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**Memory, Narrative, and Rupture:**  
**The Power of the Past as a Resource for Political Change\***

[Running head: Memory, Narrative, and Rupture]

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ABSTRACT In politics “soft” ideational factors are often dismissed in favor of “hard” quantifiable data. Since the “memory boom,” however, collective memory has become an important variable for explaining persistent grievances and cycles of hatred. Building on the work of Hannah Arendt and the first generation of the Frankfurt School, I seek to counterbalance the literature’s predominantly negative conception of memory by developing a constructive understanding of remembrance as a resource for rethinking politics in the aftermath of breaks in the narrative thread of historical time. My basic thesis is that historical ruptures shared by an entire generation can activate collective memory as a resource for reimagining political life. I show how Arendt and the critical theorists of the early Frankfurt School used the caesura of 1945 to rethink the meaning of the past and endorse new forms of political life in the aftermath of Europe’s age of total war.

KEY WORDS Collective Memory, Postwar Europe, Frankfurt School, Hannah Arendt, Historical Ruptures, Political Generations

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Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in time future  
And time future contained in time past.  
If all time is eternally present  
All time is unredeemable.  
- T.S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton" (1936)

### *Introduction*

In politics "soft" ideational factors are often dismissed in favor of "hard" quantifiable data. Since the "memory boom," however, collective memory has become an important variable for explaining persistent historical grievances. For example, while it is possible to understand the Eurozone crisis using quantifiable variables, this approach cannot explain why "[h]ardly a day goes by without [German] Chancellor Angela Merkel being depicted in a Nazi uniform" (Fleischhauer, 2012) or why many Greeks see the crisis as a German attempt to "occupy Greece through the economy" (Norris, 2011). While material factors are important, their meaning is determined by references to narratives about the past.

These frameworks of remembrance influence contemporary events by shaping the historic analogies that help individuals to interpret and understand the present (Khong, 1992). Unfortunately, collective memory can also turn the past into a Weberian "iron cage" (*stahlhartes Gehäuse*). If every choice can be tied to a past trigger, then individuals are caught in never-ending causal chains. These considerations have led many scholars to focus on the "sins of memory" (Schacter, 2001) and on how past grievances drive recurring "cycles of hatred" (Minow, 2002).

I seek to supplement this predominant "negative" reading with a more "positive," constructive interpretation of collective memory as a resource for social and political transformation (König, 2008: 23-31). I draw on Hannah Arendt and the first generation of the Frankfurt School, especially Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin and Herbert Marcuse, to develop this argument. In my necessarily brief reconstructions of these thinkers, collective memory emerges as a resource for rethinking the foundations of political

life in the aftermath of traumatic social ruptures. In the course of what I call “normal politics,” collective memory is largely defined by stasis. Established interests, institutions, habits and traditions make change difficult as forward-looking narratives flow logically from past events. However, experiences that force individuals to question the underlying structures of society create a rupture in existing narratives. By breaking causal chains, such disruptions make “paradigm shifts” possible (Kuhn 1962), allowing the past to be reconstructed in new ways.

The argument begins with an explanation of my choice of theoretical resources to develop this account of collective memory. A reconstruction of the ontology of remembrance follows in part two. In the third section, I examine how societies harness and preserve the constructive power of memory through institutions and law, as well as through social norms and traditions. This leads into a discussion of historical crises as the foundation for a constructive understanding of memory that builds on the concept of rupture. I then turn to the question of agency, outlining the role of political generations in understanding such historical breaks by drawing on examples from the Second World War in Europe. The conclusion considers how their interpretation of the events leading up to 1945 led Arendt and the thinkers of the Frankfurt School to consider and endorse new forms of political life after the war.

### *Memory and Rupture in Postwar German Thought*

It is somewhat counterintuitive to seek a constructive reading of memory in postwar German social and political theory. However, the firsthand experience of violence and atrocity forced intellectuals like Arendt, Benjamin, Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse to consider how a past that included two World Wars and the death chambers at Auschwitz could be used to build a better future, instead of merely repeating the horrors of the past. My use of these thinkers of “dark times” (Benhabib et al., 2010) is not meant to deny their deep philosophical – and in the case of Arendt and Adorno, deeply personal (Rensmann 2012) – disagreements. Since their work spans a range of topics and methods, this divergence is

hardly surprising. What is important for my argument is that in the aftermath of Europe's age of total war these theorists agreed on the need to harness memory for constructive ends.

The common thread running through their thought is a philosophical orientation defined by fear, i.e. of the need to avoid the evil that haunted Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century (Forst, 2013: 166). Not only were Arendt and the first generation of the Frankfurt School driven by the trauma of what they had witnessed; "their reaction to the catastrophe of the twentieth century was a *political* as opposed to a *theological* or a merely *philosophical* one" (Benhabib, 2011: 22). As a result, they all sought to stop the recurring cycles of violence in Europe by identifying how memory could fit into an emancipatory social and political theory.

Although their lived experience was defined by catastrophe, none of these thinkers were overcome by their orientation to the *summum malum* (Shklar, 1998: 11). Instead, they clung to the possibility of redemption. The theoretical resources for this confidence came from Benjamin. Despite his broader theoretical pessimism, he also argued that it is "[o]nly for the sake of the hopeless ones [that] we have been given hope" (2002: 356).

Benjamin created a personal and a theoretical link between Arendt and the Frankfurt School. Due to his association with the Institute of Social Research (*Institut für Sozialforschung*), Benjamin's connection to critical theory is clear. Although she was not affiliated with the Frankfurt Circle, Arendt's work represents "the critical political theory of the post-totalitarian moment" (Benhabib, 2003: xliv). After Benjamin's death these thinkers all took up his anamnestic form of "redemptive criticism" (Habermas, 1979: 30-59), which focused on saving the treasures of the past in order to reappropriate them for a different future.

The idea of crisis plays a crucial role in Benjamin's historiography. He argues that it is only in moments of profound dislocation, when events can no longer be subsumed into existing narratives, that submerged pearls from the past can be retrieved for the present.

Building on this insight, Arendt and the Frankfurt School argued that such “Benjaminian moments” (Benhabib, 2012: 32-3) could break the seemingly inevitable link between the past and the present, rekindling hope for the future. This shared emphasis makes this constellation of thinkers fruitful for developing my positive understanding of memory in the aftermath of historical ruptures.

A brief disclaimer regarding my interpretation of Arendt and the first generation of the Frankfurt School: my goal is neither full hermeneutic fidelity to their respective philosophical projects nor completeness as regards their theoretical differences. I merely draw on the work of these postwar German theorists to inspire a constructive understanding of the creative potential of memory in the aftermath of profound societal ruptures. In doing so, I uncover and draw attention to an interesting and often overlooked overlap in their otherwise divergent approaches to social and political theory.

### *Individual and Collective Memory*

The social pressure to be a unique individual is one of the key markers of modernity. In traditional societies identity is determined by social position and family background. In the modern process of individuation, the autonomous actions of human beings are crucial to the maintenance of a coherent identity. These choices are rooted in the decisions of individuals, who maintain their identities by appropriating their actions and carrying them into the future. Since past decisions determine individuality in the present, the concept of life history takes on a central role (Kierkegaard, 1987: 216). These histories are preserved in memory. As a result, remembrance becomes “an essential element of the finite historical being of man” (Gadamer, 2004: 14).

Memory is neither history, nor is it defined by the chronology of linear time. The concept of history comes from the Greek *historia* (*ἱστορία*), meaning inquiry or knowledge acquired by investigation. Whereas history is defined by the study of archival texts and

objects, memory comes “from within.” It is an affective connection, “a felt knowledge of recent events” (Kateb, 1998: viii), created by formative experiences in the life of the individual. Unlike history, memory refuses “to keep the past in the past, to draw the line, as it were, that is constitutive of the modern enterprise of historiography” (Spiegel, 2002: 162).

Despite these conceptual differences, history and memory are difficult to separate in practice. The study of history can change an individual’s remembrance, just as the personal experiences of historians affect their academic work. Communal understandings of the past can even cause individuals to remember events they never actually witnessed. Although memory is experienced as coming “from within,” it can also be implanted “from without.”

The difficulties involved in separating memory from history highlight the close interaction between personal and collective memory. While individuals interpret raw experiences and give them meaning, society as a whole provides the frameworks that allow individuals to construct and maintain their identities. Arendt (1998: 181) describes the process through which persons situate themselves as a “web of relationships and enacted stories” that bind the community together, while also enabling individuals to differentiate themselves from each other.

Maurice Halbwachs, a student of Émile Durkheim, developed the paradigm of collective memory (*mémoire collective*) in the aftermath of the Great War. Based on his observations of interwar Europe, he concludes that individual memories are inseparable from the frameworks of collective remembrance. Halbwachs (1925: 404) argues that personal identities are socially rediscovered (*retrouvée*) and socially reconstructed (*reconstruite*). Social frameworks not only give meaning to individual memories; they also provide the broad historical imaginary that shapes the selection and interpretation of formative events.

As a result of the interplay between individuals and society, similar processes occur at both levels. Just as modernity has pushed individuals to take responsibility for past selves by constructing coherent life histories, it has also demanded that communities incorporate the

past into their collective identities. In modern nation-states, it is no longer enough for the people to merely obey. Citizens also have to maintain a collective identity that enables them to act as coauthors of law.

As experienced by human beings, historical processes are marked by a distinct temporality. Unlike linear time, memory does not take equal account of events happening at regular intervals. Instead it endows certain events with meaning while silencing or forgetting others. In contrast to positivistic approaches, remembrance emphasizes the importance of certain events that shape the perception of numerical facts. Crucial events, which “unfol[d] within an irreversible linear time, [are] absorbed into cyclical, liturgical memory” (Spiegel, 2002: 152) that repeatedly revisits these experiences. Collective frameworks transform the *chronos* (κρόνος) of *linear, chronological time* into the *kairos* (καιρός) of *circular, liturgical time*, defined by the cyclical return and reenactment of decisive experiences.

There are many ways to navigate between the “space of experience,” incorporated into the present through memory, and the “horizons of expectations” individuals and communities project into the future (Koselleck, 1985: 2). Whereas experience is finite, expectations are less constrained, allowing individuals to see the momentum of the “past in the present” pushing them into differently configured “futures in the present.” Memory is personal because it “is bound up with social and political actions, with concretely acting and suffering human beings and their institutions and organizations.”

Benjamin (1977: 159) developed the distinction between “everyday events” (*Erlebnisse*) and “authentic experiences” (*Erfahrungen*) to separate formative occurrences from the minutiae of daily life. Everyday events form the primary data of the individual subject. They are defined by the continuous flow of time. By contrast, authentic experiences – “formative events” in Halbwachs’s terminology – are something the individual undergoes and “which does not leave him who has it unchanged.” Unlike quotidian events, authentic experiences are not comprehended as separate occurrences. Instead, they are incorporated into



narratives that lie within liturgical time, helping individuals link the spaces of experience and horizons of expectation to the present. “What we call experience (*Erfahrung*)...is a living historical process; and its paradigm is not the discovery of facts but the peculiar fusion of memory and expectation into the whole.”<sup>1</sup>

Authentic experiences are always defined within communal frameworks, either because the experience is shared or because it is given meaning by the community. Formative experiences tie the individual to the community through social institutions and traditions. As Arendt (1977b: 5) points out, memory “is helpless outside a pre-established framework of reference, and the human mind is only on the rarest occasions capable of retaining something which is altogether unconnected.”

While individuals and communities quickly forget most events, authentic experiences are preserved and continue to define identity and affect action in the present. In addition to helping individuals form stable identities and connecting them to the other members of their community, existing institutions and traditions link them to their ancestors as well as the generations to come by giving the community a vertical, temporal dimension to go with the horizontal, social dimension of daily life.

### *The Power of Memory*

Social power can be divided into at least two basic categories. The first is rooted in the ability of actors to achieve their ends despite the resistance of others. This kind of “power to” may be described as *effective* or *strategic*. The second focuses on power as a constructive force that defines an actor or group in a social setting. Unlike effective power, which is an instrument that agents possess and deploy, this form of “power with” is *constructive* or *communicative*; it is part of who they are (Saar, 2010: 9-12).<sup>2</sup>

What I call “type 1 power” dominates empirical approaches. In the words of Max Weber (1978: 53), it is defined by the likelihood that an agent can effect action within a social

relationship “regardless of the basis on which this probability rests.” Weber applied this notion to the sphere of politics through the concept of rule (*Herrschaft*), which he defines as “the probability that a command with a given specific content will be obeyed by a given group of specific persons.” Although he mentions traditional and charismatic sources of authority, in modernity effective power is expressed through legal-rational institutions, where superiors are defined by their authority over subordinates (Weber, 1958: 295-301).

Weber did not live to see how the new regimes of the interwar years would combine administration with the strategic power of a charismatic leader to create totalitarian political regimes. In the aftermath of this experience, the Frankfurt School criticized conceptions of power that legitimized such forms of domination (*Beherrschung*). They did so by placing the individual at the center of a critical theory of society, arguing that “aiming for enlightenment is essentially... [a] *turn toward the subject*” (Adorno, 1986: 128).

Arendt drew on the past to theorize an account of constructive or “type 2 power” in my terminology. Arendt develops an ontological account of the power of individuals “acting in concert.” By acting in social settings, she contends that “men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities” (1998: 179). This constructive account of power differs from effective power in a number of ways. The first is in its goals or ends. Instead of looking to the external world, the action generated by type 2 power is oriented towards other human beings. In addition to specifying the characteristics and capabilities of the unique individual, it is also the source of collective identity for groups who define themselves through “action in concert.”

Second, this kind of power is nonviolent and non-instrumental. It is not applied *by* individuals, but arises *among* them. Constructive power is essentially dialogical. This differentiates power, which is communicative by definition, from force and violence, both of which rely on physical coercion. Lastly, type 2 power cannot be manifested in isolation. Appearing in the world depends on plurality, since individuals cannot assert a unique self

without others to identify ourselves both with and against. Constructive power is always relational. For Arendt (1998: 200), “Power is what keeps the public realm, the potential space of appearance between acting and speaking men in existence.”

This account leads to a narrative model of “identity in action,” where individuals identify who they are as a result of what they say and do. Words are linked to deeds, as the account of any action requires the identification of a doer with intentions acting in a certain context. In addition to creating unique individuals, this process also identifies communities through narratives of collective action. Within these webs of intersecting narratives, coherent understandings of self and group identity depend on the ability to integrate various stories from different perspectives into meaningful historical accounts (Benhabib, 2003: 261).

Constructive power is futile without memory. Speech and deeds leave nothing behind. The experience of action must be secured by “the saving power of remembrance, which helps us preserve what would otherwise be lost to time” (Beiner, 1982: 155). Great words and deeds, such as Pericles’ Funeral Oration or the heroic deeds of Achilles, would have been lost but for the human capacity for remembrance. “Without remembrance...the living activities of action, speech, and thought would lose their reality at the end of each process and disappear as though they never had been” (Arendt, 1998: 95). Memory is needed to sustain the constructive power of individuals and unique human beings within self-consciously defined communities.

### *Preserving Memory in the World*

Memory is not the most reliable source of social influence. The fleeting nature of words and deeds gives constructive power a tragic quality, which Arendt (1998: 181) calls “the frailty of human affairs.” In order to be viable in the *longue durée*, memory and the narratives that sustain it must be encased within more permanent structures.

The fragility of constructive power defines the distinction between communicative and cultural memory (Assmann et al., 1983: 284). While both are socially mediated forms of collective remembrance, communicative memory depends on repeated retelling. Because oral traditions are difficult to maintain, especially when the stories run counter to dominant social narratives, communicative memory has a limited temporal horizon. By contrast, cultural memory has been bound to objects or practices, such as memorials, written texts or social practices. The transition between communicative and cultural memory is a two-stage process: “The whole factual world of human affairs depends for its reality and its continued existence, first, upon the presence of others who have seen and heard and will remember, and, second, on the transformation of the intangible into the tangibility of things” (Arendt, 1998: 95).

Whereas communicative memory participates only in the first step, cultural memory passes through both. The action remembered is no longer merely a product of the mind but has been reified into an artifact or performance in the world of human affairs. Individuals “fabricate a memory” (Arendt, 1977b: 64) to help them define their collective identity through collective symbols, sites and practices. Unlike the shifting horizon of communicative memory, the fateful events and objects of cultural memory are fixed in the historical timeline of a community.

The preservation of the past is the essential function of the polity. The political community fabricates memory in a variety of ways, including “the mundane apparatus of bibliographical structure” (Waldron, 2000: 208) represented by governmental archives, serials and anthologies. Both legal and institutional regimes, as well as social norms and traditions, help to legitimize the polity by linking political authority to the action of the citizens in concert. As Halbwachs (1980: 296) observes, “[S]ocial organization gives a persistent framework into which all detailed recall must fit, and it very powerfully influences both the manner and matter of recall.”

Although they are more closely associated with the Weberian account of rule, institutions draw much of their legitimacy from their origins. This opens the possibility that the Janus-face of power can be brought together into a single visage. The anamnestic power preserved in institutions can be used to justify political order – and the presumably legitimate “power over” that some individuals have in the established system – in the present. By making decisions in the same institutions as their ancestors, members of the polity do not merely recall the past. They also legitimize the strategic power of the community. While constructive power is a potent force for change, in the long term it is harnessed as a mechanism to legitimize the application of effective power.

This link is often drawn through legal regimes. From the narrow perspective of type 1 power, positive law sets the boundaries of acceptable behavior, making living together possible. By ensuring the safety of its members, the political community guarantees that witnesses will be present to testify to action. Each generation modifies and adds to the existing structure of law through historically established and legitimized practices. Law is not only a creation of the present, but also of the past. Arendt (1998: 198) points out that the organization of the political community, “physiognomically guaranteed by its laws – lest the succeeding generations change its identity beyond recognition – is a kind of organized remembrance.”

The traditional linking of nationalism to self-determination draws on the connection between the legitimacy of political institutions and the constructive power of narrative. The Peace of Westphalia laid the foundations for the modern state system by establishing the principle of internal and external sovereignty in the aftermath of the Thirty Years’ War (1618-1648). In the nineteenth-century the state combined sovereign authority with the legitimacy provided by a common national heritage. The nation-state justified the effective power expressed in its institutions with the constructive power of nationalism, establishing national self-determination as the highest principle of modern politics.

The crucial role played by a shared conception of the past in the consolidation of the nation-state can be seen in the growing prestige and political importance of history. With the awakening of national communities, historians helped to forge the bonds of solidarity that would unify the ethnic nation with the political state, the national *ethnos* with the civic *demos* (White, 1973: 170-5). Along with cultural, literary and political actors they were able to create a mythic past that bound individuals who spoke different dialects, lived different lifestyles and had little in common together through a broadly-shared collective identity built on the past.

Social norms and traditions are a second mechanism for preserving the fleeting power of collective action. At its most basic level, tradition represents that which is passed on from generation to generation. Adorno (1966: 63) points out this usually occurs within the family, which socializes individuals into practices at a young age, becoming part of what he calls “unconscious memory” (*unbewußte Erinnerung*).

In addition to helping individuals form stable identities and connecting them to the other members of their community, tradition links them to their ancestors and to posterity by giving the community a vertical, temporal dimension to go with the horizontal, social dimension. The polity unifies individuals not only with their contemporaries, but also with past and future members of the community. In this way, “[T]he history of each of our own lives is generally and characteristically embedded in and made intelligible in terms of the larger and longer histories of a number of traditions” (MacIntyre, 1981: 222).

#### *Unleashing the Critical Power of Memory*

Maintaining a connection to the past through legal and institutional regimes, as well as social norms and traditions, is crucial to individual and group identity. However, this relationship is also potentially dangerous. While memory helps to create frameworks of reference, it can also act as a roadblock, limiting freedom of thought and of action. Adorno

(1998: 315) was particularly concerned by this dilemma in the aftermath of the Second World War, observing, “No timely tradition exists to be summoned, but if all tradition is lost, then the march into inhumanity begins.”

Adorno (1986: 124) responds to this problem by advocating for a “working through of the past” (*Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit*), instead of the “empty, cold forgetting” that defined years immediately following the war in Germany. Although *Aufarbeitung* is usually rendered as “coming to terms with,” I prefer the translation “working through” because it highlights the psychoanalytic connotations of this phrase. Adorno argues that Germans must bring to consciousness and actively deal with their memories of the gas chambers at Auschwitz, in order to avoid the repression that he believes damaged the social fabric of the early Federal Republic. Although he (1986: 115) notes that Germans “wan[t] to be free of the past: rightly so,” it is impossible to simply evade these experiences, since they are “still so intensely alive.” The “loss of history” involved in repression has practical consequences for a newly democratic community that cannot recall its progenitors without suffering neurosis. It also has important ethical consequences: “The murdered are to be cheated even out of the one thing that our powerlessness can grant them: remembrance” (1986: 117).

As a result of these reflections, Adorno (1998: 318) called for “a critical relationship towards tradition as the medium of its preservation.” Despite their other methodological and substantive disagreements, Arendt agreed with the first generation of the Frankfurt School on this point. Instead of settling into the “mindless peace of complacency” (Arendt, 1977a: 38), she argued that the past must be an object of consciousness, actively confronted and learned from.

In developing their understanding of collective memory, Arendt and the thinkers of the Frankfurt School all drew on Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940). These fragments are Benjamin’s attempt to understand how human freedom can be saved

from teleological conceptions of history. He highlights two important characteristics of rupture (*Bruch*).

First, Benjamin illustrates how rupture forces individuals and communities to question the previously unthematized foundations of social life. Within “normal politics” narrative stabilizes societal structures by ordering the human experience of events through time. These unconscious frameworks, which Habermas (1984/1987: 70) refers to as the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*), form the horizon of “more or less diffuse, always unproblematic background convictions” of a community, storing the “interpretive work of preceding generations.” Benjamin (1977: 261) argues that historical ruptures allow actors to “wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it.”

Second, Benjamin observes that such breaks are not caused by a single event. On the contrary, a rupture is the product of a series of experiences, which slowly crack the foundations of the lifeworld. In a particularly poignant image, he describes the European crisis of the interwar years as “a chain of events” that is unified into “one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage” (1977: 257). In answer to Adorno’s dilemma regarding the simultaneous need for and dangers of tradition, Benjamin suggests that tragic events unified into a single rupture destroy the coherence of existing traditions while also providing the community with the resources to establish new forms of life.

In this vision, ruptures are necessarily violent. In clashing together, the past and the future destroy narrative, leaving only fragments of the past behind. While this frees individuals and communities from teleological philosophies of history, it also breaks the webs of narrative that had supported their conscious self-understandings. Benjamin (1977: 262) notes that revolutionary moments make “the continuum of history explode” by developing new calendars and highlighting new moments as meaningful for the present.

Arendt used these reflections to develop a historiography that saves the human capacity for spontaneous initiative from mechanistic conceptions of causation (1978: 195-213). She



argues that traumatic events have the potential to tear tradition asunder, creating a gap between past and future. This creates a hiatus between the “no-more” and the “not-yet,” when thinkers and actors have the opportunity to set the foundations of a new world. Arendt (1977a: 51) compares this process to the actions of a pearl diver, who searches the depths for bits and pieces of the past that have “undergone a sea-change” and then “bring[s] them up into the world of the living.” This approach has a liberating quality, preserving the memory of the dead without being enslaved to it.

Arendt’s narrative account of constructive power, combined with her understanding of historical rupture, shows how communal crises of self-understanding can unleash the critical potential of memory. Although it is usually a source of stability, communal experiences of rupture break the established connection between past and future. The fragmentation of narrative unleashes the Arendtian power of natality to “start anew” within the *kairos* of liturgical time.

Benjamin’s colleagues at the Institute for Social Research also took up these ideas. For example, Adorno (1986: 125) argues collective memory raised the issue of democratic education, as “Enlightenment about what happened in the past must work, above all, against a forgetfulness that too easily goes along with and justifies what is forgotten.” Conversely – and more in line with Benjamin’s own messianic tendencies – Horkheimer (1970) links memory to the “yearning for the wholly other” (*die Sehnsucht nach dem ganz Anderen*), which allows individuals to imagine a better future. This not only involves rearranging and reinterpreting formative experiences. It is also a process of (re)discovery, as events that were previously forgotten are reinvigorated and given new meaning.

For his part, Marcuse (1937: 126) argues, “Critical theory has engaged with the past in such unheard of dimensions precisely because it cares about the future.” Reflecting on the past is crucial because it gives individuals a different, potentially critical perspective on the present. “[T]he restoration of memory goes hand in hand with the restoration of the cognitive

content of the imagination [*Phantasie*]. [...] The *recherche du temps perdu* becomes a vehicle of future liberation” (Marcuse, 1955: 24ff). Despite the horrors of the past, hope for the future exists because of the faculty of human imagination.

Once unleashed, the ability to imagine a different future can help individuals create new forms of politics. Marcuse (1964: 101-2) argues, “Remembrance of the past may give rise to dangerous insights, and the established society seems to be apprehensive of the subversive contents of memory.” Memory allows individuals to think beyond the limits imposed by present institutions, thus empowering them to realize Marx’s dictum by “making their own history.”

After breaks in historical time, collective memory not only frees individuals to rethink and reinterpret their own experience; it also allows them to reframe communal narratives by drawing on events that lie beyond their individual experience. Reacting to Weber’s claims about the effects of the past on present behavior, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1955: 2) used the phrase the “imagination of history” to describe ability of the retrospective observer to gather together different historical events and strands of thought. By tying these together in the present, the observer not only brings these different elements into contact with each other but is also able to reveal in them an altogether different meaning than what they stood for in the original context. The ability of memory to expand the imaginary scope of individuals is crucial to understanding its importance for postwar Europe.

### *The Communal Nature of Rupture*

I have argued that historical ruptures have the power to unleash the critical potential of memory by breaking apart existing narratives. This begs the question of what counts as a rupture and why. To a certain extent this varies by individual. For example, the experience of the interwar years and the start of a Second World War was enough to trigger a rupture for Benjamin before his suicide in 1940. Similarly, Arendt focuses on the decline of human

plurality within the corporatist, totalitarian states after the Great War. By contrast, the Holocaust – particularly the image of Auschwitz – is central for Adorno and his colleagues.

A rupture must be widely recognized as such if it is to break apart existing narratives, opening a new, critical perspective on society. It should also exhibit both of the characteristics of rupture I have identified above. The events that create this caesura between past and future must enter their collective memory as a single break. The rupture must become part of collective memory, presenting the past to communities as a task, as a call for change.

In order to have this effect, the experience of rupture cannot be seen as the product of the exogenous force of nature.<sup>3</sup> Individuals and the communities are unlikely to consider making fundamental changes to collective narratives in response to events over which they believe they have no control. By contrast, if traumatic experiences are seen as emanating from within the structure of a community, then they can be interpreted as necessitating a fundamental rethinking of the meaning of the past for the future.

The interpretation of traumatic events as a historical rupture is often contested. This raises the question of agency. While everyone in a society can accept or reject a new historical interpretation, not all individuals have equal influence. Political leaders and cultural elites can take advantage of their access to mass media and the institutions of the state – such as the school system – to shape societal viewpoints by channeling type 2 power (Shain, 2010: 13).

The role of “memory entrepreneurs” (Jelin et al., 2003: 33-6) is important in the process of constructing new stories out of the scattered shards that remain after a historical rupture. Political leaders and other elites can act as agenda setters, advocates, inventors of innovative policy options and deal brokers. This is especially true of individuals who come to power by interpreting traumatic events as a historical rupture (Smith, 2003: 35). Because these events have destroyed the “webs of narrative” that individuals and the community as a whole had previously depended on, such leaders are free to reassemble the fragments of the past into new narratives.

This perspective is not intended to demean the agency of the people. Political leaders and other cultural elites are always constrained by what narratives the people will accept (Benhabib, 2002: 102). If their understanding of the past fails to resonate, new agents telling different stories will come to the fore. This gives elites a strong interest in listening and responding to narratives that their constituents find to be meaningful.

The need for traumatic events to be interpreted as a rupture, not an exogenous shock, can be illustrated by examining the differing reactions to the events of the two World Wars on the continent. As Jay Winter (2006: 49) points out, “‘Never again’ is a term we now associate with the Holocaust; but the phrase was on the lips of millions of men and women a generation earlier.” The cataclysm of the Great War brought many new ideas to the fore, leading to the founding of the League of Nations, the writing of a liberal-democratic constitution of the Weimar Republic and the signing Kellogg-Briand Pact outlawing war. Although certain interwar leaders supported these initiatives, they were unable to garner enough support from the people to see them through, often losing office in the process. As a result, none of these projects succeeded.

While the Great War rocked the foundations of European society, it was not yet enough to rupture the historical narratives of the old continent. Instead of leading to a rethinking of the past, the Great War reinforced existing cycles of hatred, especially Franco-German tensions. The failure of 1918 to change fundamental aspects of the international system can be demonstrated in the fact that despite their internationalist rhetoric, the states of Europe soon returned to the “time-honored core of international diplomacy” (Winter, 2006: 49).

In contrast to the return to tradition of the interwar years, World War II is a historical rupture. The Second World War was not merely a repeat of the horrors of the Great War. It brought not only destruction on a far greater scale, but also the industrial production of death at the Nazi extermination camps. Narratives glorifying the nation’s exploits became stale (Frei, 2008: 81). The old traditions linking experience and expectation had been pulled apart.

A new generation of political leaders, including Robert Schuman, Konrad Adenauer, Alcide De Gasperi and Henri Spaak – who were all born within a few years of each other – came to power and were able to implement new ideas based on the interpretation of the past as a historical break.

The fact that such a break must be shared and interpreted “in concert” (Arendt, 1998) highlights the importance of historical generations. On a basic level, the members of generational cohort can be defined by the fact that they share “forms of knowledge [that] become available to us only as a result of certain historical experiences” (Benhabib, 2002: 135). Although generations are never in full agreement regarding their interpretation of the past, they are defined by their search for an answer to questions that arise from the authentic experiences that defined their lives.

The difficulty in defining generations emanates from the fact that they must account for both the objective and subjective dimensions of experience. In trying to understand the generational dynamics of Weimar Germany, Karl Mannheim developed a framework that seeks to bridge this divide by focusing on how and why generational experiences arise in the first place. On one hand, he (1952: 291) argues that the temporal and spatial location of birth is an objective fact, which predisposes individuals to “a certain characteristic mode of thought and experience, and a characteristic type of historical action.”

On the other hand, these social factors do not guarantee the formation of a self-conscious generation. The objective experiences of a generation only become salient after they have been actively thematized. In other words, generations become aware of themselves when events shake them out of their received categories of interpretation. This destabilization forces them to search for new categories that can help them make sense of the new circumstances in which they find themselves. These “fundamental integrative attitudes and formative principles” (Mannheim, 1952: 305) form the basis for a generation that sees itself as experiencing a historical rupture that no longer allows them to merely follow traditional

norms within existing institutions. The shared generational experiences of postwar European leaders such as Schuman, Adenauer, De Gasperi and Spaak made them “anxious not to repeat the mistakes of the interwar period and to progress as quickly as possible” (Robert Marjolin quoted in Wells, 2011: 95; see Verovšek, 2014a).

### *Conclusion*

Drawing on the work of Arendt and the first generation of the Frankfurt School, I have argued that collective memory can be deployed as a constructive resource in the aftermath of historical ruptures. Although I opposed this reading to the more dominant destructive reading of collective memory as a driver of social conflict, no understanding of the past is truly “positive” or “negative.” While memory can occasionally be constructive, it often also has destructive consequences. It is not a question of remembering *or* forgetting, but of remembering *and* forgetting. As Arendt (1998: 237-40) points out, our capacity to promise, which is premised on memory, must be balanced by faculty of forgiveness, which can erase past promises, freeing us to once again “begin anew” with a clean slate.

Shared generational experiences – combined with the arguments of memory entrepreneurs – are crucial in furthering the interpretation of traumatic events as a historical rupture. Despite their many philosophical disagreements, Arendt and the thinkers of the Frankfurt School all saw the events of 1914 through 1945 as constituting a historical rupture. However, they differed greatly in their interpretations of what changes this rupture ought to bring about.

For Horkheimer and Adorno, the caesura of 1945 required a rethinking of all aspects of civilization, including the philosophical tradition of reason, going back to ancient Greece. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) they maintain that “progress is reverting to regression,” as the “the wholly enlightened earth [has come to] radiate with triumphant calamity” (2002: 28, 1). Because science, technology, reason and modern forms of social life have been

polluted by an all-encompassing instrumental reason, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that “only authentic works of art have been able to avoid mere imitation of what already is” (2002: 13). By contrast, their colleague Herbert Marcuse rejected this politically quietist stance, choosing instead to engage with the student protests of the 1960s and becoming the intellectual doyen of the New Left in the United States.

Although she agreed with the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School that the events of World War II constituted a historical rupture, Arendt had a much more hopeful reading of the potential of postwar society. Arendt saw great potential in the postwar European movement to unify the continent. She (1994: 416-7) was supportive of the “very healthy and necessary efforts to federate the European nations” (see Verovšek, 2014b). Despite her critiques of technology and the increasingly economic focus of politics in modernity, in 1958 she described Europe as “a totally god forsaken place except for the presence of the Coal and Steel Community” (quoted in Kohler and Saner, 1993: 351).

Regardless of these different interpretations of what needed to be done, all of these thinkers saw the events of the Second World War as constituting a historical rupture. Subsequent political developments, especially the widening and deepening of the European Union, have followed the prescriptions of Arendt more closely than the wholesale rejection of modernity presented by Horkheimer and Adorno (Verovšek, 2015). The extent to which these changes in political life have addressed the social pathologies that led to the horrific events of Europe’s age of total war is an open question. However, the success of integration after 1945 compared with the spectacular failure of similar initiatives after World War I, illustrates the transformative power of historical ruptures as opportunities to constructively rethink the future based on the lessons of the past. It demonstrates the profound power of collective memory to frame how individuals and communities understand and interpret politics outside the numerical data points that define so much of modern political analysis.

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<sup>1</sup> I have retranslated *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* using the nouns “event” and “experience” to emphasize the personal import of the latter over the mere occurrence of the former.

<sup>2</sup> Other concepts of power also exist, including a Gramscian notion that structures the symbolic and material field on which actors operate and a Foucaultian understanding that permeates human action and knowledge. However, given my focus on political interactions, I set these aside here.

<sup>3</sup> I thank a reviewer from this journal for highlighting this point.

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