

# Dynamic memories of the collective past

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## Abstract

In this paper, I first retrace some aspects of a dynamic theory of humans in society, and then highlight what appear to me as major contributions of two papers of this special issue. This leads me to highlight a series of questions, which I address through two other consonant studies on remembering, the work of Harald Welzer and his team on the memory of WWII in three generations in German families, and the study by Steve Brown and Paula Reavey on people's remembering of the London bombings.

## Keywords

Imagination, collective memory, intergenerational transmission, vital memories, prolepsis

An interesting turn is currently happening in the study of memory, as authors both critically reread classical theories of remembering and thinking, and free themselves from approaches that consider memory as something about adequately preserving the past, in mind or in artefacts. Dynamic approaches of remembering are developed, showing the social and cultural making of individual remembering and the part of each act of remembering in the making of the social, as well as the future orientation of remembering (Boyer & Wertsch, 2009; Brown & Reavey, 2015; de Saint-Laurent, 2014; Murakami, 2012; Wagoner, 2013, 2015), and as this special issue shows. Perhaps this move reflects a more general tendency in some parts of the social sciences, where authors try to go beyond fragmentation in the study of social and psychological phenomena. This integrative movement is undertaken both by engaging in more abstract and general theorization, and by relying on general dynamic theories, reflecting other moves in philosophy and sciences in general (Salvatore, 2016; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015a; Zittoun & Valsiner, 2016).

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## **Remembering as part of the dynamics of mind**

An effort of sociocultural and critical approaches in psychology has been to reinstate an authentic developmental science—that is, a science that tries to apprehend human experience in society *in time* (Valsiner, Molenaar, Lyra, & Chaudhary, 2009; Zittoun et al., 2013). From a general developmental perspective, one entry is to focus on the constant mutual constitution of mind and society through an analysis of semiotic dynamics. Such focus allows to concentrate on the flow of consciousness—or semiotic stream that constitutes our experience—and the dynamics by which we constantly construct the world as it is given to us. From such perspective, people's attempt to “make sense” of any aspect of their experience demands dynamics of linking past experiences with “the given” of a situation as we apprehend it. This given is itself organized in a world partly made or configuration of signs crystallized into material and symbolic cultural artefacts. This process can be analyzed at different levels of granularity—from the smaller microgenesis of semiotic process (Salvatore, 2016; Valsiner, 2007) to more general dialogical dynamics involving others and cultural elements (Marková, 2016; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015b).

Recently, we have proposed to consider these processes through the particular entry of imagination—seen as the psychological experience of temporarily leaving the here-and-now of the present to explore past, alternative, or future experiences, through the uses of past experiences, various semiotic means, social interactions, and symbolic resources (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016). At this level of granularity, human experience and sense making can be conceived as a loop—moving in and out of the surface of the given immediate semiotic stream, to apprehend it through the perspective given by these various resources. This loop, we have proposed, always demands, yet to variable degrees, the linking of past experiences with future and present ones. The return to the present, charged with this semiotic loop, necessarily produces a change of experience—an emotional, at times embodied, change, or reconfiguration of meaning, or an opening of possibility to act. In other words, this loop transforms the semiotic stream in which we live, whether at the microgenetic level in the here-and-now, at an ontogenetic level—opening new life choices—or at a more sociogenetic scale, when new societal futures are made possible—from flying to the moon, to leaving European Union.

From that general developmental, and necessary dynamic perspective, remembering thus appears as one particular case of imagination, or even, semiotic

process—these looping processes that are particularly oriented toward the past before coming back to the present, whether it is to answer the questions of a researcher (as in de Saint-Laurent, 2017) or to make political plans (as in Brescó de Luna, 2017).

More specifically, individual remembering demands certain semiotic loops, oriented toward what is culturally considered as the past, enabled by personal past experiences (affective, emotional, physical, generalized) or by cultural elements in the present (documentaries, monuments, pictures), interactions with others, as well as social representations (de Saint-Laurent & Zittoun, in press). Remembering a collective past can be in contrast conceived as remembering something about a configuration of events in the past, which affected many lives in an interrelated manner, and collectively designated as such. Of course the events do not need to be the *same* for various individuals or even for different groups: hence World War I included many events, which are very different for a Silesian farmer and a Prussian general; these meanings also change with time.

These preliminary considerations highlight two basic principles of collective remembering: one is its inherent developmental nature; the other is the necessary tension that the notion presupposes between individual and collective acts of memory. The two papers presented in this section fully respect the first principle, and beautifully explore the second aspect. I now examine them in turn, and highlight three questions they raise.

## Dynamics of prolepsis

Brescó de Luna (2017) usefully recalls the notion of *prolepsis*, developed in the field of literature critic and expanded by Cole within cultural psychology (Cole, 1996, 2007). He uses the notion to question a linear conception of memory, to which he opposes a narrative view, for which a proleptic movement implies “an imagined scenario that pulls the present towards the future through a certain way of reconstructing the collective past” (Brescó de Luna, 2017, p. XX). In that sense, it is through a loop oriented toward the future that historians, activists or political groups can design the past leading to their current present to be changed. The innovative proposition that such developmental perspective allows, thus, is to consider the collective past as a constant construction-in-the-making oriented by an evolving imagination of the future.

From this perspective, two questions can be raised in the light of our knowledge about imagination. The first one is, what is it that is used to imagine the future that will guide certain constructions of the past, rather than others? And is the potentiality of these engrossed futures not precisely enabled and constrained by these resources? Thus, for instance, in a religious discourse, the possible imagined futures are constrained by a set of beliefs (e.g., the survival of one’s soul in another world, which allows to disengage from the problem of the future of life on earth), and these in turn guide the reading of the past (e.g., in which the mythical death of a leader grounds the hope of eternal blissfulness). In political games, the same

happens: totalitarian powers limit the creation or access to cultural elements nourishing diverse possible imaginations of the future, by repressive means and/or by redundancy of only one discourse (Marková, 2017) (e.g., the supremacy of a group of individuals under the leadership of an elected guide), and thus restrict the reading of the past (e.g., a foundational myth announcing the guide), thus justifying the present (e.g., submitting to the leader and accomplishing the supremacy of the given group). In that sense, what sort of cultural elements would be needed to open alternative futures which, in turn, would allow groups to develop rich, open, interesting reading of their past, so as to get a better, polyphonic, grip over their complex present?

A second question raised by this paper is that of authorship. At this scale of analysis—collective prolepsis—one may wonder who does the imagining, and for whom, and in turn, who is doing the remembering? Is it the same person—activists, political leaders, or teachers—or groups? Or is one person or group providing elements (e.g., dystopian films) for others to imagine (e.g., a general public destabilized by recent political events), and third ones to remember (e.g., politicians imagining a blissful, problem-free past)? In the first case, versions of collective futures and pasts might be deliberately crafted to convince electors, to polarize public opinion, to find support, or to bring hope to a depressed population. In the other case, the ones might not have any intentions about changing the sense of past of the others—yet their changed understanding of past and future is just a byproduct of these distributed proleptic processes. Hence, as de Saint-Laurent nicely shows (2017), a person’s discovery that academics are building certain versions of the collective past might bring him to radically change his present actions, turning him from a scholar to more of an activist. In any case, it may be useful to question these chain dynamics leading to the emergence of unexpected futures and past imaginations.

## **Dynamics of social positioning**

Given the importance of authorship—who is remembering, with whom in mind, and for whom—it is most welcome that de Saint-Laurent focuses on such issues in her original analysis. At the scale of ontogenesis, her paper shows that a given person’s imagination of the collective past is itself evolving according to what she calls a “trajectory of remembering” along the lifecourse. As in Brescó de Luna, remembering is always in tension with imagining the future. In addition, the originality of the paper is to retrace how, at different moment of a lifecourse in various sociocultural situations, marked by specific individual and collective ruptures, memory is crafted by a person, engaging in various memory acts, enabled by various resources, with specific present others as well as others in mind, and using also their memory of having previously remembered the past. The genealogy of one’s evolving imagination of the past is thus a history of past encounters and dialogues, and the richness of one’s remembering results from the partial or complete integration of the many positions in memory acts one has adopted through life.

The paper also furnishes a model that allows identifying the multiple dimensions of remembering, “for example new interlocutors, access to novel information, development of alternative social positions for the self, mastery of different narrative frames, emergence of new concepts and understandings of history, etc.” (de Saint-Laurent, 2017, p. 263). Here as well, we can see that the material used for remembering is not always produced by people using it, and so, in the recounted case study, the person’s access to resources depended on the others with whom he engages in memory acts. The paper thus highlights the ever-going dynamic or of generating imagination of the collective past. It also gives leverage in the possibility of changing people’s relation to the past and therefore the future—it is not only a matter of how the past is recounted, it depends also by whom and in what conditions. More importantly, the model might also give us an access to understand the refusal that some people or group may have to certain versions of the past—which can be understood in terms of position impossible to hold, for instance for emotional or belonging reasons.

This thus raises a third question, that of the interplay between the various others with whom people engage in memory acts over time—and the possible consonant, or contradictory effects (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015a). Indeed, not all others are equal to self: we have elective relations to our closest ones, our “significant” others, and their positions in memory work may have different valences (Zittoun, 2013).

## **Interrelated intimate lives and the past**

It is to try to highlight these valences of specific others that I wish to rapidly turn to the work of Welzer on German families over three generations. Welzer and his team interviewed 40 families over three generations, the older member being an eyewitness of World War II, often a perpetrator (Tschuggnall & Welzer, 2002; Welzer, 2005; Welzer, Moller, & Tschuggnall, 2013). Welzer shows that although some elder members of families openly speak about crimes they observed or even perpetrated, their children avoid or ignore these memories, and their grandchildren would find a way to express how much their grandparent did refuse the system, or support the Jews, or in one way or another took some risk—“grandpa was not a Nazi.”

In the following series of quotes, reported in Welzer (2005, pp. 9–11), we see such transmission and transformation of memories of the collective past. First, 91 years old Elli Krug, who lived near Bergen-Belsen during the war, explains that she didn’t know about camps (such statements have long shown to be false). She explains how, after the war, British forces requested her to host survivors, former inmates on their way out of the camps:

*Elli Krug:* The Jews were the worst afterwards. They really harassed us . . . They sat there and made us serve them, and then they didn’t want . . . We had this big hayloft [where] they slept overnight. . . . The Jews and Russians, I always made sure that I didn’t get them. They were really disgusting, you know?

Asked about these events told many times by his mother, her son also explains that people did not know about the camps. Yet in parallel, he refers to a story recounted by his wife about someone living near Bergen-Belsen at the same time, who did hide escapees (which, per definition contradicts the “not knowing”); he calls this person “the grandma”:

*Bernd Hoffmann:* The grandma hid some of them, and they sat in a wooden box. Then [the SS-men] went around, searching everywhere . . . They would have shot the grandma immediately. She put a hot pot with boiling potatoes on top of the wooden box so they wouldn't get them.

Finally, the 26 year-old granddaughter, exposed to these narrations, tells her version of what her own grandmother did:

*Silvia Hoffmann:* Once she told a story I thought was really interesting: Our village was on the road to Bergen-Belsen, and she hid someone who escaped from one of those transports, in a really interesting way, in some grain box with straws sticking out—she really hid them. Then people came and looked in her farmyard and she kept quiet. That's a little thing that I really give her a lot of credit for.

Obviously, the granddaughter's remembering of the story of the grandmother has been fully recomposed: in this narrative, the grand-mother (Ms. Krug) did not at all refuse to host Jews; in contrast, she hid them in a wooden box—a narrative element borrowed from the story about the “grandma”; the place for hiding is a mixture of the hay of the first story and the box of the second one. But this active creation is not a “memory failure”: it is an active, yet not deliberate, reconstruction of an event belonging to the collective past, in which a close, loved person is involved.

This process of transformation of events of the past is systematic enough in the data collected by Welzer and his group, for them to name it “cumulative heroisation.” According to the author, “cumulative heroisation” can be explained by the coexistence of two logics. On the one hand, because of Germany's huge effort to educate about the Holocaust, younger Germans have been systematically taught about the history of war, the responsibility of Germans in the Shoah, etc. This “cognitive” education is reinforced by an over-abundance of films, novels, TV series, commemoration, and memorial trips to which the postwar generations have been exposed. On the other hand, people live with a subjective feeling of loyalty to their own families. Their need to protect their own family members would explain the need to recognize the public murders, but to totally isolate these from their relation to their own grandparents.

In the light of what has been exposed so far, we could also understand this as follows: the older generation of Germans, their children and their grandchildren, relate differently to the events of the past. For the oldest, the past was once their present; they now relate to it using as resources the traces of their own experience,

but also all the mediatic discourses that are available (in other examples, Welzer shows how personal anecdotes are mixed up with scenes from Remarque's descriptions of the war front (Remarque, 1989), or from film depictions of the war (Welzer et al., 2013)), and so address their families in certain terms—either to show them the past as it was and that there is nothing to hide, or to protect them. For their grandchildren, two distinct types of relation to the collective past coexist, both of them imaginations of a past they haven't experienced. The first has as *others* the teachers, school friends and generalized others, and it uses as resources the formal material and the modalities of historical reasoning, with a strong normative proleptic function of “never again” letting similar event happen. The second modality of imagining the past has as *other* a beloved grandfather or parent, and as resources a mixture of family stories, other narratives heard, and other symbolic resources—here the proleptic function is meant to save the morality of the family. Because of the “loyalty” to family members, or the positive emotional valence, the position of the *other*—the grandparent—can be taken, but is filled with what is acceptable to self. This is totally incompatible with what is taught in the other context of formal education, with other *others* and resources.

Hence, two types of memory act (de Saint-Laurent, 2017) are generated, with different others; and given the emotional valence of intergenerational ties, the latter survives untouched by the former. The paradoxical effect of this cleavage in intergenerational remembering of collective past is that, as Welzer (2005) underlies, the younger generation celebrates the heroic resistance of their forefathers (even when they have been openly active perpetrators)—thus putting resistance as role model. The more negative consequence of this cleavage is that people build a dichotomic representation of the Nazis (them) and the Germans (the good *us*), and maintain unwillingly an uncritical racist discourse about the Jews. Othering the Nazis and the Jews creates semantic barriers (Gillespie, Kadianaki, & O'Sullivan-Lago, 2012) so strong that it makes impossible taking their positions and fully seeing the events from their perspectives (Welzer, 2005).

## **Interrelated public lives and the past**

The tension between personal memories and collective remembering, and the saturation of others in collective remembering that enters in concurrence with more private remembering, is also addressed by Brown and Reavey in a chapter named “Remembering with, through and for the others. Surviving the 2005 London bombings” (Brown & Reavey, 2015, pp. 133–154). Here, the authors explore the work of constituting a traumatic experience into a personal and then a collective memory for the victims of the London bombings, and the consequences these collective memories have back on people's personal remembering of the collective past, using the metaphor of the Möbius strip.

The authors emphasize in particular the process involving persons who externalized their intimate, embodied experience publically—through blogs, books, or

documentaries, as “survivors often can feel similar moral obligation to tell their own story, because it is part of the narrative mosaic that constitutes the collective memory of 7/7” (Brown & Reavey, 2015, p. 136). These events become “vital memories”, turning points that redefine their life trajectories. In many cases, the stories allow others to recognize and name their own experience, through the semiotic mediation these provide and the perspective they allow (e.g., on reconstituting what happens when the bus blew up). This externalization thus became symbolic resources to others and a mutual, collective fabric of shared memories.

However, once externalized, these discourses are crystallized, and can be used also by other agents—political, mediatic, activists, etc.—who can develop stereotypical discourses and identify “guilty” parts. Personal externalizations, initially meant to give shape to a personal memory and sharing into building a collective one, became thus proleptically used as part of a political agenda. For instance, John Tulloch appeared cover in blood on the front cover of one British tabloid, pictures used in favor of a reinforcement of anti-terrorist laws.

In a third movement, these collectivized stories come back to people, who might not recognize themselves in these now shared, or doxa version of the past. Hence, the same John Tulloch did not support the laws his image was meant to support; yet this newspaper representation of him became part of his personal remembering of what has become a collective past. Such recomposition of personal memories might lead, paradoxically, people to disengage from the collective remembering, as they then feel that the latter eventually blocks them in one version of the past, thus denying the specificity of their own experience and its possible development. One of the woman involved thus explains how she felt “quite bored by your own story” (Brown & Reavey, 2015, p. 152), and “for John Tulloch, the way out has been to refuse a straightforward status of victim” (Brown & Reavey, 2015, p. 152).

Hence, Brown and Reavey’s analysis shows how people first need to elaborate their experiences into semiotic forms to be shared with others, and second, see these grow and join the flow of discourses and artefacts constituting collective remembering—with all its possible uses as symbolic resources for other persons, but also, normative and proleptic uses by institutional others. In a third movement, people need to free themselves from their participation in acts of building and maintaining a memory of the collective past, in order to redefine personal futures for their own present lives. In other words, the loops in which these single persons engage get intertwined with collective work, through intense position exchange; but the only way to be able to close the loop is to disentangle self from the collective, that is, close positions, so as to preserve some subjectivity and the possibility of development.

## **Expanding dynamic studies of collective remembering**

In this paper, I started by underlying the importance and interest of dynamic approaches of memory and especially collective remembering, that contribute to a developmental understanding of human in societies. Underlying proleptic

dynamics—how the future is bounded in the past and back in the present, de Saint-Laurent shows trajectories of remembering in the lifecourse, and Brescó de Luna highlights the memorial work in the development of communities and nations. In addition, bringing in insights from position exchange theory, de Saint-Laurent shows the importance of the others with whom one remembers, *in presentia* or *in absentia*—these others, whose position we endorse, are constitutive of the memory act (de Saint-Laurent, in press). Through time, as the others change, memory necessarily evolves through the multiplication of perspectives.

In order to dialogue with these readings, I proposed to read memory of the collective past as a variation of imagination, which led me to formulate three questions, all related to the distributed nature of remembering about the collective past: these concern, first, the authorship of the resources used for remembering—it may not be the same persons that produce the elements that can be used as resources to remember, that those that use them; second, the authorship of collective remembering; and third, the weight and valences of the others in remembering.

These questions, I have addressed by complementing my reading of Brescó de Luna and de Saint-Laurent's papers with a rapid presentation of two other dynamic studies of memory of collective past, that of Welzer (2005) and of Reavey and Brown (2015). First, in both cases, there is a distribution of remembering over time and people; second, the production of memory artefacts for certain purposes by certain persons (e.g., survivor's testimonies to help others, films about the past to avoid future catastrophes) are used by others in very different ways—to dissociate family memories from more "public" rememberings of the past, or to make sense of one's own life. Interestingly, in both cases, these uses bring to a dissociation of memories of the collective past, and personal, subjective memories related to this past—whether one's own experience of events, or one's close ones. Finally, regarding the third question, we saw in Welzer's case that the others with whom one is closely emotionally related can have a radical prevalence over distant others, thus blocking the possibility of adopting these second positions of the past. The immediate need to preserve a relation to close ones even brings to radical transformations of past narrations, for which all kinds of resources are used to build a past compatible with such futures. In Brown and Reavey's case, the immediate need to preserve one's subjectivity brings, at some point, to distance the person from the position of others, so as to enable the emergence of new futures.

Hence, as a whole, adopting a dynamic, sociocultural development understanding of collective remembering proves fruitful. It involves, as shown in this section, a consideration of the future in the imagination of the past, and others in remembering; but also, as suggested in these lines, the emotional valence of various others with whom one is related, and the existential need to preserve a personal sense of integrity—subjective, but also embodied—beyond various imperatives to collectively remember.

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