

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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