

The Unbearable Weight of the Past. Commentary on “Negotiating With the Dead: On the Past of Auschwitz and the Present of Oświęcim” (CRISTINA M. ANDRIANI & JODY R. MANNING)

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“J’avais été mis en demeure de choisir entre l’écriture et la vie. C’est moi qui m’étais mis en demeure de faire ce choix. Non pas, parce-que je ne parvenais pas à écrire; parce-que je n’arrivais pas à survivre à l’écriture”

“J’étais revenu dans la vie, c’est-à-dire dans l’oubli: la vie était à ce prix. Oubli délibéré de l’expérience du camp”

Semprún (1994)

On a Sunday in April 1945, General Patton, commander of the Third Army, liberated the concentration camp at Buchenwald where Maurice Halbwachs spent the last months of his life. As in the rest of the concentration and extermination camps scattered throughout occupied Europe, for the survivors, foremost, it meant a challenge to leave behind a world ruled by death and to integrate again with the world of the living. Along with this challenge was another no less difficult: to tell the world the horror experienced in the concentration camps– specifically, trying to relate an experience that was difficult to transmit with patterns or narrative forms that were available to the culture in those times. Leaving testimony of these acts was in many cases a moral imperative that was self-imposed by numerous survivors. Something to be done not only for comrades that were lost along the way but also for all of humanity: the obligation to tell what happened so that it would never happen again. Nonetheless, there were survivors such as Jorge Semprún (member of the Spanish resistance exiled in France after the Spanish Civil War and prisoner for two years in Buchenwald) who, faced with this obligation to remember the past and write about their experience in the camps, exercised their personal right to try and forget. The right, definitively, to leave behind a past that was related to death and focus on life in the present in order to project a future that was bearable.

The suggestive work by Andriani and Manning (2010) considers, in the collective sense, a similar predicament in which the weight of the past seems to collide with the present. Specifically, these authors reflect on the controversy, a few years ago caused by the opening of a discotheque in the Polish town of Oświęcim close to the

extermination camps of Auschwitz. A controversy that was centered on the place chosen to house the new entertainment center: an old tannery used as a place for slave labor where many prisoners —mostly Jewish— brought from different concentration camps in the area died. In this respect, this article shows us — through a wide range of voices that belong to the inhabitants and authorities of Oświęcim, the owners of the discotheque as well as the representatives of distinct victims associations— the delicate balance between the preservation of the memory of Auschwitz on one side and the daily needs of the city of Oświęcim on the other. Using this specific case, the authors tackle the difficult coexistence between one of the most important symbols of death and horror and the needs of a medium sized city located close to Krakow who's inhabitants attempt to coexist with a heritage that, in many occasions, represents a real burden for the present as well as the future development of the town. In the words of the authors, "Oświęcim must repeatedly contemplate the past while struggling to live in the present and plan for the future. The past and present collide continually in 'Auschwitz' and Oświęcim" (p. 43).

This continuous collision between the past of Auschwitz and present life in Oświęcim is contemplated from the perspective of *positioning theory* (Harré & Langenhove, 1999; Moghaddam & Riley, 2005), which is related to concepts of identity, memory and collective narratives. In this way, throughout the article, the collection of rights and duties held by the different positions formed around the controversy of the discotheque are analyzed and examined vis-à-vis both the memory of the holocaust and the collective identity of the inhabitants of Oświęcim. On one side, it shows a position that claims the right and the obligation to preserve the memory of the holocaust that is represented in the figure of Auschwitz while at the same time avoiding the development of activities that could disturb the climate of tranquility and respect that is required for grieving and the memory of the dead. On the other hand, however, it shows the position that claims the necessity to respect the right of the inhabitants of Oświęcim to live a normal life. The right, in sum, that being close to the well-known extermination camp does not constitute an impediment for the inhabitants to enjoy themselves and participate in leisure activities as in any other place of residence.

As we can see, the example chosen by Andriani and Manning holds certain similarities with the dilemma presented in the introduction, in that in both cases the excessive weight of the past comes into conflict with the present and the plans for the future. Nonetheless, in the first case, we reflect upon the individual attempt of a survivor to deal with the past and who which the decision to forget is founded in the personal right to not have to continually suffer with the constant reminder or re-experimentation (Caruth, 1995) of the trauma. Alternatively, the controversy provoked by the opening of a discotheque close to the historical camp at Auschwitz—as well as similar controversies surrounding other concentration camps (see Koonz, 1994)—deals mainly with the symbolic importance of these places with respect to the collective memory and the consequent obligation to preserve them as spaces for remembrance and reflection in the hopes of avoiding the repetition of similar episodes in the future. In this sense, the main problem that is considered and that surely will continue into the future—especially with the physical disappearance of survivors and witnesses—has to do with the symbolic

role Auschwitz has in so much *public culture* (Barclay & Smith, 1992) and therefore how it is susceptible to multiple uses and interpretations. As Halbwachs (1950/1980) pointed out, the gap between memory and history —between the accounts lived by the witnesses and later versions written by historians— inevitably supposes the need to wrestle with different ways of interpreting the past on the part of individuals who did not directly experience the events. It is a situation that puts on the table a set of questions related with the management and distinct social uses of the past.

Halbwachs himself underlined the symbolic dimension of monuments and geographic spaces by indicating their importance for group identity. In this respect, it is worth mentioning the social meaning attributed to these places as a common element. As Devine-Wright and Lyons (1997) state, such “places are seen as acquiring social significance—their accepted antiquity being socially valued, symbolising values, experiences and emotions which are considered important” (p. 35). In these cases, the symbolic heritage of said places is assumed as part of the group, not only because it forms part of their geographical territory, but more so because at the same time it constitutes an historical reference in that it forms part of their collective memory. In this sense, it could be said that the existence and preservation of these *‘lieux de mémoire’* (Nora, 1984/1989) in the present creates and makes visible a link with the past, resulting in a sense of continuity that reinforces the identity of the collective. As Osborne (2001) points out, “familiar material worlds become loaded with symbolic sites, dates, and events that provide social continuity, contribute to the collective memory, and establish spatial and temporal reference points for society” (p. 39).

Moreover, the spatial and temporal dimensions of these places brings us closer to the concept of *‘chronotope’*—first used by Bakhtin in the field of literary studies—and prompts us to consider the utility of said concept for the study of collective memory in relation to group identity (see Brescó & Rasskin, 2009; Shenhav, 2004). In the absence of a concrete definition, Bakhtin (1981) gave “the name chronotope (literally, ‘time space’) to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (p. 84). In this way, applying this general concept to, for example, the Bastille, the Parthenon, the Liberty Bell, etc. we can see how such places—which are fundamental for the memory and identity of groups—would constitute a spatio-temporal reference in which collective narratives are structured. In this respect, it can be said, quoting Bakhtin (1981), that “the chronotope is the place where the knots of narrative are tied and united” (p. 250).

Nevertheless, as opposed to what happens with most monuments and other sites of memory scattered throughout countries, the presence of what Koonz (1994) calls *‘topographies of evil’* would represent a heritage that threatens to break the knots of collective narratives. Thus, contrary to national monuments, places such as Auschwitz would tend to be considered as something alien: as not forming part of the collective past. Koonz (1994) illustrates this point using the complaints of a German citizen, taken from a Weimar newspaper about the presence of different commemorative symbols in the vicinity of the Buchenwald concentration camp: “I have walked past that death march sign every day on my way to work. That is not

my memory! It must go" (p. 271). In the case of the controversy brought up by Andriani and Manning, the problematic proximity between the city of Oświęcim and the extermination camp at Auschwitz would also be affected for being the latter an imposed inheritance caused by the German occupation of Poland; something that would convert Auschwitz into a place even further removed from the population.

In this case, there exists a paradox in that the past, materialized in the extermination camp of Auschwitz, far from being '*a foreign country*', as conceived by Lowenthal (1985), proceeds from a chronologically recent event that is at the same time geographically close in that it is located only a few miles from the city of Oświęcim. A past, from this point of view, which is characterized by being a domestic past but at the same time, it is impossible to domesticate due to its extraordinary symbolic weight. In this sense considering the final outcome of the controversy—consisting in the closure of the discotheque—it could be said that more than forming part of the geographical space of Oświęcim, the extermination camp of Auschwitz will have ended up symbolically appropriating this Polish city. In other words, the conservation of Auschwitz in the present will project the unbearable weight that this extermination camp symbolises over the city of Oświęcim. The result in terms of the concept of 'chronotope' will be translated into a peculiar spatio-temporal game between both places. Thus, while the memory of Auschwitz exists in so much past space, the effort to preserve it in the present will ensure that life in present day Oświęcim will be anchored in the past.

As pointed out earlier, the controversy provoked by the opening of the discotheque in Oświęcim is contingent upon a wider debate that is more complex and even more polemic: that of the management of the memory and forgetting. It is a debate that would embrace, in as much as we are concerned, other questions such as the silencing of the victims' memory on one hand and the ventriloquization (Bakhtin, 1981) of their voice by those who would speak in their name on the other. The negation of the responsibilities and obligations derived from the past on one side and the exploitation of this past to the ends of justifying the acquisition of certain rights to act in the future on the other. A series of questions arise that are definitely aimed at the importance of the past in relation to the present. A past that, in the opinion of Todorov (1995), should not be made sacred nor be understood as something immeasurable or exceptional if we want it to serve as a reference in order to learn from it and to prevent future events like the ones Auschwitz represents. In the words of this author, "it is impossible to affirm at the same time that the past should serve as a lesson and that it is incomparable with the present: that which is singular does not show us anything for the future" (p. 37).

Following this approach, Todorov (1995) distinguishes between what he calls *literal memory* which tends to make the memory sacrosanct and to underline the exceptionality of certain events in the past and *exemplary memory* which without seeking to eliminate the identity of each historic event, permits the establishment of comparisons between the past and the present with the ends of identifying and condemning those episodes that reproduce—although by different means—certain past events. According to this viewpoint, the exemplary memory would be at odds with the mere accumulation and conservation of sites of memory

converted in places of worship. Thus, in the case that we have been looking at, the conservation of Auschwitz, far from being an end in itself, should serve as a cautionary example that will enable us to recognize genocide as part of our current reality; a reality reflected in the latest conflicts in Rwanda, Bosnia, Sudan, etc. The whole point of this would consist of avoiding these sites—aimed at symbolizing the memory of the past—from symbolizing at the same time the oblivion and indifference with respect to similar episodes which are taking place in the present. As Nora (1984/1989) remarks, “if we were able to live within memory, we would not have needed to consecrate *lieux de mémoire* in its name” (p. 8).

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