Holocaust memory and political integration

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Since the second half of the 1990s, the memory of the Holocaust has played a crucial role in the European Union's integration policy. Based on the recognition that European citizens cannot "fall in love with a market" – as famously observed in 1989 by former Commission president Jacques Delors – European policy makers had started to increasingly invest in initiatives that had the power to develop the feeling of a common belonging. The memory of the Holocaust was meant to express the common European values and provide a common supra-national framework of belonging in which every national or local community with different cultural and political affinities can find its proper place. Thus a specific memory construction of the Jewish genocide has become the object of an immense political enterprise. During these three decades we could observe one of the largest experiments of memory politics.

Yet what is precisely memory politics? The political significance of memory is nothing new: ever since in human history those who ruled attempted to legitimize their domination with a corresponding representation of the past. Memory politics is something rather different. It is a specific and recent form of politics that aims to intervene into the relation societies maintain with the past. Underlying this form of politics is the belief that memory equals identity that is, by providing the possibility of identification, the memory narrative contributes to social cohesion. This equation has become taken for granted in scholarly research since at least the re-discovery of Maurice Halbwachs' theory of collective memory at the turn of the 1980s. Consequently, another definitive scholarly tradition, going back at least to Georg Simmel, that deals with the inherent relationship between memory and conflict – this tradition had to be marginalized. The social and political conditions of this process are yet to be uncovered.

Another underlying belief of memory politics is that the correct or even the healthy relation with the past is a precondition for democratic political rule. In other words, democratization is dependent on the "proper way of social remembering." Without political intervention in society in order to nurture collective memory, so goes the argument, there is no democracy. According to the different national contexts, a number of terms have come into general use for this specific type of intervention: dealing with the past, coming to terms with the past, working through the past, mastering the past, etc. Accordingly, the EU's memory policy initiatives address societies

of the member states and aim not only to promote its own canonical memory narrative but also to foster members and institutions of society to make the necessary memory work.

Though I will in the following focus on EU integration policy, it is not the only political discourse in history that embraces the idea of collective memory, see the global institutionalization of the transitional justice paradigm or that of the human rights' memory agenda. The reference to the Holocaust is not even the first manifestation of memory policies in the European Union. The memory turn of the EU's integration policy dates back to the 1970s, when the notion of cultural heritage became central to the core European values instead of peace, prosperity and stability. It was only during the geopolitical rearrangement following the end of the Cold War that European institutions embraced a specific form of Holocaust memory endowed with universal moral significance.

From a political point of view, the memory construction of the Holocaust that I so far only referred to obscurely as specific, is a historically new form of cosmopolitanism. The scholarly literature terms this new form of past representation "cosmopolitan memory", which is in fact the memory of the Holocaust. It is a collective memory that not only transcends the geographic location of the Jewish genocide but is also meaningful to societies which are not implicated in the alleged aftereffects of the historical event. The idea that because of the universal significance of the Holocaust its memory concerns everybody – this is the core of its cosmopolitan nature. This cosmopolitan memory of the Holocaust, which is thus based on the idea of not only historical but also moral uniqueness, came into being in the United States, in a continent which was untouched by the Nazi racial aggression during the war. American society was differently implicated than those in the two Germanys, the societies which had been occupied by the third Reich, or the former Axis countries. The specificities of this social implication, especially its indirect nature, were among the conditions of possibility of the constitution of a clear-cut and coherent moral memory lesson. This lesson about Good and Evil is abstracted from the complex historical reality of the Second World War and the Jewish genocide.

The moral significance of the cosmopolitan memory of the Holocaust manifested in the imperative of "never again": that is, in the moral obligation to prevent the reoccurrence in any form of this Radical Evil. Institutions of holocaust memory in the USA had their explicit mission of fighting against anti-Semitism. This memory political aspect, that is the moral obligation to convey a historical lesson in order to achieve a political goal, was historically unprecedented and was far from self-evident. As Charles Maier put it with regards to the opening of the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC in 1993, "the lesson cannot be just that genocide is evil.

This conclusion hardly requires the museum effort" (Maier, 1993, p. 144). Yet scholarly criticism pointing out that history in fact does not repeat itself was unnoticed in a year when *Schindler's list* featured in the movie theatres. Disseminated by the scholarship and the culture industry, this decontextualized memory of the Holocaust not only transcended national borders but promised to convey a universal moral lesson that makes every people on earth capable of recognising injustice as a repetition of Radical Evil archetypically manifested in the Nazi genocide of the Jews.

It was in reaction to losing the Cold War enemy and the concomitant reorganisation of the continent's geopolitical landscape that the EU's integration policy began to systematically refer to the cosmopolitan memory of the Holocaust as a European historical experience with universal significance. The EU presidency statement on 31 October 2005 affirmed, "the significance of the Holocaust is universal. But it commands a place of special significance in European remembrance. It is in Europe that the Holocaust took place" (EU, 2005). The Holocaust has become a reference point as "the negative core event of the 20th century" (Diner, 2003, p. 43), or the "inaugural event" of the European political community. It is now the historical lesson of the memory of the Holocaust that is supposed to provide solidarity and a sense of belonging to European citizens. The European political project finds the condition of its legitimacy in references to this "negative founding myth". All this spurs European institutions to foster the cultivation of cosmopolitan Holocaust memory both inside European borders and, through the enlargement process, in countries seeking entry.

Thus began an immense institutional implementation of memory politics both on the European and the national level. Nearly 3 decades have passed since then. Following the recent crises of European political integration, such as the rise of right wing populism, the so called "migration crisis" or more recently the Brexit, there is a growing number of scholars who attempt to assess how efficient or successful memory political initiatives are and in what way they contribute, if at all, to a peaceful and solidary society. Their point of departure is a sharply visible contradiction between the political investment in institutions of memory politics on the one hand, and the lack of social cohesion and political integration on the other. As Valentina Pisanty puts it at the very beginning of her recent book *The Guardians of Memory and the Return of the Xenophobic Right*: "Two facts are there for all to see.

1) In the last twenty years the Shoah has been the object of widespread commemorative activities throughout the Western world.

2) In the last twenty years racism and intolerance have increased dramatically in those very countries where the politics of memory have been implemented with the greatest vigor."

The question is then, continues Pisanty, whether these two facts are unrelated or there is a connection between them, and it is up to a society wishing to oppose the current wave of xenophobia to investigate the reasons for their contradiction. Now this last statement is of particular importance. For many years, criticisms of memory politics could easily be pushed aside by the belief that the problem arises not from the memorial articulation of political problems but from the unequal distribution of memory either as a result of the insufficient transmission of historical lessons or as a consequence of the unequal relation between different groups' memories. The task was thus, we heard, to make more memory so that the moral lessons of history be properly conveyed and the marginalized memories equally recognized. If this reasoning reminds us to the neoliberal argument that the solution to the deficiencies stemming from the market mechanism's implementation is more marketization, that is not by accident.

An underlying conviction of memory politics is that the transmission of historical knowledge will change the relation between members of society. Learning the lesson transmitted by memory will make them capable to relate to each other in a proper way. In their recent book *Beyond Memory. Can we really learn from the past?* Sarah Gensburger and Sandrine Lefranc aim precisely to provide an empirically based answer to the question why "The development of memory policy has not been associated with the development of a more tolerant or peaceful society." (6.) Why did passing the moral lesson of Holocaust memory not lead to the suppression of xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and racism? On the one hand, the authors question the tacit presumption that knowledge conveyed by the past leads to a change in attitude in the individual. They empirically prove that the knowledge about the Holocaust passed on in museums, exhibitions, through a variety of memorial contents, does not necessarily lead to a change in the attitudes of far-right students. On the contrary, exposure to the lessons of the past leads to a reinforcement of the beliefs already professed in their case. On the other hand, Gensburger and Lefranc question the presupposition that moral lessons mediated by memory policy actually change the behavior of individuals. They see the failure of memory politics in that the model of reconciliation to be achieved through knowledge disregards the social embeddedness of the individual, who acts in his or her specific social circumstances, even when confronted with the moral lesson of the past. We can conclude from their study that memory policies miss the point when addressing the individual mind instead of social relations.

As Lea David proves in her recent book *The Past Can't Heal Us: The Dangers of Mandating Memory in the Name of Human Rights*, memory political tools aiming to foster the transition from dictatorship to democracy are not only ineffective but can themselves be the source of social conflict on the ground. Instead of "healing" the so-called societies with a difficult past by implementing standardized tools of moral remembering, they can strengthen categories of nation and ethnicity, increase social inequalities by inducing moral hierarchies of victimhood, and they do not make people more appreciative to human rights values. According to David, one reason behind these "side-effects" of "dealing with the past" is what she calls standardization of memory. "As the human rights memorialization agenda is shaped through the prism of universalism, standardization of memory requires a shift from concrete memories to abstract remembrance. However, this always occurs at the expense of complexities and moral ambiguities. Thus, the 'dealing with the past' approach, which has become deeply rooted in human rights memorialization practices and norms, whitewashes and misinterprets the historical and political context in which it emerged, as if this latter had been apolitical and natural and the only proper way to remember." (David 2020a, 2020b)

On a collective level, the first influential theoretic critique of the politics of Holocaust memory came in the mid-2010s as a reaction to its failure with regards to the challenge of right wing extremism. In their article entitled "On Agonistic Memory," Anna Cento Bull and Hans Hansen observe that "a cosmopolitan mode of remembering, far from having superseded the antagonistic mode associated with 'first modernity' in the European context, has proved unable to prevent the rise of, and is being increasingly challenged by, new antagonistic collective memories constructed by populist neo-nationalist movements." (390-1.) For Bull and Hansen, the main reason for this failure is that the cosmopolitan memory construction, that is, the pubic memory of the Holocaust, is detached from the historical context and, as a consequence, appears as de-politicized, as a technical toolkit of building a good society. They argue that the exclusive role attributed to the "non-acting victim" similarly precludes the possibility of remembering and understanding the historical context, and also the imperative of identification with abstract ideas of Good against Evil. All these features of the European integration memory policy equal to a complete self-disarmament against the neo-nationalist and Eurosceptical currents that for their part freely re-appropriate the political significance of public remembering. In order to counter this challenge, Bull and Hansen introduce a new model of remembering that they term agonistic memory. In contrast to the cosmopolitan model of Holocaust remembrance, agonistic memory does not operate with the abstract moral examples of Good and Evil, that is, it does not seek to draw universal lessons, but re-contextualizes memory; it does not seek self-reflective and

rational consensus of the parties; it pluralizes memory by letting authentic historical utterances not to be limited exclusively to victim testimony; and it recognizes the role of emotions in public remembering. Bull and Hansen seek to develop a politics of memory that rests not on abstract-universal empathy with the victim, but on critical understanding and recognized, even conflicting political positions based on historical knowledge. Their theoretic framework was put into practice by a European Horizon 2020 program entitled *Unsettling Remembering and Social Cohesion in Transnational Europe*.

The current memory political crisis is not limited to the mere strengthening of the ideological opponents of the liberal establishment. The situation is far worse than that as those forces attacking the enlightenment edifice are using the very same language of memory political reconciliation and moral recognition. Memory policies aiming to foster reconciliation are turning into battle fields where political struggle presupposes the mutual silencing of political interests. This is what Ann Rigney termed the ambivalence of reconciliation: "the orchestration of reconciliatory remembrance itself becomes a new site of conflicting investment, with some groups using public performances of memory to foreclose an awareness of past crimes, while others seek to use the same procedures to bring them to the light of day." (Rigney 2012) The complete failure of the memory political reconciliation model was nowhere else more evident than during the EU enlargement process when the debate about the so called "constitutive historical legacies" unfolded.

This debate about the political boundaries of the European community degraded into a mutual delegitimation game which opposed the memory of the Holocaust and the memory of Communism. As I argue in my book *Traumasociety. A sociological-historical critique of Memory Politics*, these two culturally identical memory constructions are the outcome of the mimetic victimhood competition that unfolded during EU enlargement. While from the "integrator position" the canon of Holocaust memory was prescribed as a precondition of democratization and thus as a "soft criterion" of accession, actors in the "to be integrated position" not only appropriated the "proper way of memorialization" but represented, according to the prescribed norms of historical representation, the memory of Communism as their additional "historical experience". The downward spiral of the mimetic victimhood competition reached its symbolic endpoint with the 2009 EP resolution on 'European conscience and totalitarianism.' This compromise has been built on mutual silencing. Neither national socialism nor state socialism could be debated in political terms. Critiques of EU politics attacking post-colonial attitudes or market fundamentalism could easily be pushed aside as totalitarian, betraying the core values of Europeanness. Similarly, those critiques pointing to the

emancipatory ideals of the state socialist enterprise were too easily marginalized as communist, betraying the human dignity of its victims. The drive behind the resolution is clearly to unite Europe, which necessitates 'form[ing] a common view of its history,' yet it respects internal differences such as an east-west divide of historical legacies of past suffering. Moreover, this political declaration of reconciliation allows only the position of the victim of historical suffering. In this view of the past, potential moral judgement can only differentiate between criminalized totalitarian regimes of whatever ideology on the one hand, and the conglomerate of suffering innocent individuals on the other. As the document clearly puts it, 'from the perspective of the victims it is immaterial which regime deprived them of their liberty or tortured or murdered them for whatever reason'. With a deliberate sarcastic exaggeration, one can summaries this whole process as in contemporary European memory culture, the Second World War appears as a mythic struggle between liberal democracy and totalitarianism fought by an alliance of victims of a Western Holocaust and Eastern communism. This is indeed a genuine historical moral lesson – but has unfortunately nothing to do with historical reality.

If my diagnosis is correct that the current crisis described above has much more to do with politics than to memory, then the first task is to account for this radical transformation of politics. When did it happen and why? What are its characteristics? Beyond doubt, the historical shift to memory politics took place in the "free world" of the Cold War somewhere in the late 1970s and the early 1980s. This is when and where the so called memory boom took place. The usual explanation is restricted to temporality. Behind the rise of memory in society since the 1970s lies the uncertainty of expectations for the future, which is also responsible for the crisis in politics. Yet this argument does not give an explanation to the emergence of a new and specific form of politics that addresses the social relation to the past. One possible answer relies on the global power relations characteristic in the given historical period. From this point of view, the birth of memory politics equals to the turning away from transformative politics which is characterized by future oriented and collective reference points. Memory politics was a reaction to the global challenges posited by decolonization on the one hand, and by the Cold War struggle on the other. Let me begin with the role of decolonization.

The retreat of politics into morality in the Cold War West is illustrated very well by the change in the discourse of human rights in the 1970s. The popular explanation is that the turn away from left-wing political programmes was due to the disappointment of 1968 and the colonial liberation struggles in both the East and the West. According to this view, the overwhelming political rise in the importance of human rights is due to the disillusionment with Cold War realpolitik, which would explain the retreat into the 'pure' world of morality and anti-politics. According to Samuel

Moyn, one of the most influential proponents of the 'new historiography' of human rights, this discourse in the 1970s offered the possibility of a 'last utopia' in the midst of a general disillusionment with revolutionary transformation, in which it was possible to take steps towards a better future, even individually, as citizens, through small-scale change. The new historiography, while emphasising discontinuities and pointing to the untenability of the triumphalist narrative of the gradual spread of human rights, remains limited in its focus on North America and Western Europe. As Joseph Slaughter shows, looking at other parts of the world, in particular the 'Third World', we get a rather different narrative. What we see is the use of human rights language as a weapon by advocates of collective-national liberation struggles. What happened in the 1970s is therefore not a rediscovery of human rights, but a neoliberal reinterpretation of them in reaction to the anti-colonialist efforts that focused on the responsibilities of the capitalist West. It is not an extension of rights, but a deprivation of rights, which can be interpreted as a re-subjugation of the Global South seeking to free itself from colonial dependence.

Now let me turn to the role Cold War power relations played in the narcissistic turn of politics. In the aftermath of the Second World War, Cold War power relations played a key role in defining the discursive conditions for references to the moral significance of the world war. From the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 onwards, the international position of the Federal Republic of Germany was increasingly determined by its role as part of the Western alliance system in averting the communist threat, rather than by its role in cleansing society of Nazis and Nazism. The position of the newly created German Democratic Republic was also influenced by the Soviet bloc's Cold War aims. The 'German question' became the central issue of the early Cold War in Europe, with the moral significance of the Nazi past subordinated to geopolitical rivalries. In other words, power relations between the blocs also influenced the development of the war narrative. In the crossfire of Eastern bloc communist campaigns against the continuity between Hitler's Rich and Audeauer's Republic and the alleged "-re-nazification," West Germany presented the issue of Fascism as a matter of the past. While the communists urged political trials of former Nazis in West Germany, Adenauer's regime attempted to prove its democratic nature by taking moral responsibility and reparations payment. Put simply, the Cold War West pursued a moralising (de-criminalising) strategy, while the East pursued a criminalising strategy, characterised by an antagonistic temporality: the former sought to define the significance of the issue as memory, the latter as actuality. Ultimately, the Eichmann trial contributed not only to the emergence of the idea of the Holocaust as an event of universal moral significance, independent of the Second World War, but also indirectly to the questioning of an

anti-fascist moral universalism that ascribed (contemporary) significance to fascism as the supreme atrocity against humanity. The moral significance of the Holocaust became a problem of memory.

This profound change of politics in the Western world, especially in the North American continent, can be characterised by an orientation towards the past (memory), a retreat from politics to morality, the use of the sacred idea of the Holocaust as a moral yardstick, the language of human rights, and an anti-communist-neoliberal ideology. This change to an anti-political sense of politics is responsible for the fact that the revolutionary or at least transformative conception of democracy has been replaced by a technical transition concept of democracy which only requires the application of the pre-given standardized toolkit of moral remembering.

So what conclusion can we draw from all this? My personal scholarly answer is the reconstruction of the antifascist consensus that, as historian Dan Stone proves, reigned in postwar societies in both Eastern and Western Europe. While antifascism in Western Europe did not transform into state ideology the way it did in Eastern Europe, it "structured and shaped" what postwar societies in the West were to become: the lessons of fascism led Christian-Conservative elites to embrace class cooperation, the welfare state, and parliamentary democracy (Stone 2014: 8-11). This moral order based on the common experience of defeating Fascism was not memory politics but a source of legitimacy for the political relevance of memory. Its historical and sociological reconstruction might help critically observe our present and establish possible ways out from our deep political crisis.