

AVOIDING UNCERTAINTY BY MAKING PAST USABLE

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Abstract. Time can be interpreted as a cognitive construction of social reality, which brings order to social interaction and communication, in all its variability from one culture to another. Using a variety of (culturally distinct) reckoning systems, people would like to control and regulate the uncertain and unreliable circumstances of their lives. Human time is characterised by the dichotomy of inner and outer realms, which highlight the continuity of self-awareness against the discontinuity of external events. The division of the arrow of time into past, present and future is quite illusory and relative, just as in real life streams of events from the past and the future are subordinate to current needs. In everyday practise there are many strategies (forgetting, sacralisation, banalisation, etc.) for making use of the past to further a sustainable development of the lives of individuals/collectives as social subjects.

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1. Introduction

I am interested in the specifics of the human cognitive capacity to reflect upon and rationalise past experiences and memories, to match them with present and foreseeable future circumstances via a strategy for making past usable (MPU). Individuals, communities, and generations – they all need to find ways of dealing with uncertainty in their lives and thus need to continuously use their past practices and memories to prepare for the unknown future. In the following, I develop an interdisciplinary argument for this process through three successive analyses, moving from the abstract to the concrete.

In the first section I revisit the old philosophical problem of whether time represents an aspect of nature that exists independently of human beings, or whether it is merely a notion rooted in human consciousness. The question of

MPU has an important place in this relationship between subjectivity and objectivity in time, because it is precisely by raising such a question that we admit that throughout the long progress of humankind the human cognition of time has grown more and more synthetic, continuously using previous experiences to deliberately recreate a framework of perception to make its connection with environmental reality more definite. According to Norbert Elias, the problem of objective and subjective time is still relevant, as people have had more success in studying „natural“ time from astronomical to quantum levels than in learning about the psychological and social aspects of time (Elias 1994).

In the second section I examine the same problem of subjectivity/objectivity from a socio-psychological point of view as a relation of inner and outer times. Inner time is defined as an accumulation of biographical Self-awareness, which constantly but creatively meets the regulations, restrictions and demands of the outer structure of time. MPU is interpreted as an enduring but changing balance between Self-reflection and the influence of cultural mechanisms. I argue that in biographical case studies, MPU is relatively easy to determine by using turning points in individual life stories, and that it is harder but more beneficial to analyse it in strategies for coping with cultural trauma.

In the third section I investigate the same problem of objective and subjective human time at the socio-historical level. Now I ask whether past events, as experienced by individuals, communities or states, can be later recalled in an objective manner. I answer with the words of Peter Burke that “neither memories nor histories seem objective any longer” (Burke 1989:98) after a serious exploration of the social framework of memory (starting with the work of Maurice Halbwachs in the 1920s). Reinterpretation of the past by the certain social groups for the purposes of the present is keying to the past’s usability.

2. The essence of human time

Human time is paradoxical: growth and decay, durability and transience, certainty and uncertainty are genuinely interlinked. On the one hand, the *homo sapiens* of any period would like to control surrounding events and forecast the future and in doing so to build up a reliable living environment. Yet, on the other hand, humans constantly remake their understanding of the temporal structure of the universe – in both a very local and a very global sense – preferring to hide from the finality of human ontology. Time is a very sensible feature: people are afraid of discovering the essence of time because they do not know what they might uncover. Time could be an order or a chaos, a mystical deity like *Chronos* or a practical commodity like money, an *a priori* intuition or a stable social structure. “The problems of ‘time’, too, are often treated like a secret, protective cloak in which to hide” (Elias:83–84). Humans behave both like a creator god who gives rise to the temporal order of the world they live in, and a trickster god who disrupts the order of that same world and then remakes it in the oddest manner.

Human time is a fundamental property of human reality, defined by Pertti Alasuutari as “the entire reality that we face and experience as human beings” (Alasuutari 2004:2). Human time is a simultaneously durable and fluid cognitive system of co-ordinates for fixing mental as well as environmental realities, which frames every individual and collective form of existence. “Humans differ from other species precisely in their ability to exceed the physical and mental limits of individuals” (Alasuutari:5) and create a social order of signs and meanings. The human ability to successfully adapt to the environment is closely tied to their skills and capacities for storing gathered experiences and information in an interpersonal way. Claude Levi-Strauss has smartly postulated that the sign-based creation of meaning in interpersonal communication was a very revolutionary achievement of the Neolithic. Dating and measuring time is based on humans’ capability of mental synthesis, “of seeing together what does not happen together but successively.” (Elias:8) Anthony Giddens assumed that it is “people not only living in the time, but having an awareness of the passing time which is incorporated in the nature of their social institutions” (Giddens 1991:36).

The difficulty in conceptualising the essence of time is hidden in the abstract cognitive level of human perception and related memory activities. A human being not only reflects on the processes of internal and external worlds, but also invests them with semiotic significance and bases on them the overarching temporal frameworks of his or her life. Human time is even more difficult to understand because as a bio-social creature, *homo sapiens* participates in very different processes from individual metabolism to astro-geo-biophysical rhythms, from gradual personal aging to rapid changes in social routines, etc. Reflecting on the abstract interconnection of all these processes is often ambivalent and limited in scope. Thus, the line between subjective and objective in human perception and cognition of the dimension of time is fine and subtle. Paraphrasing the above quote from Anthony Giddens, we could say that people primarily live in time and only afterwards make it socially meaningful, thereby making the objective and subjective aspects inseparable.

Human time is determined by such a multitude of natural and cultural, genetic and non-genetic factors that its structural composition is extraordinarily complicated. In contemplating human time it is possible to evoke very many different levels, aspects and reckoning systems, all of which are relevant to each other. In the following I only list some of the more significant properties of the temporal fabric of human reality:

- adaptation to the natural rhythm, pace, sequence and other astro-geo-biological variations through cognitive procedures used for creating socially institutionalised timeframes for human activities;
- reflective monitoring of past events to establish some kind of sensory and mental order called memory (both individual and collective);
- rationalisation of the continuity and innovations in the progression of natural and social events, aiming to regulate and control;

- interpersonal negotiation of the use of many kinds of time-reckoning systems and memory-assisting devices, including symbols, notions, values, norms as well as mechanical and electronic artefacts, etc.

Temporality is an integral aspect of social interaction and the construction of meaning (Adam 2004:66). A (yet mythical) concept of time was introduced by ancient Greeks and further developed through three thousand years of different civilizations, by “long chains of human generations” (Elias:37) towards a more and more general notion. The more complex human society becomes, the greater is the importance of temporal ordering and the more weight is accorded to the institutional reckoning systems of social interactions. “In other words, the more societies grow in complexity, the more temporal concepts tend to the abstract, to a higher degree of conceptual synthesis” (Leccardi 2008:121).

MPU reflects the fundamental features of the temporalisation of human reality, both on the ontological and the phenomenological level. Human reality and its temporality are in a permanent process of becoming and reshaping. Novel experiences of organic (body) or cognitive (mind) qualities of time imply reflectivity, and part of this reflectivity involves the past. “That is, unanticipated experiences make people reconstruct the past symbolically – make them look back upon the past from a new perspective” (Baert:319). The process of making past usable proceeds by an adaptive remaking of practices and memories to match and be beneficial for the present, enhancing the mechanisms of recording and recalling social as well as individual experiences.

3. Inner and outer time – *Durée* and *Temps*

“The personal reason why the discovery of that which is eternal and permanent behind all changes has a high value for people, I suggest, their fear of their own transience – the fear of death.” (Elias:129). For lessening this fear, a person delegates the establishment of the more permanent structures of his/her existence to collective regulations and institutions. From a phenomenological point of view I interpret this division and co-existence between inner and outer time as a great interplay between the two fundamental arenas of human reality – the personal and the interpersonal.

The dichotomy of internal and external sides as the constitutive structures of human time was designed by the French social scientist Henri Bergson at the end of the 19th century. *Durée* as our intuitive, subjective insight into inner, personal durations manifests as a continuous emergence of the Self. *Temps* belongs to the practical, material world; it is more objective, reversible, quantitative and divisible into spatial units, measured by the mechanical clock, used for everyday purposes (Bergson 1886/1988). This division into inner and outer time is useful, because a human being differentiates between the continuity of a personal Self and the perpetual contrasting of this Self with external events and outer personalities (Others). Nearly a century later, the English sociologist Anthony Giddens also

interpreted this inner time as an introspective experience, directed towards a continuous reflection of the current situation and development of the Self, as an internal referential process. Yet the goal of this continuous self-reflective inner time is to make “active attempts to re-embed the lifespan within a local milieu” (Giddens:147) or outer time. I will describe the dichotomy between inner and outer time by distinguishing between two closely interconnected modes of human time: cultural and personal time.

Cultural time as a *Temps* structure emphasises the continuity of human time and sets its goal to arresting and controlling the duration of time through interpersonal measures (Adam, Gell 1992, Fabian 1983, Zerubavel 2003). Humans live within their *Umwelt* (a term introduced by J. von Uexküll, see Sebeok 1989:194), a specific mental environment of signs and meanings, trying to reduce external uncertainty by creating and shaping order, which has both spatial and temporal dimensions. Although the mental creation of order is species-specific, its actual implementation is still confined to a locally and historically determined population (a clan, an ethnos, a nation), which we can treat as a culture. The specific set of timing-measuring devices is like a frame of a collective ‘window’ into the surrounding world. Pertti Alasuutari noted that “a culture is a home, an order people try to maintain in the anarchy and disorder of human reality” (Alasuutari:15). The culturally ordered form of human being is opposed to the other side of the same coin – to ‘the trinity’ of uncertainty, vulnerability and insecurity.

Cultural time is closely connected with social representations and collective memory and identity (as investigated by Emil Durkheim, Maurice Halbwachs et al.). The patterns of behaviour are created through the repetition, sequence, rhythm, etc. within a particular collective experience, diminishing the role of uncertainty and chaos in social reality. Security, trust and identity within a community are based on the institutionalisation and maintenance of certain value-normative constellations in collective memory and the corresponding stereotyping of everyday behaviour. “Human values are seen to join the perennial attempts of our species to oppose the passage of time” (Russell 2005:122). Culture creates such existential value-normative frameworks for concrete human populations that are capable of actively specifying future trends by revisiting and utilising their past experiences. Cultural time could be interpreted as a consensus between living generations and the generations of the dead (Misztal 2003:95).

Thus, culture is a self-regulating interpersonal system that tries to face transience and chaos by increasing order and lessening the unfamiliar influences from external transcendence. It may be conjectured that the progress of cultural time along its diachronic (continuous) and synchronic (discrete) axes is complementary. On the one hand, every culture possesses the desire to routinise and ritualise activity, to achieve its stereotypes in thought and action through re-representation. This could be viewed as the creation of the flexible but fixed invariant of behavioural and mental patterns with the general aim of increasing trust and stability. On the other hand, every culture has to deal with the never-

ending waves of uncertainty (invasions from other cultures, abrupt changes in the environment, etc.) influencing its semiosphere (a term coined by Juri Lotman in 1992) as its realm of active meanings. The discontinuity axis of cultural time accepts mutual changes, but still tries to create the material and intellectual resources the society needs to adapt to the inevitable variability and divergences from the assumed invariance. Against slowly progressing changes, institutionally well-structured cultures can usually come up with adaptive mechanisms, like stockpiling food and other vital supplies, introducing rituals for softening the socio-psychological impact of poor climate or seasonal variation, defence mechanisms for managing a moderate ‘alien’ invasion etc. Fast and fundamental changes at discrete axes cause cultural trauma, which I will consider in more detail below.

Anthony Giddens pointed out that all cultures have “possessed modes of time-reckoning of one form or another” (Giddens:16). The reckoning of cultural time proceeds through: a) keeping the traditions inherited from the ancestors; b) routinisation of everyday behaviour and common sense; c) passing on certain institutionalised systems (ownership, power-holding or family structures, etc.) from one generation to another.

The process of making past usable becomes evident in cases when rapidly progressing human conflicts (interventions, wars, revolutions, etc.) or non-human forces like natural catastrophes (hurricanes, earthquakes, etc.) cause rapid and unpredictable changes in cultural reality. Forceful implementation of new traditions, unavoidable directives from the new power-holders, unexpected modifications to everyday customs – all these adjust the temporal structure of a culture and in doing so deeply transform how people understand the past.

Individual life course as a basis for *Durée* is given by an organism’s internal regularities (e.g. aging), life-long personality traits, psychological processes (perception, cognition, memorisation, etc.) and a socially realised Self-identity. An individual life course is the most real reification of the order of time within human reality; according to Jean-Paul Sartre it could be interpreted as a *universal singular* (Denzin 1989:9). The backbone of Self-awareness has also been described as a *different unique* (McAdams and Olson 2010), including Self-authorising by intertwining two dimensions: the inner and outer time or personal reality and the reality of the Otherness.

An individual life course has a very clear biological starting point – the time of birth. This is a formative act – uncertainty becomes some kind of certainty. An individual being is genetically programmed to go through predetermined states of growth and aging, which will culminate in death. This sequence forms the main continuity axis of an individual life. Its duration corresponds to the continuous flow of consciousness one may call Self-awareness. Carmen Leccardi maintains that “Husserl’s (1966) reflections on *durée* as temporal consciousness remain fundamental” (Leccardi 2009:1).

A human life is an unfinished project and uncertainty is an inevitable property of every life course. To diminish this existential uncertainty and anxiety, “a person attempts to organise those projects around his or her identity or personal

biography” (Denzin:29). The construction and narration of a particular life story make the corresponding life course fit into a socially acceptable discourse and lessen the weight of past randomness and uncertainty by viewing the subject’s life as an ordered process with a definite goal. The perpetual internal retelling of a biography as a process of Self-authorship “involves fashioning the raw material of a life-in-culture into a suitable narrative form” (McAdams and Olson:527). According to Giddens, “each of us not only *has*, but *lives* a biography reflectively organized in terms of flows of social and psychological information about possible ways of life” (Giddens:14).

The creation of every individual life story must simultaneously pass along two intertwined paths: socio-culturally standardized life courses (Corsten 1999:250) and the unique individual Self-realization. Pierre Bourdieu compares a single life to a subway line “where the stops have no meanings by themselves, only as parts of a larger structure” (Bourdieu 2000:301). One could develop this metaphor further and say that in the progress of a life course its principal seeks the names of the stops on the way and the meaning of the structures behind these names. This may be seen as embracing outer time, a personal recognition of the ways of reckoning time that were created and recorded in social memory before this concrete life began. A person seeks his/her place in the succession of generations, trying to make the spirit of the time (*Zeitgeist* in Weberian sense) practically comprehensible, to take a position on the current political or economic order etc. Over the course of this process of embracing, “the self forms a trajectory of development from the past to the anticipated future” (Giddens:75), which could be viewed as a construction of inner time. “The trajectory of the self has a coherence that derives from a cognitive awareness of the various phases of the lifespan” (Giddens:75). An (auto)biography is a form of self-presentation as well as self-identification, where one attempts to link the sequence of personal experiences with the ‘objective truth’ of social reality. According to Pierre Bourdieu, this dialectic of inner and outer time “leads to constructing the notion of trajectory as a series of successively occupied positions by the same agent in a space which itself is constantly evolving and which is subject to incessant transformations” (Bourdieu 2000:302).

Reckoning the time of individual life in a Self-narrative proceeds through: a) recognizing some (officially) fixed day of birth as ‘my birthday’; b) becoming aware of the cohort disposition, common life-expectancy and the process of aging in a particular cultural environment; c) consciously accepting the culture’s measure of external durations (calendars, (clock) time units, historical periods); d) developing short- or long-term plans for the future; e) discerning the turning points in one’s life, which (usually) correspond to ‘life-changing’ events.

These turning points are extraordinarily important for describing the mechanism of making the past usable in a life-long Self-authorship. At every turning point in one’s life, the Self emerges as the balancing of previous experiences and mental standards with a new set of cultural patterns. Adoption of these patterns is often obligatory and enforced, because an individual inevitably challenges and

explores new norms, be it age- and health-related statuses, new requirements for building a career or receiving an education, changed ideologies and institutions, etc. “How do people think about and cope with the conflicts and challenges they face” (McAdams and Olson:524) is a very important question for understanding the essence of human time. Pasupathi and Mansour found that the use of the concept of turning points in one’s life as an autobiographical tool increases with age up to midlife (referenced from McAdams and Olson:529), when an individual has lived long enough to estimate his/her life in a more complex manner.

There are two basic turning points in every individual life course: birth and death. Martin Heidegger interpreted the bridging between these two turning points as *Dasein* (*Being-in-the-World*), implying the dualism of origin and destiny, thought and action, being and becoming, which interweave the Self with the life-flow of its predecessors and successors (Heidegger:1962). These turning points mark an individual’s passage from the non-personal realm of the *Temps* into the *Durée*’s sphere of personal becoming and the final converse exit from the Self-awareness of the *Durée* back into the domain of the *Temps*. After the last breath is taken, every life and its corresponding story could (not can!) be socially measured and thus becomes a vulnerable and insecure object of public discussion without any further possibility of taking responsibility for that lived life. The complete life stories of national heroes, important political figures, great artists, etc. become inspirations and archetypes for the following generations. The preservation of nationally significant life stories serves the purpose of diminishing the uncertainties of the past and guaranteeing the transmission of memory between generations. The conservation of past relics – old manuscripts, photographs, pieces of art, personal belongings or tools of great writers, composers, artists, etc. – is a time-honoured practice of every larger community of memory. But every political turnover can fundamentally alter the interpretation of those lived lives: the heroes of yesterday may be re-labelled ‘enemies of the nation’ and, contrariwise, former adversaries may suddenly turn into allies. Demolishing the statues and monuments of important politicians and military commanders, renaming streets named after them, closing down personal museums, etc. are all common practices after a political turnover to make past usable.

Generational time can be taken as continuous as much as life itself is, reflecting both biological and social chains of reproduction. Individual finiteness and generational succession demonstrate the connection between inner and outer time – *Durée and Temps* – in an especially prominent way. At the same time the historical change of generations is not reducible “to the biological law of the limited life-span of man and the overlap of new and old generations” (Mannheim 2003:24). Generational activity (Corsten:250) happens in two directions: participation in certain historical processes and bonding with one’s contemporaries into a community of memory. Such interconnection actuates the transmission of cultural patterns, i.e. “traditional ways of life, feelings, and attitudes” (Mannheim:43). Generational time operates as a ‘transmission belt’ for values and norms, functioning as the perpetual carrier of the temporal structure of a particular society. But

many authors (Adam, Nowotny 1994, Giddens, Leccardi 2009) see vast differences between traditional and contemporary societies: Post-modern time-based inter-generational ties are considered fragile, the process of “remembering together” (Leccardi 2009) is deemed to have become heavily obstructed due to the time compression of social life, and the instantaneity and simultaneity of many communicative acts. Nowadays, several generations live ‘in the same cage of the time’ and, for the most part, each of them would like to be heard in its own understanding of time and thus annex the positions of co-existing generations. Vera King mentions that “the recognition of one’s own limitedness, as well as steadfastness and the gift of time, to the generational others, who follow, as well, hold greater vitality” (King 2010:67).

Generational time is also discrete as it occupies a very concrete historical and geographical niche and covers the biographical developments of a limited number of individuals. Every succeeding generation passes through its circle of life in a more or less different manner than its predecessors, thus expressing its members’ creativity, plasticity, flexibility and capacity for making the past usable in their specific circumstances. Bryan Turner defines a generation “as an age cohort that comes to have social significance by virtue of constituting itself as cultural identity” (Turner 2002:15–16), i.e. as a subject that takes positions towards the myriad of events that accompanies their appearance on the stage of history. An individual’s generation is a resource-rich structure of opportunity for its members experiencing historical processes during a certain unique biographical period.

So within human time, a cohort is an age-homogeneous group with similar life cycles, it is the basis for a specific pattern of mental differentiation and stratification within a particular “social and intellectual current” (Mannheim:46). While they go through genetically predetermined life cycles against the backdrop of certain historical events, every generation has some freedom to “articulate temporally the interpretative forces of its new ideas” (Corsten:251), i.e. to make past usable. Generational time is a “cluster of opportunities or life chances” (Edmunds and Turner 2002:5) within given historical conditions, which the cohort can transform to a certain degree. Generational time cannot exist “without its members having concrete knowledge of each other, and which ceases to exist as a mental and spiritual unit as soon as physical proximity is destroyed” (Mannheim:33).

Here, I must point out Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* as a durable generative principle that produces and reproduces the cognitive schemes and is formed of practices within certain (class-based) social groups. (Bourdieu 1977) *Habitus* could be interpreted as a temporally organized set of means by which specific historical social groups succeed (or do not succeed) in imposing ways of seeing reality favourable to their own interests and goals. *Habitus* is an involuntary inter-generational transmission girdle, which passes from one genetically (family, kinship) or socially (class) linked group to the next one through structured dispositions, highly visible even in bodies, and recognizable in value-orientations and everyday behavioural patterns. Bridging lived lives with living those lives,

habitus is a trusty anchor that in limited way allows new forms of action, but is far from allowing the creation of unpredictable novelty.

Generational time expresses the polyphonic temporal connections of an intergenerational relationship on the one hand, and the time schemes of distinctive collective awareness, the thriving, ageing and decay of a unique generation on the other hand. Generational time progresses through a dialectic interaction between conflict (generation gap) and reciprocity (inter-generational dialogue).

4. Remembering as a process of remaking the past

The past is commonly viewed as an interval of a line, succeeded by a point called 'present', existing objectively and independently from our current experience. This kind of distinction is very illusory and simplified, like talking of a 'true' or 'false' past. The myriad of past human lives and events do not necessarily have any direct importance to present human lives, but some of them could be crucial because we construe them in this way. The past of human reality could be interpreted only as a multitude of events, which we investigate in order to understand our current lives. The point is that we do not have access to the past without a scheme of our own culture, or as Durkheim would say, without a subjective set of our 'collective representations'. The temporal structure we call 'past' from the 'present' point of view is only a 'selectively exploited' (Zerubavel 1995:5 *via* Halas 2008:107) compendium of events from this endless multitude. "There is no past independent of the present, as there is no present independent of the past. Memory can never rescue the past through reflexivity, since there is no past in itself to be rescued" (Santos 2001:170).

Even more, there is no actual memory of a society as a whole, just the opposite, there are "...numerous, often varied experiences of the past and different oral histories" (Halas:105), officially recognized written histories and versions of counter-histories. Distinctive groups and individuals can recall shared or similar life experiences in quite disparate ways, "so the memory of the same fact can be placed within many frameworks" (Halbwachs 1992:52). During different historical periods and under various political systems, the interpretations of a society's past can diverge greatly. There is an excellent exposition by American researcher James Wertsch on the differences in how the 20th century school textbooks before and after the collapse of the Soviet power represented past events (Wertsch 2002). Carmen Leccardi highlights a concept of the British scholar Paul Connerton (from 1989), who has carefully analyzed the notion of 'incorporated memory', identifying it as a strategically important dimension for understanding the processes through which social groups conserve and transmit memories. (Leccardi 2009:7) The Polish-American researcher Iwonna Irwin-Zarecka uses the expression 'communities of memory' (a derivative of Halbwachs' '*group that remembers*'), which are formed of individuals with not only common experience but a shared sense of its meaning and relevance. "A great deal of our daily interactions take

place within various communities of memory allowing us the comfort of feeling at home with people we are with" (Irwin-Zarecka 1994:54). Cohorts and other social groups involve people in the genuine processes of building up certain modes of remembrance and connecting those with present circumstances, thus creating policies for making past usable.

Therefore dealing with the past is not feasible without a special toolkit of appropriate ways of remembering, a set of narrative templates. And even then it is a very uncertain, vulnerable and susceptible procedure, so a person has to choose between different possible versions without any guarantees for a comfortable solution. When an individual life is moving through the present, it is nearly impossible to know whether some fact from the past will exert negative influence on it. Only a few examples: an individual could be suddenly attacked by previously undiagnosed genetic disease; one's grandparents' 'wrong' social position or former membership in a currently outlawed organization could distort the chances of descendants, etc. Thus the uncertainty of the past is a huge risk that may easily blemish single life courses. Everybody would like to have a brilliant life trajectory, but in practice we have to face its limits and manoeuvre between personal ideals, taken-for-granted cultural patterns and real-world conditions. To make past more usable and minimize the impact of prior negative events, people reinterpret the past, legitimize their previous memories and experiences, and fit them into the present.

Collective as well individual memories become legitimate first and foremost when they are approved by the current power-holders and the authorities within public opinion. While Self-awareness and auto-biographing work within the *Durée*, they are not independent of the framing forces of the *Temps*. The legitimacy of narratives as well as identities is not derived from the past, but it comes from a present act of narration (Santos:183). An astute comment of Peter Burke's is that at all times "it is important to ask the question, who wants whom to remember what, and why?" (Burke:107)

There are outside pressures for including many of the past events in a narration and an individual has to be very careful to only choose useable memories from the mixture. Continuous Self-awareness (*Durée*) introduces one more aspect to making past usable: responsibility. An individual can choose to remember (or not to remember) various historical events and therefore makes the decision of what he/she is ready to be responsible for. In contrast with official duty (the above-mentioned legitimate narration templates), "responsibility in fact emerges as an option of a decidedly individual nature, the outcome of the elaboration of its own irreducible difference. In this sense one can affirm that personal identity is constructed and confirmed through the exercise of responsibility" (Leccardi 2009:4).

Claiming to take responsibility for some combinations of historical events is again very closely connected with the desire to diminish uncertainty and increase trust. Here the subject selects a aggregate subset from among all the practices and mental patterns that he/she has ever used, declares that it matches his/her personal

identity and that he/she is ready to be responsible for it. Carmen Leccardi posits that taking responsibility, “conceived as the possibility for the agent to decide between different alternatives” (Leccardi 2009:6) allows taking charge of the consequences of his/her own actions.

To live a human life includes mastering two opposing scales of time: the auspicious and prosperous days *versus* the inopportune and traumatic days. Both the individual as well as the collective can experience fundamental negative changes, i.e. traumas, which directly cause personal or social instability, risk and uncertainty. Human beings have basic psychological needs (a concept put forth by Maslow in 1954) for trust, security, order, love, approval, belonging, Self-actualization. When something happens that sharply undermines the fulfilment of those needs, people feel traumatized (Alexander et al. 2004:3), betrayed and become distrusting. The traumatizing event may partly or fully shatter identity and disrupt the continuity of awareness. Since traumas are not rare in human reality, every (individual or cultural) subject possesses a mechanism for recovering from such wounds in the fabric of its temporal structure.

On the interpersonal level this process is called coping with cultural trauma (Aarelaid-Tart 2006, Alexander et al., Sztompka 2000). There is no culture that has not encountered a natural catastrophe or a man-made disaster. Correspondingly, throughout all history people have experimented with different strategies for coping with difficult periods and have saved these many-faceted experiences in the memory-systems of cultures. Beside glorious victories and eras of prosperity, collective memories include recollections of embarrassing defeats, economic recessions and natural disasters. Very often it is not only the human bodies, but the value-normative systems of a given collective that suffer at these turning points. Cultural trauma is not the result of a group or a nation experiencing physical pain, but the collective feeling of anxiety, helplessness, and uncertainty. “It is the result of this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity’s sense of its own identity” (Alexander, 2004:10). Thus, cultural trauma could be interpreted as moment in which the continuity of cultural patterns is strained or broken and former identities crumble. “By collective trauma I mean a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality” (Erikson 1976:153). Coping with trauma entails a series of narrations and discussions encouraging the resurgence of collective memory for rebuilding an appropriate identity and a usable past. The renewal of collective as well as individual identity mostly lies in becoming aware of a new, unusual way of bridging the gap between the present and the past, a special positive mode of discussion about events too uncomfortable to remember.

Coping with cultural trauma begins when the changing (mostly political) reality makes it necessary to give meaning to the rapid changes in the value constellations of a particular culture. Then the freshly launched discourse on traumatic events itself is interpreted as an innovative social practice, the goal of which is to overthrow the atrocities and create a fresh version of history, i.e. to make the past usable instead of distressing to the people. Such a discourse introduces novel

words, signs, leitmotifs, etc. which interpretations influence the active actors' conceptions and behaviour when communicating with the past. Discourses on trauma, as a result, bring into being analytical 'toolkits' for dealing with an uncomfortable past. These may not relate to actual events very well, but they shape the innovative layer of "instrumental (semantic) collective memory" (Wertsch:57) and produce narrative templates for individual biographies. The memories that a society chooses to actively recall become distinguished among all those it actually possesses. Collective memory is not a neutral storehouse of events, but it "emerges in response to the need to create a usable past" (Wertsch:44). The latter opens up the dualism of remembering according to two different scales of human time. On the one hand there is the reference to a concrete historical event, yet on the other hand it proceeds through particular narratives as 'cultural toolkits', placing the memories of the past into fixed and socially acceptable frameworks. There are things that people do not want to remember about the unpleasant and traumatic events, and other things that are constantly recalled and focused on. There are no wrong or right memories, there are master commemorative narratives (Halas:108), which legitimize general notions that refer to the past and allow them to be shared as appropriate templates for interpreting present life.

There are several strategies for coping with an unpleasant past. A well-known one is forgetting: members of a memory community cease to discuss some objectionable topics (e.g. membership and collaboration with the former Communist parties of Eastern European countries). This 'work of memory' is mostly subordinate to selecting the matters that have to be remembered in order to reproduce power (Leccardi 2009:10). There is also the complementary strategy of sacralization of a period or event with the goal of producing a dominant narrative toolkit for the power-holders. For example, in contemporary Estonia the inter-war independence period (1918–1940) is practically held sacred in order to legitimize the ownership reform of the beginning of the 1990s, which heavily favoured pre-WWII Estonian citizens, including those who went into exile. Another opposite yet parallel strategy is that of banalization, which presents some social group, prominent person or movement from the past as hostile, awkward or dangerous (e.g. the brutal punishment of well-to-do farmers, re-branded as *kulaks*, after the Red revolution in Russia in 1917).

5. Concluding remarks

Time is both a vanishing moment and a lasting bio-social invariant in organizing human activity and perception. The ultimate goal of this organization is to lessen the uncertainty and randomness that individuals, social groups, nation states and cultures constantly encounter in form of the results of both natural and human action. It is important to distinguish between individual existential uncertainty (when and how will I die?) and social uncertainty (what kind of natural or social risks could restrict the succession of a specific socio-cultural environment?).

Although uncertainty is a dimension of the future, human beings still hope to reduce risks through the past dimension, interpreting what has already happened to expediently match that which is yet to come.

In the article I treated MPU as an important principle in the analysis of the human perception of time, reflecting the dialectics of objectivity and subjectivity with regard to individual, generational as well as social order. MPU as a principle is important in the execution of many social-psychological and sociological studies. First I would stress this in biographical studies, where the researcher constantly faces the problem of how truthfully the respondent is telling his/her tale, which episodes or even longer periods are left untouched, and why. Lived lives and told lives may correspond to each other, but not necessarily very well, since respondents use narration templates to construct their stories as 'true' according to the currently dominant interpretation of history. MPU is also important in studies of recent history, where different mnemonic communities represent even only decades-old events within frameworks that are presently beneficial to them. In such a case MPU becomes a source-critical point of view, aimed at finding greater relevance between historical events and their interpretations. MPU is also important in generational studies (youth or ageing studies, cohort studies like the baby-boomers or Komsomol elites of the 1970s in the USSR, etc.) The representatives of a generation usually overestimate their role in maintaining the continuity of the society and underestimate the contribution of either their predecessors or progeny, but there also exist converse cases when people want to see exactly their contemporaries as losers, a group representing historical interruption (Kõresaar 2004). MPU is also significant in the analysis of great historical cataclysms or cultural traumas, where it is important to find out how people create those social representations of the past that are aimed at reducing the after-effects of negative events during a period of identity reformation.

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