

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

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** Associate Professor, Sociology of Cultural and Communication Processes, “G. d’Annunzio” University of Chieti-Pescara, Department of Business Economics, Viale Pindaro 42, 65127 Pescara, Italy, e-mail <luca.corchia@unich.it>.

*** Full Professor, Sociology of Cultural and Communication Processes, Tor Vergata University of Rome, Via Columbia 1, 00133 Rome, Italy, e-mail <hassan@lettere.uniroma2.it>.

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 Pedrosa 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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