical relation. Such seizure cannot be reduced to a sovereign act of reconstruction, since recognition is itself conditioned by the temporal constellation in which the image becomes legible. The possibility that such a moment may be missed gives this historiographical practice its ethical-political stakes: what fails to become legible risks being returned to the continuity of progress through which the claims of the defeated and oppressed are effaced. The relation to trauma can, at this point, be maintained in a more restricted sense. What historical and traumatic experience share is not an identical temporal structure but a disturbance of contemporaneity between occurrence, experience, and subsequent intelligibility.

3. Form and Shock: Aesthetic Mediation

Whereas Section 2 asked how what-has-been can become historically recognizable through its discontinuous constellation with the Now, establishing that the dialectical image configures rather than merely represents this historical relation, the question of form follows from the conditions of that configuration itself, including the interpretive position through which it becomes legible. The image does not first exist as a temporal rupture to which perceptible form is subsequently added; material and formal mediation participate in constituting the historical relation through which rupture becomes recognizable in the first place. This problem of mediation also prepares the subsequent return to the relation between image and trauma, since any such relation must take account of the forms through which discontinuity becomes perceptible rather than presupposing a structural equivalence between traumatic and historical temporality. The present section therefore considers more briefly how particular aesthetic forms organize historical recognizability and under what conditions formal interruption acquires critical force rather than merely reproducing fragmentation.

Modern aesthetic procedures such as montage, allegory, citation, and photographic arrest organize historical legibility by giving materially differentiated form to relations of interruption, temporal disjunction, and return. Their significance cannot therefore be reduced to the representation of a rupture constituted independently of them. Yet neither does formal discontinuity possess an intrinsically critical force. Fragmentation, shock, juxtaposition, or arrest can interrupt the appearance of temporal continuity without thereby rendering the historical relations traversing that continuity intelligible; indeed, the same formal operations may displace or aesthetically contain what they make perceptible. Rather than directly re-enacting traumatic temporality, aesthetic forms participate in configuring temporal relations whose critical significance depends upon whether heterogeneous historical materials become recognizable in a determinate constellation. The problem of aesthetic mediation consequently lies in this non-equivalence between formal interruption and historical legibility: the former may condition the latter, but cannot by itself guarantee it. At their most incisive, such forms allow an unassimilated past to become perceptible without either restoring it to continuous historical meaning or converting discontinuity itself into an aesthetic resolution.

Benjamin's entry into this perceptual dimension is the concept of shock (*Schock*). Modernity produces a sensorium exposed to recurrent impacts—crowds, commodities, signage, speed—whose discontinuity alters the conditions under which experience can be accumulated and transmitted. The distinction between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* becomes crucial here: the immediacy and fragmentation of modern perception place under pressure those more durable and collectively mediated forms through which experience acquires continuity. In "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," shock accordingly names not simply an external impact but a problem concerning the relation among perception,

consciousness, memory, and the formation of experience (Benjamin 1939 [2003], pp. 316–18).¹⁰ Aesthetic procedures organized through ellipsis, interruption, or juxtaposition can reproduce the discontinuous rhythm of shock at the level of form without thereby acquiring, by virtue of that discontinuity alone, a determinate critical force.

The significance of shock for aesthetic mediation lies, however, not in supplying a single formal model that could subsequently be identified across different media. Its interruption of perceptual continuity assumes different determinations according to the medium. Poetry, photography, and montage therefore need to be distinguished according to the temporal relations they configure: the fleeting encounter, the arrest of a trace, and the constructed juxtaposition of heterogeneous historical materials do not perform the same operation. Their comparison nevertheless makes it possible to ask how discontinuity passes from a condition of modern perception into formally organized modes of historical recognizability.

In “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” Benjamin finds one such configuration in the urban poet’s exposure to modern shock. The city, with its crowds, noises, and rapidly succeeding impressions, places perception under conditions in which the fleeting encounter can resist incorporation into continuous experience. Baudelaire’s “À une passante” (“To a Passerby”), for example, condenses desire, shock, and loss into an encounter whose disappearance belongs to its very mode of persistence: what is retained poetically is not the recovery of a continuous experience but the tension of an encounter that cannot be prolonged into one. This condensation can be compared with traumatic non-coincidence without being identified with it, insofar as the significance of the encounter persists through the discontinuity that prevents its experiential completion (Benjamin 1939 [2003], pp. 313–18, 328–29).

Photography introduces a different operation. In “Little History of Photography” (1931), the photographic image arrests a moment and preserves details whose historical significance need not coincide with the circumstances of their initial inscription (Benjamin 1931 [1999], pp. 518–20). Arrest is therefore not simply another version of poetic shock: the persistence of the photographic trace opens a temporal interval within which what has been recorded can become differently readable. Montage, in turn, makes the constructive dimension of such mediation explicit. By juxtaposing temporally and materially heterogeneous elements—advertisements, architectural fragments, journalistic anecdotes, commodity forms—it does not merely preserve discontinuity but actively constructs relations among materials whose historical connection is not given in advance (Benjamin 1999, N1a,5; N2a,3). Buck-Morss sharpens this point by distinguishing montage as such from its critical operation: while Benjamin’s construction leaves its ideational elements “unreconciled” rather than fusing them into a “harmonizing perspective,” montage can equally produce illusion when incompatibility and contradiction are concealed; what matters is whether the construction “makes visible the gap between sign and referent” rather than absorbing it into a deceptive totality (Buck-Morss 1989, pp. 67–68).

In this respect, the traditional conception of aesthetic form as possessing an atemporal integrity is unsettled. Form emerges instead through a temporal interaction between intention and material, activity and receptivity, in which what is given can be worked through without its heterogeneity simply being dissolved. If such working-through generates different determinations of meaning, subsequent mediation remains internally ambivalent: as Comay’s account of traumatic belatedness suggests, it may register the pressure of what initially failed to be assimilated while also “elid[ing]”

¹⁰ Benjamin’s discussion of shock here is itself one of the points at which his engagement with psychoanalysis becomes particularly explicit. Roff (2004, pp. 129–131) emphasizes, however, that Benjamin does not simply reproduce Freud’s account of the protective shield against stimuli: in the Baudelaire essay, the psychoanalytic problem is displaced through the bodily and historically specific experience of modern shock, so that Freud functions within a constellation of other aesthetic and materialist concerns rather than as an autonomous explanatory model.

it through its displacement (Comay 2011, p. 25). What matters aesthetically is therefore how formal mediation can hold out against mere fragmentation without converting discontinuity into closure, participating instead in the production of conditions through which a present relation may open onto futurity. Benjamin's "moment of danger" sharpens the stakes of this distinction: what becomes recognizable in the present is bound to a historical relation that may disappear if it is subsumed once more under the apparent continuity of history (Benjamin 1940 [2003], Thesis VI). The critical force of aesthetic discontinuity lies, accordingly, not in nonclosure as such, but in its capacity to hold open historically determinate relations whose heterogeneity would otherwise be effaced by their reintegration into continuity.

4. Memory, History, and Political Remembrance

The move to memory becomes necessary once the temporal relation between past and present is considered across individual experience and collective history. In contrast to Adorno's more general reserve toward such a passage, Benjamin remains considerably more open to relations between these levels. Yet, as already argued, their relation cannot be collapsed into the historicity of a common subject through which individual experience and collective history would acquire an underlying temporal unity. The relation between image and trauma is rooted in this problematic, since perceptual receptivity alone cannot account for how what has passed exceeds its occurrence and acquires renewed actuality. Such actuality proceeds through the individual temporalization of experience, even where what becomes actual belongs to a history that cannot itself be possessed as individual memory. Trauma makes this problem particularly acute insofar as its recurrence unsettles any simple coincidence between the objective pastness of an occurrence and its actuality in experience. Remembrance extends this problem beyond traumatic recurrence, naming a relation in which what has passed acquires another mode of presence through encounters with objects, images, and sensible experience without being exhausted by the present in which it becomes actual. What kind of relation to the past is established when such re-emergence can be reduced neither to retrieval nor to representation or assimilation? Its non-sovereignty becomes decisive here: what has passed is neither simply present nor reduced to what no longer exists, but becomes effective through material and aesthetic encounters in which its significance, as well as the subject's relation to it, is altered under present conditions.

Proust and Involuntary Memory

Benjamin's interpretation of Marcel Proust brings the relation between image and remembrance into the domain of lived and sensible experience, where the past becomes accessible neither through deliberate retrieval nor independently of the material encounters through which it re-emerges. Proust's achievement, in Benjamin's view, lies in making involuntary memory (*mémoire involontaire*) central to the experience of the past. Involuntary memory does not simply bring back a stored image; rather, recollection renders perceptible what was not fully available to experience in the same form before its return. One "sees for the first time" what remained latent until a material trigger awakens it (Benjamin 1929 [1968], p. 210). This is distinct from *déjà vu*, which superimposes an illusory familiarity upon the present, whereas involuntary memory emerges unpredictably through encounters with material objects and sensations. The famous madeleine soaked in tea functions as a material key, unlocking strata of the past "beyond the reach of the intellect" (Benjamin 1929 [1968], pp. 210–211). These images flash up without the guidance of conscious will, establishing a temporal disjunction between an earlier experience and its later emergence in memory.

Freud's concept of afterwardsness provides one model for understanding this temporal non-coincidence insofar as an earlier experience may, through a later experience that retroactively reconfigures it, acquire a significance it did not possess or could not register in the same way at the moment of its occurrence. Proust gives a distinct phenomenological form to a comparable temporal non-identity: what is no longer present enters remembrance through the astonishment of its re-emergence and, without becoming present again in its original form, nevertheless remains effective and acquires renewed actuality. This Proustian configuration of memory can in turn be brought into relation with Freud's "Mystic Writing Pad" (*Wunderblock*), where memory appears not as a transparent archive but as a stratified field of traces whose impressions persist through differentiated layers without remaining continuously available to consciousness (Freud 1925 [1961], pp. 227–32).

What the psychoanalytic models formulate in terms of retroactive significance and the persistence of traces, Proust allows Benjamin to encounter at the level of sensible and embodied experience of what never have been met.¹¹ Yet Benjamin's affinity with this Proustian configuration exceeds the interpretative position from which he ostensibly approaches it. Proust becomes less an object of commentary than a textual medium through which a temporal proposition already at work in Benjamin's thought acquires another articulation. Through this encounter, the disjunction between past and present becomes perceptible not as an abstract temporal relation but in the material occasions of involuntary memory. What Benjamin takes from Proust is therefore not trauma or loss as its content, but a non-sovereign structure of temporal emergence in which memory-images (*Bilder*) emerge through sensory encounters and render the past newly legible in the present. Involuntary recollection can acquire a traumatic structure when belated return becomes inseparable from the recognition of loss, without trauma thereby defining involuntary memory as such (Comay 2009, pp. 86–90). Such memory-images bring past and present into a dense constellation without collapsing their temporal difference. Time, for Proust, is therefore neither a continuum nor an indefinitely extended present, but what Benjamin calls "convoluted time." Distinguishing Proust's rapturous eternity from both Platonic and utopian eternity, Benjamin locates his "true interest" in the passage of time in its "most real—that is, space-bound—form," most openly disclosed in the interaction of "remembrance within and aging without." Proust's world is consequently a "universe of convolution," in which involuntary memory brings what has passed into a present relation without abolishing its temporal difference (Benjamin 1929 [1968], pp. 210–211). Benjamin then characterizes Proust's method as "actualization, not reflection" (p. 211).

This actualization is itself inseparable from the corporeal passage of time. Remembrance works inwardly while aging registers temporality outwardly, so that Proust can, in Benjamin's formulation, let "the whole world age by a lifetime in an instant" (p. 211). The body thus belongs internally to this convolution rather than merely registering its effects. Benjamin's discussion of Proust's psychogenic asthma makes the relation aesthetic as well as corporeal: the illness "became part of his art," while his syntax "rhythmically and step by step reproduces his fear of suffocating" (pp. 213–214). Sensation, corporeality, and literary form thereby become different sites at which a temporality unavailable to reflective recollection becomes perceptible. What returns need not have been preserved as continuously available content. Benjamin accordingly refuses to oppose remembrance simply to forgetting. Remembrance and forgetting form the woof and warp of the same experiential fabric, so that forgetting belongs to the constitution, rather than merely the loss, of what can later emerge in involuntary memory (p. 211). Habit becomes significant within this structure insofar as the habitual organization of experience can render what it contains imperceptible, whereas involuntary memory

¹¹ Benjamin formulates this peculiarity of *mémoire involontaire* in "A Short Speech on Proust": "not only do its images appear without being called up; rather, they are images we have never seen before we remember them" (Benjamin, GSII.3, p. 1064; trans. Hansen, 2008, p. 348).

breaks with such availability without simply restoring an intact past. Memory does not therefore simply overcome forgetting: what has withdrawn from conscious possession can become perceptible otherwise, through the sensory and material occasions of its return. Benjamin's subsequent description of the "free-floating forms" of *mémoire involontaire* as largely "isolated, though enigmatically present, visual images" gives this discontinuous return an explicitly imagistic determination (p. 214).

Material Traces and Historical Remembrance

Involuntary memory renders intelligible how that which is no longer continuously available to consciousness may nevertheless acquire renewed perceptibility through material and sensuous encounters. Yet this structure remains indexed, however non-sovereignly, to a remembering subject and a past that belongs to its experience. Where such a relation cannot be presupposed, a differently constituted problem of historical remembrance arises: how can a past never experienced by the present subject—belonging instead to other lives, earlier generations, or defeated histories—acquire actuality through encounters with its material traces in the present? At issue is therefore not the extension of subjective remembrance beyond the individual through the supposition of a collective identity as its remembering subject, but a change in the mode of the past's transmissibility: from experiential return to historically transmitted traces. Objects, photographs, texts, citations, ruins, artworks, and urban remains can mediate such persistence without requiring that what they transmit ever have been retained as memory by the subject who encounters them, allowing a past never possessed as memory to persist "in the world of things" (Conty 2017, pp. 48–49).

The historical image gives this materially mediated relation to the past a specifically historiographical determination. Historical transmission is never neutral with respect to what it preserves: the continuity through which the past becomes available is itself marked by the asymmetry between the victorious and the defeated, between what enters the inherited account of history and what it suppresses or renders illegible (Benjamin 1940 [2003], Theses II, IX). Historical intelligibility cannot therefore be identified with the continuous unfolding of what has been transmitted, since the conditions of transmission participate in determining what can appear as history at all.

In Proust, the material object occasions the return of a past belonging to the subject's own experience. In historical remembrance, however, the material trace enters a history of transmission that exceeds the subject's experiential relation to the past. A photograph, ruin, text, or artwork not only mediates access to a past the present subject never experienced; its availability in the present is itself conditioned by processes of preservation, selection, displacement, inheritance, and neglect. The significance of transmission therefore concerns whose past can acquire presence in the present and under what conditions. What survives cannot be separated from the historical conditions of its survival. For Benjamin, the continuity through which the past is handed down is politically compromised by the relations of victory sedimented within it. If the image of the past becomes apprehensible only in the fugitive *Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit* at which it flashes up, its recognizability cannot be dissociated from the danger attending both tradition and those who receive it: that what has been transmitted be appropriated anew as an instrument of the ruling classes (Benjamin 1940 [2003], Theses V–VI).¹²

¹² Andrew Benjamin gives *Erkennbarkeit* a more exacting determination than the recognition of an already constituted historical object. His distinction between what is "given to be seen" and what "has to come to be seen" locates recognizability in the event through which an image acquires its historical visibility, rather than in the subsequent identification of something whose historical significance would already be available. Hence his twofold characterization of recognizability as "seeing within destruction" and as seeing that is itself "a form of destruction" (Benjamin 2013, pp. 174–177).

Historical materialism consequently intervenes not simply by retrieving what historical continuity has left unarticulated, but by contesting the mode of transmission through which that continuity constitutes itself as inheritance. Historicist empathy, ostensibly granting access to the past on its own terms, proves inseparable from the position from which such access is undertaken: insofar as empathy attaches itself to the victor, it enters the succession through which past victory is inherited by those who rule in the present. Cultural inheritance thereby becomes internally non-identical with the civilizational continuity it appears to attest, since what the triumphal procession carries forward as its spoils remains inseparable both from the anonymous labour to which those cultural treasures owe their existence and from the process in which, as Benjamin writes, “barbarism taints the manner in which it was transmitted from one hand to another” (Thesis VII).

What presents itself within the historicist continuum as a sequence of events, and under the rubric of progress as historical advancement, confronts the angel as a single accumulating catastrophe whose wreckage is not left behind by the movement that produces it (Thesis IX). Yet to interrupt this continuity is not thereby to occupy a position outside the history it has transmitted. The difficulty becomes especially acute where revolutionary standstill remains implicated in the temporality it negates: as Comay strikingly puts it, the revolutionaries who shot the clocks “had, in the first place, to synchronize their watches” (Comay 2005, p. 100).

This non-exteriority bears equally upon historical transmission: what has occurred enters later constellations under conditions in which its significance cannot remain simply identical across its passage. Trauma renders this temporal non-identity especially acute, since the delay between occurrence or inscription and later articulation belongs to the constitution of its significance rather than merely succeeding it. Comay locates this difficulty in the broader structure of *translatio*—“transfer, transference, transmission, transport”—through which passage across historical boundaries cannot be separated from the material and semantic displacements such passage entails (Comay 2011, pp. 13–14). Her subsequent description of trauma renders the temporal implication of this structure more precise: between “originary inscription” and its later “transcription, translation, or re-edition” there persists a delay in which chronological sequence is thrown out of joint (pp. 24–25). What reaches the present through a historical trace is therefore neither the unchanged persistence of an earlier significance nor something detached from the past it transmits; transmission exposes that past to a later determination whose belatedness belongs to the historical relation itself.

Trauma and the Politics of Remembrance

If historical remembrance cannot be derived from an enlargement of individual memory into a collective mnemonic subject, no more can the political significance of trauma be secured by transferring the psychic structure of traumatic experience directly to history. Irreducibly singular though trauma remains in the psychic and corporeal experience of the subject who undergoes it, exhausted by such singularity are neither that which inflicts the wound nor the modalities under which its effects subsequently return, sedimented within both being the determinations of historically organized relations of violence whose unequal apportionment of exposure, vulnerability, and power conditions, in turn, what may become rememberable, representable, or susceptible to disavowal. Caruth locates the peculiar historicity of trauma in precisely this temporal difficulty: an event may acquire its traumatic force through a latency in which occurrence and conscious experience fail to coincide, while its historical significance emerges through forms of implication that exceed the subject to whom the event occurred (Caruth 1991). Yet once this implication is extended beyond the experiential history of the subject, altered too is the register of the problem carried forward from Benjamin. At issue is how what has been singularly undergone can enter into a political relation with the historical conditions of its occurrence without being either immured within private experience or subsumed under an antecedently constituted collective memory.

Intensified under modernity by technological acceleration, metropolitan shock, warfare, and the circulation of images is precisely this non-coincidence between singular experience and the historical conditions of its occurrence, altered thereby being not only the modalities under which violence is encountered but also the temporal and medial conditions under which its effects can recur. Testimony renders this difficulty particularly perspicuous. That traumatic memory exceeds the experiential enclosure of the individual does not of itself confer historical or political significance upon it, such significance depending instead upon a testimonial relation in which the address of singular experience to another makes it communicable without effacing the difference between undergoing an event and subsequently bearing witness to it (Felman & Laub 1992; Rosenberg Schipper 2024). Witnessing names, in this sense, a further determination of remembrance rather than a consequence immanent to traumatic recurrence itself. To witness need entail neither empirical co-presence with the event nor the subsequent contemplation of its representation, but may consist instead in becoming implicated in the mediated survival of a past whose claims remain incommensurable with their exhaustive recognition from the standpoint of the present. Responsibility takes shape within this temporal asymmetry. Irretrievable though the past remains, the present is not thereby absolved of answerability for the forms under which what has been excluded, suppressed, or left unresolved is permitted to appear. Politically determinate, then, is remembrance neither by virtue of the past it preserves nor through the retrospective knowledge it makes available, but insofar as its intervention into pastness alters the temporal disposition of the present itself. Andrew Benjamin gives this structure a particularly forceful formulation when he writes that remembering “takes the place of knowing” and that remembrance “breaks the links” holding what was past “as the past.” As a “form of destruction,” remembrance breaks open the interarticulation of remembering, pastness, and temporal continuity, thereby undoing the hold of historicist time. It is in this interruption that remembrance acquires its political determination. Each generation is endowed with a “weak messianic power” whose actualization belongs to the present, opposed by the project that would “maintain the present as it is”; the co-presence of these possibilities constitutes what Andrew Benjamin calls “the politics of time” (Benjamin 2013, pp. 169–170). Political, then, is historical recognizability not because cognition of what has been would of itself acquire practical efficacy, but because, in the very present in which a past becomes recognizable, at stake is also the disposition of that present toward possibilities foreclosed within the history it inherits.¹³

Such a politics of time is not exhausted by the praxis toward which historical recognizability may be directed, since political action itself presupposes a mode of inhabiting the present through which relations to what has passed become possible. It is at this juncture that the temporal structure of mediation reconstructed through Benjamin opens onto a post-Benjaminian thought. Rather than being returned to the closed circuit of an exclusively Benjaminian terminology, the problem can be carried forward through Agamben’s account of the contemporaneous, in which belonging to one’s time is constituted through disjunction from it, paradigmatically figured in the capacity to perceive the darkness of one’s epoch rather than coincide with what that epoch renders immediately visible (Agamben 2009).

What matters here, beyond the metaphors of darkness, is the experiential implication of the subject in a temporality whose moments no longer stand in relations of simple succession. Refracted through the problem of historical remembrance developed here, Agamben’s disjunction thereby acquires a determination not exhausted by his formulation. The subject inhabits a present whose

¹³ Tagliacozzo (2022, pp. 176–178) brings this implication into explicit relation with praxis. In the fleeting emergence of the dialectical image, a forgotten moment of the oppressed past enters into constellation with immediate political conditions and can thereby provide a direction for praxis, so that historical cognition bears upon political action rather than merely augmenting knowledge of what has been.

relation to what has preceded it is bidirectionally determining while remaining temporally asymmetric. The past cannot be altered in its having-occurred, yet the significance through which it bears upon the present remains susceptible to renewed determination, while the present is itself reconfigured through that encounter. Futurity emerges from this reciprocal asymmetry, rather than appearing as a temporal horizon simply awaiting what comes next. Being present would accordingly designate a temporal-political praxis in which neither the past is incorporated into present actuality nor the present secured as the sovereign position from which what has passed receives its final meaning. Political remembrance carries traumatic belatedness beyond recurrence in this sense. It concerns the possibility that what remains unresolved may participate in the formation of a future precisely because neither its historical significance nor the present's relation to it has been brought to completion.

5. Conclusions

Reconsidered through the temporal relations among interruption, belatedness, and actualization, Benjamin's image emerges neither as the representation of an antecedently constituted historical meaning nor as the aesthetic transcription of rupture alone. What the foregoing analyses have sought to establish is, rather, that the historical force of the image inheres in the relations it renders possible among temporally non-coincident determinations whose belonging together cannot be presupposed. Proustian involuntary memory disclosed this structure within the experiential history of the subject, where what has ceased to be continuously available can acquire renewed actuality through material and sensible encounter. Historical remembrance displaced the same problem without merely enlarging its scale, since the traces through which other lives, defeated histories, and unexperienced pasts become transmissible cannot be assimilated to the mnemonic contents of a collective subject. Traumatic belatedness introduces a further complication. It cannot simply furnish historical materialism with a ready-made temporal grammar, even where the delay between occurrence and later significance bears a certain affinity to historical transmission. What these different relations might nonetheless disclose is a more circumscribed temporal structure. What has passed remains irreversible; its significance, however, is not thereby fixed once and for all. Exposed to later determination, the past can enter into a new relation with a present that, in encountering it, is itself no longer left unchanged.

On the reading ventured here, neither interruption nor incompleteness could readily be accorded an intrinsically critical or ethical valence. Montage, allegory, fragmentation, and the dialectical image become consequential only insofar as the relations they articulate prevent historical difference from being absorbed into the sovereignty of a present for which the past would be either fully knowable or definitively complete. Hence neither aesthetic reconciliation nor the mere preservation of rupture provides the terminus of the argument. At issue instead is a non-sovereign form of actuality in which what has passed can bear upon the present without being restituted as presence, and in which the present, far from constituting the immutable standpoint from which history is retrospectively adjudicated, becomes susceptible to determination by what it cannot make contemporaneous with itself. Being present, understood in these terms, names neither possession of the historical moment nor coincidence with one's time, but the more exacting capacity to sustain relations with what remains temporally other to it.

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