

## Seventh International Conference on Holocaust Education

# Shoah Education and Remembrance

### Remembrance and Resentment ALAIN FINKIELKRAUT

Europe, since 1945, has been afraid of its own ghosts. The inhabitants of that haunted continent would do well to repeat to themselves Faulkner's celebrated line: "The past is never dead. It isn't even past", for they have good reason to, their concern is justified. Twentieth-century Europe was the origin and theater of the two most murderous wars in world history. As George Steiner sadly reminds us, Buchenwald stands close by to Weimar. The poetry of Goethe did not prevent the sinister achievements of Hitler. Post-Nazi Europe knows that neither culture nor progress is a safeguard against ferocity. It knows that modernity does not necessarily overcome cruelty and that the most egregious evil is produced by a combination of unleashed violence and methodical, sophisticated and civilized coldness. It is for this reason that the obsession of Europe since World War II has been to protect itself from itself. Unlike America, reinforced in its calling by victory over Nazi Germany (there is no geographical proximity between Washington and Buchenwald), traumatized Europe wonders endlessly what went wrong. Whoever feels innocent is ready to fight his adversary. Whoever feels guilty crosses swords with his demons. European institutions are aimed at keeping those demons in check.

But institutions are not enough. Vigilance is required and vigilance is fostered by commemoration, ceremonies and the transmission from generation to generation of the memory of the death camps and the madness of *Lebensraum*. What is now called "*le devoir de mémoire*", the imperative to remember, in order to sterilize the womb that gave birth to the dreadful, appalling beast, in Brecht's famous line, it appears indispensable to prevent Nazism from fading into the distance, and even from becoming just another moment in history. In order for this past to be known to the present, it has to remain present as a continuous warning.

As Jürgen Habermas, the German philosopher, writes: "Something happened in the extermination camps that up until now no one could have thought possible. A profound solidarity among all that bears a human face was attacked and uprooted there." What indeed was revealed there was the essential fragility of democracy, not only as a regime, but also as a feeling, as an evidence, that all human beings are alike, the feeling that all men are just. Because, in the middle of the twentieth century, and in the center of civilization, men could replace mankind by *my* kind, and say to other men: "You are not my kind," and decide to get rid of them, Europe has decided not to let that revolution be erased from its consciousness. The only way for democracy to be strong, in European eyes, is to remember that it is vulnerable, precarious and mortal. This resolution took shape movingly and convincingly, during the sixtieth

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anniversary of the discovery of the camps. During the ceremony and programs, terminating with an unprecedented pilgrimage to Auschwitz, the European governments and the Europeans themselves demonstrated to the last survivors that the commemoration would survive them. The French president, for instance, Jacques Chirac, found words that managed to convey the unforgettable. Here, he said, an unknown abyss was disclosed. The criminal madness of the Nazis questioned the very essence of humanity. Here the state apparatus led a policy of scientific, systematic and methodical extermination that cannot be compared to anything else." The extermination of a whole people extended to a whole continent, the essence of humanity questioned through the extermination of a people, the predicament of that people remembered by humanity and especially Europe as a warrant against its own propensity to oblivion: that lesson was unanimously delivered---except for one false note.

A famous French comedian, of African origin, Dieudonné denounced what he called, quoting Israeli historian Idith Zertal, "the pornographic memory" of the Shoah. He created a scandal, yet he expressed himself not as a clown, not as a showman, but as the spokesman of the *Damnés de la Terre*, the wretched of the earth. He said loudly what more and more people think: that Africans, Arabs, Asians and Latin Americans are dispossessed by the Jews of the human compassion they deserve, that the emphasis on the Jewish tragedy throws into oblivion all other cases of genocide, and above all that the so called imperative to remember has become a certificate of good behavior awarded to the oppressors of the Palestinian people.

We Europeans, we French wanted to extinguish the flames of antisemitism with the water of memory. And it suddenly appears that we are adding, with memory, fuel to the fire. The more we commemorate, invoke, and teach the pain of the Holocaust, the more we scrutinize these dark times, the more we infuriate countries, continents, communities, and minorities which don't feel accountable for these events. Every commemoration increases in other parts of the world, mostly in our suburbs, in the non-European neighborhoods of our cities, the rage at the good fortune of the kings of misfortune: the Jews. That is the way it goes in numerous schools all over my country. Youngsters show their disgust not at what was done in Auschwitz, but at the memory of Auschwitz and progressive teachers understand and support them, because they are appalled by the current predicament of the Palestinians. They boycott Auschwitz as an Israeli product. The insistence on the Jewish experience does not discourage hatred; it nurtures hatred. It is a therapy that spreads the epidemic it is supposed to cure, a memory meant to kill the old nationalistic antisemitism yet ends up sustaining the resentments of post-national communities.

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How can we deal with this unpredictable and astounding situation? By broadening the scope of memory, the voice of remorse in Europe and especially in France, currently tells us. This voice says that Europe did not lose its innocence in Auschwitz. Its criminal record is heavier and larger than that. It has committed, says the voice, other atrocities. The Jews are not the only victims of European hubris, far from it. Before Hitler and the conquest of *Lebensraum*, there was the colonial conquest and before colonialism, the slave trade. It is time to make room for these other tragedies now that many of their descendants live on our soil. Europe is no longer a land of emigration. It's now a land of immigration. It is, so to speak, an unprepared America. So, says the voice, it cannot afford any longer to neglect its distant sins.

I hear that voice. It's impossible *not* to hear it in France, but I am unconvinced, because such recognition does not rely on cognition, scholarship, knowledge, and research. Recognition does not entail additional light shed on forgotten crimes. The heirs of the slaves or the colonized don't ask for truth. They ask for the biggest crime. They ask for *Shoah*. And as strange as it sounds, they won't compromise. They won't accept any other deal.

In 2005, Claude Ribbe, a writer who presents himself as a philosopher, historian, and defender of the memory of slavery, published a book subtly titled *The Crime of Napoléon*. The crime is not only the reintroduction of slavery in the colonies, but also the invention of the gas chambers. "Men," Claude Ribbe writes, "were locked in the hold of ships, and a brand new method was tested in order to kill them. They inhaled the gas that was used to disinfect those holds." In other words, Hitler was an imitator, and he knew it. That is why, when visiting Paris in June 1940, in the wake of the *Blitzkrieg*, he paid tribute to his master. The picture of the *Fuhrer* overlooking Napoleon's grave was chosen for the cover of Claude Ribbe's book.

The book did not burst like a bolt out of the blue. Seven years earlier, in May 1998, a symposium had taken place at the headquarters of UNESCO in Paris. It was organized by the COFFAD (Collectif des Fils et Filles d'Africains Déportés). The name, as you may have noticed, is modeled on Serge Klarsfeld's Association of Sons and Daughters of Jewish Deportees. And the world is now full of angry descendants, of infuriated sons and daughters... The subject of the symposium was: "Is the slave trade a crime against humanity?" The answer was: yes. But the participants went further than that. They adopted a series of resolutions in order to rewrite history from the point of view of the victims. Claiming that the word "slavery" tends to ignore the ferocious, racial particularities of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the deportation of Africans, they coined a new name: Yovoda. "*Yovo*" in the language of Benin, formerly Dahomey, where slave trading existed, means the white man, and "*Da*" means cruelty: The cruelty of the white man. Yovoda; like Shoah. They also asked for the condemnation

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of Pope Nicholas V, who, in 1454, issued a text legitimizing the trade of black captives. They demanded a public condemnation of this pope and they also asked for his removal from the list of popes. That, of course, has not happened... yet. And Yovoda is not yet the African equivalent of Shoah. But in May 2001, the French Parliament voted through a law defining the Atlantic slave trade as a crime against humanity. This law also stipulated that school and research programs in history must grant the slave trade the importance it deserves. The slave trade, defined as the trans-Atlantic slave trade and only the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Thus, when scholar and historian, Olivier Pétré-Grenouillaut, published a book about slavery showing that the African and Islamic slave trades lasted longer and were more murderous than the dreadful European trade, and adding that none of those trades was in fact genocidal - he was immediately accused of falsification.

In February 2005, the French Parliament passed another law, a law expressing (as you may have noticed, the French are legislative addicts) the gratitude of the nation toward the French citizens who had been repatriated from Algeria, and also stipulated that school programs should recognize the positive aspects of the French presence overseas. This law provoked a huge scandal. Most of France's researchers protested. Some of them went so far as to say that there could not be anything of value in a process of exploitation and even extermination. *Coloniser, exterminer – Colonization, Extermination* - is the title of a book published in French a few years ago. These historians obtained, after a few months, the repeal of this infamous article, and they obtained it in the name of academic freedom. But when other historians tried to link together the two controversial laws - the law on the slave trade and the law on colonization- and to apply the same standard to both of them, they were not heeded. After nominating Claude Ribbe to the National Consultative Commission on Human Rights, the French government chose to commemorate slavery on May 10, the very day on which the law on slave trade was voted.

What does it mean? It means that the obsession today is not to defend academic freedom, but to expand and broaden the Holocaust. This historical event is no longer an event. It's a pattern. And it's an entitlement. Every minority is entitled to it. Jews are invited to share the pie. That is what diversity is all about in today's Europe. And does this vision correspond to the historical truth? No, it doesn't. Will this policy of a slice of the pie for each and every minority do away with resentment? No, it won't. It will only increase the widening gap in France and throughout Europe between identity and nationality. Nationality nowadays is not a matter of belonging. It is at once a narrative whose heroes are regarded as perpetrators, a list of rights, and a range of commodities. It is the marriage of a dreadful legacy with social security. It combines a bloody heritage with a series of advantages. And for the descendants of this heritage's

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victims, these advantageous rights and commodities appear as compensation for the sufferings of the past. They bear a grudge against France, the country they feel entitled to, because it does not pay its debts, and against the Jews because they are the darlings of remembrance. In other words, memory has become a grievance. Society is turning into a compilation of grievances, of claims, and Francophobia develops in tandem with Judeophobia. They are now two sides of the same coin. We are not living in a time of pogroms. Yet it is not as easy as it was in the second half of the twentieth century, to be a Jew in France nowadays.

You should also bear in mind that it has surprisingly enough become quite problematic in some neighborhoods to be identified as French. Of the projects or cites in the suburbs, where the riots of 2005 broke out, the most common insults are “*sale Juif*” (dirty Jew) and “*sale Français*” (dirty Frenchman). And what makes the picture really frightening is that the authors of these verbal aggressions have French identity cards. Which is why I think it is at the same time wrong and useless, inappropriate and ineffective, to sacrifice or to minimize historical differences between the tragedies of the past in order to cure identity wounds. This medicine is poisonous.

What should be done, then, to defuse this mimetic animosity? I really don't know. I have no recipes, no remedies in mind. I can merely draw two lessons from our current predicament. The first is that we should not accept the very notion of a competition between victims. We should, on the contrary, emphasize the fact that whatever the crime, the descendants of the victims are not themselves victims. Remembrance is about paying our debt to the dead, not about taking their place.

The second lesson regards the definition of Europe. What is Europe? Memory, as it is now understood and practiced, forbids us to give a historical, geographical or cultural answer to this question. Memory makes sure that all traces are erased, that the origin is dismissed, the ancestors challenged and repudiated. According to the prevailing mode in Europe, the attempted destruction of the Jews calls for the abolition of all the barriers between humans, and it calls for Europe to be an example, that is, to take off, to take leave of itself and the earth for the heaven of universal values, choosing, against its gloomy discriminatory past, the redeeming path of non-specification. Jean-Marc Ferry, a French philosopher and disciple of Jorgen Habermas, writes that the definition of Europe, of European identity is the openness to other identities. And for a famous German sociologist, Ulrich Beck, the European formula is what he calls the combination of substantial vacuity and radical openness; nothing substantial so that the openness can be radical and total. From this point of view, the Europeans, for instance, who continue to wonder whether Turkey belongs to Europe, forget dangerously that Europe doesn't belong to Europe any more. Europe doesn't *belong* at all. Not belonging is what post-Holocaust Europe is all about.

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This official self-denial or self-effacement has two terrible drawbacks: First, it weakens integration. (How can one be integrated into a disintegrated world?) It legitimizes hatred. It encourages members of non-European communities to act as angry creditors. And the second drawback is that it leads to the conclusion that the Jews are now betraying their own cause: the democratic credo that was established or re-established on their behalf Israel is the name of their betrayal. Israel, a state based on the principle of blood kinship, and which is now, in the age of Doctors Without Borders, of instantaneous communication and world culture, building a fence in stone. To this European spirit, professing the religion of humanity, imbued with admiration for the "wandering Jew," and full of contempt for the "Jew according to the flesh," I would like to oppose Ruth Klüger. I don't know whether you know the name of this woman. She wrote an extraordinary autobiographical volume, *Weiter leben*. In French the title chosen was *Refus de témoigner*; In English: *Still Alive*. I quote her: "The name of Auschwitz has such a negative aura today that it determines the image of a person as soon as you know that he or she was there." (And she was in Auschwitz.) But she goes on to say: "I don't come from Auschwitz. I come from Vienna. One cannot erase Vienna, whereas Auschwitz was as foreign to me as the moon. Vienna structures my brain and speaks in me, whereas Auschwitz was the most absurd place where I once found myself and its memory remains a foreign body in my soul, as a bullet that cannot be removed from the body. Auschwitz was an appallingly random occurrence, nothing more." I read this text as an anti-Kitsch manifesto and a warning. We should not, in the name of Auschwitz and Buchenwald, deprive Europe of its cultural identity and replace it by the declaration of human rights. It looks noble, it seems wise, but it's wrong, it's deceiving, it's counterproductive. It's an undeserved gift to Hitler, which ultimately does not prevent, but rather intensifies, the development of the ugly feeling it was intended to keep at bay once and for all.

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