

## About the complexity of the past

Tuesday 15 September 2020, by [TRAVERSO Enzo](#) (Date first published: 15 September 2020).

**The historian Enzo Traverso, a professor at the Cornell University (USA), is one of the most distinguished specialists in memory studies. In the following pages he answers a series of questions focusing on the memory of the perpetrators and their legacies, the current rise of new far-right movements and the situation of the European policies of memory. He also refers to his latest books, [Left-wing melancholia. Marxism, History, and Memory](#) (Columbia University Press, 2017) and [Les nouveaux visages du fascisme](#) (Editions Textuel, 2017).**

### **Why are there so few studies about the memory of perpetrators?**

There are numerous and sometimes extremely important studies on perpetrators if you think of the works of Christopher Browning and Harald Welzer. The memory of perpetrators has been the object of literary fiction — for instance, *Les Bienveillantes* (*The Kindly Ones*) by Jonathan Littell — but the available corpus of testimonies and memoirs is limited. Perpetrators do not like to exhibit or recall their crimes and prefer to conceal them. Instances of “coming out” are rare (for instance, the memoirs of the general Aussaresses on torture during the Algerian war). This is not surprising. The scarcity of memories of perpetrators (and therefore studies concerning them) is the dialectical reversal of the increasing role that the remembrance of victims has taken in our societies and in collective memory.

### **Do you believe that a policy of memory focused exclusively on the victim and not the perpetrator can provoke a certain blindness towards crimes that are currently committed?**

Frankly, I believe that it is necessary to extricate ourselves from this game of mirrors and from a historical consciousness based on mass victims. We should try to accommodate the complexity of the past, which is not reduced to a binary confrontation between perpetrators and victims. The memory of battles and political commitments to past causes like emancipation has little recognition. The 20<sup>th</sup> century is not made up exclusively of wars, genocide, and totalitarianism. It was also the century of revolutions, decolonisation, the conquest of democracy and great collective struggles. This memory has been delegitimised nowadays, having become hidden and covert. I call it a “Marrano memory,” insofar as it is a hidden, underground memory like that of Marranos in the Spanish kingdom at the time of Inquisition. It seems to me that in order to break down the cage of “presentism” — a world locked up in the present with neither utopia nor the capacity to look ahead to the future — it is necessary to accommodate these memories. The remembrance of collective movements takes on an anti-conformist, perhaps subversive dimension to a neoliberal era dominated by individualism and competition.

### **You speak of “post-fascism” in order to describe the new political and social movements of the far right and to distinguish them from the fascism of the 1930s or the neo-fascism of the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Could you explain to us what post-fascism entails?**

I speak of “post-fascism” because the new far right has taken its distance from fascism, at least in the countries where it has become a major player in political life. On an ideological level, post-

fascism is very different to traditional fascism in terms of language, organisation, and mobilisation. It is no longer fascist but has still not become something completely different and new. It is a form of transition, which justifies the notion of post-fascism. Its dominant characteristics are nationalism and xenophobia, especially in the form of Islamophobia. Nowadays, it no longer finds its fundamental purpose in anticommunism or anti-Semitism. The focus has changed. Nevertheless, a major economic crisis with the dismantling of the euro and European institutions etc. could bring about a change of direction and a return to traditional fascism. Of course, this can happen also outside of Europe. After the election of Donald Trump in the US, Jair Bolsonaro, a politician who clearly fits all requirements of a fascist leader, has been elected in Brazil. This depicts an international tendency.

**What could be some policies of memory that raise awareness of the dangers of the current far right without resorting to trivialising fascism with outdated comparisons?**

All establishment politicians stigmatize the far right, but often they legitimize its rhetoric. If we accept the idea that constructing Europe involves adopting austerity policies, that the constraints put in place by the markets are indisputable, that there are too many immigrants and that illegals must be deported instead of being legalised, that Islam is incompatible with Western democracy and that terrorism should be combated by special laws reducing civil liberties — as all our governments have been saying for ten years — then the far right will only prosper. In order to stop its advance, it is necessary to first have a real discussion and tell the truth. Receiving immigrants and refugees is a moral duty, insofar as millions of Europeans emigrated and fled from authoritarian regimes in the past two centuries; and a social necessity, insofar as we need them for both economic and demographic reasons. In a global age, our societies cannot survive as closed, ethnically and culturally homogeneous entities.

In terms of policies of memory, we have to recognise that the fascism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is very different from that of the 1930s. The lesson we should infer from history is that democracies are perishable and can be destroyed. In countries that have experienced fascism — I'm thinking of Italy, Germany, Spain and a few others — a democracy that has not assimilated this lesson will be fragile and vulnerable. In this sense, anti-fascist memory seems topical to me.

**Dictatorships have left a legacy and some places of remembrance. The treatment of these places by democracies has been controversial, to say the least. What could be done with places like the Valle de los Caídos in Spain?**

I don't believe in the myth of "reconciliation" or "shared remembrance". A strong democratic society should not fear its enemies and grant them freedom of expression within the limits of the law. When it comes to the remembrance of fascism in Italy and Francoism in Spain, it would be better to recognise their existence rather than conceal them. A democratic state can tolerate them, by no means assuming them or integrating them into its own institutions. A democratic state should not establish an official vision of the past (as is the case in dictatorships), but it does have the duty to recognise its own responsibilities. For example, Chirac's recognition of the responsibility of the French State for deporting Jews or Emmanuel Macron's recognition of the torture that took place during the Algerian war are welcome. In Spain, the "Law of Historical Memory" moves in this direction despite its limits.

The question of what to do with the Valle de los Caídos is complex. My view is that of an independent observer who by no means claims to have magical solutions. To my mind, the decision of Pedro Sánchez to exhume the remains of Franco and remove them from the Valle de los Caídos is a good choice. However, it is also necessary to remove the gigantic cross on top of the site in order to "desacralize" it. It could then be transformed into a memorial and museum with a critical presentation of its history. It would become a memorial in the German sense of a *Mahnmal* (a

warning for future generations). I don't believe in the possibility of creating a place of consensual remembrance in which Republicans and those nostalgic for Francoism can gather "fraternally" in the name of national reconciliation. Nor do I believe in a memorial that would be a recollection of all the victims of the civil war, putting them all on the same level and the same place. This would be a hypocritical choice and not the policy of memory of a democratic state. In this case, it would be difficult to avoid exhuming all the remains (equally those of Francoist soldiers and those of deported republicans) to bury them in a different spot, alongside or elsewhere. That being said, I am not aware of all the propositions that have been made and my position is not the result of in-depth study or extensive contemplation of the subject.

### **How has neoliberalism affected our perception of time? How does it influence our vision of the past, present, and future?**

Neoliberalism compresses our lives into an eternal present, a world dominated by acceleration that gives us the impression of permanent change, although the social and economic foundations remain static. The free-market society promises to satisfy all our desires — our utopias become individual and are "privatised" — within the context of a social and anthropological model that shapes our lives, institutions, and social relationships. In a neoliberal society, the past is reified and remembrance transformed into a consumer item shaped and disseminated by the cultural industry. Politics of memory — museums and commemorations — are submitted to the same criteria of reification (profitability, media coverage, adapting to predominant tastes etc). Inventing and especially imposing different timeframes is no easy task. Connecting to the temporality of the past (shooting at clocks of church towers in order to arrest time, according to the famous image of Walter Benjamin) or inventing timeframes that are not submitted to the rules of the free-market society is the major challenge facing all alternative projects. Social movements in the last few years such as 15M, Occupy Wall Street, Nuit Debout etc. have been interesting experiences in this sense.

### **What is the "melancholy of the left-wing" and how can remembrance become a tool of social transformation?**

The melancholy of the left-wing has always existed. It has followed failures of collective movements and the collapse of hopes for revolution. It seeks neither passivity nor resignation and can favour a critical reappraisal of the past capable of preserving its emotional dimension. This means both mourning lost comrades and remembering the joyful and fraternal moments of social transformation through collective action. We need this melancholy powered by remembrance, which is no obstacle to the reactivation of the left-wing.

### **How would you describe the politics of remembrance that the EU has implemented up until now and what are its main challenges?**

The essential mission of the European Union's politics of remembrance has primarily been instrumental and decorative: showing virtue whilst adopting anti-social policies. On one hand impoverishing Greece, on the other organising commemorations of the Holocaust; on one hand introducing the power of the troika, a supranational power devoid of any democratic legitimacy, on the other proclaiming human rights; on one hand financing museums and commemorations dedicated to the victims of totalitarianism and genocide, on the other meticulously closing borders and refusing to adopt a common policy to welcome refugees. This hypocrisy can only have detrimental consequences. The rise of the far right is proof of this.

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Interview with Enzo Traverso, Cornell University

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