

Memory as Resistance to the Systemic Colonization of the Lifeworld: Contributions from Jürgen Habermas's Critical Theory of Society

Daniel Valente Pedroso de Siqueira*

Abstract. This article conceptualizes collective memory as a communicative practice capable of resisting the systemic colonization of the lifeworld, taking as its central reference Jürgen Habermas's critical theory of society. Building on *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (1981; 1988), it argues that the symbolic and normative reproduction of the lifeworld depends on communicative processes that preserve and reinterpret culturally sedimented resources – such as narratives, values and rituals – which are fundamental both for collective self-understanding and for democratic legitimacy. In contrast to conception that reduce memory to a passive repository of facts, the article contends that memory should be understood as an intersubjective practice in which recollection and the re-actualization of the past take place through communicative interactions oriented towards mutual understanding. In dialogue with Habermas's later work, *Auch Eine Geschichte der Philosophie* (2019a; 2019b), the article emphasizes how his genealogy of semantic contents – tracing the “migration” of religious meanings into the secular horizon – demonstrates the importance of cultural memories as normative reserves. Far from being residues of an absolute past, such contents – when discursively preserved and critically reinterpreted – strengthen the collective capacity for critique and moral orientation in the face of the functionalist and objectifying tendencies of modernity. The article also diagnoses contemporary social pathologies of memory: (1) administrative standardization, whereby bureaucratic institutions ritualize remembrance through official protocols; (2) cultural commodification, whereby heritage industries reduce historical complexity to consumable spectacles; and (3) digital fragmentation, whereby algorithms personalize memory while simultaneously undermining its integrative and deliberative functions. These mechanisms not only distort the content of memory but also compromise its integrative and deliberative roles. Finally, the article outlines normative and institutional strategies for the protection and revitalization of memory, defending it as a democratic public good. By recovering and updating normative contents from the past, collective memory can function as a communicative core of resistance, capable of countering systemic colonization and sustaining a plural and critical public sphere.

Keywords: Collective memory; Theory of Communicative Action; Colonization of the lifeworld; Social pathologies; Habermas; Normativity; Public sphere.

Riassunto. Questo articolo concettualizza la memoria collettiva come una pratica comunicativa in grado di resistere alla colonizzazione sistemica del mondo della vita, prendendo come riferimento centrale la teoria critica della società di Jürgen Habermas. Basandosi sulla *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (1981; 1988), sostiene che la riproduzione simbolica e normativa del mondo della vita dipende da processi comunicativi che preservano e reinterpretano risorse culturalmente sedimentate – come narrazioni, valori e rituali – fondamentali sia per l'autocomprensione collettiva che per la legittimità democratica. In contrasto con la concezione che riduce la memoria a un archivio passivo di fatti, l'articolo sostiene che la memoria dovrebbe essere intesa come una pratica intersoggettiva in cui il ricordo e la riattualizzazione del passato avvengono attraverso interazioni comunicative orientate all'acomprendimento reciproca. In dialogo con l'opera tarda di Habermas, *Auch Eine Geschichte der Philosophie* (2019a; 2019b), l'articolo sottolinea come la sua genealogia dei contenuti semantici – che traccia la “migrazione” dei significati religiosi nell'orizzonte secolare – dimostri l'importanza delle memorie culturali come riserve normative. Lungi dall'essere residui di un passato assoluto, tali contenuti – quando conservati in modo discorsivo e reinterpretati criticamente – rafforzano la capacità collettiva di critica e orientamento morale di fronte alle tendenze funzionaliste e oggettivanti della modernità. L'articolo diagnostica anche le patologie sociali contemporanee della memoria: (1) la standardizzazione amministrativa, per cui le istituzioni burocratiche ritualizzano il ricordo attraverso protocolli ufficiali; (2) la mercificazione culturale, per cui le industrie del patrimonio riducono la complessità storica a spettacoli consumabili; e (3) la frammentazione digitale, per cui gli algoritmi personalizzano la memoria minandone contemporaneamente le funzioni integrative e deliberative. Questi meccanismi non solo distorcono il contenuto della memoria, ma ne compromettono anche i ruoli integrativi e deliberativi. Infine, l'articolo delinea strategie normative e istituzionali per la protezione e la rivitalizzazione della memoria, difendendola come bene pubblico democratico. Recuperando e aggiornando i contenuti normativi del passato, la memoria collettiva può funzionare come nucleo comunicativo di resistenza, in grado di contrastare la colonizzazione sistemica e sostenere una sfera pubblica pluralistica e critica.

Parole chiave: Memoria collettiva; Teoria dell'azione comunicativa; Colonizzazione della vita; Patologie sociali; Habermas; Normatività; Sfera pubblica.

* Ph.D. candidate in Philosophy, Federal University of ABC (UFABC), Brazil. Address: Alameda da Universidade, s/n, Bairro Anchieta, São Bernardo do Campo - SP, 0960 Brazil, e-mail <daniel.valente@ufabc.edu.br>.

Submitted on September 9, 2025, accepted on December 18, 2025, published on January 18, 2026.

Introduction

Jürgen Habermas's *Theory of Communicative Action* remains one of the most sophisticated and influential attempts to diagnose the pathologies of modernity while normatively grounding a conception of communicative rationality. Its starting point – the distinction between system and lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*) – opened the way for a novel description of how the delinguistified functional imperatives of money and power can *intrude* into contexts of communicative integration, producing distortions that affect the very foundations of socialisation and culture. As Habermas notes: “[...] the lifeworld serves as a background for processes of mutual understanding; it is threatened whenever the systemic logic of the economy and administration invades domains previously organized by language” (Habermas, 1988, p. 322).

This article takes this classical diagnosis as a point of departure but expands it in a new direction. Whereas Habermas identifies, in *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, two principal waves of colonization – that of the market and that of administration – this paper argues that we are now confronted with a third: algorithmic colonization. Unlike the earlier forms, this new mode directly targets collective memory by intervening in communicative processes mediated through digital infrastructures and the phantomization of the public sphere. This represents a qualitative shift: while previous forms distorted action coordination, algorithmic colonization reconfigures the very grammar of social remembrance, fragmenting historical narratives, personalizing memories, and undermining the conditions for critique and democratic deliberation.

Before situating this argument within the Habermasian framework, it is important to acknowledge the broader field of memory studies, which has shown that memory is not merely a repository of the past but a contested terrain of social construction. Foundational contributions by Maurice Halbwachs, Aby Warburg, Pierre Nora, Jan Assmann, and Paul Ricoeur demonstrate that collective remembrance is always embedded in institutional, linguistic, and power structures. Contemporary debates have further underscored the inherently agonistic character of public memory. In such aspect, as Jeffrey Olick (2007) and Andreas Huyssen (1995) observe, remembering and forgetting are socially negotiated acts that involve conflicts over interpretation, representation, and authority. In this sense, memory is both a field of cultural transmission and a site of struggle, where competing groups seek to legitimize their versions of the past. This agonistic dimension makes memory a privileged object for critical theory, for it condenses processes of social recognition, exclusion, and norm formation.

Within this broader framework, the article positions Habermas's theory as a powerful normative perspective for conceptualizing memory not as an inert reflection of the past but as a communicative practice through which societies articulate, contest, and renew their normative horizons. Moreover, the idea of memory as resistance must also be viewed against the backdrop of what Hartmut Rosa has described as the social acceleration of modernity (Rosa, 2013). Accelerated temporal structures – technological, economic, and communicative – erode the continuity of collective experience and produce a form of temporal alienation that weakens the transmission of meaning across generations. Under such conditions, the preservation of memory becomes itself a critical task: to sustain the intergenerational conversation that the modern lifeworld requires for its symbolic reproduction.

The guiding hypothesis of this study is that memory should not be conceived as a passive depository of facts or images of the past, but rather as a communicative practice and normative reserve indispensable to the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld and to the sustenance of deliberative democracy. This conception draws, on the one hand, from the tradition inaugurated by Maurice Halbwachs, from whom “it is in society that people acquire their memories” (Halbwachs, 1950, p. 38), indicating that remembrance is always a socially situated and linguistically mediated act. On the other hand, it is reinforced by Jan Assmann's notion of cultural memory, which highlights how narratives and symbols preserved over time constitute normative and identity-forming reserves for

political communities (Assmann, 2011). Beyond this, Paul Ricoeur adds that memory is not mere conservation but also hermeneutical field of dispute, where recollection is constantly reinterpreted (Ricoeur, 2000).

Critical Theory further provides a fundamental matrix for conceiving memory as a field of resistance. Walter Benjamin, on his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, insisted that every act of remembrance opens the possibility of redemption in the face of barbarism: “even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins” (Benjamin, 1968, p. 226). Theodor W. Adorno, for his part, conceived the memory of suffering as an irreducible ethical obligation: “the demand that Auschwitz not be repeated is the foremost of all for education” (Adorno, 1996, p. 120). These formulations indicate that memory is not limited to the past but project a normative horizon that bears on both present and future.

At this juncture, Habermas’s theory provides a decisive framework. For Habermas, cultural tradition remains alive “through the interpretative appropriation of its contents in communicative action” (Habermas, 1988, p. 210). Memory, understood in this register, appears as a communicative practice oriented towards mutual understanding, capable of preserving, updating, and criticizing sedimented normative contents. This insight acquires renewed vigor in *Auch Eine Geschichte der Philosophie* (2019a; 2019b), where Habermas reconstructs genealogically the “migration” of religious contents into the secular grammar of modernity – “Western philosophy was continuously nourished by reflexive translations that transformed contents of faith into secular knowledge” (Habermas, 2019a, p. 17). Cultural memory, thus, is not a residue of a surpassed past but a source of normative reserves that sustain emancipatory horizons even amidst crisis.

This approach allows us to clarify the transition from market modernity to algorithmic modernity as a transformation not only in the economic and institutional structures of capitalism but also in the temporal and communicative infrastructures that mediate memory production. While market modernity commodified remembrance through the spectacle and circulation of images, algorithmic modernity introduces a new logic of automated selection and participatory dislocation – authorship becomes distributed among users and platforms, archives are rendered unstable and dependent on private infrastructures, and the very boundaries between public and private memory are dissolved by the globalization of data flows. In this sense, algorithmic colonization should be seen as a new phase in the ongoing process of lifeworld colonization (one that acts directly upon the temporal texture of collective experience, accelerating forgetting and producing selective visibilities of the past).

The original contribution of this article lies in updating the thesis of the systemic colonization of the lifeworld to diagnose this *third wave of colonization*: algorithmic colonization. This unprecedented form operates directly on language, memory, and the lifeworld, reconfiguring processes of meaning production, identity formation, and social integration. As Habermas acknowledges in his most recent reflections, “the new information technologies are producing a structural change in the conditions of the discursive formation of opinion and will” (Habermas, 2022, p. 60).

This shift underscores the centrality of memory: amidst the commodification of culture, the bureaucratization of remembrance, and algorithmic fragmentation, preserving memory as a communicative practice means safeguarding a normative core indispensable to the democratic public sphere.

This article unfolds in four movements: (1) reconstruction of memory as communicative practice and normative reserve, in dialogue with Habermas and the tradition of memory studies; (2) analysis of Habermas’s genealogy of modernity as a foundation for a critical conception of memory; (3) examination of the mechanisms of memory erosion (bureaucracy, market, and algorithms) including the “canonical case” of the Holocaust; and (4) delineation of a normative horizon in which civil society, the public sphere, and deliberative democracy can resist new forms of colonization.

1. Memory as Communicative Practice and Normative Reservoir

The concept of *Lebenswelt*, formulated by Jürgen Habermas in *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (1981; 1988), constitutes one of the fundamental axes of his critical theory of society and serves as a basis for understanding memory not as a static deposit, but as a living communicative practice. The articulation between lifeworld and memory is decisive: if the *Lebenswelt* is the horizon of background convictions sustaining social interaction, memory represents the way in which these horizons are continuously preserved, reinterpreted, and criticized by successive generations.

Habermas describes critical theory of society in terms of a historical transition marked by the devaluation of religious-mythical thought as the exclusive instance of orientation. The “capacity to interpret the world” proved insufficient to address the complexities of modernity and was eventually supplanted, thus opening, as Habermas states, “the way of what followed” (Habermas, 1981, p. 105). In this process, religious, cosmological, and metaphysical figures were removed as privileged forms of understanding, giving way to more reflexive and differentiated levels of learning.

This transformation also entailed changes in modes of learning: in the objectifying dimension of science, in practical-moral discernment, and in aesthetic-artistic expression. As Habermas argues, every “cognitive development means [...] a decentring of a world-view egocentrically marked” (Habermas, 1981, p. 106). Understanding is no longer guaranteed by world-images immune to criticism, but rather depends on shared interpretation among subjects.

Modernity thus inaugurates an unprecedented reflexive potential. With the replacement of founding myths by differentiated discourses on science, morality, and aesthetics, the possibility arises of thematising criticisable validity claims, anchored in intersubjective processes of justification. Habermas observes that this movement represents “the most important dimension of the development of world-views” (Habermas, 1981, p. 114). It is in this context that the notion of *Lebenswelt* appears for the first time in his work.

The lifeworld therefore designates the shared horizon in which subjects engaged in communicative action understand one another (Habermas, 1981, p. 107). It is constituted by background convictions that serve as a basis for situation-definitions and stores the interpretative work of preceding generations, functioning as a “conservative counterweight against the risk of dissension arising with every process of understanding” (Habermas, 1981, p. 108).

For the purposes of this article, with the decentring of religious-metaphysical world-images, communicative action becomes the means by which understanding among social subjects takes place. This understanding occurs when it is achieved through *yes/no* positions of acceptance or refusal in relation to criticizable validity claims. According to Habermas, this takes place:

«[...] the more broadly the world-view that prepares the cultural stock of knowledge is decentered, the less the need for understanding is covered in advance by a lifeworld interpreted with immunity from criticism; and the more this need has to be satisfied through the interpretative operations of the participants themselves, that is, through agreement, which is risky because rationally motivated, the more correct it is to expect rational orientations in action» (Habermas, 1981, p. 108).

As it became established that the reflexive relation of subjects to the world must take place upon itself – within a process in which the nexuses of meaning, validity, understanding, and critique could be systematically elaborated, allowing alternative interpretations to be investigated – cultural tradition was required to connect with specialized argumentations, so that its learning processes could be socially institutionalised. It was “along this path that cultural subsystems could emerge for science, morality and law, for music, art and literature, in which argumentatively supported traditions are formed, fluidified by permanent criticism, and at the same time professionally secured” (Habermas, 1981, p. 109).

Habermas defines the lifeworld as “the stock of cultural knowledge, interpretative patterns, and competencies necessary for symbolic reproduction” (Habermas, 1988, p. 209), which allows it to be understood as the background that guarantees the possibility of social interaction oriented towards understanding. Yet, and this is essential, it is not a fixed structure, but a horizon continuously updated through communicative action, in which tradition, solidarity, and identity intertwine (Habermas, 1988, p. 211).

With specific relevance for this article, by emphasizing the centrality of language as a medium of social integration, Habermas shifts the problem of memory from the field of mere conservation to that of communicative practice. Memory, in this framework, is not an immobile archive of facts (just as the lifeworld is not a fixed structure), but a process of critical updating. This nexus between tradition, interpretation, and critique is also the proper place of memory. Maurice Halbwachs had already pointed out that every recollection is anchored in collective frameworks, so that memory must be understood as “social memory” (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 38). Habermas, in insisting that cultural tradition remains alive only through communicative appropriation, approximates this intuition: only communicative intersubjectivity is capable of preserving the normative vitality of cultural heritage.

Several commentators reinforce this point. Richard Bernstein, for instance, notes that the *Lebenswelt* may be understood as “the locus of memory and critique, in contrast to the reifying dynamics of the system” (Bernstein, 1985, p. 18). Likewise, Thomas McCarthy describes the link between the memory and lifeworld in Habermas by maintaining that tradition itself must be understood as “a stock of interpretative resources whose validity depends on their communicative reappropriation” (McCarthy, 1985, p. 156).

This normative dimension is deepened by Habermas in *Auch Eine Geschichte der Philosophie* (2019a; 2019b), where he reconstructs modernity genealogically as a process of reflexive translations, in which religious contents are transformed into secular knowledge. Habermas argues, “Western philosophy was continuously nourished by reflexive translations that transformed contents of faith into secular knowledge” (Habermas, 2019a, p. 17).

Cultural memory thus appears not as a residue of the past, but as a normative reservoir capable of orienting emancipatory practices. Jan Assmann restates this point when he defends the need for “a culture of memory that allows us to distinguish between critical remembrance and destructive forgetting” (Assmann, 2011, p. 21).

From a political perspective, understanding memory as communicative practice implies recognizing its centrality for deliberative democracy. Seyla Benhabib underlines that the public sphere depends on “normative resonances” derived from cultural memory (Benhabib, 2002, p. 448). Andreas Huyssen, in dialogue with the Frankfurt tradition, affirms that memory has become, in the contemporary world, “a terrain of decisive symbolic struggles, between critical remembrance and socially induced amnesia” (Huyssen, 1995, p. 14). This struggle shows that memory is not neutral: it constitutes a cultural and political field.

This critical dimension was already present in the horizon opened by Walter Benjamin, who warned that history always runs the risk of being written “by the victors” and that the task of critique is “to wrest tradition from the conformism that is always threatening to overpower it” (Benjamin, 2006, p. 697). Similarly, Theodor W. Adorno insisted “education must have as its foremost aim that Auschwitz not be repeated” (Adorno, 1966, p. 358), reminding us that memory is inseparable from resistance against forms of domination that reproduce themselves under new guises.

Within this horizon, Habermas presents memory as the core of resistance against the systemic colonization of the lifeworld. He warns that, as this colonization expands, “the source of meaning, which can only be renewed through communicative action, are exhausted” (Habermas, 1988, p. 324). The erosion of memory thus amounts to the pathologization of communicative rationality. As Albrecht Wellmer observes, systemic imperatives threaten to instrumentalize the lifeworld (Wellmer, 1991, p. 56). Memory, so, emerges as an indispensable resource for keeping open the space of critique, reinterpretation, and cultural plurality.

Accordingly, to understand memory as communicative practice and normative reservoir means not only to describe it as a social process but to defend it as a condition of possibility for the renewal of normative horizons and the sustenance of the democratic public sphere. Preserving memory implies resisting the colonizing tendencies that threaten to silence alternative narratives and erode cultural plurality. Memory, understood as an intersubjective practice of critical updating, is therefore both a means of integration and a nucleus of resistance.

Colonizing tendencies, here described as threats to alternative narratives and cultural plurality, are conceived from the concept of systemic colonization of the lifeworld which Habermas formulates as his second thesis of modernity. Initially, Habermas distinguishes two processes arising with capitalist modernity: (1) cultural rationalization, consisting in an internal differentiation of cultural spheres, in which “not only are the ‘intrinsic legalities’ of the cognitive, expressive, and moral components of culture made conscious, but the tension among these spheres also increases with their differentiation”; and (2) social modernization, referring to the institutionalization of formal patterns of systemic control and coordination mediated by money and power.

This dual distinction between cultural rationalization and social modernization enables Habermas to develop and ground his immanent critique of modernity in the very normative principles that made it possible. In this respect, the role of language is emphasized as the privileged medium for discursive legitimation, since “cultural rationalization [...] prepared the ground for a discursive form of legitimation, which remains alive whenever social participants are able rationally to thematise their norms and decisions” (Habermas, 1981, p. 263).

The distinction between cultural rationalization and social modernization not only enriches the analysis of capitalist modernity but also establishes the theoretical foundations for the critique of the systemic colonization of the lifeworld. This hermeneutic key guides the diagnosis of contemporary social pathologies and rests on the establishment of corresponding attributes for the processes that took place in capitalist modernization. In a certain sense, it is possible to affirm that while cultural rationalization offers emancipatory potentials, social modernization – operated by systems and constraining communicative action – presents forms of symbolic reification and disintegration that can be critically analyzed.

Alongside his thesis on the systemic colonization of the lifeworld, Habermas also describes the thesis of the selectivity of the modernization process. With this, he shows how it became possible for systemic imperatives to co-opt attributes from the sphere of symbolic reproduction for their own maintenance, strengthening, and expansion. The selectivity of modernization, which privileges subsystems of purposive-rational action, transforms reason into functional power, and “social modernization, thus detached, will turn selectively against the space of possibilities opened by this very cultural rationalization” (Habermas, 1981, p. 18).

The link between memory and colonization becomes clearer when one considers Habermas’s distinction between cultural rationalization and social modernization, particularly in light of the importance of language as the privileged medium for discursive legitimation. Whereas the former – cultural rationalization – represents emancipatory potentials, in which the differentiation of spheres of knowledge and the possibility of discursive legitimation stand out, the latter – social modernization – is marked by the selectivity of the modernization process, whereby systemic imperatives are privileged and symbolic resources are captured for purposes of functional reproduction. In this perspective, reason, which should serve enlightenment and critique, is co-opted by autopoietic systems that convert it into instrumental power.

This selectivity, as I have sought to argue, produces a rupture between the reflexive knowledge of modernity and its practical application in social life. Normative achievements – democracy, human rights, the discursive principle of morality – are neutralized by the logic of accumulation and administration. Hence Habermas’s diagnosis that the failure of modernity does not lie in an excess of rationality but in its unilateral and functionalized appropriation. It is in this context that memory, conceived as communicative practice and normative reservoir, emerges as an indispensable counterweight for sustaining both communicative rationality and the democratic public sphere.

2. Genealogies of Modernity and Memory as a Normative Resource

The reconstruction undertaken by Jürgen Habermas in *Auch Eine Geschichte der Philosophie* (2019a; 2019b) stands as one of the most ambitious contemporary attempts to situate modernity in a critical continuity with its religious and metaphysical past. His gesture is not merely historiographical but also normative: it aims to show how the post-metaphysical reason of modernity depends, for its very sustenance, on cultural memory contents that have been translated and reappropriated throughout historical processes of learning. In this sense, the genealogy of modernity is equally a genealogy of memory: without the capacity to critically rearticulate inherited traditions, communicative rationality would be deprived of its normative reserves.

Habermas takes as his point of departure the Jasperian hypothesis of the axial age [*Achsenzeit*], namely, the period between 800 and 200 BCE during which, almost simultaneously, religious and philosophical traditions emerged in both the West and the East (Jaspers, 1953). This period is interpreted as a civilizational rupture in which societies began to distinguish between objective, social, and subjective worlds – a process that opened the space for universalizable validity claims. Crucially, however, these contents were not lost; they were preserved through memorial practices and interpretive re-elaborations. Habermas states that “modernity lives off contents it did not produce itself but translated from premodern sources” (Habermas, 2019a, p. 98). In other words, the memory of modernity is a translated memory, and its vitality depends on the ability to critically rework inherited contents.

This understanding allows us to situate memory as a communicative practice. If the lifeworld is the horizon within which cultural traditions are constantly reappropriated, cultural memory is the medium through which these traditions remain alive. Habermas emphasizes that such religious or metaphysical contents could only become modern normative resources insofar as they were “linguistified”, that is, transformed into validity claims open to criticism (Habermas, 2019a, pp. 164–165). Already in *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* he had formulated the thesis of the “linguistification of the sacred”. In his late work, this thesis is expanded: the sacred is understood as a complex of myth, ritual, and transcendence whose solidarizing potential remains accessible, albeit displaced. Memory plays here an essential role, since it is the only resource capable of ensuring that such potentials are preserved as critical reserves without lapsing into dogmatism.

This is why *Auch Eine Geschichte der Philosophie* does not merely map influences but rather proposes a narrative of reflective translations. Habermas describes how Western philosophy was “continuously nourished by reflective translations that transformed contents of faith into secular knowledge” (Habermas, 2019a, p. 17). These translations do not erase the religious origin but reinscribe it within a post-metaphysical horizon, allowing its normative force to be sustained. Memory, in this key, is not a repository of the past but a hermeneutical operation: to remember means to translate, and to translate means to rearticulate normatively.

It is worth highlighting how this conception of memory as reflective translation of the past already figures in Habermas’s earlier works. Several commentators have insisted on this memorial dimension. Cristina Lafont, for instance, stresses that Habermas’s reconstruction of normativity “is inseparable from a work of collective memory” (Lafont, 2020, p. 212), since only critical recollection can sustain democratic legitimacy in the face of cultural plurality. James Bohman (2019a, p. 67), from another angle, underlines that the public sphere can only fulfill its critical function if it maintains a living connection with “historical experiences of injustice”. Thus, remembering Auschwitz, for example, is not a mere historical exercise but a condition for democratic resistance.

By way of illustration only, without aiming to expand the issue beyond Habermas’s work, it is noteworthy how the conception he proposes resonates with reflections by Jan Assmann, who insists that societies need a “culture of memory” capable of distinguishing between critical remembrance

and destructive forgetting (Assmann, 2011, p. 21). One may also include Paul Ricoeur among the intellectual affinities on memory, since for him memory is always traversed by the ambivalence between fidelity and manipulation, and must be oriented by the promise of justice (Ricoeur, 2005, p. 85). Yet, even if sympathetic readings can be identified, it is crucial to underscore that in Habermas these intuitions are translated into a post-metaphysical conception of memory: it retains its force only if it can be thematized discursively, open to critique and reinterpretation. This understanding figures as a distinctive trait of the Critical Theory tradition.

From a political perspective, cultural memory conceived as reflective translation constitutes an indispensable normative resource. Seyla Benhabib (2002, p. 448) observes that the public sphere depends on “normative resonances” derived from cultural memory. Andreas Huyssen (1995, p. 14), in dialogue with the Frankfurt School tradition, shows that memory has become, in the contemporary world, a “terrain of decisive symbolic struggles, between critical remembrance and socially induced amnesia”. This terrain can only be understood in light of Habermas’s genealogy, which articulates memory and modernity as inseparable dimensions: modernity not only produces new contents but depends on its capacity for critical remembrance.

Finally, Habermas relates the genealogy of modernity to the problem of selectivity in the rationalization process. By distinguishing between cultural rationalization and social modernization (Habermas, 1981, pp. 263-265), he shows that the reflexive gains of modernity were, to a large extent, neutralized by the systemic imperatives of money and power. Memory, in this context, functions as a counterweight: it recalls that emancipatory potentials cannot be reduced to instrumental functionalizations. As Theodor W. Adorno warned, education must have as its first task the prevention of Auschwitz ever happening again (Adorno, 1966, p. 358). This maxim echoes the imperative of a critical memory that resists colonization.

Thus, Habermas’s genealogy of modernity cannot be dissociated from the question of memory. By reconstructing how religious contents were translated into secular knowledge, Habermas reveals that cultural memory is the link ensuring both continuity and critique, tradition and innovation. Modernity remains alive only insofar as it is capable of reflective remembrance. Its erosion would entail not merely the loss of a past but the depletion of the normative reserves that sustain communicative rationality and deliberative democracy itself.

3. The Systemic Colonization of the Lifeworld and the Mechanisms of Memory Erosion: Administration, Market, and Algorithms

The thesis of the systemic colonization of the lifeworld is one of the structuring concepts in Habermas’s critical diagnosis. Formulated in *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (1981; 1988), this thesis describes how modernisation, conducted in a selective and functionalist manner, has produced deep distortions in the symbolic structures of social life. The distinction between system and lifeworld is central to this diagnosis: while the system operates through de-linguistified means of coordination (money and power), enabling large-scale functional integration, the lifeworld consists in the horizon of symbolic, normative, and cultural presuppositions that sustain social interaction oriented towards mutual understanding (Habermas, 1988, p. 193).

In advanced capitalist societies, Habermas observes, when the economic and administrative subsystems (originally charged with ensuring the material reproduction of society) overflow their functional boundaries and penetrate domains previously mediated by communicative and consensual practices, what occurs is what he calls the “colonization of the lifeworld” (Habermas, 1988, p. 523). The metaphor of colonization is not merely illustrative: it designates a process of functional usurpation in which the communicative capacities of the lifeworld are displaced by systemic codes of instrumental control (such as money and power). In this dynamic, forms of intersubjective understanding are replaced by strategic mechanisms of coordination, reconfiguring social

organization and imposing upon it logics external to its communicative origins. Habermas describes this process with particular clarity, arguing that:

«In place of “false” consciousness, we now find a fragmented consciousness that evades any clarification of the mechanisms of reification. Only when these conditions are present does the colonization of the lifeworld become possible: [when] the imperatives of autonomous subsystems, stripped of their ideological veils, penetrate the lifeworld from outside – like colonial rulers in a tribal society – forcing it to assimilate; yet the fragmented perspectives of the native culture can no longer coordinated in such a way as to permit the recognition of the play of the metropolis and the global market from the periphery» (Habermas, 1988, p. 522).

This displacement has direct consequences for memory. Colonization manifests itself not only as the institutional reorganization of social life, but also as a subjective reconfiguration of the ways in which experiences are remembered, interpreted, and transmitted. Social practices, personality structures, and interactive contexts come to be shaped by systemic imperatives, converting life goals and cultural values into means subordinated to functionally defined ends. When language – the original medium of social integration – is distorted by the interference of the de-linguistified codes of money and power (which replace discursive consensus with functional and strategic modes of coordination), collective memory runs the risk of being emptied of its critical dimension, reduced to bureaucratic records or to cultural commodities.

The phenomenon of systemic colonization emerges when the lifeworld, once capable of regulating social relations through tradition and natural language, becomes unable to resist the increasing specialization and fragmentation of modern spheres. Habermas links this development to a selective pattern of modernization that instrumentalizes “the potentials of cultural rationalization in the service of capitalist accumulation and bureaucratic-administrative control” (Habermas, 1988, p. 519), identifying four principal forms through which systemic colonization manifests itself:

«[...] (1) if traditional forms of life have disintegrated to such an extent that the structural components of the lifeworld – culture, society, and personality – have become widely differentiated; (2) if the relations of exchange between subsystems and the lifeworld are mediated by differentiated roles (with regard to participation in formally organised workplaces and private household economies, in relations of clientele with public bureaucracies, and in formal participation within the process of legitimation); (3) if the real abstractions by which the labour power of employed individuals is made available and the votes of enfranchised citizens are mobilised can be accepted by those affected in exchange for system-conforming compensations; and (4) if such compensations are financed by increases in capitalist growth, in accordance with the model assumed by the welfare state, and channeled into those roles in which privatised hopes of self-realisation and self-determination – withdrawn from the world of work and from the public sphere – are primarily pursued, namely, those of consumer and client» (Habermas, 1988, pp. 522-523).

The outcome of colonization is the substitution of discursive solidarity with functional compensations, which dismantle critical memory by privatizing it into forms of consumption and entertainment. This process, Habermas stresses, is neither homogeneous nor absolute. Yet when the conditions described above are fulfilled, the structures of meaning and legitimacy within the lifeworld undergo a progressive depletion, leading to the reification of social interactions and the disintegration of shared sense.

Habermas identifies two central mechanisms in this process of invasion: monetarization, which transforms social relations into commodities, and bureaucratization, which governs everyday life through formal systems of control. Christina W. Andrews (2011, p. 142) notes that the colonization of the lifeworld occurs precisely through these instruments, interfering with the process of socialization and distorting the normative foundations of social solidarity. As this systemic process autonomizes, it imposes depersonalized and externalized forms of coordination upon social interaction, breaking normative and symbolic ties that once sustained social life. Thus, “monetarization and bureaucratization affect the symbolic structure of the lifeworld in such a way

that they deform the use of language” (Habermas, 1988, p. 534). Without language as a medium of mutual understanding, cultural reproduction, social integration, and identity formation become unsustainable. Memory, dependent on narrative and discursive practices, is especially vulnerable to such deformation: lived experiences are converted into consumer commodities or administrative data, neutralizing their potential for critique and resistance.

This dynamic provides fertile ground for the emergence of so-called “social pathologies” [*Soziale Pathologien*]. These phenomena indicate the rupture of communicative mechanisms of social reproduction and become all the more visible when the potentials of cultural rationalization are instrumentalized “in the service of capitalist accumulation and bureaucratic-administrative control” (Habermas, 1988, p. 519). Systemic integration is certainly effective for the functional organization of society, but when it extends its scope and overflows beyond the sphere of material production into the symbolic domain of the lifeworld, it directly affects subject formation and cultural development – generating pathological effects on the principles of communication, integration, and social cohesion.

In this sense, the transition from market modernity to algorithmic modernity (a shift only briefly noted earlier), marks a decisive transformation in the structure of colonization itself. whereas market modernity relied primarily on commodification and bureaucratic mediation, algorithmic modernity introduces an additional layer of control that operates through data extraction, prediction, and behavioral modulation. These mechanisms no longer act merely upon institutions but intervene in the very production of subjectivity, authorship, and participation. As collective memory becomes digitized, the boundaries between individual recollection and public archive blur, generating new asymmetries of visibility and power. Processes of archiving, deinstitutionalization, and global circulation of memory (previously mediated by cultural institutions) are now increasingly determined by algorithmic infrastructures that decided what is preserved, amplified, or forgotten¹.

Hartmut Rosas’s theory of social acceleration (Rosa, 2013) provides a crucial complement to Habermas’s framework. Rosa argues that the constant acceleration of technological innovation, communication, and social change weakens the continuity of experience and thus undermines the very conditions for collective remembrance. From this perspective, algorithmic modernity intensifies the temporal pressure on memory, replacing enduring narratives with fleeting fragments. The acceleration of circulation and the contraction of attention spans erode the stability of symbolic transmission, producing what Rosa calls “desynchronization” between system and lifeworld. This desynchronization, I suggest, constitutes one of the most insidious pathologies of memory in digital capitalism: remembrance is not denied, but rendered structurally impossible.

In this respect, the thesis of colonization operates as an analytical bridge between processes of cultural rationalization (such as Max Weber’s *disenchantment of the world*) and the emergence of structurally entrenched forms of domination. The paradox is that rationalization itself, while releasing cognitive potentials, “opened the way for the disintegration of its communicative foundations” (Rehg, 1997, p. 173). Habermas leaves no doubt: “the colonization of the lifeworld can be interpreted as the result of the uncontrolled expansion of systems of purposive-rational action, which escape the normative control of participants” (Habermas, 1988, p. 516).

Systemic colonization does not merely represent the erosion of social normativity, but the hollowing out of the very possibility of mutual understanding – a central condition of communicative

¹ In the present discussion, I assume the expression “algorithmic modernity” as broadly equivalent to “platform capitalism” (Srniczek, 2017), designating a phase of capitalist modernity characterized by the convergence of digital infrastructures, data extraction, and predictive algorithms as the main mechanisms of accumulation and social coordination. This usage follows Habermas’s distinction between modernity and capitalist modernity (presented in *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, 1988, pp. 495-523), in which the rationalizing potentials of modernity are selectively appropriated by systemic imperatives. Similarly, algorithmic modernity represents a new phase of colonization, in which communicative rationality is subsumed under algorithmic rationalization – a process that extends the commodification and bureaucratization of the lifeworld into the digital domain. See also Zuboff (2019) on “surveillance capitalism” and Couldry & Mejias (2019) on “data colonialism”.

rationality. This reconfiguration intervenes in the processes of socialization that shape subjectivity and collective identity, affecting memory as a communicative practice. At this point, memory becomes a decisive field. Cultural fragmentation and social reification not only distort communication but also disfigure the ways in which societies remember and transmit collective experiences. Albrecht Wellmer (1991, p. 56) warns that “the imperatives of the system come to instrumentalise the lifeworld and threaten its destruction” – which, at the level of memory, means official narratives and suppress dissenting voices or cultures of consumption that transform historical traumas into media spectacles. Colonization thus marks the moment when objective social forms (such as money, power, and institutions) reproduce themselves autonomously, imposing their own logic that silences alternative discourse, historical narratives, and individual and collective memories – as Huyssen (1995, p. 25) cautions in his analysis of the “memory industry” that transforms traumatic events, such as the Holocaust, into commodities devoid of normative force.

The thesis of colonization therefore provides both an analytical framework for diagnosing forms of domination rendered invisible by systemic rationality and a normative foundation for social critique. Its strength lies in anchoring critique in a pragmatics of intersubjective understanding capable of resisting reified forms of coordination. This grammar, rooted in communicative action, does not seek to eliminate functional subsystems, but insists that their operation be tied to discursively generated legitimacy and robust regulatory frameworks.

The critical contribution of this article is to propose that, alongside the classical mechanisms of monetarization and bureaucratization, we must today recognize a third form of colonization: algorithmic fragmentation. This “third wave of colonization” is distinct, though interwoven with the previous ones. In the digitalization of the public sphere and the platformization of communication, a new layer of memory erosion emerges. The algorithmic capture of communication and subjectivity operates directly upon language, social reality, and history itself (and consequently memory), reshaping processes of meaning production and political will-formation through platforms and artificial intelligences. As Habermas warns in his most recent work “the new information technologies produces structural change in the conditions of discursive opinion-and-will-formation” (Habermas, 2022, p. 60). In this scenario, profit-driven algorithms select, promote, or conceal content, shaping selectively what is remembered and what is forgotten – a change directly linked to the fact that such algorithms are developed by private corporations oriented to profit, rather than by public institutions committed to the democratic sphere.

In this emerging configuration, memory itself becomes a terrain of social struggle. Following Nancy Fraser’s (2009) concept of “subaltern counterpublics”, we can interpret practices of remembrance as fields in which marginalized groups articulate alternative narratives that resist cultural hegemony. Similarly, Axel Honneth’s (1996) theory of recognition underscores that struggles over memory are constitutive of struggles for social esteem and self-respect: to be recognized as a subject capable of remembering is already to participate in the communicative construction of moral community. From this standpoint, the colonization of memory is not only a process of systemic distortion but also a conflictual arena in which counter-memories and emancipatory recollections continue to emerge.

At the present stage of colonization, we face not merely a prolongation of the commodification and bureaucratization of the lifeworld, but a qualitatively distinct form that acts directly upon the very processes of mutual understanding, reconfiguring language, epistemic production, and patterns of social recognition. George Orwell’s warning – “who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past” (Orwell, 1949, p. 37) – recalled by Habermas in *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, could well appear in his most recent writing as an even more urgent admonition. Today, the control anticipated by Orwell is exercised not only by totalitarian states, but by private platforms whose technical architectures condition collective memory. Habermas (2022, p. 74) speaks, in this regard, of a “new vulnerability of the digital public sphere”, where collective memory is reconfigured by private infrastructures of communication.

The case of the Holocaust illustrates the centrality of memory in this diagnosis. In the debates of the 1980s, Habermas defended the view that Auschwitz constitutes a foundational memory of German democratic identity (Habermas, 1987, p. 237). Historical denialism, in falsifying the past, not only distorts facts but undermines the normative reserves that sustain democracy. Today, digital forms of revisionism expand globally, replicating this threat on an unprecedented scale and corroding the link between memory and democratic deliberation.

Thus, systemic colonization can be systematized in three moments: (1) administration/bureaucracy; (2) market; (3) algorithms. In the first, the administrative subsystem imposes bureaucracy upon the lifeworld, reducing collective memory to formal records and technical classifications co-opted and manipulated by specialists or political agents. Habermas (1988, p. 343) had already warned that “excessive juridification leads to a formalization that empties solidarity of content” and showed how this process transforms lived experiences into administrative data, neutralizing their critical potential.

In the second, the economic subsystem commodifies memory, transforming it into a cultural product suited to consumer interests, aimed at increasing profit or expanding regulated consumer markets. Huyssen (1995, p. 25) observes that the “memory industry” tends to convert traumas into consumer goods – a critique that connects to Habermas’s (1992, p. 452) analysis of the weakening of the link between remembrance and deliberation, whereby critical narratives are transformed into media spectacles.

In the third, algorithmic mediation operates selectively upon collective narratives. Digital platforms select, promote, and even conceal content according to logics of attention and profitability, producing the fragmentation of shared narratives and fostering selective amnesias.

These three mechanisms converge towards the same effect: the erosion of memory as a communicative practice, emptying it of its normative and critical potential. Systemic colonization, in its new algorithmic form, not only threatens social solidarity but intervenes directly in the processes of meaning production, weakening the very possibility of mutual understanding and of deliberative democracy.

4. Normative and Institutional Proposals: Memory as a Democratic Public Good

Habermas’s diagnosis of systemic colonization reveals that it is not enough to describe the mechanisms of lifeworld depletion; it is also necessary to offer normative alternatives capable of restoring the eroded communicative potentials. When applied to the field of memory, this task becomes even more urgent, for remembrance constitutes a condition for collective self-reflection, intergenerational recognition, and the very symbolic reproduction of society. If memory is vulnerable to the forces of commodification, bureaucratization, and algorithmic capture, then the defence of its integrity must assume a central normative role.

The preceding analysis showed that the erosion of collective memory does not result solely from mechanisms of control, but from transformations in its very production and reproduction within digital capitalism. Normative responses must therefore operate not only as limits to systemic intrusions but also as enabling conditions for the renewal of communicative practices that sustain cultural continuity.

Habermas (1981, p. 137) argues that the validity of norms rests on the possibility of securing assent in inclusive discursive processes. By analogy, the validity of memory – understood as a communicative practice that transmits historical experiences and inherited normative contents – depends on its public circulation under conditions of discursive equality. Absent such conditions, memory tends to be reduced to a cultural commodity or to an instrument of political manipulation. Habermas’s critique thus finds here a privileged field of application: memory must be preserved as a living communicative practice, not as a commodity or as a crystallised archive.

Nancy Fraser (2009) underscores the need for subaltern public spheres, capable of resisting cultural hegemony and articulating counter-narratives. Axel Honneth (1996), for his part, emphasizes that struggles for recognition are intrinsically bound up with struggles over memory, since the recollection of traumas, injustices, and exclusions is a constitutive element of collective self-respect. Memory is thus not merely an object of cultural dispute, but a normative resource indispensable for social justice.

Both Fraser and Honneth extend the Habermasian framework by reintroducing conflict and recognition as constitutive dimensions of communicative life. While Habermas privileges discursive rationality as the ground for legitimacy, Fraser insists that public communication is always traversed by structural asymmetries of power and representation; hence, the formation of counter-publics is indispensable to resist hegemonic memory regimes. Honneth, conversely, interprets memory as a moral grammar of recognition, where struggles over remembrance become struggles for visibility and self-respect. Their insights complement the Habermasian emphasis on procedural legitimacy with a socio-moral attention to injustice, showing that the preservation of memory requires not only communicative inclusion but also the repair of distorted relations of recognition.

In light of these diagnoses, I propose five axes of action aimed at building a democratic politics of memory: deliberative forums, legal safeguards, digital regulation, education, and intergenerational transmission, and the consolidation of memory as a democratic public good. These axes are conceived in line with the *modus operandi* of the tradition of Critical Theory, and in accordance with the Habermasian framework of a critical theory of society. .

4.1. *Deliberative Forums of Memory*

Deliberative forums constitute the communicative dimension of memory politics. Inspired by Habermasian pragmatics, these spaces should be designed to promote the plural and inclusive participation of social actors in open processes of remembrance. As Habermas (1988, p. 85) affirms, solidarity can only be sustained when subjects mutually acknowledge one another's validity claims. Applied to memory, this means understanding it not as the mere accumulation of facts, but as a process of reciprocal recognition. Historical experiences confirm this thesis. "Truth Commissions" in Latin America, the South African "Truth and Reconciliation Commission", as well as more recent initiatives in Eastern Europe, demonstrate that memory acquires normative depth when articulated in public arenas of listening and contestation. Yet such forums cannot be treated as one-off events culminating in final reports. To avoid bureaucratic crystallisation, they must incorporate: (1) the periodic renewal of narratives; (2) intergenerational and intersectional inclusion; and (3) openness to marginal voices, often silenced in official processes.

Moreover, deliberative forums must incorporate the digital horizon. Initiatives of *memory activism* in virtual platforms – for example, the use of social networks to preserve testimonies of recent genocides or to denounce state-led erasures – show that today the public sphere of memory extends beyond physical spaces. This reinforces the need to guarantee its plurality and to prevent corporate algorithms from dictating the contours of what may or may not be remembered.

4.2. *Legal and Institutional Safeguards*

A second front of proposals lies in the legal-institutional sphere. Habermas (1992, p. 150) argues that fundamental rights function as institutional guarantees of the communicative practices that sustain democratic self-legislation. By analogy, memory must be protected through institutional arrangements that recognise it as part of the communicative conditions of democracy.

These safeguards involve at least three dimensions: (1) transparency and accountability, whereby memorial institutions, archives, museums, and documentation centres must operate under clear rules of acquisition, curation, and funding, preventing political or corporate capture; (2) public and equitable access, guaranteeing free access to documents, records, and testimonies, which are essential if memory is to remain a communicative resource rather than a privilege of cultural or political elites;

and (3) participatory governance, through management councils composed of civil society representatives, experts, and directly affected groups, capable of ensuring that institutionalized memory is not monopolized by states or corporations.

Jeffrey Olick (2007) cautions that collective memory is a contested field and therefore requires arrangements that preserve its openness. Andreas Huyssen (1995) adds that, without robust protections, the “memory industry” tends to reduce traumas to cultural products, dissolving their critical potential.

4.3. Democratic Regulation of Digital Infrastructures of Memory

In the current context, the most urgent front concerns the regulation of digital platforms, the central mediators of access to the past. By subjecting historical narratives to the logic of algorithmic personalization, these platforms fragment collective memory and subordinate it to criteria of profitability. Habermas (2022, p. 184) warns that when driven by the logic of attention, the digital public sphere “destroys the intersubjective character of opinion-formation”.

In this regards, three measures are central: (1) *algorithmic transparency*: requiring platforms to disclose their criteria for content curation; (2) *long-term digital preservation*: preventing the arbitrary deletion of historical materials, by establishing international standards of archiving; and (3) *protection of testimony*: safeguarding the integrity of victims’ and survivors’ voices against manipulation in disinformation campaigns. These measures can only be effective if based on transnational cooperation. Digital memory circulates in a global network, and its preservation cannot depend on isolated legal arrangements. At this point, Shoshana Zuboff’s (2019) contribution is fundamental: surveillance capitalism captures human experience as raw material, directly threatening democratic autonomy and, consequently, the integrity of memory.

4.4. Education and Intergenerational Transmission

A fourth axis, often neglected, is the role of education as the infrastructure of democratic memory. Without educational programmes that foster critical historical awareness, even institutional and digital safeguards remain fragile. Historical education must be conceived not only as the transmission of facts, but as the formation of communicative competences oriented towards public debate.

Habermas (2019a, p. 1120) reminds us that inherited normative contents remain alive only if they are discursively re-actualized. This mean that the teaching of traumatic events – genocides, slavery, dictatorships, etc. – must include spaces for debates, critique, and communicative appropriation by new generations. Initiatives in public history and participatory pedagogical practices fulfil this role, ensuring that memory does not become an inert tradition, but remains a living resource for democratic self-understanding.

4.5. Memory as a Democratic Public Good

Taken together, these proposals converge towards a normative conception of memory as a democratic public good. Like language, memory must be treated as a shared communicative infrastructure, not subject to exclusive appropriation by States, market, or corporate algorithms. Habermas (1988, p. 367) describes these conditions as “communication infrastructures that sustain civil society”.

To defend memory as a public good is not a mere cultural supplement: it is a condition of democracy itself. Without critical memory, there is no autonomous deliberation; without autonomous deliberation, there is no normative legitimacy. It is at this juncture that Habermas’s genealogy of reason (Habermas, 2019a; 2019b) connects with the present diagnosis: inherited normative contents are preserved only if there are discursively re-actualized. Memory, kept in communicative circulation, reinforces the collective capacity to resist the pathologies of modernity and to project more just and inclusive futures.

In this perspective, to defend memory as a public good is also to defend its productive autonomy – the collective capacity to generate, transmit, and reinterpret meanings beyond systemic imperatives. Only by recovering this generative dimension can memory fulfill its role as a communicative form of resistance to the ongoing colonization of the lifeworld.

Conclusion: Memory as a Normative Infrastructure of Deliberative Democracy

The theoretical and analytical trajectory developed in this article has sought to shift collective memory from the position of a mere archive to that of a communicative practice constitutive of the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld and, consequently, as an indispensable normative reserve for social critique and democratic self-legislation. This shift is not merely semantic: it entails recognizing that memory cannot subsist outside discursive practices that update, question, and reconstruct it. In Habermasian terms, remembering is an integral part of the discursive legitimation process; without memory in critical circulation, the conditions for public argumentation that make shared validity claims possible are lost.

A combined reading of *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* and *Auch Eine Geschichte der Philosophie* allows memory to be understood as a normative resource operating on two complementary layers. First, as a sedimented cultural repertoire – narratives, rituals, values – that provides criteria of understanding and interpretive frameworks. Second, as a practice of reflexive translation: traditions remain normatively alive only when translated and reconfigured in public language capable of generating critical assent. Habermas captures this issue by emphasising that modernity “lives off content that it did not produce itself, but translated from pre-modern sources”. The crucial point is that such content acquires normative force to the extent that it is reappropriated in communicative processes free from coercion.

The diagnosis of the three forms of colonization – administrative, mercantile, and algorithmic – must therefore also be read as a temporal and communicative diagnosis: all these colonizations produce risks of shortening historical horizons, eroding the argumentative depth of the public sphere, and transforming recollections into manageable, profitable, or customizable devices. Bureaucratization tends to reduce experiences to technical categories; commercialization stylises and fragments memories into spectacles; algorithmic colonization reconfigures attention ecologies and institutes regimes of visibility that produce selective amnesias. Collectively, these mechanisms promote memory pathologies: the reduction of the normative density of remembrance, the dilution of experiences of injustice into consumable formats, and the erosion of the deliberative capacity necessary for democracy.

It is essential to acknowledge that resistance to colonization is never purely procedural: it unfolds within fields of conflict, recognition, and power. Nancy Fraser’s conception of counter-publics and Axel Honneth’s theory of recognition clarify that the struggle for memory is simultaneously a struggle for justice. Memory, as a communicative practice, is thus always situated in asymmetrical contexts, where some voices are privileged and others silenced. Recognising this conflictual dimension does not weaken the Habermasian model but renders it more historically and politically responsive: the rational reappropriation of memory presupposes both the inclusion of marginalized perspectives and the rectification of past injustices.

From a theoretical standpoint, three critical implications emerge clearly from this investigation. The first is that the thesis of lifeworld colonization must be updated to incorporate the centrality of digital infrastructures and the role of algorithms in reconfiguring collective symbolic resources. The “third wave” of colonization proposed here does not replace the previous ones but operates in intersection with monetarization and bureaucratization, distinguishing itself by directly affecting the conditions of production, circulation, and reception of meanings. The second implication is epistemological: the erosion of memory is also a problem of epistemic injustice – it silences testimonies, marginalizes subaltern perspectives, and structures hierarchies of credibility that weaken social recognition. The third implication is normative: defending memory simultaneously means

defending communicative rights (such as access, preservation, participation, etc.) that sustain democratic self-legislation.

Based on these premises, the defence of memory as a public good demands an articulated set of institutional and normative responses, guided by three interdependent principles:

1. *Protection of the plurality of voices and contestability*: Memory remains alive only if open to critical dispute. This requires institutionalised deliberative forums (such as promoted by “deliberative design”) that combine active listening, transgenerational participation, and mechanisms of public controversy capable of preventing both bureaucratic ritualisation and spectacular commercialisation. Memory commissions, advisory councils with civil representation, and pedagogical processes oriented toward controversy are complementary measures in this direction.

2. *Legal guarantees as safeguards of memorial integrity*: It is necessary to establish legal instruments that ensure participatory governance of archives and museums, transparency in acquisition and curatorial policies, free public access to collections, and protection of testimony against instrumentalisation. In line with the argumentative framework Habermas presents in *Faktizität und Geltung*, such guarantees must function as “institutional guarantees” of the communicative practices that sustain democratic self-legislation.

3. *Democratic regulation of digital infrastructures*: Platforms that mediate access to the past today bear public responsibilities proportional to their power to shape memories. This requires norms of algorithmic transparency (explainability and auditing), obligations for the preservation of public interest (interoperability standards and long-term preservation), mechanisms to curb disinformation, and legal protections for the integrity of testimonies (rights to non-manipulation and contextualisation). Furthermore, public digital infrastructures – repositories and networks of public curation – must be promoted to provide counterpoints to private memory ecologies.

In addition to these principles, a further implication arises from Hartmut Rosa’s theory of social acceleration: the temporality of late modernity, marked by compression and simultaneity, corrodes the very rhythm of remembrance. The acceleration of communicative exchanges and the volatility of digital attention undermine the capacity for narrative continuity and critical reflection. To resist this temporal pathology, democratic institutions must cultivate what Rosa terms ‘resonance’: the capacity to sustain meaningful temporal relations with the past. Thus, defending memory as a public good also entails defending temporal infrastructures of reflection against the accelerated reproduction of meaning imposed by digital capitalism.

These measures do not exhaust the agenda but point to the need to treat memory as an infrastructure – not only symbolic but also material, legal, and technological – that sustains civil society and the public sphere. In this regard, institutional reforms must be combined with educational policies that strengthen competencies in critical reading of history, media literacy, and memorial citizenship practices. Historical education, conceived not as the transmission of immutable truths but as training in critical controversy and recognition of interpretative pluralities, is a key element in preserving living normative reserves.

From a critical-theoretical perspective, it is equally important to emphasize the negative function of memory: its critical and dissonant dimension – what Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin insisted on preserving – constitutes a condition for memory not to turn into mythification or commodity. Adorno warned that remembrance must retain the weight of tragic experience (as in the example of Auschwitz) to prevent the recurrence of domination structures. Benjamin, in turn, urged us to “brush history against the grain” to recover subaltern voices. Critical memory, therefore, does not seek consensus at any cost, but rather fair and discursive conditions of contestation that allow for the emergence of robust moral and political judgments.

It is precisely in this tension between consensus and contestation that the communicative potential of memory resides. A critical theory of memory must recognize that remembrance is a dialogical and agonistic field: it preserves its emancipatory power only when the plurality of perspectives remains audible. Thus, the goal is not harmony but discursive justice: a public space where conflicting interpretations of the past can coexist under conditions of reciprocal recognition.

The practical implications for democratic vitality are compelling. Societies whose public memories are fragmented or captured – by official bureaucracies, cultural industries, or private platforms – tend to lose the capacity of civil society to aggregate demands, form deliberative opinions, and sustain recognition processes. In contexts of accelerated polarization, the weakening of normative reserves and the fragmentation of the past open space for authoritarian strategies of reinterpretation or historical manipulation for present legitimizations. To counter this trend, memory politics must be an integral part of any robust democratic agenda.

In sum, treating memory as a democratic public good is to recognize it as the normative infrastructure of deliberative democracy. Protecting this infrastructure requires legal instruments, deliberative institutions, and technological regulations that ensure plurality, preservation, and contestability. Only by preserving memory in its communicative dimension – open, plural, and critical – can the past be restored to an emancipatory function, capable of guiding present political action and preserving spaces of critique against successive forms of lifeworld colonization.

Ultimately, defending memory is defending public time: a time in which narratives intersect, arguments are confronted, testimonies are heard, and validity claims can be discussed under reasonable conditions. Without this public time, the democratic promise loses its normative support. Memory, far from being a mere relic of the past, must be treated as a praxis of resistance – a field where the practice of communicative freedom is continuously rehearsed.

This conclusion is intended not only to suit the article developed here but also to remain faithful to the tradition of Critical Theory. Since its classical formulation by Max Horkheimer in *Traditionelle und kritische Theorie* (1937), Critical Theory has assumed the dual task of diagnosing social pathologies and elaborating normative prognoses oriented towards emancipation. Habermas, in *Theorie des Kommunikativen Handelns* (1981; 1988), resumes and radicalizes this task by reconnecting critique and emancipation to the grammar of communication, shifting the axis of critique from political economy to the conditions of linguistic intersubjectivity. If Horkheimer defined critical theory by its refusal of neutrality and its demand for social transformation, Habermas expands this horizon by offering a procedural criterion of communicative rationality capable of grounding diagnoses of colonization and, at the same time, opening prognoses for emancipated social practice. In his most recent work, *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie* (2019a; 2019b), even though the focus falls on the genealogy of reason and normativity, the gesture remains faithful to this tradition: the historical-critical reconstruction of the normative sources of modernity is not a mere erudite exercise but a critical resource for projecting conditions of self-understanding and self-renewal of democratic societies.

In this sense, the present investigation situates itself in the lineage of critical theory: not only to diagnose the mechanisms of erosion of collective memory but also to propose institutional and communicative prognoses that reinforce its preservation as a democratic public good.

By resuming the tradition that runs from Horkheimer to Habermas, this article reaffirms the central task of critical theory: not only to offer rigorous diagnoses of social pathologies but also to elaborate prognoses capable of orienting emancipatory practices. In this sense, the analysis presented sought to show that critique is not exhausted in the denunciation of the forms of colonization of the lifeworld but projects itself as a normative horizon for social transformations. Critical theory thus remains a discipline that links reflection and action, sustaining the promise that reason can be mobilized in favor of justice and emancipation.

If social critique must both diagnose pathologies and project horizons of emancipation, memory play a decisive role in this process. More than a simple record of the past, it operates as a normative resource capable of illuminating injustices, keeping historical responsibility alive, and orienting practices of solidarity. It is in this interweaving of critique and memory that critical theory finds its current force: to transform remembrance into potentials of resistance and into conditions of possibility for more just societies.

References

- Adorno, T. W. (1966). *Negative Dialektik*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Adorno, T. W. (1977). "Erziehung nach Auschwitz". In: Theodor W. Adorno. *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 10.2: *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft II*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Alexander, J. C. (2004). *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Andrews, C. W. (2011). *Emancipação e Legitimação: Uma introdução à obra de Jürgen Habermas*. São Paulo: Editora Unifesp.
- Assmann, J. (2011). *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Benhabib, S. (2002). *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Benjamin, W. (1968). *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Benjamin, W. (2006). "Über den Begriff der Geschichte". In: *Gesammelte Schriften* 1.2. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Bernstein, R. J. (1985). *Habermas and Modernity*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Bohman, J. (2019a). "Deliberative Democracy and the Problem of Memory". In: Maurizio Testa (ed.). *Critical Theory and Democracy*. London: Routledge, pp. 63-81.
- Bohman, J. (2019b). "Public Deliberation and Historical Injustice". In: *Deliberative Democracy and Its Discontents*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Couldry, N. & Mejias, U. A. (2019). *The Costs of Connection: How Data is Colonizing Human Life and Appropriating it for Capitalism*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Feenberg, A. (2017). *Technosystem: The Social Life of Reason*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Fraser, N. (2007). *Reframing Justice in a Globalizing World*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Fraser, N. (2009). *Scales of Justice: Reimagining Political Space in a Globalizing World*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Habermas, J. (1981). *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns, Band 1: Handlungsrationalität und gesellschaftliche Rationalisierung*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.
- Habermas, J. (1987). "Eine Art Schadensabwicklung". *Die Zeit*, July 11, 1986; reprinted in *Eine Art Schadensabwicklung. Kleine politische Schriften VII*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, pp. 237-267.
- Habermas, J. (1988). *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns, Band 2: Zur Kritik der funktionalistischen Vernunft*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.
- Habermas, J. (1990). *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Habermas, J. (1992). *Faktizität und Geltung: Beiträge zur Diskurstheorie des Rechts und des demokratischen Rechtsstaats*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Habermas, J. (2019a). *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie, Band 1: Die okzidentale Konstellation von Glauben und Wissen*. Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag.
- Habermas, J. (2019b). *Auch Eine Geschichte der Philosophie, Band 2: Vernünftige Freiheit. Spuren des Diskurses über Glauben und Wissen*. Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag.
- Habermas, J. (2022). *Ein neuer Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit und die deliberative Politik*. Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag.
- Halbwachs, M. (1950). *La Mémoire Collective*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Honneth, A. (1996). *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts (Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought)*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Huyssen, A. (1995). *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*. New York: Routledge.
- Jaspers, K. (1953). *The Origin and Goal of History*. London: Routledge.
- Lafont, C. (2020). *Democracy without Shortcuts: A Participatory Conception of Deliberative Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McCarthy, T. (1985a). *The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- McCarthy, T. (1985b). "Complexity and Democracy, or the Seductions of Systems Theory". In: Richard J. Bernstein (ed.). *Habermas and Modernity*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, pp. 141-174.
- Olick, J. K. (2007). *The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility*. New York: Routledge.
- Orwell, G. (1949). *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. London: Secker & Warburg.
- Rehg, W. (1997). *Insight and Solidarity: The Discourse Ethics of Jürgen Habermas*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ricoeur, P. (2004). *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Srnicek, N. (2017). *Platform Capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Wellmer, A. (1991). "Reason, Utopia, and the Dialectic of Enlightenment". In: Richard J. Bernstein (ed.). *Habermas and Modernity*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, pp. 35-65.
- Wellmer, A. (1993). *The Persistence of Modernity: Essays on Aesthetics, Ethics, and Postmodernism*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Zuboff, S. (2019). *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*. New York: PublicAffairs.