REVIEW ESSAY

PUBLIC MEMORY AND CULTURAL TRAUMA

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Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka: *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004, 304 pp., $ 65.00 (hardback) ISBN: 0 520 23594 0, $ 24.95 (paperback) ISBN: 0 520 23595 9.

Kendall R. Phillips (ed.): *Framing Public Memory*. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2004, 288 pp., $ 42.50 (hardback) ISBN: 0 8173 1389 3.

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Since the original studies by Halbwachs, we are witnessing an increasing scholarly interest in the study of collective memories. Different terms have been elaborated to better focus on the analytical distinction between the types of memories: individual versus collective, collective versus social (Halbwachs 1968; Namer 1991), communicative versus cultural (Assmann 1992). Most of the literature dealing with collective memories attempts to address the question of the socially constructed nature of the past directly, by examining the social processes that literally affect and shape different representations of the past, and it considers the implications of its social nature as a strategy for understanding how contrasting versions of a certain event, sustained by different social groups, compete within the public arena. Social scientists have provided several definitions to investigate how societies remember and forget. The past has been defined as "a foreign country" (Lowenthal 1985). The future has been conceived as "*Vergangene Zukunft*" (Koselleck 1979). The tradition has been considered as "invented" (Hobsbawn and Ranger 1983), the memories as "contested" (Zolberg 1996). Many studies in the sociology of memory have documented how negotiation and competition between different social groups, actors, and institutions represent a crucial key to understanding the making of collective memories (Schwartz 1982; Middleton and Edwards 1990). In this process the limits are established by the competition between conflicting and contrasting representations of the same event (Schudson 1993).

Several studies have been focused particularly on the relation between cultural symbols and collective memories, and in the last two decades, the cultural perspective has consolidated in the field. Studies concerned with remembering at the cultural level have focused generally on documenting the extent of cultural symbols in shaping the content and the meaning of a historical event. Each representation of the past corresponds to a narration, whose images and symbols derive from the broader social and cultural context. The main focus has been on the poetics and politics implied by the emerging representations of a certain historical event, and it analyses the role played by commemorative genres (Wagner-Pacifici 1996). Why the dedication of a week rather than of a tangible monument originally appeared as the best way of commemorating the Vietnam War (Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991)? Why to commemorate the Hiroshima bombing a stamp seemed to be more adequate than a public display (Zolberg 1996)? In these studies, like in other relevant approaches to the analysis of memory, the past has been viewed as a very controversial terrain, and public discourse has been analysed as arena where the conflicts over different versions of the past are articulated or composed.

Public Memory: A Controversial Definition

Over the last decade the term "public memory" has entered into the debate. It has become rapidly a very used term to studying the processes that make possible the social inscription of the past in the public discourse. Even in the variety of perspectives, public memory has been analysed by several scholars (Norkunas 1993; Bodnar 1993; Bodnar 1996; Jedlowski 2002; Tota 2005) with a shared focus on the publicness of the past. The study of public memory has grown across different disciplines leading to a renewed interest on the formation of collective and national identities. According to this perspective, the public definition of controversial past might represent a key to understanding how power relations are articulated

and composed within a social or national context. It is not suggested here that the dimension of social power was excluded or undermined in the previous works on collective memory. On the contrary, most studies generated within the collective memory paradigm have considered issues of power as central (e.g. Hobsbawn and Ranger 1983; Middleton and Edwards 1990; Bodnar 1993). However the term public memory seems to add a more specific focus on the relation with the public sphere, and the capacity of memory work to intervene and affect the public discourse of a nation. In this sense the volume edited by Phillips offers a useful contribution to promote a broader reflection on the current state of public memory studies. However, this volume does not succeed in providing a unique and clear definition of the distinction between public memory and the other terms used in the interdisciplinary field of memory studies, as one would expect. On the contrary, for example, the first chapter (Casey's essay on "Public Memory in Place and Time") seems to contribute new definitions without positioning itself in the whole spectrum of previous works. Casey's definition of collective and social memory does not consider and contrasts Halbwachs' one and its further elaboration by Namer (1991), without explaining why we should abandon it. This reformulation of two basic concepts of the sociological analysis of memory does not contribute to clarifying the very distinction between public memory studies and the collective memory paradigm, leaving to the reader the impression that the use of terminology in the field is much more unclear and ambiguous than it should be. In this case the most problematic distinction is not that between public and collective memory, but on the contrary that between public and social memory.

Framing Public Memory is composed by two main parts: the first on the memory of publics, and the second on the publicness of memory. "To speak of public memory must be to simultaneously speak of certain groups of individuals remembering together (the memory of publics) and to speak of those memories appearing before or perhaps simultaneously with these groups (the publicness of memory)" (Phillips 2004, 10). How can we define public memory? According to this preliminary definition, public memory should be located in the semantic space between the two concepts of collective memory and social memory, defined on Halbwachsian terms. Casey's essay underlines its instable and mutable nature: public memories need a space of enactment, they always need spatial anchorage. The sites become part of the memories in their making. However, as already underlined, those characteristics do not provide a clear cleavage between the Casey's concept of public memory and Halbwachs' notion of social memory. Moreover it remains also a potential overlapping with the notion of cultural memory introduced by Assmann (1992). For those reasons the most interesting chapters of the book are not the theoretical ones, but those related to empirical case studies. The essays contained in the volume illustrate many aspects of the American public memory: Rosa Eberly analyses the Texas tower shootings of 1966 and how the local officials succeed in minimising this past. Her contribution offers useful insights in institutional practices used to privatise the memories of these events and deny their public inscription in the public identity of the university campus. Charles Morris considers public reactions to Larry Kramer's declaration that Lincoln was homosexual and analyses its effects for the queer public discourse in general. By analysing the overreactions of the guardians of Lincoln's public memory, he illustrates "mnemocide at work" (the process of erasing and suppressing memory).

> *Why would anyone care if a known gay extremist delivered a fantastic rendering of an American icon's homosexuality at a gathering of Midwestern collegiate queers, a tale only repeated by the end of spring 1999 by the gay press, Madison's Capital Times, and the online magazine Salon.com? … Given the magnitude of Lincoln's memory in forging our collective, national identity … conviction of his homosexuality … elicits not only fear of homosexual complicity but perhaps more consequentially that of normalizing and centralizing queerness as a national value* (Phillips 2004, 99).

The public memory of another American President is analysed in the essay by Amos Kiewe. By doing a discourse analysis of the final speeches of Ronald Reagan, the author documents Reagan's attempt to affect and literally create his own eulogy: "Reagan ended his political life with a series of addresses that suggest a preferred historical accounting … he sought to influence those who would look back at him after his ultimate departure. The Great Communicator was concerned about communicating his version of America's story" (Phillips 2004, 264). Again by dealing with different frames and tales of memory, we are confronted both with the publicness of memory and the memory of publics.

Cultural Trauma Theories and Different Meanings of Having a Common Past

The relation between memory and trauma represents a very central focus in the memory studies and has been analysed by several scholars (Caruth 1995; Caruth 1996; Laub 1995; Felman 1995). The cultural trauma model proposed by Alexander et al. further investigates the relation between memory, identity and public discourse, as it questions the ways of analysing how and to what extent hegemonic and counter-memories become constitutive basis for the formation of collective identities. This model explores the ways in which crucial events mark forever memories and identities of the collectivity. Eyerman's study (2001) on slavery as cultural trauma and the volume by Alexander, Eyerman, Giesen, Smelser and Sztompka (2004) represent an attempt to document the relevance and systematise cultural trauma theories. Smelser (Alexander et al. 2004) provides a formal definition of cultural trauma: "a memory accepted and publicly given credence by a relevant membership group and evoking an event or situation that is a) laden with negative affect, b) represented as indelible, and c) regarded as threatening a society's existence or violating one or more of its fundamental cultural presuppositions." Alexander (Alexander et al 2004, 1) argues that "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." The main hypotheses proposed by the book are that, firstly, trauma is not something naturally existing, but on the contrary it is constructed by the society; and secondly, individual and social traumas are very different. Smelser (Alexander et al 2004, 38-39) in his contribution to the volume specifically addresses this question: "a cultural trauma differs greatly from a psychological trauma in terms of the mechanisms that establish and sustain it. The mechanisms associated with psychological trauma are the intra-psychic dynamics of defence, adaptation, coping, and working

through; the mechanisms at the cultural level are mainly those of social agents and contending groups."

What does it mean that trauma is cultural? There is a gap between the event and its representation: this gap is *the trauma process*. As Alexander points out, for trauma to emerge at cultural level a new master narrative has to be successfully established by a carrier group who "*projects the trauma claim to the audience-public*." A successful process of collective representation of the traumatic event has to deal with the following questions: (a) the nature of the pain; (b) the nature of the victim; (c) relation of the trauma victim to the wider audience; (d) attribution of responsibility. The cultural trauma model refers also to the institutional arenas where the trauma's meanings are produced. Six different types of arena are considered: religious, aesthetic, legal, scientific, mass media, and state bureaucracy arena. Alexander's essay offers the analytical framework to study theoretically and empirically the process through which the trauma is taking its shape in the public discourse. Through the trauma process the collective memories and the national identities are also affected. However, the theory of cultural trauma raises some questions which deserve to be further investigated: in some national contexts it might happen that the access to one institutional arena is systematically denied (for example, the aesthetic codes are the only ones available to represent traumatic events). What will be the consequences of the systematic exclusion of the legal or the mass media arena in terms of public sphere? Moreover how does the concept of power enter into this model? Alexander clarifies that different social networks will provide different access to the distribution of material and symbolic resources: "the constraints imposed by institutional arenas are mediated by the uneven distribution of material resources and the social networks that provide differential access to them" (Alexander et al. 2004, 21).

A very critical point has to do with the generalisability of the theory: a "middle-range theory," as it is defined. However Alexander clarifies that "It would be a serious misunderstanding if trauma theory were restricted in its reference to Western social life" (Alexander et al. 2004, 24). The author mentions the example of the rape of Nanking, whose memories have never extended beyond China. According to his perspective, the lack of recognising traumas and inscribing their lessons into the public sphere would depend on

> *an inability to carry through … the trauma process. In Japan and China, just as in Rwanda, Cambodia and Guatemala, claims have certainly been made for the central relevance of these "distant sufferings" … . But for both social structural and cultural reasons, carrier groups have not emerged with the resources, authority, or interpretive competence to powerfully disseminate these trauma claims* (Alexander et al. 2004, 27).

However, Alexander's conclusion does not refer at all to a middle-range theory:

> *Collective traumas have no geographical or cultural limitations. The theory of cultural trauma applies, without prejudice, to any and all instances when societies have, or have not, constructed and experienced cultural traumatic events, and to their efforts to draw, or not to draw, the moral lessons that can be said to emanate from them.*

The proposed generalisability of the theory to non-Western societies represents a very complex issue. *The inability to carry through the trauma process* seems to be a misleading concept when applied to non-Western societies. The first condition to meet in order to carry through the trauma process is to have the collective (and national) power to do it. It is difficult to imagine that it would be possible, for instance, in some African societies where the victims are still victims, where the destiny of the entire population is not decided within the national context, but on the contrary depends on the international exploitation of the national resources. Moreover after the post-colonial debate it seems very problematic to consider theories elaborated on Western societies as a model to generalise, without setting any specific cultural and geographical limits. In this respect, it is highlighting the essay by Bradford Vivian published in *Framing Public Memory.* It refers to the Gipsy collective memory, arguing that the "relationship among place, history, and community assume a different character in the context of Gypsy collective memory" (Phillips 2004, 191). For the Gypsy the experience of passing time is dramatically different: they have no history, they live in a permanent present. The essay aims at documenting "the fragmented and dispersed mnemonic conditions – the lack of a transcendent origin, the distrust of archival memory, the highly mutable and often elliptical nature of cultural folktales – that prevent Gypsy identity, culture, or memory from achieving the stable or uniform sense and value that such phenomena acquire in Western communities" (p. 195). Gipsy communities lack an evident investment in the power of the past: "not even the horrors of the Holocaust could induce a lasting commemorative consciousness in Gipsy culture" (p. 197). When there is no tradition of commemoration, when forgetting is not a form of defeat or resignation, but on the contrary represents a politics of remembering different from that we are used to, we have to reconsider the relation between cultural trauma, past and national identities. Even if the idea that we have to remember the past to avoid its coming back is very central to the democratic societies, we cannot take it for granted when we are referring to other cultures. "The Gipsy art of forgetting … suggests a political response to a democratic politics of memory, which, in labouring to remember the past so as not to repeat it, reproduces familiar forms of exclusion by endowing particular kinds of memory with political priority" (p. 198). The cultural trauma theory becomes a powerful framework of analysis, only if it is able to consider its own limits of generalisability. To carry through the trauma process implies certain definitions and conceptions of time (viewed as dynamic relation between past, present and future) and memories. However, definitions of time and memory differ a lot between different societies: they are unstable, fragmented, and nomadic. Alexander and Vivian (Philips 2004) offer to the reader two different approaches to the problem of how social memory works in different cultural settings. While Alexander's position pretends to be "universalistic," but seems to extend the Western model of work memory to non-Western societies, Vivian position raises the unsolved question of the multicultural meaning of memory. For example, the question of collective debt is frequently raised in international settings and adjudicated in international courts. If the collective meaning of sharing a common past differs widely across culture (as in the case of Gipsy culture, studied by Vivian), to what extent such international institutions might represent valid and adequate means to intervene in the memory work of a minority? And how might these international institutions become more culturally sensitive?[1]

The Public Memory of *Shoah*: German and American National Identities

The structure of the volumes considered here (a multi-authored book and a reader) indicates that a variety of interesting case-studies on very different topics are presented. However, for reasons of brevity it is necessary to focus on specific cases which authors of both volumes have dealt with. The two main topics considered here will be the public memory of *Shoah* and its interpretation in terms of cultural trauma in different national contexts, and the case of American national identity constructed in relation to its two most relevant cultural traumas: slavery and September 11.

In both volumes several essays deal specifically with *Shoah* as traumatic reference for national identities. Bernhard Giesen in his essay "The Trauma of Perpetrators," published in the *Cultural Trauma* volume, analyses what happens when national and collective identities have necessarily to refer to very traumatic pasts rather than to national triumphs, like in the German case. He stresses the necessity to investigate not only the trauma of victims but also that of perpetrators. How was it possible after the *Shoah* to construct German national identity? The public inscription of the *Shoah* in the German national identity went through different phases. The post-war Germany responded to the disclosure of the *Shoah* by a denial of the trauma: "A tacitly assumed coalition of silence provided the first national identity after the war. Everyone assumed that the others, too, had supported the Nazi regime and would therefore agree to be silent about their common shame" (Alexander et al. 2004, 116). However, as not everyone could be co-opted into the coalition of silence, the German public discourse required quite soon a new narrative, which was based on the demonisation of Nazism: Hitler was transformed into a monster. An interesting part of the essay refers to the role played by different German generations in carrying through the trauma process: when the generation born after the war entered the political stage, they faced their families with annoying questions. They identified themselves with the victims persecuted by the Nazi regime and wanted to know about the guilt of their parents. The generational conflict was a necessary resource to construct a credible moral distance to the guilt of previous generations who had supported the Nazi regime. The notion of guilt itself was questioned: "*Diese Schande nimmt uns niemand ab*" was the slogan of a whole generation. The kneeling of Willy Brandt in Warsaw in 1970, during the visit to the monument for the Jews victims of the ghetto, became a symbol of recent German history. As Giesen points out, "Brandt took the burden of the collective guilt of the nation although he was innocent as a person" (Alexander et al. 2004, 131). As Willy Brand had no personal interests or involvements with *Shoah*, his humiliation represents the first step in the process of reconciliation between the nation of the victims and the nation of perpetrators. After Brand's gesture the public confession of guilt has become a new pattern of constructing national identities. The politics of apology and the rituals of public confession of guilt provide nowadays a way of getting the recognition of national identity. Also Barry Schwartz and Horst- Alfred Heinrich in their essay deal with the politics of regret and apology. They note that during the last decade this pattern of constructing national identities has been very widespread. To apologise for past atrocities is destined to become a new mode of international relations between nations. The two authors have carried out a survey

among American and German university students "to determine how different combination of culture and historical experience lead to different perspectives on personal responsibility" (Phillips 2004, 117). The results of the survey are interesting and methodologically accurate[2]: the way in which German and American students deny and affirm their responsibility for very shameful and dishonouring pasts (such as slavery and *Shoah*) are very different. While German students tend to recognise more often their collective responsibility for the past, American ones do not tend to feel guilty. "*I wasn't born yet*" reflects more the American way of dealing with responsibility for past atrocities rather than the German way. The context of regret depends on cultural pattern and this study documents how these patterns are rooted in national identities.

Alexander in his essay "On the Social Construction of Moral Universals," published in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, further analyzes the ways in which *Shoah* became transformed into a symbol of moral evil. His analysis is focused on the narratives used to code the Holocaust in the American public discourse after the discovery of the Nazi atrocities committed upon Jews. As he points out,

> *no trauma interprets itself; before trauma can be experienced at the collective (not individual) level, there are essential questions that must be answered, and answers to those questions change over time. … For a traumatic event to have the status of evil is a matter of its becoming evil. It is a matter of how the trauma is known, how it is coded. … Becoming evil is a matter, first and foremost, of representation* (Alexander et al. 2004, 201-202).

The necessary condition to construct this representation of Nazi atrocities in terms of evil is that the means of symbolic production were controlled by the triumphant America, and not by a victorious post-war Nazi regime. The culture structure was created by representing Nazi as the Absolute Evil. Alexander clearly documents the role played by the American public's reactions to the *Kristallnacht* anti-Jews violence.

The idea to fight against Nazi becomes transformed into the anti-anti-Semitism: in other terms, to fight against the evil means to fight for the Jews. The author analyses the emergence of different narratives used to frame the *Shoah* in the American public discourse. The first is called the progressive narrative, and its principal carrier group is "the nation that in the immediate post-war world most conspicuously took the lead in building the new world upon the ashes of the hold. … The goal was focused, not on the Holocaust, but on the need to purge post-war society of Nazilike pollution" (Alexander et al. 2004, 221). The second narrative is the tragic code, which represents a new cultural configuration. The new culture structure differs from the previous one mainly because of its attempt to deepening the evil: "In the formation of this new culture structure, the coding of the Jewish mass killings as evil remained, but its weighting substantially changed. It became burdened with extraordinary gravitas … as evil on a scale that had never occurred before. The mass killings entered into universal history" (p. 222). The author suggests that the Jewish mass killing become a sort of sacred-evil in Durkheimian terms: something so radical that it should be set apart from any other traumatising event. Another trait of this new cultural configuration of *Shoah* is the inexplicability, the mystery and the irrationality of what happened. Within this new narrative the

trauma is renamed to point out its absolute difference from any other war atrocity. The terms *Holocaust* and *Shoah* become part of the contemporary language. While in the progressive narrative the mass killings were conceived as the beginning of a new era, where those atrocities would be no more possible, in the tragic narrative the Jewish mass-killings become an event out-of-history and out-of-time. The trauma drama of the Holocaust has a kind of mythical status and its message is that: "evil is inside all of us, and in every society. If we are all the victims, and all the perpetrators, then there is no audience that can legitimately distance itself from collective suffering, either from its victims or its perpetrators" (p. 229). The author documents how during the following decades Western democracies were forced to loose control of the means of symbolic production in the telling of this story: during the 1960s and the 1970s with the Vietnam war and particularly with the My Lai Massacre in 1968 (where civilians and children were killed by the American soldiers in Vietnam) America could no more present herself as "the purified protagonist in the worldwide struggle against evil … the morality of American leadership in World War II came to be questioned in a manner that established polluting analogies with Nazism" (p. 239). The last step in the cultural transformation of the Holocaust is represented by its transformation into a *bridging metaphor*: the trauma drama of *Shoah* is generalised and it is linked to universal human rights.

In the last paragraph Alexander raises an important question on the relevance of the Holocaust trauma as symbol of universal rights in non-Western areas. *The lessons of post-Shoah morality* are very central in the foundation of Western democracies, but what about non-Western societies? The author asks himself: "Can countries or civilizations that do not acknowledge the Holocaust develop universalistic political moralities? … It might also be the case that non-Western nations could develop trauma dramas that are functional equivalents to the Holocaust" (p. 262). Even if this answer is very reasonable, it seems to not consider a relevant point. As already argued, the cultural trauma model and its interesting application to the empirical case of the Holocaust implies specific (Western) politics of memory and forgetting, and specific (Western) definitions of time that cannot be taken for granted. They are also culturally defined, and we cannot sociologically imagine to generalise them to non-Western cultures without running the risk of the imperialistic fallacy, as the essay by Bradford Vivian (Phillips 2004) points out.

Also Biesecker's contribution, published in the *Public Memory* volume, deals with *Shoah* and World War II: the point of view is that of the American winners who still in 2004 refer to their victory against the Nazi regime as a positive element for the constitution of their national identity. Barbara Biesecker, by analysing the construction of the World War II Memorial on the sacred ground between the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument (the memorial has been dedicated on May 29, 2004), studies the contemporary World War II formation and its role in renovating the American identity. In 2004, when the memorial is dedicated, the successful victory against the Nazi brutality and the triumph of American soldiers against German ones during the World War II becomes a renewed reference for the American national identity, and functions as a "veiled conservative response to the contemporary crisis of national identity, to our failing sense of what it means to be an American and to do things the so-called American way" (Phillips 2004, 238).

Cultural Traumas in American National Identity

The relation between cultural trauma and American national identity is further explored by referring to two other crucial events: the public memory of slavery and September 11. Ron Eyerman in his essay "Cultural trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity," published in the *Cultural Trauma* volume, synthesises the different steps in the process of formation of African American identity: "The notion of a unique African American identity emerged in the post-Civil War period, after slavery had been abolished. … Slavery formed the root of an emergent collective identity though an equally emergent collective memory … . It was the memory of slavery and its representation through speech and art works that grounded African American identity and permitted its institutionalization in organizations." The author analyses the interconnection between the emergence of the African American identity and the ways in which public memory of slavery is inscribed into the American public discourse. The representation of slavery in public discourse, the cultural shapes of this public memory (such as literature, music, the plastic arts, and movies) are crucial in the memory work necessary to elaborate the cultural trauma. Also in this case, like in the German trauma of perpetrators analysed by Giesen, the role of generations and the cycle of generational memory play a very relevant role. The memory of slavery is at the beginning a counter-memory in Foucaultian terms: "In the 1880s, as the dreams of full citizenship and cultural integration were quashed, the meaning of slavery would emerge as the issue of an identity conflict" (Alexander et al. 2004, 76). In this perspective slavery is a point of origin, a common past that grounds the constituency of the black community. Over the decades the progressive and the tragic narratives represent two different codes to interpret this cultural trauma. Several generations of American blacks have rediscovered their blackness and their slave past, by reworking the cultural trauma. The collective identification "African American" can be accepted nowadays without denying the distinctive and relatively autonomous collective history of black Americans.

While the authors of the *Cultural Trauma* volume were finishing the last chapters, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 occurred. The publication of the book was postponed to include the chapter "September 11, 2001, as Cultural Trauma" written by Neil Smelser on this actual drama. Sztompka in his essay "The Trauma of Social Change" published in the same volume, defines trauma as "*sudden, comprehensive, fundamental, and unexpected*." September 11 had all these ingredients, and Americans perceived it from the beginning as the greatest trauma in the American history.

There is an immediate sense of the indelibility of the trauma: the world's history will be divided into pre-September 11 and post-September 11 period. The terrorist attacks in Manhattan have altered American national identity forever and this circumstance is acknowledged from the beginning by the most relevant public interpreters of the event. The burst of solidarity is the national response to the attacks: "*We are all New Yorkers*" is the symbol of the public reactions of American citizens. The two main questions to raise, according to Smelser, are: "What insights about the events of September 11 can be generated in light of what we know about cultural trauma in general? What implications do the national reactions to September 11 have for our theoretical and empirical understandings of the notion of cultural trauma?" (Alexander 2004 et al., 265). The essay is written four months after September 11, and it is very complex to interpret an event with so little tem-

poral distance. However, the cultural trauma model is positively verified also in the case of the attacks to the Twin Towers. The author reconsiders his hypothesis according to which "It is not possible to derive the nature of a traumatic response from the 'external' characteristics of the traumatizing event. The character of the traumatic response must also be found in the context … into which it comes to be embedded" (p. 270). Smelser documents how the specific narratives used to carry the trauma process depend on the American context, where the trauma has occurred ("The reactions to similar events in other national contexts would have unfolded differently"). As in the case of Pearl Harbor, America has gained after September 11 a newfound innocent national identity that will be used to frame the war in Afghanistan and Iraq. However if one considers the succeeding steps of this public memory, the photographs coming from the prisons in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo have changed a lot the worldwide narrative of September 11. The American moral superiority among nations and people is again under question and will provoke a reworking of the narratives used to carry through the trauma process, a trauma whose means of symbolic production will not be controlled for any longer only by a unique antagonist.

The essay "The Voice of the Visual in Memory" by Barbie Zelizer published in the public memory volume, also addresses the drama of September 11, but not as its central topic. The author raises the question on how images work: the relation between camera and memory is very complex and has been analysed by Zelizer also in her previous work (1998). When photographs shape the past, difficulties arise: "At best photographs are arbitrary, composite, conventionalized, and simplified glimpses of the past. … 'Voice' offers a useful way of making sense of the image's role in memory … voice helps explain how the image takes on an already provided meaning upon its initial appearance. In this regard, voice can be seen as an assist that help us understand both the image's third meaning and the role of contingency in visual memory" (Phillips 2004, 160-162). The about-to-die moment images are analysed by Zelizer as typical ways to address death using the subjective voice of camera: "By freezing the representation of death before people actually die, we mark the moment before death, rather then after, as the most powerful and memorable moment of representation in the sequencing of events surrounding human demise" (p. 165). The about-to-die image reflects our irrational hope that something different may happen and the death may not occur. Among others, the author analyses some images of people about-to-die in the World Trade Center. The first is a photograph taken by Richard Drew where an unidentified man jumps to his death from one of the towers, and the second image is taken by Jeff Christiensen and shows people hanging out of the World Trade Center: they are poised between death by fire and death by jumping. These kind of images were reprinted widely only during the first few days, and are soon replaced by images of the burning towers. As Zelizer points out,

> *The substitution of buildings for people as the preferred representation of the about-to-die moment in the World Trade Center attacks makes sense when considering the role of the subjunctive in the popular imagination. Viewing the raw horror of bodies tumbling to their death was clearly problematic because their harsh depiction overwhelmed the subjunctive possibility of muting the finality of death for viewers. The buildings, by contrast, prolonged that subjunctive response, softening the reality of the response with the improbable*

– but comforting – sense that time might have thwarted death's intention (in Phillips 2004, 179).

Conclusions

Framing Public Memory and *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* represent two relevant contributions to the analysis of the relation between collective memories, public discourse, and collective identities. The *Cultural Trauma* book presents a high theoretical coherence between different essays, which articulate the cultural trauma theory in its relevant dimensions and apply it to different empirical cases (slavery, Holocaust, postcommunist societies, September 11). The main risk of the volume (especially in the first Alexander's essay "Towards a Theory of Cultural Trauma") seems to be the potential imperialistic fallacy of the cultural trauma model, if extended and applied to multicultural contexts, without considering for example the different meanings of having a common past across cultures.

Phillip's book is based on the proceedings of an interdisciplinary conference held at the Syracuse University. Even if several essays are highly interesting, at the end the book seems to lack of a powerful theory of the functioning of public memory. The relation between memory and public discourse is analysed in details with reference to specific case studies, such as the journalists' use of images to represent the drama of the World Trade Center. The inter-disciplinarity of the book has an unexpected outcome: while the empirical studies are carried out within sociological, anthropological and communication frameworks, the more theoretical chapters are written by philosophers. Casey's distinction between individual, collective, social and public memory is not convincing, as it subverts Halbwachs' and Namer's more consolidated definitions. His chapter provides only partially a general theory of public memory that the volume would deserve. However, the book represents an important contribution to our understanding of how public memory is framed, and will be framed.

As regards the future of this concept, several questions remain open and will need to be further investigated; one of them is related to the role of new technologies. Historical websites and memories on line represent an increasing trend in most European and Western societies, providing a sort of "hand-made history" with several problems deriving from the controversial quality of the sources and historical data. To what extent commemorative and historical websites will challenge the current notion of public memory? Will they change the relation between memory and public sphere? To what extent will they affect the processes through which the past is inscribed into the public knowledge of our societies? During the last decade public memory has become a very used concept in the study of the past and it seems that it will be destined to keep its centrality for longer. The main problem is that we need to define this concept in a more accurate way, so to better clarify its semantic distance from more consolidated concepts, such as social memory and collective memory.

Notes:

1. I wish to thank anonymous referees for all their comments and especially for this example.

2. The research is based on a survey in which the authors found out that "German responses to the question about American responsibility depended on question order. When the question

about American responsibility for slavery appeared *before* the question about German Holocaust responsibility, four percent of German students agreed that Americans are responsible for historical wrongs. When the question about American responsibility appeared *after* the question about German responsibility, the percentage of German students agreeing that Americans are responsible rose to 13.5 percent" (Phillips 2004, 132). However, it could be also argued that the comparison between the two different pasts is problematic. The immigration processes in USA at the beginning of the last century have radically changed the composition of the population. A relevant portion of American citizens were not American at the time of slavery. This might be another reason for the minor sense of personal guilty of Americans in comparison to the German case.

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