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Remembrance Work as a Precondition of a Reflective Modernity

In the transition to the twenty-first century, modernity became a subject of discussion – although not for the first time, if we think of Spengler's apocalyptic vision from the 1920s (*The Decline of the West*) or of Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* from 1947.[1] Very different though they may be in terms of argument, structure, and aims, what both works have in common is that they were written during war time and they belong to the immediate post-war literature. Also they try to reconstruct historically and systematically the world catastrophes produced by modernity itself and from the constructs thereby obtained to make prognoses for a future, it goes without saying, in which such catastrophes would be avoided. Hence, Adorno, despite all his objections to Spengler's involvement with National Socialism, sees in Spengler's cultural criticism a certain farsightedness insofar as "the course of world history itself proved in a way his direct prognoses, which would be astonishing if we were still to remember these prognoses."[2]

Although these thinkers are hardly known for an optimistic conception of society – quite the contrary: the future, insofar as they prescribe a "carry-on" scenario, is painted in very dark colors – their so-called cultural pessimism only makes sense in light of their view directed forward to a future society in which instrumental reason is limited by moral law. It is through this alone, to echo Kant, that the history of culture and civilization can be transformed into a human history under moral law (i.e., the categorical imperative). Such a transformation process must only be located in a self-reflecting modernity under moral principles. Or, in other words, by reflecting its history of cultural development, i.e., its instrumental knowledge, from the standpoint of morally practical reason (and nothing else, according to cultural criticism), an epoch constitutes itself at the same time as a historical process of moral and spiritual renewal and therefore as modernity in perpetuity.

This means that the critique of modern culture, or, in short, the critique of modernity, does not call for a radical withdrawal from a modernity influenced by

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[1] The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was published first time in a very small edition in the USA, 1944, second time in Amsterdam 1947. However, it did not become influential since its third edition in 1969, when German students had dug out the old philosophical fragments in the process of coming to terms with the past.

[2] Th. W. Adorno: Spengler After the Decline (lecture from 1938, published in English 1941 and in German 1950).

the technically practical sciences, but, rather, confronts that modernity with a humanitarian claim, a claim which modernity may have formulated during the Enlightenment, but which it has not yet realized. Given the potential for destruction possessed by the instruments that are now available, that for the first time in the history of humanity are able to extinguish it and push it back into unconscious nature, the re-formulation in the context of cultural criticism of the old Enlightened humanitarian claims aims primarily to place technically practical or instrumental reason in the service of morally practical reason, in order thereby to contest the notion that the instruments can have an independence beyond subjective responsibility. In other words, in the work of Spengler, as well as in that of Horkheimer and Adorno, Enlightenment and modernity were not discussed in their entirety; what was discussed, rather, were their one-sided forms of alienation supporting technological progress, social control and disproportionate widening of the profit margin.

Even if the chances of a self-cleansing process by modern civil societies were also assessed to be low, so that in the meantime it was considered, at least by the *Critical Theory* of the Frankfurt School, whether, with the abolition of capitalism (which Marx had demanded a hundred years previously), modern consciousness and with it society could also be brought back into balance again, modernity itself and as a whole was never called into question. For, in the course of a comprehensive secularization process that had claimed traditional feudal society as its victim, the modern constitutional state came into being and thereby also the guaranteed right of everyone, irrespective of position and class, and independent also of gender, age, religion, property and skin color, to partake in public life and to be judged in court under the same law. The neglect of this side of modernity, i.e., the neglect of those basic principles underlying the rationality of administrative procedures, such as the recognition of the other as a person, as a legal entity, and, in the wider philosophical sense, as an end in itself, had led precisely to the global catastrophes of the twentieth century. For this reason, the strengthening of the legal state and thereby the strengthening of morally practical reason after Verdun, Auschwitz and Hiroshima was not only a logical consequence, but also the only remaining way for reason to curb its immanent instrumentality.

The medium to curb the inhumanity was, according to the reasoning of *Critical Theory*, education, which, although misused as an instrument of dominance by bourgeois elites in the nineteenth century, was to enable anew the modern, constitutional consciousness under the protection of a public infrastructure. This consciousness would stand in opposition to a merely technically practical reason, which, left to its own devices, had led only to blind obedience and moral cowardice. Modernity had, in a sense, not run its full course. The Enlightenment

project was stuck halfway somewhere, and education, provided that it did not allow any of its claim to reason and humanitarianism to be "stripped away", promised to be the engine to pull the carriage out of the mud of anti-civilization again. If – and here lay and still lies the real problem of each and every possible emancipation process – if education beyond pseudo-education (what Adorno terms *Halbbildung*)[3] is still at all possible in a reality which stands completely under system-rational and technocratic principles.

But, despite all skepticism regarding the realization of the project of humanization, the struggle between instrumental and moral reason was fought within the framework of modernity. None of the positions, not even the conservatively national position of a Carl Schmitt, would have placed itself outside modernity or rejoiced in its demise. The struggle to determine the right path in science, politics and economics was a struggle to determine the direction of modernity, with modernity thereby evading its traditional and autopoietic mechanism of progress and henceforth having to enter into a self-reflective relationship. To reconstitute modernity as a humanization project could only be achieved from the perspective of a critical distance from it, i.e., modernity had to be viewed to a certain extent from the outside, so that it could be identified as such in the first place and so that the risk posed by its plenitude of power gained through the accumulation of knowledge and capital could be calculated.

Since Horkheimer's programmatic work *Traditional and Critical Theory* (1937), scientific self-reflection had been identified as *the* principle of modernity, and all knowledge and action that eluded this claim was simply not critical, not modern – at best, traditional; at worst, barbaric. The barbarity of systematic genocide symbolized by the term "Auschwitz" had certainly appropriated the instruments of technically practical reason, but had arrived through the use of these instruments not in modernity, but in a pre-modern, anti-scientific myth into which all science tended to sink unless it reflected itself. Just as the thinkers of Enlightenment had called for the self-reflection of scientific understanding, so the representatives of *Critical Theory* demanded in the process of dealing with war crimes and genocide that, in the final analysis, the sciences undertake a process of moral self-questioning, the precise reason being that the sciences had not prevented the

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[3] Adorno even wrote a theory of *Halbbildung* in 1959. As we know, there is no precise English translation of the term *Bildung* in the sense of educational und cultural self-formation and naturally no precise English term of its opposite. Maybe the term "conventional wisdom" which I have found in an essay on Hanna Arendt by Roger Berkowitz in the NYT from July 7, 2013 (*Misreading 'Eichmann in Jeruslem'*) covers the meaning best. What we need to know is that Adorno understands *Halbbildung* as the "deadly enemy" of *Bildung*, as the absolute endpoint of a failed academic biography, and not as an incomplete knowledge which is aware of its limits.

destruction of the democratic legal state and the basic moral consensus underlying it, but had actually made that destruction possible. Considered this way, the failure of the sciences seemed also to be a failure of modernity itself, since it had been influenced above all else by the unstoppable progress of the technological sciences, which had been entrusted with solving all the problems of a rapidly growing world population – be these problems of an economic, social or political nature.

Located within this discourse on the end or on the new beginning of modernity is also the term "remembrance culture", a term which was used to an excessive extent during the transition to the twenty-first century. On the one hand, fifty years after the war, as witnesses gradually became ever scarcer, such a large distance had appeared from the generation responsible, from which hardly anyone was still alive, that people could "remember" without having to denounce personally their own father, professor or mayor. On the other hand, though, against the background of the revival of national-socialist ideologies, which were even lurking behind the slogan of the reuniting Germany (*We are the people*), it became imperative once again, and this time from hearsay, to shed light on the atrocities committed and on "the mechanisms" that had led to these atrocities. Thus came into being memorials and museums, but with them also a "remembrance tourism", one which provided striking evidence of Adorno's analysis of the inevitable *Halbbildung* in the civil class society which itself is only half-modernized. In the wake of a semi-documentary film about the last days of the *Führer* in his bunker, there even ensued a discussion 60 years after the end of the war concerning the *human being* Adolf Hitler, while to be politically "on the right" suddenly appeared to be *one* of many youth cultures through which plural – that is, modern – societies necessarily characterize themselves. The phenomenon of social diversity, behind which is really nothing more than the traditional fragmentation of bourgeois class society into so-called "parallel societies", and which is actually simply an expression of social inequality, has thereby become the index of modern, cosmopolitan societies that no longer have to ask the social question. Viewed critically, what underlies the entire social plurality is not, as Popper suggested,[4] a new democratic cosmopolitanism, but, rather, an indifference towards everything that does not affect the individual personally.

It is therefore not just the anti-democratic forces that threaten an "open society" by using the same technologies as does the "open society" to achieve opposing aims. In addition, the "open society" itself is its own worst enemy as long as its own architecture is based on the principle of exclusion, since a competitive society necessarily produces both winners and losers. Strictly speaking, the national-

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[4] I am referring to the important work of Karl Popper *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, written during World War II, but first printed in London 1945.

socialist system on a social level was also a radical and ruthless exclusion system within which genocide was employed as an instrument of "social engineering". Hence, the National Socialists also understood themselves primarily as "social architects" who were equipped with the most modern tools from science and technology, and who also saw genocide as being "scientifically" justified as a social-technological measure carried out for the benefit of the *Volk* and its "hygiene", a measure that therefore no longer required any special legitimacy.[5] It is true of course that there were attempts made by the accused during the so-called war-crime trials to justify their murderous actions by claiming that they were simply acting in line with unconditional state policy – as we know, Eichmann defended himself with a reference to Kant's concept of duty.[6] Nonetheless, during the Nazi dictatorship itself, it did not occur to any of the perpetrators, and possibly neither to any of their innumerable followers, to ask the moral question. The system required the working out of technical problems, such as those concerning transportation and production, and those who solved these problems satisfactorily were rewarded accordingly and achieved social advancement. The system functioned more or less perfectly.

That is why no social system, simply because it works, protects society against a possible brutalization or against a moral regression, since, as Luhmann argues[7], the system may make the preliminary decision for the single individual as to what is rational or not, but it thereby means also that the individual is not a self-responsible agent with his or her own aims and purposes. If the functioning of the system is privileged over a competence to judge and behave in a subjectively responsible manner, then the individual is depersonalized and made into a small cog in the big machine.

As Kant already pointed out in the late eighteenth century, just to achieve a functioning human zoo would not have required such a long distance from the natural state to civil society, and, above all, and this is his main argument, it would not have required such an effort of reasoning, since the natural state could also have been achieved without having to embark on a transformational process of reason.

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[5] In this context see the work of Zygmunt Bauman *Modernity and the Holocaust* from 1989 which reflects sociologically on the philosophical results of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* without mentioning these philosophical fragments or their authors.

[6] Cf. H. Arendt: Eichmann in Jerusalem – A Report on the Banality of Evil, New York 1963. In my opinion Hannah Arendt decided for that subtitle in order to show that Eichmann's attempt to justify his crime with Kant (who had written about the radical evil as one side of human nature) was an intentional misunderstanding of Kant's categorical imperative.

[7] Niklas Luhmann who died 1998 is still the most famous system theorist in the field of sociology in Germany and has written on almost any subject – from law to art and religion – from the perspective of system rationality.

"If this individual was sent out into the world by his spirit to seek his fortune", as Hegel, following Kant, wrote in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, then this also means that "this individual" from now on, after he or she has emerged from nature and dictates to nature the laws as an "I-think" entity, is self-reliant and must first create with each step the world which he or she traverses as a wanderer, as a seeking spirit. Here, Hegel construes modernity as the coming into being of a self- and world-creating subject whose essential characteristic is his or her self-consciousness or self-reflection.

In the light of the translation made valid by Hegel of true education (Bildung) as self-reflective acculturation work, I prefer the concept of "remembrance work" to that of "remembrance culture". Education, understood as work on oneself, aims for something other than just simple adaptation and socialization. It aims for independent thinking, thinking that does not simply go along with things just because they seem to be opportune and to promise a quick return.

Education within the horizon of a self-engendering modernity has, since Hegel, been understood as an unlimitable process of understanding and at the same time as a process whereby the understanding subject engenders him- or herself. Education is, despite all its dependence on external influences and pedagogical demands, essentially a process of self- formation, and it is only in this regard that it can differentiate itself from randomly absorbed half-knowledge. Facts drummed into students' heads can never be anything other than an arbitrary sum of superficial knowledge and also generates a purely consumerist attitude towards learning which blocks each and every critical demand. Hence, remembrance work does not jump on the bandwagon of a remembrance culture polished smooth by the *zeitgeist*, but must, as Horkheimer and Adorno showed in their studies of the development of modern rationalism, go back much further than the nineteenth century and the historical beginnings of a pseudo-scientifically based anti-Semitism. Remembrance work begins, according to the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, with the reconstruction of the beginnings of modern thought, when science had emancipated itself from theological custody in the course of the Galilean-Cartesian revolution and had replaced divine providence with the paradigm of domination over nature.

Since then, modernity has renewed itself on countless occasions; or, in other words, the permanence of social upheaval since the Renaissance indicates its existence, since modernity – by definition – always positions itself against the traditional. Historical self-reflection therefore resides within modernity and within the individual's learning process, a process which will only corroborate its own claim as a self-reflective, "negative work", as a permanent rejection of the self-evident and of the "all-too-familiar". Only because departure from modernity would also

mean departure from a self-responsible learning and human development has "remembrance work" placed itself once again in the service of the Enlightenment project. To attempt modernity as a project once again makes sense not because there would then be reason to hope that it could get to grips with its greatest problems, such as world hunger, environmental destruction and war by dint of technological progress. Rather, the project of modernity, or of a self-reflective Enlightenment, makes sense because, in such times when there is a madness of unbridled possibilities, there is no alternative to it other than the genetically or manipulatively controlled human zoo,[8] which would not differ substantially from the ant colony. The departure from modernity would, if we take our thoughts to their logical conclusion, also lead to the resolution of that antagonism between private and public space from which the constitutional state, with its roots in the cosmopolitan city, obtains its necessary momentum and through which it differentiates itself from natural communities without private property and equality before the law.

For this reason, "remembrance work as a precondition of a reflexive modernity" means primarily work on the project of modernity and does not, for example, cast a final look at an already past epoch which, if Martin Albrow were right, only has a narrow gap left before the door finally slams shut for good.[9] But if it is true that the present reality of internationally active terrorist networks has given us a pre-taste of the reality of a post-modern age and of post-democratic societies, then the other option, which is to reflect on modernity once again and to bring it back into balance with itself (in the sense of a balance between technically-practical and morally-practical reason), would perhaps not be so unreasonable after all. This would not mean trying to reverse the process of globalization and pluralism, as if such a return to the supposedly secure nation state were a real option. Rather, it would mean placing the opportunities of global interaction generated by technological progress and economic networks under the control of a civil world society, a society at the heart of which is, to echo Kant, cosmopolitan discourse.

But this cosmopolitan discourse does not emerge in a climate of postmodern, almost wistful, remembrance culture, one that makes us commemorate the victims of Auschwitz today, the Germans who ere expelled from their homelands tomorrow, and the bombing of Dresden the day after that. Although everything

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[8] It is Peter Sloterdijk who described in view of a more or less uninterruptedly failing constitutional state the human zoo as a real option of modern and bio-technologically advanced societies to tame the "radical evil". Cf. Rules for the Human Zoo: a response to *the Letter on Humanism* (2001), in: Society and Space, Stanford Center of Biomedical Ethics 2009, volume 27.
[9] Cf. M. Albrow: The Global Age – State and Society Beyond Modernity, Stanford University Press 1997.

may be connected somehow, it is *not* all the same. After all, remembrance work also means remembering from different perspectives, being able to differentiate, and, not least, being able to distinguish between cause and effect.

This is the advantage that "those who were not there" have. The national guilt no longer rests on their individual shoulders, so that they can look from a beneficial historical distance on that society from whose centre the anti-civilizing, the bestial found its way. But the guilt, the crime, the horror ... all of it is still there – in the national memory and outside in the world. That is why we must deal with our history through remembering. We owe that to world knowledge and to the world community.