

Historical memory between use and abuse

Abstract of the speech by Marcello Flores

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Memory is a subject that has been taught and widely debated in schools for many years. So I hope I can contribute something useful for teachers, because they sometimes have a clearer grasp of the complexity of the memory issue as it stands today, seen from a slightly different angle compared to 15, 20 or 30 years ago. Why, how and what to remember is something that is also closely linked to the question of how to study history. To simplify, I believe that in the last 15/20 years memory has increasingly become central to the study of history, and has led certain scholars, particularly Todorov, to talk about the use and abuse of memory. The three terms that occur most frequently in connection with memory have been: truth, in terms of the relationship between memory and historical truth; justice, because memory frequently re-emerges when legal proceedings are under way; reconciliation, because reconciliation is linked to memory and memory helps to reconcile people and thus avoid conflict.

The relationship between memory and truth, justice and reconciliation has been elaborated according to two models that have often intertwined and in part still coexist, both of a state/judicial nature. The first is the Nuremberg model, which strongly influenced the way the tragedy of World War II and of the Holocaust was remembered in the ensuing decades. Despite the very selective and limited type of justice applied – which left numerous contradictions still open – the Nuremberg model had two merits: the first was to get the idea of Nazism as the culmination of evil within ultra civilized Europe generally accepted; the second was to lay the foundations for an international court of justice that had not been feasible after World War I, basically by appropriating a small degree of sovereignty from individual states. In the face of war crimes or crimes against humanity, there has to be a supranational institution with a mandate to decide and to take on a task that individual states are required to relinquish as a cession of part of their sovereignty.

The other model is that of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission – which came many years later – set up within a single country and thus with completely different needs and procedures compared to those of Nuremberg. It was precisely to overcome the limits of that paradigm in terms of memory, reconciliation and collective peacemaking, that the Commission tried to identify another type of process, the main objective of which was reconciliation. And to achieve reconciliation they aimed above all at the broadest possible revelation of the truth.

If we consider the case of Italy, we are all well aware that there are still numerous episodes involving our country – for example events that happened during World War II – that remain obscure. As new documents gradually came to light between the 1960s and 1990s, some such episodes were indeed revealed. But our ignorance of these facts, the lack of public truth about them is without doubt a weight on our collective conscience and one of our very worst legacies. The South African experience says: let us strive for historical truth so that we can follow the road to reconciliation and avoid conflicting memories, even at the cost of not pursuing criminals whose guilt is manifest, as long as this allows us to reveal the truth about all crimes.

Clearly, memories are always different and will always be divided because even collective memories are anyway subjective events. However different memory is from history – which tries to reconstruct the facts as objectively as possible – it is also true that the way in which

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Commento: I think he means 'process' here and not 'trial' – vero?

these memories are then compared may radicalize the contrasts or may, on the other hand, foster a new sensitivity with respect to the past, taking the other person's memories into account as well. Palestine is a prime example of how hard it is to find memories that can communicate with each other. It has to be said, however, that precisely on this terrain, significant efforts are being made by certain teachers who are trying to compare different memories.

The switch from the Nuremberg to the South African model became possible in the mid Seventies, when the voices of the victims could actually be heard. In the Nuremberg trials the victims had no voice; to avoid possible accusations of bias towards the Third Reich, the court chose to look for evidence mainly among the Nazis' official documents, rather than to listen to the victims' first-hand accounts. In other words, subjectivity was considered dangerous and preferably to be put on one side precisely to ensure as objective a view as possible of Nazism's crimes and responsibilities. Starting from the Seventies, however, much greater focus was placed on subjectivity, on the victims' own memories. In fact, one of the cornerstones of the South African Commission is listening to the testimony of the victims, to those who can testify not only to what had actually happened but also to how they themselves had experienced those events.

Today, the subjectivity approach is widespread and widely accepted. We can also say that everything we know about the Righteous is a result of this emergence of subjective memory, not only of the victims but also of those who played a particular role within the victim/persecutor relationship.

There is, however, also the possibility that the use of memory may involve certain risks. First because the subjective voice, especially that of the victims, is a voice charged with emotion; if, on the one hand, emotivity is key to understanding an event, on the other, it could also cloud collective understanding of that same event. In an educational environment emotivity plays a part, especially in identifying positive moral values, but to reconstruct the complexity of the past, a more rational approach is required if we are to understand all the mechanisms in place, and we cannot expect many victims to take a rational view. They cannot help us, for example, to understand what it was that persuaded the vast majority of Germans to submit enthusiastically to Hitler's will and continue to support him until the war was almost over. Attempts to explain this enigma have to be made not only in historical, sociological and anthropological, but even psychological and cultural terms and they must therefore be accompanied by the victims' point of view, which is the moral one, the point of view of the moral choices to be made. Of course, using memories also has to be considered in cases where justice has not been done and reconciliation has not been achieved, to understand what it means in those cases where reconciliation has failed, except at an institutional political level. This means, for example, that the continual re-emergence of memory can lead to it being exploited at an ideological and political level, even in good faith, but in a way that often blurs the complexity of the period. The more you talk about memory, the more memory seems to prevail over the possibility of a factual account or of verification.

Let me give you a simple example regarding Italy. In our country it took decades to remember and understand historically what the *foibe* [sinkholes] had been and it was therefore extremely useful, legitimate and proper to investigate and discuss the atrocities that had taken place in them. On this occasion, emotive memory prevailed over analysis, so that when people talk about the *foibe* in general, they only mention the tragedy that struck us, that struck Italy, while nobody has successfully revealed the overall context in which this tragedy was played out. So memory sometimes risks conflicting or overlapping with history. From this point of view, I believe that the question of the Righteous can also be a question of our ability to reconstruct

the context as well. If it is true that the experience of the Righteous is a very particular individual and in some way unrepeatable experience, it is nevertheless also true, that many Righteous people were part of the very workings of the regime that created the victims. It was in that same context that they suddenly decided to reach out to the victims and put a spanner in the wheels of the system that they were part of. This fact offers a chance for a better understanding of what went on from a historic and comprehensive point of view too.

The risk is that the excessive burden of memory tends to trivialize and re-appraise the complexity of history, which should show us how every tragic event has its own specificity, its own mechanism, its own procedures and that it is not only caused by the wickedness or cruelty of the human soul. Of course, this aspect, whether you call it spiritual or genetic, is in some way always present but it is extremely generic. We have to understand how the Holocaust was possible within a cultured and civilized country like Germany, why a genocide happened in Rwanda, while nothing similar occurred in other more economically and culturally backward situations. We therefore need to know which mechanisms and signals we should be looking out for in order to prevent possible future genocides.

Historical truth has two sides to it: facts and interpretations, the latter understood as a selection of facts. We need to know what happened and where, who committed that crime, how many victims there were, because you cannot be left with generic accounts, as often happens when the story is based on memories. Within historical truth there is also an element of interpretation, given first of all by the way the facts are selected, and to a lesser extent by ethical-political considerations on the individual figure. An ethical-political judgement means, for example, that Italian Fascism was not as bad as German Nazism. However, even if such a judgement may have some justification, this approach contributes nothing at all to our understanding of what effectively happened. From this point of view, selecting while also considering the victims' testimony is a fairly new approach. Of course, without letting this perspective exclude the others, this approach provides one of the few certainties compared to those who prefer to base truth exclusively on documents, because archive material on its own is not enough; to understand criminals, you need the memories of the criminals themselves.

In conclusion, I'd like to make another consideration about this latter period, which has been called the 'era of the witness'. Witnesses have, in fact, enabled us to bring memory, and also history, back to the attention of the collective conscience and also because, especially with reference to the Holocaust, once the last witnesses have passed on, memory will be entrusted to written accounts and documents and the voices of the leading players will fade and lose their impact, especially for young people and students. But this is also (and here I am moving onto rather delicate ground) an era of growing victimization, i.e. there is a tendency for people to emphasize and amplify their own role as victims in order to get their own situation recognized; in a world wracked by violence, massacres and human rights violations, those who shout loudest have more of a chance of being listened to. From this point of view, for example, the continual, repeated and, in my modest opinion, exaggerated use of the term "genocide" represents precisely this trend. The concept of genocide – first defined in a legal context – has become a synonym for "the worst evil". From a historical point of view, the question is complicated because historians' analyses sometimes differ from those of the jurists. On this point, I can understand perfectly, for example, why in Argentina people frequently talk of genocide regarding the "desaparecidos", the victims of the military dictatorship of the 1970s and early '80s. It is clear, however, that by applying the term "genocide", accounts of the violence sound much worse. Today, jurists are still debating whether or not there was a genocide in Darfur, but, quite apart from the legal differences, the fact remains that in the United States there was a huge controversy because, to mobilize

students – and large numbers were mobilized in support of Darfur – the word “genocide” had to be part of the rallying cry. We are affected by the emotive impact of such terms, but this should not prevent us from analyzing the complexities of a given historical context more closely.