

**THE GUARDIANS OF MEMORY**  
AND THE RETURN OF  
THE XENOPHOBIC RIGHT

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface

For a Memory Culture Beyond Victims and Perpetrators.

By Michael Rothberg

Introduction

What Went Wrong?

By Valentina Pisanty

Chapter I, The Duty of Memory

Chapter II, The Discourse of History

Chapter III, Collective Memories

Chapter IV, New Cinema of the Shoah

Chapter V, The Spectacle of Evil

Chapter VI, Denial and Punishment

Appendix

End notes

Bibliography

Filmography

Index

About the author

About the preface

About the translator

## **INTRODUCTION: WHAT WENT WRONG?**

Two facts are there for all to see.

1) In the last twenty years the Shoah has been the object of widespread commemorative activities throughout the Western world.

2) In the last twenty years racism and intolerance have increased dramatically in those very countries where the politics of memory have been implemented with the greatest vigor.

Are these unrelated facts, two independent historical threads, in the same way as there is no demonstrable link between, let's say, soccer hooliganism and progress in cancer research? Or is there a connection, and is it up to a society wishing to oppose the current wave of xenophobia to investigate the reasons for this contradiction?

The reflections that follow were collected in the years spanning 2015 to 2019, a period that historians will have to interpret with the necessary detachment but that, seen from within, looks like a prelude to important turning points. Against the background of events that are all too real, the

symbolic environment is saturated with narratives old and new in a struggle for supremacy. What is at stake is the power to control public perceptions and passions, endlessly conditioned by influential metaphors, argumentative structures, and identitarian narratives deposited in an ever-changing set of commonly held beliefs. But while in the decades when academics and the media were discussing the “end of history,” the order of discourse seemed stable and unassailable (and too bad for those excluded), the 2010s ended with an unstable scenario that left citizens faced with an apparently ineluctable choice.

On the one hand, the old liberal order, entrenched behind the values of democracy, invokes the memory of crimes against humanity — the Shoah in particular — to reaffirm the reasons for its irreplaceable permanence. On the other hand, new political formations are pushing alternative counter-histories, many based on latent memories, suppressed rancor, and national myths once thought to be dead and buried, but which now reveal an unexpected vitality. The positions of

both sides — assuming there are only two — are shot through with glaring inconsistencies.

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But the first grouping, which its opponents label ultra-nationalist, is split between a flaunted revolutionary drive (to demolish the system) and the reactionary collective imagination from which it draws consensus.

But the first grouping, which its opponents label variously (establishment, elite, Europe, Soros...), is not free of contradictions either. A discrepancy between ends and means seems to be its principal limitation. The rhetorical armamentarium with which it legitimizes itself — starting with the closely interrelated concepts of identity and memory — clashes with the much-vaunted project for an open, free, fair, and progressive democracy. The aporias emerge in various spheres of cultural life and not only in the commemorative area, but this is what we shall be discussing here. The

fetishization of witness testimony as the sole kind of authoritative discourse. The privatization of history as an asset to be spent on the public stage. The appropriation of the language of the Holocaust by those interested in cloaking their partisan arguments with universality. The political use of criminal law as a shield against the thugs of memory. Such instruments of consensus are more suited to an authoritarian regime than to a democratic project: it is no surprise that the surging right-wing parties have appropriated and adapted them to their own purposes. As in the martial arts, the xenophobe parties use their opponents' moves against them. They empty dominant forms of their historical content to surreptitiously take them over and, by so doing, play the persecuted victim of an establishment jealous of its own privileges; they flip accusations on their heads; they intercept traditionally left-wing positions to divert the awareness of the excluded and the oppressed and focus it on imaginary enemies (immigrants, Gypsies, Eurabia...). They proliferate amid the chaos they contribute to creating. Where they come into

power they implement discriminatory policies to the detriment of the new minorities while claiming to be the defenders of the majorities and their downtrodden rights; they spread fake news while they launch campaigns against disinformation; they nod to fascism while rejecting any distinction between left and right; they declare solidarity with Israel while they rehabilitate the ancient calumny of the Jewish plot to take over the world.

It may be that the Enlightenment belief according to which human progress can be achieved only by exposing rhetorical deceptions and fielding a disciplined opposition — even when positions are in violent contrast with one another — has become outmoded. Those who still long for the promises of modernity wonder how to react before the rising tide of intolerance and despair of bringing the matter back within the bounds of civil debate, namely the kind of dialectical thinking that acknowledges ontological legitimacy even in theories it is preparing to demolish.

How to reaffirm democratic principles in a context of unbridled competition such as this, which works in favor of the most assertive and unprincipled



bullies, just like some of the darkest examples of dystopian fiction in the cinema and on television that have recently won over the public imagination? Of course, the rules of the game can be changed; of course, democratic principles are often twisted to favor the interests of those who appeal to them; and, of course, the lack of alternative political plans discourages the progressive front, sunk ever deeper in its impotency complex, obliged for decades to submit to the blackmail of the lesser evil, the cut-price compromise, to avoid even more catastrophic scenarios.<sup>1</sup> But I can see no way out that does not pass through a vigorous promotion of critical thinking on every level of public life — thinking that, by definition, should be brought to bear on one's own prejudices even before those of the adversary.

These few preliminary considerations explain why I have chosen to deconstruct the rhetoric of memory, notwithstanding the more urgent threats that crowd the semiosphere. But before lancing the boil of xenophobic nationalism, it is necessary to understand the setting in which it has taken root

and flourished. The first observation is the glaring failure of the politics of memory over the last twenty years, founded on the simplistic equation “never forget” = “never again.” The question is whether this failure was accidental (xenophobia is increasing *despite* the politics of memory)<sup>2</sup>, or whether it is already inherent to the premises (because of the way the political premises have been formulated, they could lead only to the outcome they produced). The aim is to prepare to combat discrimination in an efficacious, incisive manner, which also means honesty, awareness and, where necessary, ruthless self-criticism.

### *The chapters*

1. The duty of memory. The memory of the Shoah has filled the void left by the crisis of the great revolutionary utopias of the last century. Elected a cornerstone of the liberal ethic after the fall of the Berlin Wall, it is the result of a “top-down” project (led by the United States) aimed at uniting the scattered pieces of a Europe in search of an identity amid the unanimous condemnation of

Nazism and, by extension, Soviet communism. Anyone can identify with the victims of absolute Evil. But this is the very problem: the aporias of “cosmopolitan memory” lurk in the contrast between the presumed universality of the core narrative and the inevitable specificity of the uses made of it. Suited to a vast range of historical contexts, the Holocaust narrative has shaped the political imagination of the last thirty years, reducing every conflict to the frame persecuted versus persecutor (sometimes resulting in catastrophic blowback, as in the case of the wars in former Yugoslavia). Hence, the competition between the victims and accusations of offences against memory hurled at rival groups. The Guardians of Memory — the people, associations or institutions appointed to conduct appropriate commemorative practices — manage these disputes to establish who, among the litigants, has more right to express their claims in the vocabulary of the Holocaust.

2. The discourse of history. The Guardians speak in the name of the victims. Witnesses of witnesses,

they draw legitimacy from a kind of osmotic contact with those who “were there.” The assumption is that physical presence in the places of trauma is, per se, grounds for credibility and authoritativeness. Before analyzing the circuits through which the Guardians are delegated, I shall enlarge upon the transformations that have beset witnesses since the time their words became charged with a truth value that transcends historiographical parameters. In contrast with the critical method historians employ to weigh, cross-check, and interpret their sources (while remaining aware of the margin of error that all testimony necessarily involves), the rhetoric of memory fetishizes witnesses, as if no cognitive or cultural filters existed between the accounts they produce and the events of which they speak. And it sacralizes them, as if the traumas endured had projected them outside history into some transcendent metaphysical dimension. The appeal to authority (“I believe it because she/he said so”) supplants the more cautious guiding principles of scientific-argumentative thinking. In this chapter I shall analyze some collateral effects of this

changeover, while in the Appendix I shall discuss, in rather more technical terms, the epistemological status of testimony as proof or a sign that “something has happened.”

3. Collective memories. History is public, while memory always belongs to someone. As such, it reflects the concerns and the particular interests of those who direct it. Whereas historians aspire, in theory at least, to reconstruct events as objectively as possible (on the basis of publicly accessible documents), people who recall the experiences they have personally lived through hold full title to their reminiscences, even when they get confused or remember badly. But the question grows more complex in the shift from firsthand memories to the way in which a cultural community presents and perpetuates the image of its past for the benefit of and as a warning to successive generations. Who has the right to establish formats, to the detriment of other possible representations? What happens to memories that cannot be translated into the terms of the dominant paradigm, and how do they re-emerge

in periods of political instability, when power relations between dominant memories, the adversaries' counter-memories, and the silent majorities are being reorganized? The irreducibly proprietary aspect of every memory is dealt with in chapter 3. In particular, when the disputed memory still has potent effects on the present, as in the case of the Shoah, control of it is the prize at stake in bitter disputes aimed at undermining the primacy of the dominant representations, and the authority of the Guardians who set themselves up as their defenders.

4. New cinema of the Shoah. The formats of memory are particularly influenced by the cinema and television, which pick up and amplify dominant commemorative attitudes. In the past, debates on the limits of

representation have fascinated directors, intellectuals, and public opinion, intent on squaring the circle regarding the “representation of the unrepresentable” of death in the concentration camps. In recent years, the creative tension of filmmakers has gradually flagged as the memory of the Shoah has settled on an ethical-aesthetic canon that no critic, or almost none, is prepared to call into question anymore. What is the cause of this flattening out, and up to what point is it reasonable to consider it a symptom of a more general “memory fatigue”? In chapter 4 I shall analyze four recent films in light of a critique of so-called post-memory. The suggestion is that we are going through a crisis in the Holocaust paradigm, not suited to take account of a diversely traumatic present that can no longer be reduced to the familiar schema persecuted versus persecutor.

5. The spectacle of evil. The palpable weariness of a memory that has become more and more ritualized, dried up, and self-involved can be perceived in various areas of social life: from the disrespectful selfies taken by tourists on trips to Auschwitz to irreverent episodes on the subject of the Holocaust, especially on social media; from displays of racism in soccer stadiums to the outrageous language used by leaders of the new right to stigmatize the minorities they target from time to time. The impression is that such uncivil and/or xenophobic behaviors do not happen despite the shield of memory, but, on the contrary, that the new racists have learned to encapsulate the responses of the Guardians within the rhetorical strategies they employ to drum up consensus. If the narrative of the Shoah has lost its former incisiveness, what are the formats of contemporary storytelling from which the next great narratives might emerge? I shall search for them in the hypercompetitive worlds of the new generation of films for cinema and television whose global success suggests an identification far



superior to that with which we currently bring to moralizing narratives on the Holocaust.

Characterized by the values of social Darwinism and the survival of the fittest, the new “win or die” shows pose to viewers a disturbing question that flips the meaning of testimony from the camps on its head: Which of your fine principles would you be prepared to sacrifice to attain your goal?

6. Denial and punishment. The last bastion of memory is the law. Every legal system reflects the political will to mold a cohesive society thanks (also) to the inspiring example of past episodes. Usually, legislative intervention is limited to the promotion of dominant narratives through scholastic curricula, national celebrations, monuments, and other non-punitive measures. Only occasionally is the law mobilized to criminalize any commemorative behaviors deemed unacceptable, notwithstanding the evident conflict between such intervention and the principles of freedom of speech. This is the case with the European framework decision of 2008, which decrees that all the countries of the Union must

establish laws imposing sanctions on anyone who denies or minimizes the most traumatic episodes of the twentieth century, starting with the Shoah. In chapter 6 I shall maintain that the anti-negationist laws — whose inefficacy is easy to demonstrate — do not aim so much at protecting the rights of the minorities to whom those denied memories belong as at safeguarding memories per se, as if the perpetuation of historical traumas constituted an inalienable legal right to be defended by any means necessary. But is it possible to catch a glimpse of a different agenda (with respect to the declared aim of its supporters – i.e., to combat racism) in the will to introduce exceptional measures to protect society from those who do not accept “shared common values”?