

Theodor W. Adorno, “The Meaning of Working through the Past” (1963)

Abstract

In this classic essay, remigrant Theodor Adorno, a critic and philosopher who belonged to the famous Frankfurt School, reflects on why West German society found it so difficult to “work through the past” of Nazi crimes. Adorno suggests that West Germans’ preoccupation with their own suffering ought to inspire more sympathy for the actual victims of the Third Reich.

Source

The question “What does working through the past mean?” requires explication. It follows from a formulation, a fashionable slogan that has become highly suspect during the last years. In this usage, “working through the past” does not mean seriously working upon the past, that is, with a lucid consciousness breaking its power to fascinate. On the contrary, its intention is to close the books on the past and, if possible, even remove it from memory. The attitude that everything should be forgotten and forgiven, which would be proper for those who suffered injustice, is practiced by those party supporters who committed the injustice. I wrote once in a scholarly dispute: in the house of the hangman one should not speak of the noose, otherwise one might seem to harbor resentment. However, the tendency toward the unconscious and not so unconscious defensiveness against guilt is so absurdly associated with the thought of working through the past that there is sufficient reason to reflect upon a domain from which even now there emanates such a horror that one hesitates to call it by its name.

One wants to break free of the past: rightly, because nothing at all can live in its shadow, and because there will be no end to the terror as long as guilt and violence are repaid with guilt and violence; wrongly, because the past that one would like to evade is still very much alive. National Socialism lives on, and even today we still do not know whether it is merely the ghost of what was so monstrous that it lingers on after its own death, or whether it has not yet died at all, whether the willingness to commit the unspeakable survives in people as well as in the conditions that enclose them.

I do not wish to go into the question of neo-Nazi organizations. I consider the survival of National Socialism *within* democracy to be potentially more menacing than the survival of fascist tendencies *against* democracy. Infiltration indicates something objective; ambiguous figures make their *comeback* and occupy positions of power for the sole reason that conditions favor them.

Nobody disputes the fact that in Germany it is not merely among the so-called incorrigibles, if that term must be used, that the past has not yet been mastered. Again and again, one hears of the so-called guilt complex, often with the association that it was actually first created by the accusation of a German collective guilt. Undoubtedly there is much that is neurotic in the relation to the past: defensive postures where one is not attacked, intense affects where they are hardly warranted by the situation, an absence of affect in the face of the gravest matters, not seldom simply a repression of what is known or half-known. Thus, we often found in group experiments in the Institute for Social Research that mitigating expressions and euphemistic circumlocutions were chosen in the reminiscences of deportation and mass murder, or that a hollow space formed in the discourse; the universally adopted, almost good-natured expression *Kristallnacht* [the Night of Broken Glass], designating the pogrom of November 1938, attests to this inclination. A very great number claim not to have known of the events at that time, although Jews disappeared everywhere and although it is hardly believable that those who experienced what

happened in the East constantly kept silent about what must have been for them an unbearable burden; surely one may assume that there is a relation between the attitude of “not having known anything about it” and an impassive and apprehensive indifference. In any case the determined enemies of National Socialism knew quite early exactly what was going on.

We all are also familiar with the readiness today to deny or minimize what happened—no matter how difficult it is to comprehend that people feel no shame in arguing that it was at most only five and not six million Jews who were gassed. Furthermore, the quite common move of drawing up a balance sheet of guilt is irrational, as though Dresden compensated for Auschwitz. Drawing up such calculations, the haste to produce counter-arguments in order to exempt oneself from self-reflection, already contain something inhuman. Military actions in the war, the examples of which, moreover, are called “Coventry” and “Rotterdam,” are scarcely comparable to the administrative murder of millions of innocent people. Even their innocence, which cannot be more simple, is contested. The enormity of what was perpetrated works to justify this: a lax consciousness consoles itself with the thought that such a thing surely could not have happened unless the victims had in some way or another furnished some kind of instigation, and this “some kind of” may then be multiplied at will. The blindness disregards the flagrant disproportion between an extremely fictitious guilt and an extremely real punishment. At times the victors are made responsible for what the vanquished did when they themselves were still beyond reach, and responsibility for the atrocities of Hitler is shifted onto those who tolerated his seizure of power and not to the ones who cheered him on. The idiocy of all this is truly a sign of something that psychologically has not been mastered, a wound, although the idea of wounds would be rather more appropriate for the victims.

Despite all this, however, talk of a guilt complex has something untruthful to it. Psychiatry, from which the concept is borrowed with all its attendant associations, maintains that the feeling of guilt is pathological, unsuited to reality, psychogenic, as the analysts call it. The word “complex” is used to give the impression that the guilt, which so many ward off, deny, and distort through the silliest of rationalizations, is actually no guilt at all but rather exists in them, in their psychological disposition: the terribly real past is trivialized into merely a figment of the imagination of those who are affected by it. Or is guilt itself perhaps merely a complex, and bearing the burden of the past pathological, whereas the healthy and realistic person is fully absorbed in the present and its practical goals? Such a view would draw the moral from the saying: “And it’s as if it never happened,” which comes from Goethe but, at a crucial passage in *Faust*, is uttered by the devil in order to reveal his innermost principle, the destruction of memory. The murdered are to be cheated out of the single remaining thing that our powerlessness can offer them: remembrance. The obstinate conviction of those who do not want to hear anything of it does indeed coincide with a powerful historical tendency. Hermann Heimpel on several occasions has spoken of how the consciousness of historical continuity is atrophying in Germany, a symptom of that societal weakening of the ego Horkheimer and I had already attempted to derive in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Empirical findings, for example, that the younger generation often does not know who Bismarck and Kaiser Wilhelm I were, have confirmed this suspicion of the loss of history.

Thus, the forgetting of National Socialism surely should be understood far more in terms of the general situation of society than in terms of psychopathology. Even the psychological mechanisms used to defend against painful and unpleasant memories serve highly realistic ends. These ends are revealed by the very people maintaining the defense, for instance when in a practical frame of mind they point out that an all too vivid and persistent recollection of what happened can harm the German image abroad. Such zeal does not accord well with the declaration of Richard Wagner, who was nationalistic enough, to the effect that being German means doing something for its own sake—provided that it is not defined a priori as business. The effacement of memory is more the achievement of an all too alert consciousness than its weakness when confronted with the superior strength of unconscious processes. In the forgetting of what has scarcely transpired there resonates the fury of one who must first talk himself out

of what everyone knows, before he can then talk others out of it as well.

Surely the impulses and modes of behavior involved here are not immediately rational in so far as they distort the facts they refer to. However, they are rational in the sense that they rely on societal tendencies and that anyone who so reacts knows he is in accord with the spirit of the times. Such a reaction immediately fits in well with the desire to get on with things. Whoever doesn't entertain any idle thoughts doesn't throw any wrenches into the machinery. It is advisable to speak along the lines of what Franz Böhm so aptly called "non-public opinion." Those who conform to a general mood, which to be sure is kept in check by official taboos but which for that reason possesses all the more virulence, simultaneously qualify both as party to it and as independent agents. The German resistance movement after all remained without a popular base, and it's not as if such a base was magically conjured up out of Germany's defeat just like that. One can surely surmise that democracy is more deeply rooted now than it was after the First World War: in a certain sense National Socialism—anti-feudal and thoroughly middle class—by politicizing the masses even prepared, against its will, the ground for democratization. The Junker caste as well as the worker's movement have disappeared. For the first time something like a relatively homogeneous bourgeois milieu has developed. But the belated arrival of democracy in Germany, which did not coincide with the peak of economic liberalism and which was introduced by the Allied victors, cannot but have had an effect on the relationship of Germans to democracy. That relationship is only rarely expressed directly, because for the time being things are going so well under democracy and also because it would go against the community of interests institutionalized by political alliances with the West, especially with America. However, the resentment against *reeducation* is sufficiently explicit. What can be said is that the system of political democracy certainly is accepted in Germany in the form of what in America is called *a working proposition*, something that has functioned well up until now and has permitted and even promoted prosperity. But democracy has not become internalized to the point where people truly experience it as their own and see themselves as subjects of the political process. Democracy is perceived as one system among others, as though one could choose from a menu between communism, democracy, fascism, and monarchy: but democracy is not identified with the people themselves as the expression of their political maturity. It is appraised according to its success or setbacks, whereby special interests also play a role, rather than as a union of the individual and the collective interests, and the parliamentary representation of the popular will in modern mass democracies already makes that difficult enough. In Germany one often hears Germans among themselves making the peculiar remark that they are not yet mature enough for democracy. They make an ideology out of their own immaturity, not unlike those adolescents who, when caught committing some violent act, talk their way out of it with the excuse that they are just teenagers. The grotesque character of this mode of argumentation reveals a flagrant contradiction within consciousness. The people who play up their own naiveté and political immaturity in such a disingenuous manner on the one hand already feel themselves to be political subjects who should set about determining their own destiny and establishing a free society. On the other hand, they come up against the limits strictly imposed upon them by the existing circumstances. Because they are incapable of penetrating these limits with their own thought, they attribute this impossibility, which in truth is inflicted upon them, either to themselves, to the great figures of the world, or to others. It is as though they divide themselves yet once more into subject and object. Moreover, the dominant ideology today dictates that the more individuals are delivered over to objective constellations, over which they have, or believe they have, no power, the more they cultivate a subjective powerlessness. Starting from the phrase that everything depends on the person, they attribute to people everything that in fact is due to the external conditions, so that in turn the conditions remain undisturbed. Using the language of philosophy, one indeed could say that the people's alienation from democracy reflects the self-alienation of society.

[...]

As far as wanting to combat anti-Semitism in individual subjects is concerned, one should not expect too

much from the recourse to facts, which anti-Semites most often will either not admit or will neutralize by treating them as exceptions. Instead, one should apply the argumentation directly to the subjects whom one is addressing. They should be made aware of the mechanisms that cause racial prejudice within them. A working through of the past understood as enlightenment is essentially such a turn toward the subject, the reinforcement of a person's self-consciousness and hence also of his self. This should be combined with the knowledge of the few durable propaganda tricks that are attuned exactly to those psychological dispositions we must assume are present in human beings. Since these tricks are fixed and limited in number, there is no overwhelming difficulty in isolating them, making them known, and using them as a kind of vaccine. The problem of how to carry out practically such a subjective enlightenment probably could only be resolved by the collective effort of teachers and psychologists, who would not use the pretext of scholarly objectivity to shy away from the most urgent task confronting their disciplines today. Yet in view of the objective power behind the continuing potential of anti-Semitism, subjective enlightenment will not suffice, even if it is undertaken with a radically different energy and in radically deeper psychological dimensions than it has been up to now. If one wishes to oppose the objective danger objectively, then no mere idea will do, not even the idea of freedom and humanitarianism, which indeed—as we have learned in the meantime—in its abstract form does not mean very much to people. If the fascist potential links up with their interests, however limited those interests may be, then the most effective antidote is still a persuasive, because true, demonstration of their own interests and, moreover, their most immediate ones. One would really be guilty of speculative psychologizing in these matters if one disregarded the fact that the war and the suffering it brought upon the German population, although indeed being insufficient to remove the fascist potential, nonetheless offers some counterweight against it. If people are reminded of the simplest things: that open or disguised fascist revivals will cause war, suffering, and privation under a coercive system, and in the end probably the Russian domination of Europe, in short, that they lead to a politics of catastrophe, then this will impress people more deeply than invoking ideals or even the suffering of others, which is always relatively easy to get over, as La Rochefoucauld already knew. Compared with this prospect, the present *malaise* signifies little more than the luxury of a certain mood. Despite all the psychological repression, Stalingrad and the night bombings are not so forgotten that everyone cannot be made to understand the connection between the revival of a politics that led to them and the prospect of a third Punic war. Even if this succeeds, the danger will still exist. The past will have been worked through only when the causes of what happened then have been eliminated. Only because the causes continue to exist does the captivating spell of the past remain to this day unbroken.

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