TIME AND MEMORY: A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

Elżbieta Hałas

University of Warsaw

Abstract. This article presents an outline of the problems of time, history and memory seen from a cultural perspective. Aiming at a revalorization of the cultural dimension in sociocultural phenomena, it particularly highlights the concept of cultural memory. In the cultural perspective, memory is a temporal dimension of meaning. Memory consists in communicative acts transmitting reflexive knowledge about the past from the perspective of the future present. Of significance is the development of a new semantics of memory, which is symbolized by the concept of trauma. Trauma as a cultural process is based on symbolization; this process takes place between the event,which has been traumatogenic for a community, and the establishment of its representation. The analysis of trauma as a cultural phenomenon can be grounded in the outlined concept of cultural memory with such essential dimensions as: communication, reflexivity of the knowledge about the past, axionormativity, affectivity and, last but not least, orientation toward the future. Collective trauma in particular shows the symbolic, emotional and moral dimensions of memory as a cultural phenomenon, the temporality of which is not limited to the past in the present, but also encompasses the future.

Keywords: cultural memory, history, temporality, time, trauma

1. A cultural approach – introductory remarks

Time, history and memory are crucial terms in the research of sociocultural phenomena, constituted by meanings shaped through cultural knowledge. However, the humanities have never formed one comprehensive theory of culture. For this reason, every attempt at clearly explicating them carries the risk of opening some Pandora's box, full of contradictory views or differing traditions of thought. This is a situation in which investigators will find themselves also upon entering the field of some discipline seemingly already developed. The presented rule applies to sociology as well, in which a processual – thus embracing the dimension

of time – approach to phenomena has not always been obvious (Elias 1987). First and foremost, an explicit understanding of sociocultural phenomena – and of the relations between culture and society – has never become established. This impacts our understanding of time, memory and history.

The presented essay proposes a look at issues of time, history and memory from a cultural perspective. It shows that social and cultural meanings of time, history and memory are not identical. Attempting to revalorize the cultural dimension in sociocultural phenomena, it especially brings into relief the concept of cultural memory. Thus, it questions the assumption that human social life produces time conceived as a measure, because of the narrow focus and sociological one-sidedness of this view. Instead, it embraces the idea of cultural autonomy of time and temporality, neither of which can be confined within the social boundaries of distinct groups. At the beginning, the issue of cultural time will be sketched out, in order to subsequently present a deeper analysis of cultural memory and of the particular phenomenon of the collective memory of trauma. The universalization of the cultural meaning of trauma is showing itself to be a global phenomenon today.

2. Time as a cultural dimension of meaning

At the outset, it is worthwhile to return to the reflections on the understanding of time, as presented years ago by Fernand Braudel (1958) He claimed that the historian cannot perceive the time of sociologists as his own; the deepest structure of the historian's craft defies this. For historians, time is a measure. Neither did he see a possibility of building a bridge linking historical and sociological research. Furthermore, Braudel claimed that time will never become a central problem in sociology, although he pertinently observed that time with which sociology concerns itself is something that exists inside social phenomena – it is one of their dimensions, or characteristics – a sign that gives meaning to social phenomena. This is a very important statement with regard the present attempt to show the problematics of time, history and memory in a cultural perspective. However surprising the standpoint of Braudel may seem as regards the centrality of the question of time in sociology, it must be acknowledged that merely introducing the term 'social time', or rather – as Georges Gurvitch (1963) proposed – the multiplicity of social times, or even an already clearly demarcated current of research in the form of sociology of time (Ryan 2005:838-839) do not suffice to undermine the validity of Braudel's skepticism. After all, it might be accepted that sociology of time remains on the periphery of the discipline, although it presents many valuable results of analyses of multiform social time, which is a correlate of individual and collective actions. Rhythms, cycles, pace and other rules of socio-temporal order do not mean that time moves into the focus of sociological problems. Instead, the question of time has become shifted toward the center of sociological problems by research on social memory. Matters change when

Braudel's claim becomes confronted with the problem of time as it appears in historical sociology, which depicts the sociotemporal conditions that underlie events and processes (Tilly 2001:570).

In an attempt to conclusively undermine both theses, concerning time of history and time of sociology, as well as the place of time in sociology, it is however best to question Braudel's notions on the grounds of history itself – the author's native discipline – where new ways of perceiving the object and methods of historical research have appeared (Le Goff 1992:213). When we acknowledge that one of the meanings of 'history' is a story – a narrative – and this meaning remains tied to the primary meaning of 'history' as research (Ricoeur 2000:173), then time as a 'when' category of meaning in the narrative order of phenomena is no longer an external measure, but rather a cultural dimension of the meaning of phenomena investigated both by the historian and by the sociologist or other researchers of culture and society. Thus we arrive at the question of qualitative time, which makes it possible to break out of the narrow concept of social time in favor of a broader, cultural perception of time – time linked with structures of meanings, values and emotions, or affects, which are not limited to social phenomena. For this reason it is important not to identify history solely with society. In other words – one should rather link history with culture, recognizing the latter as a term encompassing more than just social phenomena, which however do belong within its scope (Znaniecki 1934), as shown by the notion of societal culture.

It is to Braudel's credit that he noted the difference between time and history. This is significant insofar that even in approaches which take into account the complex dynamics of the influences of cultural meanings and social meanings time and history are occasionally treated as equivalent (Bourdieu 1984:74–75). Time, temporality and history – in regard both to phenomena of social life and to culture – require a more precise definition as distinct terms. These categories also do not yet exhaust the main issues which uncover the key significance of the problem of time as a dimension of meaning in sociology, transforming this branch of science into cultural sociology. Here belong, in particular, tradition and memory; of these two, more attention will be paid here to the latter; from a cultural perspective, after examining questions of time and history.

This direction of pursuits in sociology, within which the issue of time as such explicitly appeared, has been interpreted most often as a variant of social determinism in regard to the phenomena of culture, in other words – systems of meanings, values and their symbolization, conditioned by social structures. I am referring to sociologism as the research method proposed by Emile Durkheim. It was this sociological school that gave rise to the well-known work of Maurice Halbwachs, who conceptualized memory in social frames (Halbwachs 1969). However, the matter is not as clear as it might seem, since it is possible to apply a more cultural or semiotic interpretation to ways of thinking, feeling and acting – the facts analyzed by Durkheim. The contemporary strong program of a cultural sociology, researching the meanings of social life, is rooted in an interpretation of Durkheim's thought that proceeds in precisely such a direction (Alexander

2003:8). With regard to the further course of reflections, gravitating towards the cultural issues of collective memory and trauma, it is worth noting that for the Durkheimian research on collective representations and imaginations, the religious fact remained paradigmatic. This accentuates the constant relevance of symbols, sacrum and emotions in culture.

The culturalist point of view, nowadays regaining visibility, has formerly been proposed by certain researchers who pointed out the multiplicity of cultural systems and recognized their relative autonomy in regard to social systems (Archer 1996, Geertz 1973:66–73, Znaniecki 1952), although it is frequently tempting to use a term that embraces 'sociocultural phenomena' as a whole (White 2008:369). In the light of culturalist notions, time is closely linked with the constitution of cultural phenomena and its reduction to social time is impossible. Here arise issues of, on the one hand, the actuality of the 'here and now' and the long duration of cultural phenomena, and on the other, of their temporality and history. When adopting a cultural perspective, one has to acknowledge social phenomena – since they are significant – as belonging to the cultural reality. Although the collective life of humans induces us to discern within this reality social phenomena as such – based on interactions and relations, or networks – the idea of the relative autonomy of cultural phenomena as compared to social phenomena must be supported. It is thus necessary to draw a distinction between cultural time and social time.

An example of a modern sociological theory, in the center of which we find the problem of time, is Niklas Luhmann's theory of social systems. Two elementary categories here are communication and meaning – in other words, cultural categories *par excellence*. Thus, at the outset it must be noted that both for Braudel and for Luhmann time is linked with what may be called the semiotic mechanism of culture (Łotman and Uspienski 1971). As Luhmann writes, 'time' is a symbol which indicates that whenever something particular is happening, something else is happening as well, so that no single operation can achieve complete control over the conditions in which it is taking place (Luhmann 1995:41). Time is basically given in changes, which may be reversible or irreversible. Of significance for the cultural perspective is precisely the thesis that time – whatever it may be – does not necessarily require irreversibility, which allows us to distinguish between time and temporality. Temporality refers to experiencing and representing time with metaphors which emphasize its irreversibility (Luhmann 1995:42).

Reversible time, analyzed by Claude Lévi-Strauss, is characteristic for structures, whereas processes[1] consist of irreversible events (Luhmann 1995:44–45). Socio-cultural phenomena do not consist in an opposition between structures and processes, since processes have their own specific structures (Strauss 1993:254), whereas structures should be regarded as processes of structuration. Structure and

---

[1]   On temporality, events and social processes see the earlier views of Robert M. MacIver (Hałas 1995).

process assume each other, and the difference between them appears precisely in the dimension of time (Luhmann 1995:45).

As Luhmann remarks, time in systems of meaning makes it possible to interpret reality because of the difference between the past and the future (Luhmann 1995:77–78). The experience of the passage of time is associated with the difference between two species of the present. The first one consists in signs that something is irreversibly changing. These changes are symbolized as the inevitable occurring of time. On the other hand, the second present lingers and thereby symbolizes reversibility, which can manifest itself in all systems of meaning (Luhmann 1995:78–79). That which is irreversible and the prevention of irreversibility are both represented as time. A double difference manifests itself here; first between the past and the future, and second – between the reversible and irreversible occurring of the present (Luhmann 1995:78–79).

Bearing in mind the issue of cultural memory discussed further on, especially the question of memory of trauma, it is worthwhile to recall Luhmann's concept of 'gaining time'. Gaining time may consist in – among others – the ability to turn something which has become outdated back into a live issue by recalling the past and anticipating the future. Here, Luhmann invokes the concept of *prudentia*, which possesses a moral dimension (Luhmann 1995:46), in other words – a cultural ideal of the right action at the right time.

Once again it is necessary to emphasize the convergence between Luhmann's notions and the cultural perspective adopted here. This convergence stems from the basic assumption that time is a special dimension of meaning (Luhmann 1995:78–79). It is the dimension that gives meaning to experience and action through defining 'when' and not 'who', 'what', 'where' and 'how'. In other words, time has its own semantics, which refers to the relations between the 'past', 'present' and 'future'.

The temporal dimension of meaningful experiencing and action (Luhmann 1955:278–356) or the active experience of meaning (Znaniecki 1934:42) lies at the root of cultural reality and the constitution of social systems within it. From the hitherto presented reflections one may conclude that this is one of their symbolic dimensions. A closely related concept is the semantics of temporality and temporal orientations that underlie the reproduction of this semantics in society (Luhmann 1955:278–356). The present as actuality undergoes temporalization, in other words – perception in terms of the difference between the future and the past, or that which is changing. Thus, temporality is a variant of time understood as *tempus*, which contains moments that consist in the difference between the future and the past[2].

Following Luhmann's reasoning, we return to the question raised by Braudel – in other words, to the difference between time and history. Time is a more basic category and it is in the dimension of meaning which time represents that

---

[2]   On various cultural notions of time and the changes of temporal orientations, see Le Goff:50-64. For related questions of chronometry, chronology, chronography and chronosophy, see Pomian 1984 (after: Ricoeur:193).

temporality and history are constituted. History is not a simple sequence of events, which result from past events and causally influence those that will take place in the future. The focus is meaningful history – history endowed with significance. When describing social systems that emerge according to the principle of reduction of complexity, which enables their construction, Luhmann states that history is always a present past or a present future; it always involves distancing oneself from the pure sequence and always consists in a reduction of the thus obtained freedom of abrupt reference to everything past and everything future (Luhmann 1955:78–79).

Until now the issue of consciousness, which is linked to memory, has appeared only indirectly, in connection with the discussed question of time as a dimension of constructing the meaning of cultural and social reality. In accordance with the viewpoint established in the beginning, when taking up the question of memory we stay within the cultural dimension of communicated meanings, without venturing into the grounds of phenomenology with its analyses of the inner experience of time and meaning, to say nothing of the grounds of psychology.

The human experience of time, temporality and history is not passive – it is an active experience. As Anthony Giddens writes, humans do not simply live in time and history. As reflexive creatures, they cognitively frame the passage of time and make their history (Giddens 1986:237). Alluding to the well-known debate about 'making history' between Jean-Paul Sartre and Lévi-Strauss, he points out the lack of obviousness both of 'history' and of that which the 'making' of history might consist in. One must emphasize at least two issues associated with the above-mentioned distinction between reversible time and irreversible time. The routines of everyday life and a long duration of institutions are what characterizes reversible time, a vehicle for which is tradition. This would be one of the senses of 'making history'. In the other, stronger sense, the key issue is the agency of events that create irreversible time. This process involves the impact of memory, which cannot be defined merely as a record of the traces of past experiences, because memory does not only consist in recalling the past. It is something more, because it is linked with anticipation of the future in the present (Giddens 1986:46).

3. Reflexivity of cultural memory

Cultural reality is a historical reality shaped by human actions, the meanings and intentions of which assume a temporal experience, in other words – an experience of past, present and future time (Znaniecki 1919:30–32; Ingarden 1987:41–68). Cultural processes and cultural changes are closely linked with the memory of individual and collective agents as active factors. Externalized with the help of signs and symbols, meaningful experience possesses both a subjective and an objective dimension. Similarly, temporality has its subjective and objective side.

Psychology has given 'memory' a functional meaning, denoting the ability to assimilate, preserve and recall sensations and information. Adopting the notion of social memory, sociologists have undertaken studies on social contexts of remembrance processes. The concept of memory must first be reendowed with a cultural dimension. In fact, the theory of cultural memory remains insufficiently elaborated. Recently, interest in cultural memory has been stimulated by Jan Assmann's publications. However, the concept proposed by that author has a particular application and a limited significance (Assmann 1995:126), because he treats cultural memory as an identity-forming characteristic of social groups. The concept of cultural memory sketched out here differs from the proposal of Assmann, who did not draw a clear distinction between cultural memory, cultural heritage and cultural tradition. Actually, memory – as Max Scheler noted – makes it possible to neutralize the coercive or captivating power of tradition (Scheler 1976), since memory consists in reflexive reference to tradition. Thus, memory should not be considered the equivalent of tradition, as the former may consist in a radical departure from the latter and still retain the character of cultural memory, because memory is not associated exclusively with the past.

It is not my aim to reconstruct Assmann's concept in detail, or to analyze it critically. Hence I only pay attention to selected issues, highlighting the specificity of the cultural approach proposed here. The direction of the presented reflections has been determined primarily by the analytic distinction between culture and society, as well as by assuming the supremacy of the former and consequently by recognition of the autonomy of cultural phenomena in relation to social phenomena in the strict sense, that is – phenomena related to the collective life of humans. Instead, in Assmann's concept the notion of culture is close to the standpoint of those cultural anthropologists who use the differentiating concept of culture being always the feature of a certain group, so the concept in fact refers to cultures in plural. According to Assmann's concept, cultural memory remains an exclusive feature of a certain group – the part of shared knowledge that articulates the group's identity. In fact, Assmann speaks about "the inevitable egoism of cultural memory" (Assmann 1995:130). In such an approach, cultural memory is truly a sociocultural phenomenon and this concept prevents grasping the more universal processes of cultural dynamics in the temporal dimension of culture. Moreover, the proposal of separating cultural memory from communicative memory – that is, separation of the long-lasting, objectified memory of past events from commonsense memory on the level of everyday life – appears unsustainable. After all, the former also consists in communication, although in organized and institutionalized forms.

In the cultural perspective proposed here, memory is a temporal dimension of communicated meaning. In other words, memory consists in communicative acts transmitting reflexive knowledge about the past from the perspective of a future present. Thus, a further important difference lies in the fact that this proposal no longer regards memory as turned exclusively towards the past. In Assmann's concept, cultural memory – understood as knowledge about the past, objectified in

various symbolic forms – is retrospective (Assmann 1995:129). However, memory cannot be reduced only to sets of ideas about the past and to ways of commemorating that past, because it is closely linked with action (Mead 1964:345–354), and thus with an orientation towards the future.

In an attempt to shed light upon the cultural dimension of memory, it is worthwhile to consider religion as a cultural system constituted by memory[3]. Biblical tradition transmits a primary, moral sense of memory, which might be taken for a specific paradigm of axionormative models of cultural phenomena. In such a cultural sense the key issue is not short-term or long-term memory, nor merely the recollection of past events, but the memory that determines the transmission of meanings which will be formative for the future. In other words, the memory of the past prepares new events and makes it possible to actively anticipate the future. Such a notion of memory as a cultural phenomenon becomes a basis for social relations and ties connecting individuals or groups and determines their future actions.

God's memory about the human being and the human being's memory about God, depicted in biblical texts (Leon-Dufour 1970) is therefore a cognitive and affirmative memory, as well as a normative and imperative memory, directed towards the future. The focus is on 'memory that [something]' or 'memory of [something]', as well as memory relating to the future, obliging to actions consistent with principles derived from the past – 'remember to [do something]'. Thus, here we find the modeling features of culture which Clifford Geertz (1973) analyzed as 'models of' and 'models for'. The transcendence of relations and memory in the religious symbolic universe illustrates the autonomy of axio-normative models of culture. According to the concept proposed here, cultural memory enables reflexivity.

It follows from the presented line of argumentation that the concept of cultural memory is broader in terms of temporality than the concept of history, which only refers to the past of cultures and societies. In this way, temporality creates a different platform for the opposition of memory and history than the most frequent distinction between history in the sense of rational knowledge – history as a science that deals with the past – and memory as common knowledge about the past – an opposition questioned in any case, as evidenced by the expression 'living history'[4].

Here one must also consider the affective dimension of memory. Cultural memory, an outline of which is being sketched out here as communicated, reflexive knowledge, is associated with emotions relating to meanings and values originating in the past (the present past) and significant for the future present. As already shown, one must venture beyond researching the social circumstances of memory as ideas about the past – including group identity requirements – towards

---

[3]   The presented proposal differs from Assmann's claims also in this respect (Assmann 2006).

[4]   The expressions: 'living history' and 'living memory' do not refer only to a representation of that which is animate as opposed to that which is inanimate, but rather reach for the cultural sense of the transmission of meanings through the 'living' – spoken word.

analysis of autonomous cultural memory as a formative factor for social phenomena. This requires maintaining the analytically distinct categories of culture and society.

Cultural memory also has its past and may be a subject of historical research. The modern history of memory should take into consideration the appearance of a new criterion for selecting facts worthy of remembrance and commemoration. From heroic or triumphant memory the accent has shifted to martyrological memory. Of significance here is the development of a new cultural semantics of memory, which is symbolized by the concepts of trauma and genocide. Today, cultural memory both in the local and in the global dimension is largely a traumatized memory.

Transformations of memory in a global perspective (Hałas 2008) are associated with the establishment of new international relations on a cultural basis. The future of those relations depends on how each country deals with memories of past events – even those that took place in a very distant past. An assessment is being made of the entire modern age, from the time of great geographical discoveries and the beginnings of colonial expansion to the consequences of World War II. As regards the European context, the relevance of cultural memory stems from its differentiation and the still-valid sociocultural division between the East and West. European memory requires shared transmission of the meanings of past events, or at least their articulation, especially in the case of traumatogenic events. The analysis of trauma as a cultural phenomenon can be grounded in the outlined concept of cultural memory and its essential dimensions, such as: communication, reflexivity of the knowledge about the past, axionormativity, affectivity and, last but not least, orientation toward the future.

4. The cultural memory of trauma

'Trauma' is a symbol that condenses the tragic experiences of the age that saw two world wars. Their extreme manifestation is genocide. This relatively recent term, introduced into international law by Rafał Lemkin, is crucial in the semantics of contemporary, universal humanism. Trauma was initially understood as a psychological phenomenon – it appeared in the works of the French psychiatrists Pierre Janet and Jean-Martin Charcot, who had encountered the problem of personality disorders among World War I veterans. Earlier, too, there had been numerous autobiographic and literary descriptions of mass sufferings, for example the recollections of Henri Dunant – the founder of the International Red Cross, who described harrowing images of the aftermath of the Battle of Solferino. However, the meaning of 'trauma' has become broader – once referring to the psychical experiences of individuals, this term was extended to the collective experience of traumatized communities (Erikson 1994), or – as in the concept of cultural trauma – beyond the borders of directly affected participants (Alexander et al. 2004).

Both 'trauma' and 'genocide' are terms that encompass in meaning not only cognitive and emotional content, but normative content – moral, legal and political – as well. Their use often becomes an object of dispute and symbolic strife in various contexts of relations between groups, nations and states. Governments, international organizations such as the United Nations Organization, and other newly formed institutions participate in political actions on a global scale – politics of symbolization and politics of memory – which have developed around these concepts. In these sociocultural processes the autonomy of cultural factors manifests itself. Thus, the psychological perception of trauma is secondary and depends on sociocultural processes. A cultural approach allows the understanding of trauma as a process which is the result of an event defined as the disruption of the group's existence and the cultural meanings and values which are constitutive for that group. The memory of a traumatic event articulated in traumatic discourses simultaneously divides and connects – it is a memory both shared and divided. Significantly, cultural memory of trauma involves both the perpetrators and the victims, the witnesses and those who participate in it in various indirect ways as a result of the transmission of the memory of trauma. In the cultural understanding of trauma, a key question is its symbolic representation and communicated meanings, which is associated with other constitutive dimensions of cultural memory – axionormativity, affectivity and reflexivity.

In contrast to the concept of cultural trauma used by a team of researchers from the Advanced Center for Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University (Alexander et al. 2004), here I propose the term 'cultural memory of trauma' in order to avoid ambiguity associated with such an interpretation, in the light of which the experience of trauma would be something relative and only constructed. In this respect I partially share the standpoint of those who criticize the concept of cultural trauma (Joas 2005). However, the meaning of trauma is not limited only to the primary experience, unmediated by meaning. In fact, the experience of trauma often requires passage of time in order for the event to become defined as traumatic. Thus, trauma understood as a cultural process is not restricted only to the experience 'here and now', but consists in interaction and communication, where a blow dealt to the community is defined, victims are identified, responsibility is ascribed and future consequences of the experiences 'there and then' are determined. A crucial component of this process is the way of presenting trauma, its images, in other words – symbolization that influences the constitution and changes of collective identity. This translates into constantly repeated retrospective and prospective remembering oriented towards the future – a spiral process along the timeline. Jeffrey Alexander distinguishes several components of trauma: the feeling of community members that they have experienced a terrible event; indelible traces of the event left in the group's consciousness; permanent scarring of collective memory by that event; and finally, a fundamental and irreversible change of the collective identity (Alexander 2004). The characteristic of trauma presented above emphasizes group consensus and the continued upholding of the definition of the situation as traumatic. However, trauma as a cultural

process is not a state of group existence, nor can it be brought down to individual experiences; neither is it limited to the experience of those who directly participated in the traumatogenic event, but consists in the process of constructing cultural memory. The understanding of trauma has frequently been dominated by interpretations rooted in the psychoanalytic tradition. According to this approach, defense mechanisms are a key issue and successful therapy requires bringing the experience out into the open – its articulation. Although analogies between psychoanalytically perceived individual trauma and collective trauma may be useful, in a cultural analysis of trauma attention should be focused on reflexive processes of communication, interaction and symbolization.

Reducing trauma to a state of group existence dominated by a past event prevents its analysis as a cultural process which does not guarantee the consolidation of collective identity. This is a process with a variable course over time, and furthermore, its participants are not passively subjected to trauma; on the contrary, they are active. They define trauma, deal with trauma, enter into disputes about the meaning of trauma, or even defy it. Thus, trauma is not merely an accepted memory, publicly affirmed by a significant group of participants, all of whom recall events or situations which are burdened with negative affect; appear indelible; are considered a threat to the existence of the group, or else are thought to violate some fundamental cultural values of that group (Smelser 2004:44).

In this way one can, at most, describe the experience of trauma communicated by a traumatized group, where such a message represents only an element of the reflexive, cultural process of memory which constitutes trauma. In the cultural perspective the key issue is showing trauma as a future-oriented process of attempting to publicly define some historical event as trauma, to acknowledge it, and thus to respond to it. The point is not that social catastrophes are not traumatic in themselves for the people who have survived them, but the fact that their recognition and acknowledgment as trauma are not an unavoidable consequence of those events. It is the sociocultural context and the initiated process of constructing cultural memory that decide whether the given events will be recognized and acknowledged as trauma. This is the final result of processes of communicating, defining and symbolically representing, thanks to which the experience can later be remembered and acknowledged as culturally significant, because it has violated the axionormative model of culture.

Also, despite the content of the basic memory-creating message of the experience of collective trauma – in other words, despite the claim regarding its lasting existence – trauma often becomes a thing of the past, although not necessarily in an irreversible way. Cultural memory is historically variable and shifting. An analysis of this sociocultural process requires taking into account both the symbolic actions that construct the memory of trauma and the interactions of social subjects which respond variously to the claims of memory.

Assuming that collective trauma is a concept referring to very diverse traumatogenic events, one may – albeit with reserve – agree with the statement that a given situation may be traumatogenic in one sociocultural context and non-

traumatogenic in another (Smelser 2004:36) – at least in regard to the initiation of the reflexive process of memory. Thus, the cultural process of collective trauma is not restricted to the psychological dynamics of mechanisms of defense and adaptation – 'dealing' with trauma or 'working through' trauma. A traumatogenic event must be associated with a strong negative affect that accompanies defining a tragedy, shame, a collective catastrophe, in order for it to have a traumatic impact (Smelser 2004:40–41). The cultural understanding of trauma is in no way undermined by the fact that trauma has an affective dimension. On the contrary – emotions have a sociocultural explanation. The cultural vocabulary of emotions is characteristic for communicative processes constituting trauma as a cultural phenomenon. Affect-filled cultural representations – the affective symbolization of trauma – are not restricted to individual, psychological experiences, since they belong to axionormative models that endow experience with meaning.

Trauma as a cultural process is based on symbolization – this process takes place between the event or situation which has been traumatogenic for a community and the establishment of its collective representation. In this sense one may speak of a cultural process of constructing collective trauma, which is initiated by a message – the claim of the traumatized group that the symbolic representation of its experience should be acknowledged. Hand in hand with the narrative about the experience that violated the cultural models of existence goes a request for memory and for amends: emotional, institutional or symbolic. Thus, this is a process of symbolic interaction, by nature uncertain, contested, causing the polarization of the communities and individuals that participate in it. During its course, there is competition among various answers to the questions: what does the harm consist in, who is the victim, what is the relationship between the traumatized group and the wider audience and whether this audience will consent to symbolically participate in that group's experience of trauma. Finally, the identity of perpetrators is determined and responsibility is ascribed to them.

The modern institutions of international law, trials for crimes against humanity and crimes of genocide have fulfilled and still fulfill a special function in the cultural process of trauma, objectivizing the symbols of moral universals and creating axionormative models. Here, the representation of trauma comes under strictly defined categories, on the basis of which judgment is passed, responsibility is ascribed and punishment is meted out. However, these actions need not lead to the perpetrators' recognition of their own guilt, or to a solidary identification of wider audiences with the victims of trauma. Administering justice to those responsible for atrocities through researching the past is problematic, which raises doubts about the degree to which criminal law makes it possible to adequately deal with collective trauma. Requirements of justice, of historical truth, moral upbringing and commemoration create the need for various alternative ways of relating to trauma (Cohen 2001:230–231). One cannot ignore the voices which point out that new institutions are also needed, in order to create conditions promoting the development of a culture of peace in the future (Christie 2003:346–347).

Thus, the memory of trauma is on the one hand a shared memory, when it connects a traumatized community, and on the other hand a divided memory, which means not only the divided memory of perpetrators and victims, but also the differences, divisions and stratifications of the memory of trauma in a local and global scale. Oblivion as a result of the disruption of the transmission of memory – collective amnesia – neutralizes trauma. In another sense one may speak of neutralization, which can be the result of growing routine in the cultural process of symbolically representing trauma. Neutralization means above all a reduction or removal of the strong affect. Acknowledging the claims of the traumatized community or society and consensus as to the meaning of the traumatic experience become objectivized symbolically in places of memory and in commemorative rituals. This does not mean that in such a routinized form the memory of trauma does not have deep normative implications and significance for the collective identity, as a reference system for the interpretation of the present and future, as well as relations between groups or between nations. Rituals of truth and reconciliation, acknowledgment of the traumatogenic event, or of the situation and of responsibility for causing it, in rituals of repentance and apology which have become a new cultural form of defining identity in international relations – all this emphasizes the significance of the issue of collective trauma in the modern world.

One may speak about the neutralization of collective trauma in yet another problematic and conflictogenic sense, when – as in the classic criminological concept (Sykes and Matza 1979) – the perpetrator denies responsibility for his norm-breaching deed or questions the classification of the results of that deed as a violation of the preexisting order. In such a case, however, there still exists consensus – at least an implicit one – as to the question that a deed belonging to a certain category constitutes a breach of the norm. Perpetrators and their supporters employ various means of neutralization in order to try to prevent the acknowledgement of the claims of the traumatized community or society. Avoiding the label of genocide is an extreme example of communicative situations in which such 'states of denial' occur (Cohen).

Techniques of denial and neutralization used by individual perpetrators are similar to those which appear in the discourse of the representatives of groups or governments accused of violating human rights. Furthermore, their semantic cultural resources resemble those that are utilized when calling people to actions that involve committing atrocities. These are cultural vocabularies of motives, the main purpose of which is to help avoid a depreciating categorization of actions. Thus, the definition of wrongs is questioned, as is victimhood; those who condemn are condemned; higher loyalties are invoked in an effort to justify acts, or responsibility is denied entirely, or an attempt is made to prove a lack of knowledge about the traumatogenic event, in other words – inability to understand the significance of one's own earlier actions (Cohen:76f). Official denial often follows a clear course: from a strategy of literal denial (no such thing has happened), through interpretative denial (something completely different

happened), to implicative denial (the occurrence is justified). If the first strategy fails, one switches to the others (Cohen:7–8).

The concepts of trauma and genocide, referring to extreme, tragic experiences of collective existence – such as Nazism and communism – must be considered an achievement in the process of civilization, because they have appeared as symbols of opposition against that which may be called the inhuman coefficient of social and cultural reality. They create the semantics of cultural memory in the cognitive and affirmative sense ('remembering that [something happened]') and in the normative and imperative sense ('remembering to'). Thus, although they may be subjected to semantic manipulation in the politics of memory, above all they become tools for ongoing preventive action against the normalization of atrocities in the future. The cultural process of trauma shows the temporality of collective memory, which encompasses not only the past, but also the future.

5. Concluding remarks

This article presents an outline of the problems of time, history and memory seen from a cultural perspective. Semiotically interpreting the concept of time used by sociology, we acquire the ability to better analyze the connections between the cultural and the social in sociocultural phenomena, as well as their temporality. It has been shown that the issue of time has a central position among sociological problems and is not restricted to the question of social time as a correlate of social actions, since time is a cultural dimension of meaning. It is necessary to relate social phenomena to a relatively autonomous cultural reality of meanings and values – axionormative models. Cultural memory endows them with reflexivity. Collective trauma in particular shows the symbolic, emotional and moral dimensions of memory as a cultural phenomenon, the temporality of which is not limited to the past in the present, but also encompasses the future variants of the present.

Address:
    Elżbieta Hałas
    Institute of Sociology
    University of Warsaw
    Karowa 18
    00-927 Warsaw
    Poland
E-mail: ehalas@uw.edu.pl

References

Alexander, Jeffrey C. (2003) *The meanings of social life. a cultural sociology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Alexander, Jeffrey C., Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka, eds. (2004) *Cultural trauma and collective identity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Alexander, Jeffrey C. (2004) "Toward a theory of cultural trauma". In *Cultural trauma and collective identity,* 1–30. Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka, eds. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Archer, Margaret S. (1996) *Culture and agency: the place of culture in social theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Assmann, Jan (1995) "Collective memory and cultural identity". *New German Critique* 65, 125–133.

Assmann, Jan (2006) *Religion and cultural memory: ten essays*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre (1984) *Question de sociologie*, Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit.

Braudel, Fernand (1958) "Histoire et science sociales: La Longue durée," *Annales ESC* 4, 725–53,

Christie, Nils (2003) "Answers to Atrocities". In *The moral fabric in contemporary societies,* 335–353. Grażyna Skąpska, Annamaria Orla-Bukowska, and Krzysztof Kowalski, eds. Leiden: Brill.

Cohen, Stanley (2001) *States of denial: knowing about atrocities and suffering*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Elias, Norbert (1987) *Time. an essay*. Edmund Jephcott, transl. Oxford: Blackwell.

Erikson, Kai (1994) *A new species of trouble: explorations in disaster, trauma, and community*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co.

Geertz, Clifford (1973) *The interpretation of cultures: selected essays*. New York: Basic Books.

Giddens, Anthony (1986) *The constitution of society: outline of the theory of structuration*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Gurvitch, Georges (1963) "Social structure and the multiplicity of times". In *Sociological theory, values and sociocultural change,* 171–184. Edward Tiryakjan, ed. London: The Free Press of Glancow.

Halbwachs, Marice (1925) *Les cadres socioux de la memoire*, Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan.

Hałas, Elżbieta (1995) "Robert Morrison MacIver (1882–1960) on temporality and understanding of social phenomena". *Polish Sociological Review* 1, 5–14.

Hałas, Elżbieta (2008) "Issues of social memory and their challenges in the global age". *Time and Society* 17, 1, 103–118.

Ingarden, Roman (1987) *Książeczka o człowieku*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie.

Joas, Hans (2005) "Cultural trauma? On the most recent turn in Jeffrey Alexander's cultural sociology". *European Journal of Social Theory* 8, 3, 365–374.

Le Goff, (1992) *History and Memory*, Steven Rendall and Elizabeth Claman transl. New York: Columbia University Press.

Leon-Dufour, Xavier (ed.) (1970) *Vocabulaire de teologie biblique*, Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf.

Luhmann, Niklas (1995) *Social Systems*. John Bednarz, Jr. transl. Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press

Łotman, Jurij and Borys Uspieński (1971) "O siemioticzeskom miechanizmie kultury" *Semeiotike 5, Trudy po znakowym sistiemam*, Tartu, 144–166.

Mead, George H. (1964) "The nature of the past". In *Selected writings. George Herbert Mead,* 345–354. Andrew J. Reck, ed. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Pomian, Krzysztof (1984) *L'ordre du temps*. Paris: Gallimard.

Ricoeur, Paul (2000) *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.

Ryan, Dan (2005) "Time and social theory". In *Encyclopedia of social theory*, II, 837–840. George Ritzer, ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Scheler, Max (1976) *Die Stellung des Mensches In Kosmos*, In Max Scheler, Gesammelte Werke, vol. 9, Bern: Francke Verlag, 9–71.

Smelser, Neil J. (2004) "Psychological trauma and cultural trauma". In *Cultural trauma and collective identity*, 31–59. Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka, eds. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Strauss, Anselm L. (1993) *Continual permutations of action*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

Tilly, Charles (2001) "Historical analysis of political processes". In *Handbook of sociological theory,* 567–588. Jonathan H. Turner, ed. New York: Kluwer Academic.

Sykes, Gresham M. and David M. Matza (1979) "Techniques of neutralization: a theory of delinquency". In *Social interaction. introductory readings in sociology,* 497–504. Howard Robboy, Sidney L. Greenblatt, and Candace Dark, eds. New York: St. Martin's Press.

White, Harrison C. (2008) *Identity and control: how social formations emerge*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Znaniecki, Florian (1919) *Cultural reality.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Znaniecki, Florian (1934) *The method of sociology*. New York: Rinehart and Co.

Znaniecki, Florian (1952) *Cultural sciences: their origin and development*. Urbana, Il.: University of Illinois Press.