

Social Memory, Public Memory, and Marginality: The Case of the “Death in Migration”

Guido Nicolosi ^{1*}

¹ University of Catania, ITALY

*Corresponding Author: guido.nicolosi@unict.it

Citation: Nicolosi, G. (2023). Social Memory, Public Memory, and Marginality: The Case of the “Death in Migration”, *Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change*, 8(2), 11. <https://doi.org/10.20897/jcasc/14064>

Published: December 30, 2023

ABSTRACT

Memory is a source of ‘immunization’ for individuals (psycho-cognitive memory and biological immune system) and for communities (De Martino). We can consider culture as the memory of society. Particularly, the cultural memory of disasters plays a fundamental role. Ideally, it should help to reduce the vulnerability of societies to the risks of recurrence of natural/technological/social catastrophic events. However, memory is not an exact process, but a selective and reconstructive one (Bartlett). Furthermore, the memory of society is multiple and continuously exposed to the risk of distortions, interpretations, and manipulations. Social memory (Halbwachs) is the broader sphere of communicability that delimits the arena in which the different collective memories (of groups) compete for the relevance and plausibility of their own discourses. It will correspond, with good approximation, to the term “public memory”. In particular, the media and journalism play a very important function, as public memory is a memory of the public sphere (Habermas) and, somehow, the public sphere is itself memory (Jedlowski). This presentation aims to compare two social memories of a single catastrophic event in which a marginal social category was involved: migrants illegally crossing the Mediterranean Sea. The research focus concerns a watershed event of the recent migratory phenomenon: the Lampedusa shipwreck that took place on the 3rd October 2013. The goal is to show how collective and public memory contrast each other. We will discuss two cultural and communicative processes located along the oppositional materialization/dematerialization axis. In the article we will reinterpret the evidence collected in the research carried out in 2014 on the Lampedusa shipwreck that took place on 3 October 2013 in order to reflect on the dynamics between different types of memories in the framework of the memory of disasters. We assume that they can be deeply distortive as they promote interrelated memory bias.

Keywords: disasters, death, migration, media, collective memory

INTRODUCTION

On 26 February 2023, in the early hours of the morning, almost 10 years after the dramatic shipwreck of Lampedusa, a new tragedy involving migrants occurred in Italy, a few metres off the coast of Steccato di Cutro (Calabria), when a boat with over 100 people on board was pushed by very rough sea against the rocks close to the Italian coast. Thanks to the public dissemination of the video, we can see the boat in movement as filmed the night before by a control plane from the European agency Frontex (**Figure 1**).

According to journalistic reconstructions, at 23.03 Frontex warned the International Coordination Centre of Maritime Safety with a dispatch. It also sent the report to the Operations Centre of the Coast Guard in Rome. There are no visible elements showing the presence of migrants on board, however, the systems on board the



Figure 1. Frame from Frontex video footage.

Eagle 1 detect a ‘significant’ thermal response near the hatches, an accurate sign of a possible human load. Moreover, Eagle 1 records a flow of calls between the boat and Turkey, and this too supports the theory of migrant transport.

Today, we know that there were at least 180 people hidden in its ‘belly’, with the telephone signal inhibited by traffickers. After tracking, Eagle 1 departs, and as it leaves, it takes a photo of the boat with a long distance shot that shows it rocking among the waves more than was apparent from closer footage. The rest is the story of a massacre. The bodies of the migrants remain in the memory and in the nightmares of the inhabitants of Cutro. What remains in the memory of the international public opinion is only the picture of the skeleton of a wreck (**Figure 2**); or worse, the aseptic black and white photo of an anonymous boat with the romantic name of Summer Love which today sounds to our ears like an unbearable insult of black humour.

Ten years later, the tragic story of the migration crisis in Italy repeats itself, as if nothing had happened on the beaches of Lampedusa on that terrible October 3, 2013. The primary objective of this article is to develop a reflection on the theme of the memory of disasters, such as a specific and particularly significant case of the social and also political role of public memory. This objective will not be pursued solely through a review of theoretical issues, however important they may be, but by presenting and re-reading, from a memory studies perspective, the results of a case study linked to empirical research carried out after the Lampedusa shipwreck (Nicolosi, 2018).

In particular, the main aim of this article is to compare two social memories of a single catastrophic event. The research focus concerns a watershed event of the recent migratory phenomenon: the Lampedusa shipwreck that took place on 3 October 2013. The goal is to show how collective and public memories can contrast each other.

MEMORY, IDENTITY, AND IMMUNIZATION

Memory is the basis of our identity. It is correct to say that we are what we remember we are. Reversing the Cartesian maxim *cogito ergo sum*, we are not what we are because we think, but because we have the ability to remember what we think. Our every thought, every word spoken, and every action depends on our ability to store our experiences (Squire and Kandel, 2010). Memory is also a fundamental source of ‘immunization’ for the individual. First of all, from a biological point of view, our immune system is the memory of our body, with respect to the threats we suffer from the outside world (Edelman, 1992). From a psycho-cognitive point of view, memorizing experiences decreases the likelihood of repeating past mistakes.

But memory is not a phenomenon that unfolds exclusively on an individual level. There is a social matrix of memory that has been demonstrated over time by the authoritative consolidated literature. Of these, it is sufficient to recall the most relevant (e.g. Bartlett, 1974; Halbwachs, 1954; Vigotsky, 2007 [1934]).

Lev Semenovic-Vigotsky (2007) works on the theme of memory as part of his research on the development of children’s abstract thinking and inner language. To his merit, he is credited with having introduced the definition



Figure 2. Photo of the remains of the boat on the beach of Cutro shortly after the shipwreck.

of ‘mediated memory’, referring to a socially and culturally connoted subject. In doing this, he focusses his attention on the communicative dimension, in particular the verbal dimension, i.e. the use of words.

The great Soviet psychologist and pedagogist showed that there is a link between memory and evolutionary development and, therefore, the appearance of mental functions based on logic and abstraction. He distinguishes between an organic and a mediated memory and clarifies that if in childhood the child thinks through memory, later the adolescent remembers through thought. Remembering therefore has a double nature: a natural mechanism (based on the stimulus-response relationship), but also a social and cultural process. The social and cultural context shapes the form, content, and mode of transmission of memory. Here, the identity characteristics of the subject and his individual life history, are fundamental, and the mediation of language is decisive.

The second contribution which we deem important to mention, albeit briefly, is that of the British psychologist Frederic Bartlett. He was not satisfied with the results of experimental research under laboratory conditions, indeed, his goal was to show the real functioning of memory mechanisms, in the real social contexts to which the subjects belonged.

Bartlett’s studies are pioneering because they are aimed at creating a bridge between memory, imagination and the construction of meaning. In particular, he claims, meaning is the result of a connection between what is and what is not, aligned to the classic definition of the sign provided by De Saussure (1916). This obviously means reading meaning as a connection between the present and the past.

The ethnographic connotation of his research and his attention to other cultures in the carrying out of his experiments are very interesting and relevant. This interest arose from the aim of studying and showing the weight that culture plays in the construction of meaning and in the processes of memorisation. For example, his experiments on the domestication of experience in repetition were of great importance, with the use of narrative repertoires from different cultures to those of the subjects studied. In short, for Bartlett, memory is a process of gradual and phased rationalization which implies a progressive transformation consistent with the socio-cultural horizon of reference.

Bartlett defines memory as a constructive process because remembering an experience means adapting it to an already constructed meaning, but it is also creative because remembering can stimulate active and selective intervention. Both the individual and the social group, he tells us, recall the past by reconstructing and reshaping

it in the interest of the present. According to Bartlett, recollection uses the social past to creatively direct the actions of the subject's present, thus also organizing future knowledge. In this sense, remembrance grounds the subject in duration.

Maurice Halbwachs (1925, 1950), rightly considered the father of the sociology of memory, defines memory as a *social fact*, since every memory implies social structures that function as a canvas around which to organise a story from the past and which make communication and sharing possible.¹ For Halbwachs, memory is knowledge, remembrance, trace, evocation of the past, and, ultimately, all social thought is memory. Although there is a tendency to consider it a privileged object of psychology, that it is a functional and mental operation of the individual, there are 'social frameworks of memory' and that is a 'collective memory'. Only when our individual thought is placed within these frameworks, can it remember.

Thus, Halbwachs's (1925, 1950) theory of memory has a dual nature. On the one hand, it seeks to demonstrate that an individual's memory itself always develops within a social framework and, on the other hand, it highlights the true and proper manifestations of collective memory, i.e. the way in which human groups, social classes, religious groups or families keep the memory of their past. Naturally, Halbwachs does not intend to question memory as a psychic function, but rather he opposes the sociological level of the collective to individual mental mechanisms.

Furthermore, for Halbwachs, memory is never merely preserved, but always reconstructed from the present. It is, in fact, the group to which the individual belongs that provides the tools to reconstruct the past: language, calendars, conventions, spaces, durations, etc. All these things make the past meaningful. The selectivity of memory, after all, is nothing more than the ability to order the sense of the past according to representations, visions of the world, symbols, or notions that allow social groups to think about the present.

Thus, there are three key passages in Halbwachs (Lavabre, 1998):

- a) The past is not preserved but reconstructed from the present;
- b) The memory of the past is possible only because of the social frameworks of reference that individuals possess;
- c) There is a social function of memory: the mythologised past is recalled to justify the present social representations.

A particularly relevant aspect, for our work, concerns the emphasis placed by Halbwachs on materiality. Memory, the French sociologist tells us, is inscribed in places and spaces (and in things) in which the groups in action in society recognise each other. In this sense, unlike history, which aims at a universal knowledge of the past through a unitary reconstruction of truth, collective memory is plural and multiform, because it is inscribed in the social times and in the differentiated spaces appropriated by groups.²

On the other hand, since individuals participate synchronously and diachronically in the social life of different groups, they will have an individual memory which is defined as the interference of different collective memories. Therefore, collective memory is not a sociological abstraction or a pure metaphor. It is not the unitary memory of a group on the model of individual memory and it is not a mere addition of individual memories. It is the precondition of the ability to remember for individuals and is, for this reason, able to guarantee a fundamental function of social integration.

The great Russian semiologist Yuri Lotman says that the memory of a society is its culture. More generally, the concept of culture is decisively intertwined with the concepts of memory, transmission, text and *semiosphere*.³ For Lotman (2023), culture is memory because it is always linked to past experience and therefore always implies an intellectual continuity that develops at an individual and social level. Culture is the set of nongenetic information, the nonhereditary memory of humankind. However, it is an active and dynamic memory, not merely a documentary one. The destruction of memory is the destruction of a culture. From a political point of view, this aspect is central. Furthermore, in Lotman's semiotics, since culture is a function of the mnemonic operations that take place within it, it is also a function of the media, institutions and practices intrinsically linked to the preservation and transmission of cultural knowledge (Ernst, 2018: 164).

¹ In brief, we can distinguish between three conceptual fields of reference (Guzzi, 2004): 'collective', 'social' and 'cultural' memory. The first denotes groups' memory heritage characterised by powerful identity bonds - family, religious community, class. The 'social memory' concept denotes a wider communication sphere encompassing the arena within which the various collective memory discourses vie for relevance and plausibility. To a considerable extent this corresponds to the term 'public memory'. Lastly, 'cultural memory' denotes the past's influence over the present via symbolic legacies, rites and traditions.

² Jacques Le Goff (1988) masterfully investigates this contrast between history and memory, refusing to dismiss the relationship between the two as merely opposing. Indeed, he defines history as the scientific form of collective memory, both based on documents and monuments.

³ The continuum that makes social life, relations and communication possible is called the *semiosphere* by Lotman (1985), in analogy with the concept of *biosphere* - the ambit necessary for living beings for their biological survival.

Interestingly, the archaeologist Jan Assmann (1997) tells us about a ‘grand alliance’ between power and memory. He will say (*op. cit.*, p. 43): ‘A strong incentive for memory is power’ and, again, ‘Power needs an origin, a provenance’ (p. 44). However, also in this case, as in that of the cult of the dead, we are faced with a duality of the phenomenon: retrospective and prospective. Power must take possession of the past to have legitimacy, but it also wants to take possession of the future with its own performances, that is, it legitimizes itself retrospectively and immortalizes itself prospectively. Furthermore, duplicity within duplicity, since the other side of memory is oblivion, the alliance of power with memory is an alliance with oblivion. For this reason, we will also see it later, a decisive question for power concerns the definition of the perimeter of the so-called *damnatio memoriae*.⁴

If we insist on the biological metaphor, we could say that there is a social memory that is also a decisive source of immunisation for communities (De Martino, 2019). For example, the memory of disasters plays a complex and fundamental role in determining the way in which social groups deal with emergencies and crises (environmental, social, technological, etc.). In addition to having a highly symbolic function, capable of rebuilding the social and supportive fabric of a wounded community (Clavandier, 2004), ideally it should also help reduce the vulnerability of societies to the recurrence of catastrophic events.

However, as demonstrated by Bartlett (*op. cit.*), memory is not a perfect process, but a highly selective and ‘reconstructive’ one. Even social memory lends itself to distortions, interpretations, and manipulations (Pfister, 2009), ultimately representing a potential risk for the management of future catastrophes (D’ercole and Dolfuss, 1996). However, whilst a social group can share the same knowledge of past events, collective memory is ultimately always divided in its interpretations. Moreover, in cases referring to traumatic and tearing events for the community, which are extremely controversial, this can be a source of political and judicial conflict (Luchetti, 2022). There is a gap between the accepted version of the past, the past conserved in the archives, and the *under-reported* versions.

Assmann (1997) himself, on the other hand, had spoken of a contra-presentistic memory which pushes against the founding memory which legitimises the *status quo* thanks to the mythology constructed by the holders of power, and is aimed at expressing the dissatisfaction of certain social groups: the revolutionary movements, heretics, etc. These groups, by imagining a different past than the one celebrated by institutionalised power, build an imaginary memory projected towards a new order, a new social reality.

These traces play no part in event commemoration and express no capacity to forge memories. This is especially decisive in the official definition of catastrophe memories as Kaspersky brilliantly demonstrated (2012) in reference to the Chernobyl nuclear tragedy. The symbolic transmission of community allegiance is built on a putative past, a tradition. The past is used in various ways as if it were a resource. In fact,

The manner in which the past is invoked is strongly indicative of the kinds of circumstance which makes such a ‘past-reference’ salient. It is a selective construction of the past which resonates with contemporary influences (Cohen, 1985: 99).

Whilst the symbolic-identity narrative generally aims to over represent the collective memory’s homogeneity, coherence and internal harmony it is actually only rarely a monolithic entity. The existence of the community depends on the power of official and institutional symbols and on memory with selective re-elaborations designed to create functional, legitimising frameworks. It can also make use of memories as a tool in the struggle against political opponents or to legitimise specific power aspirations. *Damnatio memoriae* is a historical reconstruction constant in the collective memory (Wynter, 1998).

The media and journalists play an extremely significant part in the public-memory-shaping process. Drawing on Habermas’s thought, public memory can be considered a public sphere memory (Habermas, 2005). In some ways the public sphere is itself memory, as Paolo Jedlowski rightly argued (2018), as it only exists as a constant and diachronic dialogue between ideas and arguments, both past and present. But this is not all. The public sphere also encompasses and elaborates past discourses, arguments and narratives which are constantly marshalled to shore up theories, back up stances and support collective ideas and so on. Public memory is thus ultimately an ‘image of the past under public debate’. And it performs two fundamental functions: a) defining the ‘plausibility and relevance criteria’ by which traces of the past are selected from the vast patrimony available to groups and societies; b) delineating the arena in which group collective memories dialogue with one another, lose their self-referential quality and are subject to critical analysis.

Jedlowski interestingly acknowledged the fundamental importance of two key issues: the selection matrix at work in public memory, which inevitably tends to exclude certain stances and theories considered marginal, and the increasingly important role played by non-rational, identity-based or imaginary symbolic arguments.

⁴ In Roman law, *damnatio memoriae* was a penalty which consisted in the cancellation of traces concerning a particular person, as if he had never existed. It was a particularly harsh punishment, reserved only for traitors and *hostes*, the enemies of the Roman Senate.

The memory-journalism bond can seem counter-intuitive. Journalism has always been considered distinct from history and has itself always aspired to newsworthiness, a quality powerfully bound up with proximity, relevance and novelty (Zelizer, 2010). However, from the late 1980s onwards, collective memory studies have devoted a great deal of attention to journalism and the role it plays in shaping memories and the collective reconstruction of the past, because it is increasingly clear that group memories are powerfully influenced by themed agendas. Media sociologists, in particular, have increasingly highlighted a persistent preference on the part of journalists for events preceding currently-under-way news items. Three aspects of the past are journalistically appealing: commemoration, historical analogies, historical contexts. In this sense journalists can certainly be said to be 'memory agents' of great importance, although many journalists would probably reject such a definition.

For Lang and Lang (1989) collective memory selects from a set of images of the past which retain their historic relevance by means of a re-mediation process. In this sense journalism is fundamentally important memory work. The reference to the past in journalistic narrative is a constant quest to accord meaning to the present narrative, to connect-up, suggest inferences, create reference points with which to assess the impact of a given event and its magnitude, offer analogies and supply immediate explanations. It is very frequently precisely comparison with the past that makes news stories especially appealing. In this sense, for journalists the past is a decisive implicit backdrop to draw on to highlight foreground news reporting. In other words, for journalists the past is the most important knowledge store available to them to supply explanatory readings of the present (and future). It can thus, with Lang & Lang, be said that the past is the primary furnace in which public opinion is forged.⁵

An important part of journalistic narrative is based on traumatic events which the public is urgently seeking interpretative frameworks for. As has now been clearly demonstrated by trauma studies there is a powerful nexus between journalism, collective memory and collective trauma (Alexander et al., 2004; Meek, 2010). The tensions and critical issues feeding into the public debate which revolves around dramatic events are a reliable memory work generation indicator. The more controversial the events – such as disasters and catastrophes – the greater the recourse to journalistic memory and past narratives. Naturally this dialogue with the past is not always accurate. Quite the opposite. It can also be misleading and dangerous.

PUBLIC MEMORY, SOCIAL MEMORY, AND DISASTERS: DEATH IN MIGRATION AND THE CASE OF LAMPEDUSA

As already discussed in the introduction, the main aim of this article is to re-read, from a memory studies perspective, the results of a case study already discussed (Nicolosi, 2018): the Lampedusa shipwreck.⁶ The goal is to show how collective and public memories can contrast each other. To do that we decided to present the two opposing intertwining processes acting in that case study. In that research, we called the first process *materializing*, as it is based on the cultural elaboration of death in concrete and corporeal terms. On the contrary, we decided to call the second *dematerializing*, as it is based on the concealing and rarefying of the material aspects of death.

In order to do that, we compared the Italian media representations of the events of Lampedusa with the accounts related by the inhabitants of Lampedusa. With regard to the media, a qualitative analysis was carried out on texts and images produced by the news programmes broadcast by television channels (over a period of seven days) – Rai 3 (public television), La7 (private channel) and Sky (private digital TV) – and some articles published in the newspaper *La Repubblica* (over a period of 28 days), in the weeks following the boat disaster. With regard to the experiences of the inhabitants of Lampedusa, on May 2014 we carried out about 30 non-structured in-depth interviews with firsthand witnesses (emergency rescuers, teachers, priests, scuba divers, fishermen, institutional representatives).

Media Representation of Migration and the Events of Lampedusa

Media representation is a form of social representation (Moscovici, 1961) and a process oriented towards a symbolic reconstruction of reality (Eco, 1964; Wolf, 1985). The media representation of migration in Italy

⁵ This fertile relationship is confirmed by the experience of Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BnF) which recently (2012) set up an online service entirely devoted to past media for which it coined the term *retronews*. It is a website providing free access to 1500 printed items published from 1631 to 1950. *Retronews* is both a textbook digital consultation and archive space, a research tool and fully-fledged magazine – an opportunity to find out more about history via press archives - and, at the same time, a retrospective view of current events.

⁶ On the 3rd October 2013 a fishing boat sailed from Misurata, Libya, overflowing with immigrants sank half a mile from the coast, due to a fire that had broken out on board. The shipwreck caused the death of about 400 people. It was not the most serious catastrophe in the Mediterranean Sea, but it was the only one with first-hand witnesses, the first (and the only) narrated by media, the first one producing social memory.

produced a broad socio-political debate and several empirical studies (Binotto et al., 2016; Censis, 2002; Corte, 2002; Cotesta, 1999; Dal Lago, 1999; Mansoubi, 1990; Morcellini, 2009; Musarò e Parmiggiani, 2014 and so on).

Although they show different perspectives they also have some important evidence in common. In particular, it would seem that newsmaking in Italy submits the migrant to a radical process of symbolic deindividuation. The techniques of representation often use an expressive, linguistic and iconic register shaped by a semantic structure negating the migrants' social identity (Nicolosi, 2007).

The tragic events of Lampedusa on 3 October 2013 reproduced the very same semantic configuration. Concerning the press, around 80% of the article we analysed followed the traditional de-individualizing register. In this narrative, death underwent a process of refined symbolic rarefaction. It is always 'between the lines' and never explicit. It is always detached from the identity of the involved people. Here, death remains a 'backdrop' detached from the bodily dimension of real corpses. It becomes immaterial, abstract, odourless and colourless.

In the case of images, the tendency was even more homogeneous. Media (press and television) used a 'tropical' iconographic regime based on a rhetorical 'translation'. Here, the corpses were metaphorized or 'rarefied' using synecdoche, metonymy, etc. Images shown on television were relics of the boats, flowers in the sea, coffins, coloured bags, groups of anonymous migrants, etc. In newspapers we saw fishing boats overflowing with migrants, remains of objects such as toys, instruments and utensils, documents, shoes, trousers, etc. All these objects are only traces. The real identities of migrants and their bodies were never revealed. The corpse disappears, it is present only in the background, as we said before.

Anatomy of the Social Memory (and Imagery) of Lampedusa Inhabitants

The real experience of the people of Lampedusa shows a different frame. We carried out our interviews a year after the tragic events (May 2014) and we can say that on Lampedusa, death and its material dimension had a tremendous impact on the life of the island community. The power and the scale of the events violently dictated the most material features. Many fishermen who had taken part in the rescue operations were still not able to go out to sea to cast their nets.

The prevailing sentiment of the interviewees is that of abandonment, a feeling produced by the fact of being abandoned *with the corpses* of the migrants. From the interviews it clearly emerges that it was the concrete, physical presence of the corpses and the material difficulties linked to the management of this presence that marked the lives of the community. This material presence was symbolically elaborated and then expressed with various remembrances and mental images. We tried to categorise and present them using the words of the inhabitants.

The first rescuers were above all besieged by the shouts and cries of a multitude asking for help. B., a shipwright who had gone out to sea on the evening of 2 October to spend the night on the craft with some friends, found himself in the place of the shipwreck the following morning. He remembers having mistaken the screams for the cries of the shearwater (*Calonectris diomedea*), birds that nest on the Pelagie islands, similar to seagulls, whose cry is reminiscent of the desperate cry of an infant:

what happened? So it was then that he started to say: I can hear screams! I said: look, with all these seagulls ... 'No no no I can hear shouting, I hear shouting' [...] and, while we were going out into the open sea I told him: 'See, A., shearwaters, seagulls, shearwaters, seagulls' but then ... after a minute there were no shearwaters or seagulls. All these arms reaching up for the sky, these young men of colour who were desperately shouting out for help. And, well; then we understood that the sea was full of them and we understood the scale of the tragedy taking place.

Another significant issue emerging from the accounts was what we called the dilemma of choice, here lived as a corporeal fact. The drowning victims in fact were pleading for help, arms flailing, begging to be pulled aboard the boat to safety. For the rescuers, this meant the burden of a terrible choice, deciding who should be 'drowned' and who should be 'saved'. This was a choice conditioned by material contact with the bodies of one with the bodies of the other; a contact whose memory is seared on the conscience of those who found themselves there. As Z., a fisherman, explained:

it's hard to get a word out of him these days. One of his brothers doesn't go fishing any more because two or three of the people he was trying to save just slipped right through his hands. Two kids as well, do you see? This thing has stayed with him; he just can't get over it and has fallen into depression. Guys, this morning he was sitting right here, but he seemed to me just like a mummy.

The fact of bodies slipping away towards death is one of the main dramatic aspects of the accounts. It happened often as the bodies of the migrants were covered in petrol and therefore particularly slippery. The onus of choice returns in other accounts but from a different perspective. For example, the doctor of the town is moved to tears

while narrating the story of a father who is forced to choose which of his two sons to sacrifice in order to save the life of the other son and that of his wife:

he told me a story, that would have been better if he hadn't. What I mean is, there were four of them and they had a little 3-year-old son. Don't ask me to tell you these things because it makes me feel ill... Because he says 'I am a good swimmer', he had his wife on one arm, the older boy on the other and the youngest on his chest. Then he got tired, obviously, and had to leave the elder son... D' you see? ... So when you lot ask me about these things I feel ill.

Another powerful issue reported in the accounts we collected is that of the strong smell emanating from the corpses of the migrants (*lu càuru di mortu*). These corpses were collected in plastic bags and then placed in coffins in the hangar of the airport for some weeks. G. related that:

Really, if you went by the road to the airport you could smell the smell of death, you felt a really strange sensation. There were people who had to leave that area for a while because you could smell ...

S., on the other hand, underlined that:

Compared to the deaths that have taken place here, especially that of the last one, which was the most visible: bodies were laid out along the pier, they were left in the hangar for a long time, many weeks ... what a stink! I lived in front of the hangar so ... whoever went by there could smell the odour of death, so it was tangible this time, in a physical way ... death was present.

Importantly, A., who coordinated the organization of the process to put the corpses into coffins spoke of nightmares and waking up during the night. Again, the main feature here is the smell:

possibly it is hard to believe, only from the telling, because who has not seen, who has not lived though this experience first hand... I tell you again, still today I wake up at night with the smell, really. And I say: what is that smell?

The presence among the corpses of several young infants and children (*i picciriddi*) provoked a shared commotion defined by the interviewees as a 'delirium'. This had strong impact on the collective memory of the island. One of the most common images discussed by the interviewees concerns finding on the seafloor a mother with her child in her arms, holding her hand over his mouth in a last desperate attempt to save his life by avoiding drowning. She was depicted also by the media as a sort of *Pietà* of modern times.

G., remembering the incredibly hard work carried out by the deep-sea divers mobilized (many novices) from all over Italy:

No no no, I spoke to someone from Catania who told me 'I don't think I'll be able to go underwater for at least a year' ... because of what they found down there, because they found many mothers with their children. They saw the worst, if you really want to know: they saw mothers, some young girls who had gone into labour, about to give birth, with the babies still attached; a massacre.

The doctor who examined the corpses underlined this feeling with this particular emphasis:

it isn't true that you get used to it, absolutely not ... most of all concerning the young children and babies [...] they bring them to you immediately during a boat tragedy, as happened in October 2013, you're having trouble [understanding if the child is alive], and so they just give them to me to hold, as if they were alive, to look over them intensely, to try and figure out if there's a breath of life left in them. And this image remains impressed on your brain and then you relive it every now and then, often when you're relaxed and in bed, at home, you relive all these things.

Food and death linkage is a fundamental anthropological topic. In Lampedusa, many people remember facts considered as a violation of an archetypal *taboo* for cultural integrity of a closely knit social group: the contact and the contamination of the community's food with the 'impure' remains of the migrants' (the foreign) corpses. Particularly, two events were frequently related by interviewees. The first one concerns the deployment of the refrigerated lorries, generally used to transport fish and food stuff, for transferring the corpses. G. is very clear on this point:

All these people left us with no means of transport, I mean, how were we supposed to transport these bodies from the sea to the hangar? The divers recovered the bodies and laid them on the quay. Where were we supposed to put these bodies? So in the end they had to ask the help of our fishermen with

their refrigerated lorries. I mean, can you believe that? What a fiasco [...] I'll just tell you that when we saw our lorries go by, which we recognized, all the water coming out from underneath where the bodies were ... I mean ... words fail me.

The second event concerns the bodies and corpses that were not retrieved from the sea. T., a teacher at the local, high school, explains this quite clearly:

We were talking about fish with my pupils last year, and then I asked the kids something that really had nothing to do with the lesson: 'Where should we buy fish? Directly from the port? In the fish market, or here? Well, as it was the period when there had been a lot of migrant boats arriving ashore, a boy said to me 'What's important is that you don't buy bluefish' [...] And I thought 'Why?' And, well, they explained to me that when there are migrant boat disasters they never eat bluefish, because bluefish are carnivorous: and so these bodies that are in the sea, perhaps ... in fact, he said, sometimes it happens that in the nets the fisherman find a head, a leg, an arm, a piece of chest, all eaten by fish and the fish that eat immigrants are bluefish.

Finally, what strongly marked the collective memory of Lampedusa inhabitants was the choice to move the migrants' coffins, loading them onto a ship with a crane, even before they were all identified. S. defines the scene of this phase of the material 'management' of the corpses as surreal, Pirandello-esque:

but the absurd thing at the last moment is that some relatives had obtained authorization to identify the bodies while they were carrying the coffins of their relatives from the hangar towards the port, and they were putting them on board with a crane [...] and at a certain point all the relatives came to get the coffins off the ship again, crying, despairing, and so they stopped to identify the bodies, put a flower ...

The apotheosis of this process was on the day of the funerals. Once again it was the material body (its absence, here) that defines its boundaries. In fact, the Italian government, for 'logistical' reasons, decided to organize it in the mainland (Agrigento) and, above all, *without* the corpses of the migrants. S., a sociologist with the non-profit organization Caritas operating on Lampedusa, defined this fact a sort of *coitus interruptus* that blocked the freeing of negative energies that had accumulated over the preceding weeks. Surely it dramatically interrupted the process of elaboration of mourning that the community of Lampedusa was experiencing, together with the families of the deceased migrants.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Ten years after the Lampedusa tragedy, the dramatic shipwreck that occurred on the beaches of Cutro somehow reactivated public memory of the events of October 3, 2013. Many Italian and foreign media evoked the events of Lampedusa, and the parallel animated public debate. The element that unifies the two dramatic shipwrecks is the same 'dyscrasia of the imaginary'. On the one hand, that of the local community is once again defined around the materiality of death, its alienating emotional power. On the other, the one built in the media on the rarefaction and metaphorization of migrant bodies.

As mentioned in the introduction, collective memory is not the unitary memory of a group on the model of individual memory, and it is not a mere addition of individual memories. At the same time, the collective memory's homogeneity, coherence and internal harmony is a very rare condition. This is especially true when we face traumatic, highly symbolic, and inevitably divisive events.

The memory of disasters is not a monolithic entity. Based on Rothberg's theory (2011), we defined it as 'multidirectional'. In a world characterized by technologically mediated communication flows, the memory of a traumatic event does not belong only to the community that suffered the event itself. In this complex and heterogeneous process, the public memory produced by the media plays a central role. The memories of local communities who have directly experienced a certain catastrophe could remain under-reported. In our opinion, this is a very important challenge for the management of future disasters. Equally, it is a potential source for the political manipulation of collective memory. This is why in this article we would like to reinterpret the evidence collected in the research carried out in 2014 on the Lampedusa shipwreck that took place on 3 October 2013 (Nicolosi, 2018). The aim is to reflect on the dynamics between different types of memories in the framework of the memory of disasters.

The empirical analysis of the two forms of memory produced, the collective memory of the inhabitants of Lampedusa and the public memory of the Italian media, led us to emphasize their profound difference which we tried to represent along the oppositional *materialization/dematerialization* axis. The choice of this contrast is obviously full of meaning, because it appears somehow counterintuitive, to the point of creating an interesting tangle of

oxymorons. As a matter of fact, in scientific literature, public memory is usually considered in some way the material dimension of collective memory.

In fact, we can consider the notion of public memory to be halfway between collective memory and official memory. We know that there are few traces in the social sciences theorizing the notion of public memory, the notion of collective memory remaining largely dominant. However, a notion that in my opinion deserves to be mentioned is that of the sociologist Olivier Roueff (2013), who proposes a pragmatist conceptualization of public memory as a regime of availability.

This expression aims to emphasize the materiality of collective memory. Here, we start from the traces, materials from the past which are concretely available and can be grasped in different contexts as memorial signs and constituted as a history of a group, a practice, an institution, etc. It is this material availability which defines its public character. This definition seeks to move away from mentalism, thanks to the importance given to the materiality of memorial signs, available depending on the uses in contextualized practices. Public memory can be distinguished from collective memory in several ways.

On the one hand, if we consider collective memory as the production and transmission of common memories within the intermediate groups (families, churches, etc.), we speak of public memory to designate groups which publicly problematize a memory and identity disorder and, where appropriate, request recognition (compassion, repentance, reparations, etc.) from the official authorities and translation of their demands in memory politics. Here, we have a public memory awaiting official memory.

More importantly, the notion of public memory demands *proofs* of memory in the sense that, on the one hand, memories can be the subject of controversies, of disputes in public arenas exposed to telling, arguing, interpreting, showing, etc. The materiality of its production and transmission needs mnemotechnics and memento-technologies. Far from being axiologically neutral, these memory technologies are most often the subject of controversy and dispute. Like for the *lieux de mémoire* (Nora, 1984), controversy can concern the choice of their location, the administrators of the place, the symbolism conveyed, etc.

On a theoretical level it is interesting to note the specific nature of media communication, which has a double condition of social representation and public memory. Indeed, collective memory and social representations are two phenomena whose kinship and affinity are demonstrated on a theoretical and empirical level by at least three common characteristics (Viaud, 2003): a) the fundamental role played by communication (Moscovici, 1961); b) the role played by group identities and memberships in defining the orientation of both (Halbwachs, 1925, 1950); c) the weight of the natural language in their definition (Jodelet, 1989).

Theorizing the notion of social frameworks of memory or collective memory, Halbwachs (1925, 1950) proposed a sociology of remember-with opposed to Bergson's thesis of a reduplication of the past in the present. Halbwachs opened the way for the analysis of reconstruction of the past according to the horizons of meaning of the present. Sometimes this perspective seems to propose a reified meta-subject which would impose itself on individual memories.⁷ In order to overcome this limitation, we assumed a processual interpretation of collective memory (Bastide, 1970). In this interpretation, we can consider the memory phenomenon, not as an already constituted object or as a phenomenon reduced to its indexation to an already constituted back-world (social frameworks, social structures, force fields, etc.), but as something *en-train-de-se-faire*.

In this article we assume that media and journalism play an extremely significant part in the public-memory-shaping process. Public memory can be considered a public sphere memory, and, in some ways, the public sphere is itself memory, as Paolo Jedlowski (2018) rightly argued. Public memory is thus ultimately an 'image of the past under public debate'.

It is interesting to note how the public media memory of the Lampedusa events materializes a collective memory by dematerializing it. The tension towards the officialization of collective memory here is therefore based on the dematerialization of the Lampedusa inhabitant's social memory, with important social and political consequences. Particularly, the symbolic rarefaction of death means that it is always detached from the identities of the involved people. Here, I would like to emphasize that this process is deeply distortive as it promotes three main interrelated memory biases: a) deindividualization (loss of identity); b) the erosion of the tragic dimension of migration phenomena; c) social irresponsibility.

In order to understand the impact of the first and the second bias, we could consider, using the *a contrario* argument, the consequences of the publication of the images of the death of Aylan Kurdi. Here, it is possible to see the effects on public opinion and decision makers of showing the death and the identity of migrants involved in catastrophic events.⁸ The picture of Aylan Kurdi's death has remained one of the most iconic images of international collective memory on migration. Taken up by artists, intellectuals, philosophers, and journalists, it

⁷ The same criticism is often made of Durkheim's theory of social representation.

⁸ We remember that following its publication, several governments, such as Germany and England, decided to open the doors to a significant number of refugees and, more generally, a very critical public debate was activated regarding European immigration policies.

remains the most symbolic image of the migratory tragedy. Many years later it continues to exert an important influence on public opinion, unlike the many similar images never published.

What explains the influence still exerted by this photograph these days? As we said, usually news-making on migration produces a radical symbolic deindividualization process. Representation techniques and images are based on an expressive, iconic, and linguistic register denying social identities of migrants. On the contrary, thanks to that picture, our memory of Aylan Kurdi is built around his identity. In a very simple way, the photo presents a small child with whom we can all identify thanks to his common and recognizable clothing (the shorts, the shoes) and his somatic features, barely glimpsed. Aylan, whose name, and face are known, looks like anyone's kid. Furthermore, the image presents an essential iconographic structure, which shows an evident plastic and semantic asymmetry. On the one hand, the incurable drama of the death of a child, on the other, the cold and bureaucratic, yet embarrassed, acknowledgment of an impotent official. This photo swiftly became a symbolic representation of the ongoing clash between the legitimate hope of a better future (with which we all identify in times of crisis) and the indifference of a technostucture unable to enter into harmony with the world.

The body of Aylan reminds us that we must abandon the reassuring belief that migration is a 'mechanical' problem, of moving from one point of the globe to another. This is the watershed. It forces us to ask ourselves what could push fathers and mothers to get to the point of risking the lives of their children to reach Europe. It shifts the focus from the fact (mechanical delocalization) and the alleged consequences (crime, unemployment, terrorism, etc.) to the background: what terrible condition could push me to risk so much? In this sense, this photo identifies the crisis, giving it a human and tragic face. It takes it out of the abstract and rarefied dimension that characterized the media representation of the death in migration like in the Lampedusa tragedy. It represents its counterpart and (demonstrates) all the implications of the neutralized narrative of the Lampedusa events.

About the third presented bias (social irresponsibility), public memory appears anchored to a narrative dramatization based on metaphors referring to impersonal events, without any possible 'subjectivization'. Public memory is dotted with verbal and iconographic metaphors that refer to an emergency paradigm: 'invasion', 'horde', 'mass'. Often the metaphorization refers to natural cataclysms: 'tsunami', 'wave', 'storm', etc. Like in the case of Lampedusa media narration, newspaper articles dedicated very little space to direct first-hand accounts of the migrants. There are very few subjective and autonomous connotations (migrants are generally discussed as a group, whose homogeneity is debatable). There is a strong tendency to polarize the figure of the migrant in a dichotomous representation as positive (victim) or negative (guilty): 'helpless protagonist of journeys of hope' / 'criminal enemy'.

It is important to note that the most used metaphors are negative: securitarian (criminality, terrorism), or sanitary (dirt, diseases, infection, contamination), even if statistical data show a very different reality. This negative emergency discourse exploits fears, prejudices, stereotypes and economic concerns of the native population and it is a fundamental political resource in the hands of several 'entrepreneurs of fear' (political actors such as the Front National in France, Lega and Fratelli d'Italia in Italy, and so on) able to successfully capitalize the outcomes of a climate of terror.

But when the polarization is positive, as in the case of Lampedusa shipwreck narration, the media organize public memory around the suppression of migrant bodies and identities, vehiculating a dangerous self-absolving and consolatory interpretative frame: a migration emergency linked to external and impersonal causes against which we have no chance of intervening. This emergency refers to an almost 'meteorological' exceptionality: it's like a flood, a tsunami, a storm. Against this exceptional emergency, what can we do? Little or nothing. We can only buffer or limit the damage, waiting for it to end. Deaths at sea are not our responsibility. They are caused by recklessness, desperation, and the unscrupulous trafficking of smugglers. The production of a rarefied and metaphorized memory supports the cultural paradigm of social irresponsibility based on a systematic and symbolic 'concealment of a corpse' (Nicolosi, 2018b).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study was funded by Piaceri 2020-2022 linea 2.

REFERENCES

- Alexander, J. C., Eyerman, R., Giesen, B., Smelser, N. J. and Sztompka, P. (2004). *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Berkeley: California University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520936768>
- Assmann, J. (1997). *La memoria culturale. Scrittura, ricordo e identità politica nelle grandi civiltà antiche*. Torino: Einaudi.
- Bartlett, F. (1974). *La memoria, uno studio di psicologia sperimentale e sociale*. Milano: Franco Angeli.
- Bastide, R. (1970). Mémoire collective et sociologie du bricolage. *L'Année sociologique*, 21, 65-108.
- Binotto, M., Bruno, M. and Lai, V. (2016). *Tracciare i confini: l'immigrazione nei media italiani*. Milano: Franco Angeli.

- Censis. (2002). *Tuning into Diversity: Immigrati e minoranze etniche in Italia*. Roma: Censis.
- Clavandier, G. (2004). *La mort collective. Pour une sociologie des catastrophes*. Paris: CNRS Éditions. <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.editions-cnrs.1589>
- Cohen, S. (1972). *Folks, Devils and Moral Panics*. St. Albans: Paladin.
- Corte, M. (2002). *Stranieri e mass-media*. Padua: Cedam.
- Cotesta, V. (1999). Mass-media, conflitti etnici e immigrazione. *Studi Emigrazione*, 36(135), 395-416.
- D'Ercole, R. and Dollfus, O. (1996). Mémoire des catastrophes et prévention des risques. *Natures Sciences Sociétés*, 4, 381-391. <https://doi.org/10.1051/nss/19960404381>
- Dal Lago, A. (1999). *Non-persone: l'esclusione dei migranti in una società globale*. Milano: Feltrinelli.
- De Martino, E. (2019). *La fine del mondo. Contributo all'analisi delle apocalissi culturali*. Torino: Einaudi.
- Eco, U. (1964). *Apocalittici e integrati*. Milano: Bompiani.
- Edelman, G. (1992). *Sulla materia della mente*. Milano: Adelphi.
- Ernst, W. (2018). Archeologia dei media: la crisi della memoria narrativa, in G. Fidotta and A. Mariani (eds.), *Archeologia dei media. Temporalità, materia, tecnologia* (pp. 141-178). Roma: Meltemi. <https://doi.org/10.7238/a.v0i21.3205>
- Gongaware, T. (2010). Collective memory anchors: Collective identity and continuity. *Social Movements, Sociological Focus*, 43, 214-239. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00380237.2010.10571377>
- Guzzi, D. (2004). Per una definizione di memoria pubblica. Halbwachs, Ricoeur, Assmann, Margalit. *Scienza & Politica*, 44, 27-39.
- Habermas, J. (2005). *Storia e critica dell'opinione pubblica*. Bari: Laterza.
- Halbwachs, M. (1925). *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*. Paris: Félix Alcan.
- Halbwachs, M. (1950). *La mémoire collective*. Paris: Albin Michel.
- Jedlowski, P. (2018). La memoria pubblica: cos'è?, in M. Rampazi and A. L. Tota (eds.), *La memoria pubblica. Trauma culturale, nuovi confini e identità nazionali* (pp. XIII-XVIII). Torino: UTET.
- Jodelet, D. (1989). *Folies et représentations sociales*. Paris: PUF.
- Kaspersky, T. (2012). Chernobyl's aftermath in political symbols, monuments and rituals. Remembering the disaster in Belarus. *Anthropology of East Europe Review*, 30(1), 82-99.
- Lang, K. and Lang, G. E. (1989). Collective memory and the news. *Communication*, 11, 123-139.
- Lavabre, M. (1998). Maurice Halbwachs et la sociologie de la mémoire. *Raison Présente*, 128(4), 47-56. <https://doi.org/10.3406/raipr.1998.3504>
- Le Goff, J. (1988). *Histoire et mémoire*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Lotman, J. (1985). *La semiosfera. La simmetria e il dialogo nelle strutture pensanti*. Venezia: Marsilio.
- Lotman, J. (2023). *Conversazioni sulla cultura russa*. Milano: Bompiani.
- Luchetti, L. (2022). *Commemorare una strage. La memoria pubblica di Piazza Fontana, 12 dicembre 1969*. Milano: Franco Angeli.
- Mansoubi, M. (1990). *Noi stranieri d'Italia: immigrazione e mass-media*. Lucca: Maria Pacini Fazzi.
- McCombs, M. E. and Shaw, D. L. (1972). The agenda-setting function of media. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36(2), 176-187. <https://doi.org/10.1086/267990>
- MEEK, A. (2010). *Trauma and Media. Theories, Histories and Images*. New York: Routledge.
- Morcellini, M. (2009). *Immigrazione e asilo nei media italiani. Sintesi del rapporto di ricerca*. Roma: Università di Roma La Sapienza.
- Moscovici, S. (1961). *La Psychanalyse, son image et son public*. Paris: PUF.
- Musarò, P. and Parmiggiani, P. (2014). *Media e migrazioni: etica, estetica e politica del discorso umanitario*. Milano: Franco Angeli.
- Nicolosi, G. (2007). Il riconoscimento simbolico in una società multiculturale: i media, i corpi, in M. Avola, D. Melfa, and G. Nicolosi (eds.), *Immigrati nella "Città dell'elefante". Regolarizzazioni, integrazione culturale e mercato del lavoro* (pp. 65-91). Acireale – Roma: Bonanno.
- Nicolosi, G. (2017). *Lampedusa. Les damnés de la mer*. La tour d'aigues: Les éditions de l'aube.
- Nicolosi, G. (2018a). Lampedusa, 3 October 2013: Anatomy of a social representation. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 21(5), 539-552. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877917694092>
- Nicolosi, G. (2018b). Narrare (la morte) in migrazione. Semiotica del genocidio, violenza culturale e "diasporicidio", in S. Mazzone (ed.), *Narrare le migrazioni* (pp. 333-348). Acireale-Roma: Bonanno.
- Nora, P. (1984). *Les lieux de la mémoire*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Pfister, C. (2009). Learning from nature-induced disasters. Considerations from historical case studies in Western Europe, in M. Christof and C. Pfister (eds.), *Natural Disasters, Cultural Responses: Case Studies Toward a Global Environmental History* (pp. 17-40). Lanham: Lexicon Books.
- Rothberg, M. (2011). From Gaza to Warsaw: Mapping multidirectional memory. *Criticism*, 53, 523-548. <https://doi.org/10.1353/crt.2011.0032>

- Roueff, O. (2013). *Jazz, les échelles du plaisir*. Paris: La Dispute.
- Squire, L. and Kandel, E. (2010). *Come funziona la memoria*. Bologna: Zanichelli.
- Viaud, J. (2003). Mémoire collective, représentations sociales et pratiques sociales. *Connexions*, 2(80), 13-30. <https://doi.org/10.3917/cnx.080.0013>
- Vygotskij, L. (2007 [1934]). *Pensiero e linguaggio*. Milano: Giunti.
- Wolf, M. (1985). *Teorie delle comunicazioni di massa*. Milano: Bompiani.
- Wynter, J. (1998). *Il lutto e la memoria. La grande guerra nella storia culturale europea*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Zelizer, B. (2010). Journalism memory work, in A. Erll and A. Nunning (eds.), *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies* (pp. 379-387). Berlin: De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110207262.6.379>