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Marco Schmitt, "Trennen und Verbinden. Soziologische Untersuchungen zur Theorie des Gedächtnisses", Wiesbaden: Vs Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2009, 366 pp.

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## Book reviews

**Marco Schmitt, *Trennen und Verbinden. Soziologische Untersuchungen zur Theorie des Gedächtnisses*, Wiesbaden: Vs Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2009, 366 pp.**

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The object of this book is memory as a constitutive element of the social structure, a focus that marks a new approach to social theories with respect to traditional memory studies: social theories are here not used to explain memory as an emergent social phenomenon but as a process that contributes to generate and reproduce social orders, identities, boundaries and relations. Paying attention to memory from a processual point of view means adopting a dynamic perspective, which overcomes the duality between structure and agency, event and structure, time and space.

The author's main reference point is Luhmann's system theory (e.g. Luhmann 1996, 1997), even if the author goes further to get closer to Latour's *Actor Network Analysis* (ANT) (e.g. Latour 1993; 2005) and White's relational sociology (e.g. White 1992). Thus, for the author memory does not only select the information necessary for the autopoiesis of systems, but it also creates connections between several structures and sub-universes. So although the theoretical path remains basically linked to a systemic paradigm, memory works also in a transformative sense by constructing social structures as structures of social networks and networks of meanings. Furthermore such a combination of a systemic and a relational perspective reintroduces the questions of agency and of semantics (which was disregarded by Luhmann) and, at the same time, it enlarges the research issues of the classic social network studies. Hence if this combination is only relatively new, especially in German sociology,<sup>1</sup> the focus on memory and the attempt of constructing an operative model of social memory through the lens of social theories represent however a theoretical advancement, which also offers interesting cues to reflect upon some specific issues of memory studies: for example the possibility to compare memory phenomena on the basis of their relational structural differences (in terms of types of identity, types of relations, systems of norms and schemes of actions that memory produces in interdependence with the social worlds it connects) and, as a consequence, to define and classify memory types from a perspective that allows one to consider both their structural and performative aspects.

The book is organized in three parts. The first one is dedicated to concepts that are considered crucial for understanding memory as a communicative device that structures society. So the Halbwachsian concept of collective memory (e.g. Halbwachs 1992) is reinterpreted from a Luhmannian viewpoint as structure producing possibilities that social groups maintain by communicating. Schutz's idea of a pre-reflexive socialized knowledge serves to problematize the role of latency in the externalization and objectifi-

<sup>1</sup> Already Baecker in 1996 noticed affinities between the systemic and the relational theories, by conceiving the networks as one of the basic forms of communication (e.g. Baecker 2005), an idea partially shared with Fuchs (2001) though he imagines the communicative operations as based on a binary code.

cation processes that construct social memory (e.g. Schutz 1970). The concept of latency is also relevant for distinguishing between a functional memory and a store memory within the cultural memory paradigm elaborated by Jan and Aleida Assmann (e.g. Assmann 1999). Whereas the functional memory forms a cultural/textual coherence that stabilizes collective identities, the store memory is a stock of unused possibilities without an internal structure whose social importance derives from functioning as corrective for the functional memory. Finally Schmitt deals with the Bourdieusian concepts of *habitus*, *social space* and *field*, although the last two are only sketched, and unused in the following chapters of the book. Therefore, even if the author conceives *habitus* as a system of behavior's, perception's and interpretation's schemes incorporated by social actors, mediating between a social history expressed in the accumulation of capitals and their use in each new play situation, he does not consider that the *field* itself draws its logic from a cumulative process of social history (e.g. Bourdieu 1992).

In the second part of the book, on the basis of the over mentioned concepts, Schmitt introduces Luhmannian systemic memory. This section is probably the less original of the text, however it is devised as a transit point towards a theory of social memory structurally grounded on networks of relations. Schmitt stresses how for Luhmann memory does not work for conserving (in a homeostatic sense) systems but for their continuous internal differentiation on the basis of schemes of sense that enable to distinguish between what is *internal* and what is *external* in a given system (material dimension), between *before* and *after* (temporal dimension), and between *ego* and *alter* (social dimension), in order to guarantee the coherence of the social order, that is the repeatability of those operations that are essential for the systems' evolution. However, what lacks in Schmitt's analysis is a comparison with the differentiation processes inherent the Bourdieusian logic of the field, a comparison that would permit to extend the list of the exclusion mechanisms activated and produced by social memory. Thus Schmitt criticizes system theory basically by comparing it with Latour's ANT and White's relational sociology, hence he underscores how system theories focus exclusively on memory as a function that separates (*trennen*) between system and environment, but they are unable to explain how memory can connect (*verbinden*) different social worlds.

The third part begins with the notion of praxis as it is explicated in the ANT. In this regard the author highlights how memory does not work only through communicative processes but also through practices that enable actors to inscribe contingencies in a structure of sense, that is to create a network of meanings towards which they orient themselves as a social group. Dealing with memory means therefore understanding how it reduces social complexity (as it does quite similarly in Luhmann's theory) in order to stabilize social networks and networks of meanings. The differentiation processes activated by memory do not concern the entities involved in a network but the types of links among entities. Even if Schmitt does not reflect further on the question, this passage suggests that the ways in which networks are structured, intersected and institutionalized entail a continuous production of memory types and, thus, of their classificatory systems. Finally, Schmitt considers White's relational theory. In particular he pays attention to the combination between closure mechanisms, which construct the internal order of a social structure and shape the related social identities, and opening mechanisms that define new ties among *social molecules*. If both kinds of mechanisms respond to a need

of control and thus of elaboration of contingencies, forming networks means however making fluid the physical, social and temporal boundaries that the closure mechanisms produce. So, whereas for Luhmann social memory mainly functions as a filter, a relational understanding of social memory offers the possibility to individuate its creative and innovative potentialities. In other words, if compared with Luhmann's systemic theory, the idea of a reticular activating social memory highlights: *first*, the importance of practices in structuring social reality as networks of social relations, and, *second*, the understanding of cultural coherence as a plot of stories and as a system of past objectifications, which define collective identities as symbolic synthesis of specific social ties. Memory processes build therefore a social history of social networks and networks of meanings that constitute constraints and resources for the conservation, negotiation and questioning of the existent.

This thesis is however only roughed out by Schmitt: in the final conclusion, he proposes a synthetic comparison between Luhmann, Latour and White without extending it to Bourdieu, even if his goal is to strengthen the structural model of memory with a praxis theory. This weak point emerges clearly when, by treating memory as praxis (that is, generating relations, according to the interpretative orientation that follows the *practice turn*: e.g. Schatzki, Knorr Cetina and Von Savigny 2001), he does not consider the dimension of the conflicts arising through practices within a social structure and, consequently, the idea of making memory as an enactment of incorporated knowledge. In this way the author blurs the dynamics of power that reproduce and regulate the social relations and that produce social inequality through *habitus* as device of social history (e.g. Schroer 2004). From a relational perspective (as the one Schmitt claims to attain), that means that the positions the actors occupy in a network structure are hierarchical and that the communication/transmission mechanisms that produce this structure are conditioned by the perception's and behavior's schemes incorporated in the *habitus* of actors, through that they continuously redefine classifications and social, symbolical and material boundaries. Thus, from this viewpoint the dynamics of inclusion in /and exclusion from a social structure appear more complex. However the question is not only to multiply, with respect to the binary code proposed by Luhmann, the operations through which inclusion and exclusion are activated and perpetuated, rather to consider how some mechanisms that function on a systemic level are interwoven and also influenced by exclusion (and inclusion) strategies practiced by social actors in the routine and crisis phases of a social structure. To sum up, it seems that the model Schmitt suggests does not contemplate that social-historical contingencies do not simply correspond to inert materials, selected to be included in or excluded from a social system, but that they participate in structuring it. In this sense the mediation that the author searches between structure and agency appears to be poor in its final theoretical-analytical synthesis, as it is also evident by the restricted explanation and use of conceptual and operative categories such as: *place*, as setting for human action, materially and culturally organized (in this regard he deals only with the localization processes of the ANT); *space*, as dynamic configuration of objectified social relationships (e.g. Bourdieu 1992), refigured by actors through their practices and interactions (e.g. Löw 2001), and *historical event* (instead of the Luhmannian idea of punctual events) as combination among several social processes and different temporalities (e.g. Sewell 2005). By spotlighting the resources available to

the actors and the constraints that limit their possible actions and interactions, these categories can indeed highlight how power dynamics influence the closure and opening mechanisms through which social identities and relations are created and dismantled within a field of tensions, defined by the attempt on the one hand to conserve social order and on the other hand to redraw the existent material, social and temporal *boundaries* and *ties*, which respectively cross or connect a social reality or several social worlds.

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