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Hard and Soft



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To practice science means to go into details. These details make your work different, your books thick, and your students busy. This time, I will sketch, with no details, some Gothic thoughts which populated me between lunches at the Wissenschaftskolleg.

This year I worked on a group of the 19th century Russian intellectuals who were fascinated with obscure communities of religious sectarians, took them for a nationalist ideal and hoped to make the revolution with their hands. This is a follow-up of my previous research on sects, culture and revolution, which covered a later period (the turn of the 20th century) and is already published as a book. The topic is important because, I think, it changes the whole perspective on the early roots of the Russian Revolution. It is also theoretically relevant. When social actors are trying to change social reality, they base their projects on certain representations which they acquire and in which they believe. The imagined realities oscillate between historical discourse and political action. These discursive constructions have implications, regardless of their validity. This is particularly important when actors make something really big, for instance a revolution.

In Berlin, and probably due to the demanding style of the Tuesday discussions, I became more sensitive to methodological problems, which I carefully escaped earlier. For instance, I took for granted that a good history requires an account of the lives of the participants. “Biographical

writing” is tautological, but it does not sound so (which only shows how deeply we are used to this idea of writing lives). The primary interest in biography is certainly pre-scientific. Most obviously it is connected to human, very human interest in others. Scientific paradigms in history, like social history or discourse analysis, usually deny the value of biographical writing. The ideas and values which used to be fashionable in the course of this century were usually anti-personal, and therefore did not support biographies. Still, this is a powerful form of memory, probably the most effective one available. Maybe cloning will provide something superior. Biographical writing fulfills a natural wish to preserve the memory of a person, to construct a monument to the dead, in this case a textual monument.

To keep track of a person is one task, to make sense of his or her life is the other task. These tasks do not coincide ultimately. For instance, a clinical case in Freud’s style attempts to make sense of the individual life, but does not keep track of a certain individual. An archival record, a monument, a memorial museum do the opposite. A good biography aspires to accomplish both tasks. Unlike ethnographers, biographers usually deal with literate people, those who read and write and deserve a biography because of this reading and writing. Being written and read, some texts modify the life of the author and the reader. My argument moves in exactly the opposite direction of the famous dictum of Derrida that there is nothing beyond the text. As for me, I am trying to put real-life events in the same space as texts and to make these events available to the same kind of reading. We need to make sense of the life of the author, and the most direct and economic way to do so is to interpret the life of the author in terms of his own texts.

A special sort of interest in biographical documents is common for post-revolutionary societies, or may be for traumatized groups of any kind. There is an understandable wish to keep track of the victims, as well as of the executioners, and also to make sense of their actions and fates. In Russia, this wish produced different results than in Germany. There are no institutional forms of condemnation of the Leninist and Stalinist crimes. There was no foreign occupation and no Nuremberg trial, only discussions in political and academic circles. In this situation, the work of intellectuals has critical importance. The absence of institutionalized and materialized forms of historical memory makes the writing the only way of commemoration.

I admire the sensibility of the current German debate on historical memory, which (fortunately for me) culminated once again when I was in Berlin. However, the experience of commemoration cannot be exported/imported. Like any other cultural domain, the culture of memory can be

influenced or even conceived from the outside, but should grow and mature inside the society. In Russia nowadays, the debate about the form of memory of the victims is still impossible, because there is no consensus about the content of this memory. Was Stalinism a crime? Is Communism a crime? The Communist Party is not forbidden, as the Nazi Party is. There is nothing similar to a Holocaust memorial in Moscow, and no plans for such monuments to revolution, collectivization, and labor camps are in the air. Ghosts are still to be buried, Czars as well as Commissars, and so they are coming back. Sometimes even the mummified remains walk around, marking the crucial turns of Moscow politics. That was my first experience with television almost forty years ago: my father watched how the corpse of Stalin was removed from the Mausoleum, and I watched the tension of my father. Now from Berlin I watched how the removal of Lenin's corpse from the same king-size show-case was made into a central political problem, and I was puzzled by the tension of my compatriots.

Here in Berlin I realized that there are two means of cultural memory: *soft memory*, which is psychological, moralistic, and textual, and *hard memory*, which is legal, institutional, and monumental. The Russian memory of the Terror exemplifies the former, the Jewish and German memory of the Holocaust exemplifies the latter. The court trial or the state monument works as a final conclusion. It stops the discourse on the matter, or at least constrains it to a very significant extent. We the intellectuals are never happy with such constraints. In these domains, however, they are highly important. The hardening of memory is a historical process with its own thresholds, sources of resistance, checks and balances. No memory is absolutely hard: monuments could be removed, capital cities could be transferred and/or renamed, and mummies are particularly unstable. Still, the hardening of memory promises that the issue will not come back, that the demons of the past are exorcised, that the present exists and is granted importance. In contrast to this, textual memory is never final. The guilt feelings can be consoled by new voices, and even the most influential texts can be confronted with new texts. The memory without monuments is vulnerable to cyclical, recurrent process of refutations and denials. The past is still there, and people are obsessed with its spirits.