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Using History: The Struggle over Traumatic Experiences of the Past in Historical Culture

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*Using History:
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It is the main intention of this article to defend the autonomy of historical thinking as a basis of our work as professional historians against any attempts to prescribe historical interpretations and representations by the force of law or by political pressure. The presupposition of this intention is a clear distinction between political and judicial intentions and norms, on the one hand, and the principles of proper historical thinking, which constitute historical studies as an academic discipline, on the other.

For every professional historian, this distinction is evident. But, unfortunately, it is not as clear as it seems to be at first glance. There are intersections between politics and law and historical thinking as an integral part of our culture. In this article, I would like to address those principles of historical thinking which mediate between both sides. I think of fundamental principles of historical sense generation, which constitute the particularity of history in human culture and lie beyond the difference between politics, law and academia. If they are sufficiently explicated, it becomes evident why historical thinking always is an issue of politics, so that politics cannot be kept out of the realm of our profession despite the logical difference between a rational argumentation in academia and the power games in politics.

History is a narrative answer to the question of who the people to whom the historians belong are. Historians are specialists in providing a proper and convincing answer to this question of identity. Herein lies the cultural function of their work, which, as academic professionals, they cannot abandon.

The narrative structure of historical thinking and its results in all forms of historical representation have a specific logic of making sense of the experience of the past for purposes of the temporal orientation in present practical life.¹ The clear distinction between fact and norm, and empirical data and value judgments, loses its plausibility since in the procedure of telling a story both elements are synthesised. Take the idea of value-free research: We have to realise that this idea can be highly misleading if it really means that historians only use neutral facts and no norms and values in representing the past.

Nevertheless, the idea of value-freedom² can have an acceptable meaning if it means that historical statements have another logical form than ethical, moral or juridical statements. Additionally, it opens up and protects a space for rational argumentation in the field of historical culture. In doing so, it makes historical studies an academic discipline that is independent from any obedience to political and ideological prescriptions which may aim at determining the understanding of the past.

I don't wish to go further into this issue of academic autonomy and value-freedom in the humanities and social sciences.³ Instead, I want to look at principles of historical sense generation, which span the division of value-freedom and rational argumentation, on the one hand, and political obedience and legitimation by history, on the other. It has become a stereotype to make a clear distinction between the power of historical memory in the cultural life of the people and the academic distance from it.⁴ This may even reach a state of neutrality towards the needs for historical orientation in practical life. But this juxtaposition is misleading. A distancing, rational argumentation and the functioning in practical life are systematically interrelated in historical studies. Memory and academia share basic principles of sense generation.

I want to address these principles in the special perspective of the cultural strategies of coming to terms with traumatic historical experiences. For me, the paradigm of these experiences is the Holocaust. Nobody can deny that the Holocaust is both a subject matter of historical research and academic interpretation and an essential element in the historical culture of not only Jews, Germans and all people who were involved in this event – as victims, perpetrators, bystanders, profiteers, witnesses or as simple contemporaries. It has a meaning for every human being.

I would like to pick up the German case since it represents a remarkable structural change in historical sense generation. This change took place along the lines of the change of generations and of an intergenerational discourse, and it can be applied to many other cases of dealing with historical traumata.

In an ideal typological manner, we can distinguish three attitudes towards the Holocaust in German identity formation, each of which is typical for a generation.⁵ I would like to characterise them in a very short and abstract way as the prewar, and the first and the second postwar generation. To say it in a very personal way: the generation of my parents, my own generation and that of my children.

The attitude of the prewar generation can be characterised as one of concealment. The traumatic experience of the Holocaust could not find a place in a pregiven pattern of historical understanding. This was even the case in academic discourse, where the Holocaust did not play an important role in coming to terms with the recent past in the new field of contemporary history. The acceptance of responsibility for Nazi barbarism would have destroyed the established historical identity of this generation, which was shaped by traditional nationalism.

The second generation was deeply determined by a hidden transference of responsibility onto their innocent shoulders. They had to get rid of this burden and they did so through assuming a moralising attitude. Historical identity was brought about by a mentality of distancing oneself from the previous period of German history, by condemning it and the perpetrators, by throwing it out of the field of (positive) sense-bearing historical experience. The postwar generation developed its identity through this negative judgment and the idea of a universal morality that lay behind it. (By the way, it was this attitude that brought about a definite end to the so-called German "Sonderweg" (special path to modernisation), and which has integrated the political culture of the Federal Republic of Germany into the western tradition of democracy based on human and civil rights.)⁶

This way of dealing with the Holocaust is deeply ambivalent. Historical identity always needs elements of the past with which the people of the present can identify. In respect to the recent past, there were not very many events for identification, apart from the resistance and opposition to the Nazi regime. Rather, the more sensitive and reflective people identified with the victims. This could only be done by ignoring the pregiven chain of generations, where parents grow into the identity of their children.

For the third generation, this breach could not be continued but had to be overcome. They had to reintegrate the morally guilty generation of their grandparents, and by doing so they brought a good deal of ambivalence into the historical culture and the collective identity of Germany. The most telling indication of this new relationship to the disturbing past of the Nazi period is the Holocaust memorial in Berlin.⁷ I think that my people – to date, at least – are the only ones to have erected a monument for their victims in the centre of their capital.

I strongly believe that the German case is not an exemption but a paradigm for a forward-looking European historical culture.⁸ It includes the criteria of a universal morality in dealing with the past by overcoming its fatal consequences. A moral judgment based on universal principles makes a strong division between innocent victims and responsible perpetrators. And this division serves as a base line in the identity-forming historical perspective of modern and contemporary history. The distinction between victims and perpetrators is a necessary element of historical understanding, of course. But when it becomes the essence of forming historical identity, it falls into the trap of ethnocentrism.

Ethnocentrism is a strategy of identity formation which inserts positive values into one's self-image and negative values into the image of the others.⁹ This is even the case when the sense criteria of universalistic morality were used in forming one's own historical identity. Because of logical reasons, this use brings about the ethnocentric imbalance between historical evaluation and judgment since it makes a clear distinction between good and evil. This can easily be demonstrated by

the attraction of victimisation in conceptualising historical identity today. There is a corresponding phenomenon on the other side: the growing culture of officially apologising for misdeeds of one's own people in the past. (Recently the Japanese prime minister gave an official apology for the treatment of the Koreans on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the annexation of Korea by Japan.) Victims are innocent, and the others are not. And this otherness includes not only the perpetrators.

I think the achievement of ambivalence in historical culture is a chance to overcome this moralistic ethnocentrism, without negating universalistic moral principles of historical evaluation and judgment.

Apologising is based on the same moral principles as the accusing of perpetrators by the offspring of victims. In this way, both sides share a basic values system. If apologising means that the dark side of one's own history becomes integrated into the historical self-image of the people, a new concept of historical identity will be the outcome. Here, ways for reconciliation are opened up. But reconciliation needs the acceptance of the other side. And therefore a new element of historical culture has to be developed, namely forgiveness.¹⁰ There are only a very few examples of a historical culture of forgiving – like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa – but they do exist and have set new terms of trade in dealing with a burdening past.¹¹

The moralistic attitude in historical culture finds its highly problematic equivalent in the field of identity politics, in the form of laws prescribing correct historical statements and attitudes. If this moralism becomes transformed by apologising and forgiving, identity politics will change as well. This change needs a common attitude towards the past in the cultural processes of identity formation brought about and shared by both the offspring of the victims and the perpetrators as well as of the other participants in the dark events of the burdening past. It must be an attitude that is essentially related to the realm of identity, and should spring from a mental activity which belongs to the essentials of human culture: We are all aware of this attitude – it is the general and fundamental cultural phenomenon of mourning.

The aesthetics of historical culture provide a few, but remarkable, examples of historical mourning.¹² It is an open question as to what it means to introduce elements of mourning into the academic field of history. But it is evident that mourning can be a procedure in intellectual activities like philosophy, so why not in history?

In order to prepare academic historical discourse for the development of these new elements and strategies of sense generation, a change in the basic categories of historical interpretation is necessary. Historical thinking is mainly interested in human activity and agency. A corresponding form of human life – which is as elementary and universal as agency – is suffering. This dimension of human life has found much less attentiveness from the historians than the “*res gestae*” in the human past. This is so evident that a theory of historical consciousness might arrive at the result that it is one of the main functions of historical consciousness to cover, if not to suppress, the memory of suffering.

The first attempts are already underway to represent suffering as a basic element of historical experience.¹³ But without a change in basic concepts of historical interpretation, the normal work of professional historians will continue to display an ignorance of suffering.

A new awareness of the fundamental importance of human suffering in understanding history is required. It has to be combined with the cultural practice of mourning and forgiving and the new, fundamental elements of ambivalence and ambiguity in the concepts of historical identity. All these elements have the potential to lead to a new form of historical culture in general and of academic discourse in particular. I would not hesitate to characterise these forms as genuinely humanistic. So our academic criticism of the political misuse of historical cognition and of political interference should not only defend the achievements of an open, rational discourse in historical studies but it should be an incentive for a new humanism in history.

NOTES

- 1 For more details, see Jörn Rüsen, *History: Narration – Interpretation – Orientation*, New York: Berghahn, 2005.
- 2 The classical text on this issue is Max Weber, “Objectivity’ in Social Science”, in idem, *Sociological Writings* (The German Library, vol. 60), ed. Wolf Heydebrand, New York: Continuum, 1994, 248–259.
- 3 See Jörn Rüsen, “Historical Objectivity as a Matter of Social Values”, in Joep Leerssen and Ann Rigney (eds), *Historians and Social Values*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2000, 57–66.
- 4 A typical example is Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire”, *Representations* 26 (1989), 7–25.
- 5 For a more detailed argumentation, see Rüsen, *History*, 163–204.
- 6 See Heinrich August Winkler, Germany. *The Long Road West*, 2 vols, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006, 2007.
- 7 Jan-Holger Kirsch, *Nationaler Mythos oder historische Trauer? Der Streit um ein zentrales Holocaust-Mahnmal für die Berliner Republik* (Beiträge zur Geschichtskultur, vol. 25), Köln: Böhlau, 2003.
- 8 See, for example, Klas-Göran Karlsson and Ulf Zander (eds), *Echoes of the Holocaust: Historical Cultures in Contemporary Europe*, Lund: Nordic Academic Press 2003; Klas-Göran Karlsson and Ulf Zander (eds), *Holocaust Heritage: Inquiries into European Historical Culture*, Malmö: Sekel, 2004.
- 9 See Jörn Rüsen, “How to Overcome Ethnocentrism: Approaches to a Culture of Recognition by History in the 21st Century”, in *Taiwan Journal of East Asian Studies* 1/1 (2004), 59–74; also in *History and Theory* 43 (2004), 118–129.
- 10 See Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006; “Memory, History, Forgiveness: A Dialogue Between Paul Ricoeur and Sorin Antohi”, *Janus Head* 8/1 (2005), 14–25, available at www.janushead.org/8-1/Ricoeur.pdf, accessed 6 Mar 2011.
- 11 See examples in Mamadou Diawara, Bernhard Lategan and Jörn Rüsen (eds), *Historical Memory in Africa: Dealing with the Past, Reaching for the Future in an Intercultural Context* (Making Sense of History, vol. 12), New York: Berghahn, 2010.
- 12 The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, for example. The issue of mourning in historical culture is addressed in Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1995; Burkhard Liebsch and Jörn Rüsen (eds), *Trauer und Geschichte* (Beiträge zur Geschichtskultur, vol. 22), Köln: Böhlau, 2001; Jörn Rüsen, “Trauma and Mourning in Historical Thinking”, *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in History and Archaeology* 1/1 (2004), 10–21.
- 13 For example, Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, 2 vols, New York: HarperCollins, 1997, 2007.