The Digital Cult

A New Theocracy Between Media and Memory

By

Guido Nicolosi

Translation by Emanuele Liotta

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The future is the door, the past is the key

Victor Hugo

To Urbana and Riccardo, who obsessively and joyfully animate my memories of yesterday, today and tomorrow.

Acknowledgements

In medias res

Pierre Musso

In medias res (Horace, *Ars Poetica*, v. 148) means "in the midst of things". Today, the formula could designate the omnipresence, or the omnipotence of technologies in our societies and in our daily lives: mediatization, smartphoneization, robotization, virtualization, etc. Guido Nicolosi proposes here a socio-anthropological approach to the media in a historical and genealogical perspective. Social memory materializes and exteriorizes itself in the objects, places and techniques it deals with in a learned and original way. The media have, he insists, "a double function: to fix and to recreate." They fix memory and create stories, narratives and fictions. In the age of mediatization and generalized and accelerated technologization, digital techniques have thus become "meta-objects", placed between memory and sacralization, vehicles of magic and also of religiosity.

Most anthropologists point out that, in his relationship with the world, man must separate things and words through language and adapt to his environment through technology. For Leroi-Gourhan, the characteristic of man is to create techniques and symbols in a double process of exteriorization and objectification. For his part, Gilbert Simondon argues that man's original relationship with the world is structured by doubling into technicality and religiosity, forming an inseparable couple. Georges Balandier preferred to speak of techno-imaginary rather than technique, to underline how it produces representations that alternate techno-messianism and techno-catastrophism. In the West, in fact, the representation of technology has always been ambivalent: *pharmakon* remedy and poison among the Greeks, "evil-remedy" for Bacon and Rousseau, machine and machination for Marx, magical and diabolical at the same time.

Technology (*tekhné* + *logos*) therefore does not proceed without story-telling, without imagination and without fiction. It can be defined as dual: fictional and functional. Castoriadis emphasized that "the instrumental or functional dimension of making (the *teukhein* and the technique) and its significant dimension are inseparable".[1] Even if it claims to symbolize and solicit the divinities, technology resides on the terrain of imaginaries and fictions. Thus, references to the sacred and to God are omnipresent in Anglo-Saxon culture, particularly in Silicon Valley or MIT. These techno-times adopted a "techno-mystical ideology" inherited from the cybernetics of Norbert Wiener who resurrected the figure of the demiurge man-god, in particular in his last work God and Golem (1964). It has been revitalized by the New Age and by certain techno-artistic currents of the same era. Since the 1990s, Silicon Valley has also partnered with the big Hollywood studios whose blockbusters depict techno-messianism or techno-catastrophism. One imagines that the invocation of the divine, immortality, a higher intelligence (Matrix) or transcendence should bring a soul supplement to the proliferation of "revolutionary" techno-narratives surrounding digital industries.

By now, in the West, the relationship between technicality and symbolism has become asymmetrical, since technology has not ceased to unfold its power, surrounded by stories and fictions, or sacredness, where symbolism frays and tends to flatten out on technicality. "Without a doubt, it is the first time in human history," noted anthropologist Georges Balandier, "that the imaginary is so strongly linked to technology."[2] This is the great contemporary challenge: the generators of technical power do not cease to develop, while the generators of meaning and symbolism do not cease to marginalize.

In the era of the waste of the symbolic (and therefore of the political), can technicality create a new power, that is, legitimize and make institutions govern? It aspires to it, all cloaked in sacredness or religiosity

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1   Cornelius Castoriadis, L'institution imaginaire de la société, Le Seuil, Parigi 1975, p. 52.
2   Georges Balandier, Un regard sur la société de communication, CNCA-Centre Georges Pompidou, Parigi 1986, p. 161.

with the impetuous development of information technology, networks, the Internet, computer systems and AI. But this would presuppose that technology can symbolize, that is, embody an instance of Truth, an irrational nucleus of beliefs, mysteries or myths, which answers the question of "why?" to live in society. It thinks it can do so as an applied science or technoscience, since Science has become the instance of truth in Western societies. But technicality cannot symbolize why it remains closed in the "how?" (doing), in the order of rational action, instrumentality, utility and efficiency.

Linked to the imaginary, technology cannot symbolize only an institution can do it. Symbolism always requires a founding reference or a Third Guarantor (God, Fatherland, Nation, People), who can answer the "why" to make society and who is staged in the institutions that legislate "in the name of" this Reference (Pierre Legendre). To establish means to embody myths and produce norms. Technology can claim to act only in the name of "efficient action". Thus, it remains sub-symbolic, indeed a-symbolic, that is, enclosed in the sphere of the imaginary. From this point of view, it can be considered "diabolical", in the original sense of the term, since it stands against the symbolic. Symbolic and diabolical are antonyms: the Greek verb *ballein* means "to throw"; both to throw together (*sym-ballein*) and in the middle (*dia-ballein*). Thus, *dia-ballein* is a factor of war while *sumballein* restores peace.

Technique is also a diabolical solvent of the symbolic because it resides in the order of rationality. In this sense, technique is "diabolical", not as a machination, but as a complementary and inverse figure of the symbolic. It cannot act as an ultimate Referent or as a great divinity (except, perhaps, for the nuclear bomb?), but aspires to it, in a "Desire for God" (Pierre Legendre) omnipresent in digital tales and utopias/dystopias that would like to replace the human and its fragility (robotics, algorithms, generative Artificial Intelligence, etc.).

In his conclusion, Guido Nicolosi rightly criticizes this "new digital theocracy", of which the gurus of Google and the techno-geniuses of GAFAM are like theologians. He calls for a secularization of digital tech-

nologies and already identifies emerging forms of such a movement in society. This secularization requires a critique of its founding dogma, that is, the pursuit of unlimited technological progress: "everything that is technically possible must be realized." The limit of this myth-pillar are the limits and human and planetary fragility. The explosion of technological power opens up an enormous question about the meaning of this "progress", its limits and its regulation, as Nicolosi suggests by evoking this techno-secularization. In fact, paraphrasing Rabelais, one could say that power without meaning is nothing but the ruin of man.

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Introduction

Due to the extraordinary acceleration of technological development and the increasingly pervasive role played by digital media, a phenomenon often called *mediatization*, the question of mediation has become one of the central intellectual problems of the latter part of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. However, even though there has been, for decades now, a wide theoretical production on technological media, the concept of mediation remains poorly theorized in the study of culture and only poorly integrated in the study of media (Galloway, Thacker, Wark 2013). Here the hypothesis is advanced that the historical development of the disciplines has stimulated a clear division between media and communication studies on the one hand, and cultural disciplines on the other. This has probably inhibited the development of a general sociology of culture that deals with communication and mediation processes in a correlated way.[1] The American philosopher Don Ihde (2002), founder of an approach defined as post-phenomenological, has attempted to find a "third way" rather than the opposition between the "phenomenological materialism" of Merleau-Ponty's *corps vécu* (1945) and the "constructivism" of Foucault's cultural body (1975). Ihde is often considered the main contemporary referent of a "theory of mediation", whose main idea, in a nutshell, is that technology mediates our relationship with the world. That is, technologies, when used, help shape the relationship between men and between them and the world. Technologies, in this perspective, are not mere material objects opposed to human subjects or even simple extensions of human beings, but real mediators of man-world relationships (Veerbek 2015).

In the genealogical reconstruction carried out by John Guillory (2010), the word media itself would philologically go back to the Latin term *medius*, whose semantic definition is, for example, found in the meaning of the classical statement: in medias res. However, in the past, the noun media was rarely linked to issues related to communication. Until its definitive affirmation as a concept capable of filling a semantic gap that had been created in the world of classical arts, following the impetuous

proliferation of new technological media that took place starting from the nineteenth century (telegraph, phonograph, photography, etc.). From Aristotle's *Poetics* onwards, in fact, the classical arts have always been dominated by the concept of *mimesis* (imitation) and not by the one of communication.

However, mediation is not a specific object, but a process. And it is probably Hegel's philosophy that first grasps the first-order relevance of this process, although he does not refer it in a privileged way to communication. The media of communication are only one instance, however significant and pervasive today (the most advanced frontier), of a universal process that governs the relationships between different terms of thought or domains of reality. And this is the use that Hegel (1807) will make of it, using the German term *Vermittlung*, referring to a key concept of his system of thought: the dialectic of relations, in which concepts such as subject and object, or mind and world, have assigned a role in a system. In its most general meaning, the principle of mediation denies the possibility of an immediate relationship between subject and object, or the immediacy of any form of knowledge.

The universal dimension of this process will then be developed and declined later by Marx, a pupil of Hegel, replacing the reference to *being* with that to *work* which in the philosopher from Trier represents the foundational anthropological mediation between human beings and nature. Guillory's reconstruction, therefore, has the merit of highlighting how the instances related to communication, which today have fully absorbed the meaning and relevance of this universal process, are actually a mere technological declination that resurfaces in the terminological use of the term media. However, it would be wrong to reduce the totality of the process to communication, it would not allow us to understand its depth and its possible, even unpredictable, implications.

It was Charles Sanders Peirce who systematically connected the concept of mediation (semiotics) with a communicative perspective. For Peirce:

> A sign, or *representamen*, is something that for someone stands
> for something in some aspect or capacity. It is addressed to

someone, that is, it creates an equivalent sign in that person's mind, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign he creates I call the interpretant of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its object. It stands for that object not in all respects, but in reference to a kind of idea, which I have sometimes called the ground of representation.[2]

Umberto Eco (1979), as is well known, defined the process described by Peirce as an *unlimited semiosis*, since in Peirce the object of representation can only be the representation of which the first representation is the interpretant, and so on, in a process that he himself defines as an infinite regression. This perspective leads Peirce to bring back, in some way, the entire world or at least human society within the domain of semiotics and symbolic exchange. On the one hand, it has inspired an anthropological turn of the interpretivist type (e.g. Clifford Geertz), on the other, it finds ample reflection today in the development of social theories that have been inspired by linguistic and communicative models: structuralism, post-structuralism, systemic theory, communication studies and information theory.

An important intellectual tradition that has focused its interest on the theme of mediation, but mainly articulating its socio-political side, is that of the neo-Marxist matrix of the Frankfurt School (in particular, Adorno, Horkheimer and Benjamin) and of a part of cultural studies (in particular, Raymond Williams). Here the reflection on art in the era of its technical reproducibility and the role played by culture understood as a superstructure (theory of the Cultural Industry) that mediates the relationship with reality, conveying the modes and social relations of production, is of great importance; as well as, with particular reference to cultural studies, the central value assumed by Gramsci's concept of hegemony with all the decisive implications on the model of coding and decoding of communicative processes developed by this current of studies.

In this context with such marked socio-political contours, it is impossible not to remember the contribution of Giorgio Agamben. The Italian

philosopher, in a short but dense pamphlet dedicated to the concept of the device, states how this was decisive in the overall structure of Michel Foucault's philosophical thought, with particular reference to the themes of governmentality and biopolitics. Foucault never gave a rigorous definition of the concept of biopolitics in his writings. However, in the various arguments, speeches, interviews he gave during his career, it seems that it can emerge with certainty that the French thinker's idea of a device was that of a network that establishes the relationships between a heterogeneous set of discourses, institutions, architectural structures, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, etc. This network performs a strategic function that is inscribed in a relationship of power that intersects with relations of knowledge. Interpreting Foucault's thought, Agamben then defines disposition:

> [...] anything that has in some way the ability to capture, determine, orient, intercept, shape, control and secure the gestures, conducts, opinions and speeches of living beings. Not only, therefore, prisons, asylums, the Panopticon, schools, confession, factories, disciplines, legal measures, etc., whose connection with power is in a certain sense evident, but also the pen, writing, literature, philosophy, agriculture, cigarettes, navigation, computers, mobile phones and – why not – language itself, which is perhaps the oldest of the devices, in which thousands and thousands of years ago a primate without probably realizing the consequences he was facing – had the recklessness to be captured.

For Agamben, the device is an event that produced the human, which appeared with Homo sapiens, and was an essential component of the hominization process. The subject results as a condition emerging from the relationship between living beings, which are substances, and devices. Despite this existential condition of devices, contemporary societies with capitalist development would have exponentially amplified their pervasiveness (as demonstrated by digital technologies) and would have become "gigantic accumulations" of devices.

From a philosophical point of view, for Agamben the term disposition, from the Latin *dispositio*, translates the Greek term *oikonomia* which in Christian theology referred to the world of action and praxis, a stratagem to justify, without falling back into polytheism, the trinity of divine figures. The one God affirms himself as the ontology of the world of being, whereas in the world of *praxis* (*oikonomia*), of the administration of the world and of creatures, the trinity has a reason to exist. Therefore, dispositio is pure activity of government, without foundation in being. For this reason, says Agamben, devices must create their subject in order to work.

Finally, a very important aspect for the questions that we will address in this essay, Agamben defines this process of separation between being and praxis that the device realizes as religious. Retracing the tradition of Roman law, in fact, religious was that which, belonging to the world of the gods, was removed from common use and the commerce of men. For this reason, to consecrate meant to take these things out of the sphere of human law. Religion is, in this view, that which removes things, places, animals or people from common use and transfers them to a separate sphere. The device that par excellence implements this separation is sacrifice. Now, for Agamben, in capitalist society this separative process is taken to the extreme, causing the subjectification of man. On the model of Foucault's disciplinary society, devices through a series of practices, knowledge and discourses push for the creation of free men who, however, assume their freedom through their subjugation (the television *zappeur*, the smartphone addicted, etc.).

It would be impossible, in the context of this essay, to give an in-depth account of all these (and other) theories that place the concept of mediation at the center of their reflection. Here, we will adopt a specific perspective that limits itself to declining from a particular perspective the ontological principle posited by Grusin (2015) of "radical mediation". In the relationship with the world, man's existence has always been, and it could not have been otherwise given its anthropological characteristics, distinguished and defined by continuous mediation. This does not mean limiting oneself to reiterating the ubiquitous presence of tech-

nological media in our contemporary life, but asserting, with McLuhan or Latour, the ubiquitous presence of mediation in itself: flowers, stones, lakes, bacteria, cars, etc., continuously mediate our relationship with the world. However, here we are particularly interested in human objects and artifacts, i.e. the symbolic use of material culture.[3]

Since his origins, the human being has inhabited the world, known it and experienced it through objects, tools and artifacts, which represent for him fundamental factors of mediation and, therefore, of communication. The importance of these factors is enormous. There is a relationship of interdependence between the human being and the material culture he produces. Archaeology bases and legitimizes its epistemological status precisely on the understanding of this relationship. The archaeologist's main task is in fact to reconstruct the societies of the past through the study and analysis of their material remains. In essence, archaeology presents man as told by things, or his "material memories" (Gamble 2015). Sociology, on the contrary, has historically underestimated the importance of material culture in understanding relationships and social behavior. A gap that for several years seems to be rapidly filling (Sassatelli 2004).

The strength of objects lies in concreteness and stability. They are fundamental for fixing memory and for stabilizing the unstable elements of social relations: belongings, relationships, symbols, identities, beliefs, etc. The philosopher Michel Serres (1995, p. 87) stated that social ties and relationships would be as ethereal as clouds if they were based only on the relationships between subjects. For Serres, only objects stabilize relationships. The same principle was also reiterated by Hanna Arendt (1958, p. 137).

We can speak of a real paradox of objects: concrete entities capable of incorporating and fixing mediation with the immaterial. Then we know that this fixity and stability is extremely relative, an appearance: things decay, destroy, change, etc. However, this force remains in the human imagination.

One of the authors who best represented this relationship was Ian

Hodder (2011). The British archaeologist has defined an archaeology of the relationships between humans and things based on the theory of entanglement (translatable as interconnection, tangle, intertwining) with which a dialectic of dependence (in the double sense of recourse/entrustment and constraint) between human beings or things, understood here in a very general sense of objects built by man or existing in nature (including plants and animals) is presented. This dialectic is specified in 5 points: a) men depend on things; b) things depend on other things; c) things depend on men; d) the existence of a double bind relationship: men depend on things that depend on men; e) the traits and characteristics of things evolve and persist.

Hodder himself acknowledges that this theory of entanglement has been presented several times throughout history by different authors: from the aforementioned Merleau-Ponty to Heidegger (1927), from Latour (2005) to Ingold (2007), from Mauss (1924) to the oft-cited Leroi-Gourhan. Different perspectives, accents and angles that are not always in agreement.[4]

The great French anthropologist Leroi-Gourhan, who has profoundly influenced entire generations of scholars of all disciplines, attributes to material culture (especially technical tools) a decisive role in the process of humanization. For him, the fundamental characteristics of humanity are upright posture, short face, free hand during locomotion and possession of removable tools (Leroi-Gourhan 2018).

The decisive question concerns the dual and ambiguous nature of objects and artifacts. At the same time, they are inanimate, because of their physical nature, and yet products of human desires. As "social things", that is, they are in some way placed on the border between persons and non-persons, arousing an ambivalent feeling of agency, as we will see better in the second part of this book.

There is, in fact, a dependence of the subject on the object and the human cognitive process is largely conditioned by objects, which become real cognitive media. This is evident, for example, from the importance played by paper, pen or calculator or, today, by the computer in the

realization of complex calculations. In the same way, the construction of memory and remembrance is significantly based on objects (including the body), with which we fix, store and process the data of our lives (Miller 2014). The question we must ask ourselves is therefore whether there is a clear distinction between subject and object in the cognitive process. Authors such as the cognitive archaeologist Lambros Malafouris questions this separation and ends up considering mediation with things (*thinging*) a process capable of changing the ecology of our minds, reconfiguring the boundaries of cognition and therefore, ultimately, modifying, influencing the very development of human evolution (Malafouris 2016).[5]

The Greek-British archaeologist (2013; 2019) elaborates on a theoretical approach called Material Engagement Theory (MET). By re-actualizing a rich multidisciplinary intellectual tradition,[6] the MET argues that we can understand human beings only by understanding the ways in which human cognition evolves, that is, how the human mind transforms. These modes are actualized on different temporal and spatial scales by means of material involvement, both at the ontogenetic and phylogenetic levels. In this approach, cognition is not individual, nor does it refer to an internal scheme or representation or design (cognitivism), but refers to the circular relationship between body, brain and things, where concrete and processual action in the world is the privileged point of perspective. It is necessary to reiterate that the term "thing" here refers in a broad sense to material forms, techniques and socio-material assemblages, to the materiality of space and the built environment.

On the other hand, as stated by Daniel Miller (1994), attempting a systematic distinction between a natural and an artificial world makes little sense. All societies, not just modern and industrial ones, intervene in the natural world to change it (plants, animals, landscapes, etc.). In addition, human beings interact with natural objects that they cannot control (such as the sea or snow) on the basis of classifications, categorizations, meanings that "artificially" and even radically modify their order. So, for example, Miller claims, snow for an Inuit hunter is not the

same as snow for a young Westerner on Christmas Eve.

Material culture is a form of being in the world and each of us is socialized within contexts and on the basis of daily micro-routines (Goffman 1997) in which we are oriented to and from spaces, in which objects (and their shapes) help us to define classifications and habits. Conversely, this pushes us to create expectations that allow us to assimilate the world quickly as given-for-granted. In this sense, following the teaching of Pierre Bourdieu (1972), our cultural identity is not only embodied, but also "objectified", as further emphasized by feminist studies on "gender objects" (Hebdige 1988) or those on the relationship between ideology and material culture (Miller, Tilley 1984). For some authors, objects construct subjects much more than the other way around.

For this reason, ultimately, studying material culture means analyzing the implications of the materiality of forms for cultural processes. Dominic Boyer has rightly noted that the study of media should not be limited to analyzing, as a sub-disciplinary field of anthropology or sociology, the dynamics and tools of mediated communication:

> [...] mediation also raises the question of how we should conceptualize 'media' in the first place. To paraphrase one of Marshall McLuhan's more effective provocations (1964), if one understands media as extensions of human instrumental and semiotic capacities then why should wheels, money and clocks, for example, not also be considered alongside broadcast media such as newspapers, radio and television? Along the same why could the anthropological study of roads and migration, currency and finance, commodity chains and values, and the formation and dissemination of expert knowledge, not be productively connected to anthropological research on communicational media under the rubric of a broader anthropology of mediation?

Boyer's reflection poses a decisive question: what are the media? Correspondingly, if we asked a student of communication sciences what the first means of communication in history was, he would plausibly

answer by indicating newspapers, or more generally, the printing press in Europe in the 1500s, or perhaps writing or the invention of the alphabet itself in ancient Greece.

The truth is that it is impossible to give a rigorous scientific answer to this question, because from the moment our prehistoric ancestors began to build tools of wood, bone or stone to better adapt to changes in the environment in which they lived, they began to produce "tools for thought". The media, therefore, are part of a long and complex process through which human beings still continue to express their instincts and their skills in the construction of systems of meaning and symbolic interaction (Heyer, Urquhart 2019).

The aim of this book is to articulate this macro-theme, which will remain in the background, to define the outlines of a complex relationship between media and memory. The book is divided into two parts. In the first, an excursus of this relationship will be presented in a diachronic and critical key. In the second, we will try to show how a fundamental consequence of it is the contemporary affirmation of a new cult of the digital. A "secular religion" with significant and dangerous social implications.

Notes

[1] One of the few authors who have ever systematically attempted this feat was certainly Jurgen Habermas (1986) with the concept of steering media referring to money and power and John Thompson (1998) with his study on the typologies of interaction.

[2] Peirce Charles S., Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, ed. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss and Arthur W. Burks, 8 vols., Cambridge (Massachusetts), Belknap, 1931-1966, vol. 2, p. 228. 3 The expression "material culture" indicates all the visible and concrete aspects of a culture, such as urban artifacts, the utensils of daily life and productive activities. Archaeologists have made material culture a specific method of investigation that has made it possible to relocate art objects and artistic phenomena within a

homogeneous cultural fabric (Julien, Rosselin 2005).

[4] In particular, on the relationship/clash between Latour's ANT model and Tim Ingold's vision, see also Nicolosi, 2012.

[5] On the relationship between Nature and Culture and on the plasticity of the human organism in the definition of evolutionary processes, see also Nicolosi and Ruivenkamp, 2012.

[6] The work of the semiologist Peirce, that of the philosophers Dewey, Henri Bergson, Merleau-Ponty and Whitehead, that of the psychologist Gibson, of the sociologists Bateson and Latour and of the anthropologists Suchman and Ingold, just to name a few of the most relevant.

Part One

Memory And Media

Our identity depends significantly on our ability to store information in the form of memory.[1] The human brain is an organ with great plasticity, its synaptic connections can be strengthened or loosened and are even capable of permanent structural changes. This plasticity is fundamental to define our individuality, the sense we have of ourselves. It is true, in fact, that we all possess the same brain structures and a common framework of synaptic connections, based on a pattern characteristic of our species. However, the details of the scheme vary from person to person. The genetic constitution and, above all, the specific experiences of each one, mediated by our body and its senses, modify the precise picture of the connections between individual neurons and the strength of synaptic connections (Edelman 1992). The plasticity of our brain is, without a doubt, a great opportunity, because it makes us beings indefinitely "open" to change and improvement. At the same time, it also exposes us to the risks of a deterioration or even a dissolution of individuality (age, trauma, illness, bad habits, etc.).

Memory, therefore, is the basis of our identity. It is correct to say that we are what we remember to be. Reversing the Cartesian maxim cogito ergo sum, we are not what we are because we think, but because we have the ability to remember what we think. Every thought, every word spoken, and every action depends on the ability to store our experiences (Squire, Kandel 2010). Memory is also a fundamental source of "immunization" for the individual. First of all, from a biological point of view, our immune system is the memory of our body, with respect to the threats we suffer from the outside world (Edelman *op.cit.*). From a psycho-cognitive point of view, memorizing experiences increases the chances of avoiding making the same mistakes of the past.

Yet, scientific interest in memory is a relatively recent phenomenon, born in the nineteenth century. Galton (1892), Bergson (1896), Ribot (1881),

Freud (1901), Ebbinghaus (1913), Semon (1921; 1923) are the best-known names attributable to this new scientific and philosophical interest. To these, we must add those of others who today have taken a central position for understanding the social bases of memory: Vygotsky (2007), Bartlett (1974) and, above all, Maurice Halbwachs (1925; 1950).

Memory and society

Memory is not a phenomenon that unfolds only along an individual and subjective axis, and this has been amply demonstrated over time by various scholars. We have decided to briefly report the contribution of the three that we consider the most significant to understand the social connotation of an act generally considered as among the most subjective, intimate and private.

Lev Semenovic Vigotsky (2007) has been working on the topic of memory as part of his research on the development of abstract thinking and inner language in children. His great merit was to have introduced the definition of "mediated memory", referring to a socially and culturally connoted subject. In doing so, he focused his attention on the communicative dimension, in particular the verbal one (the use of words).

The great Soviet psychologist and pedagogist showed how there is a link between memory and evolutionary development and, therefore, with the appearance of mental functions based on logic and abstraction. Vigotsky distinguished between an organic and a mediated memory and clarified that if in childhood the child thinks through memory, later the adolescent remembers through thought. Remembering has, therefore, a double "nature": a natural mechanism (based on the stimulus-response relationship), but also a social and cultural process. The social and cultural context shapes the form, content and mode of transmission of memory. Here, the identity characteristics of the subject, his individual life history, are fundamental and the mediation of language is decisive.

The second contribution that, albeit briefly, we consider important to mention is that of Frederic Bartlett (1974). Even the British psychologist stood out, among the first, for not feeling satisfied with the results of

experimental research in laboratory conditions. Its goal was to show the real functioning of memory mechanisms, in the real social contexts to which the subjects belong.

His studies were pioneering because they were oriented towards creating a bridge between memory, imagination and the construction of meaning. In particular, for Bartlett, meaning is the result of a connection between what is there and what is not, evoking the classical definition of the sign provided by De Saussure (1916). This means, of course, reading meaning as a connection between present and past.

The "ethnographic" connotation of his research is very interesting and relevant, his attention to other cultures in the realization of the experiments. This interest arose from the aim of studying and showing the weight played by culture in the construction of meaning and in the processes of memorization. For example, his experiments on the domestication of experience in repetition were very important, with the use of narrative repertoires from cultures other than those of the subjects studied. For Bartlett, in short, memory is a process of gradual rationalization and in phases that implies a progressive transformation consistent with the socio-cultural horizon of reference.

Bartlett defines memory as a constructive process, because remembering an experience means adapting it to an already constructed meaning, but it is also creative because remembering can stimulate active and selective intervention. Both the individual and the social group evoke the past by reconstructing and reworking it in the interest of the present. For Bartlett, remembrance uses the "social past" to creatively orient the actions of the subject's present, thus also organizing future knowledge. In this sense, memory roots the subject in duration. In this, after all, Bartlett gives scientific relevance to the philosophical intuitions of Bergson, who affirmed that the role of the brain does not consist at all in storing images of the past in its cells in physico-chemical form, but that of selecting what in this past is useful for present action (Bergson op. cit.).

Maurice Halbwachs (1925; 1950), rightly considered the father of the sociology of memory, defined memory as a social fact, since every memory

implies social structures that function as a canvas around which to organize a story of the past that makes it possible to communicate and share it.[2] For Halbwachs, memory is knowledge, remembrance, trace, evocation of the past and, at the end of the day, every social thought is memory. Although there is a tendency to consider it as a privileged object of the psychology, function and mental operation of the individual, there are social frameworks of memory and a "collective memory". Our individual thought is capable of remembering only to the extent that it is placed within these frameworks and participates in this collective memory.

Thus, Halbwachs' theory of memory has a dual nature. On the one hand, it wants to show that individual memory itself always develops in a social framework and, on the other hand, it wants to highlight the manifestations of collective memory proper, i.e. the way in which human groups, social class, religious group or family preserve the memory of their past. Of course, Halbwachs did not intend to question memory as a psychic function, but rather to oppose the sociological level of the collective to individual mental mechanisms.

Moreover, for Halbwachs, memory is never merely preserved, but always reconstructed from the present. It is, in fact, the group to which the individual belongs that gives the tools to reconstruct the past, that provides the calendars and the language to express the memory, the conventions, the spaces and the durations that give meaning to the past. The selectivity of memory, after all, is nothing more than the ability to order the meaning of the past according to representations, visions of the world, symbols or notions that allow social groups to think about the present.

There are therefore three key passages in Halbwachs (Lavabre 1998):

a) the past is not preserved, but reconstructed starting from the present.

b) the memory of the past is possible only because of the social frameworks of reference that individuals possess.

c) There is a social function of memory: the mythologized past is invoked to justify present social representations.

A particularly relevant aspect of our work is Halbwachs' emphasis on materiality. Memory, the French sociologist claims, is inscribed in the places and spaces (and things) in which the groups in action in society recognize themselves. In this sense, collective memory, unlike history which aims at the universalistic knowledge of the past through a unitary reconstruction of the truth, is plural and multiform, because it is inscribed in social times and in the differentiated spaces that groups appropriate.[3]

Conversely, since individuals participate synchronically and diachronically in the social life of different groups, they will have an individual memory that is defined as interference of different collective memories. Therefore, collective memory is not a sociological abstraction or a pure metaphor. It is not the unitary memory of a group on the model of individual memory and is not a mere addition of individual memories. It is the precondition for the ability to remember for individuals and is, for this reason, able to guarantee a fundamental function of social integration.

Continuity and materiality in memory processes

Maurice Halbwachs' reflection was fundamental in defining an organic and general plan on which to build a sociology of knowledge and communication based on the decisive role of memory understood as a social product. At the same time, it is also of great importance for having emphasized the central importance played by materiality in the fixation of memory and its social quality. In particular, the reference to a traditional awareness regarding the decisive relationship between memory (time) and space, places, is evident.

The ancient Greeks and Romans were already widely aware of this close connection and developed the "technique of loci" or even "palace of memory", a mnemotechnic introduced by ancient treatises (*Rhetorica ad herennium, De oratore, Institutio oratoria*) and in which the elements to be remembered are associated with physical places. To remember various contents in a certain order, the memorization of spatial relationships is used.

Cicero, in his *De oratore*, narrates that this technique is to be attributed

to a certain Simonides of Ceo, a lyric poet of antiquity. During a banquet with the Thessalian king Skopas, he was called out of the palace to welcome two young men. Just then, when the poet was still outside, the palace collapsed, burying all the diners. Since the faces of the dead had been disfigured, the poet was able to give them a name by remembering the place where they were sitting.[5]

The relationship between memory and space depends on the way in which we can construct in our minds the sense of historical continuity. The present and the past are not clearly separate entities and looking at the present without any reference to the past would mean condemning oneself to the impossibility of a full understanding of it. This explains the feeling of estrangement that migrants face, for example, who have to face a forced uprooting from their cultural roots.

Individuals live an incurable paradox: the persistence of change. Everything changes and yet we perceive a continuity of identity of things and people. We ourselves are exposed to even radical changes in our body (about every 40 years we face a complete turnover of all our cells) and yet we are still able to recognize ourselves as the same. As already shown philosophically by David Hume, this paradox of persistence in change is made possible by a quality of our perception. Continuous identities are the product of a mentally realized integration of disconnected points distributed over time, into an integrated historical whole. In particular, it is our memory that achieves this specific integration, guaranteeing us the mnemonic illusion of continuity, which Eviatar Zerubavel (2003) calls bridging.[6]

The bridge is, by definition, a mediator capable of integrating non-continuous spaces. It is also the perfect metaphor to represent the strategy implemented by our memory to integrate temporally non-contiguous manifestations of what we consider the same identity (a society, a person, etc.). It is an editing work, very similar to that carried out in the art of cinema with the editing technique, with which we are able to build a fluid continuity of an integrated whole which, in reality, is the result of the collation of individual frames made at different and mutually separate moments.

Now, although bridging is a mental act, we generally tend to hook it to material entities. One of the most effective ways, in fact, to fill the void between temporally non-contiguous points is to establish a relationship that allows a "contact" between them. The persistence of the places is certainly an exceptional characteristic capable of promoting a feeling of uniformity. The physical environments around us maintain a remarkable level of relative stability, thus providing us with a feeling of permanence that extraordinarily promotes the reassuring illusion that things do not change. It follows that places and, in general, material reality (objects, bodies, etc.) are a reliable *locus* of memorization and, therefore, often a considerable source of personal and social nostalgia.

For this reason, moreover, places play a fundamental role in the rhetoric of identity. Pilgrimages are designed and carried out precisely to build close contact with the collective past of groups and communities. Let us also think of the symbolic significance assumed by the significant places of religions and national communities, pilgrimages to holy places, tourist walks in historic centers, or the symbolic value assumed by Palestine, for example, for Zionism.

Objects can also perform a very similar function, such as memorabilia, relics, and souvenirs. They provide a material reality with which to carry out mnemonic bridging (Zerubavel literally defines them as transitional objects)[7] with objects detached from physical places, but symbolically connected to them and easier to use and carry with them to maintain a tangible link between past and present. This also explains the attachment with objects and clothes that belonged to a loved one and now distant or deceased, the use of plaques, medals or plaques to create sites of memory, etc.

Also, for Zerubabel, a particular declination of bridging is provided by the "iconic connection", i.e. the generation of iconic representations of the past through the reproduction of a likeness. A practice widely used in architecture, in art and, above all, carried out in a widespread way after the invention of photography, as we will see in detail later. The imitation of the past through its reproduction often takes the form of

ritualized performances, such as in religious rituals, parliamentary procedures, ethnic dance, traditional cuisine, court or institutional ceremonies (not to mention revivals).

There is a socio-cognitive foundation to bridging and it has been masterfully presented by Berger and Luckmann (1969). On the basis of a seminal phenomenological analysis, which has now become famous and foundational in the sociology of knowledge, the two authors tell us that consciousness is always intentional and always tends, or is directed, towards objects. Daily life is always organized, first of all, around space-time coordinates that are our *hic et nunc*, that is, the here of our body and the now of our present: this is our *realissimum*. However, it does not end here, because it embraces phenomena that are not present in this *hic et nunc*.

Human expressiveness is able to objectify itself. These objectifications are more or less durable indices of subjective processes. They are fundamental because they allow their usability to extend beyond the direct encounter, in which they can be perceived directly. For example, an emotional state can be expressed through a particular bodily, postural or gestural dynamic. In direct contact, these clues allow access to the subjective state of the other that would otherwise remain inaccessible.

However, on this expressive level, these clues are destined not to last beyond the present. Objects, on the contrary, have the characteristic of lasting and fixing in time and space the memory of a subjective state. For example, Berger and Luckmann tell us, a knife stuck in the wall can, better than a gesture of anger, remind us over time (and to more people who will be able to come and see it) of the anger of the one who threw it. Everyday reality is full of objectifications and is possible only through them. Objects are constantly talking about our intentions and those of others. Of course, these must be interpreted, and archaeologists know how complex these interpretations are (especially after centuries) and uncertain.

At the same time, there is a particular kind of objectification, the relevance of which is crucial for human beings: signification, the human