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# MEMORY, HISTORY, AND THE HOLOCAUST

*Notes on the Problem of Representation of the Past*

*La maggior parte dei testimoni, di difesa e di accusa, sono ormai scomparsi, e quelli che rimangono, e che ancora (superando i loro rimorsi, o rispettivamente le loro ferite) acconsentono a testimoniare, dispongono di ricordi sempre più sfuocati e stilizzati; spesso, a loro insaputa, influenzati da notizie che essi hanno appreso più tardi, da letture o da racconti altrui. In alcuni casi, naturalmente, la smemoratezza è simulata, ma i molti anni trascorsi la rendono credibile, anche in giudizio: i 'non so' o 'non sapevo', detti oggi da molti tedeschi, non scandalizzano più, mentre scandalizzavano, o avrebbero dovuto scandalizzare, quando i fatti erano recenti. (Levi 1986, 10)*

## How to Remember the Holocaust?

Memory, remembering, is not politically and historically innocent. **M**On the contrary, historical memory is profoundly political. One could even claim that politicking with memory is one of the most influential ways of doing politics. The politics of memory may be defined as an attempt to represent certain historical events in such a way that these events obtain a wanted significance. Thus, the politics of memory is about how and what past events will be remembered and what kind of political significance will be given to these events.

The politics of memory does not only concern the past as such. By presenting of the past a wanted interpretation, by remembering certain events and dimensions of the past (instead of some others) in a certain way we want to affect and influence the present time and future. In other words, we don't remember for the sake of remembering itself but rather for the sake of the present time and future. Hence, on one hand, our representations of the past may be influenced by our conscious desire to affect the present time and future. On the other hand, however, as Primo Levi points out in the quote above, our memories of the past may change in the course of time even when we try to remember as "authentically" as possible: they are affected by what we read and hear from others. We tend to adjust our memories to them and finally we are not able to distinguish our original recollections from stories and accounts we have read and heard later.

Traditionally, historical investigation has been based on documentation. Personal memories and eyewitness stories have not been considered as reliable documents: there is, indeed, a lot of evidence that different individuals can remember the same events in entirely different ways. However, this conviction has also turned out to be a dilemma of historical writing especially concerning politically controversial or extreme events. Documents, archives and other written sources are destroyed either by accident or purposefully. Sometimes historical agents consciously avoid leaving traces of their actions. In this sense the Third Reich and the Holocaust<sup>1</sup> are a case in point. We know that Hitler gave his orders and commands by word of mouth. We know that the Nazis managed to destroy a considerable amount of archival and other written evidence of their deeds before the collapse of the Reich.

However, the Third Reich and the Holocaust are a case in point also in another respect. No other single event in human history has produced so much historical investigation, archives, memoirs, eyewitness testimonies and different kinds of cultural and political reproductions. Indeed, in the beginning of the 21st century the amount of "Holocaust studies" and all kinds of cultural products concerning the Nazi period, such as films, documents, memoirs, exhibitions, monuments, and so on, is huge and steadily growing.

The extension and expansion of the investigation and discussion over the Third Reich and the Holocaust suggests that there is

something more in it than a simple desire to get historical facts correct. It invites to think that the contemporary discussion does not only concern past events and deeds but also the contemporary world – in one way or another. It invites to ask what really is at stake in this endless discussion and reproduction of a past that casts a dark shadow over any representation of European political history. Why is it that representations of these events more often than not are received by a heated debate? Why is it that historians, political theorists, philosophers, and other scholars still disagree of the political significance of these events? In what kinds of terms is the Holocaust remembered and discussed in the beginning of the 21st century?

In this essay my aim is not to give exhaustive answers to these questions. They rather provide a context in which to ask how remembering has been approached and discussed in recent historical and political studies concerning the Third Reich and the Holocaust. In order to approach this question I will compare two different periodisations of remembering the period of the Third Reich and the Holocaust. I will suggest that accounts of the Nazi period and the Holocaust in terms of chronological periodisations unavoidably tell only a part of what really happened and what is important in all that happened: they ought to be seen as a partial perspective to a past that cannot be entirely captured in a single representation of it. However, this does not mean that we should refuse historical representations and periodisations of the Holocaust altogether. Rather, I will suggest that we should resist the temptation to see the Holocaust as an impossible event to represent at all. In my view we should also avoid the view according to which “correct” representations of the Holocaust are bound to a certain style or way of writing. In order to challenge these temptations and views I will first discuss Hayden White’s suggestion that the answer to the question of how to represent the Holocaust correctly<sup>2</sup> is to write about it in a modernist way in the form of a middle text. I will argue that in order to represent and transmit the political significance of the Holocaust the middle text is not enough. Finally, I will defend Hannah Arendt’s conception of storytelling as an indispensable practice of constructing a shared past in such a way that political meaning of past events may emerge. I will try to show that although remembering will inevitably remain a controversial – and as such a profoundly political – practice, it

constitutes an indispensable dimension of political reality without which we are not able to judge human action and tell right from wrong. Consequently, we need to tell and remember also the story of the Holocaust because otherwise we lose our capacity to judge an important part of our historical and political past. In Arendtian terms, truthful representations and accurate judgments of the past are not necessarily bound to personal experience: you didn't have to be there in order to be permitted to transmit and judge the stories about the Holocaust. Hence, I will finally argue that in the discussion of the possibility to represent the Holocaust, experience and event should be kept conceptually and theoretically apart from each other.

## From the Post-War Silence to the Era of the Eyewitness

*Quasi tutti i reduci, a voce o nelle loro memorie scritte, ricordano un sogno che ricorreva spesso nelle notti di prigionia, vario nei particolari ma unico nella sostanza: di essere tornati a casa, di raccontare con passione e sollievo le loro sofferenze passate rivolgendosi ad una persona cara, e di non essere creduti, anzi, neppure ascoltati. Nella forma più tipica (e più crudele), l'interlocutore si voltava e se ne andava in silenzio. (Levi 1986, 4)*

To Primo Levi (see Levi 1947) and many other survivors this nightmare came true. Those who returned from the camps were not enthusiastically welcomed home. Not only their physical appearance but also their stories were often received by unbelieving hostility. People did not want to hear, talk about and believe what the survivors wanted to tell. This was, at least, a personal experience of a number of survivors. Later, many scholars of the Third Reich and the Holocaust have argued that the first decades after the end the Second World War were, indeed, characterized by a desire to stay silent about what had taken place in Europe.

One of the historians who have approached the Holocaust in these terms is Annette Wieviorka. However, in her interpretation the post-war silence did not remain permanent. On the contrary, she argues that the Holocaust is a unique event at least in one sense: despite the

enormous amount of victims who never returned, no other event in the European history has produced such an enormous number of eye-witness testimonies as the Holocaust. Although the Holocaust has also been investigated with traditional historical methods, the eyewitness testimonies have strongly influenced our reception and conception of it. This is curious because the eyewitness testimony is a very particular historical source – and not necessarily the most reliable one. (Wieviorka 1998, 13-15) Wieviorka identifies four characteristics that distinguish it from other kinds of sources. Firstly, an eyewitness testimony expresses an individual experience in its uniqueness. Secondly, testifying takes place in a certain context and time against certain expectations and demands. Third, expectations and demands of the era have ideological or political motives. And fourth, expectations and demands of the era contribute to the birth of purposeful collective memories. (Wieviorka 1998, 14)

In addition to these four characteristics it should be kept in mind that a witness never remembers and tells everything: an eyewitness testimony is not the whole truth. It is often full of factual mistakes and errors. Witnesses do not always fully understand the context they try to describe<sup>3</sup>. Some testimonies rather mislead than help the historian. The dilemma of the historian is that he/she has to do his/her research in the midst of disputes concerning the phenomenon itself: research is interwoven with ethical, political and scientific disputes. Despite – or perhaps because of – all this Auschwitz has become a metonym of absolute evil. The Shoah has become a paradigmatic model of constructing memory to which one refers almost everywhere. (Wieviorka 1998, 16)

In terms of these preconditions, Wieviorka divides the post-war period in three phases. The first period immediately after the war was characterized by reading the Holocaust from the traces left by the victims. In fact, already during the mass murder many victims understood that they would never return to tell what was happening to them. Thus a need was born among the victims to leave traces of what was going on so that afterwards it would have been possible to trace down the truthful course of events. After the war, on the basis of these traces it has been possible to establish huge archives for historians and other scholars. (Wieviorka 1998, 21-23)

Another category of traces of the victims was born on the basis of stories, recollections and testimonies of the survivors. Many of them wanted to tell their story so that coming generations would know and understand what happened. Immediately after the war many of these stories and reports were published. From the victims' viewpoint the problem was that soon hardly anybody wanted to listen to these stories while for the historians the trouble was that nobody wanted to tell everything. Thus, for example the infamous diary of the leader of the Warsaw ghetto, Adam Czerniakow, was published only in the 1960s and translated into English in the 1980s. People did not want to remember the dilemma of the Jewish Councils: the fact that the deportations were organized by the Jewish Councils on the basis of Nazi orders was too embarrassing to be continuously recollected. Even less the surviving members of Jewish police and *Sonderkommando* wanted to remind people of their role in the ghettos and camps. The survivors of these groups began to talk in public only during the 1990s. (Wieviorka 1998, 33-34; cf. Saletti 1999 and Gradowski 2002)

Memoirs and reports written in the 1940s and 1950s are mostly characterized by a desire to avenge and sanctify. On the one hand, the survivors were driven by a lust to avenge their sufferings and on the other hand many of them wanted to sanctify the memory of the victims as totally innocent and helpless objects of the Nazi terror. The reverse side of this sanctification was making the rest of the world guilty of what happened to the Jews. Wieviorka argues that the problem of this kind of repetitive storytelling is that it threatens to turn totally ahistorical. (Wieviorka 1998, 55-56)

During the 1950s the interest for the Holocaust was slight. Then, in the beginning of the 1960s something happened that encouraged eyewitnesses to step forth. It was the trial of Adolf Eichmann that changed everything: now remembering the Holocaust became a constitutive element of a certain Jewish identity. Recalling and representing the Nazi genocide became a public ritual. Instead of focusing on the crimes of the accused, the trial became a spectacle of countless witnesses who were allowed and encouraged to tell whatever they wanted and for how long they wanted. The trial of Eichmann became a political trial, in which the Holocaust was made an instrument for political purposes: the state of Israel needed it to

strengthen its position and justify its existence. (Wieviorka 1998, 71-74)

According to Wieviorka, on general level the trial of Adolf Eichmann revealed the ambivalent nature of justice, court and trial if they are used as historiographers. In other words, the dilemma of the trial is the question of what follows if a law-court tries to write history. The undoubtedly positive impact of the trial was that it liberated witnesses' testimonies so that survivors could gain a social identity recognized by society. In the centre of this identity is the task of witnessing: the witness becomes a bearer of history. However, the reverse side is related to the fact that the mass murder becomes a continuity of individual experiences with which the rest of the world should be able to identify. All the attention is focused on the victims. The aim is to construct a collective memory on the basis of the stories of the victims. (Wieviorka 1998, 99-102) By the same token the political analysis of Nazi totalitarianism as a system and the question of political responsibility recedes in the background. (Cf. Arendt 1963/1965)

Wieviorka argues that on the basis of all this after the Second World War two different histories were born. On the one hand there is the history of Final Solution, which is told by means of Nazi documents. On the other hand there is the history of Jewish sufferings, which is told by means of testimonies of victims. The problem is that these two histories do not necessarily interrelate. The history of Jewish sufferings presents "generalising history" as cold and non-empathic way of telling of the past. The viewpoint of witness fragments history into distinct stories, the mutual relationship of which disappears from the sight. The viewpoint of witness does not reach the totality of the events and consequently does not offer tools for judging the significance of past events for the present-day and the future. (Wieviorka 1998, 103)

The third and still on-going phase of Wieviorka's classification is the era of the witness that began at the end of the 1970s. This era is characterized by a certain "democratisation of historical agency". History is no longer only told by victors on the macro-level, but it is also told by means of individual life-stories. On the level of popular culture this change is not exclusively Jewish. All kinds of expressions of individual stories and experiences from memoirs to confession programs become popular. (Wieviorka 1998, 109-111)



One of the most outstanding events in this context is the American television-series *Holocaust* that gained 120 million watchers. The term itself came to use with it. It caused an immense debate because it was claimed to be too washed-out, romantic and subjective. It was said to have been done for Americans who needed a story of a middle class family. It is difficult to say how strong an influence this single television-series really had on the becoming boom of the Holocaust. The fact is, however, that it was followed by a flood of all kinds of Holocaust items from research centres to films, documents, memoirs, monuments, seminars, etc. In Wieviorka's view, among this huge amount of material, it is possible to single out a project that has totally changed the nature of witnessing. Until Steven Spielberg's famous film *The Schindler's List* at the centre of all testifying there was the story and the witness him/herself. Now what begins to be emphasized is no longer past events but the fact of surviving as a kind of hero-story. More precisely, what gains central importance is transmitting the testimony and individual experience, not the contents of the story. In addition to this substantial shift of emphasis there are other problematic aspects in Spielberg's project. One of the most significant of them is that it renders the entire witnessing an industrial project: Spielberg wants to interview all the survivors without exception. (Wieviorka 1998, 122-125)

As a whole, Wieviorka's periodisation is sensitive and succeeds in catching a number of important aspects of the phases of remembering the Holocaust. However, it also raises two major questions. First, it may be asked whether phases or rather modes of remembering a historical event may be presented in a chronological order. Would it be better to understand phases or periods in terms of different strategies or types of approaching and remembering the Holocaust that may also be historically simultaneous? However, Wieviorka does not suggest that the three periods of remembering of the Holocaust are somehow mutually exclusive. More precisely, she does not argue, for example, that "the silence" of the 50s would have been absolute. She rather suggests that with hindsight it may seem so especially as certain influential survivors, such as Elie Wiesel, keep on supporting this view (Wieviorka 1998, 50-55; cf. Wiesel 1958). Neither does she argue that the "turn" of the 60s would have replaced all the other kinds of accounts by eyewitness testimonies but she rather suggests

that the sixties marked a kind of acceleration of the intensity and quantity of testifying and remembering the Holocaust.

Second, it may be asked whether Wieviorka's periodisation is valid everywhere. More precisely, possible weaknesses of her classification may stem from her attempt to present a general periodisation valid in the entire Europe or Western world. In other words, its level of generalization may not do justice to particular European contexts and realities. One way to examine whether these doubts are well founded is to compare Wieviorka's periodisation to other accounts of remembering the Nazi period. This is why in the following I will compare it to Michael Geyer's account of politics of memory in Germany that has been written from an entirely different angle. While Wieviorka characteristically looks at the Nazi period from the victims' viewpoint, Geyer approaches it as a piece of German history. As such, it does not represent perpetrators' history but rather attempts to give an overview of how the Nazi period has been approached and discussed in Germany. It is comparable to Wieviorka's account precisely in this respect: it covers the entire post-totalitarian period from the end of the Second World War until the end of the 1990s focusing on the question of how the Nazi period has been remembered and recollected in Germany.

## The Myth of German Amnesia

*But nowhere is this nightmare of destruction and horror less felt and less talked about than in Germany itself. A lack of response is evident everywhere, and it is difficult to say whether this signifies a half-conscious refusal to yield to grief or a genuine inability to feel ... This general lack of emotion, at any rate this apparent heartlessness, sometimes covered over with cheap sentimentality, is only the most conspicuous outward symptom of a deep-rooted, stubborn, and at times vicious refusal to face and come to terms with what really happened.*  
(Arendt 1950, 249)

This is how Hannah Arendt estimated the situation in Germany after her first post-war trip to Europe in 1950. She does not speak of "silence" but rather a conscious refusal to take responsibility for the Nazi atrocities. Here the quote serves as an introduction to Geyer's

account as it testifies for the fact that it is not possible to describe and judge the post-war situation in Germany in any simple black and white terms. One might argue that post-war German silence was a very "roaring silence".<sup>4</sup>

At any rate, in Geyer's estimation, during the first two post-war decades the quest for recollection of the still very present Nazi past was the affair of a small minority of contemporaries. At this stage, the act of recovering the past, which manifested itself as naming names, exposing crimes and attributing guilt, cut through a veil that shrouded the overwhelming presence of the past in benevolent oblivion. This revolt of "angry men" exhausted itself in running up against a solid wall of lies. The rejection of responsibility for Nazi crimes by even the most obvious perpetrators and the denial of any participation in any but the most upstanding activities by the majority of German contemporaries gave the controversies of the day an extraordinary degree of bitterness. The trial of the members of the *Einsatzgruppen* (SS murder squads) in 1958 and the Auschwitz trial in Frankfurt in 1964 encapsulated these confrontations. (Geyer 1996, 170)

In addition to all this, there were, of course, Chancellor Adenauer's official politics of *Wiedergutmachung*, and egregious cases of former perpetrators remaking themselves as staunch proponents of a politics of memory. Finally, there were those who gained their distance from the Third Reich by publicly disassociating themselves from their pasts. In Geyer's view, it is crucial that the latter group eventually spoke up in the 1950s and 1960s: in raising the issue of memory against the overwhelming desire to bury the past, they pushed West Germans out of their forgetfulness. (Geyer 1996, 171)

On the basis of Geyer's account, rather than silence, the West German context seems to be characterized by bitter debates and controversies over the past. More precisely, the German case seems to be that there was, on one hand, a widely spread desire to forget and keep silent but, on the other hand, in practice this desire did not become true. Thus, the German reality was contradictory consisting both of silence and debate, concealing and forgetting and remembering. With hindsight, it is easy to over-emphasize one of these aspects while they ought to be approached as historically simultaneous phenomena.

As to the sixties and the Eichmann trial, which Wieviorka names as one of the most important turning-points in remembering the Holocaust, it is conspicuous that Geyer does not even mention this trial although we know from other sources that it caused a debate also in Germany especially after Hannah Arendt's (1963/1965) report on it (see Krummacher 1964). In this case, at least a partial explanation may be found in the difference of approaches. Wieviorka is principally looking at the history of remembering the Holocaust from the viewpoint of victims and testimonies given by them while Geyer focuses on the question of how the politics of memory was born in Germany. In the German context it may well be that the Eichmann controversy was only one of the innumerable debates and controversies that finally led to the culture of memory. More precisely, in the German context Eichmann's trial apparently does not represent such a decisive turning point as it probably did in the Jewish victims' context.

At any rate, there are points in common – or at least analogies – in Wieviorka's and Geyer's chronology. One of these is the interpretation according to which remembering, or digging up the past, accelerated in the 1970s. Geyer argues that by the 1980s memory turned into an "issue" that nobody could avoid in Germany. Indeed, the 1980s witnessed a variety of debates and initiatives from the *Historikerstreit* (see *Historikerstreit...*) to Helmut Kohl's conservative *Schlußstrich*. (Geyer 1996, 172) It was at this point that the "silence" of the 1950s came to be read as the amnesia of a guilty generation that paralysed and stymied present German society: forgetting was increasingly attributed to the older generation as a whole (Geyer 1996, 173).

However, at the same time there seems to be a significant difference between Wieviorka's and Geyer's approaches to the "great silence" of the 1950s. For Wieviorka this silence seems to be real and concrete while Geyer represents it as a posthumously constructed interpretation. I would like to argue that in order to get a reliable picture of the post-war context we need to combine both of these accounts (and many others) and understand that "silence" and "debate" may be simultaneous phenomena or aspects of the same situation that is composed by an innumerable amount of subjective realities. On the one hand, there is for instance Primo Levi's experience of the almost total refusal of the Italian public to listen to his story. On the other

hand, we cannot deny the German reality of the 50s that was characterised by war crime trials and other events that forced the Germans to remember, at least somehow.

It would be tempting to think that growing temporal distance would inevitably have balanced the accounts of the Nazi period and the Holocaust. On the basis of Wieviorka's and Geyer's accounts, however, this is not necessarily the case. As to the recent developments of the politics of memory in the 1990s, it is noteworthy that both of them raise one and the same cultural event beyond all the others. This is Steven Spielberg's film, *The Schindler's List* (1993). As pointed out above, in Wieviorka's interpretation this film and Spielberg's project Visual History Foundation followed by it succeeded in switching the emphasis from stories told about the actual events of the Holocaust to hero-stories about survival.

According to Geyer, the aspect of salvation became strongly present also in the German context. He reports that the film was most successful among the youngest generation, which insisted that in it, they had encountered the history of the Holocaust for the first time: they encountered the past not as a lived experience but as a retelling of a powerful and moving story of something that had happened before their time. Precisely in this context the fact of salvation became important: the survival of the Jews is the only guarantee that life continues after the catastrophe. Younger Germans read the ending of the film as evidence that even for the victims and their descendants the Holocaust was over. (Geyer 1996, 190-191)

According to Geyer, the switch of emphasis caused by Spielberg's film in remembering and recollecting the Holocaust shows that the living memory of the past is temporal and that there is nothing in this world that can keep it alive but the labours of the imagination (Geyer 1996, 196). This conclusion raises a set of new questions. How do these products of popular culture really influence our understanding of the past? More precisely, on what our understanding of the past is really based? Have these fictional stories, situated in historical circumstances, replaced historiography based on "serious" research? Have Steven Spielbergs become Homers of our day, with which historians and political theorists are not able to compete? How and who is supposed to tell the story of the Nazi period and the Holocaust? Is the story of the Holocaust impossible to represent and

transmit, as many survivors and scholars have argued? Can it be told and transmitted in the form of traditional historiography? In the following I will approach these questions in the light of Hayden White's considerations of the problem of representation of the Holocaust.

## The Problem of Representation of the Holocaust

In an essay originally published in 1992 White poses a set of questions as to how the story of Nazism and the Final Solution can and ought to be told. He asks whether there are any limits on the kind of story that can be responsibly told about these phenomena. Does the nature of Nazism and the Final Solution set absolute limits on what can be truthfully said about them? And does it set limits on the uses that can be made of them by writers of fiction? (White 1992, 28)

In White's understanding, these questions cannot be answered in terms of any black and white distinction between fact and fiction. Historical accounts are always inevitably narrative accounts that do not consist only of factual statements and arguments: they consist as well of poetic and rhetorical elements by which what would otherwise be a list of facts is transformed into a story. Among these elements there are generic story patterns that we recognize as providing the plots. (White 1992, 28)

However, for traditional historical discourses, there is presumed to be a crucial difference between an interpretation of the facts and a story told about them. This difference is indicated by the currency of the notions of a real story as against an imaginary story and a true story as against a false story. Whereas interpretations are typically thought of as commentaries on the facts, the stories told in narrative histories are presumed to inhere either in the events themselves or in the facts derived from the critical study of evidence bearing upon those events. (White 1992, 29)

White points out that a number of historians have argued against any use of the genocide as a subject of fictional or poetic writing. In his view Berel Lang is an excellent representative of this view as he

pushes it into the extreme. Lang argues that only the most literal chronicle of the facts of the genocide comes close to passing the test of authenticity and truthfulness by which both literary and scientific accounts of this event must be judged. Only the fact must be recounted because otherwise one lapses into figurative speech and stylisation, i.e. aestheticism: only a chronicle of the facts is warranted because otherwise one opens up oneself to the dangers of narrativisation and the relativisation of emplotment. Indeed, for Lang the genocide is a “literal event”, which means that it is an event whose nature permits it to serve as a paradigm of the kind of event about which we can be permitted to speak only in a literal manner. (White 1992, 34; cf. Lang 1990, 143) Consequently, Lang argues that the events of the Nazi genocide are intrinsically anti-representational, by which he in White’s view means that they are paradigmatic of the kind of event that can be spoken about only in a factual and literalist manner: the genocide consists of occurrences in which the very distinction between event and fact is dissolved. (White 1992, 36; cf. Lang 1990, 146-147)

White points out that although Lang’s objection to the use of this event as an occasion for a merely literary performance is directed at novels and poetry, it can easily be extended to cover the kind of belletrist historiography which features literary flourish. In fact, by implication it must be extended also to include any kind of narrative history, i.e. any attempt to represent the Holocaust as a story. (White 1992, 36) I would add to this that it can even more easily be extended to cover cinematographic representations of the Holocaust. This means that not only Spielberg’s project will be objected but also a number of cinematographic representations that are based on survivors’ stories, such as Francesco Rosi’s *The Truce* (1996).

How, then, should and could the Holocaust be represented if it cannot be told as a story? Lang indicated that what is needed is for anyone writing about the Holocaust is an attitude, position, or posture that is neither subjective nor objective. He invokes Roland Barthes’s notion of intransitive writing as a model of the kind of discourse appropriate to discussion of the philosophical and theoretical issues raised by reflection on the Holocaust. Intransitive writing denies the distances among the writer, text, what is written about, and the reader: an author does not write provided access to something independent

of both author and reader, but writes himself. For the writer who writes himself, writing becomes itself the means of vision or comprehension, not a mirror of something independent, but an act and commitment – a doing or making rather than a reflection or description. (White 1992, 37; Lang 1990, xii)

It is easy to classify for instance Primo Levi's first book, *Se questo è un uomo*, to this genre while it is simultaneously clear that his later account, *I sommersi e i salvati*, no longer represents intransitive writing. While in his first book Levi precisely "writes himself", in his account of 40 years later he rather describes, reports and evaluates.

Despite his critique of Lang, it is precisely in the notion intransitive writing that White finds a way of resolving many of the issues raised by the representation of the Holocaust. This is possible if one goes back to see how Barthes exactly used the idea of intransitive writing. Barthes points out that while modern Indo-European languages offer only two possibilities for expressing the different kinds of relationship that an agent can be represented as bearing to an action, the active and the passive voices, some other languages, such as the ancient Greek, offer a third possibility, that of middle voice. Whereas in the active and passive voices the subject of the verb is presumed to be external to the action, as either agent or patient, in the middle voice the subject is presumed to be interior to the action. He concludes that in literary modernism, the verb *to write* connotes neither an active nor a passive relationship but, rather, a middle one: in the modern verb of middle voice *to write* the subject is constituted as immediately contemporary with the writing, being effected and affected by it. (White 1992, 38)

In White's view, this difference indicates a new and distinctive way of imagining, describing, and conceptualising the relationships obtaining between agents and acts, subjects and objects, a statement and its referent, between the literal and figurative levels of speech and therefore between factual and fictional discourse. Consequently, he suggests that the kind of anomalies, enigmas, and dead ends met with discussions of the representation of the Holocaust are the result of a conception of discourse that owes too much to a realism inadequate to represent events, such as the Holocaust, which are themselves modernist in nature. (White 1992, 38-39)



White's point is that modernism is still concerned to represent reality realistically, and it still identifies reality with history but what has changed is the history itself: the social order that is the subject of this history has undergone a radical transformation that permitted the crystallization of the totalitarian form that Western society would assume in the twentieth century. Literary modernism was a product of an effort to represent a historical reality for which the older, classical realist modes of representation were inadequate, based on different experiences of history, or rather on experiences of a different history. (White 1992, 41)

Understood in this way modernism appears as an anticipation of a new form of historical reality, a reality that included among it supposedly unimaginable, unthinkable, and unspeakable aspects such as the phenomena of Hitlerism, the Final Solution, and the total war. White argues that all this suggests that modernist modes of representation may offer possibilities of representing the reality of both the Holocaust and the experience of it that no other version of realism could do. However, to be so, by intransitive writing we must intend something like the relationship to that event expressed in the middle voice. This demands that our notion of what constitutes realistic representation must be revised to take account of experiences that are unique to our century and for which the older modes of representation have proven to be inadequate. (White 1992, 41-42)

White's suggestion is undoubtedly both intriguing and challenging since it also suggests that we should learn to write in a new, different manner of these events that escape traditional realistic description. Besides, nobody can deny that a number of survivors' accounts of their experiences can best be described as having been written in the middle voice. However, in my view White's suggestion raises two questions. On one hand it raises the question of whether the middle voice is the only correct way to represent the Holocaust? On the other hand it leaves open the question of the relationship of experience and event in the representations of the Holocaust. In the following I will discuss these questions in Arendtian terms challenging White's idea from the viewpoint of Arendtian storytelling.

## Hannah Arendt, Storytelling and the Political Significance of Memory

In the context of the Holocaust one easily begins to wonder whether remembering well and correctly is possible at all. The human world begins to look like a battlefield of competing lies: in the final analysis it does not really matter what we believe to be true if all the representations of the past are lies or at least distortions. Hannah Arendt once seemed to confirm this despair by claiming that in politics lying is a common practice and there is nothing we can do about it. Lies are often used as substitutes for more violent means and – at least under normal circumstances – they are apt to be considered relatively harmless tools in the arsenal of political action (see Arendt 1968). However, at the same time she firmly believed that storytelling is a constitutive practice of a political community without which political significance of past events cannot emerge and consequently we are not able to judge even contemporary events.

In *The Human Condition* Arendt writes:

That every individual life between birth and death can eventually be told as a story with beginning and end is the pre-political and pre-historical condition of history, the great story without beginning and end. But the reason why each human life tells its story and why history ultimately becomes the storybook of mankind with actors and speakers and yet without any tangible authors, is that both are the outcome of action. . . . The perplexity is that in any series of events that together form a story with a unique meaning we can at best isolate the agent who set the whole process into motion; and although this agent frequently remains the subject, the 'hero' of the story, we never can point unequivocally to him as the author of its eventual outcome. (Arendt 1958, 184-185)

In Arendtian terms, action always takes place in the human world and concerns the world between people. As the result of action a web of human relations is born: this web constitutes that which we call reality. Politically speaking, one of the prerequisites of political judgment is a sense of reality: we need to know and understand what happens in the human world in order to maintain our sense of

reality and judge politically significant events in it. The trouble with totalitarian regimes is that in them there is no web of human relations that would constitute a common world. Consequently, human words and deeds threaten to vanish without leaving a trace.

Human words and deeds do not automatically remain alive even under more free conditions. Deeds have to be told into stories in order to obtain permanence and reveal their uniqueness and significance. This is where storytelling and its task enter the scene: storytelling is the link by means of which significance can be transmitted to future generations. This is because it is characteristic of human action that its story can be told only afterwards and hence its real significance can be revealed only afterwards in the story told of it. In other words, the real significance of action can be revealed only to the storyteller:

...the light that illuminates processes of action, and therefore all historical processes, appears only at their end, frequently when all the participants are dead. Action reveals itself fully only to the storyteller, that is, to the backward glance of the historian, who indeed always knows better what it was all about than the participants. (Arendt 1958, 192)

This means that in Arendtian terms a person is not able to tell his/her own story. The Arendtian storyteller is not an auto-biographer but rather a historian, a spectator who tells about actions and deeds of other people. The storyteller tells with hindsight that is inevitable and necessary: it is precisely by means of hindsight that the storyteller is able to crystallize the significance of action. This also means that an Arendtian storyteller is not dependent of personal experience. On the contrary, in Arendt's view experience only tends to blur or obscure judgment:

All accounts told by the actors themselves, though they may in rare cases give an entirely trustworthy statement of intentions, aims, and motives, become mere useful source material in the historian's hands and can never match his story in significance and truthfulness. What the storyteller narrates must necessarily be hidden from the actor himself, at least as long as he is in the act or caught in its consequences, because to him the meaningfulness of his act is not in the story that follows.

Even though stories are the inevitable results of action, it is not the actor but the storyteller who perceives and 'makes' the story. (Arendt 1958, 192)

Consequently, from the Arendtian viewpoint, the "testimonies" of the Holocaust survivors are source material of the historian: as such they do not reveal the meaning of events. In Arendtian terms, it is, indeed, the task of posterity to tell the story of the Holocaust on the basis of all the available source material. In other words, it is our task to judge the meaning and significance of the Shoah on the basis of eyewitness testimonies and other source material. More importantly, it is our task to judge the meaning of the Shoah for our present-day world since we don't judge it for the sake of the past in itself but for the sake of the present world.

In Arendtian terms, writing in the form of the middle text is not enough in order to make the political significance of the Holocaust to emerge. Although it may be understood as possibly the best way to represent the experience of the survivors it does not provide us with a form with which to judge the past events. This is precisely because it does not distinguish between the writer, the reader and text. In Arendtian terms, in order to judge we need also stories with the author, the agent and the plot regardless of the fact that the Holocaust cannot be told as a hero-story. In fact, in my view the modernity of the Holocaust does not lie so much in its indescribability as in the fact that it reveals the character of modernity as an era of anti-heroes or non-heroes. The deeds of the agents of the Holocaust are not great deeds of positive heroes but they are deeds anyway. As deeds we need to tell and transmit them in order to be able to judge their significance.

One of the reasons that made the Nazi Holocaust possible was the fact that people had lost the sense of sharing a common world. In the Nazi regime the Jews (and a number of other groups of people) were deprived of the basic human right to inhabit and share the world with other people. In fact, the Nazis did not recognize this general human right and condition at all but intended to destroy a significant part of the population of the world. This is a general trouble with all the totalitarian governments. They don't recognize the

inalienable right of every human being to inhabit the world and share it with other people. The (anti)political organization of totalitarian government is not based on the principle of free public organization of people but rather on the contrary principle of destroying the common world, the public space between people.

As far as there is no free public space in the totalitarian regime it lacks reality. There is no web of human relations that would guarantee that every action always has a witness that could tell about it in order to reveal its meaning. From this it follows that the totalitarian regime threatens to become a regime of general amnesia without shared political memory. This totalitarian situation helps us to understand what is so valuable in Arendt's conception of free political organization as an organized memory: the totalitarian situation does not only destroy political freedom as such but along with it, it destroys the sense of reality by destroying the possibility to share a common world by acting and speaking together and by sharing a common history. It destroys political judgment because without the sense of reality people are not able to judge what really is going on. Without political judgment giving meaning becomes impossible and finally remembering becomes impossible because without public deeds there is nothing about which to tell.

Consequently, we need to tell and remember also the story of the Holocaust because otherwise we lose our capacity to judge an important part of our historical and political past. In Arendtian terms, truthful representations and accurate judgments of the past are not necessarily bound to personal experience: you didn't have to be there in order to be permitted to transmit and judge the stories about the Holocaust. Hence, my argument is that in the discussion of the possibility to represent the Holocaust experience and event should be kept conceptually and theoretically apart from each other. In Arendtian terms, experience is always personal and cannot really be neither shared nor transmitted. What can be transmitted, instead, is the story, which by the same token allows the significance of the event to emerge. Hence, it is indeed true, as a number of survivors and scholars have argued, that it is impossible to represent the experience of the Holocaust. However, this does not mean that it would be impossible to represent the events – or stories – of the Holocaust that are always in plural since it is impossible to encapsulate

in one and the same story the plurality of this extraordinary phenomenon.

In sum, the Arendtian conception of storytelling and organized memory suggests that the best way to resist and fight totalitarianism is to remember. However, remembering is not important for its own sake but rather for the sake of the possibility of political existence that renders human life meaningful. The Arendtian conception of storytelling also suggests that the best way of fighting distortions of memory is taking good care of political freedom. As far as political conditions are such that free public debate is possible, it is also possible to correct false statements and stories.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> There is an on-going debate over the question of how we should call this event because all the terms in use are somehow problematic, deficient or partial. I follow Dominick LaCapra's suggestion to use various terms with an awareness of their problematic nature. See LaCapra 1997, 88-89.
- <sup>2</sup> The problem of representation of the Holocaust has been thematized from Theodor Adorno's famous claim that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" to Giorgio Agamben who has problematized the possibility to testify for those who did not return. See Agamben 1998.
- <sup>3</sup> Also Primo Levi has pointed out that most inmates of the camps did not have any idea of the totality of the destruction process that was taking place. See Levi 1986.
- <sup>4</sup> I want to thank Klaus Sondermann for suggesting me this characterisation.

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