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Cultural trauma and religious identity

Following Niklas Luhmanns suggestion we may conceive of religion as any communication that relies on the distinction between immanence and transcendence. This implies that not all societies dispose of a religious foundation. Some very simple societies do not reflect on the difference between their own society and other societies. They see themselves as coextensive with humankind and consider other people as nonhuman. Most societies, however, dispose of a presupposition of their unity and it is this unity that generates the meaningful relating between communications. Cultural discourse can hardly dispense with these presuppositions. Despite their utmost certainty they are difficult to describe, they are what Levi Strauss has called “empty signifiers”.

(Levi Strauss introduced the notion of empty or floating signifiers when he referred to the Australian "mana" or the Native American "Omph").

This reference to the whole and the sacred, to the horizon or to the unclassified world reaches out to something invisible beyond the realm of everyday acting and ordinary conversation. Neither the monotheistic God, nor nature, neither reason nor the Hegelian "Geist", neither life nor culture can be perceived or are at the disposal of particular persons. They contrast to the particular things at hand, to the world of useful and transformable objects, to things that perish and decay, to world of immanence. Only by special methodical procedures like prayer and experiment, criticism and drug use can the everyday certainties be suspended and access to transcendence be gained. Victor Turner has called these extraordinary moments “liminality” (Turner 19). The great transcendence is omnipresent, disembodied and eternal. Asking for its origin is pointless. The great transcendence is a sovereign singular - to vary Kosellecks famous term: we cannot think of a plurality of reasons or natures.

There are, however, also "middle transcendences". They, too, resist to any fixed representation by events or objects, but they allow for the question of origin. Individual persons, but also nations and States, and religious communities are cases in point: they have a beginning, an origin, a founding moment. They are commonly called "identities". On the one hand these identities cannot be confined to a particular representation and to a particular event, on the other hand, however, they can be thought in the plural tense, they presuppose a difference to other identities, and they presuppose the difference between their prehistory and their history. Nations can only be conceived of in contrast to other nations, states can only be conceived of in contrast to other states and a European identity can only be outlined in distinction to Asia or America.

The reference to identity is unavoidable. Let's consider first the case of individual identity. If we talk about actions, intentions, aims, interests, plans, responsibility, guilt etc. we have to presuppose a source of agency, an actor who is distinct from his actions, but whose existence relates different perceptions and states of mind to each other, who can choose between a limited set of alternatives and who, hence, can be held accountable for his actions (Anscombe 1966) .

But in spite of its presuppositional nature identity has to be represented. Representations, however, will never give a complete, exhaustive and undistorted account of identity. Any attempt to represent identity in social interaction can always be contested and questioned, it represents only one perspective on it among others, it is only partially true at best. What we are fighting about in identity wars and identity politics is not identity as such, but particular representations of identity, that are claimed and denied, rejected or recognized (the only case in which identity as such is denied is the case of the victim who is dehumanized and treated as an object, as a case of a category, without a name and without a place to remember him/her as a person).

In distinction to these symbolic representations identity is absolutely certain but intransparent to us. This holds true not only for our enduring existence but also for the events limiting it: we know that we have been born, but we cannot report the experience of birth; we know that we will die some day but we are unable to communicate the experience or our own death. It is only the birth and death of others that we are able to observe and to describe.

While the notion of identity has been largely accepted with respect to individual persons it has been heavily contested when applied to collectivities. The concept of collective identity is, of course, a notoriously complex and essentially fuzzy one (Wagner1998; Brubaker/Cooper 2000; Giesen 1999). But although social boundaries are contested and communities are constructed, there are striking similarities between personal and collective identities: the constitution has to be set by a pouvoir constituant, by a sovereign who has an enduring existence that is independent from the constitution. We cannot hold nations responsible for their history if we do not accept the idea of a transgenerational and transconstitutional collective identity. We would have no reason for solidarity beyond kinship ties etc.

Identity is not just a heroic creation of the actor or of a community who sovereignly and autonomously defines his or her self. Representations of identity are obviously not just an (individual or collective) actor's self-definition that has to be accepted and recognized unconditionally by outsiders. Ego who defines his identity cannot dispense of alters approval because egos own identity remains intransparent to him- or herself - it is almost impossible to think of one own identity in complete isolation without at least referring to an imagined other. In order to imagine and to describe this intransparent identity, in order to calm down his own insecurity ego needs the communication with others. A similar indispensable reference to others can be found on the level of collective identity. We are not sovereign and autonomous in creating our collective origins and destinies, in commemorating our ancestors and in admiring our heroes. Our neighbors may object to our claims, despise what we are proud of, contest our achievements.

Let's now consider the representation of collective identities. The question as to what was before the origin is commonly answered by mythical accounts. The founding myth of a community bridges the gap between prehistory and history and this founding myth allows for no further questions. This founding myth often centers the figure of triumphant heroism. By definition the hero is in a liminal situation: he stands above the rules, defies conventional wisdom and the risk of death, he crushes the existing order and ventures out to the unknown (Rank 1922; Campbell 1971). In a position between Gods and ordinary human beings he (or she) is subjected to no rules, commands a divine violence and creates the new. The triumphant hero

represents autonomy, uniqueness and sovereign subjectivity.

Triumphant founding myths narrate frequently a story of immigration or conquest of a land that is imagined as wild and empty and that was rendered fertile by the act of conquest or of occupation. If human beings lived on this land before the occupation they are regarded as uncivilized, savage and crude, their resistance to the occupation is seen as unreasonable and rigid like the resistance of pagans against being baptized. Expelling the native population or even their killing appear justifiable - in particular if we presuppose that they - on their turn have had occupied the land in times immemorial. This heroic narrative of conquest can provide a founding myth for the US and Israel, Australia and Argentina, but it is certainly unable to match the European case.

Many foundation myths of political communities, however, refer to the narrative of triumphant heroism in a different way. Instead of conquering savage territories in these founding myths, the hero stands up against oppression and foreign rule. In the advent of modernity the sovereignty of the monarch relied on this charismatic core of political authority. The divine right of kings and the notion of absolute princely authority presuppose a superhuman reference as embodied in the figure of the triumphant hero.

Modem democracy turned triumphant heroism from an individual into a collective mode. The people rising against the personal rule of the prince or against foreign domination break the unjust social contract, relapse into a state of nature, seize violently the power and set a new constitution by themselves. The revolutionary self-constitution of the demos is the central foundation myth of modem democracies. It imagines the people as the collective sovereign that exists before constitution and law are established and that has to be appealed to in order to change it.

The myth of the revolutionary birth of the people not only imagines the origin of the demos, but it legitimizes public protest marches, acts of civil disobedience or the symbolic occupation of public spaces by protesters. Because these forms of protest are related to the collective heroism of the people on the barricade they are - to a certain degree at least- sanctified in democracies. Political authorities cannot treat them straightforwardly as acts of lawbreaking. Whoever violates the parking rules is

fined, but thousand protesters blocking a road are exempted from legal persecution because they are symbolically related to the revolutionary birth of the demos that exists before the law existed and that is considered to be the source of the law.

Solemn ritual performances and annual celebrations remember and reenact the revolutionary origin of the demos. Its ritual form is the public parade displaying the power of the people in front of its representatives and representing the people's triumphant seizure of public spaces. The annual Soviet parades celebrating the October Revolution, the French parades on 14 Juillet, the American celebrations of Independence Day or the many postcolonial parades in Africa and Asia are cases in point.

Triumphant heroism, is however, not the only mode of heroism around which a collective identity can crystallize. There is also the liminality of the tragically failing hero. The tragically failing hero is defeated by the adversity of the world, but in his defeat and because of his defeat he can keep his pristine purity and sacredness (Jaspers 1946). In contrast to the victorious hero who has to accept compromises in order to stabilize and routinize his rule, the tragically failing hero symbolizes the irredeemable tension between sacred and the profane. He was defeated but not profanized. He, too, represents liminality, but he demarcates the chasm as unbridgeable. The defenders of Masada, the early Christian martyrs, Imam Hussein the murdered founder of the Schiah, the defeated Serbians of the battle of Kosovo, the failed Irish insurrections against the British rule, the Japanese "nobility of failure" (Morris 1975), the Warsaw uprising against the German occupation, the defenders of the Alamo, even the German resistance against Hitler are mythical embodiments of tragically failing heroism that became integral part of the respective national or religious mythologies. This myths of failing heroism frequently ascend to the status of an official trauma of a community although traumatic memories in the strict meaning of the term resist any official representation and rememberance. They are always ruminating in our minds but they can hardly be spoken out.

The most important ritual form of remembering failing heroism is not the public parade, but the historical museum or the memorial site. In the historical museum mostly silent visitors representing the living people are confronted with the remainders and relics of the dead heroes. In contrast to public parades there is no position for the ruling political authorities in this ritual form. Telling the stories of

courageous resistance and desperate uprisings not only saves the honour of the community, but also inspires the resolve of the people to be on the alert and to let the enemy never defeat "our people" again.

A more complex reference to failing heroism in constructing identity can be found in a melancholic abstention from profane engagements as futile and vain. Existentialism and romanticism, but also stoicism and monastic retreatism are cultural movements that - as different as they are - center the chasm between the thisworldly and the otherworldly realm and recommend distance and abstention from profane involvement as the prime path to personhood and subjectivity. Hence, even some ways of constructing the axial-age tension outlined so brilliantly by Eisenstadt crystallize in the figure of the tragic hero (Eisenstadt 1986). In a way the melancholic abstention from military intervention, the skepticism with respect to progress, the chasm between moral and money are special features of a European perspective on identity - at least if seen from an American point of view. But the melancholia of the hero who knows that he is doomed to failure provides hardly an identity that includes all social strata and all nations in Europe. As in the case of triumphant heroism tragically failing heroism,too, is a matter of nations - it undercuts the European level while the cultural universalism of the enlightenment exceeds it.

Heroes who, in triumph or failure, were able to remain unique and sovereign subjects represent the liminal position between Gods and humans. At the opposite end of the human condition we find the liminality of the victims. Victims are human subjects who are treated as objects, as cases of a category without a name, a face and a place within the community (Bauman 1989; Todorov 1996). The perpetrators tried to disperse their remainders and to blur their traces in the outlands of human society. Nothing should remind of their existence. Like heroes they are exempted from the regular social order, but -unlike heroes - they are pushed beyond the margins of social community, they live in extraordinary spaces, in camps (Agamben 1995). Heroes are incomparable; victims are counted by their numbers. They have been recognized as persons before their victimization and they still are viewed as persons from an outside perspective, but the perpetrators have turned them into profane objects that can be killed, traded, used or deported like cattle (Giesen 2004).

Being a victim means not only to be reduced to a profane object but also to encounter mortality and in many cases also death. Death is the liminal horizon of human life absolutely certain, but impossible to communicate as our own experience

(Heidegger 1986). The mind has to ignore the possibility of its own mortality. While death as voluntary sacrifice is invested with profound meaning by most cultures, death by victimization disrupts the web of meaning - it does not fit into a meaningful sequence of narration. It is an inconceivable event (Caruth 1996) and this restraint is the basis of traumatic memories. Therefore, the experience of the surviving victims resists to be told to others, the trauma is enclosed in his or her bodies.

Only from a distance, after a long time or from the position of following generations, the horror and the suffering can be spoken out and worked through (Alexander/ Eyerman/Giesen/ Smelserl/Sztompka 2004). This is exactly what happened in the classical cases of victimization that, later on, were turned into central representations of collective identity in the respective communities. The Shoah, the African American slavery, the great Irish famine, the Armenian genocide were widely ignored when they occurred (Laqueur 1980). They entered the arena of public attention only after a period of latency was passed. Subsequent generations, assisted by few surviving witnesses, try to preserve the collective memory of victims and to give them back their name, their face and their place within the community. During the last century the figure of the victim has gained in attraction as a symbolic representation of individual and collective identity (Giesen 2004). The suffering of the past seems increasingly to provide an attractive reference for the imagination of collective identity – in particular in Western nations: here the victim seem to replace the hero as a figure of heightened subjectivity.

Conflicts and debates about the public recognition of a groups claim to victimhood are, certainly, driven by hidden interests. Big money is at stake; self-appointed advocates of victims stage their cause in public arenas and require compensation. But revealing these interests does not answer the question why these claims are publicly recognized, why people visit monuments remembering the victims of the past, why, today, serious intellectual debates about collective identity focus more on victims than on heroes.

Explanations of this remarkable phenomenon cannot ignore the level of structure and culture. The collective identity of victims is, of course, a retrospective one: it is not our own suffering here and now, but the suffering of the past, the suffering of others that is turned into an identity of the present. Today African Americans and Jewish Americans can, as persons, hardly claim to be victims but they can claim the collective identity of a group the members of which have been victimized in the past.

The figure of the victim seems to gain salience as a pattern of collective identity when the surviving individual victims are disappearing (Giesen 2004). There is also another structural reason for the increasing focus on victims. In identifying with the victims of the past we avoid retroactively the position of the bystander, the noninvolved third party who ignored the suffering and failed to intervene (Hilberg 1992). When we identify with victims and remember their suffering, we reverse the depersonalization of the victims; we give them back their names, their faces and their places within the community. A hidden and haunting awareness of the dangers of objectification in modem social systems might foster this retroactive recognition of personhood: what has been treated as an object is invested with the qualities of a subject again (Bauman 1989).
In a way the increasing focus on victims as embodiments of collective identity is also reflecting the Christian heritage of western culture. The suffering and the crucification of Christ sets the mark for an insurmountable victimhood. Many Christian martyrs tried to follow this path and to construct their own heightened subjectivity by suffering and death. Thus victimization and suffering appear - only at a superficial glance – as a humiliation that asks for revenge, but instead, it provides a chance for sanctification. What from a modern view is conceived of as collective trauma, reveals its religious core if set in the context of the Christian tradition. We will return to this religious core of seemingly utterly secular rituals later on.

The perpetrator is the counterpart to the victim. Perpetrators have, by their voluntary decision, moved beyond the regular social order and have trespassed the basic norms valid in a community. In particular they have, without further authorization, decided about the life and death of others and thereby they have disdained the sacred core of other persons (Giesen 2004). The liminal position of perpetrators results - similar to those of heroes - from a sovereign subjectivity that has cut its ties to regular order and legal norms. Unlike heroes, however, the extraordinariness and rule breaking power of perpetrators, their venturing out into the wild outlands lack recognition and respect on the part of the social community. It is the admiration of the social community that sacralizes the often violent deeds of the charismatic hero. Without this support heroes are turned into evildoers, demons, perpetrators. Sometimes this shift of perspective is produced by a major historical event - a defeat or a change in political authority. Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot and Saddam Hussein had

been viewed as redeemers before and as demons after their death or defeat; their special forces - the SS, the Tscheka etc. - were heroes before and perpetrators afterwards.

Such a total change of perspective is performed by the social community through ritually expelling the perpetrators, by putting them on trial, by killing them, or by banning their actual or symbolic presence. Much more difficult to cope with is the situation of followers and bystanders, who admired the perpetrators but were not directly involved in acts of victimization. These ordinary members of the community had acted according to the regular social order, they had ignored and disregarded the signs of horror and crime, and they had continued to trust in their political leaders. After the defeat or the change of regime they have to realize that, by their very inactivity, they have been accomplices in a mass-murder.

This traumatic experience occurred in postwar Germany. After the war German national identitiy underwent indeed a traumatic sequence. A period of latency in which a coalition of silence about the German guilt united the new Federal Republic was followed by a period of "speaking out" in which a new generation, the "68ers", accused their parents' generation of being responsible for the Holocaust (Assmann/Frevert 1999; Dubiel 1999; Giesen 2004). To this public accusation of an entire generation, new political ritual of remembering the responsibility for the genocide of the European Jews was established. It was originated by Willi Brandt sudden and unexpected gesture of atonement at the Warsaw Ghetto memorial in 1970 (Giesen/Schneider 2004; Rauer 2004; Schneider 2004). The German chancellor, undoubtedly innocent as a person (he was persecuted by the Nazis), kneeled down as a representative of the nation of perpetrators. The individual guilt of perpetrators and collective trauma of the nation of perpetrators are disconnected here. Since then a new public culture of mourning and confessing the collective guilt of the nation has been spawning in Germany. It resulted in historical exhibitions and historical research, TV series and public addresses and it has produced an extraordinary sensitivity of public life with respect to anything that can be interpreted as belittling the German guilt.

The ritual of confessing and affirming publicly the guilt of the past was not limited to representatives of the German nation. During the last decades it spread rapidly among European nations that, retrospectively, discovered their entanglement in collaboration and their missing intervention. After celebrating the tragically failing

heroism of resistance France is increasingly concerned with Vichy, with collaboration in the Shoah (Papon) and with the French roots of anti-Sernitism (Sternhell 1996), Poland is debating its own genocidal involvement in the case of Jedbawne (Gross 2001),the former Norwegian president Bruntland noted that more young Norwegians died in the ranks of the Waffen-SS than as victims of the German occupation, the Pope apologizes for the lack of official intervention against the genocide, the Italian post-fascist leader Fini visits Auschwitz, the negligence of reports about the Holocaust by American and British authorities and the lack of intervention is publicly debated in the United States (Laqueur 1980) etc. The once clear cut distinction between Germany as the nation of perpetrators and the occupied European nations as the victims is gradually blurred. Most nations have been entangled in collaboration and many acknowledge this now by official apologies offered by political representatives who - like Brandt - are innocent as persons. Germany reluctantly rediscovers her own victims who died in the allied bombing raids, as refugees fleeing from the Russian invasion or as prisoners of war in Siberia or in Eastern Europe. A widespread awareness of victirnhood and perpetratorship seems to provide a new collective identity of Europe.

Searching for the conditions fostering this surprising turn we can point to the structural boundary separating the individual perpetrators from those who claim the collective identity of perpetrators. If we, as innocent persons, feel shame, remorse and atonement on the part of the collectivity we belong to, then we oppose strongly the past of our collectivity- it should never happen again. We know that there is a bond of belonging between the perpetrators and us, but we disapprove strongly their actions and identify with the victims. In this axial reversal we even hope to get rid of this bond of belonging.

This turn from triumph to trauma is reflected in rituals and monuments. New national memorials and museums rarely remember triumphant victories, but recall the victims of the past. The turn from triumph to trauma has been preluded by a major change in the monuments representing the embodiment of the nation in the hero. After the First World War the monument of the anonymous soldier rephrases the once victorious hero who had a face, name and story at first as a tragically failing hero, than as the nameless victim who ranges among other depersonalized victims of ethnic cleansing and genocide (Koselleck 1997). The new national memorial of the reunited Germany in Berlin is such a memorial of anonymous victims, a memorial constructed by the

nation and for the nation of perpetrators. In remembering a collective trauma it includes victims as well as perpetrators and it can do so because it represents the collective memory of the German nation instead of hinting at the personal guilt of individual perpetrators, very few of whom are still alive. Individual suffering and guilt on the one hand and collective trauma and responsibility on the other are decoupled here.

The turn from the memory of heroes to victims and perpetrators, from triumphant to traumatic foundations of collective identity is also reflected by official rituals performed by representatives of the state. The famous kneeling gesture, performed by the former German chancellor Willy Brandt in front of the Warsaw Ghetto memorial thirty years ago, engendered today a political culture of ritual apologies with respect to the victims of the past (Cunningham 1999). In a strange way the figure of the perpetrator becomes an archetype of collective identity - not only in Germany (Giesen 2002). During the past years many representatives of different European nations have officially confessed their nations involvement in the Shoah. at. Compared to these solemn confessions of guilt and its representation in monuments, museums and public debates the traditional celebrations of triumphant memorial days are increasingly reduced to the status of local folklore.

This contemporary shift from triumphant to traumatic foundations of collective memory contrasts sharply to the postwar attempts to purify ones own community by shifting the guilt to one nation and within this nation to a limited group of criminal if not demonic perpetrators. Today the turn towards a collective memory of past trauma blurs the once clear cut separation between the nations of perpetrators and the nations that could remember themselves as victims.

And again: this secular turn from triumphant to traumatic memories, from rituals of celebration to rituals of confessing a collective guilt seems to be driven by a religious core in the Christian tradition. Public confessions of collective responsability for the genocide of the past have certain common features with the self sacrifice of Christ who , although ultimately innocent as an individual person, was humiliated and killed in order to attone for the wrongdoings of his people. In a way Willi Brandts kneeling in Warzawa was a performance of christomimesis (Ch. Schneider). This holds true although Brandt was not a religious person: the religious core of European or more general: of Western culture prevails even through many translations and

transformations.

The conjecture of a religious core is supported by the striking difference between the German readiness to confess the guilt of the past and the Japanese refusal to admit to any national responsablity for Japanese war crimes. This difference is not due to stubbornness or immorality on the Japanese part. Instead, it is a matter of religious identity. While Germany and other European nations are patterned by the axial divide (Eisenstadt) that considers politics and the nation as accountable with respect to religion, to the sacred or to transcendental principles, the Japanese cosmology lacks such a divide: in Japanese culture the nation itself is sacred and the Tenno is God. Hence the collective identity of Japan cannot be accused in the name of God, of the sacred, or of some universal principles. In traditional Japan there is no such reference to a realm that transcends the nation. Individual persons can be held accountable for war crimes but never the nation itself. Thus, the religious core of cultures shapes and patterns their response to trauma and guilt.