

Pre-workshop comment

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1. 'Historiography' means literally 'the writing of history'. This is one of the possible meanings of the idea of history but at the same time a crucial one. This idea of history as discursive production relates to our capacity of collecting and organizing a diversity of sources of information about the past. It would not be right to think of history as something exclusively related to the past. In virtue of this capacity of combining historical materials with ever-new interpretations, history can be regarded as 'history of the present'. Practical interests and methodological approaches ultimately spring from the ground of present-day circumstances. They respond to the needs, interests, challenges and urgencies of specific societies, which interrogate themselves as realities subjected to the pass of time.

It was not until recently that there has seemed to be a shared belief that what we apprehend as 'history' is actually a set of texts whose discursive structure entails social mechanisms of transmission of 'memories', functioning at different levels and beyond the circle of academic practices. Historical narratives are the result of cultural operations that construct social reality (what Hutcheon has described as the social construction of facts from events). This symbolic operation involves different vectors of cultural transmission, through specific sociocultural processes. The forms and consequences of these processes for social life are far from being univocal: this is why historical experiences can be not only inherited but also contested in the course of these large-scale processes.

2. The concept of 'memory' is not a perfect synonym for 'history' and it should not be considered as such yet to try to establish clear-cut distinctions between them might involve even worse consequences. Over the 20th century these risks were illustrated by a whole historiographic tradition that tried to separate the two concepts on the basis of the epistemological dualism that underlies the conceptual pair subjectivity/objectivity. History was thus considered as the realm of objective research while memory was restricted to the domain of subjective and evanescent personal memories. In this way, History was confined to the activities of professional historians under an atomistic perspective by which historians are understood as agents who are embedded in no other social relation apart from their methodological repertoires. As a consequence of this perspective, a huge diversity of sources of information (including literary ones) were largely overlooked in the practice of historical research for a long time.

Regimes of memory are closely linked with subjectivity-formation processes, both at the individual and at the collective level. Memory is a crucial artefact for the creation of collective self-perceptions. In this sense, the concept of memory is far from being univocal and even less intrinsically innocent. Quite the contrary, memory is a site of struggles in which identifiable political goals are always inscribed. These goals shape patterns of meaning assigned to shared past experiences, moulding the perception of certain events as sources of collective and personal identity.

Apart from this, an increasing number of Historians are becoming aware of the burden of subjectivity which is involved in their research, as they are self-interpreting agents inscribed in larger social contexts and dynamics. Their work appears in this way as just one possible form among other devices of transmission and construction of past experiences (and experiences of the past, so their activities must be understood in relation to other agencies such as mass media, literary devices as many other possible producers of memory, functioning at different levels of ideological mediation).

3. The conceptual relationship between trauma and memory is highly problematic today. The general stance that 'the more memory we have the better our life is' is far from being unconditionally true. There is a somehow pragmatic or utilitarian sense of memory implied in this view that seems to assume an underlying therapeutic value in the act of remembering. A greater or lesser presence of

the capacity to remember — the greater or lesser intensity with which a society decides to evoke the past — is thus related to a not-always-explicit idea of social health.

Remembering traumas of past generations also constitutes a powerful source of coalescence for social groups and national identities, but mourning always places memory in an intricate relationship to the past, not only because it arouses certain epistemological problems but also because it often risks legitimating some aspects of the present by virtue of what Ricœur termed 'an excess of empathy'. Discourses of victimization can easily be used for mobilizing both social imaginaries and unreflected pulsional energies and they obviously can be used for different political purposes. As a result of this, a cautionary accent is especially required when dealing with social feelings as sources of the community. There can be nothing such as an ideal 'community of remembering' because memory is always plural, which means that it is a locus of struggling and contestation.

4. There is nothing inherently good either in the act of remembering or in the very concept of memory, nothing that can be isolated from their concrete uses. Therefore, unconditional glorification of memory as an end in itself runs the risk of obscuring the practical ends inscribed in every political activity. The question of why memory matters today and how our discourses on memory build up real political communities needs to be cautiously scrutinized. Moral imperatives of responsibility must be carefully distinguished from political goals: examining the ideological premises underlying memory policies perhaps is the first step for a robust pluralistic relationship with the past and the safest path to the ideas of Justice usually associated with it.

Position Paper

On the uses and misuses of memory for life

My paper deals with the question that memory is a political reality. Memory has become an important social issue and a widely researched topic in recent decades. However, few of the many books that have dealt profusely with this issue over the past years have really questioned what memory might be in political terms and therefore they have rarely explored the possible perverse consequences and misuse of this concept. Very often they have just assumed that memory is inherently a duty and a valuable end in itself. As a result of this perspective, a 'blind spot' has increasingly been generated in their discourses, even though they respond to the best intentions and to real social necessities.

My aim here is just to pinpoint briefly three of the problematic dimensions of this 'blind spot': Firstly, the present scarcity of critical approaches to the issue, in the sense of being really *critical*, that is, taking a critical distance which will enable them to explore the conditions of possibility for acts of memory, acts invested with different practical meanings and goals according to each social environment. Secondly, I will refer to the problematic relation of memory and normative frames, taking into account how if memory is considered as a value for its own sake then it may be politically tempting to transpose its contents directly as values into the public sphere. I will try to intimate why the desirability of this passage is not clear and it can be at least debatable, even though it does not amount to the proposal of a public sphere considered as a sort of neutral *tabula rasa*, where every statement on the past is as acceptable as any other and can be sustained and proclaimed with public acquiescence and economic support. Thirdly, I will discuss two different models for the role of the State when it fosters or discourages certain ways of remembering as well as the problems and challenges of each of them.

1. If it is true that memory is a crucial part of the capacity of societies to judge and understand themselves as changing realities subjected to the passage of time, it is equally true that the idea and the role we attribute to this 'instrument' in our societies has to be carefully scrutinized, precisely because it is an instrument – that is, a thing used for doing things and not an ultimate value abstracted from concrete historical reality. If we agree with this definition of an instrument then we have to grant that an instrument is defined in relation to an end that in principle it does not contain in itself; on the contrary, this end is provided by an external agent. In the case of memory as a social phenomenon, the number of agents involved in this social process is high and heterogeneous: it is as varied and multifarious as their practical goals might be. Hence, like any other instrument, memory exhibits a constitutive ambivalence (rather a 'multi-valence') according to these multiple practical aims. There is always the risk (one might say that it is an intrinsic risk) of a change in its nature and its uses from one period to another. This idea is not a latecomer in western thought: Nietzsche already suggested it in his *Untimely Meditations*, where he tackles 'the Use and Abuse of History for Life'. This is a short essay in which Nietzsche highlights a very important and unsettling point: there is nothing intrinsically good in memory *per se*, as there are only different uses and these uses can (and must) be appraised. The goal of this appraisal is to put in a cautionary note the regarding the act of remembering and how it is related to the present. Today, the content of this note would probably consist in avoiding jumping from the moral domain to the political dimension of human experience and vice versa. It is true that both parts of human experience maintain subtle mutual dialectics and intense links, but if they were simply interchangeable many of the most important and poignant problems of political thought would simply have been already cancelled – which obviously has not been the case up to now. The passage from values in the moral sphere to political decision-taking processes might be not as easy as it may appear in many communitarian philosophic arguments. The concept of memory, which is an instrument that plays a critical role in the capacity of societies to examine themselves, is pervaded with different political goals and practical ends and this certainly demands investigation. Memory really constitutes a new site of social struggle: historical struggles reveal profound modifications of political positions and consequently have the power to reveal memory as an ever-changing process whose meaning and desirability must be subjected to critical scrutiny at every point. This involves, since it is one of the most urgent tasks at present time, developing critical typologies of memory in order to pinpoint why memory matters today and to make possible a new specific inquiry of 'the use and misuses of memory for life'.
2. One of the most delicate 'uses' of memory at the present time, which is certainly a permanent source of possible 'misunderstandings' and 'misuses', is the relationship between memory and normative frames and more specifically with that set of governmental and normative actions called 'transitional justice.'
It seems to be beyond doubt that memory is a social issue, that is, an activity involving a perception of shared past experience that has to do with the political dimension. However, its links with normative activities are far from evident. I would like just to pose the question whether there can be a normative frame for the [collective and private] act of remembering and what the possible outcomes of the attempt to shape the ways in which societies memories are informed and co-authorized would be.

There have been several attempts to enable laws that would try to rule these complicated processes, and their results up to now have been very controversial. One of the most contested efforts is 'transitional justice'. Many people think that is simply impossible to aim to repair damages inflicted on various scales by a regime. There are obviously aspects of human experience that go beyond the confines of juridical criteria. Transitional justice runs the risk of superseding them by contending that normative activities provide a sufficient kind of neutrality to repair every sort of damage. The problem with this stance is that very frequently this has been interpreted as 'collectively organized forgetting' assuming a sort of therapeutic or utilitarian approach whose criteria are not made explicit by publicly debatable criteria. Who and on what basis decides what has to be forgotten and forgiven? This is a far from easy question to answer. The very concept of 'transition' implies or intimates that there is a sort of continuity between two

moments and hence there must be some elements that remain in both parts of social time, the past and the future. What if there is no agreement about what the elements should be which are regarded by society as needing to be maintained or cast off?

- 3 This last question leads us to the final point that I wanted to approach in this paper: the role of the State and whether a totally neutral stance is possible or, on the contrary, there must be a partisan role that reinforces some memories above others. My aim is not to provide solutions; it is only to single out some knotty questions that may arise from this. On one hand, I do not find the liberal ideal of procedural neutrality practicable or even desirable, because it contains the assumption that, for instance, the worst lies about the past can be stated in the public sphere and as this public sphere guarantees a sufficient level of self-regulation to make public debate possible, the 'truth' would create its own defence. Historical experience has disputed this ability of 'truth' to defend itself in a context where consensus and dissent are not the assured outcome of an equality of positions and possibilities of public hearing. A cautionary accent must be put on this 'neutrality'.

On the other hand, republican models contend the existence of certain public virtues and substantive notions of common goods. The problem is that every attempt to implement laws in favour of certain memories is highly problematic, insofar as they are often denounced as 'liberticide laws' by revisionists and so on and so forth. Another risk is that a normative frame may revert to a conservative rule insofar as it may approach the past as something static which is not subject to debate. At the same time, I would like to add the problem intrinsic to a subrogation of every normative activity on the part of the State: this would imply the idea that the State has no responsibility in the sort of facts that, at some point of the history of a society, made regulation necessary; it is the idea that the State as such has nothing to do with the events that once were the origin of these laws. Devotion to 'truth' is a core aspect of every society interested in justice but to acknowledge the difficulties in defining and achieving this itinerant goal, along with the practical difficulties for the truth to defend itself, is the precarious and modest ground on which we must base this task.