Reflexive Pasts. Cultural Pragmatics, Identity Formation and the Roles of Social and Collective Memory

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3. **Article accepted for publication (*data*)**
       September 2011

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Cultural Pragmatics, Identity Formation and the Roles of Social and Collective Memory

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Abstract

Drawing on some theoretical stimuli provided by cultural sociology, the article will show how, when it comes to discussing the identity-creating function of memory, focusing the analysis on the relationship between representations of the past and the process of identity building is not enough. In addition, it is necessary to evaluate whether it is appropriate to include the consciousness (that here is assumed to be increasingly widespread) of the socially constructed nature of each identity in the concept of memory. In this case, memory would play an ambivalent role regarding identity. On the one hand, memory would represent a vital resource for its construction and retention, while on the other it could constitute an element making actors aware of the artificiality of their selves, therefore ending up by playing a destabilizing role. Some consequences of this way of conceiving memory are discussed with regards to the general process of forgetting and the so-called 'ethics of memory'.
Key words: Collective memory, flow, forgetting, performance, social memory

1. Introduction

Memory studies in the last two decades have been characterised by a large degree of diversity in terms of approaches and issues, developed within a wide variety of different fields. When attempting to provide a critical overview of the available literature, it is impossible not to feel overwhelmed by the seemingly limitless output, even when the field is restricted to the social sciences. Indeed, as Jeffrey Olick has noted (2008, p. 26), while it was still possible to carry out bibliographical reconnaissance work on the theme of memory with a realistic hope of being exhaustive ten or fifteen years ago, any such attempt now would involve a mountain of work big enough to discourage even the most dogged researcher. In addition to the startling number of articles, books, collections of essays and specialist magazines, one is also struck by the disparate range of topics linked to memory. A quick JSTOR search on articles published in the last twenty years whose keywords include *memory*, *collective memory* or *social memory* produces an endless list of results ranging from the ethnography of commemorative events to theoretical analyses of evil, historical sociological studies of martyrdom and research into the expression of gratitude within friendship networks. To this end, while reflecting on the pandemonium which is now an intrinsic part of this field of study, Olick defined collective memory research as a 'nonparadigmatic, transdisciplinary, centerless enterprise' (Olick and Robbins, 1998: 106), characterized by a chaotic process whereby work carried out in some subjects often does not take into account the relevant output in certain others.

The (heroic) efforts to provide a critical review of available literature (Cossu, 2008; Olick, 1999a, 2008; Olick and Robbins, 1998; Zelizer, 1995; Zerubavel, 1996) have focused on the search

for a dominant motif in this many-sided fragmented branch of study and appear to have found a consensus regarding the concept of identity. Indeed, there seems to be a more or less tacit agreement among scholars concerning the identifying function of memory. Put more explicitly, if memories of the past are organised into structures which can convey a sense of continuity in an increasingly changing present, they constitute an indispensable anchorage device for the self, thereby becoming the main source for formation of its identity (Giesen, 2006: 109; Misztal, 2003: 133)[1].

The following study attempts to question this nexus. By drawing on certain theoretical stimuli from cultural sociology (Alexander, 2003; Alexander and Smith, 2003), in particular the branch which is most sensitive to the issue of cultural pragmatics (Alexander, 2004a; Alexander and Mast, 2006; Giesen, 2004a, 2006; Rauer, 2006), the essay will try to show that when addressing the identifying function of memory, it is not sufficient to limit one's analysis to the relationship between representations of the past and processes of identity formation, maintenance and transformation. In addition, the appropriateness of including tacit awareness of the socially-constructed nature of each form of belonging within the concept of memory needs to be assessed. In this case, memory performs an ambivalent function with regard to identity-making processes. While, on one hand, it constitutes an essential resource in terms of construction and maintenance, on the other hand it could be an element capable of making actors aware of the artificial nature of their self, thereby ultimately carrying out a destabilising role.

2. The search for success: memory and performance

Broadly speaking, the value of memory in identity formation seems to have been recognised by most sociological thinking. However, the scope of this essay does not allow me to move on to a close examination of such a vast well-structured scientific output; it is therefore sufficient to remember in general that depictions of the past are often defined in terms of complex identification devices[2]. This seems to hold true both in cases where memory focuses on a glorious past and where it reflects a difficult or even traumatic background (Alexander, 2004b; Giesen, 2004a, 2004b;). The identity-making potential of memory becomes patently visible when representations of the past developed by a specific group are included in the resources of the wider society of which it forms part (Alexander, 2002). However, they retain their vitality (although in the background) even in cases where the requested recognition is denied (Foucault, 2003; Heller, 2001; Hodgkin and Radstone, 2003). Furthermore, the identifying function of memory also seems to pass unscathed through the traditional methodological hiatus that afflicts social theory (Olick, 1999a). In the end, both approaches that start from individualist positions (Locke, 1975/1690)[3] and those which view

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[1] The distressing downward trend which can be triggered by lack of memory is expertly illustrated by Oliver Sacks (1985) through the disturbing figure of the Lost Mariner. A pathological absence of memory made this man a castaway of the present, an individual – Sacks writes – completely imprisoned in an ever-changing senseless moment; reduced to a kind of human nonsense, a mere succession of entirely unrelated impressions and events without any focus.

[2] The choice of the term identification is not a random one. By adopting it, I have tried to make use of the reflections by Brubacker and Cooper (2000: 14-21) regarding the vast inherent ambiguity in the concept of identity and take on board their suggestion to replace it with more precise expressions such as self-understanding, commonality, connectedness, groupness and, indeed, identification. I have opted for the latter because of a series of reasons. First of all, it accurately underlines the dynamic aspect which distinguishes any formation of identity. To this end, wherever possible I shall speak of *processes of formation and maintenance of identity* rather than simply identity. This stresses the fact that in reality an identity is never definitively owned, as it requires constant efforts of revision. Furthermore, if we assume that the above is true, the concept of identification automatically underlines the socially-constructed nature of every identity. Indeed, if identity is something which requires effort (whether from those who wish to gain it, those who want to impose it on others or even those who wish to rid themselves of it), it follows that there is a certain distance between the individual and any devices used to symbolize it, including representations of the past. Finally, as Brubacker and Cooper go on to suggest (2000, p. 17), the term identification does not only allude to a classification process (somebody who is recognised and wants to be recognised on the basis of certain characteristics), but is also the bearer of psychodynamically-motivated meaning, which is able, as the article will go on to show, to highlight the innate emotional component in every identity.

[3] On Locke and his vision of the relationship between memory and identity see Paul Ricoeur, (1993: 214-217, 2003: 144-154).

the phenomenon of memory as a collective entity (Halbwachs 1925, 1950) share the idea that memory resources (whether personal or shared at group level) correspond as it were to the guiding principle of structures of the individual and/or collective self.

However, the memory-identity equation is not without problems. It is well-known that a traditional topos in the sociology of memory involves seeing processes of selection of the past implied in all practices that constitute identity. The only memories which are remembered and placed at the centre of the self are those few which are most in keeping with the identity-making requirements of the present. If this is true, it means that every process of identification involves doses of memory and oblivion in equal measures (Namer, 1987: 73-9).

For example, individuals are often inclined to keep their past political ideas and allegiances hidden from others and most of all from themselves when they no longer hold them, as they are considered to be incompatible with their current image. In the same way, parents do not mention certain 'awkward' episodes from their youth to their children to avoid transmitting ideas of the family which clash with their educational goals (Connerton, 2008: 53). Similarly, with a rapid change of perspective, the process of forgetting is also found at the centre of national identities. Indeed, if it is true that the identity of a nation is sustained by imagining an original ethnic, linguistic and cultural unit, which is capable of transcending all other forms of belonging that may exist within it, all episodes which could in some way question this presumed unity need to be systematically erased from the 'national biography'[4]. Therefore, in the United States the 1861-65 conflict has been 'pedagogically' reinterpreted as a civil war rather than the historically more acceptable terms of a war between two sovereign states. In the same way, in Great Britain William the Conqueror has been positioned in the role of 'father of the nation' rather than the probably more appropriate moniker of Norman invader (Anderson, 1991[2])[5]. The collective depiction of a past in order to maintain identity therefore goes hand-in-hand with a reassuring moment of equally collective amnesia (Connerton, 2009: 49; Misztal, 2003: 17)[6].

In any case, I am not about to undertake a close examination of the processes of the inhibition and repression of memories. It is sufficient to remember this with regard to what Primo Levi wrote in *The Drowned and the Saved* (1989): when the reality of the past clashes with the needs of the present reality, There are those who lie consciously, coldly falsifying reality itself, but more numerous are those who weigh anchor, move off, momentarily or forever, from genuine memories, and fabricate themselves a convenient reality. What happens is that these fantasies merge with reality as a result of being repeated as if they were true, making it more or less impossible, even for their creators, to distinguish between truth and falsehood in the realm of memory; it is no longer clear which events really happened and which were completely invented.

Nevertheless, as psychologists have been wont to point out (Singer and Conway, 2008; Wessel and Moulds, 2008), a certain degree of care needs to be adopted when referring to alterations in memory. Indeed, we are almost automatically inclined to believe that these are synonymous with definitive losses or irreversible tampering. Today, however, scholars seem to favour the hypothesis whereby the ability to falsify mnemonic information immutably is extremely improbable, both at

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[4] The analysis carried out by Anderson (1991[2]) on Ernst Renan's renowned conference, *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?* is enlightening in this respect. Anderson commented on the following extract: 'Or, l'essence d'une nation est que tous le individus aient beaucoup de choses en commun et aussi que tous aient oublié bien des choses […] Tout citoyen français *doit avoir oublié* la Saint_Barthélemy, les massacres du Midi au XIIIe siècle' (Renan, quoted in Anderson, 1991[2]: 199). To this end Anderson points out that by using expressions such as 'St. Bartholomew's night' or 'the massacre in the Midi', Renan manages to include both victims and tormentors as part of a French identity, even though at the time they could not have felt any affiliation with it as they were members of different cultural, religious and linguistic groups: 'Since we can be confident that, left to themselves, the overwhelming majority of Renan's French contemporaries would never have heard of 'la Saint-Barthélemy' or 'les massacres du Midi,' we become aware of a systematic historiographical campaign, […], to 'remind' every young Frenchwoman and Frenchman of a series of antique slaughters which are now inscribed as 'family history'' (Anderson 1991[2]: 200-201). A historical text presents itself as an extremely powerful agent of oblivion at the same moment that it aims to reawaken a memory.

[5] For analysis of the highly intricate network of historical genealogy deriving from the memory of the conflict between the Saxons and Normans see Foucault (2003: pp. 87 et seq).

[6] Staying silent about certain episodes is clearly not the same thing as forgetting them. Nevertheless, maintaining a systematic level of silence about an event shows an evident desire to erase any memory of it, and may even have the long-term concrete effect of drowning it in oblivion (Connerton 2008: 67; Margalit 2002: 193).

an individual and collective level. While on one hand the most recent neuroscientific discoveries are related to the functioning of the brain, on the other hand the constant improvements made to digital filing systems offer more blurred complex visions based on the distinction between availability and accessibility (Singer and Conway, 2008: 280). It is said that the information itself is always available; what changes is the level of accessibility to it. In other words, it is not the memories themselves which are lost or corrupted but rather the stimuli needed to make people conscious of them (again). This does not mean, however, that it is not possible to encounter alternative traces or inducements, perhaps unconsciously, which can trigger sudden states of reminiscence. Therefore, from this point of view the ongoing threatening underlying presence of awkward destabilising memories, which might suddenly be activated again in all their devastating potential, leads us to ponder the existence of a second function of memory in clear opposition to its identifying role[7].

The words of Primo Levi (1989) quoted above prompt a second different observation with regard to the relationship between memory and identity. In order to make this, however, it is necessary to discuss a distinction between two expressions that are often used as synonyms in literature, but in reality refer to different realities, namely the concepts of collective memory and social memory. Gerard Namer addressed this matter in the past in his powerful critical rereading of Halbwachs's collected works. He positions collective memory and social memory on two clearly distinct levels. Collective memory includes representations of the past which sustain the collective identities of social groups. It is a form of memory which is alive, or rather brought to life by (and in) the interaction of groups which use this type of representation to mark out and safeguard the boundaries that distinguish their identity from that of other groups. On the other hand, social memory takes shape as the set of *Pathosformeln* which make up the entire imagination (conscious and unconscious) of a given society (Assmann, 2007: 524). In a more accessible way, Namer has noted that social groups and their identities are subject not only to change but also to crisis, break-up and death. However, as we have already seen, no element of the past seems to be lost from sight completely. While much of what has come to pass may seem to have sunk into oblivion, it can just as easily be brought back to the surface by casual circumstances or more conscious plans. Identities from the past may be reappropriated in a process that involves being experienced anew, transformed and reinvented by those in the present. For these reasons, social memory is something which the French sociologist positions as much 'on the other side' as 'on this side' of collective memory. It is 'on the other side' because a specific representation of the past becomes a social memory resource when the groups that brought it to life disappear, while it is 'on this side' because Namer (1991: 96-101; 1987: 21-31) seems to suggest that collective memories are basically formed as a result of creative reworkings of the content of social memory.

The latter can be used as a starting point to develop the concept of social memory further. In Namer's register, as we have just seen, he describes a form of symbolic reserve which groups in the present draw on to carry out the processes of the development, maintenance and communication of their identity. When considering this formulation, one connection that inevitably springs to mind is Jeffrey Alexander's definition of 'background representations and foreground scripts' (2004a: 530) as part of the development of his theory of cultural pragmatics[8]. However, before providing a detailed explanation of what these two expressions refer to, it should be stated that the theory of cultural pragmatics is an analytical attempt aimed at identifying the necessary elements for individuals and social groups to manage to acquire and transmit their own identity. What he calls performance consists of a process through which actors, individuals and groups show others the

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[7] With reference to the destabilising potential of certain memories, Gerard Namer (1993) spoke about negative memories. As is well-known, this topic was also developed by Adorno in his celebrated 1959 conference entitled *Was bedeutet: Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit?* (Adorno, quoted in Olick, 2003b: 259).

[8] Cultural pragmatics is a vital step in the implementation of the so-called 'strong program in cultural sociology' put forward some years ago by Alexander and Philip Smith (2003). As a brief summary, it can be said to constitute a corrective of the excessive importance attributed to the issue of symbolic meaning in the program at the expense of the subject of action (Eyerman, 2004: 29). For a placement of the pragmatic swing in the spectrum of cultural sociology see Cossu (2006). For an in-depth consideration of cultural pragmatics carried out by Alexander himself see Cordero, Carballo and Ossandòn, (2008: 523-533). For a heated critique of the culturalist framework developed by the Yale sociologist, see McLennan, (2004, 2005). McLennan is answered in Alexander, (2005).

sense of their social situation (Alexander 2004a: 529)[9]. This process presents itself as open: the performance may succeed, as in this case, where a 'fusion' of public identities with the identity displayed by the actors takes place, or fail, when the actors' identity does not cross the barriers that separate it from the identities that belong to its audience. Alexander has identified the reason why performances are always risky in the organisation of the symbolic structures that characterise modern societies. It is impossible to think of the latter as equipped with a single collective identity. Unlike pre-modern societies, modern societies are characterised by the fact that they have no identity: they are said to be complex precisely because they are depicted as containers of a plurality of identity-making configurations (Heller, 2001). However, the more collective identities there are within a society, the more extensive and dynamic its symbolic horizons will be and the more difficulties there will be in building successful performances (Alexander 2004a: 566-67).

Let us return to the topic of background symbols and foreground scripts. In order to explain the meaning of these concepts, Alexander (2004a: 530) draws on the beginning of Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire* (2005, p. 1), where it is stated that

> «The tradition of all dead generations weighs like an alp upon the brain of the living. At the very time when men appear engaged with in revolutionizing things and themselves, in bringing about what never was before, at such very epochs of revolutionary crisis do they anxiously conjure up into their service the spirits of the past, assume their names, their battle cries, their costumes to enact a new historic scene in such time-honored disguise and with such borrowed language. Thus did Luther masquerade as the Apostle Paul; thus did the Revolution of 1789-1814 drape itself alternately as Roman Republic and as Roman Empire, nor did the Revolution of 1848 know what better to do than parody at one time the year 1789, at another the revolutionary traditions of 1793-95»

It seems unnecessary to add anything further: in order to show their identity to themselves (Giesen, 2006: 329) and others, collective actors develop interpretations of the past which are condensed into scripts that provide the plot of the performance. The difference between 'underlying' representations and 'surface' scripts is reminiscent of the distinction between social memory, taken as the outline of past identities, and collective memories, taken as representations that form the basis of identities in a kind of nascent state.

What is it that determines the success of a performance? Which element decrees that the audience accept and confirm the situation shown by the actors and then identify with it? First of all, in order to be successful the actors themselves need to perceive the identity they are going to represent as authentic. In other words, in order for the message contained in the script to reach the audience and for its collective memory potential to be spread, identification, or rather cathexis, is required between the social actors and the script. Furthermore, performances cannot ignore the audience. Precisely because it can be defined as a differentiated presence, separated from the group of actors, the purpose of the performance can be understood in terms of cultural extension, that is to say the abolition of emotional, symbolic and cognitive (or identity-making) dissonance that distinguishes an actor and his audience to the greatest possible extent. The cathexis that needs to be created between actor and script therefore also needs to be extended to the audience (Alexander, 2004a: 530-31)[10].

A number of fundamentally important external factors naturally also contribute to the formation of the identification processes referred to above. These pertain to actors possessing adequate symbolic means to carry out the performance[11], the availability of the space required to carry it out, the level of cultural differentiation of the audience to whom it is addressed and the structure of external social powers (of distribution and interpretation)[12]. Despite the complex nature of the

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[9] The debate has not yet produced a common definition of the concept of performance. For a brief discussion of its different 'souls' see Cossu (2006: 642-643).

[10] Here we encounter once again what was previously hinted at with regard to the identification process (see note 2). Indeed, the theory of cultural pragmatics seems to manage to keep together both classification-related and emotional aspects that Brubaker and Cooper (2000) see as implicit in processes of identity formation.

[11] Emblematic in this respect is Goffman's concept of an 'identity kit', which establishes all those devices (clothes, cosmetics, various kinds of accessories) through which people manipulate their 'personal façade' (Goffman, 1961b).

[12] Certain performances will be given greater visibility, just as the content of certain scripts will be decoded by the interpretative elite (journalists, intellectuals, politicians, critics etc.) more favourably than others.

factors which contribute to determining the success of the performance, it is interesting to note that Alexander repeatedly uses the adjective 'seamless' to define a successful performance (Alexander 2004a: 529, 540, 548, 564, 567). A successful performance is therefore one which manages to conceal the signs of the 'welding' needed to hold all of its elements together. In brief, it is inferred that an effective performance is essentially a complex well-structured communicative operation that manages to come across as authentic and spontaneous.

The keyword here, which Alexander draws on from Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1975), is flow. A successful performance involves actors and spectators in an emotional cognitive dimension reminiscent of Durkheim's collective effervescence[13]. On one hand, the actors who experience the flow seem to forget the symbolic nature of their actions. The distinction between an internal state of consciousness and external social action is found to be as insignificant as the presence of external observers seems to be. For these reasons Turner (1986) writes that flow entails a loss of ego and speaks about it as a state of fusion between action and awareness. Using Goffman's terminology, it could be said that those who experience flow find themselves in a condition of total absorption in the role (Goffman, 1961a). On the other hand, however, spectators can (and must) also find themselves in a condition of flow. Seen through the eyes of the audience, this experience consists of forgetting the artificial nature of the performance and, most of all, external reality for as long as it lasts.

To complete the picture, it should be remembered that the concept of performance does not coincide with the definition of action. The subject of the action does not experience the condition of flow; there is a strictly dual reality. The act which he carries out is not only planned in advance but is also subjected to reflexive monitoring while being executed. On the contrary, however, a performance lays claim to a purely evenemential nature, as it has to come across as spontaneous and unrelated to any planning or strategy (Rauer, 2006: 262). Here, as we have seen, an actor's inner reality has to appear to manifest itself and be accounted for completely in the meanings transmitted by the performative act. In certain respects, it could be said that all boundaries between internal and external realities or, to draw on Goffman again (1959: 127 et seq.), between front and back regions, seem to be removed in the performance context. However, Alexander firmly stresses the complexity of the work needed to reach the outcome of a successful performance, namely the removal of the dualism that in ordinary situations characterises the existence of the actors as much as of the members of the audience, (development of the script, means of symbolic production, power etc.)[14]. As a testament to this, he refers to Bourdieu's comments with regard to artistic taste: a virtuoso of aesthetic judgement presents his awareness of the field of art as if it were natural, keeping the demanding nature of the long painstaking training needed to acquire this type of expertise hidden from those he comes into contact with (Bourdieu, quoted in Alexander, 2004a, p. 549).

The point which needs to be stressed is the ability of the script used by the successful performance to affect the structure of background representations, becoming an integral part of their structure. Performances are 'symbolic apparitions' which consequently only last for an instant. Nevertheless, if they succeed in their aim of transmitting their actors' sense of identity to the spectators, the result may be a clear transformation of social reality. A particularly good

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[13] To avoid any misunderstandings, we must remember that performances and rites are not the same thing. First of all, Alexander believes that the term ritual can only be used with regard to particularly successful performances. While Schechner (1986: 7-8) feels that rituals lie at the heart of every performance, Alexander (2004a: 534) affirms the exact opposite. Secondly, unlike ritual practises, which often ignore or even do not tolerate the presence of spectators, performances are characterised precisely through their need for an audience in order to be carried out. This audience has an ambivalent status compared to the group of actors: it cannot be assimilated into the position of 'outsider' or even fully into the role of 'insider'. This hybrid placement opens audiences to the possibility of being intrigued by a reality which they do not contribute to in terms of formation – the one represented by the actors – but with which they may end up identifying (Giesen, 2006: 343-48).

[14] This may be considered to be the point of greatest friction between the points of view developed by Alexander and Bernhard Giesen (2006, 2004a, 2004b: 34-36). While the former feels that any 'foundationalist' option (Santoro, 2006: 12) tends to be rejected in favour of the pre-eminence of social construction processes, the latter reserves an 'ontic' foundation for reality, on which the fabric of representations and interpretations is modelled (Alexander and Mast, 2006: 18).

example of this can be found in the analysis carried out by Valentin Rauer (2006) regarding the tribute paid by German Chancellor Willy Brandt to the Jews killed during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in December 1970. Brandt knelt down in front of the monument and stayed immobile in that position for a few minutes. With the help of the huge press presence and a large political entourage, the act caused a massive stir in the media and had a profound impact on German and international civil society, thereby managing to transform the meaning of German identity completely. While prior to that moment Germany had been perceived as the victim of Nazi madness and Soviet violence, Chancellor Brandt managed to demolish this representation through his performative act and introduced the issue of the German people's awareness of their collective guilt and sorrow for the atrocities committed against Jewish victims (Rauer, 2006: 276). The interesting thing is that while on one hand the media initially compared Brandt's act to Henry IV genuflecting at Canossa, it later became a kind of symbolic model referred to in order to build new scripts or drafts for ceremonial reconciliation practices (Rauer 2006: 259)[15].

It therefore follows that a cultural pragmatic approach to memory, which focuses on the role played by performance in the construction of representations of the past and the identities that they enable, cannot be accounted for completely within a 'presentist' trend. On the contrary, it seems to combine more effectively with a path-dependence approach that sees past and present joined in a relationship of reciprocal influence. Indeed, according to this perspective the structures of previously developed memories constitute both constraints and resources for the development of successive memories (Olick, 1999b: 381-82; 2003a: 8)[16].

The discussion developed thus far now enables us to review and expand on the distinction between collective memory and social memory. With regard to what has been shown about performance, mechanisms clearly emerge which directly implicate the processes regarding memory and oblivion. That is to say, the more actors forget reappropriations and creative elaborations applied to the system of background representations to develop the script, the more they identify with it. In the same way, the more the audience forgets the artificial nature of the performative act, the greater the possibility is that the meanings it conveys are viewed as authentic. In the briefest possible terms, the more the constructed nature of collective memory is forgotten, the more its identity-making potential is deployed, while contrastingly, the more it is remembered, the more improbable it is that such reworkings of the past are able to support coherent images of the individual and/or collective self.

If all this somehow sounds plausible, the concept of social memory can therefore be attributed with further semantic value; it should not only indicate the set of representations of the past at the heart of the identities of groups which are no longer present, but also and above all awareness of the artificial nature of every memory and every identity. This is not all: social memory is understood as widespread awareness of the gap between signifier and signified, between the 'I' and the 'Me', between genuine self-reference (that is to say identity in the strict sense of the term) and the performative devices used to convey it in interaction with oneself and others (Giesen, 2006: 329)[17].

In a certain sense the dynamics between collective memory and social memory exemplify the ambivalent destiny reserved for the idea of authenticity from the post-modern age onwards. On one

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[15] Indicative of this is the fact that on 6 December 2000 a monument was unveiled in a Warsaw square dedicated to Willy Brandt not far from the Ghetto in memory of what is now called *Warschauer kniefall* ('Warsaw genuflection') in the presence of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (Ensink and Sauer, 2003: 85). Kneeling down to ask for forgiveness for crimes committed by the people represented now seems to be an extremely widespread ritual formula in the field of diplomatic relations. Just as I am finishing this article, Serbian President Boris Tadic has performed a step-by-step repetition of the script of apologies staged more than forty years ago in the Polish capital by Willy Brandt during a visit to Vukovar, a city which was the scene of one of the most heinous massacres of Croat civilians by Serb soldiers in November 1991.

[16] From an analytical point of view, for Jeffrey Olick the structures of past memories can be considered to be constraints when they operate in a mythical sense and exercise their power on the present. On the contrary, they can be considered to be resources when they are configured as symbolic instruments used by (and in) the present to restructure one's own mnemonic assets (Olick, cit. in Cossu, 2006: 320).

[17] The moments of fusion referred to by Alexander can be understood in terms of a form of oblivion which 'happens' in the field of social memory as defined above.

hand the increasingly mediated (and mediatised) nature of social issues seems to increase the need for reality desperately, making authenticity the most precious and sought-after characteristic in social relations and identities (Huyssen, 1995: 32). On the other hand, however, it seems to be impossible to escape from the cultural reflex, conditioned in a manner of speaking, which always leads to identifying underlying traces of artificiality and affectation (Cordero, Carballo and Ossandòn, 2008: 531). As an ontological category, authenticity seems to progressively turn into an interpretative category which appears to be increasingly separable from an ontological transcendent referent (Alexander and Mast, 2006: 7).

3. Conclusion: sceptical tolerance and sceptical identities

In this essay an attempt has been made to question the relationship between memory and identity. The analysis seems to have led us to a twofold result. First of all, we have become aware of the fact that the problems that memory causes identity are not simply a question of content. It is undoubtedly true that the sudden re-emergence of something 'repressed' may destabilise the structure of an identity. Coming to terms fully with the past and revising 'awkward' episodes from it is an objectively threatening undertaking for consolidated identities and the start of faltering processes of reworking the self[18]. Nevertheless, it is also true that memory plays a destabilising role when it refers more to the procedures related to its development than to the content of the identity, or when it makes individuals and groups aware of the socially-constructed nature of their identity.

Secondly, if this is true, it is therefore possible to think of a further reduction in the mechanisms of alternation between memory and oblivion. Once again, these are not only concerned with the concrete content of social representations of the past, but also directly affect the level of their development. To put it another way, in order for an identity to be formed and maintained, it is not enough to forget episodes from the past which could eventually call it into question. Its signic or fictional nature also needs to be overlooked and awareness of the ongoing processes required to form and maintain it must also be forgotten. It therefore becomes possible to rework the social memory and collective memory pairing as a result. While the latter – to borrow language from the cultural pragmatics theory – refers to an identification, or rather a fusion, between script, actor and audience, social memory prefigures the memory of the artifice needed to achieve it. It could be said that it presents itself as a mishap, a trifle, a detail out of place that can interrupt the performance flow and thereby crush the identities supported by it.

One can conclude that the relationship between social and collective memory is a zero sum one. Or to better put it, it is a relationship governed by what Foucault (2004: 32) in a completely different context has called the revolving door principle: when social memory gets in, collective memory has to get out and vice versa. But I'm not sure things are exactly in that way. I'm tempted to think that the logic that could and maybe should govern identity building is close to what George Orwell has defined doublethinking (Orwell, 1954[2]).

In the totalitarian world described in the novel *1984*, Big Brother's party is committed to maintaining and increasing its power through the mammoth undertaking of altering reality and the past. This consists of modifying any event that might contradict the party's political line by systematically falsifying documents which contain a description of it (articles in the press, photographs, film clips, administrative circulars, etc.). However, even such widespread censorship

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[18] This kind of practices seems nowadays well developed for reasons and causes that transcend the aims of this article. Suffice it to say that coming to terms fully with the past is not a work conducted only at individual level. On the contrary it seems to be an effort marking very different collective entities such as states, churches, political parties, ethnic communities and so on. As I have already stressed, in referring to this topic Gerard Namer (1993) has proposed the concept of negative memory, alluding to the reflexive reconsideration of the past implied by this kind of memory work. On similar basis, Jeffery Olick (2007) has more recently proposed to define the current wave of apologies as a *politics of regret*. That is a politics that finds the roots of its legitimation in its capacity and willingness to identify its own mistakes and repair the pain caused by them. It is clear that both the concepts of negative memories and politics of regrets imply a reconsideration of the past and a reflexive work on the (collective) self. Nevertheless, the kind of reflexivity I am talking about must be conceived in different terms. That is as a consciousness about the procedures of social construction needed by *every kind* of self (not just the penitent one) for its formation and maintenance.

is not sufficient, as individuals are also required to forget that it has been adopted. A party intellectual knows how his memories have been treated and therefore knows that he has been involved in the manipulation of reality. Nevertheless, the practice of doublethinking makes him believe that reality has not been violated. He forgets that reality has been tampered with to believe in the narration built up as a result and, as soon as a new change occurs, he promptly forgets what was seen as certain a moment before to embed the new belief in the mind: «even in using the word doublethinking it is necessary to exercise doublethinking. For by using the word one admits that one is tampering with reality; by a fresh act of doublethinking one erases this knowledge: and so on indefinitely» (Orwell, 1954[2]: 171). It can easily be deduced from this that a similar procedure must be both conscious and unconscious at the same time; conscious because otherwise it could not be applied with sufficient precision and unconscious because otherwise it would give rise to a situation of falsehood in the individual along with a sense of unbearable guilt.

The reference to doublethinking inevitably draws us into the gloomy atmosphere which characterises Orwell's novel. However, this must on no account lead us to make the mistake of considering the dynamics between social memory and collective memory in morally negative terms. On the contrary, it is felt that greater awareness of the socially-constructed nature of identities can foster a new form of tolerance thus creating a stronger barrier against the concurrent spread of new forms of fundamentalism. The conception of tolerance I have in mind has been illustrated by Adam Seligman in the last chapter of his book *Modernity's Wager* (2000). For Seligman, real tolerance acts have to be directed toward ideals, values, conducts and identities viewed as profoundly deplorable (ivi: 210). It follows that the concept of tolerance implies a strong tension between our moral commitment and our willing to accept and respect values and belief that we consider as wrong. The risk here is to turn tolerance into indifference. That is to make tolerance coincide with a complete lack of interest toward the other and his identity. In my view, what it has been said about social and collective memory could foster a different conception of tolerance, a conception in which tolerance is not based on reciprocal indifference but on a process of mutual recognition guided by humility.

Indeed, the discussion I have tried to develop has defined authenticity as one of the most precious and sought-after characteristic of self and social relations. Nevertheless, as we have seen, it seems to be a cultural conditioned reflex that pushed us to look for signals of artificiality. Well, it must be said that this kind of attitude can be and must be reflexive, that is it must be applied firstly toward our own identities. What I am trying to say is that a greater and reflexive awareness of the socially-constructed nature of each identities can create the basis for a new and more radical form of tolerance. Being aware of the social construction procedures needed to acquire and maintain one's own identity – in searching for that I thinking that a great effort should be sustained by mass media and by schools – means adopting an attitude of what Seligman (2000: 218) has defined sceptical tolerance, a tolerance based on scepticism directed above all at one's own identity, a form of tolerance towards other identities developed using the humility of one's own identity as the starting point. The conscious and unconscious memory of the socially-constructed nature of one's identity inevitably strengthens this form of scepticism, contributing to consolidate the basis of this new radical form of tolerance, which is so urgently needed.

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