
FROM COLLECTIVE VIOLENCE TO THE COMMON FUTURE: FOUR MODELS FOR DEALING WITH THE TRAUMATIC PAST

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The Israeli philosopher Avishai Margalit dedicated his book *The Ethics of Memory* to his parents, whom he introduced to the reader on the second page of his preface. “From early childhood,” he writes, “I witnessed an ongoing discussion between my parents about memory.” Margalit then reconstructs this parental dialogue, which started after the Second World War when it became obvious that both of their huge families in Europe had been destroyed.

This is what his mother used to say:

“The Jews were irretrievably destroyed. What is left is just a pitiful remnant of the great Jewish people (by which she meant European Jewry). The only honorable role for the Jews that remains is to form communities of memory – to serve as ‘soul candles’ like the candles that are ritually kindled in memory of the dead.”

This is what his father used to say:

“We, the remaining Jews, are people, not candles. **It is a horrible prospect for anyone to live just for the sake of retaining the memory of the dead. That is what the Armenians opted to do. And they made a terrible mistake**¹. We should avoid it at all costs. Better to create a community that thinks predominantly about the future and reacts to the present, not a community that is governed from mass graves.”²

After 1945, it was first the father’s position that prevailed – and not only in Israel. What mattered then in Israel was the collective project of founding a new state, of forging a new beginning for survivors and opening up the future for successive generations. Four decades later, during the 1980s, the mother’s position became more and more dominant. The survivors turned to the past that they had held at a distance for so long. After the foundation of the state had been politically accomplished and confirmed by two wars, Yad Vashem became the symbolic cultural center of the nation and Israeli society transformed itself more and more into a ritualistic community of memory.

Margalit has presented two paradigmatic solutions for the problem of dealing with a traumatic past: remembering or forgetting, either preservation of the past or orientation towards the future. I want to argue that today we are no longer dealing with only these two mutually exclusive models but are experimenting with four. I will refer to them as

1. dialogic forgetting,

¹ Underlined by Editor.

² **Avishai Margalit**, *The Ethics of Memory*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2003, vii-ix.

2. remembering in order to prevent forgetting,
3. remembering in order to forget,
4. dialogic remembering.

All of these models deviate from these basic and widespread modes of preserving a repressive status quo in trying to limit and overcome traumatic violence by negotiating a new and mutual vision or memory of the past.

1. Dialogic Forgetting

It is an age-old experience that the memory of violence, injustice, suffering and unsettled accounts is prone to generate new violence, mobilizing aggression between neighbors which breaks societies apart. This is why humans in history have looked for pragmatic solutions how to bring to an end a lethal conflict by controlling and containing the explosive force of memory.³ Forgetting was discovered time and again in history as a resource under such circumstances. The term must not be taken too literally in this context. It is but another expression for 'silence'. While the silence that is imposed by the victors on the losers is the perennial strategy of repressive regimes to muffle the voices of resistors and victims, self-imposed dialogic silence is a model for peace designed and agreed upon by two parties connected through past actions of mutual violence in order to keep an explosive past at bay. Such a forgetting was introduced, for instance, in ancient Greece after civil wars in order to achieve closure after a period of internal violence and to mark a new era in which a divided society could grow together again.⁴ Of course the state could not directly influence the memories of its citizens, but it could prohibit the public articulation of resentments, that were liable to reactivate old hatred and new violence. The same model was implemented after other civil wars, for instance the Thirty-Years-War. The 1648 peace treaty of Münster-Osnabrück contains the formula: "perpetua oblivio et amnestia"⁵. This policy of forgetting often goes hand in hand with a blanket amnesty in order to end mutual hatred and achieve a new social integration of formerly opposed parties.

It is interesting to note that even after 1945 the model of dialogic forgetting was still widely used as a political resource. The international court of the Nuremberg trials had of course dispensed transitional justice by indicting major Nazi functionaries for the newly defined 'crime against humanity'. This, however, was an act of purging rather than remembering the past. In postwar Germany, the public sphere and that of official diplomacy remained largely shaped by what was called 'a pact

³ Machiavelli once warned the victors that it is easy to conquer a people, but next to impossible to conquer their memories. Unless they are scattered and dispersed, the citizens of a conquered city will never forget their former freedom and their old memories. They will introduce them on the every occasion that presents itself. Niccolo Machiavelli, *Der Fürst*, Stuttgart 1955, 19.

⁴ **Hinderk Emrich, Gary Smith, Hg.**, *Vom Nutzen des Vergessens*, Berlin 1996; Gary Smith, Avishai Margalit, Hg., *Amnestie, oder Die Politik der Erinnerung*, Frankfurt a.M. 1997.

⁵ The peace treaty (*Instrumentum Pacis Osnabrugensis* of 24th October 1648) contains the following article: "Both sides grant each other a perpetual forgetting and amnesty concerning every aggressive act committed in any place in any way by both parties here and there since the beginning of the war." Arno Buschmann, *Kaiser und Reich. Verfassungsgeschichte des Heiligen Römischen Reiches Deutscher Nation vom Beginn des 12. Jahrhunderts bis zum Jahre 1806 in Dokumenten*, Baden-Baden 1994, 17.

of silence'. The term was used 1983 in a retrospective description by Hermann Lübbe (,kollektives Beschweigen').⁶ He made the controversial point that maintaining silence was a necessary pragmatic strategy adopted in postwar Germany (and supported by the allies) to facilitate the economic and political reconstruction of the state and the integration of society. These goals were swiftly achieved in West Germany at the price of putting the former NS elites back into power. Dialogic forgetting or the pact of silence became, as Tony Judt has shown also a strategy of European politics. It was widely adopted during the period of the cold war in which much had to be forgotten in order to consolidate the new Western military alliance against that of the Communist block.⁷

2. Remembering in order to never forget

Especially after civil wars, forgetting was prescribed as a potent remedy against socially dangerous and explosive forms of remembering to foster a speedy integration. Dialogic silence was a remedy but it was clearly no general cure for other situations to dispose of a traumatic past. The pact of forgetting works only after mutual forms of violence between combatants or under the pressure of a new military alliance like the NATO. It cannot work after situations of asymmetric relations in which all-powerful perpetrators attacked defenseless victims. The paradigmatic case of such an asymmetric situation of extreme violence is the Nazi genocide of European Jews.

The paradigmatic shift from the model of *forgetting* to an orientation towards *remembering* occurred with the return of Holocaust memory after a period of latency. This memory returned in various steps. Holocaust memory today is supported by an extended transnational community with a long-term commitment. This memory is sealed with a special pledge for an indefinite future: 'to remember in order to never forget'. Through its widening in space as well as time it has acquired the quality of a civil religion.

In the case of the Holocaust, the model of dialogic forgetting as a strategy of sealing a traumatic past and opening up a new future was no longer considered a viable solution for the problem. On the contrary, this form of closure was exactly what had to be prevented by all means. Remembering was the only adequate response to such collectively destructive and devastating experiences. It was rediscovered not only as a therapeutic remedy for the survivors but also as a spiritual and ethical obligation for the millions of dead victims. Thus slowly but inevitably, the pact of forgetting was transformed into a 'pact of remembering'. The aim of such a pact is to transform the *asymmetric* experience of violence into *symmetric* forms of remembering. To leave the memory of suffering to the affected victim group was now recognized as prolonging the original murderous constellation. The fatal polarity between perpetrator and victim can never be reconciled but it can be overcome by a shared memory based on an empathetic and ethical recognition of the victim's memories. The establishing of such a 'pact of remembering' between the Germans

⁶ See **Aleida Assmann, Ute Frevert**, *Geschichtsvergessenheit, Geschichtsversessenheit. Vom Umgang mit deutschen Vergangenheiten nach 1945*, Stuttgart 1999, 76-78.

⁷ **Tony Judt**, *Postwar. A History of Europe since 1945*. Harmondsworth 2005.

as the successors of the perpetrators and the Jews as the successors of the victims was a historically new and unique answer to the historically unprecedented crime of the Holocaust.⁸

3. Remembering in order to forget

The cumulative process of the returning Holocaust memory was a decisive event in the 1980s that brought about a profound change in sensibility also in other places of the world in dealing with historic traumas. Against this background of a new awareness of the suffering of victims, forgetting was no longer acceptable as a general policy in overcoming atrocities of the past. Remembering became a universal ethical and political claim when dealing with other historic traumas such as the dictatorships in South America, the South-African regime of apartheid, colonial history or the crime of slavery. In most of these discourses about other atrocities, references and metaphorical allusions were made to the newly established memory icon of the Holocaust. I want to argue, however, that although the Holocaust became the prototype of traumatic memories and was and is regularly invoked in the rhetoric of memory activists all over the world, it was not chosen as a model. The transformation of traumatic suffering into a semi-religious transnational and perpetual memory is not what was and is aimed at in other contexts. When I described the shift from the second to the third model as one of ‘remembering in order to never forget’ to ‘remembering in order to forget’, I am exaggerating the difference for the purpose of analytic clarity. I therefore hasten to add, that ‘forget’ in the context of the third model must not be taken to literally as an act of erasure or wiping the slate clean. It stands rather for the urge to leave behind and go beyond – in this the third model clearly deviates from a semi-religious fixation of and on a normative past as a form of negative revelation.

Since the 1980s and 90s, we have witnessed a new policy of memory that is no longer in strict opposition to forgetting but in alliance with it. In this model, the aim is also forgetting, but the way to achieve this aim paradoxically leads through remembering. In this case, remembering is not implemented to memorialize an event of the past into an indefinite future but is introduced as a therapeutic tool to cleanse, to purge, to heal, to reconcile. It is not pursued as an end in itself but as a means to an end, which is the forging of a new beginning.

Cultures in history have produced ample evidence for such forms of transitory and transitional remembering. In the ritual framework of Christian confession re-

⁸ A problematic side effect of this model is the perpetuation of a neat division of perpetrators and victims which is programmed and transmitted as fixed and immutable across generations in the respective national memories into an indefinite future. It may constrain the capacity of these nations for re-imagining themselves in the future. It also has an effect on the possibility of social and political coexistence within a state. The former victims and former perpetrators of the genocide are today separated in different nations: Israel and The United States on the one hand and Germany (together with Austria and other collaborating nations) on the other. Germany, however, is also becoming the site of growing Jewish communities which was possible only on the basis of a clear and responsible relation of the Germans to their past, an exemplary attitude that was ironically referred to as the German DIN- norm of remembering. The coexistence of Jews with Germans in the former country of the perpetrators is highly complicated; it requires them necessarily to reinforce their difference and to take a kind of extraterritorial position.

membering is the introduction to forgetting: the sins have to be publicly articulated and listed before they can be blotted out through the absolution of the priest. A similar logic is at work in the artistic concept of 'catharsis': through the representation of a painful event on stage a traumatic past can be once more collectively re-lived and overcome in the very process of doing so. According to the theory of Aristotle, the group that undergoes such a process is purged in this shared experience. Forgetting through remembering is at bottom also the goal of Freudian psychotherapy: a painful past has to be raised onto the level of language and consciousness in order to be able to move forward and leave it behind. 'To remember in order to forget' holds also true for the witness at court whose sole function is to support with his testimony the legal procedure of finding the truth and reaching a verdict. As the goal of every trial is the verdict and conclusion of the procedure, its aim is closure and therewith the final erasure of the event from social memory.⁹ There is a world of a difference between the legal witness testifying to a crime within the institution of the court and the 'moral witness' (Avishai Margalit) testifying to a crime against humanity publicly outside the courtroom before a moral community. While the former's narrative is subordinated to the legal process, the testimony of the latter is part of a civic culture of remembrance. A merging of the legal and therapeutic function was aimed at in the staging of remembering in South Africa. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission as designed by Bishop Tutu und Alex Boraine created a new form of public ritual, which combined features of the tribunal, the cathartic drama and the Christian confession. In these public rituals a traumatic event had to be publicly narrated and shared; the victim had to tell his or her experiences and they had to be witnessed and acknowledged by the accused before they could be erased from social memory.

The model of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was invented in South America when countries such as Chile, Uruguay, Argentina and Brazil transitioned from military dictatorships to democracy in the 1980s and 90s. By enforcing the moral human rights paradigm, new political and extremely influential concepts were coined such as 'human rights violations' and 'state terrorism'. This led to the establishment of investigative commissions, which became the antecedent of later Truth commissions. They emphasized the transformative value of truth and stressed the importance of acts of remembrance. "'Remember, so as not to repeat' began to emerge as a message and as a cultural imperative."¹⁰ Within the human rights framework, a new and highly influential concept of victimhood was constructed. It replaced the older frameworks within which power struggles used to be debated in terms of class struggles, national revolutions or political antagonisms. By resorting to the universal value of bodily integrity and human rights, the new terminology depoliticized the conflict and led to the elaboration of memory policies.¹¹ In the new framework of a human rights agenda and a new memory culture, also other

⁹ **Thomas Henne**, "Zeugenschaft vor Gericht", in: Michael Elm, Gottfried Kößler, eds., *Zeugenschaft des Holocaust. Zwischen Trauma, Tradierung und Ermittlung*, Frankfurt, New York: Campus 2007, 79-91.

¹⁰ **Elizabeth Jelin**, "Memories of State Violence: The Past in the Present", Ms. 2007, p.5; see also **Elizabeth Jelin**, *State Repression and the Labors of Memory*, Minneapolis 2003.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

forms of state violence could be addressed such as racial and gender discrimination, repression and the rights of indigenous people. When decades and sometimes centuries after a traumatic past justice in the full sense is no longer possible, memory was discovered as an important symbolic resource to retrospectively acknowledge these crimes against humanity. What the transnational movement of abolition was for the 19th century, the new transnational concept of victimhood is for the late 20th and early 21th century. The important change is, however, that now the victims speak for themselves and claim their memories in a globalized public arena. The dissemination of their voices and their public visibility and audibility has created a new 'world ethos' that is not automatically enforced but makes it increasingly difficult for state authorities to continue a repressive policy of forgetting and silence.

The road from authoritarian to civil societies today leads through the needle's ear of facing, remembering and coming to terms with a burdened past. The transformation process of memory that starts with TRC commissions on the political level has to be deepened on the social level, which takes much more time. But however long it may take and how deep it may go, remembering is not the aim of the process but only its medium. The aim is to facilitate recognition, reconciliation and, eventually, 'forgetting' in the sense of putting a traumatic past behind in order to be able to imagine a common future. (Vergangenheitsbewältigung)

4. Dialogic Remembering

With the third model, we have looked at cases, in which a state transitions from dictatorship to democracy or confronts a traumatic history in order to create a shared moral consensus within its nation and society. My fourth model applies to situations that transcend such internal reconstructions of nations and societies. It concerns the memory policy of two or more states that share a common legacy of traumatic violence. Two countries engage in a dialogic memory if they face a shared history of mutual violence by mutually acknowledging their own guilt and empathy with the suffering they have inflicted on others.

As a rule, national memories are not dialogic but monologic. They are constructed in such a way that they are identity-enhancing and self-celebrating; their main function is generally to 'enhance and celebrate' a positive collective self image. National memories are self-serving and therein closely aligned to national myths, which Peter Sloterdijk has appropriately termed modes of 'self-hypnosis'. With respect to traumatic events, these myths provide effective protection shields against events that a nation prefers to forget. When facing negative events in the past, there are only three dignified roles for the national collective to assume: that of the victor who has overcome the evil, that of the resistor who as heroically fought the evil and that of the victim who has passively suffered the evil. Everything else lies outside the scope of these memory perspectives and is conveniently forgotten.

After the Second World War, for instance, with the Germans in the evident role of the perpetrators, all the other national memories chose one of these dignified positions: the narrative of the victor was that of the allies, the narrative of the resistor was assumed by the GDR and by France, the narrative of the victim was chosen

by Poland and Austria. After 1989 and the demise of Soviet union, the opening of Eastern European archives brought to light a number of documents that challenged some of these clear-cut memory constructions. The Holocaust that had been a peripheral site in the Second World War gradually into its center and to become its defining event. In the light of this shift in historical perspective, new evidence of active collaboration, passive support, and indifference to the crime of the Holocaust brought about a crisis in national memories. In Western Europe, the national constructions of memory have become more complex through the acknowledgement of collaboration. In many Eastern states, however, the memory of the Holocaust has to compete with the memory of one's own victimhood and suffering under communist oppression which is a hot memory that emerged only after the end of the cold war. Because there is a notorious shortage in memory capacity the atrocities that one has suffered claim more space than the atrocities that one has committed.

Another lack of dialogic memory has become manifest in the relations between Russia and Eastern European nations. While Russian memory is centered on the great patriotic war and Stalin is celebrated today as the national hero, the nations that broke away from Soviet power maintain a strikingly different memory of Stalin that has to do with deportations, forced labor and mass-killings. The triumphalist memory of Russia and the traumatic memory of Eastern European nations clash at the internal borders of Europe and fuel continuous irritations and conflicts.

The European Union creates a challenge to the solipsistic constructions of national memory and provides an ideal framework for dialogic remembering. As we all know, the European Union is itself the consequence of a traumatic legacy of an entangled history of unprecedented violence. If it is to develop further from an economic and political network to a community of values, the sharing of traumatic memories will have to play an important part in this process. Janusz Reiter, previous Polish ambassador in Germany commented on this situation: "With respect to its memories, the European Union remains a split continent. After its extension, the line that separated the EU from other countries now runs right through it." On the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Buchenwald, the former prisoner of the concentration camp Jorge Semprún said: One of the most effective possibilities to forge a common future for the EU is "to share our past, our remembrance, our hitherto divided memories". And he added that the Eastern extension of the EU can only work "once we will be able to share our memories, including those of the countries of the other Europe, the Europe that was caught up in Soviet totalitarianism".¹²

Conclusion

In my paper, I have focused on four models that have been devised and applied to cope with a traumatic legacy of the past and to forge a new beginning.

The first model, dialogic forgetting was pre-scribed to achieve the closure of a violent past in a symmetric situation of power. Forgetting or silence can only work to create the basis for a new future if the aggression was not one-sided but

¹² **Jorge Sempurún**, "Nobody Will be Able Any More to Say: Tthis is How it Was!" in: *Die Zeit*, 14. April 2005. (Transl. A.A.).

mutual. While *repressive* silence is the ‘natural state’ that continues the violence by prolonging oppressive power relations, protecting the perpetrators and harming the victims, *dialogic* silence is built on a mutual agreement.

The second model, remembering in order to never forget, has to be considered as the unique answer to the unique historic trauma of the Holocaust. The shift from forgetting to remembering, which is linked to the Jewish trauma and evolved over the last four decades, has irreversibly changed our moral sensibility on a global scale. While the memory of the Holocaust was conducive to the emergence of other memories, it did not, I would claim, become their prototype. The Holocaust is unique given the methods of its execution and the number of irredeemable and irreconcilable victims. The answer to it is a monumental memory that is semi-religious and an end in itself.

The third model is not unique at all but has been replicated in variations all over the world. It can be paraphrased as remembering in order to eventually forget in the sense of mastering the past and putting it behind. I wanted to show that there is a clear difference between the semi-religious memorialization of the past (my second model) and the mastering of the past (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*), which calls for moral accountability with respect to atrocities committed in the past. Not only punishments but also “public displays of remorse, no matter whether they stem from instrumental, rhetorical or normative motivations, are central elements of collective conflict resolution and reconciliation processes”.¹³

The last model is again dialogic and relational, this time applied between states (but also possible for groups within one state). Dialogic remembering transforms a traumatic history of violence into an acknowledgement of guilt. On the basis of this shared knowledge the two states can coexist peacefully rather than be exposed to the pressure of periodical eruptions of scandals and renewed violence. For the fourth model, however, there are as yet only few illustrations. It is still best described by its conspicuous absence.

Memories, to sum up, are dynamic. What is being remembered of the past is largely dependent on the cultural frames, moral sensibilities and demands of the ever-changing present. During the cold war, the memory of the Second World War was very different from today, the Holocaust has moved from the periphery to the center of West European memory only during the last two decades, but also other historic traumas went through periods of latency before they became the object of remembering and commemoration. Today, national memories emerge and are presented in a transnational if not in a global arena where they coexist in a web of mutual contiguities, references, imitations and reactions.

Remembering trauma evolves between the extremes of keeping the wound open on the one hand and looking for closure on the other. It takes place simultaneously on the separate but interrelated levels of individuals, of society and the state. It therefore has a psychological, a moral and a political dimension. But we must not forget that it also has a religious dimension when it comes to the proper burying as a prerequisite for the memory of the dead. It is precisely this cultural and religious duty of laying the dead to rest, that is to shockingly disrupted after

¹³ Christopher Daase, see note 12.

periods of excessive violence. In the case of millions of Jewish victims, there are no graves because their bodies were gassed, burnt and dissolved into air. For this reason this wound cannot be closed. At other places the victims were ‘disappeared’ or shot and hid in anonymous mass graves. Some of these, relating to the Spanish civil war, are reopened only now after more than 70 years.¹⁴ After the politicians and the society have expressed their respect for the victims, it is finally up to the family members to perform these last acts of reverence.

ԱԼԵՅԴԱ ԱՍՍՄԱՆ – Կոլեկտիվ բռնությունից դեպի ընդհանուր ապագան. տրավմատիկ անցյալի հաղթահարման չորս մոդելներ – Երկրորդ համաշխարհային պատերազմի ավարտից ի վեր վկա ենք եղել տրավմատիկ հիշողության հաղթահարման քաղաքականության տարբեր դրսևորումների: Առաջինը՝ «համընդհանուր մոռացության» տարբերակը, շատ հին միջոց է և կիրառվել է դեռ անտիկ ժամանակներից սկսած, հատկապես քաղաքացիական պատերազմներից հետո: Դրա հակապատկերը շատ ավելի նոր՝ «հավերժ հիշողության մշակույթի» տարբերակն է՝ առաջ եկած Զոլոքոստից չորս տասնամյակ հետո միայն: Երրորդ մոդելն առաջարկվել է 1990-ականներին՝ ճշմարտության և խաղաղեցման հանձնաժողովների կողմից, որի սկզբունքն է՝ «հիշել՝ մոռանալու համար»: Առկա է նաև չորրորդ՝ «երկխոսության մեջ հիշելու» մոդելը, որի համաձայն՝ պատմության մեջ այլոց հանդեպ զանգվածային բռնություն իրականացրած ազգերը պետք է բացահայտորեն ընդունեն այդ փաստն ու իրենց գոհերից ներողություն խնդրեն՝ հարգելով նրանց հիշատակը: Այս վերջին մոդելը դեռ իրականության մասը չի դարձել, սակայն կարող է նպաստել հիշողությունների միջև բախումների հաղթահարմանը Եվրոպայում և այլուր:

АЛЕЙДА АССМАН – От коллективного насилия – к общему будущему: четыре модели преодоления травматического прошлого. – После окончания Второй мировой войны возникли различные политические проекты, призванные преодолеть травматические воспоминания. Модель “всеобщего забвения” является наиболее древней и применялась ещё в античные времена, особенно после гражданских войн. Противоположный ей вариант – это модель “культуры вечной памяти”, появившаяся через четыре десятилетия после Холокоста. Третью модель в начале 1990-х гг. предложили комиссии по истине и примирению; в её основу лёг принцип “помнить, чтобы забыть”. Существует также четвёртая модель – “диалогической памяти”, согласно которой народы, когда-либо совершившие массовое насилие и агрессию по отношению к другим, должны открыто признать это, попросить прощения у своих жертв и почтить их память. Эта модель ещё не вошла в политический обиход, однако могла бы способствовать преодолению “конфликта воспоминаний” в Европе и других регионах.

¹⁴ Paul Ingendaay, “Der Bürgerkrieg ist immer noch nicht vorbei”, FAZ Nr. 276, Nov. 25th 2008, p. 40.