

# The Democratization of Memory

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## Multiple Pasts?

No nation can avoid the task of creating an account of the past, and traditionally the past belongs to the victors. It is those in power now who determine who was right back then. In the apartheid era in South Africa, the Museum of Cultural History in Kaapstad contained almost nothing on slavery — an institution generally recognized to be an integral part of the country's history. Similarly, during the rule of Hastings Kamuzu Banda in Malawi, one could discover every detail of the dictator's biography in the nation's historical museum but hardly anything about his allies in the independence struggle against the British. The closer Banda came to seizing absolute power, the more of these former allies of the regime landed in jail, and the emptier the museum became.<sup>1</sup> It may be hard to seize power, but appropriating the past is also no easy task.

Why are nations in need of a past? Because they need a "we" — a designation of what their citizens have in common. Even if this identity is to some extent fictive (as Benedict Anderson has demonstrated so well<sup>2</sup>), that doesn't make it less real. A common past is helpful; it shows what the "people" have always had in common, what they have shared for a long time. How else can it be decided who belongs and who doesn't? A common past can also serve the nation's need to legitimize its geographical boundaries. It provides the bricks and even the cement for the self-awareness of a national community and its political class.

Every year in my own country, The Netherlands, we commemorate the victims of the German occupation of 1940-45, and also those who fell fighting the Japanese in what was then called Dutch East India and is now Indonesia. The government's declaration of a national holiday on May 4 and 5 states that on these days "the liberation of the kingdom from German and Japanese occupation should be commemorated and celebrated." This official formulation, in which the nation creates a concept of its past, equates the Japanese occupation of Holland's former colonies with the German occupation of the Netherlands. Having suggested that these two occupations can be compared to one another, the formulation ignores the fact, for example, that the Dutch were themselves an occupying power in the colonies, and fought to suppress the independence movement, which was backed by the Japanese. In this version of the past, literally official because produced by the state, the Dutch people are portrayed as the victims of powerful aggressors whom they bravely resisted both at home and abroad.

In recent decades, Dutch authors, artists, scholars, and journalists have confronted the less happy sides of the nation's colonial past. There have been many cases of "coming out," in which former army men, both soldiers and officers, have admitted to having participated in atrocities. These facts have even been discussed fairly openly in the Dutch parliament. Nevertheless, on the national level, the official image of the past persists in relatively unblemished form. The need for a common past is tenacious, and in the drama of this past it seems as if people can only play one of two roles: hero or victim. In past years, The Netherlands has demanded an apology from German and Japanese politicians for their nations' actions during World War II. Yet the government did not allow the Dutch queen to apologize in the name of her country on a visit to Indonesia in 1995. She had to limit herself to the neutral statement, "It fills us with sorrow that so many people were killed in this fight or were marked by it for their entire lives."

The past in The Netherlands is Janus-faced — there seem to be two fundamentally different attitudes toward it. On one side is the official attitude that recurs like a repetition compulsion every year on May 4. Politicians, the military, and representatives of many organizations parade past the National Monument in solemn observance to lay wreaths and give speeches. Here a consensus reigns as to what should be commemorated and celebrated, and the relationship to the past is ritualized. On the other side is the unofficial attitude, no less a part of public consciousness for being expressed in novels, works of art, scholarly writing, and media debates. Here there can be no talk of a consensus; instead the past itself is contested. Writers like Rudy Kousbroek and Graa Boomsma have convincingly contested the equation of the German and the Japanese occupations. Veteran organizations have criticized and threatened them for it.

The function and source of the ritual attitude are clear: as argued above, it is a question of the constitution of a national identity — an identity backed by a state that considers itself the representative of the people. But what is the source of the second face of the Janus head? Why argue over the past? What does that achieve? Isn't it all relative and subjective anyway? How has it happened that in recent decades, in many nations of the world, so many controversies have arisen around coming to terms with the past? What are the means they employ, what interests do they express, and what groups do they represent?

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The term "truth commission" has not existed for long:<sup>3</sup> in a dictionary I have from 1999, the Dutch equivalent, "waarheidscommissie," does not yet appear. Expressions like "monument against slavery" and "Holocaust memorial" are neologisms too. Language, it goes without saying, responds to social developments — and what kind of development are we dealing with here? How has it happened that, as Timothy Garton Ash writes, "The relationship of societies to a difficult past is one of the most important problems of this era"?<sup>4</sup>

The question has a quick answer and a less quick one. The quick answer: the issue arises out of specific social upheavals. Without the end of apartheid there would be no South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Without the fall of the Berlin Wall there would be no Enquete-Kommission Aufarbeitung von Geschichte und Folgen der SED-Diktatur in Deutschland (Inquest commission on the history and consequences of the SED [Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands] dictatorship in Germany). Without the end of the Salvadoran civil war there would be no Comisión de la Verdad para El Salvador (Truth commission for El Salvador). The phrase "social upheaval" here, however, is clearly vague; further elucidation is needed of the quick, unsurprising answer, and it runs: for the relatively new phenomenon of truth commissions and the like, we can thank those who have fought for freedom and democracy. When it becomes clear what freedom and democracy have to do with problems of justice and truth, our quick, trivial answer can be replaced by a more complicated one.

As mentioned, the ritual attitude to the past is ultimately based on a form of victor's justice. We commemorate victims, but our commemoration takes place in the context of a retrospective view of the elimination of an enemy. The freedoms we enjoy today, it is said again and again, could not have been achieved without painful sacrifices. But isn't the second, more analytic kind of approach to the past — clearly the kind involving truth commissions, etc. — just as much a victor's affair? Those who benefited from the apartheid system have ultimately lost; and one can say the same of those who held power in the former GDR, some of whom were even sent to jail by German courts. Surely this, too, looks like victor's justice.

But that is not the case. One cannot say that this is victor's justice, because the process of "transitional justice" sets fundamentally different attitudes to the past in conflict with one another. It is an open question whether those who benefited from apartheid have suffered actual damages as a result of the work of South Africa's Truth Commission. As Mahmood Mamdani has shown, little has so far changed in their economic position.<sup>5</sup> The commission's task, however, did not include the discussion of these problems. Political compromises made at the time of apartheid's fall meant that its political representatives would not be criminally charged. As for the punishment of former SED officials in Germany, that, too, was contested — especially in the progressive press.

Processes of transitional justice are characterized by competing attitudes to the past. Who have justice on their side? "The truth" is not yet codified under the new, more peaceful circumstances; it will have to be dragged into the light, and to a certain extent reinvented, since it has toiled so long in the service of the former regime. Who will control it now?<sup>6</sup> Given questions like these, transitional justice clearly involves not the secure perspective of the victors but a nonritual approach to the past and to the uncertainties of the democratic process.

In nonritual approaches to the past, new groups or classes of society lay claim to their own history — they sue for it, so to speak. Until now they have literally lacked a recognized history; it has not existed, or at best has existed underground, passed along by word of mouth. It was not contained within the earlier society's official self-image, which was constantly retouched by propaganda. Do you speak of oppression? Terrorists were justly punished. Do you speak of murder? The man jumped out of the window, he wasn't pushed. Do you speak of the wrongfulness of slavery? Blacks were children, and the constitution only applied to those with civil rights. These types of justification, which retrospectively deprive the so-called "freed" of their past, are tenacious, and are not automatically refuted by social change. Shifts toward democracy take paths determined by the specific social situation; in the beginning there is the political fight, and only later, sometimes even decades later, comes the reappraisal of everything that has happened. Processes of emancipation typically advance only with great difficulty and have a long-drawn-out history. If the social group in question is unsuccessful in bringing its past to light, it will lose its path toward freedom and democracy.

It is precisely here that we encounter the nontrivial significance of contested concepts like freedom and democracy. In victor's justice there is always a continuum between the past and the present: the Ministry of Propaganda tinkers with history until the prevailing situation seems its logical development. As narrated by the Ministry, history becomes the red carpet on which those in power march into the present, propelled by their self-created repetition compulsion. In the nonritualized approach to the past, however, such a continuum cannot exist. Things happened in the past that today are barely comprehensible. Individuals and groups who participated in these events may now lead quiet lives, and may not want to hear about what they once did; yet countless people still suffer from the dark events that marked the lives of their parents and ancestors. What is needed is not a retouching of history but, often, a writing of it for the first time.

With a truth commission the relationship to the past shifts paradigmatically. Where victors colonize memory, the truth commission democratizes it. Neither winners nor losers, neither perpetrators nor victims, have the final word. The democratization of memory seeks to avoid a future repetition of the horrors of the past.

The relation between memory and democracy is not a theoretical construction: processes of memory require a real, existing democratic context, a space in which competing claims can unfold. In Germany, for example, the debate over the Nazi past did not begin until the 1960s. An important catalyst for this debate was the student movement for a democratization of German society, which was not

yet completely de-Nazified.<sup>7</sup> In the United States, similarly, the debate on the history of slavery really only began after African-Americans successfully fought for civil rights, in the 1950s and '60s.<sup>8</sup> It was only then, for the first time, that there was a call for monuments, that museums were founded, books were written, and scholarly debates were conducted on the many aspects of slavery. The new citizens refused to live with an amputated past. The right to know about the conditions of life in the past is among the civil rights of a democracy. The process of democratizing memory, with all its detours and wrong turns, is part of the confusing situation of a pluralistic society that must come to terms with conflicting internal interests.

## The Effort of Memory

Four different aspects of the effort of memory will be discussed here. Before doing so, however, it may be useful to state that societies face their problematic histories with varying degrees of adequacy. As I have said, nations living under dictatorships have no interest at all in dealing with history well; for them, the red carpet suffices. It does not follow, however, that nations that are democratic always resist the seduction of the red carpet. Slavery, for example, was abolished in the Netherlands in the nineteenth century, by which time it must already have been clear that this peculiar institution contradicted the fundamental equality of all individuals. Yet for decades after its abolition, no mention of it was to be found in Dutch history books. The national history of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries remained as glorious as ever. Only in recent years have lively discussions of problems of slavery been heard, and only now, in 2001, has it been decided that a national monument on the history of slavery will be built. England, one of the first nations to abolish slavery, was also ahead of other countries in founding a museum of its history, in Liverpool.

In Holland, the public debate on slavery, with the ensuing discussion of a memorial, comes thanks to pressure from immigrant groups from the former colonies, especially those in the Caribbean. It is a case of their history being brought to light, and of their democratic right to their own past. A liberal democratic society that refuses to recognize its problematic past discriminates against the social groups that carry this unrecognized past around with them.

What does this have to do with those who did not commit any atrocity, and who probably never would have? What do they have to do with this history? To what should they confess? They never sold slaves or put Jews and Gypsies in concentration camps. Why should anyone even deal with memory work in their own society?

This point concerns the first aspect of the effort of memory: it is appropriate when the truth of one's own way of life is under debate. In a democratic society, citizens have the right to perform the work of memory. Those who want to inform themselves about their own society run up against these problems whether they like it or not. Teachers, spiritual leaders, journalists, historians, and others who pass on knowledge of their society should not overlook this.<sup>9</sup> They have a responsibility to the truth. They are concerned with contexts in which recognizing the past as a part of the existing way of life is absolutely necessary — even if, as individuals, they had nothing to do with it.

The truth is not relative. It can compel one to recognize the past as a part of one's own political self-understanding. This is what Jürgen Habermas is aiming at when he writes about the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin: "As citizens of this country we take an interest in the darkest chapter of our history — in the criminal activity of the perpetrator and the problematic behavior of the generations of perpetrators — especially when we are interested in reconstructing our own political identity."<sup>10</sup>

The effort of memory, however, is not only a matter of disclosing the truth; there is also the political question of how much disclosure a society can stand without disintegrating. I have already mentioned Mamdani's entirely legitimate critique of the way the Truth Commission spared the beneficiaries of apartheid. The commission's work, however, under the direction of Bishop Desmond Tutu, would not have been possible without such a concession. In this respect the truth can indeed become relative. Not only questions of truth but inevitable problems of power assert themselves in the effort of memory. Tutu's modesty in delivering the commission's report to President Nelson Mandela was no accident; to sum up what had been achieved, he remarked, "There has been some truth, some reconciliation. Now there is a face, there is a name for the cry of anguish."<sup>11</sup>

The issue of a truth commission's authority, and general questions as to whether a truth commission or even a tribunal should be set in place during the establishment of democracy, are much to the point. As studies of the roles of truth commissions show, no broad answers are possible. Much depends on the political context. Even when it is quite clear that the deposed regime committed crimes, legal action cannot always be taken in cases where punishment is merited on moral or legal grounds. And this brings me to perhaps the most difficult point, and to the third aspect of the effort of memory: the necessity of justice. Justice does not depend on truth findings and pragmatic policy questions alone. The democratization of memory affects not only the past but the future as well.

In which ways can victims be offered restitution? Moral recognition and revelation of the truth are not enough; material support is also essential, as was provided in postwar Germany, for example, to the survivors of the Holocaust. The material compensation that was paid to the relatives of the disappeared and murdered in Chile and Argentina can also be mentioned here.<sup>12</sup>

Financial reparations to the descendants of slaves are controversial. How are the damages that their ancestors doubtless suffered, and that they themselves continue to suffer, to be assessed, and translated into concrete sums of money? Which persons and groups should be considered for such payments? In my opinion general sociopolitical measures are more in order here: support must be supplied to groups that lack economic, social, and cultural opportunities, just as their ancestors did. The fact of being economically deprived or underprivileged can easily be transmitted from generation to generation; imaginative and promising social projects are needed, and a fair amount of money will have to be spent on them. Though financial reparations cannot reverse history, they offer prospects for the future. Social and material agencies provide public recognition that people have been done injustice, that in the past they have been victims of political crimes. If they have been frozen in a bad situation, as some of them have, this may help them to move out of it. Paradoxical though it may sound, just the acknowledgment that cruelty and abuses of power were suffered can serve to ease the "victim status" of the people affected.

It sometimes happens that suffering in the past is instrumentalized instead of palliated. Groups and even whole peoples can be politically seduced into insisting on their victim status. Their former suffering becomes their most valuable asset, and everything that happens is evaluated in its light. In this way the suffering is kept alive instead of overcome. Genocide can be justified, for example, in the name of a genocide suffered. Similarly, while compensation can be a first step toward justice, a repetition compulsion in dealing with traumatic memories can be the occasion for new injustices. The state of Israel is an example; Israeli Arabs and Palestinians are deprived of their legitimate civil rights. I am not one of those who believe that Israel has no legitimate rights in Palestine — a view, incidentally, that a majority of Israeli Arabs and Palestinians no longer hold. But it remains true that uncompromising groups in Israel commit injustices that they justify by appealing to the oppression of their own

people in the past. In this way they instrumentalize their previous suffering. The ties with the past are not loosened. This kind of memory effort makes history something permanent, an immovable obstacle in the future.

Memory efforts that are not publicly visible do not exist. Here we touch the fourth aspect of the process under consideration. When people in new democratic circumstances confront the past, such a confrontation must find cultural expression. Recognition in a purely formal sense — through apologies, for example — is not enough. The same is true of monetary compensation. Memory efforts have a surplus value in relation to the facts, to power, to morality, and to money, and this surplus value can find expression in art. Our everyday languages are practical instruments formed by all kinds of experiences. Works of art create new languages and open up worlds that were previously unknown.

As signs of efforts of memory, works of art can only be unconventional, surprising, even provocative. To bring individuals and groups to the point of asking themselves what actually took place back then, traditional means are insufficient. People just pass them by. Instead of monuments one needs countermonuments, obstacles to conventional memory such as those made by the Austrian sculptor Hrdlicka, or, in the past, by painters like Goya and George Grosz. These works of art don't bow to the heroes of the past but instead make it possible to discuss the terrors of repression and war. They force the spectator into the work of memory, like it or not.

Such countermonuments raise questions about the traditional monuments one comes across in every great city. What should happen to them? Must they be maintained as symbols of the ritual attitude to the past, something every nation seems to need? Or should they, as an organization in Germany once suggested, be technically outfitted so as to slowly sink — a couple of centimeters a year — into the ground?

In my opinion, they must remain where they are. Nations, after all, haven't disappeared from the earth as yet. The democratization of memory is not a process of harmonization. It is contradictory, bringing to light unknown and unpopular chapters of history. It should not marginalize other attitudes to the past but put them in question. The controversies it starts can be carried out publicly and peacefully, and can include debate on the symbols through which individuals and groups are trying to come to terms with their past.

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## References

- 1 Hastings Kamuzu Banda was the president of Malawi from 1966 to 1994 and "President for Life" from 1971 to 1993.
- 2 See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

- 3** See Priscilla B. Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths: Confronting State Terror and Atrocity* (New York and London: Routledge, 2001).
- 4** Timothy Garton Ash, "The Truth about Dictatorship," *New York Review of Books*, February 19, 1998, p. 35. See also Ian Buruma, *The Wages of Guilt: Memories of War in Germany and Japan* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994).
- 5** Mahmood Mamdani, "The Truth according to the TRC," in Ifi Amadiume and Abdullahi An-Na'im, eds., *The Politics of Memory: Truth, Healing, and Social Justice* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2000), pp. 176-83.
- 6** See Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull* (Johannesburg: Random House, 1998).
- 7** See Gesine Schwan, *Politics and Guilt: The Destructive Power of Silence*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001).
- 8** See Gert Oostindie, ed., *Het verleden onder ogen, Herdenking van de slavernij* (The Hague: Arena/Prins Claus Fonds, n.d. [1999]).
- 9** See Frank Martinus Anon, "Een ,beau geste,'" in *ibid.*, pp. 19-23.
- 10** Jürgen Habermas, "Der Zeigefinger: Die Deutschen und ihr Denkmal," *Die Zeit* (Hamburg), March 31, 1999, pp. 42-43.
- 11** See Peter Hawthorne's article on the Truth Commission's report in *Time*, November 9, 1998.
- 12** See Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths*, p. 314.