

[*Preface*: This talk is based on three sources: first, several articles and lectures by Theodor W. Adorno on the subject of education towards autonomy (a matter that had been of central importance in the ‘student movement’ of the 1960s and after, often for this reason dubbed the ‘anti-authoritarian movement’); second, a very exciting book by a German historian, Lutz Niethammer, a specialist on the period of fascism, on the concept of ‘collective identity’ (a concept that he entirely trashes; very good indeed); and third, an article on the notion of ‘globalized Holocaust memory’ that I wrote together with a colleague (Jean-Marc Dreyfus, a historian of the Holocaust) that expressed our unhappiness with the fact that the more official, fancy and ‘globalized’ Holocaust commemoration becomes, the more superficial and empty it tends to be.² We emphasize in our article of 2010, in a deliberately old-fashioned manner, the duty to remember the dead and the victims of violence as being of importance in itself, not because any particular so-called ‘lessons’ needed to be drawn or propagated.

The present talk emphasizes, as it were, the ‘anarchist’ aspect of the practical-political side of critical theory (of the ‘Frankfurt School’, a term I don’t like very much as it was not a ‘school’ and, in the perhaps most productive period, it was not even in Frankfurt but in exile in the USA). The thrust of the talk is that memory and commemoration of past events, including social and political catastrophes, should be based on the detailed, concrete and critical work of (historical and social) scholarship and genuine, serious art. The hard and painful work of memory must not be subordinated to the good offices and interests of the state and other major powers in society (state power-seeking political parties, for example) as they inevitably, necessarily have their own interests. (These include shaping national identity, creating societal cohesion, the illusion that ‘society’ was ‘community’ etc. etc., all of which make them part of the problem more than part of the solution).

(To be clear: by ‘genuine, serious art’ I mean art that engages and challenges social reality *by way of* maintaining and insisting on its *formal*, aesthetic, artistic autonomy from society and the state, in the way argued by Adorno for example in his 1962 lecture on ‘Commitment’ [‘Engagement’]: although art and scholarship need of course to acknowledge the narrow limits to that autonomy, autonomy needs to be defended. This perspective suggests that the power of those artworks that truly affect and move us comes from their successfully creating an illusion of standing outside society, as if they came from elsewhere and also pointed to an elsewhere [a utopia]; in this sense, art preserves and utilizes some aspects of religion, out of which, historically, it has developed and emancipated itself. Art cannot

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² Dreyfus, Jean-Marc and Marcel Stoetzler, ‘Holocaust Memory in the Twenty-first Century: between National Reshaping and Globalisation’, in: *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire* 18:1, 2011, pp. 69-78

be good, in this sense, without a healthy portion of arrogance and outrageousness; it cannot be nice and family-/community-friendly, the kind of stuff that the cultural bureaucrats hope creates ‘community cohesion’.)

The ‘anti-authoritarian’ argument implies that genuine and effective cooperation *in-against-and-beyond existing society* (i.e. ‘association’ of independent individuals, to use the term Marx would have used) as opposed to a sense of ‘community’ that is essentially conformist can only be deliberately willed and created by strong individuals. To appreciate this argument, it is important to keep in mind that the starting point of Critical Theory (in 1920s Germany) was a specific historical experience that forms the empirical basis of this theory: when at the end of World War I a situation existed that seemed to open the possibility to create a radically new, democratic society (a society whose ‘politics’, i.e. the necessary coordinating and deliberating processes about what to produce and how etc. would be done by all-inclusive councils, not by the kind of hierarchical, centralised and separated structures we call a ‘state’), this opportunity was not exploited partly because workers and others in the lower classes of society felt more loyal to traditional authority and traditional elites than to what objectively would have seemed their own best interest: the empirical observation was that people – many if not most people – act in ways that work against their own interests. This destroyed (for those who were prepared to look around and perceive it) the more conventional basic assumption in modern social and political thought that humans are rational beings and live in society through making rational choices. Apparently, in existing society they often don’t. The second even more devastating experience was that the only force in society that would have been able to stop fascism and National Socialism, the labour movement, failed to do so, in spite of having an urgent enough interest in it: sheer survival. This time the analysis was, similarly, that the organisations of the labour movement (chiefly, communist and social-democratic parties) had replicated the authoritarian structures of wider society – they were themselves authoritarian, hierarchical structures, not the associations of independent individuals that would have produced the type of people who might have been able to face down fascism (and, elsewhere, Stalinism). In this specific sense, these organisations were conformist. (The Critical Theorists established these positions by way of theorizing, i.e. systematic conceptual thinking, *as well as* empirically, i.e. by asking and listening to people.) The notion of anti-authoritarian education and that art can play a (small but important) role in the strengthening of moments of autonomy in society was developed in this specific context, and as there are still (perhaps, even, increasingly) plenty of authoritarian societies (some with hints of fascism) around in our present, this issue is as urgent as ever, if not more so. (Those living in post-Soviet societies might find the question of anti-authoritarian education particularly relevant, I guess. The ten rules on learning and teaching formulated by John Cage³ that are painted on one of the walls of the Centre of Contemporary Art in Tbilisi express the same approach.)

³ Apparently there is a dispute over whether these famous rules were written by John Cage, or may have been written by Corita Kent who merely

This is the general framework (most of which came up in the discussions we had at the *Triennial* in Tbilisi). Artists (like scholars) need to contribute to a conscious, well-informed anti-power that will be needed in the struggles to come. What follows is the script of the talk, basically as it was given, i.e. somewhat unpolished, ‘work in progress’, to call a phrase. (One of the dimensions that are not developed is the connection between memory and nationalism: nationalism depends on ‘collectively remembering’ one set of events and actively forgetting another set of events, an idea for which the classic reference is the 1882 lecture by Ernest Renan, developed for example in Ben Anderson’s book *Imagined Communities*. Culture, including art, education and scholarship, is crucial to the processes of nation formation.)

Incidentally, a few days before the talk (November 9, which was the date of the antisemitic 1938 pogroms in Germany) Neo-Nazis in the German town of Greifswald removed eighteen *Stolpersteine* from the pavements of their town,⁴ ‘stumbling stones’ which are cobblestones that a German artist who lives in Cologne covers with a layer of copper that is engraved with commemorative data of one particular victim of the Holocaust each; there seem to be some 20000 of these ‘stumbling stones’ anywhere in the streets of Europe – a very grassroots form of commemoration that operates on the level of everyday life, literally fitted into its fabric in a sort of mimicry (one does not actually stumble over them, but one cannot fail to notice them).⁵]

Abstract: this talk reviews some of the classical and more recent discussions on the concepts of memory and commemoration. It argues for continued adherence to Adorno’s demand for *Aufarbeiten*, ‘working through’ of the past in the two parallel modes of critical scholarship and genuine art that seem little helped by the established and (state-)official practices of commemoration and their ‘memory places’: the latter subsume and instrumentalize actual memories and memory work and dilute their impact. As memory is one of the main sources art production draws on, it is suggested artists reflect carefully on what kind of relationships to what kind of memories they adopt, and how far it is possible for them, as it were, to ‘keep it real’ rather than feed memories into political, especially state-driven discourses that have their own logic and agenda.

Geoffrey H. Hartman, a scholar of literary studies and a key commentator on how the arts and humanities can deal with the Holocaust, asked, ‘can public memory still be called memory, when it is increasingly alienated from personal and active recall?’⁶ ‘Increasingly, politicized and

attributed the tenth rule to John Cage (<http://www.kerismith.com/blog/you-know-i-love-a-good-mystery/>).

⁴ <http://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article110873303/Stolpersteine-in-Greifswald-herausgerissen.html>

⁵ <http://www.stolpersteine.com/>

⁶ Hartman, Geoffrey H., 2002, ‘Public Memory and Its Discontents’, in his *The Longest Shadow, In the Aftermath of the Holocaust*, Palgrave Macmillan, pages 99-115, quote here: 99

simplified aspects of the collective memory take over from an actual artistic heritage. ... This falsified memory ... is the enemy.⁷ This enemy can be fought, Hartman asserts, only if artists and scholars 'accept the scarred rather than sacred, the fragmented rather than holistic nature' of memory (using an expression by the poet Derek Walcott), a memory that is being 'recomposed' ever again in the way an epic is. Hartman warns against 'a simplification of memory, which both history-writing and significant art seek to prevent' and refers for illustration to the contemporary habit of postulating 'rampant analogies between the Holocaust and other catastrophes or disputed actions (such as claiming abortion leads to "a holocaust of babies").⁸ In a similar vein, James E. Young commented that 'a nation's monuments efface as much history from memory as they inscribe in it'⁹ and warns from becoming complicit in anything that 'allows our *icons* of remembrance to harden into *idols* of remembrance'.¹⁰ Hartman writes that 'the dead are exploited by the living' when remembrance 'turns into a politics of memory'¹¹ and quotes the architect Giovanni Leoni saying that 'the very term "monument" has a treacherous sound': it is an invitation to discard the obligation to remember.

These comments draw, on the one hand, inspiration from the critique of modern, capitalist culture that was espoused by Critical Theory, most famously perhaps in Adorno's statement in his key essay 'Cultural critique and society' of 1951 that writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric, and that this affects also the sentence that says so, i.e., that very same sentence itself. The thrust of this statement, and the theoretical tradition that it epitomizes, is that the civilization that brought about, or at least failed to prevent, Auschwitz lacks the legitimacy to organize the activities and processes that are meant to draw the conclusions and learn the lessons from this catastrophe, unless it does so in a way that offers its own structures, dynamics and values up for interrogation, critique, negation and overcoming. Only such practices that open the possibility of the radical self-reflection and self-critique of this civilization are adequate; all others are to be suspected of bad faith.

On the other hand, though, the quoted comments also draw on more comfortably mainstream traditions in social theory on the concepts of memory and commemoration. The most important contributor in the classical tradition to be considered here is Maurice Halbwachs, a student of

⁷ *ibid.*: 111

⁸ Hartman, Geoffrey H., 2002, 'Introduction: On Closure', in his *The Longest Shadow*, pages 1-14, quote here from page 10. See also Achinger, Christine, 2004, 'Evoking and Revoking Auschwitz. Kosovo, Remembrance and German National Identity', in: Lentin, Ronit, ed., *Representing the Shoah for the Twenty-first Century*, New York, Oxford: Berghahn

⁹ Young, James E., 1986, 'Memory and Monument', in: Hartman, Geoffrey H. ed., *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, pages 103-13, here: quoted on page 105

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 112

¹¹ Hartman, Geoffrey H., 2002, 'Darkness Visible', in his *The Longest Shadow*, pages 35-59, here page 42

the philosopher Bergson and a collaborator of Durkheim, and after WWI the most pre-eminent sociologist in France. Halbwachs was prompted by the strong and, as he thought, one-sided concern with the individual in the writings of Bergson and Freud to writing his study of 1925, *The social frameworks of memory*.¹² This book is generally seen as the founding text of a sociology of memory (together with posthumously published material that Halbwachs never prepared for publication.)¹³ Halbwachs – who is currently being discussed as an inventor of ‘social constructionism’ *avant la lettre*¹⁴ – asserted that ‘people acquire or construct memory ... as members of a society’ due to their ‘direct and indirect relations with other people’.¹⁵ Halbwachs’s studies were motivated by two fields of experiences: one was his shock at how quickly WWI and its causes were being forgotten in what turned out to be the ‘inter-war period’; the other was his observation in the context of his work as a pioneer of urban sociology of the relevance of memories for the reproduction of socio-cultural milieus and class.¹⁶ Halbwachs attempted to formulate a rationalist as well as positivist-materialist conception of memory that was aimed to avoid the spiritualist overtones of Bergson’s philosophy. The pivot of Halbwachs’s concept of the memory is that ‘in the same moment that we see objects we represent to ourselves the manner in which others would look at them’.¹⁷ As our perceptions depend on categories and concepts that are constituted socially, in perceiving objects we recollect relations we have or have had with others. In Halbwachs’s understanding (recalling Georg Simmel’s conception of the individual as standing in the ‘intersection of social circles’),¹⁸

the personalised aspect of memory, the sense that my memory is unique and different from yours, was derived from the social fact that each individual is positioned not in one but in several social groups – for example in relation to class, gender, kinship and so on. In this sense, what appears as an individual’s unique world of memory is in

¹² Weissberg, Liliane, ‘Introduction’, in: *Cultural Memory and the Construction of Identity*, Ben-Amos, Dan; Liliane Weissberg, eds. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999), 7-26, here: page 13

¹³ The latter has been published under the title ‘Collective memory’.

¹⁴ Niethammer, Lutz, 2000, *Kollektive Identität, Heimliche Quellen einer unheimlichen Konjunktur*, Reinbek: Rowohlt, page 348

¹⁵ quoted in Weissberg 1999, page 13

¹⁶ Niethammer 2000, page 322

¹⁷ Halbwachs, Maurice 1998 [1925]: ‘Woodfloats on the waterway of time’ in Fleckner, Uwe, 1998, ed., *The Treasure Chests of Mnemosyne, Selected texts on memory theory from Plato to Derrida*, Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, page 222

¹⁸ Simmel, Georg. 1992. *Soziologie. Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung, herausgegeben von Otthein Rammstedt, Gesamtausgabe Band 11*. Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp.

fact nothing other than the uniqueness of the layering of social memories'.¹⁹

The experience of recollection differs, on the one hand, from sense perception of present reality insofar as it is experienced as *past*, on the other hand, from dreaming insofar as it is experienced as *real*: it is only because memory depends on collective forms of perception (discursive language, ideas, concepts; 'time, space, and the order of physical and social events as they are established and recognised by the members of our group') that the individual is prevented from becoming 'fused with the past', i.e. from believing s/he was reliving what she or he actually merely remembers.²⁰ At the same time, the memory's dependence on societal forms of perception also creates that 'feeling of reality' that distinguishes a memory from a dream where such forms are (at least partially) suspended.²¹

Halbwachs's theoretical study from 1925, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, was criticized by contemporaries for being one-sidedly anti-individualist.²² Indeed, uncritical appropriation of Halbwachs's Durkheimian perspective might lead to tipping the precarious balance of society as a totality, the multiplicity of social groups, and the individual – a balance that must be central to any plausible social theory – in favour of society and groups against the individual. The historian Niethammer who expressed reservations against the usefulness of the concept of the 'collective memory' argues that it is a metaphor that should not be misread as if the 'collective' referred to an actual agent that could be acting on its own terms; he writes that Halbwachs introduced it only in response to criticisms of his study on the 'social frameworks of memory' as a stronger restatement of his original, more guarded position.²³ Similarly, the commentator Constantina Papoulias warns from 'a currently emerging orthodoxy on the social production of memory' that – in the following of Halbwachs – aims to 'de-psychologize' the concept of memory and threatens to suppress and neutralise the critical insights into subjectivity offered by psychoanalysis.²⁴ If 'the key insight of psychoanalysis' that the subject is not sovereign, 'not "self-determining" in any straightforward sense' is to be put to work for critical analysis of society, any one-sided understanding of the faculties of the individual (memory, imagination, reasoning) as either totally private or totally public must be rejected:²⁵ in

¹⁹ Papoulias, Constantina, 2003, 'From the Agora to the Junkyard', in: Radstone, Susannah and Katharine Hodgkin, eds., *Regimes of Memory*, London and New York: Routledge, pages 114–30, here page 116

²⁰ Halbwachs 1998, 'Woodfloats', page 224

²¹ *ibid.*:228

²² Halbwachs, Maurice, 1992, *On collective memory, edited, translated, and with an introduction by Lewis A. Coser*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press; Niethammer 2000, page 356

²³ Niethammer 2000, pages 357f

²⁴ Papoulias 2003, page 115

²⁵ Radstone, Susannah and Katharine Hodgkin, 2003, 'Introduction to part III, What Memory forgets: Models of the Mind', in their *Regimes of Memory*, London and New York: Routledge, pages 91-95, here page 94

keeping with Critical Theory, it is crucial to maintain that the (bourgeois) individual is in him/herself private *as well as* public. Both, oppression and exploitation *and* the potential to emancipation are located equally in the individual and in society: both depend on the resources and the faculties of either side of this divide.²⁶

Halbwachs's most elaborated contribution on the social construction of group memory was his work from 1941, *The legendary topography of the Gospels in the Holy Land*. Based on his own field research on places of Christian pilgrimage in (what was then) Palestine and critique of the historical sources, Halbwachs showed – against Bergson – that memory was not 'inner vision' but a social construction, carried not by individuals but by social groups (in the case of the Gospels, the emerging power elite of the Catholic church). It was not so much even related to any actual events in the past but to the needs of the group that invented them.²⁷ Halbwachs showed in particular that those events in the Gospels that most likely refer to actual events (the life and teachings of a wandering priest from Galilee called Jesus) hardly produced any places for pilgrimage at all while all events that insert the former into a version of Jewish history and teleology (historically unwarranted events that added metaphysical importance to the actual events by linking them to existing powerful belief systems which could thereby be challenged) did. In other words, institutionalized 'memory places' tended to be erected whenever it helped the establishment of social, theological and political power and in cases in which the event that is being 'remembered' probably never happened. Especially the crusaders, Halbwachs argues, imported occidental theological symbols into the Holy Land in order to 'verify' their authenticity.²⁸

If the sociological theorization of memory and commemoration is constructed with Halbwachs as its starting point, then it is apparent that it is fundamentally one of the critical traditions within social theory. Memory engenders as well as is the product of what is not at all memory, but rather its opposite, anti-memory. This sceptical perspective is evident also in the writings of the French historian, Pierre Nora, the editor of the seven volume *Les Lieux de mémoire*, a celebrated work of French historiography containing 130 essays by over a hundred different authors.²⁹ The title of the book, *Memory Places*, is explained as follows:

Lieux de mémoire originate with the sense that there is no spontaneous memory, that we must deliberately create archives,

²⁶ Adorno, Theodor W. 1989 [1965], 'Society', in: Bronner, Stephen Eric; Kellner, Douglas MacKay (eds.), *Critical Theory and Society, A reader*, New York/London: Routledge, pages 267-75

²⁷ Niethammer 2000, page 344

²⁸ *ibid.*:346

²⁹ Carrier, Peter, 2000, 'Places, Politics and the Archiving of Contemporary Memory in Pierre Nora's *Les lieux de mémoire*', in: Radstone, Susannah, ed., *Memory and Methodology*, Oxford, New York: Berg, pages 37–57, here page 37

maintain anniversaries, organise celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and notarize bills, because such activities no longer occur naturally.³⁰

Nora distinguishes traditional or 'true' memory from modern memory, a form of memory that is not really one: 'What we call memory today is ... not memory but already history'.³¹ What remains of 'true memory' today 'subsists only in gestures and habits, unspoken craft traditions, intimate physical knowledge, ingrained reminiscences, and spontaneous reflexes'. It exists alongside with, and potentially in contradiction with, 'memory transformed by its passage through history' which is 'wilful and deliberate, experienced as a duty rather than as spontaneous; psychological, individual and subjective, rather than social, collective and all-embracing'. It depends on 'external props and tangible reminders of that which no longer exists except qua memory'. Nora points to a paradoxical situation in which 'hypertrophy of memory' is 'inextricably interlinked with our sense of memory's loss and concomitant industrialisation'.³² It commands 'Thou shalt remember' which makes memory a category that most obviously links the social-political and the individual-psychological.³³

The modern concept of memory does not simply replace the traditional one but both coexist in a curious dialectic that is related to a similarly dialectical and specifically modern sense of time. While traditional memory used to place the person who remembers 'in a continuous relation with the past' to the effect that the present itself appeared as merely 'retrieved, updated past', modern or 'historicized memory' is based on 'a sense of discontinuity'.³⁴ Both elements are present in the modern era. This in turn is reflected in the shift 'from a history that we believed lay in the continuity of some sort of memory to memory that we think of as projected onto the discontinuity of history'.³⁵ It is the feeling of distance to the past – a feeling that is a predominant experience in Europe and 'the West' since just one and a half centuries – that makes us produce manifold 'hallucinatory recreations of the past'.³⁶ As it were, we use memory in order to negotiate and soften the ruptures of time in the modern age – a rather Don Quixotian struggle. The power of 'collective memory' is particularly apparent when one 'remembers' something one has never experienced.

Another one of those who have put the critical edge of Halbwachs's conception to work for a contemporary debate is the historian Peter Novick.³⁷ Novick argues that whatever any particular group of people

³⁰ quoted *ibid.*, page 53

³¹ Nora, Pierre, 1998, 'Paper memory', in: Fleckner, Uwe (1998): (ed.): *The Treasure Chests of Mnemosyne, Selected texts on memory theory from Plato to Derrida*, Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, here page 296

³² *ibid.*:298f

³³ *ibid.*:300

³⁴ *ibid.*:301-2

³⁵ *ibid.*:302

³⁶ *ibid.*:303

³⁷ Novick, Peter, 2000, *The Holocaust and collective memory, The American Experience*, London: Bloomsbury

remembers or fails to remember is determined by whichever is 'functional' for that group:

Collective memory, as Halbwachs used the phrase, is not just historical knowledge shared by a group. [It] ... is in crucial senses ahistorical, even anti-historical. ... [it] simplifies; sees events from a single, committed perspective; is impatient with ambiguities of any kind; reduces events to mythic archetypes.³⁸

'Some memories, once functional, become dysfunctional', and, *vice versa*, what was forgotten in one period may be rediscovered when a function for it emerges.³⁹ Novick relates as an example that Holocaust memory was seen in the USA as 'inappropriate, useless, or even harmful' before the 1970s, but 'appropriate and desirable' thereafter.⁴⁰ Novick embraces the concept of 'history' as a corrective and critical instance to that of 'collective memory' as essentially uncritical and committed to a single perspective.⁴¹ From this perspective, we should forget commemoration and concentrate time and resources on studying history.

A widely read critique of Nora's position, and by implication of the wider sceptical approach to modern cultures of memory and commemoration has been formulated by the sociologists Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider.⁴² They welcome and defend what they diagnose are 'cosmopolitan', 'transnational' or 'global memory cultures' as being able to provide the cultural foundations for 'global human-rights politics'.⁴³ When they refer to the memory of the Holocaust as a 'global collective memory',⁴⁴ rather than the national collective memory that Halbwachs had had on his mind, they leave unclear, though, who exactly are the constituents of the 'global collective' that they see as being the carrier of this memory. Levy and Sznaider argue that

Nora's view essentially restates the late-nineteenth-century opposition of *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft*, which placed the new, nationwide political and economic structures in opposition to those of local communities. It claimed the larger structures were soulless.⁴⁵

³⁸ Novick 2000, pages 3f

³⁹ *ibid.*:5

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ The relationship of memory and history cannot be discussed here in any depth; suffice it to say that their relationship should be seen as dialectical and complementary: history was invented as a critical technique to correct and complement memory, as memory has been invoked as a corrective to the authority of a history that has become official.

⁴² Levy, Daniel, Natan Sznaider, 2006, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age*, translated by Assenka Oksiloff, Philadelphia: Temple University Press

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 4

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 13

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 32; *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft*: society (or association) vs. 'community'

The rejection of (methodological) nationalism and nationalistic or communitarian anti-globalisation sentiments appears to be the starting point of their argument, from which they develop an affirmative conception of 'global culture' and its allegedly 'abstract' and 'soulless' concomitants. In Levy and Sznajder's account, abstractness is indeed the most characteristic quality of 'cosmopolitan memory', and that is a good thing, too: 'it is precisely the abstract nature of "good and evil" that ... contributes to the extraterritorial quality of cosmopolitan memory'.⁴⁶ They welcome the fact that by the 1990s the Holocaust had become a 'decontextualized' symbol of absolute evil.

According to Levy and Sznajder, the 'global collective memory' of the Holocaust was brought forth by specific historical circumstances: 'When the uniting interests and values of anticommunism vanished, international cooperation had to be reorganized on a new basis.'⁴⁷ The necessity to replace, after 1989, a dated ideology by a new one allowed for the 'cosmopolitanization of Holocaust memories'. It produced 'an unquestioned moral value on which all people supposedly can agree', this value being, so it is implied, not to commit genocides.

The need for a moral touchstone in an age of uncertainty and the absence of master ideological narratives have pushed the Holocaust to prominence in public thinking.⁴⁸

The account of what has happened to the memory of the Holocaust given by Levy and Sznajder sounds true, but against their point of view, a very sad fate it is. What they rather euphemistically call the 'cosmopolitanization of Holocaust memories' is just what figures like Adorno, Hilberg, Lanzmann, Lyotard and others had hoped some kind of taboo or *Bilderverbot* could prevent: those earlier commentators had suggested that the memory of the Holocaust ought to signify the *Zivilisationsbruch*, the breaking up of civilization. It ought to have forced humanity to strive for a new civilization reflecting the insight that the civilization of capitalism – the world-system of nation states, their culture and the types of personalities and identities they have produced – has failed in the worst conceivable manner.⁴⁹ This very memory is now being degraded to fill in

⁴⁶ Ibid., 4

⁴⁷ Ibid., 17

⁴⁸ Ibid., 18

⁴⁹ The historian Dan Diner has used the term *Zivilisationsbruch* as the title of an edited volume of 1988. Drawing on Arendt, Horkheimer and Adorno, he defines it as a 'fundamental caesura/collapse [Einbruch]', destroying innermost 'certainties of civilization' that are 'basic conditions of behaviour between human beings', namely the ability reliably to anticipate that other people will act on the basis of a minimum of utilitarian rationality. This 'minimum of civilizational trust' has been destroyed by the experience of rationally organized but entirely 'unreasonable' mass murder (unreasonable in the sense of not motivated by some kind of attempt to maximize utility; this argument presupposes that normally in civilization people commit

the gap left by the vanishing of anticommunism; it is scheduled to become just another one in a long series of ideologies that would provide the same old bellicose, antagonistic civilization that produced the Holocaust with a renewed sense of purpose and cohesion.

If the Holocaust ‘now serves as a universal “container” for memories of myriad victims’,⁵⁰ a universally valid, basically empty, unspecific cipher (what poststructuralists used to call an ‘empty signifier’) denoting nothing more specific than ‘innocent victims being brutalized by absolute evil’, this simply means it has been subsumed to a much larger narrative as merely another instance of that general trope. To the extent that this account is factually correct, it means that the Jews have become Jesus, the symbol of divine innocence suffering on the cross. Whether this is a new development or a return to an earlier paradigm (one may think of the reception and marketing of the Anne Frank diaries) is another issue. The Holocaust as a ‘globalized’ signifier is in danger of becoming not much more than a one-size-fits-all marketing format that guarantees to draw attention to any suffering. The account offered by Levy and Sznajder illustrates, quite against their own celebratory attitude towards the ‘global memory’ of the Holocaust, how the modern transformation (so called ‘globalization’) of a specific memory brings about what Geoffrey Hartman described as anti-memory, or else, the destruction rather than the triumphant generalisation of Holocaust memory.

Part of the problem is here that politically driven engagement with the Holocaust can have two opposed effects: it can make more ordinary instances of discrimination, racism and exclusion (the daily bread of modern capitalist society, of the liberal-democratic or any other variety) look comparatively good (in the way of ‘lesser evils’ – at least they are not Holocausts) or bad (they are the seeds of something that could lead to events akin to another Holocaust). The more ‘collective’, namely societally and state-driven the commemoration is, the more likely it is to be the ‘feel-good-about-ourselves-not-being-as-bad-as-Nazis’ rather than the ‘this-was-the-irreparable-failure-of-our-civilization’ type of commemoration.

The first British Holocaust Memorial Day, it has been argued, articulated ‘a reconfigured vision of national identity, legitimated through reference to the past and the iconic evil of modern times’.⁵¹ The effort to instrumentalize the memory of the Holocaust for the construction or consolidation of ‘civic values’ supposedly shared either by all Europeans or even the whole world seems morally and intellectually dubious as well as rather futile. The British government made it perfectly clear that Holocaust

atrocious crimes only when they can reasonably assume to benefit from these crimes in proportion to the risk). (Diner, Dan, ed., 1988, *Zivilisationsbruch: Denken nach Auschwitz*, Frankfurt/M.: Fischer)

⁵⁰ Levy and Sznajder, page 195

⁵¹ Macdonald, Sharon, 2005, ‘Commemorating the Holocaust, Reconfiguring national identity in the twenty-first century’, in: Littler, Jo; Roshi Naidoo, eds., *The Politics of Heritage, The Legacies of ‘race’*, Routledge London and New York, pages 49-68, quote here page 63. The ceremony is described on pages 62-5.

Memorial Day was about ‘articulating a particular vision of Britishness’.⁵² It was created to articulate the government’s vision of ‘multi-cultural Britain’ by reminding of ‘the evils of prejudice and racism’.⁵³ For this purpose it produced the ‘vision of a horrific society against which to define our own’ and (in the words of the government) the revisiting of the ‘national values’ of ‘the period of Nazism and the Second World War’.⁵⁴ Britain is depicted ‘as a nation opposed to racist terror and open to the persecuted’. In the last act of the 2001 ceremony in Westminster, ‘representatives of different groups’, representing Britain’s many ‘faiths and cultures’, followed the Prince of Wales in lighting candles, each one ‘making the same journey to each perform the same act’, acting out a show of national unity defined ‘against a generalized enemy of racial purity-seeking evil’, namely the united spectres of Nazi Germany, Cambodia, Rwanda and Bosnia.⁵⁵ It seems that Dan Stone was not too far off the mark when he predicted, before the event, that Holocaust Memorial Day will be ‘a day of fatuous ceremonies when the great and the good will congratulate themselves for not being Nazis’ while also ‘reliev[ing] the community of the burden of memory’.⁵⁶ As David Cesarani wrote, beside the official act there might of course also emerge manifestations of ‘vernacular memory’ that could ‘seize the day’ and also problematize aspects that are not on the government’s agenda; after all, as Cesarani stated in an optimistic spirit, government control of memory usually does not work.⁵⁷ What the balance sheet will say about the ratio of memory to anti-memory, is far from clear; there is hope. Similarly, in their introduction to the volume ‘Universalization of the Holocaust?’, Jan Eckel and Claudia Moisel point out that the internationalisation of Holocaust memory obscures the specific history of the Holocaust, relativizes the actual degrees of guilt and responsibility of the perpetrators and turns ‘the Jews’ into ‘the paradigmatic victims of modern violence’.⁵⁸ The gains of the process are small, however: the ‘morals’ that are derived from the Holocaust are ‘simplistic’ and would not need the reference to the Holocaust. In his comment on a lecture by Aleida Assmann that proposed the Holocaust should form the common point of reference for a shared European memory culture informing ‘the

⁵² Ibid., 60

⁵³ Home Office as quoted in Macdonald, page 61

⁵⁴ Ibid., 63

⁵⁵ Ibid., 65

⁵⁶ Stone, Dan, 2000, ‘Day of Remembrance or Day of Forgetting? Or, Why Britain Does Not Need a Holocaust Memorial Day’, in *Patterns of Prejudice* 34:4, pages 53-9, quote here pages 56-7

⁵⁷ Cesarani, David, 2000, ‘Seizing the Day: Why Britain Will Benefit from Holocaust Memorial Day’, in: *Patterns of Prejudice* 34:4, pages 61-6, quote here page 65

⁵⁸ Eckel, Jan; Claudia Moisel, 2008, ‘Einleitung’, in Eckel, Jan; Claudia Moisel (eds.) (2008): *Universalisierung des Holocaust? Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik in internationaler Perspektive (Beiträge zur Geschichte des Nationalsozialismus vol. 24)*, Göttingen (Wallstein), pages 9-25, quote here page 25

values of European civil society’,⁵⁹ Peter Novick objected that ‘there is something absurdly “minimalist” about a moral consensus based on affirming that, indeed, murdering six million men, women, and children is an atrocious crime’,⁶⁰ and also that the actual history of the fight against Nazism hardly provides guidelines of exceptional ‘moral clarity’: ‘what ended the Holocaust’ was primarily ‘the result of the efforts and sacrifices of the armed forces of Joseph Stalin – Hitler’s competitor for the title of greatest monster of the twentieth century.’ Not morality or strong belief in liberal values but the combination of military and economic superiority defeated the ‘absolute evil’. A number of different ‘lessons’ can be drawn from this history, and these lessons are not at all necessarily celebratory of the ‘civic values’ promoted by European liberals.⁶¹

‘It will require both scholarship and art to defeat an encroaching anti-memory’, namely ‘representation that takes the colors of memory yet blocks its retrieval.’⁶² ‘Monuments multiply, not only to redeem but often to profit from a shameful past’.

The collective memory, in the process of making sense of history, shapes a gradually formalized agreement to transmit the meaning of intensely shared events in a way that does not have to be individually struggled for. Canonical interpretation takes over, ceremonies develop, monuments are built.⁶³

However, it is precisely the individual struggle, the process of the ‘working through of the past’, that would help form personalities able to resist totalitarian tendencies and ultimately, more Auschwitzs. Likewise, the work that is done by genuine artworks (as opposed to the kitsch that ‘the community’ is being offered at commemoration events) consists in making even stranger ‘even so estranging an event as the Shoah’.⁶⁴ Streamlined spectacles and bad art provide painless shortcuts to enlightenment that lead nowhere. The allied forces of history and art, both offspring of

⁵⁹ Assmann, Aleida, 2007, ‘Europe: A Community of Memory? Twentieth Annual Lecture of the GHI, November 16, 2006’, in: *GHI Bulletin No. 40*, pages 11-25, here page 13. Assmann quotes the Dutch historian Pim de Boer saying that ‘Europe needs its memory sites ... in order to promote understanding, forgetting, and forgiveness’ (ibid., page 19). Assmann fears that, in the following of Ernest Renan’s 1882 recipe for nation-building, European integration may ‘perhaps be achieved only at the prize of mutual oblivion’. She suggests though that transformed, namely institutionalized, *memorialized* memories, can help just this process while preserving at least some form of memory.

⁶⁰ Novick, Peter, 2007, ‘Comments on Aleida Assmann’s Lecture, Comment delivered at the Twentieth Annual Lecture of the GHI, November 16, 2006’, in: *GHI Bulletin No. 40*, pages 27-31, here page 31.

⁶¹ Novick 2007

⁶² Hartman 2002, ‘Darkness visible, page 44

⁶³ Ibid., page 49

⁶⁴ Ibid., page 53

Mnemosyne, memory, have to do battle *against* the rituals of ‘public memory’, not allow themselves to be subordinated to it. As Adorno might have written, commemoration events after Auschwitz are barbaric.⁶⁵

‘The Holocaust (Shoah) fundamentally challenged the foundations of civilization’, as the Stockholm declaration on the Holocaust quite rightly states,⁶⁶ as if referencing the concept of the *Zivilisationsbruch*. However, the concept is degraded to an empty rhetorical gesture, emptied of any of the radical, critical intention with which it had been formulated. Nothing in the Stockholm document hints at what the ‘challenge to civilization’ actually means. Rather than allowing civilization to be challenged, the memory of the Holocaust is put to service for the assertion and promotion of a European cultural identity and set of values identical to the civilization that allegedly was shattered by the Holocaust. The sad truth is that said civilization is alive and kicking and feels itself to have survived just fine, and maybe even strengthened by the catastrophe. The declaration promises to do exactly what Adorno urged is to be avoided: after the Holocaust to go back and restart the Western civilization that was (according to those who dedicate themselves to its resurrection) temporarily put on hold in 1933, in exactly the same mould, to rebuild the same old civilization rather than to look for a new one by way of negating the old one.⁶⁷

It is significant that, contrary to the current debate, Adorno hardly mentioned memory, let alone commemoration, in his canonical and much-quoted contributions on the subject, but instead discussed the educational purposes that memory-work (in his term, the ‘working through of the past’) ought to be put to, namely the formation of character types that would refuse to be torturers and murderers. Adorno flatly denied any value to the moralistic-normative ‘lessons’ that liberals encourage us to draw from the Holocaust: ‘I do not believe it would help much to appeal to eternal values, at which the very people who are prone to commit such atrocities would merely shrug their shoulders’.⁶⁸ Rather, the point is that ‘one must come to know the mechanisms that render people capable of such deeds’ and

⁶⁵ He would have added, though, that this also affects the critique that says so: rejecting commemoration is no less barbaric, in the sense that the rejection of civilization is merely the fast route to the disaster that civilization leads to.

⁶⁶ ‘Declaration of the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust’ [<http://www.holocausttaskforce.org/about-the-itf/stockholm-declaration.html>]

⁶⁷ Adorno, 2002, *Minima Moralia, Reflections from Damaged Life*, London and New York: Verso, pages 55 and 57

⁶⁸ Adorno, Theodor W., 1969, ‘Erziehung nach Auschwitz’, in: *Stichworte. Kritische Modelle 2*, Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, pages 85-101, here page 86; Adorno, Theodor W., 2003, ‘Education after Auschwitz’, in: *Can one live after Auschwitz? A philosophical Reader, edited by Rolf Tiedemann, translated by Rodney Livingstone and Others*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 19-33, here page 20. This reader contains several relevant texts in English.

awaken ‘a general awareness of those mechanisms’.⁶⁹ Adorno has not much time for the antisemites themselves: they can but be kept in check by unwavering, authoritative (though not sadistic-punitive) assertion of limits set to them, and likewise he sees no means to prevent the emergence of *Schreibtischtäter* (white collar perpetrators) out of modern, liberal society. For Adorno it is ‘the claustrophobia of humanity in the administered world’ that ‘intensifies the fury against civilization’, a necessity intrinsic to this civilization for which there is no rapid-action remedy.⁷⁰ What a liberal, democratic society can and must do, however, is to minimize the supply of willing executioners, and to strengthen the backbones of the humane types who might oppose them: this is where the task of education lies. Therefore, ‘the only education that has any sense at all is an education towards critical self-reflection’ as (with Kant) ‘the single genuine power standing against the principle of Auschwitz is autonomy’.⁷¹ The work against Auschwitz must therefore be directed ‘against the blind predominance of any collective’.⁷² That the memory of the Holocaust has a place within such education goes without saying, but the more important aspect is indeed the form, the *how* of education and remembrance: they must in no way contradict the imperative of an education towards autonomy. Staged memorial spectacles are at the very best irrelevant in this respect. Although the distinction between history and memory is less than absolute, the grind of history, the painful and laborious ‘working through of the past’ whereby the individual spends time in the solitude of a library has to be defended against the cheap and easy shortcuts of ‘public memory’ and state-orchestrated commemoration. The historical consciousness that is needed to prevent events like the Holocaust, and much else, from ‘occurring again’, is not helped along much by lighting candles in the company of ‘the community’ and watching well-intended spectacles. Mnemosyne should be left alone and allowed to be the mother of the Muses without having to be also the maiden of the state.

⁶⁹ Adorno ‘Erziehung nach Auschwitz’, page 87; ‘Education after Auschwitz’, page 21.

⁷⁰ ‘I speak so much of the psychological only because the other, more essential aspects lie so far out of reach of the influence of education, if not of the intervention of individuals altogether’; Adorno, ‘Erziehung nach Auschwitz’, page 89; ‘Education after Auschwitz’, page 22

⁷¹ Adorno, ‘Erziehung nach Auschwitz’, page 90; ‘Education after Auschwitz’, page 23

⁷² Adorno ‘Erziehung nach Auschwitz’, page 92; ‘Education after Auschwitz’, page 25