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Clio's Crimes. Historians, truth and the memory of the past

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The historian is a figure of many edges whose contours are often uncertain and whose goals are not always clear. In every society, the historian should be a mediator between the present and the past, between awareness of today and the complex heritage of yesterday. Although most historians tend to portray themselves as scientists, the circumstances and the very nature of the profession also lead them to be, above all, something else—educators and archivists, judges and writers, philosophers and politicians. This is all the more true of contemporary-age historians, since in the *present time* the tension with the recent past remains unsolved, more problematic and changing. It was largely in the modern age that 'invented' tradition, and it was in the 20th century that collective myths and beliefs first contributed everywhere to that *nationalization* of the masses that had found its main implementation tool in opposing ideologies. Of course, the process had begun in the 19th century, and its most obvious point of reference was the nation as a social and political entity. Subsequently, the 20th century added important new features: opposing ideologies (fascism and democracy, communism and liberalism) introduced a new tension into national identities but never countered them: rather, they tend to redefine them.

We will not add to the still-open debate on 'history as narration vs. history as discourse,' a debate that has brought historians, as well as others, to confront post-modernism. We shall limit ourselves to pointing out that the issue of *identity* is the ground upon which the current theoretical debate can be confirmed by the practice of historiographers. This is the same ground underlying all attempts to address the past in those societies that embraced (or re-embraced) democracy after a dictatorship, and in particular South Africa, with its unique experience—the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). In this case, the issue of identity is obviously more complex than in the European tradition of nation states, since the country's national and political identity was divided and conflict-ridden from its very inception, since it was anchored on the one hand to the social and political reality of colonialism, and on the other to issues raised by multi-ethnicity and racism.

In recent years, we have undoubtedly witnessed what has been called 'abuse of memory' or 'obsession with the past,' and in many circumstances the 'public use' of history has turned historians into consenting or reluctant participants in a debate that has gone beyond the discipline's traditional goals and at the same time challenged them. These circumstances have often been connected to issues of 'justice,' whether such justice was to be achieved in a courtroom or in demonstrations, press articles, TV documentaries, school texts. Such goals as 'doing justice' and 'giving memory its due' have often come to overlap, and the increased interest in judging human rights violations and crimes against humanity has brought to the contemporary fore the way that these same issues had been dealt with during the 20th century. In the same months, debate was underway in Europe on the ongoing Papon trial in France and Priebke trial in Italy; on the positions taken by Daniel Goldhagen in his book *Hitler's Willing Executioners. Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, and on the controversy created by the *Black Book of Communism*; on Pinochet's indictment by a Spanish judge and the possibility of his extradition from the UK; on the legitimacy and value of Roberto Benigni's film, *Life is Beautiful*; on Winnie Madikizela-Mandela's testimony before the TRC; on the possibility of bringing to trial Gen. Jaruzelski in Poland or Pol Pot in Cambodia; on the difficulty of concluding the work of international courts for former Yugoslavia and Rwanda.

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In all the examples that have been listed, and in dozens more that could be cited from all over the world, the issue of memory is intertwined with the issue of justice, identity, political initiative. And historians are invariably called upon to help and explain, to testify and to justify. Historians are often asked to legitimize a discourse which is not historical, but rather legal, political or ethical; invited to tell the truth, not about individual facts which in most cases have already been ascertained, but about a context that by its own nature eludes a faithful and exhaustive description.

The role of the historian is certainly not to build the collective identity of a nation, a people, a class, an ethnic or religious group, yet the work of historians is constantly used to this end. It can even be said that historians have made a direct and conscious contribution in the past—and partly continue to do so—to a goal which is evidently not part of their professional duties. In this process, historians are not innocent, nor can they consider their text as neutral scientific works and accuse the political leadership or the media of using them for their own goals or even manipulating them. Like all intellectuals in a mass society, the historian is a 'technician of practical knowledge' as much as the judge or the writer, the scientist or the journalist, and is compelled just like them to make a contribution to the creation of public discourse—an achievement in which the creation of an identity is crucial.

Eric Hobsbawm wrote that the historian is one of the foremost producers of the raw materials that can easily be turned into propaganda. The historian is never a detached observer, and is inevitably immersed in the opinions of the time. The temptation to serve a people, a cause, a government is always more than just a possibility, so that it is all the more important for historians "to defend the foundation of their discipline—the primacy of proof.. Bad history is never harmless. It is dangerous. The sentences written with an apparently harmless keyboard can be death sentences."

The building of an identity happens over time and is constantly renewed: continuity and innovation are part of it on an equal footing, although their role varies according to the various times and circumstances. It is a political and a cultural process alike, which predominantly moves from top to bottom, from the summits of power toward society. The latter, however, is far from passive, and often expresses its own tendencies, preferences and sensitivity through different attitudes that are more or less spontaneous. For the 'character' of a people can hardly be put aside or replaced by mere impositions or artificial creations. Nevertheless, the primary responsibility for the building of an identity lies with the political establishment as a whole. The famous comment by the Italian writer and liberal politician, Massimo D'Azeglio, after the unification of Italy—"Now that we have made Italy, we have to make the Italians"—was a concise and perhaps too lucid comment on the nature of any identity project. Although the identity of a people also includes some long-term features distilled from past events and firmly rooted in history—shared traditions and memories, common educational background, the collective profile of a people, etc.—its nature is mostly epochal and evolves with the 'stages' in the life of a nation and the regimes that rule it. Or at least this is how we understand it, although we know that there are other, more long-term ways of examining the identity of a people or of a nation. And yet, how else to explain the uniqueness of the Italian identity in these 50 years of a republican regime as compared to the identity of the Fascist era?; or the difference between the German identity in the Federal Republic as opposed to that of the GDR, or of united Germany under the Nazi regime?

We should never forget that after every historical watershed, identity tends to recreate itself, and in so doing it retains obvious elements of continuity, but at the same time tries to break with the recent past in the name of emerging and shared values, new symbols, new forms of coexistence. It is not by coincidence, for example, that only in recent years, in the midst of the deep crisis of the so-called 'First Republic' in Italy, some began to reject the date of April 25, 1945 as the birth date of the Italian republic and sparked a controversy among historians on the meaning of September 8, 1943, which according to some marked the 'death of the fatherland.' In post-war Italy, Liberation Day was a strong symbol of the country's new, post-Fascist identity; and this even when, in subsequent years, the Cold War caused a deep cleavage among the various political forces that had shaped the constitutional agreement that had given rise to the Republic. Although the date of April 25 had been surcharged with rhetorical meaning over time, the symbolic role it played in the new collective identity has never ceased. On the contrary, this identity held together, and even renewed itself, after the events of 1968, when some tried to remove the rhetoric and the national identity altogether, both from a political and from a cultural point of view.

But let us return to our main topic and ask what role the historian should play in the process of building a national identity: what are the tasks, which ones should be accepted or rejected in order to stay true to professional ethics while preventing a retreat to the ivory tower of neutral scientific research, that has been proven impossible?

A first consideration concerns the time frame of the historian's participation. Obviously, this cannot coincide with that of politics or justice, nor with that of media coverage or popularization. This holds true even though the increasingly frequent 'public use of history' causes an increased participation by historians in a debate that is at the same time about politics and identity. In Italy, no work of historiography has ever dealt as exhaustively with the complex issue of the *Resistenza*—the fight to free the country of the Nazi-Fascists—as Claudio Pavone's *Una guerra civile* [A Civil War] of 1991. In Germany, it was only in the last 20 years that historians were finally able to offer new and comprehensive analyses of Nazism and at the same time concretely influence the way of thinking about their fellow citizens—as demonstrated by the role played by the *Historikerstreit*, the recent controversy among German historians, in giving impulse to a critical rethinking of the Nazi period. In France, only in the last 15 years have the events of the Vichy regime slowly worked their way into the collective consciousness and finally found a permanent, if ambiguous, place. In Israel, the controversy raised by several recent works on the history of the War of Independence and on the Holocaust as well, which questioned a number of accepted stereotypes, appears to be closely connected with a more global rethinking of national identity.

For a long time, in the early post-war period, historians (at least in Italy and in France) were an integral part of an identity project that had already been initiated on a political and ideological level—a project combining the support of the newly restored democracy and the ideology or party (Communist, catholic, socialist, liberal) of reference; a project seeking to strengthen each party's or faction's identity within a set of values that were generally, if not universally, shared (democracy and anti-Fascism.) It was only in the Eighties, and in a more conscious and consistent way after 1989, that some historians assumed the memory of the war and liberation fight in its globality—and not only from the point of view of the winners—as the reference point for a more general and sober analysis that was able to address the complexity of the issues on the table, and not simply to steer the public towards a predetermined interpretation. Such was the goal of Claudio Pavone in his above-mentioned book, as well as many more

studies--on the massacres by the German forces, on the so-called Repubblica Sociale in Italy, on post-war violence—whose approach was no longer to adopt an interpretation keyed to a certain identity, but instead to research on the complexity of the different 'truths' present in an historical event that bore great significance for the national consciousness

If the collective memory—of a nation, a community, a party, an ethnic or religious group—is a reconstruction of the past toward a vision of the present world, then the role of the historian who identifies himself or herself with that nation, community or party can only be an ancillary role of an expert serving a cause. This does not necessarily mean adjusting historical truth to the needs of ideology; but it certainly implies a strong impulse to determine certainties and interpretations that are both consistent with and useful to the shared identity. Luckily, there is not only one truth to history—there are many that often overlap or follow upon one another, deny or reinforce one another. This explains the fact that history aspires to the status of a scientific discipline but at the same time cannot fully adhere to one scientific status, since history is an *arbitrary* narration of events, an attempt to explain them and connect them to a discourse that is essentially *interpretive*.

For the contemporary historian, the well-known difficulty of arriving at an unquestionable and shared truth—not concerning single *facts*, but their sequence creating an *event*, and the explanations that one tries to provide of that event, which necessarily take on a narrative form—is compounded with the excess of memory that weighs upon his or her work and influences it. This weight is above all a quantitative one—a surplus of documentation that almost condemns the historian to the condition of the Imperial Cartographer described by Borges. The sheer amount of documentation makes it imperative to make a rigid selection, which more often than not penalizes the memories perceived as 'more distant,' and at the same time creates a tendency to 'monocausality,' that is, a tendency to identify a single cause of events and to provide a linear explanation according to a cause-effect relationship.

It is with the truth of power—which the very historian may help to build—that he or she must first come to terms. Who has the power to establish the truth? Gen. Patton's decision to force the German inhabitants of Dachau to enter the just-liberated camp and see with their own eyes the piles of corpses and the emaciated survivors was not a choice dictated only by a moral impulse or by political expediency: it was an antidote—however limited from a quantitative point of view—against any future denial. Truth was thus associated with a strong emotional tension, becoming in itself the builder of a new memory that would intertwine with the pre-existing one, in which the existence of the concentration camp was absent or repressed. But the truth of power is also the one that was imposed by Gen. MacArthur, who immediately after the war brought to trial before an all-American commission (the War Crimes Section of the U.S. Occupation Army headquarters for high command officers) two Japanese generals who had conducted the hostilities in the Philippines. Although they were considered among the most 'human' commanders of the Japanese army, the two were executed after a strongly symbolic sentence. That was an imposed truth, which could never be internalized by Japanese public opinion, in part because the 'justice' of the authors of Hiroshima e Nagasaki had few chances of being such, in part because it was not about truth (and if it had been, it would only have been accepted with great difficulty, as with the reality of the camps for the Germans who had supported the Nazi regime).

There are truths imposed by the 'powers that be' that retain the status of official truths although they are not shared by the subjects upon whom they are imposed (for instance, the

truths of the Stalinist trials or the photographs that were retouched and manipulated to expunge the enemies of the Stalinist regime); there are truths that, after being considered as such for a short or long time, are suddenly turned into lies by direct experience or by the release or discovery of documents (e.g., the Soviet army's responsibility in the massacre of Polish army officers whose bodies were found at Katyn, or the use of forbidden gases by Italian troops during the war in Ethiopia); there are truths that the passing of time seems to place in a new and less certain perspective.

But there are also official truths that acquire a character of certainty, of founding myth, of collective conviction, of widespread prejudice. A case in point is the Armenian genocide, whose existence the Turkish authorities and public opinion always refused to acknowledge, even as a simple mass killing; another is the commemoration made by the Serbs in recent years of the Blackbirds Field battle fought in 1389, with all the emphasis and the meaning currently attached to it.

Just as that of the judge, the profession of the historian is not unambiguous. Thus, it is meaningless to speak about historians and their profession in general. The historians of the Belgrade Academy of Sciences, for example, who have endorsed and facilitated the creation of a Serbian identity founded on ethnic nationalism and the denial of others' rights and identities, belong to a type of historian whom we would not have anything to do with. The same holds for the Turkish historians who justified the Armenians' deportation during the first world war in the name of the national security, and who attribute to the hardship of the war period the number of Armenian victims, which at any rate, they maintain, was "lower than that of Turkish victims" of the conflict on the Caucasus. Beyond the macroscopic cases of historians conniving with the dictatorial or totalitarian regimes ruling their own countries, there remains the problem of the role that the historian can and should play when history, as happens more and more frequently, is used for public, or even explicitly political, purposes. Such use is hardly ever inspired by historians; more often, historians merely interpret a climate, a tendency, a widespread sensitivity and try to give them reason, make them coherent or provide scientific explanations. Yet historians are often called to take a position, especially when the political manipulation of the truth is intertwined with legal actions.

Fighting 'Clio's crimes'—historians justifying unacceptable political or ethical behavior; truth being concealed or manipulated by those in power or by collective identities afraid to come to terms with reality; the allegiance to projects, ideologies or cultures that need historical legitimization to interpret the past to their own benefit; the identification with a 'partisan' memory and its promotion to the rank of historical truth—seems to be the feasible and necessary task of the historian, the cultural battle that historians would do well to wage even within their professional associations. Much as it is inevitable for them—like any other profession—to take on a social role, one of their main duties is to counter the social or the manipulative use of history, its conversion into a tool to legitimize what is illegitimate, and to propose a critical approach to the reconstruction of the past. One could even say that historians should be traitors or displaced persons. They cannot belong to any identity, since identity is inevitably founded upon expedient truths which should instead be exposed and called into question by critical scrutiny. Moreover, they cannot have any loyalty, since it is only by transgression, desertion, flight, it is only by searching for new and different perspectives that they can pursue the most dignified goal they can achieve: the search for truths, in the plural. Of course, this is all the more imperative when 'official histories' are more deeply rooted and widespread, in which case the historian should counter them by an approach that must at least

try to be *scientific*. More often, however, the issue is not of choosing between two different and contrasting loyalties, but to place them in a hierarchical order and to make sure that respect for history comes before loyalty to the fatherland, community, party or church.

The historian's goal should perhaps be to adopt a scientific approach—that is, one which is at the same time cautious and experimental—knowing that the available materials and methodologies are far from scientific. The historian should unveil the complexity of historical events, their multiple causes, the complex indetermination of their context, the fact that memories and documentation can never be exhaustive, the provisional character of any possible synthesis and the ever new questions and realms that need to be addressed. In the actual practice of historical research, making the necessary distinction between facts and events, causes and explanations, interpretations and hypotheses, is more easily said than done. The issue is not finding alternative truths to those offered by the powers that be, or representing the viewpoint of each minority, each marginalized or 'invisible' actor and denied identity, as was often done in the 20th century. Nor is it identifying any values, projects or allegiances as a reference point or a compass. For even if there were agreement on the hierarchy of values to share (democracy, citizenship, tolerance, justice, equality), these values could never serve to guide historical interpretation because they are of an ethical, meta-historical nature.

Many historians of various schools maintain that there is no place for historical impartiality or objectiveness when the issues at stake are still closely connected to choices of the present. Every scholar, it is said, has his or her political ideological and cultural convictions or prejudices; he/she is a non-neutral individual who is actively involved with the public discourse and intertwines his or her professional knowledge with the judgement, action, responsibility concerning any events of significance for the community. The contrasting positions currently being expressed on the Balkan war by various scholars, even belonging to the same political camp, or the agreement that emerges among observers from contrasting cultures, should warn us against a facile, deterministic connection between allegiance to historiographic culture and political position.

How then to reconcile professionalism and subjectivity? Is it enough to express one's point of view, to scrutinize one's beliefs, to openly declare one's schizophrenia between the individual and the professional, the citizen and the historian? And betraying one's allegiances for the sake of truth is not the same as falling prey to the post-modernist brand of indifference, which views all historical discourse or narration as equivalent. So what is more essential to the historian: a foolproof method, or a deep sense of measure and balance?

In order to try to respond, it is useful to return to the connection between the historian and the judge, an issue that has been taken up by many in recent years. The historian operates without any legal boundary and is only subject to methodological rules that are not rigid nor necessarily codified (to continue in the comparison, one might say that from this point of view the profession is similar to that of the examining judge in an investigation). The historian passes judgments without having to submit a sentence beforehand. For the historian, the judgment coincides with the account, and the truth appears all the more evident the less bound he or she is by the rules and prescriptions of politics, ideology, justice, communication and entertainment. The historian's task, then, is to spotlight the truths as they emerge from the study of documents, memories and different interpretations; make them undergo a sort of falsification process to see if they withstand the trial of different methods or viewpoints. All

history students should be compelled to read *Apologie pour l'histoire, ou Métier d'historien* and to watch Akira Kurosawa's film *Rashomon* (Bloch's book was published posthumously by L. Febvre in 1949, just one year before the release of the masterpiece by the great Japanese director). Rather than seek the Truth, historians would be concerned with multiplying *the truths* in order to add to the wealth of interpretations, the understanding and the critical approach.

These methodological considerations are particularly difficult to apply in moments of crisis, in periods of transition, at the time of collective tragedies that require a greater involvement and commitment by the historian, if not always a more critical and vigilant attitude. When the historian is asked to represent a positive model, should he or she try instead to show the other side of the coin? Todd Gitlin wrote about the difficulties that American historian Gary Nash encountered in writing a history textbook to be adopted by California schools. He met with the resistance of the various committees representing the many different ethnic groups of the state. All of them—whites and blacks, Mexicans and Puerto Ricans, Koreans and Chinese—rejected his text, a rare example of a balanced, democratic approach to written history, because the ethnic and cultural *identities* that they represented did not find that it provided children with enough reason for positive consciousness and pride in their own roots and origins. We find a similar analysis of the lack of shared ideals (the title of Gitlin's book is *The Twilight of Common Dreams*) in different forms in the former Communist countries of eastern Europe and in the Latin American countries that have returned to democracy after years spent under bloody military dictatorships.

In these situation, as in South Africa (again, in different forms), the request that historians participate in the building of an identity, whether explicitly 'partisan' or at least tentatively shared, interweaves with the paths taken by justice to deal with the past, although at a different level. In Italy, while debate is still ongoing over the partisans' attack in via Rasella in Rome, that is, on the political expediency and the moral legitimacy of an act that triggered a bloody reprisal by the Nazis, a high Italian court, the *Corte di Cassazione*, ruled after more than 50 years that it was a legitimate act of war. What is worrisome, however, is that reconstructions made by the players or the ideological pamphlets for or against the partisans' action prevail in the debate, while the public ignores the only recently published book that combines the most rigorous research of the sources and scientific study of the events with a collection of many different memorials, perfectly recreating the climate prevailing at that time and explaining the onset of prejudiced views and actual legends concerning that event. In France, the refusal by some historians, including Henry Rousso, to testify at the Papon trial raised again the issue of what the historian's proper role should be—as witness? expert?—within a public discourse that increasingly tends to use history to gain legitimacy. If it is true, as François Bedarida maintains, that historical research and an attorney's closing statement are diametrically opposed, it is also true that the ambiguous, problematic nature of the concept of historical truth makes it useful and appealing in a variety of contexts. And it makes it available to anyone, unlike justice: whereas in a trial the judge plays the institutional role of passing a final verdict on the event (the juridical truth), in history there are no established guardians of the truth. History is subject to subsequent revisions and may be recounted by anyone.

In post-war years, courtroom proceedings played an important role in historiography: the Nuremberg and Tokyo trials were no less than the first accounts (in an unusual form) of the historical events that had just taken place. Quite interestingly, the Holocaust—an event that dominated historiography in the following decades—played a secondary role vis-à-vis other

aspects of the history and defeat of the Third Reich. Early histories of Vichy France, too, were often pieced together from the discourse, language and narration of trials that had been held by the High Court after liberation. Only in the last decade was the history of that period appropriately narrated and were the proposed interpretations finally suited to the complexity of issues involved in that experience. France had opted for collective oblivion, using the conclusion of the criminal trials and the purges to do so; and this had been accepted over the years not only by judges and politicians, but also, and less understandably, by historians. When between the late Eighties and the early Nineties France witnessed a new wave of trials based on the indictment of high-level French officials responsible for anti-Jewish persecutions, judges found at their disposal an articulate and in-depth historical knowledge and chose to call historians to testify. The controversy that arose within the scientific community and inflamed public opinion sprang from an attempt to bring back into use, over 40 years later, a kind of legal procedure that seemed to be aimed at indicting and sentencing a political system in its entirety rather than single individuals and their crimes.

The controversy over two recent books of history that had a strong impact on public opinion was instructive in a different way. We refer to *The Black Book of Communism* and Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners*. As for the former book, the part that left a mark on historical 'common sense' were the views expressed by the book's editor Stéphane Courtois, rather than the analyses offered in the single essays, in particular N. Werth's essay on the USSR, A. Paczkowski's on Poland, and L. Margolin's on Asian Communism. Courtois wrote that criminal terror, rather than being identified as a fundamental aspect of Communism that takes precedence over other aspects more often underscored by historians (centralized economic planning, the single-party system, state ideology), should be singled out as the true essence of Communism wherever it was in power. This conclusion is not only at odds with the results of the analyses contained in the book but is also a strong and deliberate contribution to the above-mentioned 'monocausal' trend in historiography that studies on Communism have always sparked with particular frequency by identifying ideology itself as the first and decisive cause of all subsequent historical events. Yet it is just this kind of interpretive *fundamentalism* which is the basis of the success and wide popularization of a view that has become the accepted 'historical' truth circulating with the hallmark, the endorsement and the further legitimization of part of the academic community, although it could never withstand rigorous historical scrutiny.

Much the same lot befell D. Goldhagen's book: it was only due to its fortunes, and his consequent ability to attract attention and funding, that Harvard University decided to offer a prestigious history chair to him instead of his competitor Christopher Browning, who had most effectively demonstrated the methodological and documentary flimsiness of the arguments presented in *Hitler's Willing Executioners. Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*. The thesis that the Holocaust and its modalities should be attributed to the 'complicity' of the entire German people with Hitler's anti-Jewish policies—a far stronger notion than the more widespread one based on 'consensus' with the dictatorship—is based on the discussion of several individual cases that can be qualified as 'extreme,' as well as on a genetic-cultural interpretation of the collective behavior and attitude of the German people. Instead, Browning's attempt to analyze and understand the mechanisms that led so many 'ordinary citizens' of Germany to collectively abdicate their individual responsibilities had difficulties in being accepted by the mass media and the general public (as though this were the other side of the coin of his more scientific approach) and becoming the accepted interpretation and the common wisdom.

Although the narration and the memory of historical events are two distinct things, they often intertwine and even overlap, as has frequently been the case with the narration and the recollection of this century's collective crimes. For a narration to take place, there must be a will not to forget. Narration cannot take place without memories, even amorphous and contradictory, arbitrary and markedly subjective ones. Yet memories, even more than archive documents, are not a linguistically neutral products. The description included in memory influences historical narration all much more when it is factually accurate and emotionally incisive. The great recent wave of studies on the Holocaust would not have been the same had they it not been received favorably by a public whose attention had been attracted by the numerous and often moving memoirs now in print. In this case, memory's influence on history is mainly indirect.

Collective memory, instead, is built upon the basis of a variety of narrations: in ways that are sometimes recognizable and other times inscrutable, it encompasses suggestions derived from individual accounts as well as teachings drawn from history with a capital 'H,' comments made in the press as well as conclusions reached in courts of justice, evidence from archival documents as well as impressions from audiovisual ones. But above, all it corresponds to the needs of the time and to the psychological and cultural climate prevailing in a given society. Of course, this climate can be changed, even artificially, by planned or random institutional or grassroots actions; in any case it must be taken into account and reflected in the work of the historian, if the latter is to convey collective memory itself.

The problem of truth, at least as far as history is concerned, is invariably connected with the problem of interpretation; yet the two are not identical, nor does the former dissolve into the latter. The connection between facts and the mechanism of their sequence, as well as the choice of events held as relevant, is indisputably influenced by possible interpretations. The same applies to the research and explanation of causes, precedents, the context and the way that the historical account is presented. Yet there is an unshakable core of truth that does not belong to interpretation and is probably shared by history and justice—even if the two apply it to different goals. Every construction of the past, even every invention of tradition, rests upon accepted truths, identified authenticities, shared certainties, although sometimes it only takes a change in perspective for the same truths to legitimize a different construction. Like memory, history is highly selective, but while the former is subject to a perceptual distortion that can change its subjective account, the latter can distort the meaning while maintaining a presumption of truth.

Obviously, opinions on the need for an 'official history' are many, contradictory, and often justified by conflicting goals. Whichever one chooses to embrace, one cannot forget the objective difficulty of building a collective memory is objectively in modern democratic societies, where historical consciousness only plays a secondary role of political legitimization and strengthening of social cohesion, even if it is true that history is the very root and foundation of democracy. The issue has not only to do with the many ways of using 'present time' historians, whose work and role would be filled with increased expectations and responsibilities, but also with the need to pay greater attention to contemporary history in terms of research organization, educational strategies, personnel training. A preliminary condition, for example, is access to exhaustive and open archives, as happened recently in Germany with the opening of the Stasi archives; another is adequate funding of appropriate institutions and studies. Still, the fact remains that historical research does not automatically

lead to the truth, and above all to the kind of truth which is often required to build a collective memory and strengthen national identity or social cohesion.

The experience of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa has directly addressed all three issues that we have tried to address with from the historian's point of view—truth, memory, and justice. Needless to say, our closing remarks will not focus on the third issue, however crucial it may be. The TRC's task was not to build a new collective memory to replace the partial, distorted, arbitrary one that had fallen to pieces after prevailing for years, nor to connect or merge different and diverging memories that had represented a decisive aspect of the identity of both the rulers and the ruled, the persecutors and the victims over the years of apartheid. Instead, it was to facilitate that process by clearly defining its goal and its own, limited task. The TRC could only hope to introduce and elicit a new climate, later on, it would be the task of the country's new government, its new political forces, its new groups, institutions and associations, to turn it into a permanent feature of South African society. The collective awareness of the illegitimacy of apartheid, the building of a public ethic founded upon the culture of human rights and upon shared and accepted values, had necessarily to include the description of the violence suffered and the denunciation of crimes, but could not limit itself to that: "The exercise of facing the South African past, no mere horror story or exercise in historical voyeurism, is rather, in multiple ways, a cornerstone of reconstruction".[1]

The TRC has succeeded in creating a sort of virtuous circle where fear and expiation, remorse and penitence, threat and reward are intertwined and mutually reinforcing, and whose primary goal is to retrace as much truth as possible. Truth in the more obvious, essential meaning of 'the facts,' something upon which to build the future possibility of reconciliation and justice, of history and collective memory. International observers have agreed that at the end of any other previous conflict or in similar trials or commissions, no one had ever seen such a high number of people from both sides who were responsible for crimes, acknowledge the abuses perpetrated and describe in such detail how they had committed them.

The TRC does not arrive at the truth only by means of confession, but often by denial. For example, de Klerk's and Botha's refusal to admit that they were aware of the way that their collaborators and subordinates had organized repression, and enforced the laws passed by the government, not only represents a confirmation of the facts in question but makes it possible to understand other, more subtle truths, such as the morality of the old *afrikaner* leadership, its sense of honor—so different from that of generals or even of policemen—and the genuineness of its endorsement of democratic rule. Also significant, although very different in nature, was the attempt by the ANC leadership to prevent its own activists from appearing before the TRC as party members unless it had previously scrutinized the statements that they were going to make. The conflict between the TRC and ANC revolves around the nature of truth and around the moral responsibility of providing an individual or partisan version of it. Of course, the ANC has a full right—even a duty—to build its own history and to make it an integral part of its identity. But precisely because that truth is founded upon an essential but partisan memory (although it is the memory of the majority), it cannot expect it to become official history. The historical truth that the ANC defends and propagates should never be presented as a model of public historical truth (of the institutions, the state or the government), let alone by using the power that democracy has put in its hands. Yet the ANC, as the party in power, carries most

[1] K. Asmal, L. Asmal, R.S. Roberts, *Reconciliation Through Truth*, op. cit., p. 11.

of the responsibility of finding the ways to promote that new historical consciousness, especially of the recent past, whose creation the *apartheid* regime had tried to prevent by imposing its own stereotypes and lies.

Choosing to place all stakes on truth rather than justice as a framework for the process of rethinking the past has meant leaving an important, but not central, or unique, role to amnesty, in spite of all the controversy about it; and bringing to the fore the actual experience, the internalized perception, the truth revolving around individual accounts, and the myth concealed in the community's memory. "It will sometimes be necessary to choose between truth and justice. We should choose truth, says Zalaquett. Truth does not bring back the dead, but releases them from silence... Identity is memory, he says. Identities forged out of half-remembered things or false memories easily commit transgressions."[2]

Placing one's stakes on truth is not easy in practice nor in principle. Theories on truth are many and conflicting, depending on whether one chooses the ethical or the psychological version. One may debate at length whether truth has a cognitive value in itself, or whether it is possible to isolate truth from the individual perceptions or accounts of it. But perhaps it is not necessary to bring in such complex and subtle issues, although they inevitably go with the awareness of our daily life in contemporary times. The victims are clear about the questions to ask as well as the responses they want to obtain: 'When? How? Where? Why?' All one has to do is tell this much, and truth is nearer. It is up to historians to examine the materials thus collected, screen them, place them in context, put them in the right perspective and give them the value that they deserve—aware that they are, and must be, participants in a process of identity-building (aimed at democracy, tolerance, and civilized coexistence among different cultures) but at the same time are the guardians who should assure that the process does not instrumentalize history, making it override truth, critical sense, the free interplay of different memories.

Historians should be the guardians of universality rather than identity, even though many of them happen to be—by choice or by hazard—the historians of the winners or of the defeated. On this point, Reinhard Kosellek remarked that the winners' historians interpret that success as a long-term teleological process in retrospect, whereas the historians of the defeated wonders why something else happened than what they thought should have happened, are led to seek medium- and long-term causes and often produce more enduring and clearer considerations. If history seems to be made by winners in the short term, over the long term the vanquished offer more material for historical understanding.

Yet memory is always here, alongside interpretation and intertwined with it. May we contemporary historians conclude with a reference to classical ages and to the wisdom that come from ancient myths. The Greek poet Hesiod wrote that Lethe, or Oblivion, was the child of Eris, or Discord. And Plutarch thus describes the origin of the temple dedicated to Lethe built in the heart of Athens' Acropolis. In the conflict, or *eris*, between Athena e Poseidon over the city of Athens, the latter was defeated. In spite of that, he wanted to erect a temple to Lethe, and in so doing became a model for politicians. But forgetting after victory is easy; after defeat it is far more difficult—and useful.

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[2] A. Krog, *Country of My Skull*, Random House, 1998, p. 24. José Zalaquett is a Chilean philosopher and human rights activist who was part of the Commission on Truth and Reconciliation created in his country and gave his contribution to its South African equivalent during its constituent phase.

The historian's task is to use, as much as possible, greater balance and wisdom than others in choosing what part of the past may become, more than others, a 'place of memory' for contemporaries to question themselves about and mirror themselves in, and become better persons.