



BETWEEN PAST AND FUTURE  
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On a sunny day in October 2002, I arrived in Berlin with my project of investigating the links between civil society, civil courage, and the newly emerging right to truth about atrocities committed in the past by dictatorial and totalitarian regimes. Berlin was the best place for such an endeavor, since Germany had faced the dictatorial past twice in the last

60 years, and German critical social theory seemed to offer the best theoretical perspective for my studies. I also looked forward to contacts with other Fellows and with the cultures and philosophical ideas they represented. In this respect, as in all others, the reality of Wiko's social life went far beyond my expectations. Another project I brought with me dealt with the past somewhat differently. It focused on the impact of the past atrocities committed in Europe, especially in the 20th century, on the formation of European identity, as an important social context of the European constitution.

In the light of a threefold argument around which my research was constructed, sociological study on truth about past gross human rights violations in fact presents a study about society itself, about horizons of experience, everyday practices of ordinary people, and the rules of social communication. Therefore the public debate about past gross human rights violations and the ways people "come to terms" with them reflects the various experiences of victims, victims' families, and perpetrators. We are dealing here with a truth that emerges from the investigation of these various experiences and that is, additionally, subordinated to the rules of its political and legal institutionalization. Hence, it was a study about various institutional arrangements and also about distortions and manipulations of meanings.

Because the "truth" about the past is so very close to the everyday experiences of ordinary people, which consist in the long-term co-existence of victims and the perpetrators, it is a truth about the everyday opportunism, cowardice, toleration of human rights abuse, or, on the contrary, about the civil courage of ordinary people, the "tacit heroes" of world history. Therefore, the social reckoning of the past in the form of public debate on it and the institutionalization of the ways the past is officially investigated presents, in the words of Zygmunt Bauman, a "moral moment" in the lives of contemporary societies. Thus, in light of my study, the truth about past human rights violations has a transformative and even emancipatory dimension: it reveals spheres of tabooization, of stereotypical thinking, of collective hypocrisies, and of communicative power and oppression. It presents society at large with an opportunity for a large-scale learning process about its authentic identity. It reveals the "other", who is also "us", and in this way it enables us to take a critical stance toward our institutions and ourselves. Since this can be a very humiliating experience, it demands a great deal of civil courage from societies that undergo this painful process of critical self-observation. It also has great importance for the development of social sciences, hitherto distorted by oppressive ideologies.

Research on the newly emerging right to truth contributed to the development of Critical Theory, as elaborated by its most contemporary representatives, predominantly Jürgen Habermas: It added an important institutional dimension to the concept of communicative action and the dimension of the everyday experiences of ordinary people to the concepts of discursive truth, social communication, and social emancipation. It focused on differentiated institutional arrangements of implementing the right to truth: truth commissions, truth and reconciliation commissions, regular trials of perpetrators, and the establishment of specific scientific institutions. It revealed social factors that hinder the formation of the right to truth and that contribute to societal immaturity even after the collapse of dictatorial regimes, as well as the social factors that present the most important social context for the successful implementation of the right to truth.

Keen observers of social life indicate several phenomena that characterize late modern society life-worlds and that impede public debate on past atrocities. They are consumerism, this “unbearable lightness of being” – to use Milan Kundera’s apt phrase; the specific forms of political correctness that promote conformity with mainstream popular opinions, resulting in a peculiar anti-politics; and the ideology of progressivism, which imposes forgetting, combined with purely utilitarian conceptualizations of politics, based on the *calculus* of costs and benefits.

The culture of consumerism consists in the elevation of private well-being and legitimizes the conscious concealment and conscious silencing of a difficult past for the sake of the present stage, for instance under the motto “living well is the best revenge”. It is based on the clear preference given to the stability of the societal situation, to a life without responsibility, and to avoidance of the difficult topics of human rights violations or genocide in exchange for a present abundance of consumer goods.

Emancipation and maturity are badly served by those forms of political correctness that consist in not tackling uncomfortable subjects, not naming things by their real names, and not questioning the status quo, i.e., not challenging a social cohesion based on the commonality of opinions. These lead to the silencing of uncomfortable voices and all difficult truths that do not fit the main current. Moreover, concerns with social cohesion and unwillingness to underline points of disagreement lead this new political correctness to deny the deep divide between supporters and opponents of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes and to exclude and increasingly pacify troublemakers.

This imposed progressivism, ideologies of “forgetting about the difficult past for the sake of the future” – especially if combined with utilitarian cost-benefit analyses –

eliminate important social experiences and their bearers, eliminate from the public realm those who have important grievances, eliminate from the public sphere the important experiences of human rights violations of the prisoners of gulags, of detention camps, experiences of families of disappeared persons, as if they weighed less than the projects of future well-being. This form of progressivistic immaturity has two-fold consequences important for the transformation of post-totalitarian or post-dictatorial societies. First, it has empirical consequences that consist in an artificial blurring of differences between the regime's supporters and its opponents, between perpetrators and their victims, as if – an often repeated argument – everyone who happened to live under a dictatorship was equally sullied by it. Second, it results in a peculiar form of democracy that excludes the voices and complaints of the former regime's victims.

However, there are contrasting sociological observations on phenomena characteristic of contemporary societies struggling for a reckoning of the atrocious past and for protection of the right to truth. Thus, governmental or international bodies have seldom exposed how and why gross human rights violations evolved, who perpetrated them, or the extent of the victimization. This task has been mainly undertaken by NGOs, with all their understandable limitations, – such as Charter 77 in the former Czechoslovakia, or the “Memorial” organization in Russia, or the Committee for Defense of Workers in the late seventies and early eighties in Poland, or organizations of mothers and families of disappeared persons in Latin America – dedicated journalists and committed researchers to whom so much is owed for fulfilling this needed task. To this list one should add the churches and church-linked organizations of civil society that greatly contributed to reversing the policy of concealment.

For many reasons, my works developed somewhat differently than expected. I was not able to finish a book, an *Opus Magnum*, as a result of my ten months of studies. This still has to be finished. The project ended in a series of papers: two of them are to be published in the Polish journal *Ius et Lex* (one in Polish, one in English), the other two in books dealing with post-communist societies and the moral component of social sciences.

The second major research initiative that occupied my fellowship year was the European constitution in the broader sociological and political contexts. Thanks to generous support from the Otto and Martha Fischbeck Foundation, I was able to organize a workshop that dealt with the future European Constitution's legitimacy in the values and worldviews of an ever more diverse and plural European society and its reflective contribution to the formation of European identity – especially from the perspective of the role that Europe's

dictatorial past plays in identity formation. Here my research and the presentation focused on the differences between Western and Eastern Europe.

I am sure I am expressing the general feelings that we will all miss our colleagues, the lunches and dinners spent together, the social gatherings, and the maximally comfortable working conditions, not to mention the exquisitely friendly atmosphere created by the Wiko's staff. It was a unique time in our lives for all of us.