

# Collective Memory and Nonpublic Opinion: A Historical Note on a Methodological Controversy About a Political Problem

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*This article describes a little-known moment in the history of social research, the so-called Group Experiment (Gruppenexperiment) conducted in Germany in 1950–51 by members of the reconstituted Frankfurt school. That research, I argue, provides a missing link in the history of the ideas of deliberative democracy and public discourse, areas of political theory in which the substantive legacies of pragmatism and interactionism are particularly significant. Most important, however, the Gruppenexperiment provides a model for rethinking certain methodological and conceptual problems plaguing contemporary research on collective memory, namely, the tendency to reify it.*

In the following pages, I describe a little-known moment in the history of social research, the so-called Group Experiment (*Gruppenexperiment*) conducted in Germany in 1950–51 by members of the reconstituted Frankfurt school (Mangold 1960; Pollock 1955). There are a number of good reasons for doing so. First, this was a much more important moment in the history of social science than heretofore acknowledged, embodying the cross-fertilization of American and German intellectual and research traditions. Second, it provided unique and consequential information about postwar Germany, yielding substantive insights not only for historians of contemporary German democracy but for scholars of “transitional justice” (Kritz 1995) and German collective memory as well (Dubiel 1999; Marcuse 2001; Moeller 2001). Third, it was a crucial—and largely unremarked—source for major statements in German public debates in the 1960s. Fourth, it was a decisive—and, again, heretofore largely unremarked—missing link in the history of certain important political-theoretic concepts, particularly deliberative democracy and public discourse, areas of theory in which the substantive legacies of pragmatism and interactionism have been quite central.

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Most important, however, the *Gruppenexperiment* provides a model for rethinking certain methodological and conceptual problems plaguing contemporary research on collective memory, namely, the tendency to reify it. This reification has in turn often rendered us unable to transcend the sterile opposition between individualist and collectivist approaches to social remembering (Olick 1999b). Particularly in this last regard, I suggest that the *Gruppenexperiment* authors shared some of the major concerns raised by interactionist approaches to collective memory, if they nevertheless responded to them in different ways.

## INTERACTIONIST APPROACHES TO COLLECTIVE REMEMBERING

Collective memory is a process, not a thing. Collective remembering, rather than collective memory, would be more accurate. Yet even to call collective remembering a process is dangerous, for indeed “remembering” and what we mean by it quickly explode the referential container even of the verb form. Awkward as it may be terminologically, we are better off, I argue, referring to an ever-changing variety of “mnemonic practices” (Olick and Robbins 1998) and, more generally, to our business as the sociology of retrospection (though even this last term, with its visual connotation, can be misleading). Ultimately, however, the real challenge is methodological: if collective memory is a process, how can sociology study it without engaging in what Elias called “process-reduction,” removing the constitutive temporality and emergence from our accounts of social life, which he (Mennell and Goudsblom 1998) conceptualized on the model of a dance (no movement, no dance)?

Among those who self-consciously identify as symbolic interactionists, there have been numerous approaches to collective remembering, all of which contribute to the dynamic view just sketched. There are certainly strong affinities, or at least areas of mutual concern, in Mead’s theory of the present and Halbwachs’s “presentist” argument about collective memory (Halbwachs 1992; Maines, Sugrue, and Katovich 1983; Mead 1959). Symbolic interactionists and others influenced by them have done extensive work in the sociology of retrospection, work without which the field would not be the same (e.g., Davis 1979; Fine 2001; Gregory and Lewis 1988; Gross 1986; Katovich and Couch 1992; Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991; Zerubavel 2003). But I know of no explicit methodological statement of why an interactionist perspective is particularly well suited to work on collective memory, perhaps because methodology is so fundamental to the tradition, as loosely as it has defined itself, that it seems unnecessary for those committed to an interactionist perspective to make such a statement when they turn to retrospection. But the advantages of an interactionist perspective may not be as clear to others struggling with the reificatory temptations inherent in the concept of collective memory.

To be sure, I offer no such manifesto here. Moreover, what follows may be stranger yet, insofar as the story I tell takes a circuitous route to anything recognizably in the “tradition” of symbolic interactionism (Fine 1990, 1993). But the power

of an interactionist perspective for the study of collective remembering—including its emphasis on dynamic processes and emergent properties of situations—should be all the clearer for the fact that such a perspective can be found outside “the tradition” and, indeed, beyond an explicit problematization of “collective memory.” That there are not only intellectual affinities but real and perhaps surprising intellectual-historical pathways in the history I elucidate is icing on the methodological cake.

### THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL’S EMPIRICAL TRADITION AND THE CHALLENGES OF POSTWAR GERMANY

The legacy of the Frankfurt school for contemporary sociology, particularly in the United States, is highly uneven (Wiggershaus 1995). Remembered mostly for the critique of “traditional theory” and the demand for a “critical theory” of ideology articulated in the prewar essays, for Horkheimer and Adorno’s (1944) pessimistic reading of modernity in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and as a precursor to the discourse-theoretic writings of Habermas ([1962] 1989, [1976] 1979, [1981] 1987), the Frankfurt school is often seen by American sociologists, when at all, as a matter for the discipline’s intellectual historians and fringe cultural theorists. Intellectual history and cultural theory, of course, have enjoyed a much higher valuation in literary and philosophical studies, and it is in such endeavors that the Frankfurt school’s most abstract contributions have had their decisive impact.

There is, however, a much less well-known legacy for social science to be found in the extensive empirical work carried out under the institute’s auspices from the 1930s to the 1960s.<sup>1</sup> This body of work is intricately tied to the efflorescence of empirical social research on public opinion, public discourse, and group processes by more mainstream figures in the United States, like Paul Lazarsfeld, Morris Janowitz, Robert Lynd, and Robert Bales, to mention only a few representatives of midcentury American sociology. Of the empirical work by the Frankfurters, only *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno et al. 1950) forms a real object in social science memory, and mostly a negative one (Christie and Jahoda 1954). However, *The Authoritarian Personality* was only one of many empirical studies by the institute’s members and associates, though it was the only one that, to my knowledge, has ever been reprinted. Before *The Authoritarian Personality* there was an extensive project titled *Studies on Authority and the Family* (Institut für Sozialforschung 1936), which had its origins in various researches begun as early as 1933 from Swiss exile. The principal concern was the structure of authority in the European family, with particular emphasis on the father’s role, as it varied by nationality and social class. There the seeds of the institute’s later ideas about the role of authoritarian family structure in the genesis of authoritarian politics are clear, though as yet inchoate; data reported in the *Studies on Authority and the Family* were not yet analyzed with quite the rigor and depth that characterized *The Authoritarian Personality*.

However, *The Authoritarian Personality* was only one volume of a second set of studies, the so-called *Studies in Prejudice* edited by Horkheimer, the others including

*Dynamics of Prejudice* (Bettelheim and Janowitz 1950), *Anti-Semitism and Emotional Disorder* (Ackerman and Jahoda 1950), *Rehearsal for Destruction* (Massing 1949), and *Prophets of Deceit* (Löwenthal and Gutterman 1949), the latter works all largely forgotten except by specialists in the history of the school. These works, moreover, employed the panoply of contemporary research techniques, including individual and group interviewing, quantitative and qualitative content analysis, collective psychoanalysis, survey analysis, and psychological profiling—not what many who know the Frankfurt theorists for their cultural and philosophical contributions usually associate with them. While the intellectual forces behind these projects were diverse—and often contradictory—this body of work demonstrates the extent to which the Frankfurt school and its associates in intellectual exile cross-fertilized with the major developments of American social science, though always with their abiding goal of coming to terms with the pathologies of the European experience, particularly anti-Semitism.

In October 1949 a roster of well-known scholars published an appeal in the *American Sociological Review* calling for reestablishing the institute in Frankfurt (“Proposal” 1949),<sup>2</sup> which did indeed come about in a piecemeal fashion, beginning with Horkheimer’s appointment by the city of Frankfurt to a “restitution” chair at the university there. *Studies in Prejudice* was also disseminated in Germany around that time, and Horkheimer and Adorno received a fair amount of press attention in Germany about their work, particularly *The Authoritarian Personality*. In the German context, the major relevance of *The Authoritarian Personality* was its claim that authoritarian propensities were both widespread and deeply entrenched in the German population; they could thus not be expected to disappear as quickly as the Anglo-American policy, after 1947, of rehabilitating Western Germany as a bulwark against Soviet expansionist aims would have liked, or as quickly as West Germany’s new elites claimed had already happened (see Moeller 2001). Indeed, these elites most often claimed that the authoritarian disposition might have been deep in a narrow segment, which was now removed from power, allowing those never affected by that disposition to lead, but, they claimed, it was never widespread. This was, to a large extent, what the Western occupation authorities wanted to hear.

The hopes of the Western occupation authorities for quickly rehabilitating Germany, coupled with the new German elites’ claims that a fascist disposition had never been more than a minority one, made Horkheimer and Adorno’s deeper suspicions politically incorrect at the time, denying as they did that any quick transformation could have been possible, even—especially—if the enormous volume of opinion polling indicated that such a transformation was taking place (Merritt 1995). Indeed, that was the case. Beginning with the march of British and American troops into German territory in the spring of 1945, the Psychological Warfare Division of the U.S. Army, later OMGUS (Office of Military Governor, U.S.) and after 1949 HICOG (High Commissioner, Germany) conducted nearly daily polls and other studies aimed at gauging German attitudes and culture (Merritt and Merritt 1970, 1980). While there was certainly much basis for concern in these studies, much

depended on how they were read. Was, for instance, 30 percent of respondents with a positive disposition toward authoritarian politics a high or a low number? As far as public discourse by various elites during the occupation years, assertions that such attitudes were not particularly powerful and that Germany had been *liberated* by the Allies from Nazi tyranny together with a positive spin on improving polls fed the engine of rehabilitation (Olick 1999a).

It was in this context that Horkheimer, Adorno, and Pollock undertook their first major study in Germany—the *Gruppenexperiment*—very much in the tradition of their empirical research in exile. They were motivated by a simultaneous admiration for and critique of the power of American social science. While steeped in the language of public opinion research, the Frankfurters harbored the suspicion that such research was, like the consumer society it served, atomistic and superficial:

The progress of a science that is able to develop methods with the help of which it can register and under some circumstances predict the truly subtle reactions, opinions, and wishes of people is undeniable. It is also an indisputable gain that one can check political and economic decisions against the reactions of the governed. Nevertheless, one should also not fail to recognize that the convergence of social scientific methods towards those of the natural sciences is itself the child of a society that reifies people. The democratic potential of the new methods is thus not unquestionable, as is so gladly assumed particularly in Germany after the suppression of public opinion by the Hitler regime. It is not incidental that modern “opinion research” grew out of market and consumer research. It [opinion research] implicitly identifies man under the rubric of consumer. As a result, the diverse tendencies to social control and manipulation that can be observed to derive from modern empirical sociology in the realm of consumer analysis or “human relations” are not merely incidental to the method itself. While they are led by the principle of the equality of people and allow no privilege in evaluating the attitudes of individual subjects, they nevertheless treat these subjects as they are constituted by the dominant economic and social relations, without examining this constitution itself. The difficulty becomes obvious when the point is to convey with representative surveys what opinions and meanings people have toward questions of general public interest—in other words as soon as one wants to deal with the problem of so-called public opinion with the techniques of empirical social research. (Pollock 1955, 18)

## METHODOLOGY

The research design for the *Gruppenexperiment*, while highly experimental and inconsistently applied, however, was articulated in terms of a friendly corrective to the procedures of American empirical opinion research. The methodological introduction to the study was filled with references to the latest American research techniques, including those in studies by Hadley Cantril, Leonard Doob, Walter Lippmann, Lazarsfeld, Harold Lasswell, Albert Berleson, Janowitz, and Kurt Lewin,<sup>3</sup> alongside the institute’s clear devotion to a Freudian perspective. The main goal behind combining these two traditions was to penetrate beyond what they saw as the surface of public opinion. As Franz Böhm put it in his preface to the 1955 report,

the study set out from the sense that there was a difference between manifest “public opinion” and latent “nonpublic opinion,” namely, between “the sum of opinions we wish people believed we had as our real opinion” versus “the sum of opinion that we truly have.” Böhm referred to “the so-called public opinion, which expresses itself in elections, referenda, public speeches, groups, parliamentary discussions [and] political assemblies,” and argued that these could be misleading. They are, he wrote, “only formal expressions we use when we are wearing our Sunday clothes,” behind which runs a different discourse “like a second currency” (Pollock 1955). The point of the Frankfurters’ method was to reveal this second currency.

The inspirational image behind the study, as expressed by Horkheimer, was that of a railway compartment, in which discussants would feel less inhibited than otherwise to express unsanctioned views (Wiggershaus 1995:438). The problem was how to get people to express their opinions openly in a research setting. More important, however, was the idea of a conversation that lay at the heart of the railway image; for this reason, the Frankfurters preferred the term “group discussion” to the more common “group interview”: “It has long since become routine,” they argued,

to apply depth psychology in interviews and to use projective tests, detailed case studies and other techniques to correct and supplement the usual questionnaire methods. The group technique used by our Institute . . . differs from all of these undertakings principally in that it is not satisfied with adding corrections at a later stage, but already begins at an early stage, while opinions are being ascertained *in statu nascendi*. (Pollock 1955:30–31)

Indeed, this goal of capturing opinion in the process of becoming is connected to their reformulation of the very concept of opinion itself. Whether entirely original or not, whether ultimately defensible or not, it is this reformulation, if I may telegraph ahead, that is of greatest interest to my purpose in this article.

As above, the methodological argument began by historicizing the conditions for opinion formation:

The assumption of the existence of an opinion of every individual is questionable. That everyone possesses his own opinion is a cliché of the modern. In earlier social epochs, the spiritual cosmos was, on the one hand, much too strongly constructed and strictly controlled for everyone to be able to have or to have been able to develop a private opinion about everything—the expression itself [private opinion] is specifically liberal—; on the other hand, the information and communications possibilities were too limited for the overwhelming majority of people to have been in the situation to have an opinion about everything imaginable. Today, when in the large industrial states information about nearly everything is widespread, the mass of informational material has grown to such an extent with the complexity of all social relations that it is even difficult for the expert himself to form an opinion about everything in his own most narrow field. . . . Insofar as opinion research proceeds from the assumption that one has to have an opinion about everything, it succumbs to the danger of misleading people in its interviews to statements about which they have no real conviction, which are not even their opinions. Exactly this contradiction between the demand for an opinion and the inability to have an opinion seduces numerous individuals to accept

stereotypes that derive from their vain efforts to opine while according the prestige of participation. (Pollock 1955:18)

In contrast, the Frankfurters' methodology strove to move beyond the putative monistic assumptions of contemporary opinion research to a more profoundly social view: "Exactly the effect of an immeasurably grown potential for communication nevertheless no longer allows grasping the individual as a monad whose opinion crystallizes and persists simultaneously in isolation and in empty space" (p. 21). As a result, "realistic opinion research" must approach as nearly as possible the actual conditions in which opinions come about. Opinions are highly variable, are limited to a narrow range of issues, and form in the process of group dynamics (indeed, the authors favorably cite the work of Bales on group dynamics.) The charge of the *Gruppenexperiment* to opinion research is thus that "it must free itself from the prejudice that opinion as the property of the individual is both in its majority stabile and that its transformations are secondary" (Pollock 1955:21). The generalizable hypotheses they state at the beginning, thus, include the following:

The opinions and attitudes of people to the themes that claim general or public interest and can therefore constitute the materials of public opinion do not arise and operate in isolation but in continuous interrelation between the individual and the society that affects him mediately and immediately. They are often not particularly fixed, but represent a vague and diffuse potential. They frequently become clear to the individual only during debate with other people. (P. 32)

Moreover, opinions "change relative to the mood and situation in which the individuals find themselves and the most diverse tendencies can variously step into the foreground of consciousness" (p. 32).<sup>4</sup>

The ontological principle behind these statements was that "the concept of public opinion presumes a social organization or group whose members have to have more or less shared experiences" (p. 21). (To telegraph ahead once again, one could substitute collective memory here for public opinion and imagine such a statement in Halbwachs.) As a result of this principle,

Here it will be endeavored to differentiate the concept of public opinion by attending to the structure of the opinion-shaping group. In the process, the consciousness arises that public opinion does not represent a simple sum of individual opinions, but contains an overarching collective moment. One can speak of public opinion only where there is something like a uniform group structure *sui generis*. (P. 21)

Given this understanding of public opinion, the purpose of the research, they wrote, was to identify the objective spirit—the "German ideology" that worked through the articulations of the participants in the discussions. Behind the changeability of opinion thus lay a "deep structure," to employ a term from later theory, and the goal of the research was to uncover this ideological constellation.

So how did they actually proceed, and what did they find? The methodology sought situations that would mimic "natural" settings as much as possible, allowing observation of opinion as a discursive process in which contrary views played out

against one another and in which positions changed constantly. The researchers began by testing versions of a putative letter by a sergeant in the U.S. Army to a newspaper back home conveying a negative assessment of German national character, particularly highlighting the unwillingness of Germans to acknowledge what they had done during the Third Reich. Researchers, who led the discussions, presented this letter (after the team agreed on a final version) to more than 140 separate samples of Germans (earlier tests included “natural settings” of preconstituted groups, as in bars, as well as randomly composed groups). The letter’s purpose was to provoke the so-called nonpublic opinion. Research consisted of quantitative analysis of both the participants and their responses and of follow-up interviews with individuals, as well as qualitative analysis of the “opinions” and the group dynamics that formed them.

### Results and Reactions

The results were, like the research itself, highly problematic. More than 60 percent of participants did not actually speak in the group discussions, which would later open the opportunity for critics to charge that the research report misrepresented the results. Qualitative analysis, which came in the form of an essay by Adorno in Pollock’s 1955 report titled “Guilt and Defense,” was based on and illustrated with a narrow subset of the responses. The methodological discussion reads like one long caveat, emphasizing the errors along the way and the work’s provisionality.

Nonetheless, the study argued powerfully that the social conditions for manipulative mass psychology and the potential for totalitarian allegiance persisted in Germany. These conditions were the result of what Adorno charged was a “collective narcissism,” which manifested itself in the virtuosic deployment of defense mechanisms corresponding “to the extent of unconscious guilt one has to suppress” (Wiggershaus 1995:474). Consistent with the widespread identification of a sense of German self-pity and charges by Germans that ostracism of Germany was a form of “Phariseeism”—as a widespread trope in the public discourse put it—Adorno characterized the situation as follows:

It seems to be a law of present-day social psychology that what one has practised oneself is always what makes one most resentful. The unconscious motives for this, closely related to the projection mechanism, need not be discussed here; suffice it to say that, as soon as one has condemned false generalization, it is easy to distance oneself from National Socialism, and that once this has been accomplished without too much cost it is easy to put oneself in the right and to make yesterday’s persecutor today’s victim. (Pollock 1955:339–40)

We should note here that Adorno’s most famous speech/essay on the problems of German guilt—indeed, one of the best-known critical essays on so-called *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (mastering the past) in Germany—his 1959 “What Does It Mean to Master the Past?” was merely reprising this argument when he stated that he was more concerned with the persistence of fascist tendencies within German democracy than against it.<sup>5</sup>

The widely read 1959 article also referred back to the *Gruppenexperiment* in another regard. After the publication of the research in 1955, the well-respected conservative psychologist Peter Hofstätter (1957) published a critical, and in many respects polemical, review in the *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*. Defending the “positivist-atomistic” method that the Frankfurters’ approach criticized (though they also employed quantitative techniques), Hofstätter disputed their interpretation of their own data. He argued, for instance, that by reinterpreting the data to take into account the large numbers of participants who remained largely silent, among other things, one had to conclude that the data did not convincingly demonstrate more than a 15 percent proportion of participants with an undemocratic attitude. Because this proportion did not differ significantly from that to be found in other countries, Hofstätter argued that one also had to conclude that there was no significant “legacy of fascist ideology” in German attitudes.

On that basis, Hofstätter went on to charge that the critical interpretive methods the Frankfurters employed in their analysis were nothing more than self-fulfilling accusations: in contrast to what he called the Frankfurters’ presumption that their method was analogous to the old idea of “in vino veritas” (in wine, truth), he described their premise as an unfair “in ira veritas” (in anger, truth), claiming that the statements elicited through their provocation method indicated nothing other than that people can be goaded into saying just about anything. He thus characterized their analysis as “nothing but an accusation, or a demand for genuine mental remorse.” But for him, “There is simply no individual feeling that could satisfactorily correspond to constantly looking at the annihilation of a million people.” As a result, he argued, these “accusations” were “misplaced or pointless” and did nothing but express “the indignation of the sociological analyst.” The Frankfurt researchers, with their implied condemnation of postwar German political culture, were simply asking too much! (Hofstätter 1957:99).<sup>6</sup>

Adorno (1957) responded in thorough and careful detail to each of Hofstätter’s methodological charges, arguing that Hofstätter ignored all qualifications and subtlety. But the bottom line for Adorno was that Hofstätter’s charges stemmed not from the limits on this kind of scientific inquiry but from what Adorno charged was a defensive unwillingness to acknowledge the reality of German nonpublic opinion, a reality Adorno believed the study had demonstrated, if not with total scientific irrefutability in all the details, nevertheless overwhelmingly. For example, where Hofstätter interpreted the large proportion of respondents who remained silent while others articulated undemocratic views as evidence of their disagreement, Adorno argued that there was as little reason to assume they disagreed as to assume that they agreed. “The method,” Adorno (1957:116) wrote, “is declared to be useless so that the existence of the phenomenon that emerges can be denied.”

For Adorno, this and other refusals in Hofstätter’s critique manifested precisely the kind of “collective narcissism” the study had uncovered. Adorno thus sarcastically lectured Hofstätter: “Hofstätter considers ‘it is hardly possible that a single individual could take upon himself the horror of Auschwitz.’ It is [however] the vic-

tims of Auschwitz who had to take its horrors upon themselves, not those who, to their own disgrace and that of their nation, prefer not to admit it.” Quoting Hofstätter’s language, Adorno continued: “The ‘question of guilt’ was ‘laden with despair’ for the *victims*, not for the *survivors*, and it takes some doing to have blurred this distinction with the existential category of despair, which is not without reason a popular one” (emphasis added). In a characteristic rhetorical move for him, Adorno then took a common expression to be found as far back as Cervantes—“In the house of the hanged, one should not mention the noose”—and made a subtle play on words to illustrate his point: “But in the house of the *hangman* one should not mention the noose; one might be suspected of harboring resentment” (pp. 116–17).

In “What Does It Mean to Master the Past?” Adorno (2003) recalled this formulation to indicate his sense of why the discussion of the Nazi past in the 1950s was, in his view, inadequate. Indeed, Adorno’s play on words has become a staple of sarcastic memory of memory since the 1960s. Interestingly, the phrase went through yet another permutation, sometimes being repeated not as “one might be suspected of *harboring* resentment” but as “one might be suspected of *stirring up* resentment.”<sup>7</sup> The difference is in who is being resentful, the victims or the Germans. On the one hand, the Auschwitz survivor Jean Amery, for instance, published a famous essay in 1966 on his “ressentiment” (using Nietzsche’s francophone version of the term) at the prosperity of Germans in whose midst he lived.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, some have charged that it is the Germans *themselves* who become resentful when one demands “too much” in the way of acknowledgment of the past. This German resentment is captured by the bitter joke that the Germans will never forgive the Jews for Auschwitz, or in reactions such as West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt’s statement at the end of a 1981 trip to Saudi Arabia, during which he had negotiated the sale of West German tanks to this sworn enemy of Israel, that “German foreign policy may no longer be held hostage to Auschwitz.”

### The Legacy of “Nonpublic Opinion”

There is one further footnote to complete the assertion that the legacies of the *Gruppenexperiment* are more consequential than scholarly memory recalls. In the midst of the debate over the 1955 book, a young researcher named Jürgen Habermas joined the institute as an assistant. For his first piece of research—a study of the role of a new generation of students in democratic politics—Habermas employed many of the techniques developed for the *Gruppenexperiment*. Additionally, it is easy to trace Habermas’s incipient ideas about discourse and the public sphere to the *Gruppenexperiment*’s methodological arguments about group process and the discursive generation of individual and public opinion. Habermas published a pair of studies in short order—the first book was an empirical research on students titled *Student und Politik* (Habermas et al. 1961), the second, a historical approach to many of the themes raised in the *Gruppenexperiment*, his much more famous *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Habermas [1962] 1989). Interestingly,

like the *Gruppenexperiment*, Habermas's *Student und Politik* has never been translated into English, and it even took many years before *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* was translated. The point is that one can in this way easily draw a direct intellectual lineage from the *Gruppenexperiment*, through Habermas's ideas about a bourgeois "public sphere," to contemporary concepts such as "deliberative democracy" and the like. One is reminded here of James Fishkin's deliberative democracy experiment, in which Fishkin studied a representative sample of the American population to demonstrate that the collective opinion formed during face-to-face conversations was significantly different from the "public opinion" captured by traditional opinion surveys (see Fishkin 1996).

### CONTEMPORARY LESSONS

While the historical importance of the *Gruppenexperiment*—both as an episode in intellectual history and as a source of contemporary concepts—should at this point be clear, my purpose in presenting this little-known work here is more forward-looking. I first turned to this obscure work because it provided information about postwar Germany rather different from either the official opinion polling data or the many polemical characterizations of postwar Germany, which have come in the form of accusations of inadequate memory and defenses against "too much" memory. In this regard, however, I ended up disagreeing with at least one important claim in the *Gruppenexperiment*, namely, that the work revealed a nonpublic opinion not visible in the official public discourse. Instead, as I have argued elsewhere (Olick 2005), the postwar German public discourse evidenced less of the superficial transformation than the Frankfurters assumed; in other words, close analysis and critical reading—the same skills Adorno and his colleagues applied to their group interview data—applied to the public discourse showed much of what Adorno et al. found in their experimental settings. Saying this does not invalidate their results—quite the contrary: it is a matter of confirming consistencies across different social fields, both public and nonpublic. In this light, Adorno and his colleagues were indeed correct in their concern for the postwar German political culture of memory.

Granted, there are differences between the discourses they elicited and those available in public. And this leads directly to the broader import of reading this study fifty years on. What impressed me most was the emphasis on discursive process, an emphasis that has, in my opinion, been all too absent in the recent sociological discourse about collective memory. In this regard, it seems to me that the *Gruppenexperiment* provides a model for current research.

Elsewhere (Olick 2007), I have argued that the sociology of collective memory falls victim to at least four common "substantialist" temptations (temptations common to all sociology as well): we treat memory as singular (every society has one collective memory, *the* collective memory of the group), as mimetic (either memory directly represents the past or it is a fiction deployed for present purposes), as independent of other social processes (either memory causes other variables or is

caused by them), and, most important, as a tangible thing (the memory) rather than as a process (remembering). These temptations pervade both our conceptual language and our methods. What so fascinated me about the *Gruppenexperiment* was thus twofold: first, its explicit conceptualization of opinion formation as a discursive process; and second, the methods—flawed as they were—attempting to capture this process empirically.

To my knowledge, there has been little of this kind of work in contemporary studies of social memory. Most of us either interpret images or conduct surveys. Even ethnography has been relatively absent from our field. In my own work on Germany, I have sought to hedge against the substantialist temptations by emphasizing the discursive qualities of historical texts. Others have worked creatively with, for instance, longitudinal survey data. But, after reading the *Gruppenexperiment*, I wondered whether we have neglected older methods at our peril, for they do seem in many ways better suited to bringing process into relief. Social psychology, in which experiment has remained more contemporary than in sociology, has done somewhat better in this regard: here I'm thinking of the kind of work done by Daniel Schachter (1996) and others on contextual factors affecting recall; or of Ulrich Neisser's (1982) demand for research on memory in "natural settings"; or of William Hirst's more recent—and more sociologically relevant—work on flashbulb memories of such events as 9/11 (*New Yorker* 2001). But reading the *Gruppenexperiment*, I wondered if many of the reificatory temptations in the contemporary sociology of memory might benefit from more genuinely processual observation and experimentation with the kinds of goals and concepts the Frankfurters transferred from the midcentury American context to a Germany in ruins.

The call for this forum was to contemplate "interactionist perspectives" on collective memory. For me, the hallmark of interactionism is its emphasis on processes. Indeed, it is worth mentioning one further intellectual-historical affinity, making even more obvious the overlap between this argument and classical concerns of symbolic interactionism. One cannot help being struck by the similarities between the Frankfurters' methodological concern and that voiced by Blumer at about the same time the Frankfurters were undertaking their work in occupied Germany. In "Public Opinion and Public Opinion Polling," Blumer ([1948] 1969:198) argued vociferously that "public opinion must obviously be recognized as having its setting in a society and as being a function of that society in operation. This means . . . that public opinion gets its form from the social framework in which it moves and from the social processes in play in that framework." As a result, Blumer argued, "the formation of public opinion does not occur through an interaction of disparate individuals. . . . current public opinion polling [thus] gives an inaccurate and unrealistic picture of public opinion because of the failure to catch opinions as they are organized and as they operate in a functioning society" (pp. 200, 204). One is reminded here as well of Halbwachs's argument about collective memory: "It is in society that people normally acquire memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories."

In the vast literature on memory and opinion in postwar Germany, I know of no better effort to capture this process without reducing it than that undertaken by Adorno et al., all its problems notwithstanding. Whether the future of social memory studies will be more ethnographic, experimental, or more processual in some other way, it does indeed seem to me as if these might be promising methodological avenues, curiously unexplored in recent years by many of us toiling in this field.

## NOTES

1. Referring to a single continuous institute in these years is at the very least a reduction of historical complexities.
2. The proposal's authors—including Robert Merton, Everett Hughes, Paul Lazarsfeld, Robert Lynd, and Talcott Parsons, among others—claimed that the institute's "greatest service to the social sciences has been in creating a link between the emphasis on theory characteristic of older European sociology and the techniques of modern empirical research" ("Proposal" 1949:681).
3. There are, obviously, some complexities in referring to all of these as American social scientists.
4. These authors, of course, have not been the only ones with these concerns, as an extensive methodological literature on public opinion research shows. See Herbst 1998.
5. This essay is reprinted in Adorno 2003:3–18.
6. See especially the annotations in Rolf Teidemann's edition of essays by Adorno (2003:477–80). For a more extensive discussion, see Wiggershaus 1995:472–78.
7. See Claussen 1986.
8. Reprinted in Amery 1998.

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