

MEMORY, HISTORY AND OBLIVION.
The educational function of historical memory.

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*You who live securely in your
warm homes
You who come home to
warm food and friendly faces.
Consider if this is a man
Who work in the mud
Who don't know what peace is
Who fights for half a loaf of
bread
Who dies for a yes or a no
Consider if this is a woman
With no hair and no name
No more strength to
remember Empty eyes and a
cold womb Like a frog in
winter.
When you're at
home, when you're walking
down the street, when you're
lying down or getting up.
Repeat this to your children
Or your house falls
down Sickness
overwhelms you
And those born to you
turn their faces away from you.*

*Primo Levi
Se questo é un uomo.*

I begin this essay with the *incipit* of Primo Levi's book *If this is a man*, one of the most impressive and lucid accounts left by a survivor of the Auschwitz Nazi extermination camp. It is *an anathema*, in the best style of the Hebrew tradition, a curse against indifference to the suffering of the "other" and at the same time an alarm, an "ominous sign of the danger" that threatens us: the extermination camps could return, the danger is always present, it is lurking and could be repeated at any moment. There is nothing that can prevent this tragedy from repeating itself: "after Auschwitz" we can no longer believe in divine providence or in the "astuteness of reason" that gives meaning to human history¹. History is in our hands and people can repeat the same mistakes, the same tragedies. The only faint hope we have left is to appeal to the collective conscience, to warn that what has happened to others can happen to us. That's why the final curse: Levi doesn't appeal to human brotherhood, to love of neighbors, but to fear of neighbors (more fear than love of God, to use the old words). He says: Let indifference to the sufferings of others twist against you and affect your loved ones and your daily life. Reflect, says Levi, on what man has been able to do to another man,

something that can be repeated if we don't become aware of what we are doing.

absolute evil that manifested itself in this historical event. That's why remembering the extermination camps is the first condition - necessary, although not sufficient - for such horrors not to be repeated.

It is with this admonition from Levi that we will analyse the relationship between memory, history and oblivion.

1. History: Clio and Chronos.

In the Latin languages, the word 'history' has two very distinct but related meanings: it can mean both history as a "collection of past events" and history as a "report and interpretation" of those events.

History in the first sense (in Latin *res gestae*, in German *Geschichte*) no longer exists, it is "past" and therefore ontologically no longer is, it has been swallowed up by the abyss of time: Kronos who devours his own children. This is the unfathomable mystery of time so well described by so many philosophers - from Aristotle to St Augustine, from Bergson to Heidegger and Sartre - and to which there is no answer, since we live immersed in time.

History in the second sense (in Latin *historia rerum gestarum*, in German *Historie*)² is something else entirely. It is the desperate human attempt to rescue, to resurrect, to revive the past that no longer is. This attempt is desperate because it will never be possible to rescue what is not and can no longer be. In this sense, "history" is "words" (oral or written), but never "things", "facts". It is therefore impossible to tell history as it truly is (*die geschichtliche selber* - *l'histoire-même*) according to the famous formula of 19th century positivist historiography (Ranke's, for example). And Nietzsche was right when he said that "there are no facts, only interpretations".

The Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce said something similar when he said that "all history is contemporary history"³. Literally, because it is those who live in the same time, the contemporaries, who write the history of those who preceded them, the ancestors, those who lived in another time. But there is also a deeper meaning: it means that each era, or generation (but we could also say each group or class) continually creates, recreates, invents and reinvents history. This is why history, as a discipline, is continually written and re-written, re-interpreted, it is one of the "hermeneutic" disciplines *par excellence*, because it is a continual (re)interpretation of texts (since the facts are no longer attainable), in different contexts, from different pre-texts.

We can see these two conceptions of history represented in two very significant images:

¹ JONAS, H. *Il concetto di Dio dopo Auschwitz*, Genova: Il Melangolo, 1993.

² In Portuguese, we could use the term "historiography", which is rarely used.

³ "The practical need, which is at the heart of any historical judgement, gives every story the character of "contemporary history", because however remote and remote the facts that come into it chronologically, it is, in reality, history that is always linked to the present moment and situation, in which those facts spread their vibrations". CROCE, B. *La storia come pensiero e come azione*, Rome-Bari Laterza, 1938, p. 5.



CLIO AND CRONOS.
Statue of the Wiblingen Monastery Library in Ulm, Germany.

The first represents Clio, the goddess who protects history, and Chronos, the god of time: it is a magnificent marble statue that can be found in the library of the Wiblingen Monastery in Ulm, Germany, and is reproduced on the cover of Paul Ricoeur's book *Memory, History and oblivion*⁴. The statue represents time, which with its left hand tears up the pages written by Clio, while the goddess, whose right hand holds the instruments for writing, tries to stop Chronos from carrying out his destructive action. The statue, typically Baroque, has a certain movement and internal dynamics, but without much drama. Clio, who is represented as a young girl, is here history as writing, not as a set of events.

But there is another image that is much more raw, strong and forceful than the mannerism of Baroque statuary: it is the image of the great Spanish painter Francisco Goya y Lucientes who also represents Chronos, but not in the act of tearing up the pages of history, but of devouring his own children. Here the image refers to history in the first sense and has an impressive tragic force (it recalls the Cyclops who ate at Ulysses' companions in the *Odyssey*).

⁴ RICOEUR, Paul. *Memory, history, oblivion*, Campinas: ed. UNICAMP, 2008.



Francisco Goya: Chronos/Saturn devours its children.

The image is immediately shocking because of its violence: it is not a representation of the labour of time that inevitably leads mortals to their natural destiny inscribed in birth itself, which is death; rather, it makes us think of something more powerful: Chronos, who devours, destroys and destroys his children, does so in an absolutely violent way. In this way, the image can be seen as a metaphor for the violence of history, which Goya represented so realistically and crudely in the engravings he dedicated to the so-called "war of Spanish independence" against French domination at the beginning of the 19th century.



Francisco Goya: Do I have to say something else?

2. *Misterium iniquitatis*: History and violence.

What can we do in the face of this collective violence that is constitutive of human history? We cannot bring back what time has inexorably devoured, there is no return to what has passed, we are submerged and immersed in the current of becoming, as the old Heraclitus said. In this sense, the victims who were devoured by the cruelty of history are still victims of injustice: they lost, they were crushed, they were defeated, they died in the most atrocious torments and tortures in the concentration camps, in the basements of the dictatorship, in the trenches of battles, in mass graves, in the burrows of the latifundia, in the alleys of the favelas. They will never return, the injustices that were committed against them and that cost them suffering and death will never be repaired.

Here the difference between historical time and personal time appears in all its seriousness: our life is terribly limited and subject to any mishaps and unforeseen events, we are a "being for death", a being for whom the world appears when we open our eyes and disappears when we close them forever. Through history we can give an "a posteriori" meaning to those who died: to the generations of militants, to the most generous and altruistic people who gave their lives in the fight against the military dictatorship and who died in the midst of unspeakable suffering, to the *partigiani*, the guerrillas, who died fighting against fascism and the dictatorship.

In this way, we can insert these lives into a larger process that indicates the "moral progress" of humanity, which overcomes injustice; but this is an operation that we do with a historical gaze, as if it were possible to look from "above" and "outside" history. In doing so, however, we cannot rescue the meaning of those lives that were brutally tortured, destroyed, humiliated and finally destroyed: the genocide of the indigenous peoples annihilated during the conquest of the Americas; the millions of victims of colonialism; the six million Jews and many other victims belonging to the "inferior peoples" annihilated by Nazi totalitarianism and tens of millions by Stalinist totalitarianism; the victims of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. What is the meaning of these deaths?



Theodor de Bry (1598). Illustration by Bartolomé de Las Casas: *A brief account of the destruction of the Indies*.



Mass burial in a Nazi concentration camp during World War II.



Shooting of a Polish mother and her son by a German soldier.

This is the only "historical truth": what has been done is done, what has passed has passed and can never be changed. To paraphrase Kant, we could say that this is the *factum* of "historical reason", which demarcates the limits and conditions of possibility for any reflection or action on history and the past.

The only definitive and effective reparation we can resort to is religious. Only a religious faith can give meaning to these lives, only by believing that there is a provident God, who is a just judge and who one day, in another dimension, imagined by prophets and theologians outside of time and space, will wipe away all tears as the Book of Apocalypse states:

*"They will never hunger or thirst
again, the sun will never afflict
them again
Nor any burning heat.
For the Lamb who is in the midst of the
throne will feed them and lead them to the
springs of the water of life.
And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes"*
Apocalypse 7:16-17

"This is God's tent with men. He will dwell with them. They will be your people, And he, God-with-them, will be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, for there will never be death again, No more mourning, no more clamour, no more pain...
Apocalypse 21, 3-4

The Kantian ethics of *religion within the limits of simple reason* can be seen as a secularization of this religious vision: if the *factum* of practical reason tells us that there is a "moral law within us" as sure and certain as the "starry sky above us", and yet historical experience shows us that those who fulfil this moral law and act in accordance with "duty for duty's sake" are not happy (indeed the just sufferer is a recurring figure in the history of religions); Then we can reasonably hope (and, among the three theological virtues, for Kant religion is not a matter of faith, but of hope) that "duty" and "happiness" will definitely meet in another dimension in which God will do justice, giving to each what they deserve (*unicuique suum tribuere*).

Stoic ethics can also be seen as an attempt at a secular ethic of the highest moral caliber, which argues that life is worth living only with dignity, as Juvenal's famous maxim makes clear:

"*Summum crede nefas animam praeferre pudori et propter vitam vivendi perdere causas.*
(Juvenal (50-60/127 AD, Satire VIII).

In Helvétio Rattón's film *Batismo de Sangue (Baptism of Blood)*, Friar Tito de Alencar, already disbelieving in all the religious and political ideals that guided his life and his militancy and obsessed with the memories of prison, the vivid memory of the torture he suffered and the torturers he could no longer get rid of, and about to commit the supreme act of suicide, says a phrase that is very close to the Stoic maxim: "It's better to die than to lose your life!".

This is the dimension of violence that is intrinsic to the human condition itself, which the Judeo-Christian tradition defines as original sin, which Kant secularizes in the idea of radical evil, it is the *mysterium iniquitatis* that humankind looks at without finding answers, which remains as a residue that cannot be removed.

3. Memories.

But if we don't accept this transcendent dimension, if we don't have this hope, if we aren't willing to face the rigour of Stoic ethics, what is in our hands and in our power to do in the face of the *factum* of history?⁵

The only path we have is through memory, the only access we have to past events. The role of memory is fundamental from both an individual and a collective point of view: anyone who knows someone who has lost their memory knows what we're talking about. The task of rescuing history from *oblivion*, from "not being" where it is, is entrusted to memory, which can be individual or collective.

⁵ Even if we have this religious and eschatological hope in a just judge God who can save us, this does not exempt us from doing something so that the Kingdom of God (which Kant calls the kingdom of ends) can begin to be realized here on earth: hence the Kantian proposal of a universal ethical political community under cosmopolitan law and perpetual peace, which is a form of ethical, civil and secular religion.

Personal memory has three main functions: a) it collects and stores knowledge: it's cognitive memory, without which there would be no learning; b) it has an affective function, of selecting negative and positive experiences, which can remain on a conscious level or be "thrown" into the unconscious, and it tells us what to remember and what to forget. Remembering a positive event is something extremely gratifying that makes us relive it again with intensity; but remembering a negative event is "suffering twice" as the popular saying goes. This is why there is a tendency to forget unpleasant things; c) memory also has another fundamental function in the construction of the personality, that of unifying knowledge and experiences around a central nucleus: it creates identity or perhaps, it would be better to say, it tries to relate the various identities that make up our personality, without which we would fall into a schizophrenic or psychotic process of multiple conflicting personalities.

Similarly, **collective memory** has the same functions as individual memory, but it is applied to collective subjects, social groups, entire nations or civilizations. Initially, collective memory manifests itself as mythical memory, which is confused with individual memory to the extent that it is impossible to separate individual and collective identity, because the former is constructed in intersubjective relationships. It is family memory, of the closest circle of family and personal relationships, which are characterised by being experienced personally, directly, or through the mediation of oral tradition. There are civilisations (those that Hegel called "without history", because without a State) in which this is the only existing collective memory, passed down through oral traditions, affirmed in kinship relations, myths and rites that revive cyclical time, trying to fix this movement through certain fixed and repetitive characteristics.

From the moment that some form of State and writing emerges, memory is transformed into history and becomes an indispensable part of the identity of a people, class, nation, institution and the legitimacy of constituted power. From this moment on, individual memory, family "oral" memory, is one of the many "materials" for building the history of a community. Without this process there would be no community, because there would be no collective identities. The main function of memory is to reconstruct, in the enormous fragmentation of personal and collective experiences, a continuity that makes something permanent possible and not simply a disorganised accumulation of different and contrasting identities.

Just as there is an individual subconscious, there is also a collective subconscious, where the collective memory of a group, a nation or humanity is stored. Among all social institutions, religion plays a fundamental role in creating the collective unconscious. Just think of the Christian sense of guilt: from childhood we were taught to feel guilty for the original sin of Adam and Eve and for the death of Christ who came to redeem this sin and that we should imitate ourselves at every moment of our lives (*imitatio Christi*). Religion internalises certain behaviours and this gives rise to a moral conscience that commands us in our innermost being in a stronger and more effective way than any external command. The collective mythical/religious archetypes, re-updated through rites, make us atone for our collective guilt!⁶

Without this complex process, there would perhaps be no collective memory, and therefore no collective identities or shared morals or ethics. Memory thus assumes an identity function, an ethical-political function in the broadest sense: it provides the models, the paradigms, the archetypes that underpin - consciously or unconsciously - our deep personal and collective identity.⁷

⁶ In very different ways, various authors have tackled the subject of the collective unconscious: Gustav Jung and the doctrine of archetypes (JUNG, G. *L'uomo e i suoi simboli*, Milano: Longanesi, 1980), or Freud with the thesis of a feeling of "collective guilt" (FREUD, S. *O mal-estar na civilização*, Rio de Janeiro: Imago, 1997) and Nietzsche who identifies the origin of Christian morality in the "bad conscience" (NIETZSCHE, F. *Genealogia da Moral: uma Polêmica*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1998).

⁷ For a critique of the excess of historical memory see: NIETZSCHE, F. *Da utilidade e desvantagem da história para a vida*, in: *Considerações Extemporâneas II*, São Paulo: Victor Civita: 1983 (Os Pensadores).

4. Memory, Justice and Oblivion.

For this reason, memory is a terrain of struggle, of conflicting interpretations and is continually subject to change: a terrain of ideological and political struggle that is fundamental to the construction of collective identities.

But if there are no facts, only interpretations, how can we find a "politics of just memory" as Ricoeur says⁸? What criteria should we use to know what to remember and what to forget? What to select and what to leave in oblivion? How do we interpret what is "worth" remembering? Why remember? Why not let oblivion prevail? Is it only out of a historical masochism of wanting to "suffer twice", to perpetuate suffering, to pass on feelings of guilt to present and future generations?

A first answer lies in the educational role of collective memory. Given that memory has to do with justice and reparation, and that the only possible reparation is for the living and not the dead, by doing justice to those who died unjustly, we are working to prevent the repetition of the barbarism, war, torture and massacres of the past in the present. Only this operation of recovering memory creates the conditions for projecting into the future not the "end of history", as Fukuyama said, but the "end of human prehistory", as Marx said, and the beginning of a history that is truly human. A utopia, or a regulating ideal, as Kant would say, which will never be achieved, but which remains as a horizon that gives meaning and direction to the march to be undertaken. Given that every "repressed thing", if repressed, comes back: the repressed thing in the collective subconscious can also come back and repeat the atrocities of the past just as violently, if not more so.⁹ Memory thus has an educational and collective therapeutic function.

To say that "everything is interpretation" does not mean that all interpretations are the same and are valid in the same way; facts have existed and continue to exist as objects of interpretation. Just as hypocrisy is the homage that vice pays to virtue, denialism is the implicit recognition of the intolerability of what is denied, and therefore indirectly an admission of guilt. This is why the Turks stubbornly refuse to recognise the genocide of the Armenians, the anti-Semites deny the "holocaust" of the Jews, the communists for many years, even after Krusciov's denunciations in 1954, refused to recognise the crimes of Stalinism, the Latin American military emphatically deny the existence of torture and extermination groups and thousands of disappeared people. The facts are so "intolerable" that they cannot be admitted without serious damage to their collective identity. In *Baptism of Blood*, the judge of the tribunal that tried the Dominican friars said that torture "is something so terrible, so abominable that it's not good to even talk about it"; the facts are so far removed from the official ideology and self-image that they must be denied, and in fact end up being repressed.

This means rescuing the work of the historian. Although it will never be possible to get to the "facts as they actually happened", although there will always be a margin and an inevitable degree of arbitrariness, history (as a discipline) needs to do its job, to carefully survey and select events through direct and indirect sources, with the aim of obtaining the broadest possible documentation on which to base its own interpretation. And that this work be passed on for the knowledge and education of future generations.

This careful work by the historian will not, however, put an end to the debate: there will always be a history and a "counter-history"¹⁰ that dispute interpretation. Just as there is no "common good" that hovers above individual and collective interests, there is no "shared common memory" that hovers above contrasting interpretations.

⁸ RICOEUR, Paul. *Memória, História, Esquecimento*. Campinas: ed. UNICAMP, 2008, p. 17.

⁹ See ADORNO, T.- HORKHEIMER, M. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar, 1985.

¹⁰ LOSURDO, D. *Contra história do liberalismo*. Aparecida, SP: Idéias & Letras, 2006.

We have, therefore, different "traditions" and "schools": conservative and progressive, Catholic or Protestant, liberal or socialist, anarchic or authoritarian, an official history (which is usually that of the victors) and an unofficial history (which is usually that of the victims), which challenges the dominant view.



Image of the repression of the Araguaia guerrillas

This pluralism of interpretations is not only inevitable, but indispensable for any democratic state governed by the rule of law, which finds its *raison d'être* in the ability to manage conflicts to reach a minimum consensus that allows social coexistence without resorting to violence. However, there must be a limit to the pluralism of interpretations, which in the end is very close to the limit of tolerance: what can and cannot be said and what can and cannot be tolerated?¹¹ These limits are given by the social pact that underpins the rule of law and which finds its legitimacy in what Ricoeur defines as "conflictual consensus": consensus because it is based on recognising and respecting the freedom of others to express their opinions and differences; conflictual because this consensus is always precarious, the result of a fragile and temporary compromise between different readings, values and traditions. What is intolerable is precisely what lies "outside" this conflictual consensus:

What is intolerable is that it cannot be included in the pact of conflictual consensus on which the balance - I'm not saying identity - of living-in-common rests. For everyone, for each community, for each national community, there is the intolerable. [...] What is the criterion of the intolerable? There can only be one: it's what doesn't deserve respect, if respect is the virtue of tolerance on a cultural level.¹²

And here we find the limits of "popular sovereignty": it is the original source of modern political power (since we no longer believe in God or nature), but once the state is constituted by the social pact, not everything is subject to the "will of the majority": the Constitution provides, for example, for respect for minorities and the clauses that prevent "democratic tyranny" and the drift towards totalitarianism and its extermination camps that took place with the indifference, complicity or consensus of the majority of people.¹³

Democratic coexistence under the rule of law therefore presupposes a fundamental "consensus", but also a "dis-sense" that interdict, prohibit, anathemise, or a curse that puts a barrier, a limit to what "man can do to another man", as Levi said.

¹¹ RICOEUR, P. Tolerância, intolerância, intolerável (1990), in: IDEM: *Leituras 1. Em torno ao político*, São Paulo: Edições Loyola, p. 174-190.

¹² Ibid. P. 185

¹³ See: BOBBIO, Norberto. *Eguaglianza e Libertà*. Torino: Einaudi, 1995.

Every social pact is, at the same time, a pact of inclusion and exclusion.



This is where the role of a democratic state governed by the rule of law comes into play in the face of the atrocities committed in the past, for example in relation to the Brazilian military dictatorship, as stated in the Third National Human Rights Programme (BRAZIL: PNDH3):

Investigating the past is fundamental to building citizenship.

Studying the past, recovering its truth and bringing its events to light characterise the transmission of historical experience, which is essential for the constitution of individual and collective memory.

History that is not passed down from generation to generation becomes forgotten and silenced.

The silence and oblivion of the barbarities create serious gaps in the collective experience of building a national identity.

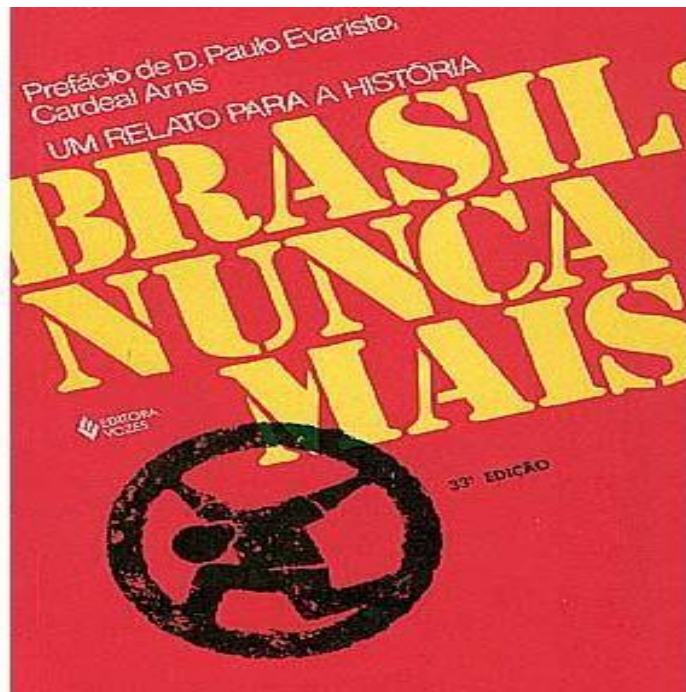
By recovering memory and truth, the country becomes more aware of its own identity and democracy is strengthened.

Totalitarian temptations are neutralised and there are growing possibilities for the definitive eradication of some remnants of that dark period, such as torture, for example, which persists in Brazilian daily life.

The work of reconstituting memory requires revisiting the past and sharing experiences of pain, violence and death. Only after remembering and mourning them will it be possible to overcome the historical trauma and move on. The experience of suffering and loss cannot be reduced to a private, subjective conflict, since it is part of a social context, not an individual one.

Understanding the past through the narrative of historical heritage and the official recognition of events enables citizens to build the values that will guide their actions in the present.

Only by officially acknowledging the state's responsibility for the atrocities committed during the dictatorship, by recovering the historical memory of that period and by providing justice and reparations to the victims, will Brazil finally be able to complete the process of transition and democratisation of institutions and society that began with the end of the dictatorship.



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