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Solitary Amnesia as National Memory: From Habermas to Luhmann

Rodanthi Tzanelli

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Rodanthi Tzanelli, Sociology and Social Research, UK

Abstract: The repressive mechanisms of collective memory have been the subject of a fierce debate in the human sciences - especially, but not exclusively, in the study of nationalism. This paper re-investigates the nature of national memory in the context of European nationalisms by drawing on contemporary national cases of remembering and forgetting. The explored instances are mobilized in the study of remembering/forgetting on a factual, rather than ideal level. Theoretically, it is argued that the Habermassian call for fostering 'anamnestic solidarity' with the past often fails in practice because of its normative undertones that disagree with Realpolitic demands. This is so because nationalist discourse, which serves to preserve the political interests of the national community, has to present itself to political forces that reside outside the community as a closed, autopoetic system akin to that theorized by Niklas Luhmann. Although the Luhmannian thesis (which would gesture towards the autonomisation of national memory) also fails to explain the nature of nationalist remembering/forgetting tout court, it allows more space for an exploration of nationalist self-presentation than Habermas' normative stance. The argument in this study, which combines an appreciation of hermeneutics and autopoeia, is that the practice of (re)producing the 'nation's' solitary amnesia enables nationalist discourse to respond to external political pressures. This presents the latter as a dialogical/hermeneutic project despite its solipsistic 'façade'.

Keywords: Collective Memory, Europe, Habermas, Hermeneutics, Luhmann, Nationalism

Theory and Memory: Habermas and Luhmann

CONTEMPORARY SCENARIOS HAVE it that we live in a post-national era: globalisation has gone a long way, and the socio-economic changes it has triggered are bound to form cracks in traditional forms of communal solidarity. There has been a slow denationalisation and simultaneous global commodification of memory with heritage industries displaying national treasures for external tourist consumption (Urry 1995: 165). Considering globally televised images of identity, media theorists point out that the 'banalization' (Billig 1995) of culture triggers processes that change the face of nations and localities in unpredictable ways (Held 2000: 1-3). The advent of new media technologies with global appeal such as the Internet open up possibilities for the production of cosmopolitan versions of identity, thus slowly removing national specificity from the socio-political plain (see Szerszynski and Urry 2006). New forms of sociality are allegedly characterised by amnesiac tendencies more than ever (Huyssen 1995; Huyssen 2000). At the turn of the 21st century nationally embedded understandings of culture and belonging come under theoretical attack from every possible side.

At the same time, the growing number of civil conflicts and harrowing wars waged around the world, counters such claims and brings to the fore the workings of national identity and nationalism as a contemporaneous political force. At the heart of this debate rests the explosive potential that narrating and manipulating a common past may have, as well as the importance of such a past for securing national solidarity. This manipulation of memory is, undoubtedly, a political tool in the hands of those who represent the national community at any time in history, and its scholarly study calls for a contextual assessment of *Realpolitik* visions. Another *problématique* that arises from the selfsame phenomenon is that of the ethics of such manipulation: what happens to the sufferers of past atrocities committed in the name of any nation? Can the 'amnesiac elixir' turn into the most dangerous poison when envisaging the community's harmonious future? The moral burden of *Aufarbeitung*, Adorno's Freudian take on the *conscious* reappraisal of the past (1986[1959]: 115), rests heavily on the shoulders of national communities that built their fictional solidarity on repression of ethnic difference, racist discrimination and genocide. This paper vies for an understanding of the workings of national amnesia. It is argued that the solitary form national remembering appears to have, its inclination to exclude any kind of disruptive critical intervention from outside, may be just a 'façade'. Behind this solipsistic 'façade' there is a re-working of critical interventions into a coherent narrative, which may be 'systemic' (in Niklas Luhmann's terms) in nature, but are still based on a rational *hermeneutic* assessment of the socio-political environment in which nations live. A theoretical move between Luhmannian *autopoeia* and Habermassian *hermeneutics* allows for an analysis

of remembering and forgetting in contemporary nationalist environments.

Habermas' contribution in the 'Historians' Debate' (*Historikerstreit*) relates to the status of German memory following the humiliating end of the Second World War. The Adenauer government in West Germany had recognised the country's responsibility for the genocide and agreed to pay reparations to the survivors of the Holocaust (Herf 1997). But even the act of 'compensation' simply reflected the general consensus that this past needs to be 'normalised', that German self-respect has to be restored at all costs, if the country wants to have a future. In this climate, any connections between National Socialism and anti-Semitism had to be repressed, even if they were still present in German socio-political life. Inevitably, the phantom of Nazism would haunt intellectual debates of the era too. From Gerard Ritter's defensive take on Nazism's populist base in the 1960s, to Fritz Fisher's *Sonderweg* approach to German history, to the functionalists of the 1970s, for whom the genocide was the 'nasty work' of a minority, the German nation was portrayed as a victim of, rather than an actor in the Holocaust. Michael Stürmer's 'Land Without an History' (1986) set the nationalist tone in the 1980s with its critique of absence of any positive German history, and Ernst Nolte's 'The Past That Does Not Want To Pass' officially opened the *Historikerstreit* (6 June 1986), with the argument that the Holocaust was a *überschießende reaktion* (overshooting reaction) to Bolshevik crimes (Postone 1990).

One could argue that in the German context the debate on national memory formed a deferred 'response to the great trauma of modernity' (Klein 2000: 140): the World Wars. In the conservative camp, this attempt to repress the damaging aspects of a universally condemned past, produced a process of what I will call 'solitary amnesia', whereby the German nation's spokesmen *alone* chose to strategically remember and forget components of their national past – a perfect replication of the liberal Hobbesian argument of *contractual* oblivion that ensures the protection of the community from endogenous divisions (Wolin 1989).

This attitude was rejected by Habermas (1997) who questioned the ethical implications of forgetting and emphasised the German nation's moral accountability for its past. For Habermas the liberal revisionist argument dissociates memory from distribution of justice, or relativises past atrocities by removing them from their context. In *The New Conservatism* (1989a) he accuses such revisionist perspectives of neo-conservatism, and stresses the German nation's need to establish a connection with the deceased of the Holocaust. Habermas followed Benjamin's (1992[1968]) reflections on the eradication of remembrance from people's lives after the Great War, but also the sudden moral awakening this triggered in the face of total memory loss. Habermas attempted to revive the Benjaminian idea of 'anamnestic solidarity' (Lenhardt 1975: 136) that war survivors create with the dead (Misztal 2003: 45; Fussell 1975). But Adorno's critique of the post-Second World War culture of forgetting also determined Habermas' political stance: forgetting our moral debt to the past threatens the future of democratic principles as it forecloses the possibility for critical self-appraisal (see also Ricoeur 1999).

This is crucial: unlike other Frankfurt school scholars (Marcuse 1955: 34-5), Adorno contended that 'the effacement of memory is more the achievement of an *all-too-wakeful consciousness* than it is the result of its weakness in the face of the superiority of unconscious processes' (Adorno 1986[1959]: 1117, emphasis mine). The genealogy of the *Historikerstreit* itself suggests that, in Germany, the creed of nationalism - which invariably fosters identity on the basis of historical continuity but *consciously* uses collective memory as a political instrument - was closely connected to liberal historical relativism. Habermas opposed this 'artificial resuscitation of nationalist patriotism that [was] offered as a sort of compensation for damages' (Duvenage 1999: 8-9) and defended the adoption of a constitutional patriotic model in its place, which combines 'universalist demands of liberal principles and the need for a robust political identity, including a shared history' (Mizstal 2003; Habermas 1996). His model of political belonging formed an attempt to re-establish Germany's link to Western Enlightenment traditions (Pensky 1989: 356-58) and replace neo-conservative emotionalism, rife with narratives of national victimisation, with a rational self-understanding of our moral obligations to the past (Habermas 1989a: 227). In the same vein, for Habermas the historian's mission is to resurrect and keep alive all the cultural traditions of the nation – to act as a public intellectual ready to critique past political errors.

Habermas unambiguously drew upon Benjaminian soteriological observations on the philosophy of history. For Benjamin, the historian-as-Messiah 'comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as the subduer of Antichrist' (1968: 247). This apocalyptic vision of historical interpretation (Pensky 1989: 366-8) is, however, also helplessly utopian, in so far as it does not resolve the question of how memory is put into public discourse effectively. Although Habermassian hermeneutics escape the theological trap, they do not avoid Benjaminian utopianism: the ethics of collective memory do not resolve political dilemmas. National communities have to manipulate their past in the struggle for self-preservation, which commences every time they receive external pres-

sures that target collectively revered pasts. Although on an ideal level Habermas' militant stance remains admirable, on a pragmatic level it fails to explain how real-life time national communities appear to absorb criticisms that originate in the international political environment in which they live. The absorption of externally produced shocks aims to preserve the social terrain of the national community intact. This is made possible through the modification of collective self-presentations controlled by the centres of political power. Nation-states control the mechanism of *anamnestic autopoeia*, a mechanism which allows for the creative reproduction of the cult of collective narcissism (Hohendahl 1995: 56-7). Arendt's dual perspective of political judgement captures the actualisation of this 'cult': unlike her Benjaminian historical spectator (Yar 2000: 1-3), the nation-state as the custodian of formal historical records also becomes an actor that shapes the moral universe of the national community.

Resorting to Luhmannian understandings of *institutionalised* patterns of behaviour found in state apparatuses, we gain more insight into the political manipulation of memory. Luhmann (1982) would argue that the inclination social systems display to devise ways of reducing their complexity stems from decisions of the moment. Such decisions nevertheless result in the constitution of meaning for the system. Meaning is therefore the outcome of a series of rational selections and rejections of possibilities that originate in the environment in which the system exists, but whose incorporation or exclusion only aims to stabilise the system itself, not to establish a dialogue with the environment. Luhmann (1990) put into use Maturana's concept of *autopoesis* (self-making) to explain the development of the state among other system formations, and later to reconstitute sociological discourse in terms of meaning, communication and their relationship to the environment (1995).

We may view state-controlled versions of national memory in terms of systems, whose aspiration is always to function better, prioritising efficiency and self-preservation. State-induced obliterations of memory betray the workings of a closed system which 'operates in a selective way, as much in the plane of structures as in that of the processes: there are always other possibilities that can be selected when one pursuits an order' (Luhmann 1995: 137). Solitary amnesia *appears* to operate on a totally self-referential level, using suggestions that circulate in the political environment of the nation-state to legitimate the latter's sovereignty *and* protect national solidarity in the face of external criticisms that may complicate national-as-political life (Ray 1996; Balibar and Wallerstein 1991). In this instance national consensus *and* the maintenance of a robust

political centre go hand in hand (Ricoeur 2004: 85). Attempts to produce *consensual* memory narratives primarily belong to centripetal institutions, such as the educational system, which 'will turn out worthy, loyal and competent members of the total society' (Gellner 1983: 64; Smith 1991: 16). Nationalist versions of memory rely on an easily identifiable strategy: that of borrowing from pre-existing cultures and ideas to invent the 'nation' – 'a *reality* for better or worse, and in general an inescapable one' (*ibid.* 49). The shift from acknowledging the presence of historical contradictions that shape national identities to selecting suitable historical narratives that make identity politically plausible resolves Arendt's contradictions of action and spectatorship on a pragmatic level. The convergence of enunciative and institutional authority in the nation's pedagogy (cor)responds to the intersection of the horizontal bond of living with the vertical bond of authority – a move that actualises the social (Ricoeur 2004: 60, 167).

Yet, a question arising from Luhmannian understandings of complexity is the total absence of interpersonal communication: Luhmann's model of 'social systems' is totally devoid of human agency and reduces *Verstehen* into a mechanical ritual (see Habermas 1971). Social systems appear to be operationally closed, as the only contact they make with the environment is based on their own self-preservation. Likewise, *Realpolitik* visions of national-as-political order tend to sideline social justice, truth and even consensual legitimation of power (Habermas' main concerns), which is usually monitored in international politics: they use technocratic strokes to brush the social.

In response to Luhmann, Habermas (1989b) developed a theory that outlines the increasing rationalisation of the 'lifeworld' with the help of systemic steering media, such as money and power (on which see also Luhmann 1999). He understands societies as both systems and lifeworlds but separates lifeworld action, which is based on consensus, from systems activity, which controls the social without requiring consensus (1989b: 118-9). We must situate solitary amnesia therefore in the process of systemic integration, as its function is to fabricate national solidarity through anodyne, guilt-free forms of remembering. To follow the trail of Habermas' thought (1989b: 183), solitary amnesia produces organic forms of solidarity (Durkheim 1964[1893]). Solitary amnesia is used by systemic power (the nation-state) to simultaneously *project* an image of solidarity *outside* the nation's lifeworld (the universe of the community) and to organise the lifeworld of the national community internally.

In view of these observations it is more correct to argue that solitary amnesia may retain the cultural and linguistic properties that characterise the trans-

mission of informal memory traditions: it is dialogical and malleable because external referents tend to slide into its structures all the time, modifying them. But because solitary amnesia is formalised by state power, it also belongs to the structural conditions of the nation's lifeworld (Habermas 1987: 355) – it operates, in Habermas' words, *a tergo* (Habermas 1989b: 135). The contingent potential of social interaction happens outside institutional contexts. In organised domains of national memory story telling becomes embedded in plausible versions of *history* to reconstruct the psychosocial matter of communicative action both *for external and internal 'consumption'*. Solitary national amnesia is never a truly solipsistic product; it only uses autopoetic techniques to cover up the embarrassment of communications with a critical environment (Todorov 2003: 123).

Solitary Amnesia in Action: Some European Examples

The types of sociality solitary amnesia produces are not norm-free but manipulate the normative potential of memory. We need only link Stürmer's lamentation of missing positive histories to strategic decisions of German power apparatuses: his support of 'patriotic' history was also a response to international criticism levelled against Nazi atrocities, and the international control imposed upon the German state, following the end of the Second World War. Although Stürmer claimed at the time that he was writing on his own accord, left-wing intellectuals saw in his argument the agenda of Chancellor Helmut Kohl for whom Stürmer, is rumoured, acted as personal consultant. We must place then solitary amnesia within its systemic political context to understand it: between 1984-6 Chancellor Kohl had devised a plan that aimed at re-positioning Germany in European and international politics. On 22 September 1984 he and the French president François Mitterrand met at Verdun to commemorate the deaths of both World Wars. This act marked the beginning of a political relationship that formed an important motor for European integration. A year later, Kohl's meeting with US President Ronald Reagan 'coincided' with the commemoration of the 'Victory in Europe Day' (7 May 1945). This was followed by a series of other appeals at reconciliation, which culminated in Reagan and Kohl's visit of the German military cemetery in Bitburg, where members of the Waffen-SS were buried. This manipulation of memory, which conflated Holocaust remembrance with a forgetting of Nazi brutalities, aroused criticism, as it followed right after the two politicians' visits to the Belsen concentration camp. Kohl's comment following the post-1989 German unification that had he grown up in the Eastern zone 'he wouldn't know which route he would have taken' (Gordon 1993: 3-4), further

emphasizes the point: memory and forgetting are coupled in political maneuvers to assist in German self-(re)presentation. Likewise, Stürmer and Nolte's work immortalised war-induced structural changes in the workings of German national memory, which threatened the integrity of German identity. Solitary amnesia appears in moments that become critical for the survival of national lifeworlds, we may say (Habermas 1989b: 291-292; Ray 1999), for crises act coercively on the production of solidarity.

Other national communities reached a critical point, at which a systemic re-organisation was necessary – hence the need to 'forget' unsavoury aspects of their past. In France both Gaullists and Communists fostered a heroic image of French resistance, foreclosing thus a painful exposure of the crimes of the Vichy regime. The only change in the narratives proffered by each side had to do with questions of leadership: whereas Gaullists favoured the idea of a French resistance led by the military, the Communists supported the idea of a working-class led resistance (Azéma 1984: 210; Todorov 2003: 205). The 'Vichy syndrome' (Rousso 1991) eventually became a metaphor for universal French collaboration with Nazi genocide of over 70,000 French Jews. Universal criticism of the Holocaust led to a bizarre reorientation of French understandings of wartime experience around Judaeo-Christian values and a reconstruction of 'the entire history of the Occupation in terms of Vichy's anti-Semitism […], thereby marginalizing the roles played by other factors, especially the Resistance' (Gordon 1995: 496) in atrocities. Péan's analysis of Mitterrand's relationship with former Vichy police minister Renè Bousquet added fuel to the fire, as it suggested that forgetting was a matter of political agendas more so than of ethics. Vichy-centred solitary amnesia followed up to the trial of Paul Trouvier in 1992-4, Bousquet's *cause celebre* that ended in 1993 with his assassination (Carrier 1994), and Mitterrand's joined televised interview with Péan on the French President's Vichy connections. The need of the French left to be recognised as the political fortress of Europe against the Nazi sway produced an ethics-free image of French left-wing agency that began to crumble only in recent years. The Vichy syndrome 'consists of a diverse set of symptoms whereby […] particularly that trauma resulting from internal divisions within France, reveals itself in political, cultural, and social life' (Rousso 1991: 10). Solitary amnesia is then not just the product of right-wing politics, but of solidarity *qua* power legitimacy that dictates a *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*.

Italian solitary amnesia manifested itself in July 2003 with Italy's ascendancy to the Presidency of the European Council. This coincided with debates concerning the nature of the European Constitution

- a decision based on the imminent accession of many new Central and Eastern European countries to the Union - and the war on Iraq that had already divided the European community. The Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, a declared critic of Franco-German domination in questions of EU policy, ardent defender of Italian nationalist interests in the European political arena and supporter of the Bush administration, was already a target for other European leaders, due to his dubious domestic manoeuvres that secured him a victory in the national elections. His opening address as President to the European Parliament (2 July 2003) was met with brutal criticism by left-wing MEPs who highlighted the recently passed Italian law that granted senior public officials immunity during Berlusconi's office. MEP Martin Schulz, the Deputy Head of Social Democrats in European Parliament, critiqued Berlusconi's coalition with *Lega Nord*, a nationalist party with an explicitly racist agenda on immigration, as well as Berlusconi's general policies that violated the EU Human Rights Charter.

Berlusconi's response was that Schulz should take up the role of a *kapò* in a film about Nazi concentration camps (*International Herald Tribune*, 2 July 2003). This caused a universal outcry in the European community. *Kapòs* were not Nazi officials but prisoners of the Nazi regime who had committed criminal offences. Such prisoners would often be appointed by the Nazis to oversee the work of other prisoners in camps (Levi 1979: 39-40). The confusion probably arose from Berlusconi's political illiteracy, yet it was widely accepted that he had portrayed Schulz as a Nazi camp guard (*BBC News*, 2 July 2003). Berlusconi refused to apologise for his racist comment, and when his attitude found support in *Lega Nord* members of his government the protest became near-universal within Italy. Berlusconi's populist nationalist style deserves closer attention however, because it bears the mark of solitary amnesia. What he did in effect, was to 'write out' Italy's involvement in these dark pages of European history: by calling a German MEP a 'Nazi' he was aligning his own country with the winners of the war, foreclosing any discussion of Italian fascist history. What was, of course, silenced, was Berlusconi's alliance with the neo-Fascist *Alleanza Nationale* party after the 1994 national elections (still symbolically connected to Mussolini's Italy), and his rumoured continuous 'relationship' with these circles. Italian solitary amnesia was political-systemic in its nature and served to preserve intact an Italian national image abroad. By extension, the defence of Italian pride against the 'bad' Germans was just a way of attacking Franco-German political plans in the EU.

There are, however, cases of systemic failure followed by lifeworld disintegration – or, to use more conventional vocabulary, political crises that lead to a collapse of established notions of identity and the state itself – that can produce solitary amnesia and new forms of collective memory. The concern here is more with the emergence of national systems that support new lifeworlds following the collapse of multi-ethnic complexity - e.g. federations that encompass many ethnicities. Such systemic reorganisations can have catastrophic consequences, as they lead to bloody conflict and genocides akin to those of the Second World War. Civil war in the former Yugoslav space fostered conflicting narratives of the past and worked as a platform for ethnic self-presentation. Interestingly, it was Slobodan Milosevic's decision to organise the 600th 'national' commemoration of the battle of Kosovo (1389), where Serbian prince Lazar was defeated by Sultan Murat, that further intensified regional tensions and led to war. This commemorative ritual also encompassed informal traditions that implicitly likened Albanian Kosovars, the object of discord in the so-called 'second battle of Kosovo', to the 'infidel' Turks, a historical enemy for the Serb nation (Ray 1999: 2.6). In addition, the collapse of the Yugoslav state led to a recounting of massacres and further commemorative rituals: 'the Communists were mass murderers (of Ustasas and Chetniks); the Croatian (fascists) state of 1941-45, were murderers of Serbs; the Muslims were collaborators with Nazi genocide; while the new Croatian state under Tuj_man diminished the extent of the Ustashe genocide thus provoking further trauma-rage' (*ibid.*: 2.8). The Yugoslav systemic collapse fostered a specific mode of solitary amnesia: unlike repressed pasts (mass murders), which bore the stigma of self-guilt, such selectively resurrected pasts supported self-victimisation.

Memories of displacement and massacre on the Julian March also haunt Balkan nations. Its partition after the Second World War was echoed in the 1991 division of the Istrian Peninsula between Slovenia and Croatia. The rearrangement of political borders after the Second World War led to the displacement of Istrian populations, forcing between 200,000 and 350,000 ethnic Italians, Slovenians and Croats to migrate in different directions (Ballinger 2003: 1-3). Neighbouring Trieste was an identity hotspot for centuries, but with the rise of Italian nationalism and the fascist resurgence of 'Italianità' the presence of any Slovenian (the minority's self-designation) or 'uncivilised' Slavs (their Italian 'nomination') was undesirable. On the Istrian border Italians fled their homes under the recurrent waves of oppression that shook Communist Yugoslavia. From 1950 onwards, Italian refugees from Titoist Yugoslavia and Italian immigrants from elsewhere were settled on the Slovene-populated corridor around Trieste. Even today, Italian, Croatian and Slovenian narratives de-

monise the 'other' side denying any responsibility for human loss and suffering. Notably, Italians celebrate Trieste's return to Italy after the Second World War and remember the massacres of Italians under Tito's Yugoslav regime (the 'Foibes' massacres). In February 2004, an Italian parliamentary motion to declare a day of commemoration for the Italian victims passed by an overwhelming 502-15, sanctioning Italian versions of memory systemically. It is significant that the motion enjoyed support even from the formerly communist Democrats of the Left (*The Economist*, 26 August 2004). What was forgotten in all this was the Italian oppression and persecution of the Slovenian populations of Trieste in the past – another version of history favoured by Slovenians that would infuriate any supporter of basic human rights.

Similar cases of solitary amnesia characterised the communist regimes in Eastern and Central Europe and their post-1989 successors. After the end of the Second World War, active resistance to fascism enabled the forging of new versions of the past as a means to the future: 'the natural scapegoat was "the Germans", just as now "the Soviets" are blamed for the pains of the Communist era' (Esbenshade 1995: 79; Wertsch 2002: 106-112). This diverted attention from the political conduct of the communist regimes, including their hunting for votes of ex-Nazis and practices of lustration and de-communisation. Especially the question of lustration appeared on public agendas in most post-communist countries, creating major controversies concerning patterns of transitional justice (Kritz 1995). In post-communist Poland, legislation was introduced, which aimed to protect the identity of former communists and to resolve political tensions generated by the communist past (Misztal 1999; Misztal 2003: 152). Nevertheless, continuous external and internal criticism forced the

government to introduce a lustration law in 1999, in an attempt to ease off the tensions. Other examples of systemic manipulation of memory in pre-1989 European countries include the 'airbrushing' of the 1948 Slovak leader, Vladimir Clementis, out of official photographs after his trial and execution, and the memory repression of the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, which Kundera extensively recounts in his work (Kundera 1981: 14). These cases present ostensible similarities when examined comparatively: individually, each aims at securing systemic (re)integration, and jointly they respond to global political pressures for (re)integration into a wider political system following the 1989 revolutions.

Conclusion

The examples used in this study point in one direction: the institution of solitary amnesia, with its power to formalise nationalist *Weltanschaung*, falls short of the ability to humanise pain and grant it with intersubjective meaning. This is so because its function is to ensure the preservation of systemic principles in a rational and efficient manner, not to do justice to harmed others (Ricoeur 2004: 89). When reflecting critically on European examples, one can argue that solitary amnesia embodies nationalist narratives-as-discourse: its aim is to make things *happen*, to support affirmative action on the political environment that the nation inhabits. Such type of action is monopolised by power, and sidesteps democratic consensus, to preserve the integrity of the system. To challenge Habermas' (1989b: 337-8) positive standpoint one may observe that when the cogwheels of power are set in motion lifeworld agency fades in the background, leaving the public sphere a hollow space ready to be colonised by the politics of the moment.

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About the Author

Dr. Rodanthi Tzanelli

Rodanthi Tzanelli is lecturer in Sociology at the School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research, University of Kent, and Visiting Lecturer at the Centre for Mobilities Research, Lancaster University (from April-August 2007). She has previously taught in history, sociology and criminology at Lancaster University and the University of Central Lancashire and held several research posts in Greece and in Britain, and an AHRB

scholarship. Her research interests include the sociology of nationalism (with reference to inequalities in Europe), tourism, globalisation and resistance (with particular reference to the politics and ethics of culture industries and the relationship of film and tourist industries) and representations of deviancy (with particular reference to race, ethnicity and gender). She has published on all these areas in international journals. Her first research monograph will be published by Routledge in early 2007 (The Cinematic Tourist: Explorations in Globalization, Culture and Resistance, International Library of Sociology).