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# Remembering Guilt as a Social Project: Some Reflections on the Challenge of Working through the Past

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## Abstract

In light of the atrocities of National Socialism, the challenge of working through the past has become a crucial issue. The end of Communism has reinforced the urgency of this challenge. Coming to terms with an ethically problematic past takes place at several levels (jurisdictional/legal, political, mental). A central challenge is to keep memory alive and thereby to gain appropriate insights. However, the demand for constructive forms of remembrance should not be overloaded with expectations that are impossible to meet. The acceptance of guilt or responsibility requires an atmosphere of mercy and forgiveness, and is threatened by impatience. In this context, historical research can be seen as a form of ‘pathological inquiry’ into time and the past, providing mental and moral orientation for the present generation of humans; reflection about the past may be an important aspect of tackling the challenge of the present. Such historical research must always critically assess its own interest and beware of a drift towards becoming ideological grounded in a certain kind of moralism. The one who sees the light of the Promise of Easter above the graves of the past can conclude, following Cordelia Edvardson: ‘The past is at our mercy’.

## Keywords

Auschwitz; forgiveness; *Geschichte*; history; recognition of guilt; remembering; tribunal; working through the past.

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## Striving to Remember Guilt

In Yad Vashem, the memorial in Jerusalem for the six million murdered Jews, one can read the phrase: 'Remembrance is the Secret of Redemption'.

This evocative thesis applies both to the dead and the living. Remembrance as the secret of redemption calls us to remember the defenceless people who have been killed. Each individual name represents the monstrosity and inconceivability of an unparalleled crime by which human powerlessness was exposed before evil. The murdered, as Theodor W. Adorno has emphasized, must not 'be cheated out of the single remaining thing that our powerlessness can offer them: remembrance'.<sup>1</sup>

Remembrance is also the obligation of the living with a view to their future. The martyrdom of the victims evades all comprehension and appeals to the consciences of those who recall the murdered. This obligation burns within their souls, causing them to resist forgetfulness unrelentingly and to employ everything, absolutely everything, which would make it definitively impossible for the past to repeat itself in a renaissance of any kind: 'A new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon unfree mankind, to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen.'<sup>2</sup>

The crimes of National Socialism, carried out with cold, technical-industrial planning, have delivered a bitter lesson to a modernity which had been confident in human progress, namely, that there is a kind of evil in light of which the traditional criteria for guilt and forgiveness break down. Up until the end of the nineteenth century, people were able to come to an agreement about general amnesty, at least in peace treaties, and trusted in the self-evident necessity of a *perpetua oblivio culpa*e in order for life to go on.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly,

1 Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Meaning of Working through the Past', in Theodor W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 91.

2 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), p. 365.

3 On this, see Article II of the Treaty of Osnabrück (1648) between the Holy Roman Emperor and Sweden: 'There shall be perpetual forgetting and amnesty on both sides for all those [*sit utrinque perpetua oblivio et amnestia omnium eorum*] who, from the inception of this unrest, have been antagonistic in some place, in some way, or in some measure, on either side, so that, neither because of this, nor on some other ground, or on the pretence of any sort of future hostility or injustice, molestation or hindrance with regard to certain persons, classes, goods or security, done either personally or by another, secretly or openly, immediately or mediately, under the guise of right or with violence, within the empire or outwith (regardless of any previous treaties stating otherwise) should anyone retaliate in kind nor permit or allow such retaliation; rather, each and all insults, acts of violence, hostilities, damages and expenses accrued in any place, both before and during the wars, regardless of the persons or situations involved, should be dismissed to the fullest extent [*penitus abolitae sint*] so that anything which could lead from one thing to another shall be buried in perpetual forgetfulness [*perpetua oblivione sepultum*].' Konrad Müller (ed.), *Instrumenta Pacis Westphalicae: Die Westfälischen Friedensverträge: Vollständiger lateinischer Text mit Übersetzung der wichtigeren Teile und Regesten*, Quellen zur neueren Geschichte, 13 (Bern: Herbert Lang, 1948), pp. 103–104. On the contractual regulation of guilt-amnesty, see the materially rich study

they constructed a fictitious equilibrium on the basis of which the past was able to step out of the shadows. Whether this succeeded is a question in itself. Today, however, we are forced to realise that there are constellations of guilt regarding which a *perpetua memoria culpa* is the *only* appropriate forward-looking response. Considering the many burdens of the twentieth century, Hannah Arendt has judged that there may be certain crimes whose dimensions necessitate neither pardon nor penalty and that, in such cases, we are dealing with 'radical evil'.<sup>4</sup> Crimes which seem to strain hopelessly the human capacity to forgive or punish must be preserved in consciousness so that their curse may continue to be avoided and not play out in new ways. The imperative to look back in remembrance, *specifically* to *avoid* stiffening into a pillar of salt (as was the case with Lot's wife), is relevant for a kind of guilt which transcends our concepts. Reconstructing, deducing, analysing and documenting it does not mean *conceptualising* guilt in its complexity. Although it involves sins, the technical term 'sins' frankly comes across as oddly pale when compared with its meaning. The temptation associated with this sense of guilt, a temptation which manifests itself as existential doubt in the Lordship of God, must be lived through and passed through. If we were able to conceptualise this kind of guilt, then we would be obliged to forgive and forget. Yet because we must accept its non-conceptuality, we can only approach it in the tribulation of our terrifying memory.

Even Auschwitz cannot destroy the certainty that there is no guilt *coram Dei* which God cannot forgive. In light of the cross of Christ, one may not speak of unforgivable sins. To limit the gospel's promise of forgiveness after Hitler would mean granting the nihilism of this man a belated triumph at the most sensitive point of God's relationship to human beings: the mercy he extends to sinners. Nevertheless, we are warned of our tendency to allow God's reconciling act to slide into an abstract triumphalism of grace, as if God were not able to distinguish between greater and lesser kinds of guilt. Yet we must learn that debt-forgiveness does not in every case entail that the offence should be forgotten. Hence, we encounter a kind of debt which can, in certain cases, be forgiven interpersonally yet which *nevertheless* should not be forgotten. This not-to-be-forgottenness can even be considered an obligation arising from sympathy for both the victims and the perpetrators. Here, it would be positively unsympathetic to refuse to speak about what happened.

In human coexistence, we are typically dealing with conflicts of guilt where reconciliation may be limited to being on speaking terms. Accordingly, guilt is given over to forgottenness. We can regard this as a rule for the individual-ethical sphere of action. Here, forgiveness stands or falls with the will to forget. Yet even this situation admits to exception. And such an approach cannot be simply carried over into matters of guilt in the context of socio-political life, although, even here, forgetting must not be fundamentally denied. Yet the more people are affected by others' guilt, the crueller it is to recommend

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of Jörg Fisch, *Krieg und Frieden im Friedensvertrag: Eine universalgeschichtliche Studie über Grundlagen und Formelemente des Friedensschlusses*, Sprache und Geschichte, no. 3 (Stuttgart: E. Klett/J.G. Cotta, 1979). (Unless otherwise indicated, non-English texts have been translated expressly for this essay. I am deeply grateful to Justin Stratis for his sensitive translation.)

4 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd edn (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 241–42.

that they forget—and this not only with respect to the victim, but also with respect to the perpetrator and those who share the blame. Here we stand at the proving ground of reconciliation, where forgetting guilt would actually hinder reconciliation and likewise cast doubt on any reconciliation already experienced. Wherever systematic mass murder and an organised contempt for human dignity are at play, there should be no forgetting, no matter what the cost. This must apply to the extent that the perspective of the victims remains the proper and determinative perspective for historical consideration, even if there is sufficient reason to consider the perspectives of the perpetrators, those involved in the crime, and the majority of the population who remained silent. The latter, however, have already been ontically conditioned to install mechanisms for resisting and denying their guilt. We have to keep this in mind if we wish to clarify ‘how it happened’.<sup>5</sup>

There are, therefore, historical constellations of guilt wherein forgiveness is surely desirable, even as forgetting would be irresponsible. If, as people encounter one another, forgiveness takes place, or if, absent the freedom to forgive, at least the guilt gradually begins to scar over, and temporal distance allows for a rapprochement over the torches of guilt—even then there should not be forgetting. This only appears to contradict the praxis of forgiveness rightly posited in the gospel. Rather, the praxis of forgiveness liberates us at this point to both understand and remember guilt. For the one who lives in the certainty that his debt will be forgiven is freed to see and recognise it. He must not disown it, deny it, or pass it on to someone else. He can remember because he experienced forgiveness. In the context of the experience of forgiveness, the seemingly paradoxical argument for the traditional understanding of forgiveness can be risky, namely, that the memory and recollection of a guilt-ridden past is not actually the presupposition, but rather the consequence of a process of reconciliation. We correspond to reconciliation if, instead of forgetting and downplaying, we memorialise. Only thus will thinking and acting become sustainable and become able to play a believable part in the process of wider reconciliation, a process which is never to be regarded as complete.

Among the most preferred strategies for remembering is an activity denoted by the ambiguous phrase, ‘working through the past’.<sup>6</sup> The fact that constitutive expressions of human existence are saddled with the concept of ‘work’ corresponds to the activism of modernity. It would have hardly occurred to earlier generations to construe such phenomena as remembering or grieving as work; such things simply had to be allowed. And they were allowed. It was presumably Sigmund Freud who conceived of the therapeutically-relevant use of remembering, repeating, and working through traumatic experiences as a specific kind of work. He did this in order to highlight the action taken by patients against obstacles which hinder the illumination of their psychic conflicts.<sup>7</sup> In

5 For evidence of this, note, for example, the speech by Philipp Jenninger, the former president of the German Bundestag, delivered on 10 November 1988 for the 50th anniversary of *Kristallnacht* (see *Die Welt*, 12 November 1988, pp. 6–7). Jenninger’s resignation was inevitable in light of the public outcry.

6 This term renders the German composite word ‘Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung’, which should be preferred to the term ‘Vergangenheitsbewältigung’, which in the following is translated as ‘overcoming the past’.

7 Sigmund Freud, ‘Erinnern, Wiederholen und Durcharbeiten’, in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 10 (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1967), pp. 126–36. The phrase ‘memory work’ (*Erinnerungsarbeit*) can be found on p. 133.

other words, because they fear being hurt, they don't want to remember and hence must be subject to the work of cognition. From individual psychology, talk of memory, cognitive and mourning work has been bequeathed to social psychology, particularly as such ideas are used to thematise the phenomena of collective amnesia/denial concerning guilt and to analyse the trauma of collective guilt which Germans have self-consciously experienced since the end of the National Socialist dictatorship.<sup>8</sup>

The demand for working through the past appears already to have come into circulation after the Second World War. It obviously arose out of the shameful state in which Germans conceived themselves after their defeat, particularly as they were confronted with the full dimension of the crimes committed in their midst and with their toleration. The longing that at some point there 'has to be an end' to the memory of evil was understandable and claimed for itself the privilege of *oblivio culpae*. The hope was that, even here, the insurmountable past must be permitted to come to terms with itself. The exalted expression 'working through the past' amounted to an *overcoming* of the past. This sort of speech still exists to this day, even in critical retrospection of the GDR's past undertaken since 1989.

For the sake of accuracy, we shall prohibit ourselves from appropriating the expression 'overcoming the past'. There is no past which people could ever overcome, certainly not the past of *this* evil. Overcoming suggests a perfect settling of the matter with the goal of retiring that which has happened to the archives. It amounts to the disposal of guilt, whether or not this is one's intention. This past must remain un-overcome. It must and should disturb us. It should painfully shake us from the illusion that people are disposable. In this way, it becomes a warning cry to the living. Once the past takes place, it compels later generations to discussion, to education, and to resistance against anything that would make possible its resurrection. Considered in this way, the strategy of working through the past must not be misinterpreted as a terminable process. Working through is not working *away from* the past, but rather a conscious and intentional remembering which resists turning into a commemorative routine, a ritual which entails no further obligation. The political lessons which the twentieth century has given to humanity are that the temptation to totalitarianism lies closer than democracy realises, and that democracy is more vulnerable than its opponents suspect.

Thus even the phrase 'working through the past', as difficult to replace as it is, is not immune to misinterpretation. We must consider the fact that Adorno, in his 1959 essay devoted to the question, 'What does it mean to work through the past?', criticised the

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8 On this point, see Alexander Mitscherlich and Margarete Mitscherlich, *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern: Grundlagen kollektiven Verhaltens* (Munich: Piper, 1980). With a view to Freud's study, the authors employ the phrase 'overcoming the past' (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*): 'By "overcoming"...we refer to a consequence of taking steps toward awareness. Freud called it "remembering, repeating, and working through". The content of a particular instance of remembering, even when accompanied by strong feelings, has a tendency to fade quickly. For this reason, the repetition of inner conflicts along with critical reflection are necessary in order to get past the instinctive and unconsciously working forces of self-preservation evident in forgetting, denying, projecting, and other similar defence mechanisms. The healing effect of such remembering and working through is well-attested for us in clinical praxis' (pp. 24–25).

slogan-like character inherent in the formula.<sup>9</sup> In the *Bundesrepublik* of economic miracles, working through the past does not mean ‘seriously working upon the past, that is, through a lucid consciousness breaking its power to fascinate’.<sup>10</sup> According to Adorno, working through has to be understood as collective and individual self-reflection on the mechanisms which ultimately led to Auschwitz. ‘The past will have been worked through only when the causes of what happened then have been eliminated. Only because the causes continue to exist does the captivating spell of the past remain to this day unbroken.’<sup>11</sup> Working through would turn into its opposite if we were to practise it as etiquette for the defence of guilt: ‘its intention is to close the books on the past and, if possible, even remove it from memory’.<sup>12</sup> Adorno does not eschew the suggestion that only the victims should have a right to forget. For the collective of those in whose midst the incomprehensible was carried out, he says, ‘The attitude that everything should be forgotten and forgiven, which would be proper for those who suffered injustice, is practiced by those party supporters who committed the injustice.’<sup>13</sup>

## Levels and Problems

Working through the past happens on many levels. On the jurisdictional level, there is the question of reparations and of the punishment of the perpetrators and accomplices. The broken legal system must be reassembled, and the personnel staffing of the social and political structures must be scrupulously replaced (de-Nazification, but also ‘de-Stasi-fication’). Strictly speaking, this involves short-term measures, implying all the faults associated with temporary actions. In other words, the measures which are initially adopted are rarely justified in an objective sense—some are regarded as too lenient, while others are thought to be too harsh. Such measures are beset with the fallibility of the worldly *iustitia civilis* and have hardly risen to the challenge of the injustice still requiring rectification. Regardless, such incisions cannot be avoided. If the baggage-ridden actors of yesterday were still to have say and leadership today, whereas the victims would again be marginalised in their politics, then society would remain incapable of establishing a new beginning.

More significant than the jurisdictional level of working through the past is the political. This has to do with the advancement of democratic and constitutional policies which reward critique and civil courage, and which offer incentives to resist thoughtless accommodation and conformity. Dictators benefit chiefly not from the gullibility of the masses, but from the convenient streamlining of ordinary behaviour experienced in everyday social life. They take advantage of the individual’s angst at incurring certain disadvantages for critiquing circumstances. Even though a person sees the injustice, he is willing to compromise and cover it up with a mantle of silence which is shifted and adjusted according to the prevailing winds. In a democratic state, danger is imminent if citizens

9 Adorno, ‘The Meaning of Working through the Past’.

10 Adorno, ‘The Meaning of Working through the Past’, p. 89.

11 Adorno, ‘The Meaning of Working through the Past’, p. 103.

12 Adorno, ‘The Meaning of Working through the Past’, p. 89.

13 Adorno, ‘The Meaning of Working through the Past’, p. 89.

are not explicitly affirmed in the use of their freedom, and their full co-responsibility for the whole is not assured. In the realisation of social and political responsibility, boldness and courage do not simply happen; they are costly. By remembering, the conditions which make such activities possible must be jealously guarded from the disastrous outworking of collective lethargy.

Both levels, the jurisdictional and the political, must be related to the mental level of working through the past, namely, the capacity to keep memory alive and thereby to gain understanding. The exercise of memory assumes that collective and individual entanglement with guilt is an ingredient to one's own history and does not appeal to 'the grace of being born after the fact'. There are two key questions posed to it vis-à-vis the political and moral catastrophe of the German people between 1933 and 1945. First, 'How could this catastrophe have happened?' and second, 'What must we do so that what happened can never repeat itself?' Both questions shed light on the principal motives for guilt-stricken remembering. The first question seeks the critical reconstruction of past events. The second question is sustained essentially from a paedagogical motive, that is, what it aims to learn is implicit: 'It should never happen again'.

We recognise how flawed this important cognitive process works. In their study, *The Inability to Mourn*,<sup>14</sup> Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich have highlighted and portrayed the psychological and socio-psychological backgrounds behind why people are not in themselves in a position to engage self-critically with their own guilt, why as a rule they prefer the strategies of justifying and denying their guilt for coming to terms with their own life stories. Nevertheless, the question of dealing with a guilty past must and had to be maintained and kept painfully alive for the simple fact that the denial of guilt (a basic human phenomenon notoriously found in the Bible) can never be translated into an acceptable ethical ground rule. The trivialisation which takes place when sin is denied, as well as the justification for refusing to recognise it, compounds the earlier guilt with 'secondary guilt' (as Ralph Giordano has strikingly and accusingly put it in his book, *Secondary Guilt, or, On the Burden of Being German*<sup>15</sup>).

In view of the outcry over the refusal to do the work of mourning in terms of collective repentance, caution is surely appropriate. During the time of the 'Sixty-Eighters', when succeeding generations discovered and re-politicised their parents' Nazi past, it was easy to look down on those who had lived and suffered through the epochal upheaval after 1945. Yet we have to ask: what opportunities to understand guilt do those people have who crawled out of the ruins or were forced to flee? We study the contemporary witnesses to bring out the fact that all their concerns pertained to basic survival and to securing a physical future. People were glad that the spectre of the '1000 year reign' was gone and that, for the most part, they had survived it. Here, even socio-psychological analysis faces an *aporia*. On the one hand, it impeccably works out the consequences of

14 Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich, *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern*.

15 Ralph Giordano, *Die zweite Schuld oder Von der Last Deutscher zu sein* (Hamburg: Rasch and Röhring, 1987). See also Ralph Giordano, *Die zweite Schuld oder Von der Last Deutscher zu sein* (Berlin: Volk und Welt, 1990), which contains the revised chapter, 'Der verordnete Antifaschismus: Ein Wort zum Thema NS-Erbe und DDR' ('Prescribed Anti-fascism: A Word on the Subject of the Nazi Legacy and the GDR'), pp. 215–28.



denied guilt. But on the other hand, it also has to acknowledge that the denial was unavoidable, that is, as the individual's vital act of self-preservation works against the naturally worthwhile desire to understand guilt.

Thus, the Mitscherliches say, 'Had it not been counteracted by these defence mechanisms—by denial, isolation, by transformation into the opposite (particularly the tendency toward attentiveness and emotional responses), and thus by the derealisation of the entire period of the Third Reich, then a state of more severe melancholy would have been the inevitable consequence for a great number of people as the result of their narcissistic love for the Führer as well as the crimes committed without conscience while in his service.'<sup>16</sup> Similarly, 'The burden of guilt with which we subsequently confront ourselves is so little compatible with the self-assurance necessary for continuing to live that we (narcissistically wounded people that we are) must turn away from melancholy.'<sup>17</sup> One wonders about the accusatory tone of the Mitscherliches' analysis as one reads this sentence. The 'inability to mourn' cannot be easily moralised if it willy-nilly reinforces the theological perception that insight into guilt is dependent upon a climate of charity, since only grace is able to absorb the self-destructive power of sin, i.e., its ostracism degenerating into melancholy. Freud describes melancholy as evidence for neurosis: 'Melancholy is psychologically distinguishable by a deeply painful, depressed mood characterised by a suspension of concern for the outside world, by the loss of the ability to love, by the inhibition of all activity, and by the denigration of self-assurance which is expressed in self-reproaches and self-insults and increases the delusional expectations of punishment.'<sup>18</sup> It could not be expressed more pointedly for the secular modern: unrestricted insight into guilt without the power of forgiveness appears as a mortal threat to the *conditio humana*. The burden of one's own guilt is unbearable without the assurance that guilt can be forgiven. Thus, the denial of sin, as unacceptable as it is, appears (humanly speaking) to be the only escape.

As an immediate contemporary, Martin Niemöller had already clearly identified the *aporia* of the Mitscherliches' analysis. He, who could describe himself as having preached to the Germans none other than the Stuttgart Confession of Guilt between 1945 and 1947,<sup>19</sup> said in one of his earlier sermons: 'It is no wonder that no man wishes to be guilty of this sin. It is no wonder when the accused in Nuremberg plead not guilty. It is no wonder if there are perpetrators who have already eluded worldly justice. For if a man wishes to say, "I am guilty of this horror, this sin to which no one will confess!" if he could live yet another moment, if he could sleep for yet another hour, then must not this man proceed like Judas and go out into the night and hang himself?'<sup>20</sup> Yet when Niemöller spoke of that place where Christ stands not at the edges, but in the centre of our lives, where one's own guilt is recognised without having to take the path of Judas (the melancholic suicide), he pointed to the church's proclamation as the only theologically possible way to know guilt: 'This knowledge of the Saviour as the Saviour of sinners *and thereby* the knowledge of our sin and guilt, this is what constitutes the renewal of the Church.'<sup>21</sup>

16 Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich, *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern*, p. 79.

17 Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich, *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern*, p. 79.

18 Sigmund Freud, 'Trauer und Melancholie', in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 10 (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1967), pp. 427–46, at p. 429.

19 See Martin Greschat (ed.), *Im Zeichen der Schuld: 40 Jahre Stuttgarter Schuldbekennnis: Eine Dokumentation* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1985), p. 20.

20 Martin Niemöller, *Die Erneuerung unserer Kirche* (Munich: Neubau, 1946), p. 7.

21 Niemöller, *Die Erneuerung unserer Kirche*, p. 11; italics original.

Working through the past as a project of mental reconstruction and social pedagogy can thus not simply be focused on the demand for understanding of guilt among that generation which has borne witness to the evil to varying levels of involvement. Profane demands for repentance and moralistic suspicions of fascism (as became fashionable in the 1968 rebellion) only fortify the very obstacles to remembrance which they loudly denounce. The question is whether there can ever be a place outside of the church of Jesus Christ wherein people identify themselves with their own guilt and complicity precisely because the promise of forgiveness interrupts this identification with guilt. Seen as a whole, 'working through' remains an undertaking which remains trapped more in the external perspective of guilt-perception than we would prefer. In other words, if the push for tribunals can be softened, this is a more sensible approach. For everyone who confronts memory and its documentary tradition will at least ask themselves where *they* would have stood in that darkness, whether they would have possibly acted more decisively, boldly and bravely than those who, in their view, lived too gullibly and cowardly. Granted its non-equivalence with National Socialism (despite many analogies), this same question could be applied with respect to the GDR when it becomes the subject of critical scrutiny.

Odo Marquard as well as Christian Graf von Krockow have characterised the revolts unleashed by the Sixty-Eighters as 'post facto disobedience', that is, a kind of disobedience which the older generation had not mustered vis-à-vis National Socialism yet which was now exercised as a kind of cheap resistance against the 'establishment'.<sup>22</sup> But working through the past construed as a mental project intends something decisively different, namely, subsequent reflection on a particular failure, inciting from the perspective of increasing temporal distance and debate about a now obviously wrong course of action: that which, in dealing with the shock of the situation, looked on idly while evil took place, hence breeding a willingness to succumb to the forces of self-justification. Personal understanding of guilt requires time and freedom; it cannot be forced.

Unveiling campaigns, the flooding of awareness with moral postulates, and shock therapies applied by the release of certain documents—all of these more likely hinder the sort of examination that is desired. This is because, with such approaches, the question of whether I, too, would be capable of carrying out mass executions (which would of course be outright denied) is not primarily in view, but rather the regularity of human failure under the conditions of totalitarian politics: the normality of keeping still and nervously submissive, the normality of disorientation by blindness. 'Whatever happens by way of propaganda remains ambiguous.'<sup>23</sup> Instead of inciting anger against the myrmidons of the Nazi regime, racial prejudice, for example, must be considered as the deep-seated structure of prejudice which tolerated the harassment of the Jews and abetted their murder.

22 Odo Marquard, *Abschied vom Prinzipiellen: Philosophische Studien* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1981), pp. 9–10; Christian Graf von Krockow, *Die Deutschen in ihrem Jahrhundert, 1890–1990* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1992), p. 310.

23 Adorno, 'The Meaning of Working through the Past', p. 101.

Adorno illustrated the ambiguousness of propaganda with the story of a woman, 'who, upset after seeing a dramatization of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, said: "Yes, but *that* girl at least should have been allowed to live"'.<sup>24</sup> Adorno adds, 'To be sure even that was good as a first step toward understanding. But the individual case, which should stand for, and raise awareness about, the terrifying totality, by its very individuation became an alibi for the totality the woman forgot.'<sup>25</sup>

Using the example of anti-Semitism, Adorno makes it clear that one cannot expect too much from the presentation of facts. Such facts will either 'not apply' to those being addressed or be neutralised as exceptions. Hence, one has to turn the argument to the subject whom one is addressing: 'They should be made aware of the mechanisms that cause racial prejudice within them. A working through of the past understood as enlightenment is essentially such a turn toward the subject, the reinforcement of a person's self-consciousness and hence also of his self.'<sup>26</sup> As long as such prejudice actively exists, working through the past must be done. Because, *de facto*, this prejudice always comes to bear in new ways, working through the past is an interminable process.

Relatedly, the following point is significant: working through the past, construed as the self-enlightenment of the individual, breaks through the armour of the depersonalisation of guilt which, via the dismissal of sin which follows from the de-theologisation of guilt, modern man has fashioned for himself.<sup>27</sup> By 'turning to the Subject', it negates a depersonalised understanding of guilt by exposing involvement (or rather susceptibility to involvement) as the fundamental existential experience of the individual. Everyone is culpable, and everyone is estranged by blindness to their human orientation. This should be recognised in the hope of gaining reality, courage, and clear awareness. Following Adorno, Jürgen Habermas has reflected on the new debate concerning working through the past in the wake of the GDR, speaking of a 'self-reflection' which must apply to the individual and cannot simply be superseded by legal procedures or the public, ethico-political struggle for self-understanding.<sup>28</sup> Reflection on the past, then, 'can only bring healing if it is not introduced from outside and used as a weapon against us. Rather, it becomes effective from within as self-reflection.'<sup>29</sup> Habermas laments the way the debate has so intensified concerning the political and moral legacy of the GDR that the focus of public reviews can be blurred by personalisation and tribunalisation.<sup>30</sup> The mid-level concentration on certain persons or groups of perpetrators, similar to a collective abreaction of anger, must not overlook two clearly definable tasks: (1) a legal procedure, and (2) a certain willingness to undergo 'existential self-examination'.<sup>31</sup> Only when this is

24 Adorno, 'The Meaning of Working through the Past', p. 101.

25 Adorno, 'The Meaning of Working through the Past', p. 101.

26 Adorno, 'The Meaning of Working through the Past', p. 102.

27 On this point, see Michael Beintker, *Rechtfertigung in der neuzeitlichen Lebenswelt: Theologische Erkundungen* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), pp. 24–32.

28 Jürgen Habermas, 'Bemerkungen zu einer verworrenen Diskussion. Was bedeutet "Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit" heute?' *Die Zeit* (3 April 1992), pp. 82–85 (82).

29 Habermas, 'Bemerkungen zu einer verworrenen Diskussion', p. 82.

30 Habermas, 'Bemerkungen zu einer verworrenen Diskussion'.

31 Habermas, 'Bemerkungen zu einer verworrenen Diskussion', p. 82.

done can the 'ethico-political working through the past achieve a mentality-forming power, thus creating the impetus for a free political culture'.<sup>32</sup>

## Working Through is Endangered by Impatience

The goals and concerns associated with the task of working through the past are plausible. Theology should respect them; yet, it will not cease thematising the question of guilt in terms of forgiveness and reconciliation—not even here.<sup>33</sup> The loss of credibility which churches incur by a calculus of mercy which is applied to the wrong situations (for example, in suspending critical examination of their own failures and systemic involvement) can only problematise theological reflection. Precisely here we must push for relentless clarity so that the word of forgiveness is protected from being perverted into a 'white-washing'.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the word of forgiveness must not be disrupted by political-moral legality such that it becomes unhearable.

Working through the National Socialist past could also be described as a history of failures. This is not to speak against its legitimacy and absolute necessity, but rather its being overloaded with unrealistic expectations. The healing spoken of by Habermas may happen for certain individuals. If, however, the hope is encouraged that one can collectively heal the whole of society by means of a comprehensive catharsis, then one underestimates the susceptibility of the *conditio humana* to all kinds of relapses.

'Germany on the Couch' was the title of an article in the *Financial Times* which had to do with the social-psychological research of Halle-based psychotherapist Hans-Joachim Maaz.<sup>35</sup> In his book *Der Gefühlsstau*,<sup>36</sup> Maaz had outlined a 'psychological profile of the GDR' (the book's subtitle) and attempted to bring to light the deformation of character which people living under repressive conditions experience. The citizen of the GDR was described as a resentful, submissive and inhibited character who, having experienced forty years of socialism, had no better option than to live out what he claimed he wanted according to West German notions of comfort. Desiring prosperity, the GDR citizen was described as wanting to compensate for the offence by means of a socialistically managed world, without burdening himself with the pain of critical self-reflection. As a result, he supposedly became more submissive and suggestible. If, however, society is to be healed, says Maaz, its individual members must first be liberated from their neurotic patterns of interaction. According to Maaz, the political revolution must be

32 Habermas, 'Bemerkungen zu einer verworrenen Diskussion', p. 82. Habermas correctly identifies the problem by suggesting that discussion concerning the history of Stalinism on German soil must not swallow up attentiveness to the Nazi-past of the German people. Now, there must be a coming to terms with a 'double past' (pp. 83–85). This has to be emphasised. The pathos of the West German public, having learned from the mistakes of the unfortunate first phase of working through the past, could quickly become an alibi for the disaster of the 'Third Reich'.

33 See Beintker, *Rechtfertigung*, pp. 33–48.

34 See Ehrhart Neubert, *Vergebung oder Weißwäscherei. Zur Aufarbeitung des Stasiproblems in den Kirchen* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1993). Neubert's chosen alternative is in fact to be avoided by all means. Whether Neubert's theological reflection on who can forgive what is adequate is a question in itself.

35 *Financial Times*, 13 January 1993.

36 Hans-Joachim Maaz, *Der Gefühlsstau: Ein Psychogramm der DDR* (Berlin: Argon, 1990).

complemented by a ‘psychological revolution’,<sup>37</sup> that is, by a therapeutically directed and accompanying path ‘to “new” life’ which is awakened by knowledge and emotional experience,<sup>38</sup> and which leads *de facto* to social therapy<sup>39</sup> (yet even without this, he claims, the benefit of the programme can be made clearly comprehensible). *Sub conditione humana*, however, it is hardly beneficial in the way Maaz wants.

More moderately, but no less bold, expectations for a ‘tribunal’ concerning the GDR-past, suggested by certain initiators in the beginning of 1992, have been dashed. With the opening of the Stasi Archive on 1 January 1992, an ‘imponderable, uncontrollable, yet necessary and *eventually liberating* process’ had begun.<sup>40</sup> Given all the courses of action identified by the initiators, it is not today entirely clear what warrants us qualifying this process as liberating. At best, it turns out to be liberating for the many victims. But is it also liberating for the majority of the population which rejects the struggle of historical reflection as imposition and humiliation? Rather, must they not be encouraged, so that their predisposition to accommodate can be harnessed for the good, namely as readiness to accept democracy and take advantage of its opportunities? And how frustrating it must be for therapeutic zeal that the democratisation of West Germany after 1945 was successful because of collective conformity to the previously scorned parliamentarianism of the western world. Only gradually were the benefits of this democracy understood, and only significantly later did people become democratic by conviction.

One insight which results from the work of coming to terms with the past must not remain unexpressed, namely, the fact that the grander the expectations for working through the past become, the more resigned the disillusionment will be. If one emerged from 1989 with a concern not to repeat the errors and missteps which had come to light concerning the process of purification in the post-1945 GDR-era, then such concerns had already turned into scepticism after three years of intense efforts. Suddenly, we were reading in prominent places that, actually, the past cannot be overcome at all (something we had known all along!). In *Weil das Land Versöhnung braucht: Ein Manifest II*<sup>41</sup> (a document edited by many notable authors), Marion Gräfin Dönhoff writes, ‘Nothing can release us from the past—there is no “overcoming the past”’. The future can only be gained by reconciliation, not by making restitution or by getting revenge.’<sup>42</sup> And we might add: how true! Yet, if under the rubric of working through the past, a secular attitude of repentance were to be created—a repentance which does not know the certainty of the forgiveness of sins and which must consign itself to moral purgatory—then the

37 Maaz, *Der Gefühlsstau*, p. 186 et passim.

38 Maaz, *Der Gefühlsstau*, p. 192.

39 Maaz, *Der Gefühlsstau*, p. 193.

40 Joachim Gauck, Friedrich Schorlemmer, Wolfgang Thierse, Wolfgang Ullmann, Reinhard Höppner *et al.*, ‘Begreifen, was gewesen ist: Plädoyer für ein Tribunal’, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (23 January 1992), p. 29; emphasis added.

41 Marion Gräfin Dönhoff, Peter Bender, Friedrich Dieckmann, Adam Michnik, Friedrich Schorlemmer, Richard Schröder and Uwe Wesel, *Weil das Land Versöhnung braucht: Ein Manifest II* (Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1993). ET: ‘Because the Country Needs Reconciliation: A Manifesto II’.

42 Dönhoff *et al.*, *Weil das Land Versöhnung braucht*, p. 14 (Foreword); see also p. 88.

continual exposure of guilt can only wound and destroy. Richard Schröder has registered the relevant theological protest sharply: 'The Christian practice of confession without God is inhumane, and...the confessional in the marketplace turns into a pillory. Humiliation does not heal.'<sup>43</sup> One cannot wish for a wide-reaching and open conversation about what happened while at the same time rigidly penalising both complicity and tolerance.<sup>44</sup>

Working through the past requires time and patience. In both Adorno and Habermas, self-reflection involves a long-term learning process which can only be successful if it is not put under pressure to succeed. In the meantime, the events in East Germany offer an abundance of material illustrating the consequences of moral perfectionism in the evaluation of human behaviour. It did not succeed in carrying out the necessary replacement of personnel in central public offices so that further wrongdoing could be avoided. The judiciary, from which we have to expect an objective and trans-moral handling of crimes and misdemeanours, have been (and are) hardly faithful to their tasks. In light of the opening of the archives, we have arrived at a situation which would have been inconceivable to previous generations, namely, one in which nearly every living person can have the most intimate details of their lives brought to light without practically any archival grace-period—so long as such illumination is deemed relevant to the general public. On such grounds, any related ethical qualms are quickly pushed to the background. The danger of a hyper-tribunalisation is not recognised.

In the attempt to consider instances of involvement critically, working through the past can itself become involved. Without patience and deliberation, without a sense for the limitations of human action, it ends up stifling itself. Too easily it can sink into the mode of guilt which it intends to unmask. We must realise that soft tones will always accomplish more than the sensational reporting of an over-eager media.

In the effort to work through the past there lies a tacit soteriological motive, that is, the expectation that people will fundamentally improve and renew themselves by understanding their history. With the retiring of the message of justification, a sense for the distinction between *iustitia coram Deo* and *iustitia civilis* has been largely lost, particularly when the necessarily relative *iustitia civilis* is saddled with an unfortunate claim to ultimate validity. That which must be carried out in the world can, strictly speaking, only be announced as an eschatological hope: the realisation of the new creation in the decisive receding of the old. Yet if the old is understood aright, then it can no longer take possession of us, as is the case with prejudice. Indeed, we can rely on the fact that people mature by insight into their failures. Yet even in this, we have to reckon with the fact that people remain fallible and will leave behind certain insights which were gained. Hegel puts it this way: 'But what history and experience teach is this: that peoples and governments have never learned anything from history or acted on principles deduced from it.'<sup>45</sup> There are many indications that Hegel has not exaggerated. Granted, he evaluated history in terms of epochs wherein traditions were bound exclusively to people's memories and

43 Dönhoff *et al.*, *Weil das Land Versöhnung braucht*, p. 29.

44 Dönhoff *et al.*, *Weil das Land Versöhnung braucht*, p. 27.

45 G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, in *Werke*, vol. 12 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), p. 17.

not to media such as documentary photography and film whereby the past could be kept available. It remains to be seen whether the history of the twentieth century, being widely recorded and thus presentable, even in film, will preserve a better living memory than narrated history. A kind of working through the past which ignores the pitfalls of the human heart takes on too much and perishes by its own hubris. It can only succeed if it aims precisely *not* to be perfect and permits itself to be upheld and circumscribed by the assurance of the forgiveness of sins.

## Historical Science as Pathology of Time and of the Times

Historians study the past. They concern themselves with the autobiographical accounts and documents of our ancestors, they open up for us the path to past times and their long lost worlds, and they make available to us archives and sources. They document and analyse, archive and catalogue. They exemplify in a great variety of ways the ancient phrase *historia magistra vitae*,<sup>46</sup> which initially stood at the beginning of all history (in the sense of the enterprise of ‘history writing’). Reflection on working through the past crucially depends on the work of historians; they are guarantors for the authenticity of narrated history and for the authentication of the transmission of past stories. They act as witnesses concerning that which we hear about past events and are therefore in the strongest sense responsible for how the living perceive and judge the past. This applies not only with a view to the chronicling of history, a practice which established itself as the directly relevant field in the middle of the twentieth century and which explored the periods which are currently most recent to memory. It concerns historiography generally—which tends to clarify ancient history much better than we ourselves, transfixed as we are on the horrors of the twentieth century. Behind the conflicts of this century, trends were rapidly surfacing which had begun centuries ago, trends which must not be obscured in the critical evaluation of the present.

Thus, for example, the verdict on German history in the twentieth century would be narrowed in illegitimate ways if one did not consider the developments which led both mediately and immediately to the fact that a world war has twice emerged from German soil. An epoch-oriented account of history probably would have to have been introduced in the Reformation, at the latest by the time of the Thirty Years’ War. One could hardly dismiss from consideration the trauma of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic invasions if one wished to understand the German situation and context. The work of remembering that which began in 1933, as well as the prehistory of that turning point, parsed in terms of a decadent, reactionary process of decline, continues to obscure crucial insights for those born after the fact. It is pointless to spark a conflict over the relativity of historical events and to insist stubbornly on the non-analogueousness of certain evil phenomena. Every historical event, despite its singularity, always represents something which is relative, since it is related to other events (i.e., it is actually in relation to them and therefore can relate to them). Relativisation is inevitable if historical processes are perceived in their interconnection and interdependence. It is only problematic, then, if it is introduced as a means for shifting the blame.

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46 Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De oratore* 2.36.

Historical science can be understood as that academic discipline which professionally organises the memories of the past and redacts them using explicitly historical-critical methods. The practice of collective awareness by means of an appropriate exposure to the past is among the most important of its tasks. This past at best presents itself ambivalently, inconclusively. It can be narrated as a history of breakdown and failure. Yet it can also be construed as a history of success, preservation and progress. Indeed, within every historical process two moments are latent—a moment of victory and a moment of defeat. As Jacob Burckhardt puts it, we always encounter both ‘joy and sorrow’,<sup>47</sup> as the joy of one moment mixes with the sorrow of another. For historical investigation, then, the following task can be identified: ‘What was once joy and sorrow must now become knowledge, as it must in the life of the individual.’<sup>48</sup> Just as the individual tends to encounter his or her past either too incredulously or too sympathetically, so too does the remembering community, construing its past as a story of successful heroics or stigmatising it by pointing out the guilt of its forebears (i.e., it passes judgement for fear of the stigma of having no history).

By far, self-construal dominates as historical events acquire the power of identity-shaping myths, assuming the remembering community ensures their significance and transmission. The ethno-nationalism which formed in the course of the nineteenth century readily hearkened back to certain legends: the lost notion of the kingdom (which ended in fateful notoriety in our century), the revitalisation of ancient Rome in Mussolini’s Italy, or the use of the Battle of Kosovo (1389) for Serbian self-understanding. Harmless by comparison is the tradition of the legendary Rütli Oath (1291) for the self-image of the Swiss. Naturally the leftist revolutionary social systems also depended on memories which contributed to their legitimisation. The ‘historic mission’ of the working classes and their Marxist-Leninist parties was derived from the impoverishment of the proletariat and their increasing roles in society. The firing of the battle cruiser *Aurora* (1917) symbolised an epochal change, as did the storming of the Bastille (1789) and the posting of Martin Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses (1517).

Critical historical science will temper carefully our latent tendency to legitimise developments and processes as well as our tendency to distort the images of our collective memory. Because it is practised by people who are partisan, who cannot simply liberate themselves from their interests and preconceived opinions, the problem of false evaluations and thus of false renditions of what should have happened, according to the historian, constantly persist. Occasionally efforts at reconstruction can be so intermingled with moral evaluations and political agendas that a ‘historians’ conflict’ shakes up the guild and polarises the public, as was the case in Germany in 1986/87 after Ernst Nolte made the comparison between Stalin’s Gulag archipelago and Hitler’s death camps.<sup>49</sup> The problem lurking in the background is as old as the writing of human history, that is, the fact that, on a certain level, the past we perceive must always be regarded

47 Jacob Burckhardt, *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen / Historische Fragmente* (Leipzig: Dieterich’sche, 1985), p. 24.

48 Burckhardt, *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen*, p. 24.

49 On this, see Rudolph Augstein *et al.*, ‘Historikerstreit’: *Die Dokumentation der Kontroverse um die Einzigartigkeit der nationalsozialistischen Judenvernichtung* (Munich/Zurich: Piper, 1987).



as our own construct. If authentically remembering our own life stories is already considered to be a fallible undertaking, how much more must remembering a history which we have not ourselves witnessed be caught up in a fatal dependence upon failing memories and wish-projections? The history which those born after the fact remember and pass on is never simply identical with actual history and its complex chain of events. One could even say that a people whose period is described in a history book perceived themselves and their time completely differently than the historiographies of later generations.<sup>50</sup> Thus, Jan Assmann has observed the following concerning the essence of the ancient near eastern view of history: 'The past does not arise from itself, but rather is the result of a cultural construction and representation; it is always guided by specific motives, expectations, hopes, and goals and is informed by a present frame of reference.'<sup>51</sup>

This being the case, overly audacious interpretive conceptions or extremely historico-philosophical structures should be considered with great caution. Yet above all, we must continually reflect on the biases and expectations which can influence the historical retrospectives of the living. The 'present frame of reference' requires elucidation and clarification. Only then will an encounter with the past be fruitful and able to serve as an instruction and guide for the living. Romanticising the past is as prohibited as blanket discreditations and denunciations. The memory of historical processes and conflicts still remains sufficiently grey if it is evoked *without* moral pretension. For even unbiased historical research will, if anything, disenchant and disillusion. After all, what we know about people has less to do with genuine heroes and more with denied and failed responsibility. Historians are, in the truest sense, witnesses to human fault. In looking back, the masks are removed and the most personal and intimate mysteries of humanity come into view. Here there is no privacy. Hence, the traces of suffering always turn out to be essentially deeper than the traces of success.

For the living, as those who still have the opportunity to self-correct through knowledge and insight, cleanly reconstructed errors are helpful, whereas romanticisations and cover-ups only add to the general confusion. Jacob Burckhardt wished to encourage incredulity towards all systematic views of history. Indeed, he grasped with impeccable clarity the fact that our constructions of the past are forced and thus useless. Against a philosophical, theological, or even socialist-liberative exploitation of history, Burckhardt sought the

50 Strictly speaking, even the immediate eyewitnesses upon whose statements historians depend interpret the realities which they present. The experiences of a particular time are communicated to us in writing (at least those which took place *before* filmic reproduction). Hence, 'it is very difficult to advance these realities by appeal to the plurality of contemporary collective interpretations. In particular, even the "immediate" experience of the average person is always already an interpreted experience'. So says Thomas Nipperdey with regard to the difficulty in capturing the dissonant experiences of people connected with the First World War. Thomas Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte 1866–1918, Zweiter Band: Machtstaat vor der Demokratie* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1993), p. 850.

51 Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1992), p. 88. Assmann says something similar in another place with reference to Maurice Halbwachs: the past 'is a social construction whose character results from felt-needs and the reference point of the present situation. The past does not arise spontaneously; it is a cultural creation', p. 48.

'starting point' for his approaches to history in 'the only remaining centre which is available to us': the 'enduring, striving, and acting man as he is, always was, and will be'.<sup>52</sup> We immediately have to wonder whether this epoch-spanning continuum of the enduring, striving and acting man does not already have to be considered a construction insofar as man transforms and changes with time as an historical being. On the other hand, as long as we understand ourselves as the essence of an interconnected human history, epoch-spanning continuities are actually recognisable: our linguisticity, our capacity for relationship, our experience of suffering ('enduring'), our goal-orientedness ('striving'), our capacity for action and interaction ('acting'), our fear of death, our angst, our need for comfort, and many more of the sort. If these phenomena did not exist, then we would be incapable of understanding the texts and testimonies which address us from the past.

Burckhardt's historical questions are valid for people when they are comprehended in such ways. He concludes, 'Hence, our study shall, in a sense, be pathological.'<sup>53</sup> Pathologists are experts in causes of death; they are scholars of the suffering which leads to death. They dissect the dead and in this way seek to gain a knowledge which can be of some benefit to the *living*. They diagnose the causes of disease and look into the background clinical pictures which remain largely hidden to those affected. Historical research can make a contribution in an analogous way in that the living profit from insight into the past. A view of history which is 'in a sense' properly pathological searches for elucidation of the fragility of humanity. It is less interested in the pinnacles than in the valleys. Even in considering the heights, it still perceives the suffering concealed in the background which emerges only too quickly upon careful study. Burckhardt's unpretentious phrase encourages the historian to consider herself as a pathologist of time and of the times.<sup>54</sup> Historiography as a pathology of a certain time, and contemporary historiography as a pathology of *our* time, can sustain the living in their pursuit of understanding and responsibility. It can be instructive in that the living can survey their spiritual and ethical bearings in the mirror of the past so that they don't fall short of their present and obstruct their future.

## Moralism as an Historiographical Problem

The affinities between the visualisation of the historical and the sphere of human morality are obvious. Working through the past is immediately bound up with expectations and appeals concerning behaviour. Even retrospectives into ancient times do not remain untouched by such concerns. Indeed, they too encourage, albeit inconspicuously, the establishment of behavioural certainty.

A few examples. For centuries, Christopher Columbus was celebrated as an explorer. Today, in light of the harrowing details of the consequences of his departure, we would rather distance ourselves from him. Yet neither perspective is entirely true to the phenomenon of Columbus. Or, for confessional self-affirmation, the images of Luther, Zwingli or Calvin which undergird their

52 Burckhardt, *Weltgeschichte Betrachtungen*, p. 20.

53 Burckhardt, *Weltgeschichte Betrachtungen*, p. 20.

54 On this, see Michael Beintker, 'Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte und systematisch-theologische Urteilsbildung', *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* 5 (1992), pp. 41–48, especially p. 46.

respective traditions are not insignificant. The same also goes for the impersonal depictions of the Reformers in Catholic historiography. In each case, the figures, powers and events of a distant past and the attitudes taken towards them contribute to identity formation and thus to the key factors which motivate contemporary generations. We should not underestimate the legitimising and even delegitimising tendencies which reside in *every* turn toward history. The establishment of an official version of history, seen above all in dictatorships, proves, presumably, the explosive power of history. Historical commissions can degenerate into 'interpretive cartels'. The same is true for emancipatory interpretive communities which can only approach such facts in themselves. In George Orwell's timely vision of a controlled totalitarian state, the archives of the present had to be adjusted in regular intervals and the history books rewritten. There is no better proof for the sovereignty of morality over historical facts. Those who orient themselves within history purely for the purpose of self-legitimation do not actually need history except to confirm themselves. They live strangely devoid of history, unteachable with respect to new insights and realisations.

The ethical, social-ethical, and ever-present political-moral biases no doubt include the 'present points of reference' mentioned by Jan Assmann. Because of their selective tendency, and therewith their susceptibility to historical misinterpretations and falsifications, there has to be critical reflection as well as the allowance for further enquiry. The posture of moral indignation suggests obviousness. Yet this posture must face the challenge of Jesus' words:

'Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back' (Lk. 6:36-38 [NRSV]; cf. Matt. 7:1-5).

Clearly, in the first line of the address, Jesus is directing the criticism of judgementalism to the living and has the relationships of individuals to one another in view—relationships which highlight charity and loving attention, not Pharisaical indignation. Nevertheless, this criticism is also relevant to the society whose members and groups can be prejudiced in the all-powerful social game of judging, condemning and reprimanding. It also applies to our attitude towards the people of the past—people who continually depend on charity (just as we do today). They depend on both the charity of our memory as well as the charity of God's memory in the rendering of his final judgement (insofar as we are speaking eschatologically). One can vary this idea in the following way: we must not believe that we act less culpably than those over whom we consider ourselves so elevated in light of all supposed humanitarian progress. *With* them, we are dependent on the fact that forgiveness is given to us, and that in this way, the future—God's coming future—is newly opened up. We all form an eschatological community which, without the divine verdict which justifies sinners, would be abandoned to nothingness. By this, a dimension comes into view which should go without saying in theology even as it has been alien to modern historical science: the dimension of the kingdom of God which takes up this earthly time, the time which occupies the historian, and will assimilate it salvifically.

Historians almost exclusively adjudicate over the dead, over people, therefore, who can no longer respond and hence can no longer defend themselves. We follow their interpretations at the risk of doing wrong to the people and times which existed before us.

Ancient people seem to have been cognisant of this risk: *De mortuis nil nisi bene* was said amongst the Romans as well as something similar amongst the Greeks.<sup>55</sup> Even if this proverbial expression was attached to the archaic fear that the dead would possibly take vengeance on posterity who dishonour their memory, it must have successfully inculcated people with the danger of slander. Yet it must have also been clear to ancient people that memory can proceed recklessly and can denounce people's shameful acts in an uncharitable manner. The verdict of later generations was not a matter of indifference to them. Hence, they strove in their historical work to bring out something good which endured from their subjects' striving and which positively influenced their memory.<sup>56</sup>

By contrast, the world of the Bible neither considers memory taboo nor insists on its unfading legacy. It is striking that the historical accounts of the Old Testament narrate events extremely realistically, that is, they neither simply glorify nor damn. One can ask whether in all cases enough caution was kept regarding final judgements and condemnations. This applies most of all to the prophetic-leaning Deuteronomistic history. Yet, at the same time, it has to be emphasised that its portrayal of the judgement of God on Israel is produced in such a way that the 'Deuteronomist' in no way claims to evaluate and pass judgement in his own name; rather, his verdict aims only to witness to God's verdict on a faithless people and their faithless leaders. Man is not entitled to God's judgement. Moreover, the final judgement, as it is described in the eschatology of the New Testament, corresponds to the sovereign act of God which is not influenced by any man. Both testaments meet in the divine saying of Deut. 32:35, a text which is cited verbatim in Rom. 12:19 amid the exhortation to extend compassion to one's enemies: 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' One may challenge the notion of revenge in terms of the theology of the cross if what is meant is the debasement in all cases of our lust for judgement under the judging and justifying verdict of God (see Deut. 32:36).

If one doubts that the final verdict belongs to the eschatological judge and Redeemer alone, then human memory can become saddled with this judge's authority. With eminently fallible, flawed moral criteria, memory will make its distinctions: condemning and honouring, praising and passing judgement, pronouncing 'guilty' or excusing. In this case, the following paraphrase of the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt. 25:31-33) would in fact be appropriate:

55 Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, I.3, 70, quoted in Georg Büchmann, *Geflügelte Worte: Der Zitatenschatz des deutschen Volkes* (Berlin: Haude & Spener, 1905), p. 407. In a similar context, one of Voltaire's thoughts is worthy of mention: 'To the living we owe respect, but to the dead we owe only the truth' (pp. 407-408). Nothing demonstrates the modern change of heart regarding the dead better than this sentence.

56 See Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pp. 196-98. Thus, in the eulogy for Pericles preserved by Thucydides (see Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* II, chs. 36-46), the responsibility of the polis for the immortal legacy of the deceased is addressed: The polis guarantees that, 'without assistance from others, those who acted will be able to establish together the everlasting remembrance of their good and bad deeds, to inspire admiration in the present and in future ages. In other words, men's life together in form of the polis will ensure that the most futile of human activities, action and speech, and the last tangible and most ephemeral of man-made "products", the deeds and stories which are their outcome, would become imperishable', pp. 197-98.

And when the historian comes in his documentary authority and all his assistants with him, then will he sit in the conference chair of his glorious competence, and all the documents will be assembled before him. And he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and the sheep he will put to his right, and the goats to his left...

The idea of an anticipated last judgement at the historian's desk or at the historically-biased roundtable may appear exaggerated and amount to a caricature. That it represents a persistent danger of our views and perceptions of history, however, cannot be doubted. Yet we can find instances wherein the historian is positively recognised as inhabiting the role of the judge of the past.

As Reinhart Koselleck points out in his collection of material on the phenomenon of the moralisation and proceduralisation of history, Giovanni Antonio Viperano's formula, 'an historian must be a *bonus iudex et incorruptus censor*, found all the more appeal as 18th century culture was lifted up as the court of justification in place of the final judgment'.<sup>57</sup> Parallel to the narrowing of histories into the collective singular concept of 'history', the tendency manifests itself to practise history-writing as a quasi-eschatological accounting and to invest culture with the authority of the consciousness-blurring *tribunal Dei*. 'The historian, as it were, *stands over the graves and calls out to the dead*. Without regard for title or entourage, he observes them with *almost indifferent, almost judging eyes*.'<sup>58</sup> Thus, even the monarchs, who will always deny the truth, can, thanks to history, learn to judge themselves in advance. A moralising power proceeds from the one who portrays history—in the words of d'Alemberts, a *tribunal intègre et terrible*.<sup>59</sup> The ruling lords are in no wise exempt from punishment; as the translator of Bacon recorded favourably: *history is its own penal law*.<sup>60</sup> And therein lay its 'philosophically' understood application: *History effectively impresses great acts with the seal of immortality and covers vices with a stigma which cannot be removed for centuries. Thus, if one studies history well, it is then a philosophy—one which will make a greater impression on us the more it addresses us through living examples*.<sup>61</sup> In this way, then, history can be advanced as an ethical textbook whose events are recorded and construed in terms of a morally instructive tale.

To the verdict of later generations belongs a significance which can hardly be overestimated. The divisions of memory banish the patterns and events of the past into barely revisable versions. The fact is, whoever would be condemned by later generations might just as well have no further opportunities to escape the forced role of the bad

57 Reinhart Koselleck, 'Geschichte V', in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, vol. 2 (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1975), p. 666 (see also pp. 666–68). Koselleck is citing G. A. Viperano, *De scribenda historia liber* (Antwerp: Christophori Plantini, 1559).

58 Citing Thomas Abbt, 'Epistle 161', in *Briefe, die neueste Literatur betreffend* (1761), p. 211.

59 Citing Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, *Discours préliminaire de l'Encyclopédie* (1751), ed. Erich Köhler (Hamburg: F. Meiner, 1955), p. 92.

60 Cited as a formula of the Swedish Count Tessin in Francis Bacon, *Über die Würde und den Fortgang der Wissenschaften*, trans. Johann Hermann Pffingsten (Pest: Weingand und Köpf, 1783; reprint: Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1966), p. 196, n.

61 Koselleck, 'Geschichte V', pp. 666–67 citing Johann Samuel Halle, *Kleine Encyclopedie oder Lehrbuch aller Elementarkenntnisse*, vol. 1 (Berlin/Leipzig: Decker, 1779), p. 521.

example. Nothing sticks more tenaciously than a bad reputation, particularly a reputation which endures in many strands of tradition for centuries. The question inevitably arises of how the verdict of later generations can be appropriate, particularly if it has to rely totally on received opinions. Fortunately, it can be maintained there against that the disavowals as much as the eulogisations of historical judgement are so seldom correct that, for their part, they must simply be characterised as baseless. On the other hand, *post festum* the judgement can often be surprisingly authentic. But precisely for this reason, it should not be construed as errorless or immunised from differentiation and relativisation. We must constantly reckon with simplifications, instrumental strettos, dilutions and overcommitments which confuse and distort our images of the past. Indeed, we cannot converse with those whom we depict. We cannot interrogate them, we cannot interview witnesses for their defence, and we are often reliant on faint, ambiguous tracks. Cases in which we can interrogate contemporary witnesses using the methods of so-called 'oral history' (measured by many thousands of years of memory-periods in human history) are the exception. And as far as authenticity, the memories of such interviewees are far more fallible than most people assume.<sup>62</sup>

Thus, the historian finds himself with an often underestimated responsibility—not only with respect to the living, but also with respect to the dead. Reinhard Wittram has in his day written a remarkable essay in which he considered the danger of slander as an historiographical problem.<sup>63</sup> The historian has no choice but to identify and label 'public evil'. He needs clear standards and must condemn schools of thought, even opposing certain people.<sup>64</sup> Yet, at the same time, this practice is fraught with difficulties emerging from the eighth commandment, a commandment which directs its prohibition against bearing false witness to writers and teachers of history as well.<sup>65</sup> To be sure, the historian cannot supplant this valid and just command 'by a rule of general clemency or "universal empathy"'.<sup>66</sup> Nevertheless, this has been done, particularly if he conceives of himself as a 'Christian observer of history'<sup>67</sup> who purports to oversee 'knowledge about the human being'.<sup>68</sup> Wittram is mindful both of the human creature's fundamental need for redemption as well as the right to human dignity—something which must not be denied regardless of a person's deeds and misdeeds.

That is:

If asked, most people would consider the past to be a necropolis. The dead are taken up to God. Yet we demand an encounter with them; we have them draw near to us in the costume

62 On this, see Gerhard Besier, 'Psychophysiologie und Oral History als Faktoren der Sozietät: Anmerkungen zur Akkuratessse von Erinnerungen', *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* 7 (1994), pp. 102–16.

63 Reinhard Wittram, 'Das öffentliche Böse und das achte Gebot', in Reinhard Wittram, *Zukunft in der Geschichte: Zu Grenzfragen der Geschichtswissenschaft und Theologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966), pp. 60–75.

64 Wittram, 'Das öffentliche Böse', pp. 63–64.

65 Wittram, 'Das öffentliche Böse', p. 64.

66 Wittram, 'Das öffentliche Böse', p. 64.

67 Wittram, 'Das öffentliche Böse', p. 64.

68 Wittram, 'Das öffentliche Böse', p. 64.

and disposition of their time as we tamper with their honour and reputation. We are permitted nothing else, for a prohibition emerges from tradition to which we must not cede without verification. Thus, the dead are as defenceless as they are powerful. We must resist the suggestion that we have to discard any testimony which justifies the perpetrators and thinkers on the grounds of their own circumstances. We must deal with their position just as if they were still here arguing with us. When they are unjustly written off, we should advocate for them and come to their defence. In other cases, we must understand and nevertheless judge. We can only do this if we recognize ourselves as being in solidarity with the bones of the dead in our common humanity before the God who is above the times.<sup>69</sup>

If the eighth commandment applies not only to interactions among the living, but also for interaction with history, with the people of the past, then therein can we see an ethos for interacting with the past. This ethos is centred in truthfulness as well as respect for persons whose integrity is distinguishable from their works. It motivates us to accuracy and carefulness. It challenges us to exercise caution and to be thoughtful. It dissuades those interpretive methods of presumption, today referred to as a ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’, which import their ideological prejudices into the past. In dealing with the past, this ethos calls for a critique of the historical power of judgement and the bringing to light of those networks of bias which inform historical reconstruction. The good historian refrains from judging. He works out, describes and displays the historical developments and actors for the reader so that he can form his own image and judge for himself. The less moral effort we exert, the better historical writing will fulfil its ethical orientation. Here, the loss of morality is equivalent to moral *gain*, since the production of historiographical morals quickly descends into the same ideological blindness which it purports to chasten.

Cordelia Edvardson, author of an autobiographical account of a life’s journey which led her as a young girl through the hell of Auschwitz,<sup>70</sup> introduced the first part of her memoirs with the astonishing words, ‘The past is at our mercy’. One can approach the past in various ways: curiously, trustingly, contemptuously, fearfully, angrily, wistfully, bitterly, affectively—the spectrum of reactions knows many emphases and nuances. One can become frozen staring into the face of the past, becoming petrified as Lot’s wife (Gen. 19:26). We can fall under the spell of the past, being literally eaten away by our shame. We can attain freedom from the spell of the past only when we refuse to look back in anger anymore, when we discover the light of the promise of Easter shining on the graves of the past, when we become aware of the fact that God will be with those who were persecuted and martyred, that he will ‘wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away’ (Rev. 21:4). And compared with these deeds, in full knowledge of our own guilt and need for redemption, Jesus’ prayer is apropos: ‘Father, forgive them, for they *did not know* what they *were doing*’ (cf. Lk. 23:34). The past which is at our mercy is not glossed over, but it will lose its terrible rule over the lives of later generations. It *has to* lose it!

Translated from German by Justin Stratis

69 Wittram, ‘Das öffentliche Böse’, p. 64.

70 Cordelia Edvardson, *Gebranntes Kind sucht das Feuer*, trans. Anna-Liese Kornitzky (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1988).