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Memory Studies for the Future. Remembering (COVID-19) as Survival Value

Our memory is a sign of the past. Collective or social memory stores what has passed and for some reason is vital to the community. As such, the politics of memory¹ is a tool of political struggle and social engineering. Undeniably, the collective memory of humanity will keep the coronavirus pandemic in its resources. In some countries or regions, it will become an essential element of building a community. It will be so in the memory of those living in the age of COVID-19, it will also survive in the next generations—in the form of post-memory² or social traces of disease preserved in works of art. It will also become an essential element of scientific development. It seems that never before in history such great resources have been allocated for one scientific and social purpose at the same time³. Even the most significant military projects, with the Manhattan Project at the forefront, cannot compare to this. Nor have so many scientists ever switched their activities on a global scale just to make COVID-19 collapse, as well as to seek a remedy for illness, economic crisis, social and mental problems. There is no room here to talk about the inequalities that the pandemic has uncovered, but their scale is overwhelming.

Can memory studies do something today in the context of the coronavirus pandemic? Is there any sense in reaching for tools and conceptualisations developed within their framework? Can we think about memory for the future? Are the memory studies helpful here?

The most apparent lead would be to document what is happening around us. To study the process of remembering, and in later years forgetting or continually changing the memory of the pandemic. One can also study the memory and post-memory (memory of the next generations) of previous epidemics that affected humanity and look at what they left behind in our community⁴. Both tasks are now performed. There are teams of scholars and journalists who collect, document, describe⁵.

However, let us reach back into the past, not so far away as to give an important example, which today seems clear, and which shapes our reality in the days of pandemic and lockdown. In the memory of most adults two situations are still alive. The first is **9/11**—the terrorist attack in the United States in 2001, symbolised by the destruction of the WTC Twin Towers. The second event was **the crisis of 2008**. They are crucial elements of the still active memory of people living in the world today. The intensity is different; the degree of impact varies. Because although the attacks took place in the United States, with New York as the most affected by their effects—not only practically, but also symbolically—the sight of skyscrapers collapsing has written itself—in the memory of all those who saw it. Mostly on TV screens, but still they saw it. However, the image is duplicated today.

The crisis of 2008 was visually less spectacular, but it affected more people in the world, workers and their families, whole cities, national economies. Besides, the reactions of

individual countries—so often criticised today for taking the side of big corporations and international business—are a constant point of reference. This is because the heroes (and anti-heroes) of those recent events of a decade or two ago are still alive, often taking their positions in the authorities of countries, corporations, and international institutions. And also because the level at which ordinary people were affected by this crisis is all-embracing, and individually many of them still feel its effects. The trauma of those events—both 9/11 and 2008—is still in many of us; and our collective memory.

What is left of this in the face of COVID-19? Two things can be pointed out: the permission for surveillance and the cuts which—if we have not done anything about 2008—are affecting people and supporting big business. If 9/11 had not happened, would we have endured the current lockdown situation so peacefully (although it is clear that it is not so obvious, and in the US it generates growing resistance)? If not for the crisis of 2008, would we be so eager to sacrifice public money to save national economies? Both questions are rhetorical. It is the experience and memory of the past that makes us accept forced quarantine and police checks, surveillance with the use of modern technologies—applications that control our positions⁶, CCTV cameras in public places or urban transportation, and systems checking our body temperature etc. It is not only a question of the technological possibilities that were developed after 9/11—as can be seen from the fact how quickly individual countries managed to introduce them during the pandemic (and this does not only apply to the police states), but above all, it is a matter of our freedom, which we once again accepted —out of fear, it is obvious—to give up.

Moreover, it is not about some rebellious or anarchist tone, incitement to civil disobedience, but about a mechanism of remembrance, which allows today's authorities to easily move the boundaries of our civil liberties. If we did not remember, it would not be possible. Mobilisation by fear is most effective when this fear is rooted in experience—even if the TV screen mediates it.

Had cautious politicians not relied on the crisis of 2008 when they tried not to interfere with the economy, would governments today have supported their citizens with such ease (and yet probably still—and here, not so much has changed—primarily corporations), increasing public debt, taking out loans, paying out money to citizens? It is the memory that makes the people taught by those experiences, make different decisions today (apparently), and we, as citizens, accept all this. It is the fear (of death) and trauma still alive in many people that makes governments have the support of their citizens in this respect (even if they are criticized for fighting COVID-19). We are not interested in other solutions; we do not see long-term effects—the effects we expect here and now, which is understandable in the face of stress and social crisis in a pandemic. It does not encourage—and in this sense, we have learnt little from the 2008 crisis—a critical discussion, wise planning, open debate.

Collective memory plays on our emotions, which is why it is so easy to feed the political game of power, and not necessarily common good. Memory feeds on fear, conceals from us a critical view of reality, argues with 'ratio' about the sense of the actions taken.

Is there room for memory in the future? Can memory studies today tell us something about how this memory will look in decades or centuries? Is there a normative aspect of memory studies that can be helpful and worth undertaking?

Two things can be distinguished: **memory for science** and **treatment of traumatic memory**. They only open a list of potential benefits of memory studies for the future—furthermore, a list of problems that we will face as a result of COVID-19.

Memory for science. This is the moment when suddenly we all started to listen to scientists. We are anxiously following the data on mortality, the number of cured people, those who have passed the disease without symptoms or new complications. We are listening to reports of new drugs, therapies using existing ones that may bring hope, predictions about the vaccine. We all know about statistics, charts, flattening of the curve, the relationship between wearing a mask and the potential for infection etc. Data, charts, percentages, facts are in the social space, even if they are already generated today, as well as predictions of the future by deep learning machines and artificial intelligence⁷. We believe scientists, doctors, epidemiologists; we distance ourselves from the nonsense talked about by politicians and celebrities. Science has not enjoyed such social prestige for a long time.

Will it stay in our individual and collective memory for longer? Once the threat is over, will it all end as soon as it began? In the era of pandemics and the real threat to life, is there still no multiplication of fake news, or hasn't this whole story become a breeding ground for conspiracy theories, which are spreading in the social media? Did the celebrities sink into the ground and the anti-vaccinationists remain silent, understanding their own mistakes?

Nothing could be further from the truth. All these phenomena, although they are socially quiet, are still present. The protests about lockdown and quarantine, wearing face masks or maintaining social distancing, especially in the US defending its freedom, show clearly that this is not the case. Science cannot be sure of its symbolic achievements in times of pandemic (and in the long run, I would not count on financial support either). It will not survive in a clash with anti-vaccine celebrities and other anti-science populists. Anti-vaccinationists can spread their ideas and feel safe because vaccines have managed, at least in part of the world, to eradicate the ever-returning diseases and epidemics. It is the comfort of living in a world—at least in the rich North—without serious epidemic diseases, together with an anti-scientific attitude, conspiracy theories, but also populism in politics, that has allowed the growth of anti-vaccine movements. COVID-19 can restore balance in this respect. However, we must keep this in mind, as opposed to the repressed memory of past epidemics that haunted us regularly. It is a work of memory for the future.

The healing trauma through the work of memory. The collective experience of death, its closeness, which we all experience today indirectly, many of us directly, but which some places in the world have felt with great force (Lombardy, New York), causes and will cause unpredictable psychological effects. The trauma of those who have fought the pandemic and of those who have experienced it will not pass easily. Stress often keeps us under control today, lockdown—having its effects—also. Nevertheless, as we leave—and the road is still a long way off—their significance and scale will increase. This is where not only psychologists play a significant role, but also NGOs that work with memory. Examples from the Balkans, Rwanda and other places of conflict in the world clearly show that this is an area of social responsibility of academia, where the humanities and social sciences can get involved and are directly needed in human life. Education to work with memory is not only a struggle for a particular shape of the political community (the politics of memory) but above all a responsibility for the shape of our

communities in traumatized societies after the pandemic. It is also a task for normative studies on memory for the future.

Remembering is a survival value for humanity, though.

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¹ See e.g.: Hodgkin, Catherine; Radstone, Susannah (eds.), *Contested Pasts. The politics of memory*, London – New York, Routledge 2003; Rufer, Mario, “Politics of Memory,” *InterAmerican Wiki: Terms – Concepts – Critical Perspectives* 2012, www.uni-bielefeld.de/cias/wiki/p_Politics_of_Memory.html.

² Hirsch, Marianne, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.

³ See COVID-19 databases: WHO Global research on coronavirus disease (COVID-19):

<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/global-research-on-novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov>; LitCovid database by the National Library of Medicine, with a useful visualizations of global researches and publications on COVID-19: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/research/coronavirus/>; both databases included in The Stephen B. Thacker CDC Library

<https://www.cdc.gov/library/researchguides/2019novelcoronavirus/researcharticles.html>; and more broad, including research information on different coronaviruses: COVID-19 – COVID-19 Open Research Dataset by The Semantic Scholar team at the Allen Institute for AI: <https://www.semanticscholar.org/cord19> (including 128,000 scholarly articles in May 19th, 2020).

⁴ See e.g.: *Visual Representations of the Third Plague Pandemic* ERC project, PI Christos Lynteris, CRASSH, University of Cambridge, <https://visualplague.wordpress.com/> It is now very active on Twitter in the context of COVID-19: <https://twitter.com/visualplague> Lynteris is also an editor of the *COVID-19 Forum* section on <http://somatosphere.net> See more details: <http://somatosphere.net/2020/covid-19-forum-introduction.html/> (till May 26th three sets of texts on COVID-19 from the perspective of social sciences – and not only – were published).

⁵ Audra D. S. Burch, *What Historians Will See When They Look Back on COVID-19 Pandemics*, “The New York Times”, April 16th, 2020, on-line: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/15/us/coronavirus-pandemic-historians-archive.html>

⁶ What happens to the data? What are they for or can they be used? Questions not only crucial in the context of conspiracy theories, but instead in the face of, e.g. potential system leakage, hacking attack etc.

⁷ In the context of AI and COVID-19 there are many articles, see e.g.: Alimadadi, Ahmad; Aryal, Sachin; Manandhar, Ishan; Munroe, Patricia B.; Joe, Bina; Xi Cheng, *Artificial intelligence and machine learning to fight COVID-19*, “Physiol Genomics” 52: 200–202, 2020, doi:10.1152/physiolgenomics.00029.2020; Punn, Narinder Singh; Sonbhadra, Sanjay Kumar; Agarwal, Sonali, *COVID-19 Epidemic Analysis using Machine Learning and Deep Learning Algorithms*, preprint in medRxiv, doi: <http://doi.org/10.1101/2020.04.08.20057679>