On Memory and Horror

A Response to Tzvetan Todorov

G. M. Tamás

Unlike Mr. Todorov, I do not think that the past in the olden days served legitimacy more or better than it does now. Greek historians usually wrote about what we would call the present; medieval political theology grounded authority on Truth, not tradition—the thaumaturge kings of France did not reign simply by the virtue of their descent, although of course the myth of the true Rome and of the *translatio imperii* were of importance, even in public law.

History had always been the tool of those who lacked one.

History as we know it was a German product in a time when there was no German state, only a universalistic notional (in fact, largely imaginary) empire, and small principalities indifferent and impervious to nationhood. The grandiloquently fictitious "histories" in the Balkans or in Indonesia and Malaya are building ethnic grandeur backward into the past: local chieftains become enlightened emperors, village chronicles are given a metropolitan gloss; history is presumed to serve equal members of an equally fictitious global community. Self-serving historiography as an instrument of political legitimacy for weak cultures and ramshackle régimes is nothing new, but it is characteristically modern.

One can have an inferiority complex only regarding people or polities that have already registered on one's cultural horizon as essentially similar to one's own: ancient cultures were not exactly famous for this propensity. It is a consciousness of plurality that makes one compare oneself to one's fellow men hidden away in an alien culture. Paradoxically, it is the surmise of essential equality that gives rise to pride. *We* might be *better,* but we have to be better *at the same thing* if we wish to compare our respective achievement or nobility or whatever. If *they* are radically inferior to start with, it is not particularly meritorious for us to win.

Political communities, as a rule, do justify their existence to themselves. Even if they do not perform this task in comparative terms any longer—it ill becomes a modern state to affirm openly that it is in any way better than its neighbours, the one obvious exception being the United States (the modern polity par excellence is archaic in this and other respects)—they at least covertly define the political aspect of their

sheer physical existence, though doing so does not confer meaning on the legal and territorial separateness of any community from the rest of humankind.

The question of memory versus forgetting will seriously arise only when the philosophical basis of political authority is crumbling, when the political identity of the polity is reduced to a recital of historical elements of continuity. When the only thing we can say about what we are is a statement concerning what we have been, then the remembrance of times past does indeed become crucial.

Contemporary Germany and Russia, cursed with a terrible history to recall, could if they so wished formulate their political rationale in terms of a constitutional régime (liberty, democracy, popular-cum-representative government, the rule of law, and the rest of it), especially since in those countries the régime of political freedom is still a novelty and the outcome of large-scale conflict still vivid in everybody's memory. But to do so seems to be beyond them. East of the Rhine—and in quite a few other places as well: one remembers the motto on Québec licence plates: "*Je me souviens*"; it takes an East European to explain how threatening that sounds—*is* is not explained by *ought,* but by *has been.* It is a rather cruel irony that people so dependent on history have to see their own history as mangled, brutally torn apart by an unspeakable caesura. *Past* on the whole means Hitler and Stalin, and no one is quite willing to identify with *that.* As a result, the quest for historical legitimacy (an unwieldy conceptual tool, at the best of times) becomes nothing better than frantic denial. Rejecting Hitler and Stalin as the linchpin of national history forces political opinion to consider history as something that merely happens to people without their active participation and commitment, thus obliterating the slightest trace of moral responsibility.

An influential theory explaining totalitarianism—or explaining it away—analyses it as just another version of modernity. This might sound innocuous enough to naïve Western listeners who cannot hear the soft basso profondo underneath the descant: *modern,* east of the Rhine and north of the Alps, means *Western.* Vaguely and clumsily, the West gets blamed for what Aurel Kolnai once called, in an important, albeit now sadly forgotten book, "the war against the West." Marxism-Leninism as a "Western" doctrine (in terms of the history of ideas, utter nonsense), National Socialism as a mere response to Versailles (a Western contrivance to destroy Germany) and a response to an Asianised Western (in a word, alien) Bolshevism—these are moves in the blame game.

Hence the emphasis on suffering. Totalitarianism caught people unawares and made them commit, or submit to, heinous acts. It is said that "we" could not possibly help it; everybody's a victim. This kind of quest for historical legitimacy is the exact counterpart to Kantian Enlightenment: it proudly affirms humankind's nonage. The only grown-ups around are the British and the Americans, and pretty ugly grown-ups at that.

This is the context in which the problem of "memory" is laid out.

Provided always that it is possible to remember or to forget at will, one must ask oneself whether either of these is conducive to something morally "useful" or edifying.

The East European debate about "screening" of former communist officials and their possible exclusion from public life (on the whole unsuccessful or else totally mendacious, dependent on arbitrary definitions of the *nomenklatura*) have been conducted in this utilitarian vein. Will remembering or forgetting be better for consolidating democracy?—this has been the question. An unsatisfactory question, in my humble opinion.

The question, as I see it, is still a question of truth and relevance. Is totalitarian horror defining our contemporary political identity? If so, how?—and in *what* did totalitarian horror consist? The mere fact of the massacre of innocent civilians—although larger in scope and more due to deliberate and conscious design than ever before—simply will not do as a response.

Again, we shall have to deal here with a plethora of false answers. Those who do believe (with the great and the good of the German Left and a large number of Russian liberals) that the totalitarian experience is determining our political identity today think that all manner of coercion and all manner of conformity are consequences of ingrained totalitarian habits.

Since you cannot eradicate coercion and conformity from the edifice of modern democracy (coercion and conformity are hardy perennials of every ordered society of even minimal complexity), political identity as defined outside politics and democratic behaviour appears to be nothing but an all-out rebellion against structured politics. All political order, since it cannot eschew the issuing of commands and the authority to make them obeyed, seems stamped with the satanic seal of Hitler and Stalin. It is only voluntary contract and voluntary association that are recognized as untainted by the memory of totalitarian oppression. The upshot, of course, is a thoroughgoing trivialization of totalitarianism, when everything from a questionable decree restricting immigration to a chaotic ethnic war such as the ones in the former Yugoslavia and the Caucasus is routinely dubbed fascist. (I must regretfully say that Alain Finkielkraut seems to be wrong on all counts.) "Fascist" and "communist" are valuable terms of invective and, as such, advantageous to hurl at political opponents, but surely these terms will not serve as well as means of analysis in a world that, although quite horrible, is remote from anything totalitarian. Not every horror is totalitarian. The sufferings of the innocent, the persecution of the good, the confiscation of liberty are universal phenomena, and might even pertain to the human condition for all we know. Fascism and communism exhibit specific clusters of doctrines, practices, and routines that are quite different from their unsavoury predecessors and successors.

Since both fascism and communism—like all political movements—had to exploit the usual motivations of people (neither ideology could transform people into monsters, particularly not *before* the seizure of state power), fascism and communism had to, and they did, offer something attractive to the passions and desires of modern man. What Robespierre called "the promises of philosophy" had to be fulfilled. Both types of totalitarian régime offered the conflation of legal-political and moral communities,

where notions of moral duty cause political action and where political obligation and civic duty are not performed as consequences of coercion and authority but stem automatically, that is, "naturally," from the essence of the new community itself. And both fascism and communism offered the subordination of economy to the moral imperative of the new community, from which all internal divisions have been expelled. Observing justly that desires for such régimes survive, that many people yearn for such philosophical promises being made, it is easy to fear a renascence of totalitarianism in various trouble spots of the world. But there is not a hint of anyone—anyone in the know—willing to shoulder the burden of a military reorganization of present society. People may desire the ends, but certainly no one desires the well-known totalitarian means.

The decadence of liberal democracy was not arrested by the velvet revolutions of 1989. Therefore, it is rather silly to be surprised that the adversary culture is alive and kicking and that it is still opposed to liberal capitalism and representative democracy—as it was in the time of Baudelaire and Flaubert and has been ever since.

The premonitory, edifying, and cautionary tale of totalitarianism is of limited value. There is no proof, nor can there be, that the ideas that prepared totalitarianism (however distasteful most of them are to this author) necessarily must lead to the same consequences today. Moral and social rebellion against a commercial society is indeed inimical to public tranquillity, but it is not at all specific to fascism and communism. That revolt resulted in terrible dictatorships in the first half of the twentieth century—but it had resulted in progressive social reform in the second half of the nineteenth. Social causes are too vague to entail permanently identical effects everywhere; and social ideas are extraordinarily tricky causes of, and reasons for, action.

Remembering totalitarian horror offers lessons, however. It is true that those lessons are not original. Blind obedience to orders that openly defy our most elementary notions of common decency—for example, that merit should be rewarded and crime punished and *not* vice versa and that we can tell virtue and vice apart—is obviously wrong, even if supported by grandiloquent rhetoric. This is a praiseworthy piece of sturdy common sense and should not be despised; on the contrary, it should be a part of the education of our children. But as theory, it is rather thin.

Memory as the source of a distorted sense of political identity, the handing down of collective responsibility through generations and generations, means that the chance to define our polity politically, morally, and legally is lost. An acquiescence in forgetting the horrible past in the hope of starting anew would mean the usual rationalistic utopianism of creating a polity ex nihilo, this time compounded by a half-hidden *mauvaise foi,* even a tacit endorsement of horrors past and present. It is a sorry choice, if it is a choice at all.

It would be dishonest to argue that our present predicament has nothing to do with the totalitarian past. Buildings in which we live, expressions we use, habits we indulge

in, behaviour patterns we imitate or are obsessed by have been devised by totalitarian planners. Some of this we reject on moral grounds, some of it has become neutral or unimportant, some of it we are not aware of. It is a part of us, unfortunately, but this does not mean that we are impotent in the face of a powerful past that we should and, I am sure, will repudiate. Everything depends on whether we shall be able to find true or at least serviceable political principles that will tell us what is just and fair, and what is not. We know that systematic cruelty must be prevented, stigmatized, and eradicated, whatever the goal with which it is embellished—and this is an immense step forward. The construction of taboos is a worthwhile social activity. It is perfectly acceptable to use the past in fashioning taboos, if we know what we are doing.

This is of course nothing but the eternal struggle against original sin. Testosterone will make men fight, whatever we do. We can educate some to resist the temptations of violence (and the temptations of lying about violence).

Which is not to say that we ought to be indifferent to this worst century of all, when voluntary serfdom elicited passionate allegiance and liberty does not rate more than a shrug. I had the dubious distinction to watch a flamboyant totalitarian rally with thousands of flags and the usual tyrannical paraphernalia, shivering with fear and trying to choke back disgust for my fellow humans. It was not so long ago, fewer than twenty years, in a university town in Transylvania (Rumania), where belonging to the Hungarian minority in that intolerant, chauvinistic climate was no great fun. Still, I do not feel contempt for those people, who a few years later probably participated in a heroic democratic revolution (and are now disenchanted with it). But it was awful, yes.

I do not want to forget and am quite willing to offer my testimony for whoever is curious enough to listen. But our experience of horror has value only if it serves a moral purpose (as opposed to being merely edifying and useful). But it is exactly this moral purpose that is undermined by our fixation with memory. If we start our inquiry from the consequences—that is, cruelty and suffering—we can cross out almost any idea that might lead to the discovery of true political principles. Almost anything can result in injustice, even the teachings of Jesus and the Buddha. But today the taboo on cruelty extends to a taboo on philosophy. This I find intolerable. We are used to fearing strength. We should learn to be scared of weakness. The collapse of politics as such in places like Russia, Afghanistan, Cambodia, Rwanda, Liberia, Somalia does not provide for happiness in the absence of a state. It is not dictatorship that is the present danger, but chaos and anarchy. Might this mean, then, that the idea of liberty is wicked? It does not, as little as totalitarianism compromised the idea of the primacy of the moral community.

Alas, it is well-nigh impossible in the modern world to feel a real and deep solidarity with the dead. It might seem that a profound understanding of Judaism would be or could have been a propitiatory and consoling gesture toward those who perished in the

death camps. But were not most Jews who died there secular or agnostic? They were simply variegated people, as we moderns all are.

Understanding Judaism would not mean understanding *them.* The only thing we do understand about them is precisely their death, *ein deutscher Meister.* So we understand Hitler instead.