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Memory in Progress

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This article traces the evolution in the discourses and representations of victimhood, citing a range of examples from across Europe. Beginning with a macro approach to the question of memory groups, which examines the representation of the victim via collective memory, the article then goes on to discuss how these groups, which are related to historical violence, have presented themselves in the public realm from the 1950s to the present day. Particular attention is paid to the manner in which different memories work together within systems of representation, the function of analogy, metaphor and allegory as rhetorical devices and how one memory often serves as a 'screen' or a prism via which to approach another.

In the 1980s, there existed many conflictual relationships between memory groups; not only communitarian memories, but also groups belonging to associations related to events of extreme violence. The existence of such groups is by no means a recent phenomenon. However, the way in which they make their presence felt and gain visibility in civil society has also evolved greatly. I would suggest that this evolution began at the turn of the 1980s, with new discourses and representations of the victim.

What is now at stake has obviously evolved and the relationship with the State has changed. Alongside its authoritative and symbolic functions, the State has now become a partner and interlocutor and is accountable to civil society for acts committed previously. As a consequence of the aforementioned circumstances, political and economic stakeholders recognise not only the existence of multiple memories, but also the groups that are related to them, as well as the pain and suffering their members endured. Thus, little by little, the State in many European countries – sometimes in the form of its administration, important companies or Banks (as is the case for Switzerland) or the Catholic Church – acknowledge and assume responsibility for the past, producing a discourse of repentance that has become a real issue. This new view of events means that victims are seen in a new way as moral criteria enter into public recognition and the memory groups achieve important visibility.

Of course, such visibility must be understood in relation to the increased prominence of the issue of representation in our modern societies, where existence depends on representation in the public realm – via, of course, the media. As Levy and

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Sznaider state: 'Cultural representations enable social groups to develop historical self-awareness and thereby also determine their relationship to other groups. Representations of memory are particularly important in this context'.[1]

My hypothesis can be formulated as follows: use of the term 'memory groups' was not really relevant 40 or 50 years ago. At that time, political frames of reference and the values of action were dominant and determined both the meaning of the past and the visibility of the groups, which will be recognised later as 'memory groups'.

I will therefore approach the subject on two levels: first, a macro approach, which looks at some characteristics of the representation of the victim through collective memory; second, how groups, which are related to historical violence, present themselves in the public realm from the 1950s to the present day. Even if I may refer to questions of period, I think that an approach that relies on periodisation is a very inferential and narrow method. It is for this reason that I prefer to examine the situation in terms of a system and balance of representations. On a preliminary basis, I would like to present some theoretical tools drawn from Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity.

Some Theoretical Tools

What is a memory group? To approach this question briefly, we have to take into account that a memory gets its own history, leaders, heroes, and its own story with its narrative production, plot and producers (storyteller, speaker, spokesman, and so on). Paul Ricœur is most useful in elucidating the narrative dimension of memory groups.

He has conceptualised two sides of identity: what he calls identity as selfhood, more precisely the *ipseity*, and identity as sameness that he calls *idem*. For him, the identity of the 'who' is never more than a narrative identity. Ricœur specifies that this notion of narrative identity can be applied to the individual as well as to communities.[2] We will visit later the question of 'who?', which had already been addressed in Arendt's essay, *The Human condition*, in 1958. Ricœur says that we can consider that a community builds itself through the story it produces by itself for itself, and of course, for outsiders. A community works to distinguish itself from other groups, which implies creating oppositions between different levels, from individual to collective. This story belongs to its narrative identity, and it identifies itself by its story. This enables us to understand how memory groups both work together and fight. At this point, we should use the concept of *ethos*: the way in which one builds an image of the self by one's own speech.[3] In this sense, conflicts between memory groups must be understood as a dynamic between rival *ethos*, as they respond to a demand for differentiation. Differentiation is not, however, an aim for them, as is argued in many academic interpretations. In many instances, we can say that these antagonisms come more from individuals than groups – that is to say from certain members and, more precisely, strong personalities, more than from the groups as an entity – and they can be interpreted in the logic of the intellectual field as analysed by Pierre Bourdieu.[4]

The kind of groups about which we are speaking founded themselves upon the story of a collective experience that its founding members had shared, and in general suffered.

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At this point, we reach an important issue: if the 'narrative identity' of a group is based on the story (or stories) of the injuries its members endured, we must ask what kind of victims are we speaking about? Heroic martyrs? Disarmed soldiers such as those whom Henry Dunant saw on the Solferino Battlefield in 1859? Civilians who are victims of the brutality of invaders during the occupation of their territory? Or a group of fellows persecuted because they belong to a specific identity?

We will see clearly that narrative identity may depend on such situations and on the meaning that people give to the label of 'victim'. How do victims fit into the collective representation of violence? How are they convoked?

The Case of the Algerian War

The example of Left-wing French intellectuals during the Algerian war can help us; the country was then at the peak of decolonisation. French intellectuals use several references from the Second World War to express more emphatically their opposition to the French Army, rather than against the war taking place at the time, in which belligerents were perpetrating atrocities on civilians.

In his book, *The Question*, Henri Alleg tells of how he endured torture by French soldiers, drawing a parallel with Nazi practices and mentioning the presence of an SS man among French officers.[5] Prior to the Eichmann trial, the importance of the witness was very significant in France, albeit in a different way than it is today. In his thesis on multidirectional memory, Michael Rothberg effectively highlights the way in which Edgar Morin and Jean Rouch combine an awareness of the Holocaust and a denunciation of the Algerian war in their film, *Chronique d'un été* (1961).[6] When Claude Lanzmann explained, in front of the tribunal in Paris in 1962, his commitment to the so-called 'Manifeste des 121' (Manifesto of the 121), which was an appeal to refuse to go into the Army, he explicitly evoked 'genocide'. In addition, we can note that in France, at the end of the 1950s, the staging of the *Anne Frank Diaries* was very successful, and many literary and cinematographic productions dealt not only with Nazism or concentration camps, but also the Holocaust. Jewish writers won awards, among them the prestigious Prix Goncourt to André Schwartz-Bart for *Last of the Just* in 1959 and to Anna Langfus in 1962 for *The Lost Shore*. In his recent book, *Le Mythe du grand silence* (*The Myth of the Great Silence*, 2012), François Azouvi highlights a period in which, within the context of the Algerian War, survivors who had experienced the Holocaust could be heard. Whilst the sound of their voices was undoubtedly real, its intensity and motivation depended on the social and cultural groups. There was a dialectic between an awareness of the Holocaust as crimes perpetrated on Jewish civilian people, and strong representations of Jewish fighters; this dialectic produced ambiguous and inconstant discourses; nevertheless, there was an evident consciousness of what had happened.

Dionys Mascolo was one of the members of the Saint Benoît group, alongside his wife Marguerite Duras, and Robert Antelme and Maurice Blanchot (the group that promoted the 'Manifeste des 121'); he told me that at this time they felt 'judaised'. The work of filmmaker Gillo Pontecorvo, another communist activist, provides further examples. Pontecorvo made *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) a few years after

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Kapo (1959), which tells the story of a young Jewish girl who became a capo in a Nazi camp after she saw her parents going to be murdered in a gas chamber. The above points to the fact that it was possible to talk about the Holocaust before the 1980s and we can state that the Algerian War was more instrumental in raising awareness of the Holocaust than the Eichmann trial. In this sense, in France, the famous 'Ère du témoin' (*The Era of the Witness*) by Annette Wieviorka (1998) is nothing more than a performative statement, which has become an easy cliché. The awareness of the Holocaust was not hidden at all – even if it is not expressed in the same terms as after the 1980s.

This era could be characterised by a great capacity to make analogies, which were a very dynamic factor in mobilising the minds and the will to engage oneself. We remember that *Night and Fog* by Alain Resnais and Jean Cayrol (1955), dedicated to the Nazi hell of the concentration camp, ends with a memorable call to vigilance concerning the Algerian War. Analogy is one of the main forces behind these relationships and political action, and it works with different sorts of reference: the hell of the Nazi concentration camp; resistance against the Nazis, the anti-fascist resistance; the Holocaust; or it can concern all the victims of Nazism. Moreover, the victims did not need to be part of the Second World War. That is the reason why Stanley Kubrick's *Path of Glory* was hardly criticised by the agents of the French State when it came out in 1957, amidst the Algerian War, because what he narrated was thematically too close to the issues raised by the dirty engagement of the French Army in Algeria.

This movement spread in the public realm as not only the voices of a Universalist view of Justice, but a Justice related to political visions of the world, and of violence. This opening up of the mind served to interpret and understand the violence at that time. However, at the same time, violence – here, the Algerian War – served to raise awareness regarding Nazi violence in general, and the Holocaust in particular.

These years were a time of political activism the likes of which we will perhaps never see again; they were also characterised by a specific blindness because it was possible to use the reference of Nazi terror, whereas from the point of view of the Left open criticism of Stalinist terror was more complicated, censured and auto-censured. Nevertheless, it is not my intention here to dwell upon this question, which also wakes up the so-called 'demon of the analogy', but to turn my attention towards others: can we really assert that the relationship between the present and the past can always be identified as a memory relation? Can we say that this dynamic and this use of memory allow us to determine the group as a memory group?

Surely there are conflicts and sometimes a very strong antagonism that draw attention to the past, but there were more political conflicts between groups and enemy groups, and above all against the State, than real conflicts of memory. To suggest some responses to these questions, we have to go to the following point: namely the uses and representations of the victim and the issue of action.

From the Issue of Action to that of Victim Representation

Over the decades, those victims who had a place in the system of the representation of violence were mainly fighters; more specifically those who had fallen on the battlefield.

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When there were too many victims, it was necessary to invent a new symbolic representation that could carry a strong meaning, such as the French 'soldat inconnu' (or Unknown Soldier) during the First World War. The model victim, as a heroic figure of martyrdom, occupied the core pole of this system of representation, and fed the 'grand narratives', if we use Jean-François Lyotard's expression,[7] which were not only ideological, but first of all epical.

The victims sacrificed themselves for the 'common good' against those forces that wanted to destroy it. This kind of victim symbolically carried the capability of one future and provided future generations with models. Such a model is redeeming, whereas that of the passive victim is not consoling at all. There is a dichotomy between heroic and passive victims and people live upon heroic representations.

Non-combatant victims did not have any place in such a system, except initially via propaganda. In this case, they were usually used to activate opinion in favour of the War effort or demonstrate the cruelty of the enemy (the example of the legend of the 'cut hands' committed by German soldiers on the Belgian children during the First World War). Second, they had an ornamental presence, like in the Nathan Rapoport monument of the Warsaw uprising (1947): the façade expresses the realm of the huge fighting heroes and behind there is only a frieze that represents the unfortunate destiny of the Jewish people.

After the discovery of the Nazi camps, whatever the country – even in Israel – people did not want to hear about passive victims, the survivors were above all acknowledged if they were perceived to belong to a network of resistance and could share values from within its framework. Civil deportees and mainly Jewish or Gypsy people did not benefit from real recognition because there was no cognitive model to give them visibility. What is more, some discourses stigmatised Jewish people, comparing them to sheep, who had agreed to be driven to the slaughterhouse. The world did, however, know that millions of Jews had been gassed (the eastern sites for execution by firing squad were not very well known at this time).

Within the context of decolonisation, left-wing political activists avoided using the word 'victim'. Instead, they preferred terms such as 'world's villains', 'damned' or 'wretched of the earth', or 'exploited' and 'oppressed' by capitalism, colonialism and imperialism. Those victims belonged to teleological discourse; victims of Nazi camps belonged to none of them (except Robert Antelme, in his book *L'Espèce humaine* (*The Human Race*, 1947), which gathers deportees and proletarians into the same fate).

I do not want to present a history of the representation of the victims, but to emphasise that memory groups are now contemporary, with the increase in power of a new emotional kind of representation, which is based on images of the disarmed and passive victim. This has progressively taken the core position, in place of heroic and fighting representations.

As the French philosopher Jacques Rancière wrote in his book *La Mésentente*: 'The end of the great subjectivations of the damage is not the end of the era of the "Universal victim". On the contrary, it is his or her beginning'.[8] What he means is that damages and injuries are no longer invested with the subjectivity of political awareness.

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On the next page he asserts: 'Human rights do not experience anymore as political capabilities' (Ref. 8, p. 172). Rancière speaks about the change of the democratic scene into one that is humanitarian. However, he does not recognise the importance of the relationship to the past through memory in that same democratic scene, aside the humanitarian institutions and representations; rather, that the balance has changed. On the one hand, humanitarian and human rights devices take care of current victims, whilst on the other, memory groups and institutions (including academic ones) concern the victims of past violence.

The consequences of this change are very important, particularly where the narrative identity of groups related to historical violence is concerned. These have become memory groups. This change corresponds not only to the vanishing of the representation of heroes, but also to the upheaval of what this act signifies for narrative identity (and more widely in Western culture). We can say that all the meaning of the action and the balance of the different figures, which represent, signify or indicate the violence, seem radically changed. We are confronted with something akin to a mutation of values in the system of representations of violence. At this time, the 'centre of gravity' of those representations of violence were moving from action to vulnerability.

Hannah Arendt can help us to understand what this evolution means and implies. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt highlights that 'action and speech are so closely related because the primordial and specifically human act must at the same time contain the answer to the question asked of every newcomer: Who are you?'.[9] We clearly see the influence of Arendt on Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity. She further writes: 'Without the accompaniment of speech, at any rate, action would not only lose its revelatory character, but, and by the same token, it would lose its subject. […] Speechless action would no longer be action'.

The age of mass violence and genocide is characterised precisely by violence against disarmed people, who have become a target, in order to kill them or reduce them to slavery. Belonging to the paradigm of cruelty, mass violence destroys both the capabilities of action and speech. When this structural link is lost and, as Arendt affirms, 'without the disclosure of the agent in the act', then 'action loses its specific character […] This happens whenever human togetherness is lost' (Ref. 9, p. 180).

We can easily see how important the challenge – but also the paradox – is to constitute a group of which the narrative identity will not be fed by any action in history, a group that cannot produce any action models that can easily be transmitted, but only a narrative that is responsible for transmitting the history of millions of vulnerable and passive victims; a new actionless and speechless martyrdom. We could argue that this change be termed a *memory turn* (we use the word 'turn', albeit a cliché).

A Memory Turn?

Between the 1940s and 1980s, public use of the past was political and it could motivate action – real action – in society. Memory was not used as it is today. Moreover, it was not

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relevant at this time, whereas today it is everywhere. The past was then mainly used to serve the argumentation in political projects. Maybe we can say that the political use of the past was, after the Second World War, the easiest way to deal with a sort of violence that had exceeded the limits of understanding and, of course, those of narrative form. Now, people readily get confused between memory and the past, because the former's retrospective gaze is influenced by the almighty power of a memory that is omnipresent. Until the 1980s, we could say that the struggles were political and that the groups did not pursue a moral aim; furthermore, they seemed not to want to build a memory, even if they wanted to fight against oblivion and to obtain reparation for the damages endured. Memory and Justice did not sit well together!

The Armenian group Asala (Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia) provides an interesting example. Asala acted with the aim of compelling the Turkish Government to publicly acknowledge its responsibility for the Armenian Genocide in 1915 and pay reparations; at that time – at the turn of the 1980s – the Armenian community did not produce a formal memory discourse addressed to the public sphere. Their claim did not in fact belong to an argumentation based on memory, but one that was political and *did* allow counter-violence against the criminals.

Counter-violence in the public sphere in this case served to claim justice – one of the strongest references was to the theory of Frantz Fanon. Violence was one of the media used to draw attention to the injuries endured and, with its revolutionary extension, to reconquer lost freedom, rights and dignity. Concerning this question, Jean Améry makes the distinction between what in German is termed *Violenz* and *Gewalt* (violence and power). He states that for Fanon violence was both an existential and historical category. To this we could add that violence has never been a category of memory.

If we return to the Armenian issue, we can observe that the memory discourse of the Armenian community is contemporary with the halt in Asala violence. Moreover, the argumentation of the Armenian community concerning the genocide of Armenian people living in Turkish national space has been significantly influenced by the Jewish discourse about the Holocaust, which has been constituted as a memory model.

Indeed, with what Rancière has called the beginning of the 'Universal victim', and with what we can observe concerning the care of victims both by humanitarian and memory institutions, at the turn of the 1980s, the awareness of the Holocaust acquires a central place in the staging of the new visibility of the victim: the passive, vulnerable and disarmed victim.

On the one hand, awareness of the Holocaust took advantage of this change, but, on the other, recognition of the specificity of the Holocaust was one of the main forces of this change, which rose during the 1980s. Rather than the beginning of the 'Universal victim', as Rancière argues, we could say that it is the beginning of a dialectic between universality and singularity where the issue of the victim is concerned (we have to think about what is located in this 'between' rather than looking at these two terms as separate entities). Now, most people would go directly to the other

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side of the Rapoport monument, behind the fighters; now people can behold what James Young calls 'counter-monuments'.

In this way, the Holocaust progressively constitutes a referential point, which gives visibility to others crimes, damages and injuries, without inscribing them in a political project, and with the capability to find and found a narrative identity without heroic models. Andreas Huyssen gives us an interesting interpretation of what he calls the Holocaust paradox in the case of Argentina: 'the Holocaust was projected onto the debates about the military dictatorship, after the dictatorship ended, and, interestingly, the first compilation of documents about the state terror in Argentina was called 'Nunca Mas'. […] Argentina had not had anything close to Holocaust, the persecution was not religious, it was not ethnic, it was political and it was an attempt to purify the country of people […] who are on the left […]'.[10]

We can give many other examples of this very open and creative way to link past and present to make them work together: for instance, use of the term genocide during the Biafra war in 1968; or the manner in which Indira Gandhi convoked the name of the Holocaust to justify her military intervention against the Pakistani Army in 1971. The mobilisation of the homosexual movement is another example of this situation when the Act Up activists invoked the AIDS epidemic via the Holocaust.

How does the Relationship between Past and Present Work?

These examples invite us to question the different ways – or logics – used by memory groups to express their link to the past and justify their existence. The following three ways can be foregrounded: first, analogy and similitude; second, the notion of screen memory; third, the issue of the optical device.

Marcel Proust has shown how what he called '*similitudes actuelles*' are fruitful and open treasures of remembrance. But, of course, out of literature and the arts, the principle of analogy can produce the best as well as the worst when people use the word 'genocide' to emphasise their history. Anybody taking an interest in memory groups can note how analogy, similitude and comparison are amongst the main principles not only to relate past and present, but also to find models, which are not only used to interpret, read or elaborate a reality or an event, but also to put landmarks into the area where people live. For instance, in Rwanda, memorialisation of the Holocaust has become a pattern with which to institute the memorialisation of the Tutsi genocide.

Andreas Huyssen again gives an interpretation of how analogy works, drawing attention to the notion of screening. He talks about this notion, referring to the Freudian theory of screen memory. But for Huyssen, the German word '*Deckerinnerung*' means that it is a memory that is covered up, whereas the English term 'screen memory' (or 'mémoire écran' in French) provides an additional dimension to the Freudian term, because it can mean not only that something is covered up, but also something onto which an image can be projected. For instance, the Holocaust memory in certain images of camps and victims was projected onto the Argentine situation. At the same time, he states: 'historically, the comparison between state terror in Argentina or in Chile and the

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Holocaust is historically wrong but it is metaphorically strong, not correct perhaps, but strong and emphatic and had a political function, it did political work of memory in those countries and hence the possibility of strong memory in the public sphere.'

It is perhaps a matter of allegory, because an allegory is more complex, ambiguous and polysemic than a metaphor. Memory convokes images and it works with them like an optical device (very close to Walter Benjamin's notion of the 'dialectical image'). This device operates like a prism, which gives a certain vision of reality and helps to move within it (this is perhaps the reason why memory is so important in an age in which the frontiers and landmarks are so confused). One memory cannot work without another. Or when it works alone, it is embedded in irredentist policy. Therefore, we could say that 'memories' work together in many different ways. Moreover, one memory is used by a group as an optical device to give intelligibility to a present event or to act on the present. In other words, a memory in progress needs to refer to another in order to constitute itself – even if the relations between them are polemic.

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