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The palisade of Auschwitz

An image

A paradox of the concept of history: when it refers to the human construction of reality over time, history becomes a great cry, an expression, unattainable through knowledge, of the multiplicity of human experience; as a form of narration of this experience, however, history selects its silences: it ignores some voices, gags others and definitively buries some experiences so as to make space for only a certain few.

Yet, *history* as knowledge is secularly expected to be the highest instance of truth. The ruling of posterity is transferred to history as knowledge. Of no other discipline is so much demanded. Certainly not of literature and its peripheries —literary criticism, literary theory, cultural studies— or of philosophy or art. Only historians are summoned to appear in the courts that judge silences, omissions and distortions. And this is the case, no doubt, because the historian is telling the history of barbarism when he or she wants to talk about the history of culture. Because any story is susceptible to being inquired into, questioned or, as Walter Benjamin wished, to being brushed against the grain.

Brushing against the grain means re-inverting the order, altering the sign of the variable: to oblige addition when the desire is for subtraction and vice versa. The metaphor of the historian as detective is pertinent. It is also the metaphor of *Crime and Punishment*, which can be read as a judgment on history as narration. Let's take a brief look. Raskolnikov is caught in the delirium of being another. Of being Napoleon, of being a new Napoleon. Of paying the price of first being a criminal so as to be absolved subsequently by history to the extent that it has been able to convert the first criminal act into something that is beneficial for society because he is able to turn himself into a benefactor of humanity. But Raskolnikov is at once assailed by astonishment: the murder of the old woman does not give him the initial energy he needs for his personal redemption and that of humanity.



Dibuix negre I (Black Drawing I).

Antoni Tàpies (2005)

paint and pencil on paper

23,8 x 16,5 cm

Tàpies

On the contrary, the delirium is accentuated and the malaise threatens his life. Expiation in this crisis will be offered him by the judge in charge of investigating the old woman's murder, Porfiry Petrovitch. At the price, however, of his confession, his being condemned, his imprisonment and his return to Christianity, which sanctions the uselessness of any human action in being able to make a better world. The end of Kant's imperative autonomy, the return to religious ways of giving sense to the world and the implicit refutation of any history that is other than that of salvation.

What does Porfiry Petrovitch offer Raskolnikov to make him shed his delirium and agree to confession? A counter-story, a history of the silences hidden in Raskolnikov's explanation. These silences are precisely the lacunae in the protagonist's argument, what he premeditatedly leaves out so as not to alter the logic of his account. The detective Petrovitch deactivates the story that justifies the violence. At the price of denying any force that justifies autonomous human action.

Logic, precisely, is what breaks through silences. It is their creator, strictly speaking. Historical narrative, insofar as it is a credible and hence "logical" explanation, has to conceal violence, which is precisely the midwife of history. It is frequently claimed that there were three stages in the development of history as an academic discipline: the first—until practically 1848—is characterised by politico-diplomacy and the State is its object of study. The second, economic and social, identifies class conflict in the struggle for power as its driving force, and its crisis begins in the 1970s. Finally, the anthropological and cultural phase, which in its latest post-modern and relativist version is still operative, would place its emphasis on defining social groups and individuals by selecting specific cultural features that condition them or mark their actions in response to external events.

In the first phase, violence is part of the early and necessary manifestations of the construction of state powers. States are violent because they are able to monopolise the use of violence and make it legitimate and then to restructure this violence into war, which is the natural means of resolving conflicts of hegemony. In the second phase, violence is the product that derives from the clash between the classes that are struggling for power. The legitimacy of this violence is justified by a logic of enemy against enemy that obliges one to think of the other as belonging to a class that must be subjugated or destroyed. Its necessity is analysed as an effect of the project of social collectives that are faced with the impossibility of modifying the structures within which human lives develop. Here, violence would be the result of the struggle for power, but not a constituent of power, as in the first case. The third phase sees violence as a dysfunction, as a disturbance in the cultural narration of a group, as the effect of an irruption by the other, or the appearance of an element that interrupts the normal reproduction of the group's identity. In all three cases, however, violence is derived and fortuitous. The greatest silence of history as narration is precisely this. The cry that results from this violence is silenced in historical narratives.

Yet, those explanations of history that refuse to set out both "the past as it has been" and an "explanation of the past as credible re-creation" or, in other words, explanations that come not from the mere application of methods but from the attempt to find answers to the different ways of formulating the question of why the past represents itself in

the way that it does, are confronted with the obligation of identifying the forms of violence that have been exercised to obtain the silences necessary for offering some image of this past. An image, yes. A diorama. Reconstructing the violence that has enabled the characters that people the dioramas to be transformed into figures of wax and identifying the processes of selection of these characters, revealing the dynamics of its logic, its variability and adaptation to changing circumstances, observing its *hic et nunc*, which is to say its past condition as present, how it was therefore eventually submitted to resistance, threats, confrontations, and inquiring into the process of its consolidation in the past of the present that will then become future and, for future generations, a description of that past as it was: destroying these silences is a task of knowledge. In their representation the diorama and the image abolish dynamics, a process, a conflict, and a contradictory interplay of hopes, some of which are broken so as to permit the emergence of new realities. History as human experience is not moral. The historian can be moral when he or she asks about the causes and effects of these kinds of violence.

The question about violence is the historical question *par excellence*, the answers to which make it possible to formulate other silences: the exclusion and oppression of women, genocide, extermination, colonialism, feudalism, resistance to these processes of destruction, isolation and alienation. But one must avoid turning this violence into an omni-comprehensible metaphysical instance. Into a kind of *deus ex machina* that is open to universal explanation. The historian has the obligation to return to the historic moment its gravity, the set of possibilities that are taking shape at any given point, that give it form. Only thus can one make the violence intelligible. Violence, too, has its *hic et nunc*, its domesticity and its singularity. Let us consider an example.

The Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum houses a collection of photographs of these two death camps amongst which four stand out. They are four images taken by a *Sonderkommando*, one of the members of the special Jewish work details that were given the task of collecting the corpses of their gassed fellow Jews, then removing the gold in their teeth, taking them to the crematoria ovens or the incineration pits, collecting their ashes, reducing to powder the bones that were not completely burned and getting rid of it all in the river. The four photographs were taken in the summer of 1944 in Crematorium v at Auschwitz, clandestinely removed from the camp, developed and sent to the Polish resistance on 4 September 1944. In three of them the images are recognisable. Two have been taken after the gassing: the dead bodies of the victims, left outside the chamber waiting to be thrown into an incineration pit. Another shows some naked women being hustled towards a shower house, which was in reality the gas chamber of Crematorium v. The last photograph, the one I find most interesting, cannot show anything. It is taken into the sun— probably at some other moment of the previous sequence —and does not enable identification of any specific object except some tree trunks. In its abstraction, the image is really shocking because of the violent transition of blacks and whites as a result of the over-exposure and the burning of the film. Reconstruction of what happens in this image refers to the work of the historian who wants to remove himself from the double violence of what the image represents but cannot because the condition of its production was marked by great danger —not of death but that it might have been impossible to capture any image— and by the silence imposed on this violence that creates the process of reality that this impossible image expresses. It is a good idea to place these

photographs, as Georges Didi-Huberman has done, next to another, this time taken by an anonymous German soldier or officer, of the camouflaging palisade of Crematorium v at Auschwitz-Birkenau. The photograph is taken from inside. One can see a wall of beech trees in which the gaps between the trees are filled by a palisade of branches and brushwood, which the prisoners of the special work units had to replace and repair every so often. The filling-in shown in the image is total. Nothing can be seen of the outside world and nothing of the interior is perceptible from outside the camp except for the smoke from the chimneys.

In his film *Shoah*, the director Claude Lanzmann interviews an ss officer from Treblinka. I reproduce below, (translated) from the Spanish version of the book of the film, the declaration of the latter about the desire of the Nazis to avoid any filtering of any information or image related with the secret that surrounded the death camps. “The ‘tube’ (the walkway that connected the unloading ramp of the trains with the gas chambers) was about a hundred metres long and four metres wide (...). They were surrounded by high palisades”. “Walls?” asks Lanzmann. “No, no, wire fencing very closely interwoven with branches, pine branches. Do you understand? It was called ‘camouflage’. There was a camouflage commando of twenty Jews who went to get branches every day (...) in the woods. And everything was covered. Everything, everything. They couldn’t see out (people going to the gas chambers through the ‘tube’), neither right nor left. Absolutely nothing. You couldn’t see through it (...) Impossible to see through it”.

“Absolutely nothing”. As Godard has said, “L’oubli de l’extermination fait partie de l’extermination”. In the era of radio and cinema, the Nazis wanted and almost managed to create such a thick wall of silence around the crime that they perpetrated that it was on the point of being simply ignored. Or banalised. The relevance of using the case of Auschwitz to talk about the silences of history is justified because Nazism represented a voluntary acceleration and a “making coherent” —in other words, creating a coherent combination— of processes of racism and structural violence that were regionally and temporarily disseminated in order to bring about a millennialist and genocidal calamity without leaving a trace. This was clearly perceived by the victims. Another of the main witnesses in *Shoah* describes an interview between himself and two outstanding leaders of the Warsaw ghetto. Jan Karski was then the courier for the underground with the Polish Government in exile. The aim of the interview was to get Karski to take a message to the allies that urgent action was needed to save the Jews from destruction. This action would have even implied a change in military strategy so that the Nazis would understand that some acts of war were clearly in reprisal for the extermination. Before inviting him to visit the ghetto clandestinely and in order to convince him, one of the ghetto leaders says, “We have contributed to Humanity, we have given wise men throughout the centuries. We are at the origin of the great religions. We are human beings”.

“The historian can be moral when he or she asks about the causes and effects of these kinds of violence”

“We are human beings”. The discourse runs out here because the ability to make the young Polish courier understand has limits. The final argument is overwhelming, not because of its forcefulness or sophistication but, on the contrary, its obviousness. The duty of saving the Jews from certain extermination arises because they are “human beings”. There can be no more moving idea: in all the processes of destroying communities, from slavery to colonial expansion, the poignant affirmation of the slaves, of the vanquished, of the victims that “we are human beings” has echoed for a long time, over slave traders, conquerors and executioners. It must be silenced. As when the 16th century Spanish theologians argued about whether the American Indians were human beings or not and, therefore, whether they had souls and hence had to be “saved” and respected as human beings. These considerations certainly came too late for some Caribbean populations that were victims of the exploitation, violence and ailments that the Europeans brought with them. Such “estrangement” has nothing archaic or circumstantial about it. It is the first phase of any process of dehumanisation aimed at the destruction of the victims. When Jan Karski tells Lanzmann what it was that he saw in the ghetto, he says literally, “That wasn’t a world. That wasn’t Humanity”.

All the silences of history have the same aim: to wipe out all evidence of the violent process of dehumanisation that is to be hushed up.

The historian who wants to escape from the narrative, who understands that the “tradition of the oppressed” is always threatened by the successive victories of the oppressors, is faced with the dilemma of making his or her work harder, of having to hone it like a knife. Because this tradition of the oppressed is not another pole of paradise, a retrospective utopia, the world of nostalgia to be recovered. Within this tradition, too, distortion and the lie are operative, constructing stories. It is material that must be handled with the greatest of care. Strictly speaking, this tradition is what it is to the extent that it is postulated as such from the present standpoint, and to the extent that it is politically magnetised as a story to counter the dominant story. Nevertheless, the historian has to work with this material because in it, properly treated, purged, methodically worked, it is possible to find vestiges of the violence that have made it a thing of the past, to show the signs of resistance to that violence, to speak of the voices that were silenced and that bore, they too, a body of experience, a vision of an alternative world and, in short, were a harbinger of other possible worlds. And in this way one can dismantle the account of history as the necessary unfolding of the dominant forces, the triumph of which was both inevitable and to be desired. And to show how, in the diorama that backs this version, what is missing is precisely the power that it has created.

I have already said that all the subsequent silences are formulated on the basis of this hushing-up of violence. There is no process that is not a result of it: the establishment of patriarchal society, the social division of classes, colonial expansion, genocides. First, the struggle for resources, then the struggle for power and, finally, the struggle for hegemony: the material of which humanity is made creates these realities. But in the excavation of this material, in the creation of methodological tools —the working hypothesis, new systems of analysis and, in particular, the brush that is prepared to go against the grain— that make it possible to capture the voices that people these silences and refute them, it is verified that this humanity is diverse and protean and that, in its diversity, there is also a spark of hope that the end of history —when it comes— will not present a balance in favour of the evil that this humanity can do ||

■ References

This is not an exhaustive bibliography, but a list of the works I have referred to in writing these pages.

BENJAMIN, W. "Tesis sobre la filosofía de la història" (Thesis on the Philosophy of History), *Art i literatura*. Translated into Catalan by A. Pous. Vic: Eumo, 1984, pp. 133-142). Much discussed in the 1980s, this text of Walter Benjamin, from which I have taken concepts like "tradition of the oppressed" and the dichotomy between "documents of barbarism and documents of civilisation" continues to be the most pertinent reflection that I know of from the field of philosophy on the "state of emergency" that is all historic present with regard to the past and also the utopian magnetisation of the future. Certainly Benjamin's reflection challenges historical narrative as knowledge and proposes, eschatologically, revolutionary historical knowledge. Academia and historical reflection are, then, incompatible for Benjamin.

DIDI-HUBERMAN, G. *Images malgré tout*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2003, 235 pp. A penetrating analysis on respecting, and the importance of what is singular in the process of understanding complex phenomena. An argument aimed at deactivating any kind of metaphysics or theologising in understanding and explaining the extermination of the European Jews.

FONTANA, J. *La història dels homes* (The History of Man). Barcelona: Editorial Crítica, 2000, 368 pp. It is necessary to construct a method of historical analysis that makes an investigation more complex, making of it a polyphonic account that, following the main strand of the "State" because, like it or not, the role of power has to

be borne in mind", gathers into the story as many voices as possible to make it more meaningful.

GUHA, R. *Los voces de la Historia y otros estudios subalternos* (The Voices of History and Other Subaltern Studies). Barcelona: Editorial Crítica, 2002, 114 pp. A critique of "statist" ideology according to which "the life of the state is central for History", and a search for other voices that offer accounts that differ from that segregated by "statism".

HANSON V. D. *Why the West Has Won*. London: Faber and Faber, 2001, 492 pp. In the history of humanity there have never been such lethal and murderous societies as those of the West –Europe and the United States– but this deadliness has been accompanied by "constitutional government, capitalism, freedom of religious and political association, free speech and intellectual tolerance", while in the world that has opened up since 1991, the clear danger is the appearance of semi-western autocracies –China, Iran, North Korea– that can attain "Western notions of military discipline, technology, decisive battle, and capitalism without the accompanying womb of freedom, civic militarism, civilian audit and dissent". The argument is Spenglerian: there would exist a great paradox that the very same western values that had given "spiritual" superiority to the westerners –since Salamina, westerners have fought for their values and freedom while the enemy armies have been comprised by mercenaries of subjects of despotisms– have led us to lose our fighting spirit, have led

us into "decadence", which is to say, to more understanding and pacifist formulas of coexistence that threaten western hegemony and, what is most dangerous of all, the values of the West. The conclusion is evident: the intellectual and moral legacy of the West is the best thing humanity has produced, says Hanson and "it is a weighty and sometimes ominous heritage that we must neither deny nor feel ashamed about –but insist that our deadly manner of war serves, rather than buries, our civilisation". This is an example of how the pain caused by conflicts can be discounted from the final balance of History and of the scant importance of human lives when defending the "values of civilisation" or, in other words, "hegemony".

LANZMANN, C. *Shoah*. Madrid: Arena Libros, 2003, 210 pp. This book brings together the dialogues from interviews that were shown in the film, making it possible to restore the precision of the testimony which is sometimes somewhat lost in the film because of the power of the mise en scène.

MAYER, A. J. *The Furies. Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions*. Princeton, 2000, 716 pp. A comparative study on the nature of the violence and the role it played in the French and Russian Revolutions. For Mayer, "there is no revolution without violence and terror; without civil and foreign war; without iconoclasm and religious conflict; and without collision between city and country". Although he seems critical of the idea that collective violence is as unusual in history as revolution is, since he

emphasises the extraordinary aspect –which is to say revolutionary– of violence, he cannot analyse its role in its more diffuse forms in controlling and shaping societies in which there exist structural and structuring inequalities. Nonetheless, it is a study that brings to the foreground the role of ideological, political and religious violence in shaping realities.

THOMPSON, E. P. “La lógica de la historia” (The Logic of History) in *Obra esencial* (The Essential E. P. Thompson). Barcelona: Editorial Crítica, 2002, pp. 509 – 526. Indeed, one could cite other texts from this collection of essential –in fact, quite Benjaminesque– works by Thompson, for example “Marxism and History”, “Agenda or a Radical History” and the preface to his best-known work,

The Making of the English Working Class. However, I shall limit myself to (a paraphrase based on the Spanish translation of) the aforementioned text that reminds us that: only those of us who are still alive can give “sense” to the past. Yet the past has always been, among other things, the result of reasoning about values. In recovering this process, in showing how the causal sequence really occurred, we must, to the extent that the discipline permits, keep our own values in suspension. But once this history is recovered, we are then free to express our prejudices about it. This judgement must in turn be subject to historical checks (...). What we can do (...) is to identify ourselves with certain values upheld by actors from the past, and to reject others.

TRAVERSO, E. *La violencia nazi. Una genealogía europea*. Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2003, 204 pp. From a standpoint in diametrical opposition to Hanson’s book, Traverso analyses the historical and European roots of Nazism and the structural nature of its violence. This is, then, a process, product of the development of a series of elements, mass murder in the name of “ideals”, scientific racism, colonialism, “nationalisation of the masses”, anti-enlightenment –which become central in the genesis of Nazism and fascism– the roots of which are not, however, German or Italian but western: “Nazism permitted the encounter and fusion of two paradigmatic figures: the *Jew*, the ‘other’ of the western world, and the ‘subhuman’, the ‘other’ of the colonised world”.