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Europe as a place for common memories? Some thoughts on victimhood, identity and emancipation from the past.

Is there such a thing as a common European memory? Looking at some recent debates, one might question this. The preamble of the Constitutional Treaty was bitterly debated by secularists and confessionalists, sovereignists and federalists. Finally, they settled for a rather vague compromise, invoking both the 'cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe', which is also a source of 'universal values', 'bitter experiences' and 'former divisions'. The Constitutional Treaty project was also, ultimately, unsuccessful, having failed the test of popular approval by referendum in both France and the Netherlands.¹ One wonders whether the text would not have been more convincing without the preamble and the bickering it occasioned. A much more powerful and tangible symbol of European integration is of course the common currency, the euro. Again, after long and bitter debates regarding the shortlist of Great Europeans whose effigy might appear on the euro notes – Erasmus, Leonardo da Vinci, Jean Monnet or Lady Diana – the Central Bank's technical sub-committee finally settled for drawings of bridges, windows and doors; admittedly a consensual but rather abstract way of incarnating the European idea. The search for an 'Atta-Europe' simply had to be abandoned. A final example is the quest for a common 'Day of Europe' for a transnational holiday. Very few Europeans actually know that this day is actually 9th May, a date that is remarkable by its avoidance. It follows the 8th May, which signals the end of the Second World War in Europe, which apparently still does not give all European nations equal reasons to celebrate.

The unsuccessful quest for common symbols is not only a political problem, but is also indicative of a fundamental intellectual challenge; one that I would define as the schizophrenia of contemporary European historiography.² On the one hand, there are European histories of the 'common destiny'. More often than not these are teleological tales of the Founding Fathers, Common Ancestors and the articulation of a Grand Idea through History. They are overall intellectually unconvincing and unimaginative, as though European Integration was just another process of nation building and as if the only contribution of historians in this process was to figure as twentieth Century Michelets, inventing yet another noble pedigree for yet another political construct. On the other hand, there are national histories of bitter experiences and past divisions. These are far more intellectually convincing, imaginative and self-critical, but insofar as they are entirely conceived of in terms of national singularity,

1 Cf. for instance Magnette/Weyembergh 2008.

2 Cf. Lagrou 2007, pp. 69–80.

they are also, ultimately, unsatisfactory, since they fail to account for the astounding convergence of European history in the twentieth century. Is European history really no more than a cluster of 27, 35, or whatever number of *Sonderwege*, of special and diverging paths to a common terminus of European 'modernity'? If one wants to understand the Vichy Regime in France, should one look to the Dreyfus Affair and the Vendée massacres of the French Revolution for inspiration, or would Mgr. Tiso's Slovakia or Admiral Horthy's Hungary be more likely sources?

The axiom of national singularity is the most important obstacle to the emergence of a common space for debate and a common language on past experiences. Even though national 'uniqueness' might not be incompatible with bi-lateral reconciliation – e.g. between France and Germany and Poland and Ukraine – in the long-term it would seem to constitute an intellectual impasse. However, rather than dwell on the challenges facing the formulation of a genuinely European historiography, I would like to return to our starting point of European memories and try to show how current memory discourses also, and in quite a different way, contribute to an impasse.

If one had to identify one common commemorative initiative that has benefitted from a genuine commitment and investment by European governments at all levels, it would probably be the 'Holocaust Remembrance Day' celebrated each year on 27th January, the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. This state of affairs is in many ways strange and even debatable. It is not a celebration of Great Events and Great Men, but the commemoration of an atrocious crime. It is about atonement and mourning and about victims rather than heroes. The centrality of Auschwitz in contemporary commemorative policies raises a whole set of questions. At its heart lies a contradictory discourse that claims both uniqueness and universality and represents absolute evil while pretending to contribute to the prevention of day-to-day racism.³ It sometimes reeks of magical thinking, as though sending busloads of high school students to Auschwitz on a day-trip vaccinates them against racism and the extreme right, in the same way as a pilgrimage to the Basilica of Saint Anthony in Padova or the grotto of Bernadette in Lourdes heals the desperate and the incurable.⁴ It also seems to be a rather unthinking Eurocentric discourse that gives incomparable prominence to one historical crime at the expense of other historical and contemporary tragedies. White Europeans killing other white Europeans seems more shocking and horrendous than white Europeans killing non-Europeans, not to speak of the common stock of 'tribal massacres' that 'savages' inflict upon themselves.⁵ However, rather than insist on the exceptionality of the public attention directed on Auschwitz, I take 'Auschwitz' as being indicative of a much wider, pervasive discourse about history and commemoration. It seems that we are witnessing the emergence of a new minimal consensus, some smallest common denominator in different commemorative currencies, namely the victim and the discourse of victimhood.

Solidarity with victims, rather than perpetrators, is the most elementary of humanitarian reflexes. Where solidarity with victims inspires actions that help to stop the crimes or that contribute to the formulation of proposals, norms and frameworks

3 Cf. Chaumont 1997; Novick 1999.

4 Cf. Lagrou 2006a.

5 Cf. Mazower 2002.

of action that aim to prevent crimes, it constitutes one of the most dynamic ways of engaging with the present and building a better future. The language of victimhood in ongoing human rights violations, for example in the case of Kurdish militants, opponents of military dictatorship and internees of Europe's new facilities for the concentration and deportation of undesired immigrants, carries a powerful and urgent message for constructive political mobilisation. However, in the dominant public discourse in Europe today, victims of contemporary crimes and human rights violations occupy only a modest place on the political agenda. They seem increasingly marginalised by the claims for public attention for crimes belonging to a distant past – crimes for which no redress is possible and no political action prescribed to stop or prevent them. This discourse is exclusively retrospective and is increasingly ritualised to strengthen communal bonds and assert identity claims. A commemorative discourse of victimhood is very much the opposite of a constructive and dynamic engagement with the present, but rather a paralysing regression of democratic debate. To illustrate this point I formulate five propositions, which pretend to be no more than five invitations to debate.

- 1) The discourse of victimhood is a universal source of legitimacy, offering a new language with which to formulate collective claims. Activists for gay rights, descendants of former slaves, victims of colonisation and – one could add – of terrorism, paedophilia, environmental disaster and more – readily adopt this discourse as a sure route to full social and political recognition. It constitutes a coded language with clear models to emulate – ultimately Auschwitz and the Nazi genocide – and clear, formal aims to achieve reparation payments, special commemorative laws and, the highest stage of recognition, a law forbidding denial. The four French memory laws and the dynamic they unleash illustrate this convincingly.⁶ The holocaust denial law is the model to emulate for the three minor claimants, who benefit of lower status of legal recognition: Armenians, descendants of slaves, victims of colonialism, or, as in the Algerian case, European settlers' victims of expulsion or indigenous populations' victims of oppression and torture.
- 2) The notion of victimhood is non-partisan. It does not tolerate contradiction and operates a consensual and inclusive partitioning between a suffering humanity of victims on the one hand, and a minority of unredeemable perpetrators who have set themselves beyond the pale of humanity, on the other. As such, it is an a-political notion, since it pursues no other political goal than the celebration of a communion of victimhood that cannot be questioned. It is about cementing a sense of community, a sense of belonging and a sense of identity. Either this can take the form of a rather pointless ritualistic affirmation of collective moral self-sufficiency, such as in the mass demonstrations of solidarity with the victims of heinous paedophile crimes, as if there were a debate with protesters on the other side who favour these crimes. Either, more often, it is a reflex of communitarianisation, affirming particularisms. Since victimhood is a category of identity and not a political proposition, it does not generate overarching solidarities.

6 Cf. for instance Crivello-Bocca/Garcia/Offenstadt 2006; Andrieu/Lavabre/Tartakowski 2006.

As long as the agenda was one of political emancipation and civil rights, there could be an objective progressive alliance of various immigrant communities, descendants of slaves, feminist and gay activists fighting for an open and egalitarian society. When the agenda is reduced to communitarian recognition, claimants are in a situation of rivalry and even outright hostility. Recent history has thus shown bitter conflict and recriminations between Turkish and Armenian communities in many European countries, but also between feminist and gay activists on the one hand and Muslim communities on the other. When a discourse of victimisation leads to racist and sexist slurs, we clearly are no longer in a register of emancipation nor in a common project for an open society.

- 3) The discourse of victimhood is static, retrospective, passive and, in a paradoxical way, nostalgic. It precludes any future projection and evaluates the present in the terms of the past. It is based on the premises of repetition and generational transmission. An often repeated maxim is that the status of perpetrator is not transmitted, while the status of victims is handed down through second, third, fourth generations in a never-ending perpetuation of victimhood. Thus, implicitly, the notion of victimhood is inscribed in a cyclical vision of the past, since we are all condemned to re-experience the past. In a contradictory way, this is linked up with the categorical imperative of prevention. The “devoir de mémoire” or memory obligation departs from the presupposition that the future is, *a priori*, the return of the past, unless we mobilise.⁷ The future is thus entirely predestined in that it has no autonomy and is never radically new. It can only be interpreted in terms of what has been, in terms of similarity and not of difference.
- 4) The discourse of victimhood is essentialist and reifies immutable, hermetic categories. These legal categories are often destined for the courtroom rather than historical understanding or democratic debate. The most central of these is the notion of genocide. Genocide defines an event in terms of the intentions of its perpetrators and establishes an implicit hierarchy of crimes, of which it constitutes the absolute summit. Its legal application implies strict geographical and chronological boundaries. For the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda in Arusha, genocide is restricted to the crimes committed within the Rwandan borders between 1st January 1994 and 31st December of the same year. The Armenian genocide singles out a series of crimes committed in Eastern Anatolia in 1915, effectively isolating it from its context. Thus, effectively, the aggression of the Rwandan Popular Front before January 1994 and the pursuit of the war against the Hutu refugees in Congolese territory in the second half of 1994 and 1995 fall outside the definition of genocide, and thus outside the competence of the tribunal. Incidentally, this implies that crimes committed by Hutus are relevant, while those of which they have been victims are not.⁸ Restricting the debate to the events of 1915 tends to ignore the context of a World War raging in the same region, as well as the fundamental

7 Cf. for instance Lalieu 2001, pp. 83–94.

8 Cf. for contrasting views van den Herik 2005; Cruvelier 2006.

impact of Russian and British policies.⁹ While the gradual territorial retreat of the Ottoman Empire since the mid-nineteenth century, but dramatically accelerated with the Balkan wars, accompanied by the massive expulsion of millions of Muslim inhabitants of the Northern and Western regions of the Empire who constitute a new refugee population in Anatolia, are important contextual events that help us to understand the events of 1915 but which cannot be encompassed by the concept of genocide. Neither was 1915 the terminus of a process of brutal demographic transformation of Anatolia, as the dramatic events of 1920-1923, triggered by a Greek aggression, illustrate. History is not about the re-ification of events, but about processes, causation, integrating events in what came before and what followed. If using legal concepts to define crimes become the only valid language with which to discuss the past, we not only deny ourselves historical understanding but, moreover, make any reciprocal debate impossible by creating a huge and partially legitimate sense of injustice. While genocide as an exclusive category of legal process and public debate suits the present Rwandan government particularly well, it makes a broad debate of historical responsibilities, crimes and victimhood for a majority of Rwandan society – and thereby reconciliation – impossible. Reducing the international debate on the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire to the Armenian genocide equally generates a partly legitimate sense of injustice and frustration. This is potentially a debate that engages with some of the most urgent challenges of international politics today, both in the Middle East and South Eastern Europe (Sykes-Picot and Balfour, Sèvres and Lausanne, internationally endorsed ethnic cleansing, Islam and secularism, the creation of Iraq and Lebanon, Arab nationalism and Zionism, you name it) – a process in which historical responsibilities for catastrophic outcomes are largely shared by all the major players of the time and not only the issue of the Turkish State admitting or denying the legal definition of genocide to qualify one specific set of crimes. It somehow seems that crimes perpetrated by Muslims deserve more scrutiny than those of which they have been victims. The process of coming to terms with the past does necessarily start with the admission that the past has effectively happened, but that making sense of the past and drawing politically useful conclusions of this past is an open and multilateral process. It is not something that can be achieved with a knife of crucial international negotiations held to the throat, nor can it be outsourced to foreign tribunals, experts or commissions.

A plea for open categories of historical interpretation and for a broad attention to historical process, causation and aftermath is not necessarily a strategy of exculpation. To state that Germans were victims of mass expulsions after 1945 and that Jews were perpetrators of ethnic cleansing and terrorism after 1945 does not diminish the gravity of nor alter the historical responsibility for the crimes committed before 1945 by German perpetrators on Jewish victims. Such a statement can only constitute a moral scandal if one mistakes victimhood for identity, or if one genuinely thinks

9 Cf. Bloxham 2005.

that a human being, when struck on the right cheek should effectively and in all circumstances offer her or his left cheek rather than hit back. It seems rather reassuring for human nature that, apart for some pathological cases requiring psychiatric treatment, there are no congenital victims. The fact that tables turn over the course of history is a source of hope, even if this implies a perpetuation and an export of violence, from Rwanda to the Kivu, from Kielce to Haifa and from Bulgaria and the Caucasus to Eastern Anatolia. Reifying categories and events prevents us from seeing the processes at work as well as causation and situation. History can only be a useful discipline for the understanding of human society if we analyse historical process in terms of identification, rather than identity.

- 5) Finally, the discourse of victimhood is always also a discourse framed in a register of the sacred. There can be no room for critical dialectic in a language that opposes absolute innocence to absolute evil. Criticism is then automatically assimilated to sacrilege and profanation. In this language, denial – even when and where it is used to stigmatise legitimate forms of revisionism and not just a radicalised form of hate speech – is no less than a reiteration of the original crime through the insult inflicted on the victims and their descendents. In such a logic of radical delegitimation there can be no room for disagreement, and thus no room for debate, rapprochement or reconciliation. Sites of memory are sites of the sacred, sacralised and desacralised. High school students throwing snowballs on the Auschwitz grounds were excluded from their French *collège* in December 2004. Had they done the same thing on grounds sacralised by any official religion, they could at least have invoked the constitutional principles of the *laïcité* in their defence. The ‘Holocaust conference’ uniting Holocaust deniers of all breeds, from Robert Faurisson over David Duke’s Ku Klux Klan to anti-Zionist rabbis organised by Iranian president Ahmedinejad in Teheran in December 2006 proceeded on the same logic. The ‘conference’ and the cartoon competitions that accompanied it were a response to the controversy over the cartoons of the Prophet published by a Danish newspaper. European liberals, claiming that Western democracies honour an integral version of freedom of expression that is indifferent to religious interdiction and sacrality, were thus trapped by a manoeuvre designed to provoke the affirmation of interdictions of a different – or, ultimately, of a comparable – kind, cast in clearly defined legal categories, with assorted penal and prosecutorial dispositions.

The recent evolution of public debates in Europe seems to suggest that we are gradually moving from a monotheistic model of the uniqueness of the Holocaust and the universal respect it commands towards a new Holy Trinity of genocides, with Armenians and Tutsis invited into an alliance for the defence of genocide memory against denial.¹⁰ Any such selection can only be arbitrary and thus intellectually undefendable. It can also only elicit emulation, rivalry, frustration and resentment from all sorts of victim groups that feel unjustly excluded from such a Holy Alliance

10 Cf. Lagrou 2006b, pp. 15–17.

and have an ambition to join the summum of political recognition: reparation, official recognition of their ordeal as genocide and a law penalising denial.

If we believe in the virtues of an open society, we have to denounce any manifestation that makes a parody of history in a bland provocation and instrumentalising of past suffering, such as President Ahmedinejad's 'Holocaust Conference'. We similarly have to denounce art. 301 of the new Turkish Penal Code on the denigration of 'Turkishness', the Republic, the foundation and the institutions of the State as incompatible with the functioning of such an open society. It would, however, be utterly perverse to multiply the entries in a new catalogue of forbidden claims and contents, a new Index of sacrileges to an ever increasing inventory of untouchable truths and values of a self-proclaimed European secular religion.

To conclude, in many of the recent debates on history and memory in Europe, there is a pervasive, but false, opposition between remembering and forgetting, particularly when crimes and their victims are invoked. Rather than such a binary scheme, we are faced with a competition for public attention and political recognition, be it under the form of specific legislation, monuments, reparation payments, museums, textbooks or school curricula. We live in societies inhabited by a multitude of victims of various crimes and discriminations and of an infinite gradation of offended identities. We always commemorate and recognise some at the expense of others. Rather than having to choose between remembering or forgetting, we are faced with a complex geometry of rivalling aspirations and with a general process of outcrowding, whereby groups and memories can only end up front-stage by pushing, even inadvertently, other groups back-stage. Such a process is inherent in the political struggle for public recognition, which is a scarce commodity. As much as it is inevitable, awareness of the true nature of the political process is vital.

The phantom of forgetting is ultimately an unlikely threat in societies obsessed with the past, absorbed by nostalgia, that no longer dare to conceive the future and that have a dearth of projects and utopias. The discourse of victimhood fuels the discourse of identity, which is an autistic discourse, binary, static, exclusive and intolerant. It is moreover fundamentally a-historical and impervious to democratic debate. Let us be honest: is the European project today all about preserving the past and inventing identity, or is it an exciting and forward-looking project in a 21st century in need of new horizons, new utopias, a common language and a new and dynamic conception of history?

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